

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH PROJECT

CRISEA: Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia – New approaches and interdisciplinary dialogues

Oliver Tappe¹

¹ c/o Prof. Dr. Volker Grabowsky, Asia-Africa Institute, University of Hamburg, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, Flügel Ost, 20146 Hamburg, Germany.

DOI: 10.23791/522021

Abstract: *The ASEAN and its member states are facing diverse institutional and geopolitical challenges. Of further concern are environmental and social issues as well as new economic dynamics (including China's Belt-Road-Initiative). The interdisciplinary EU funded research project Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA) investigates current developments in Southeast Asia, using a broad array of topics, perspectives and approaches.*

Keywords: *Southeast Asia, ASEAN, Economy, State, Regionalism*

What are the main political, economic and sociocultural dynamics shaping Southeast Asia today? How does the increasing influence of China in Southeast Asia play out on national and local levels? What are the key institutional and geopolitical challenges for the ASEAN and its member states? The interdisciplinary research project Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA) addresses these and other questions through investigating the multiple forces that affect regional integration in Southeast Asia.¹ Bringing together global level analyses in international relations and political economy with socio-cultural insights from the grassroots methodologies of social sciences and the humanities, the project aims at a macro-micro dialogue that will shed light on the challenges, crises and opportunities of the peoples of Southeast Asia and its regional institutional framework, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

More than 80 researchers from several European and Southeast Asian institutions address a broad array of topics to study the multiple internal and external forces that drive regional integration in Southeast Asia and compete for resources and legitimacy. The project has identified five key arenas where these dynamics play out: Environment, Economy, State, Identity, Region. These keywords indicate the five interdisciplinary work packages that form the core of the research framework. Migration, gender and security constitute another three cross-cutting themes which inform all work packages.

The Environment: Securing the Commons

Research in this work package explores environmental problems and nature-society relations from the vantage point of contestation over „commons“ (land, seas, rivers, air) as well as

problems of ecological governance and the potential crisis of legitimacy of the ASEAN concerning transnational environmental challenges. Individual research projects address topics such as sand mining in Indonesia, contested marine resources in the South China Sea, and hydropower dams on the Salween and Mekong rivers. Moreover, researchers discuss questions of energy efficiency and the transition to a low-carbon economy.²

The Economy: Competing Models and Practices of Capitalism

This section studies different development models adopted in ASEAN economies. Researchers investigate the impact of locally- as well as globally-driven economic change on the legitimacy of these models and their underlying political frameworks. Among the topics under scrutiny are Special Eco-

nomie Zones (SEZ) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), competing models of developmental capitalism, and variants of labour mobility. Assessing the impact of China's Belt-Road Initiative (BRI) in Southeast Asia will be one main topic within this work package. Research in this work package contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex economic developments in Southeast Asia. Case studies including the disciplines of economics, political economy, anthropology and history, investigate processes of industrialisation and rural transformation from a comparative perspective, with the developmental state only one actor of many.³

The State: Contesting the Liberal State

The states of Southeast Asia show a great diversity of regime forms, institutional capacities, and ideological orientations. This diversity implies different



questions of political legitimacy and authority, and calls for fine-grained research on questions of (il)liberalism and (un)democracy. The research projects in this work package adopt different vantage points to studying the state in Southeast Asia: ideology and religion, civil society and institutions, and the limits of liberalism. This approach is aimed to offer a wide array of answers to the overarching question: How is the character and legitimacy of the Southeast Asian state contested, and with what consequences?⁴

Identity: Forging Regional Belonging

Is the ASEAN integration an elitist project, only framed in economic terms? From the backdrop of this one-sided perception this work package looks at the role of non-state actors in fostering alternative regional identities. Research projects investigate alternative regionalist projects, different perceptions of belonging and interrelatedness, and the implications for transnationally relevant issues. How do different sets of national, ethnic, religious, and other Southeast Asian identities contribute to specific regional identities related to ASEAN? Factors such as age, ethnicity, religion, and (memory of) violence constitute key aspects of research to address this and other questions of regional identity. In addition, the single case studies in this work package provide gendered perspectives on these issues and highlight transnational connections and identities.⁵

The Region: ASEAN's Contested Centrality

Research projects in this work pa-

ckage focus on the ASEAN project within the global geopolitical and geo-economic context. The Association's legitimacy is under particular scrutiny. Question of (dis-)integration, specific norms, and competing regional projects inform the research in this complex field. For example, research projects investigate the enlargement of ASEAN from a comparative perspective through a comparison of Myanmar (a recent member) and Timor Leste (a candidate). More generally, this work package discusses ASEAN's centrality in a wider global context, taking other regional constructions in Asia into account.⁶

Outlook

With the overarching goal to assess the future of ASEAN, the different work packages and corresponding research projects within the CRISEA framework explore the manifold forms and challenges of regional integration in Southeast Asia from a comparative perspective. CRISEA offers an innovative framework to investigate urgent questions and challenges of the ASEAN and its member states within a global context. The unique interdisciplinary approach engages micro-studies specialists in dialogue with analysts of macro-phenomena. The programme aims to generate a deeper understanding of key political, economic and sociocultural dynamics in Southeast Asia, and encourages productive discussions between scholars and decision-makers.

Endnotes

¹ Homepage: <http://www.crisea.eu/home>. The research project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Framework

Programme and coordinated by the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO). The consortium includes a dissemination team and an ethics board in order to guarantee high scientific standards, efficient dissemination of research findings, cross-institutional dialogue, and public outreach.

² For more details on this work package, see Kaminski, Tomasz et al. (2019), *Contested Knowledges of the Commons in Southeast Asia*. CRISEA Working Paper Series N° 1.

<http://www.crisea.eu/publications/wp1-working-paper-the-environment-contested-knowledge-of-the-commons-in-southeast-asia>

³ See Gomez, Terence; Pietro Masina and Silvia Vignato (2019), *Development & Transformation in Southeast Asia: The Political Economy of Equitable Growth*. CRISEA Working Paper Series N° 2.

<http://www.crisea.eu/publications/wp2-working-paper-the-economy-development-transformation-in-southeast-asia-the-political-economy-of-equitable-growth>

⁴ See WP3 Team Members (2019), *Contesting the Liberal State in Southeast Asia*. CRISEA Working Paper Series N° 3.

<http://www.crisea.eu/publications/wp3-working-paper-the-state-contesting-the-liberal-state-in-southeast-asia>

⁵ See Grabowsky, Volker; Jayell Cornelio and Medelina Hendytio (2019), *Shaping Alternative Identities in Southeast Asia: Youth, Violence, and Transnationalism*. CRISEA Working Paper Series N° 4.

<http://www.crisea.eu/publications/wp4-working-paper-identity-shaping-alternative-identities-in-southeast-asia-youth-violence-and-transnationalism>

⁶ See Boisseau du Rocher, Sophie (2019), *The ASEAN Conundrum: Facing Competing Regional Constructs*. CRISEA Working Paper Series N° 5.

<http://www.crisea.eu/publications/wp5-working-paper-the-region-the-asean-conundrum-facing-competing-regional-constructs>

Corresponding Author: Oliver Tappe [otappe@uni-koeln.de] is research affiliate at the University of Hamburg. His main field of research is the history and anthropology of upland Southeast Asia, in particular the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands. Currently, he works on the topic of Vietnamese labour migration to Laos.