
Possibilities for Regional Integration in South and Southeast Asia: A Comparative Analysis of SAARC and ASEAN

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Article Information*

Review Article • UDC: 327.39(5-12+5-13)

Volume: 19 Issue: 3, pages: 76–92

Received: April 27, 2022 • Revised: June 27, 2022 • Accepted: June 29, 2022.

<https://doi.org/10.51738/Kpolisa2022.19.3r.76dj>

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I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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* Cite (APA):

Djogatović, V. (2022). Possibilities for Regional Integration in South and Southeast Asia: A Comparative Analysis of SAARC and ASEAN. *Kultura polisa*, 19(3), 76–92.

<https://doi.org/10.51738/Kpolisa2022.19.3r.76dj>

Abstract

During the second half of the twentieth century, an accelerated wave of economic and political integration at the regional level hit all corners of the world. Regions of South and Southeast Asia did not fall far behind in this regard. This paper aims to examine the scope of regional political integration in these two regions of Asia, then identify the main (non)institutional barriers that prevent emerging supranational bodies from reaching out to their full potential and analyse the results in the field of regional political associating achieved so far. Using the content analysis of the relevant literature as a primary scientific method showed some important results: (a) it is pointed out that a higher degree of integration has been achieved between the member states of the ASEAN compared to the SAARC, (b) basic historical (colonization period, type of political culture, structure of the political system) and contemporary (political violence, secessionism, ethnoreligious disputes) threats to a deeper integration have been pointed out and (c) great potential of these regions for deeper integration in the field of politics, but also the economy, culture, etc., is clearly emphasized. In conclusion, it could be argued that the Southeast Asian region, through its arguably most important supranational entity – the ASEAN organization – has achieved an extremely high degree of regional integration compared to its neighbouring counterpart – SAARC and that the latter organization has a long way to go in approaching good practices and results achieved by ASEAN within the field of regional political integration.

Keywords: comparative politics; political integration; regionalism; integrative potential; SAARC; ASEAN

Possibilities for Regional Integration in South and Southeast Asia: A Comparative Analysis of SAARC and ASEAN

The scope of this paper is to deal with the idea of regional integration in South and Southeast Asia. First, the focus of the paper will be directed towards the political dimension of regional integration, visibly permeated, and intertwined by its socio-demographic, cultural and economic dimensions. The author will try to give an answer to several important questions: (1) whether and to what extent political integration is possible in South and Southeast Asia, (2) what are the main (non)institutional barriers standing in front of the most important supranational political institutions developed in these regions, and (3) which region has proved more successful in terms of the results achieved within the field of regional political integration – (a) South Asia, with its most important representative in the form of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) or (b) Southeast Asia, with its most important representative in the form of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). The argumentation of this paper goes in the direction of pointing out the fact that these regions not only possess regional integrative potential but that that potential is at an enviable level. What distinguishes them is the domestic and current situation regarding regional political integration. While on the one hand, countries in the region of Southeast Asia decided to put their weapons aside and unite politically and economically in the organization of states (ASEAN) more than half a century ago, countries from South Asia, a group of SAARC member states, even in addition to the existence of supranational political associations, failed to solve the recurrent problems and disputes of the past – colonial heritage, mutual intolerance, ethno-religious violence and other social disasters. This manuscript will highlight some of the most important (non)institutional barriers that prevent both regions from fully exploiting their integrative potential, given their past, current situation, and future plans. Structurally, the paper is divided into four parts – the first one will serve to present introductory remarks and ideas closely related to

the issue of regional integration in South and Southeast Asia. Then, the focus of the paper will be shifted towards (non)institutional obstacles that stand in the way between the current situation and reaching the maximum integrative potential in these regions. The third chapter will be devoted to confronting the two most important supranational associations of this type in South and Southeast Asia – SAARC and ASEAN. Finally, the last chapter will present several tentative conclusions reached by this study and will present some suggestions referred to policymakers working in these organizations, as a contribution to exploiting their full integrative potential.

The Idea of Regional Integration in South and Southeast Asia

Until the 1990s, Southeast Asia was known and recognizable in the world for its militaristic regimes, frequent coups, and authoritarian dictatorships (Krstić, 2007, p. 5). According to this criterion, the region of South Asia does not fall far behind. However, what separates these two regions in terms of the structure of political regimes and the frequency and influence of political violence within them, is the absence of its overflowing into the sphere of international politics. While the most important supranational institution of political organization in Southeast Asia – ASEAN – was founded back in 1967, despite numerous, to put it mildly, disagreements among the future member states of this organization – the process of deeper connection and unification of South Asian countries was about to be reached almost two decades later. Although both Gandhi and Nehru expressed sincere sympathy for the ideas of political unification of the region (understood broader than what it is today), conflicts on the periphery of the central state of this region in every sense – India – prevailed. Given that mutual trust and reconciliation are the two most important promoters of successful regional integration, South Asia failed to meet these criteria both in the period when the most important integration of some other regions took place (e.g., Europe in the form of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) or Southeast Asia in the form of the ASEAN), and even today to a significant extent (Brennan &

Murray, 2015, p. 58). However, the positions of the representatives of seven countries in this region (the eighth member of this organization is Afghanistan, which joined in 2007) converged in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, 14 years after its declaration of independence. The idea of economic integration overcame the idea of political integration, bearing in mind the more than obvious economic backwardness of this region compared to neighbouring regions. Guided by the logic that countries that share common economic partners and are member states of the same supranational economic-political body, seven founding states of SAARC have made significant efforts to bring progress and cooperation to the South Asian region. The results of these efforts will be discussed in more detail in the next two chapters.

On the other hand, ASEAN, the most influential regional organization in Southeast Asia, was created during the war in which three of its current members participated – Vietnam (at that time officially divided into North and South), Laos and Cambodia. Today, ASEAN consisted of all countries geographically located in the region of Southeast Asia (with the exception of Timor-Leste), i.e., Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei. The common historical heritage, model and logic of colonial rule, political culture, religious and ethnic diversity, and general economic backwardness compared to the rest of the developed world were sufficient catalysts for the birth of the idea of integration of Southeast Asian countries. The favourable political climate and the absence of a regional hegemon in any way contributed to the formation of (probably) the most successful regional community in the world after the European Union. Although these countries still abound in intra-state or inter-state conflicts (e.g., the conflict between the pro-Buddhist government and Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the conflict between Thailand and Malaysia in the southern provinces of Thailand or the general dispute over the holders of sovereignty over Spratly islands in the South China Sea involving as many as four Southeast Asian countries – Brunei, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia), the formation of an entirely new way of conducting regional

policy – often called “the ASEAN way” – and its successful implementation and constant improvement, concluded with the idea of prosperity of the entire region taking precedence (see Cockerham, 2010, pp. 165–185). Having in mind the necessity and urgent need for a regional organization within both regions, two regional intergovernmental organizations were born – SAARC and ASEAN. However, given that there were and are many (non)institutional advantages, obstacles, perspectives and range of reach, these two organizations are currently at vastly different stages of development. In the next chapter, the author will point out some of the most important obstacles that stand in the way of successful political integration in the two observed regions.

Obstacles to Successful Political Integration in South and Southeast Asia

Although countries in these two regions are sharing experiences of the colonial past, economic and political problems and disagreements, historical ethnoreligious heritage and linguistic diversity, significant differences in the scope of regional political integration still exist, which greatly contributed to their two most important representatives (ASEAN and SAARC), from their inception to the third decade of the XXI century, grow into two completely different entities. In this chapter, the most important obstacles that have contributed to forming the above-mentioned distance between essentially similar organizations will be pointed out. Given the quite different starting points for developing the idea of regional integration in these two organizations, the problems and obstacles faced by ASEAN and its member states can be divided into four groups:

(1) the ethnic-national-religious structure of a society – the broad religious picture of Southeast Asia ranges from Catholicism (Philippines), Buddhism (Myanmar, Thailand), and Confucianism (Singapore) to Islam (Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei) (Krstić, 2007, p. 5). A substantial number of researchers and theorists of contemporary political relations have noticed how much effort is needed to keep members of several different religious and ethnic communities in the same political community. The abovementioned

clashes within the borders of Myanmar or Thailand are a clear indicator of this problem, and this was no exception during the period of establishment and development of ASEAN. The orientation of a group of people toward the idea of a “motherland” or existing “holy place(s)” (e.g., Muslims towards Mecca and Medina or Roman Catholics towards the Vatican/Rome) further reduces the chance of reaching a general common interest as the most important feature needed during the organization-forming period.

(2) the role of the (nation-)state – given the historically significant role of the (nation-)state in Southeast Asia, it is clear that this level of government could only act as an obstacle to the successful implementation of the ideas of the founders of ASEAN and the formation of representative bodies and policies of the organization itself. In countries of Southeast Asia, the state was an important and key factor in socio-political, economic, and cultural development, as it was the only arena of confrontation of different political currents and the only legitimate prey that politicians, kings, religious leaders, or any other “winners” could win (2007, p. 74). Whatever the type of government in question was, the determination of the political course of the entire nation was in the hands of several representatives of the political (or some other, e.g., religious) elite. With the idea of creating a supranational political organization came a clash of legitimacy and legality, which posed a great challenge for the, in the majority of cases, young states of Southeast Asia, only recently freed from colonial rule.

(3) the quality of democracy – following up on the previous problem, naturally, the question of the quality and degree of democracy in Southeast Asian societies was a major challenge faced by the young political elite, primarily ASEAN ideological fathers, during the 1960s. An overview of the state of these societies provides the best insight into how far they were from the ideals of democracy – a wide range of political systems ranging from absolute monarchy (Brunei) to militaristic dictatorship (Myanmar), one-party communist state (Vietnam, Laos) and neo-communist authoritarian regime (Cambodia) to strong and energetic but often problematic democracies (Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines) and well-established “illiberal democracies”

(Malaysia, Singapore) (2007, p. 5). Although political association is feasible even in the absence of democracy within the societies of (potential) member states, its existence significantly facilitates the understanding and harmonization of basic principles and goals of the future community.

(4) political conflicts, disputes, and separatist aspirations – although no significant number of interstate conflicts/wars have been reported in the region, twentieth-century political history has been riddled with conflicts and political violence at the domestic level. Virtually no state can boast of the fact that it is currently not in the middle of any territorial dispute with any other state in the region. On the other hand, the number of current ethnic and religious conflicts is not negligible, especially in the territory of Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines. The dispute over territorial integrity and sovereignty over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea has been the subject of many international debates and trials (see Kilibarda, 2010, p. 155). These are all major challenges when the goal is to integrate ten states into one supranational political community.

Besides these four fields, which cover the largest number of obstacles to successful regional political integration in Southeast Asia, some other, thematically narrower but also significant challenges should be mentioned: (a) lack of democratic political culture, (b) role of Asian values, (c) demographic dominance of Indonesia, (d) different levels of economic development, etc. Given the scope of this study, more will be said only about the results and achievements of ASEAN in the field of the four aforementioned criteria, meaning the four basic groups of (non)institutional barriers.

The South Asian region, on the other hand, suffers from a smaller number of equally serious political diseases:

(1) the ethnic-national-religious structure of society – the fact that India alone is home to hundreds of different nations and religious groups and that several hundred different languages are spoken throughout its territory, further complicates the process of uniting these differences into one functional member state of a supranational political organization. Religious

clashes, wars and persecutions are commonplace in a number of countries in the region (Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in particular). In addition, one could talk about the importance of the caste system for hundreds of millions of Hindus, then the conflict between monotheistic and polytheistic /atheistic religions, religious-national conflicts in Sri Lanka and Nepal, as well as religiously motivated terrorism encouraged by Al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS) in almost all countries of the region. Therefore, it is clear what challenge the founders of SAARC faced in the 1980s.

(2) political and economic imbalances – what makes the crucial difference to the Southeast Asian region is the existence of dominant power in the South Asian region. Although India has not positioned itself as a hegemon since the inception of SAARC, it is clear that its economic, demographic, and political dominance leaves a major impact on the way this organization functions. Given its size, India has an indirect power to rule the entire region and beyond. However, given the fact that there are two countries in the region with which India used to be in a political union (Bangladesh and Pakistan) and with which it does not have the best political relations at the moment, this represents a huge challenge and obstacle to South Asia's sustainable political integration. Opposite the “Indo-centric pole”, which is consisted of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, are four additionally economically-underdeveloped countries – the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal. The level of economic development within these eight countries varies significantly and as such represents a major challenge for the formulation of future economic and political public policies of the SAARC organization.

(3) political conflicts, disputes, and separatist aspirations – South Asia can boast a slightly smaller number of lower-intensity conflicts than Southeast Asia. Regional police and guerrillas working for India and its defence ministry across the bordering areas, the conflict between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the recently ended civil war in Nepal, the region's deepest wound – Jammu and Kashmir question – and other security threats, make an insurmountable problem shared by all of the eight member states. Given the centrifugal forces

of separatist aspirations, as opposed to the centripetal forces of regional political integration, it is crystal clear how important the factor of political violence is for the idea of uniting South Asia into a supranational community with a set of common goals.

In addition to the aforementioned factors, it is important to stress out, as in the case of Southeast Asia, some other important obstacles: (a) lack of democratic political culture, (b) current undemocratic political regimes, (c) varying degrees of economic development, (d) colonial heritage, etc. The next chapter will provide a more detailed insight into the degree of success that the two mentioned organizations have managed to achieve in terms of integrating member states into one team.

Prosperous vs. Failed Student: the Story of ASEAN and SAARC

Social conditions in which ASEAN originated and resides differ significantly from those in the South Asian region – societies are extremely heterogeneous, democracies are surrounded by authoritarian and communist states, there is no common economic ideology, and levels of development and living standards vary widely (Brennan & Murray, 2015, p. 59) while achieving good results is further hampered by China's activities as an (outside-)regional hegemon, countries that find it difficult to come to terms with the idea and concept of shared sovereignty and lack of effective leadership at the regional level (p. 131). However, the findings of numerous studies have unequivocally pointed out that regional integration has had a significant impact on economic development, which is one of the basic goals of regional organizations (Bong & Premaratne, 2018, p. 10). Another insight given to us by studies on the development and impact of ASEAN on the region of Southeast Asia is the way in which these countries have managed to break out on the path of prosperity. The so-called "ASEAN way", i.e., decision-making by consensus, non-interference in the internal affairs of member states and paying attention to their specific needs, found an effective middle ground between bureaucratization and too demanding and excessive liberalization in supranational decision-

making (United Nations Development Programme, 2006, p. 9). Some authors, however, point to the negative aspects of the “ASEAN way”, among which are criticisms closely related to its low level of transparency and excessive level of delegation (Cockerham, 2010, p. 165). Given the successful resolution of a number of conflicts in the region with the active participation of ASEAN (e.g., the Moro uprising in the Philippines which ended in 2019, the war between Cambodia and Vietnam which ended in 1989, uprising in Aceh in Indonesia which ended in 2005, etc.) the region should face decades of prosperity and further strengthening of mutual relations. In that direction, on 31st December 2015, the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was announced, a logical continuation of the development of mutual relations between the then seventh largest economy in the world and the third in Asia (Dosch, 2017, p. 25). The ultimate goal of the AEC is to create and strengthen three pillars of integration: (1) security communities, (2) economic communities, and (3) socio-cultural communities (see Kilibarda, 2010, p. 161). Other authors, such as Dedeić (2015), pointed out that the ASEAN single market still does not exist while progress in building the second pillar is clearly visible through tax policy harmonization, adoption of more infrastructure master plans, protection of competition, consumers and intellectual property so it can be concluded that ASEAN remains an informal group, a less ambitious project than the EU, without a large number of regional economic integration institutions (279). But the results achieved by ASEAN in terms of successful regional integration have contributed to an increasing number of descriptions of this organization by the term “miracle” (see Mahbubani & Sng, 2017). The aforementioned insights clearly and unequivocally point to the importance of results achieved by ASEAN as the most important supranational/regional organization in Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, the success of the SAARC organization is questionable, to say the least. Constant conflicts between Pakistan and India, Indian domination of the region, civil wars in Nepal and Sri Lanka, the problem of mass poisoning by polluted drinking water in Bangladesh, and Afghanistan's

orientation towards Western Asia and the Middle East cumulatively put SAARC in an unenviable position. Having in mind all the obstacles listed in the previous chapter, the situation gets even more complicated. Authors of different backgrounds consider the impossibility and practical failure of forming a collective regional identity in the South Asian societies as the greatest failure of SAARC. Chakma (2018) points out that even the term “South Asia” does not originate from this area but was formed by researchers from the USA and was first used as part of the name of an official organization – SAARC (p. 3). The success of this organization in many areas of regional integration has remained questionable to say the least. The asymmetry of the nature of the regional system (India's dominance in terms of size, economic strength, natural resources, and military power is so great that it surpasses all other countries in the region combined) has led to increasing demands from other countries (except the Maldives and Afghanistan) to participate in other regional organizations (BBIN, BIMSTEC, SASEC and BCIM, for example), which clearly indicates the absence of collectivist/regional consciousness in this area (2018, pp. 5–8). Although this regional bloc is guided by the basic principles of equality of sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other members and mutual benefits, the results are insignificant – South Asia remains the least integrated region in the world (Chaturvedi et al., 2017, p. 79). In fact, many authors agree that SAARC has not only failed to bring the countries of the region closer but has further distanced them one from another. Four reasons and indicators stand out in particular: (1) treating borders as purely intra-state issues, (2) too strong a link between national sovereignty and natural resources, (3) wrong instruments for promoting regionalism, and (4) enormous differences between normative and real, or the purpose of the organization and its performance (Lama, 2018, p. 100). Finally, SAARC became hostage to Indo-Pakistani rivalry, mutual mistrust, and a lack of necessary political will among the leaders of all eight member states (Jain, 2005, p. 72).

Conclusion

Having in mind the projected goals of this paper, I have tried to answer the questions: (1) whether and to what extent political integration is possible in South and Southeast Asia; (2) what are the main obstacles that the most important supranational political institutions developed in these regions are facing and (3) which region has proven to be more successful in terms of political regional integration. Clearly presented arguments and empirical insights point to the high degree of regional political integration achieved in the region of Southeast Asia through ASEAN as a promoter of integrative tendencies. On the other hand, numerous economic, political, historical, and other factors lead to the conclusion that, at this very moment, SAARC has no real chance of approaching the level of development and importance of ASEAN in the field of regional integration. Although both regions have recorded stable economic growth over the past two decades, in Southeast Asia alone it is the result of predominantly good regional integration. On the other hand, not a small number of SAARC members no longer hide that they have higher hopes for other regional organizations rather than SAARC itself. Such moves by member states call into question both what has been achieved through integration and what could be achieved in the future. Although it is clear that ASEAN is not a perfect organization without any problems in its functioning, it is quite obvious that ASEAN has a much better chance of survival and further deepening of relations than SAARC. Benefits from the active participation of strong leaders during its inception days (Suharto, Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir Mohamad and Siddhi Savetsila) are significant, but benefits that ASEAN made from approaching the victorious side in the Cold War, and from some other regional events (e.g., Sino-Soviet division and political events in China) are clearly expressed through a heightened sense of unity within the region, a high degree of trust and self-confidence, accompanied by the absence of inter-state wars (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017, pp. 71–78, & 185–186). On the other hand, the distance that many countries feel towards India, the bureaucratization of the organization and its constant questionable future given the decades-long conflict between

Pakistan and India, completely undermine the ideals of unity, progress, and solidarity (see Karim, 2019, p. 60). What SAARC lacks are more frequent gatherings of member states and their representatives, given that there is no good integration without frequent and (in)formal dialogue and discussion (2019, p. 69). Given the significantly more favourable current situation in the region of Southeast Asia and, consequently, ASEAN itself, it can be concluded that there is indeed greater potential for further progress of this organization, however, the future will show the capacity and scope of SAARC – whether it can join the “race” as a significant regional actor.

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Mogućnosti za regionalne integracije u južnoj i jugoistočnoj Aziji: uporedna analiza organizacija SAARC i ASEAN

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Sažetak

U drugoj polovini dvadesetog veka, talas ubrzanog ekonomskog i političkog udruživanja na regionalnom nivou zapljusnuo je sve krajeve planete. Regioni južne i jugoistočne Azije nisu zaostali u ovom pogledu. Rad ima za cilj da ispita koji su dometi regionalnih političkih integracija u pomenuta dva regiona Azije, zatim da utvrdi koje su to glavne (van)institucionalne prepreke koje novonastala naddržavna tela sprečavaju da ispune sav svoj potencijal kao i da analizira koji su rezultati u polju regionalnog političkog udruživanja do sada postignuti. Analizom relevantne literature, kako stručne tako i novinarsko-obaveštajne, došlo se do značajnih rezultata: (a) ukazano je na postignut veći stepen integracije između država-članica jugoistočnoazijske organizacije ASEAN u poređenju sa južnoazijskim SAARC, (b) identifikovane su osnovne istorijske (period kolonizacije, tip političke kulture, ustrojstvo političkog sistema) i savremene (političko nasilje, secesionizam, etno-religijski sporovi) pretnje dubljoj integraciji i (c) jasno je istaknut veliki potencijal ovih regiona za dublja integrisanja u polju politike ali i ekonomije, kulture i dr. Zaključno, moglo bi se tvrditi da je region jugoistočne Azije, putem svog verovatno najvažnijeg naddržavnog entiteta – zajednice ASEAN – dostigao izuzetno visok stepen regionalne integracije u poređenju sa komšijskim pandanom – organizacijom SAARC – te da pred drugopomenutom organizacijom predstoji dugačak put približavanja dobrim praksama i postignutim rezultatima ASEAN-a unutar polja regionalne političke integracije.

Ključne reči: regionalna integracija; južna Azija; jugoistočna Azija; SAARC; ASEAN