Contents.

01 - Political-Security Cooperation

6 Foreword from the Co-Editors-in-Chief
8 Contributors
14 Meet the Team

15 Law and Sea Gypsies: Youths on the Law Compliance and Cultural Preservation of Indigenous Fishers to Create Peace in Indonesia-Australia Waters
   Alifia Afflatus Zahra | Indonesia

22 Climate Change and Security in Southeast Asia: The Importance of ASEAN
   Lachlan Melsom | Australia

29 Prospects and Challenges of an ASEAN-Japan-Australia Security Architecture: A Philippine Perspective
   Lara Danielle Cartujano | Philippines

36 Where Are the Women: Australia’s Role in Mainstreaming Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda in ASEAN
   Muhammad Anugrah Utama | Indonesia

43 An Unexplored Avenue: ASEAN-Australia Cooperation in Transnational Maritime Security
   Mathew Yeo Jie Sheng | Malaysia

50 After Coup 2021: Tu Mae Revolution in Myanmar From Youth Perspective
   Min Thang | Myanmar

56 Water Diplomacy: Australia’s Growing Middle Power Role in the Mekong Sub-region
   Phan Xuan Dung & Nguyen Cao Viet Hung | Vietnam

63 Developing the ‘Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’: Looking toward ASEAN-Quad Cooperation
   Christina Burjan

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02 - Economic Cooperation

71 Digital Trade Between Australia and Vietnam for Agricultural Organic Products in the Post-Pandemic Era: Opportunities and Challenges
Nguyen Mai Ngoc & Do Huu Thanh | Vietnam

79 Accelerating Post-Pandemic Economic Recovery: Potential Areas for ASEAN-Australia Partnership Towards a Full Digitally-Enabled Economy
Nlain Chey | Cambodia

86 A Win-Win Relationship: An Analysis of Burgeoning ASEAN-Australia Renewable Energy Trade
Quah Say Jye | Singapore

93 A Feminist Economic Analysis on the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Asia Pacific
Taylah Leigh Spirovski | Australia

99 A Recipe for a Nourishing Friendship: Youth od Brunei-Australia for Agri-Food Industry
Siti Norfariwzah | Brunei Darussalam

107 Embracing Indonesia-Australia Cooperation in TVET System through Maximization of IACEPA
Bayu Arif Ramadhan | Indonesia

03 - Social Cultural Cooperation

115 Thinking Outside the Box: Using COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Education Reform Across ASEAN and Australia
Abigail Burbridge | Australia

123 Camera Shy: Turning the Lens on ASEAN-Australia’s Co-production Capacities for Screen and Cinema
Cindy Mititelu | Australia

132 A Sector Going Down Under: The State of Australia’s International Education Sector
Marcel Luis Garcia | Philippines

138 "Brain-drain" - the Reality: A Case From Vietnam’s Students of Countries Studies
Tran Huynh Bao Khanh & Nguyen Thanh Phuong | Vietnam

142 Rethinking Decolonizing Sociocultural Norms Invoked against Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH) in the Philippines
Felyjane Leray | Philippines

149 Transnational Youth Networks Across Asia-Pacific: Addressing the Role, Challenges, and Opportunities on Youth Participation in Sustainable Development
Kirtanac M Genason | Malaysia
Foreword.
Historically, the term Asia-Pacific came to attention in the late 1980s as being associated with finance, politics, and trade. This region plays a very functional role to the world. The region has half of the world’s population and some of the world’s largest militaries. According to research, this region is considered to be the second most developed part of the world economy after the Atlantic Region or North America and European Region. Creating 44% of the Global GDP and having 64% of global GDP growth in the past 10 years (2011-2021) this region is considered as a key engine for the global economy. The region also represents 56 percent of total U.S. trade, and contains the world’s most dynamic trade and energy routes. This means the relation between countries across the Asia-Pacific region is growing and resulting fine. However, many things happened lately such as the COVID-19 pandemic which has dismantled every single aspect of global, the war between Russia and Ukraine, genocide in Myanmar, etc. indeed affecting the region, making it dynamic.

So how to solve those?
The best way to solve world-scale issues is to know our current position. This means if you are a Governor, use your authority to solve those. If you’re a military soldier, serve your nation in your capacity. and if you’re a civitas academica, use your role and contribute to the world.

In the western academic culture, there is an aphorism, “Publish or Perish” which encourages academics to publish what they learn and contribute to the world of science. AASYP Review comes here to giving the youth of Southeast Asia and Australia a chance to publish what they know, what they have learnt, and their ideas on particular issues since we believe that they have something to say. With that spirit, we provide a media for them while still paying attention to academic principles to create publications that can be accounted for.

This year’s theme is Youth Perspectives on A Changing Asia-Pacific, covering up to three kinds of cooperation between Asia-Pacific nations: Political-Security Cooperation; Economic Cooperation; and Socio-Cultural Cooperation.

In the Review 2021 here, you’ll find our critical, science-based, and data-supported articles about how the youngsters perspective on a changing asia-pacific. They address and giving a truly fine consideration and solution, written by brilliant youths from across Asia-Pacific.

And, proudly present to you, here is the Review 2021.
Hopefully it brings insights!

Brillian Aditya Prawira Arafat & Gian Ellis-Gannell
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## Meet the Team

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
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Indonesia and Australia have a long history of partnership. During the medieval age, numbers of indigenous tribes in Southeast Asia and Australia interacted as multicultural locals in the region. This social structure was challenged by European colonisation within the region. Irrespective of the changing social structures, Indonesia and Australia sustained their partnership in many sectors, including maritime.

Australia gains support from its middle power partner in Southeast Asia: Indonesia. While Australia and Indonesia are reciprocally supporting each other on international issues, such as the South China Sea disputes, they also have to grapple with indigenous people problems related to ecosystems, fishing zone security, culture, and human rights: the presence of Indonesian sea tribes in Australian waters. Despite the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Indonesia (1974) that allows Indonesian traditional fishermen to operate in western areas of the Timor Sea, trespassers still exist.

Conflict between the Macassan tribes and Australia's modern system engendered a quandary between Australia and Indonesia. This issue cannot be commensurably aligned with other cases of illegal fishers in Australian water. According to a leading maritime historian, Anthony Reid, Macassan history is inextricable from Eastern Indonesian, Southeast Asian, and Australian maritime history. One of the most iconic Macassan nomad tribes — the Bajau/Bajo/Sama Bajau — spread around the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and Australian waters. The Arafura Sea —which is now a part of the AFZ — became a fishing ground of indigenous Austronesians 5000 years ago, including the Macassans, even until the Australian water remained invaluable for travellers.

Today, while they are practicing their old fishing tradition in the AFZ, it is considered illegal to exploit the underwater resources on certain level. As a tribes group that had sailed in Australia before colonialism, Australian policy fabricates an impression of biased and preferential limitation to Macassan tribes fishing rights.

Regarding the issue, Indonesia’s involvement encompasses more than being a domain country of the tribe, but also avid in addressing maritime issues starting from illicit trafficking, environmental crimes, and humanities. Australia and Indonesia should include this issue in discussions on addressing illegal and unregulated fishing.

### Abstract

Despite the MOU of Australian Fishing Zones (AFZ), sea gypsy tribes such as Sama Bajo and other Macassans from Indonesia often exploit within the AFZ. It is their tradition to sail up to the referred area. Macassans had settled in Australia and interacted with Aboriginal people before British colonisation. Through qualitative research method, this study acknowledges how to maintain maritime security and increase maritime law compliance while preserving the traditions and local wisdom of indigenous and traditional sea tribes in Indonesia and Australia. This study also looks at how youths are capable of being involved in the policy-making and activism of the indigenous tribes inclusivity as and bilateral resilience alongside maritime authorities. With the aim of finding solutions for peace and security, underwater ecosystem biodiversity, human rights and cultural preservation, this research shows that the fair law-making, youth endorsement, and awareness of traditional tribal cultures can create peace and security within Indonesia-Australia relations.

**Keyword:** Australian Fishing Zones, Indonesia-Australia Maritime, Macassan Tribes, Youth

### Introduction

Indonesia and Australia have a long history of partnership. During the medieval age, numbers of indigenous tribes in Southeast Asia and Australia interacted as multicultural locals in the region. This social structure was challenged by European colonisation within the region. Irrespective of the changing social structures, Indonesia and Australia sustained their partnership in many sectors, including maritime.

Australia is earning economic surplus and legitimation from maritime security investment in the Indian and Pacific ocean. It is a middle power that often solves humanitarian and climate problems in the Asia Pacific to balance main powers of the geopolitics, it is a dominant power in Pacific inner ring. When it comes to the maritime sector,
However, traditional sea tribes should be treated differently with large-scale commercial fishers, by being attentive to the rights of cultural practice of indigenous peoples. To create a sustainable solution, the governments of Indonesia and Australia will need to engage the indigenous sea gypsy communities, maritime-oriented NGO, cultural activists, ethicist, and youths in advocacy and decision-making processes.

This research includes youths as one of the important components of society on the issue. They are creative, passionate, and capable to build resilient systems if given inclusive platforms to develop policy and solutions. While being potential agents of change, youths are also fragile to conflicts, injustice, and economic shortages. Disparity repeatedly impedes their participation in community growth within sectors such as housing, information, service, informal, and others. Giving more access for youths’ voices can develop solutions to preserve indigenous tribes, maintain peace and security, and improve maritime law compliance.

This qualitative research is conducted in four stages, including heuristic (data amassing), external and internal source verification to ensure its credibility and accuracy, interpretation through analysis and explanation, and expose through scientific essay as the outcome of this research. The literature analysed in this essay ranges from the year 2011 until 2021 to ensure its novelty, except for sources that provide relevant historical evidence.

**Discussion**

**The Macassan People**

The Bajau people, one of the most dominant Macassan sea tribes in Indonesia today, came from Sulu island, Philippines. Some have also said that they originate from Mantingola and Mola, Tukang Besi Island, South Celebes, Indonesia. Their original tribe name was Samal. Yet, the name Bajau itself was first identified in Celebes and Borneo, to emphasize their boat-dwelling habit. Undeterred by its popularity as a sea tribe, many anthropological researches failed to portray it objectively. Misinformation about their lifestyle — such as throwing newborn baby into the sea as a life initiation ritual — were often spread.

The Bajau feel more comfortable living by the sea for sailing, fishing, and daily activities. Traditionally, the Bajaus are not poor, and are skillful at using various methods of food hunting. However, the Bajau are menaced by the large scale fisheries portion.

Some observations noted that they can dive for eight minutes underwater. Their culture varies in each place. Some apply practical living, which refuses to attributes their fishing success to supernatural entities. In some places, this tradition still occurs. We should not forget the other Macassan tribes, namely Buginese, Butonese, and Makassarese. Macassans are legendary trepang hunters and traders in Australia and East Indonesia.

Some observations noted that they can dive for eight minutes underwater. Their culture varies in each place. Some apply practical living, which refuses to attributes their fishing success to supernatural entities. In some places, this tradition still occurs. We should not forget the other Macassan tribes, namely Buginese, Butonese, and Makassarese. Macassans are legendary trepang hunters and traders in Australia and East Indonesia.

Other archaeological evidence that proves the Macassans’ old history in Australia are abundant, and could possibly be in higher numbers with more research. There are findings of a 1000 year old settlement of Macassans in South Wellesley islands (Thawalda, Thungaldurndurnda, Wardilmiru, Berkundaku and Kalinda), decorated Macassan potteries in Macassan site in Fowler Island, tree remains felled by Macassan iron and axe activities on Sweers Island, prau (boat) wreck near Inspection Hill on Sweers Island, and Macassan pottery in Waldimiru. Studies also found Macassan influence in Aboriginal culture, mostly in Arnhem Land and Cobourg Peninsula. This spread of culture took place through networking and exchange, and manifested through art, language, hunting, and gathering practices.

In 1950, the 200 nautical mile of AFZ was established, and later legitimated by UNCLOS in 1982. In spite of the new border establishment that forbids Macassans from fishing inside the zone, it is not yet relevant to Macassan fishers, which still seek traditional fishing ground in Australia. Some even expanded to using motor vessels, where many fishermen were confiscated. In contrast with Macassan and Aboriginal relation history, the 1974 MOU box and AFZ policies seemingly pose disproportionate accessibility to traditional fishers. Not only limiting Macassans that are incidentally considered foreign fishermen, the Fisheries Amendment Regulation in 2015 also enforces Aboriginal coastal licence, which prohibits them from using commercial equipment. Macassans and Aboriginal Australian relations remained continuously peaceful, with the Macassans only moving to virgin fields if the Sulu zone was attacked by the Iranun tribes.
In fact, it was not until the colonial era when native divers were deemed as threats in both Indonesian and Australian sea where human resources were exploited to hunt for products sold by the Chinese and European traders. Later on, the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901 began to ban Indonesian fishers in northern sea. As a further matter, larger scale fisheries gave more alarming impact to the rights of traditional fisheries and ecosystem biodiversity.

While Australian government is not culturally sensitive to diversity, Macassan fishermen possess Indonesian identity in Australian fishing communities. The modern Australian maritime fisheries are partly to recognize the tribes that historically hunted in the fishing ground, and sketches a narrow definition of ‘traditional fisheries’. With this misunderstanding, Macassan fishers continue to sail to the Ashmore Reef, Cartier island, Seringapatam Reef, Adele Island, and near Browse island, in order to ensure the continuity of sustenance livelihood. Apart from the need to seasonally adjust their fishing practice, overexploited fishing grounds by large-scale fisheries are partly responsible for the decline of small-scale and subsitent fishing yields. Subsistence fishing leads to overexploitation as well, sometimes in the proscribed areas. Nonetheless, ensuring equal access for traditional subsistence fishers that supply their own livelihood can solve this problem.

Win-Win Solution for the Policy Making

The issue of the Macassans “sea gypsies” presence in the AFZ goes beyond overfishing. Vandalism by Macassan “sea gypsies” poses a threat to regional peace and security. This might be induced by a lack of knowledge about borders. The Bajau tribes recognized the pre-MOU era as “dulu bebas,” (it used to be open and free), and post-MOU era as “nanti sekarang dilarang” (now it is forbidden). In this case, this research needs to fairly portray the Macassans. The reframing of policy must ban vandalism and overfishing — but without rejecting the rights of indigenous people for the sake of large scale industry. Despite the confiscation and arresting of Indonesian fishermen, Indonesia should judge the issue objectively, and commit to its standpoint on combatting illegal fishing including license-less fishing, fishing in prohibited area, usage of fake licences, and the use of particular equipment and boats that lead to overfishing.

The switch of Bajau people from perahu lambo to motored vessels must not be an issue, unless they use destructive equipment. To rehabilitate the superficial awareness that caused the issue, diplomacy should also be used as a problem solving instrument.

Australia’s partnership with ASEAN countries has intensified since 2018, when Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull hosted a summit in Sydney that gathered Australia and ASEAN countries. Also in the same year, Australia and Indonesia signed a partnership treaty on building stability in the region through efficient strategies. 3 years earlier, they claimed each other as strategic partners. It was followed by Indonesia participating in pushing the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” as a new diplomatic concept. Eventually, Indonesia’s foreign policy was reoriented and reframed within the Indo-Pacific context. Maritime cooperation became one amongst five pillars within the Indonesian- Australian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) of 2018, followed by Indo-Pacific Stability and prosperity. According to Laksamana (2018), both have found equal maritime interests in enforcing law against piracy, smuggling, illegal fishing, instability, and security threats, based on Joint Declaration on Maritime Cooperation in 2017.

Given the fact that Indonesia is an active and prominent player in maritime diplomacy, it should not be hard to sustain peace between both countries. To meet security and humanitarian expectations inclusively, the sowed diplomacy of both countries will need to take steps towards a mutually beneficial solution. This means reevaluating the MOU, which did not involve any Indonesian representatives. To demonstrate democracy, the government should involve all related stakeholders in the decision-making process. To make objective solutions, accurate research will be needed to comprehend the issue.

Partnership dialogue can be taken as the first step to elaborate the regional issue. Australia has this kind of diplomacy with ASEAN countries, especially with Indonesia. Dialogue not only builds familiarity and understanding, but also trust. As maintained by studies, personal ties between leaders are effective in enhancing interstate partnerships. Besides central government, this also includes ties between Indonesian Ministry of Marine and Fisheries Affair and Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA), and intergovernmental organizations, namely UNCLOS. While dialogues between these stakeholders are open, they will achieve the required Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) in Indonesian and Arafura waters. In a practical manner, patrol collaboration can be regularly enacted to perform surveillance and conciliate with traditional Macassans fishers that commit illegal fishing.
Unlike the current regulation that merely pays attention to the industry, economics, and environmental outcome, it should no longer disregard the indigenous tribes and their historical connections.25

At the end of the day, there are several recommended win-win solutions that could be legitimated for all stakeholders:

- Improving Macassan participation in the bilateral treaty stipulation.
- Validating Macassan connectivity and cooperation to Australian water by allowing traditional continuity, such as performing subsistence fishing in the AFZ.
- Returning Macassans to their old tradition. To build pride and income by using traditional subsistence fishing, it should be promoted by other sectors. It could be done by Establishing cultural science and tourism-oriented Traditional Maritime Cultural
- Centers to revisit the history of Macassans and Aboriginal fishermen history in East Indonesia and Australia.

Participation of Youth

Youth plays a vital role in peace and security. In fact, this resolution was adopted by the UN in July 2020. Youths basically reflect the behavior of the institutions, culture, and environment where they live. The quality of youth is closely related to the influence of their surrounding. Therefore, to maximize youths’ potential in making change in justice, climate, and cultural awareness, it is best to invite them into policy making.

While they have the ability to make multidimensional changes that improve societies, it takes integrated education and consideration of the government to create brilliant youth, so that they will be able to participate in sounder their opinion, drafting policy, negotiating, and galvanising the security of human rights. The dominant population of 15-24 years old citizens shows the effectiveness of youths’ movement on transforming a condition. Aside from that, youths are also fast learners, digitally prominent, and innovative on responding and making disruption.26

Youths require educational support, peer empowerment, inclusive platform, engagement from partners with financial and legitimization of ability, reintegration, and disengagement from counterproductive views. Therefore, it is recommended to support youth development through minimizing the education gap, raising funding for education facilities, securing their rights, and including them in decision-making. Facilities may include financial support and capacity building (training) to make them passionate leaders and action implementers. Many youths have made positive influences in socio-environmental projects.

While youths are aware of their responsibilities to promote social cohesion and peace-building — such as the inclusivity of certain cultures and ethnicities whose rights are challenged by the modern system — local government and intergovernmental organizations should support their initiatives. According to studies, youths should be given the platform to lead peace-building activities.30

For instance, to promote the human rights of indigenous people in Indonesia and Australia, they are expected to receive appreciation and facility. It is so that they can proceed the activism through innovative programs, including international exchange, cultural festivals, digital content that spreads indigenous ethnographic awareness, youth diplomacy programs run by international organizations, charity, and many more. These youths-lead programs necessitate project management skills and strategies that connect the targeted communities with the higher authorities and larger audiences. Also, to make accurate solutions for the dynamic needs of communities, youths need to be involved in societal research in journalistic media and academic institution.31

Tourism is one of the sectors that allows youths to contribute on preserving indigenous culture. Coastal tourism that connects East Indonesia and Australia is effective to simultaneously re-introduce forgotten indigenous cultures and sustainable lifestyles. This holistic eco-tourism emphasizes tackling obstacles to sustainability by making harvesting practices sustainable, altering destructive coastal development, biodiversity management, and minimizing pollution, based on the method of Macassan people. In the 21st century, sustainable value is highly incorporated in planning theory, including in the tourism sector. This way, tourism can accommodate social justice for the local communities in terms of environmental and cultural quality.4

This tourism could be in the form of indigenous-themed resorts, culinary businesses, and experience features such as guided traditional boating and fishing facilities for tourists. Not only empowering Macassans and expanding their source of economics, it also empowers youths. For instance, this sector can open seasonal programs for youths to make unprecedented and sustainable development programs. Projects can be managed by the Indonesian and Australian governments, youth-led NGOs, university partnerships, and local communities. To popularize the project, youths can effectively engage larger audiences through digital media.

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POLITICAL SECURITY COOPERATION

LAW AND SEA GYPSIES

18
A study denotes that 80.9% percent of tourism engagement came from social media, compared to network recommendation and other media. At the end of the day, enhancing human resource capacity and management of coastal tourism sector will consequently lessen risks associated with climate change.34

Conclusion

The maritime conflict between AFMA and traditional Macassan seamen seemed to be caused by lack of cooperation and understanding. While the 1974 MOU related to Australian Fishing Zone attempts to prevent illegal fishing committed by non-Australian fishermen, it has forgotten that the Macassans had sailed and settled in Australia earlier than post-colonial Australian citizens. They even influenced and built amicable contact with the Aboriginal tribes. As a reaction to the policy, many Macassans show non-conformity, have committed vandalism, and practice illegal fishing in the AFZ.

To solve the conflict and establish security in the area, the Indonesian Ministry of Marine and Fisheries Affairs should work with the AFMA, including representatives of Macassan communities in creating policy that prospers both sides. Without removing the enforcement against exploitative fishing, the policy should permit indigenous Macassan tribes to practice subsistent traditional fisheries, control large-scale fisheries to balance the fishing ground availability, and promote indigenous fisheries through the establishment of Traditional Maritime Cultural Centres. Within the decision making, the bilateral governments are encouraged to include Australian and Indonesian youth, and to facilitate them in retaining peace and promoting Macassan maritime culture through social projects. Thus, these youth projects would be likely to elevate historical-cultural consciousness on indigenous tribes, environmental awareness, tourism promotion, and digital economics.

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Climate Change and Security in Southeast Asia: The Importance of ASEAN

Lachlan Melsom | Australia

Abstract

Southeast Asia, often referred to by scientists as a ‘climate hotspot’, is expected to be one of the world’s worst affected regions by the effects of climate change. The predicted effects within the region of a 2-3°C increase in global temperatures include the intensification of severe weather events, sea level rise causing substantial loss of agriculturally productive territory, ocean acidification which would cause harm to already strained fish stocks and increased flooding in the Greater Mekong region. These effects will have a profound impact on regional human and national security by straining limited resources, threatening traditional livelihoods and displacing populations. This may transform territorial disputes and bilateral tensions, incentivise interstate competition for resources and exacerbate existing intrastate security threats. An effective approach to mitigating these risks will require intensive multilateral cooperation at the international level. As the primary forum for multilateral decision-making and security cooperation in Southeast Asia, ASEAN’s capacity to manage bilateral tensions and provide a cooperative and proactive regional strategy for minimising the negative impacts of climate change on regional stability.

Introduction

Southeast Asia is expected to be one of the world’s worst affected regions by the effects of climate change (Sagbakken et al., 2020). With the UN recently predicting a 2.7°C increase in average global temperatures above pre-industrial levels (UNEP, 2021), it is important to consider what this means for the region. Southeast Asia will likely experience more frequent and severe natural disasters (IPCC, 2021), as well as a rise in sea levels causing substantial loss of agriculturally productive territory, ocean acidification causing harm to already strained fish stocks, and increased flooding in the Greater Mekong region (Sagbakken et al., 2020). This may transform territorial disputes and bilateral tensions, incentivise interstate competition for resources, exacerbate existing intrastate security threats and cause large-scale population displacement.

Given the scale of the threat posed by climate change to the stability of the Southeast Asian region it is important to assess the potential feasibility and effectiveness of different methods of managing this issue. Addressing the underlying cause of climate change (greenhouse gas emissions) is undoubtedly the most effective and efficient method for mitigating its effects. However, it is now all but certain that global warming will exceed 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Even with the more ambitious national targets presented at COP26, it is unlikely that global warming will be limited below 2°C (UNEP, 2021). Therefore, it is important that the region is prepared for the effects of climate change.

As the primary forum for multilateral decision-making and security cooperation in Southeast Asia, ASEAN’s capacity to mitigate the destabilising impact of climate change in the region needs to be evaluated. Within state borders, it is likely that the primary responsibility for managing the destabilising impacts of climate change will fall on national governments (Lieven, 2020). Given the transnational nature of the issue however, the management of these impacts will require cooperation between states. Increased competition over transboundary resources and population movement, issues that have historically been sources of tensions in regional interstate relationships, threaten to destabilise the region’s peace and prosperity (Sagbakken et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to consider whether ASEAN provides effective mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation regarding such issues.

Climate change in Southeast Asia

ASEAN member states are expected to be some of the world’s worst affected by the impacts of climate change (Sagbakken et al., 2020). The Southeast Asian region is likely to experience rising sea levels, coastal erosion, increased coastal flooding, more frequent and severe heatwaves and ocean acidification (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021). The Mekong Delta region in particular is threatened by increased flooding and
The potential for climate induced mass migration provides another possible source of interstate tensions within the region. The combination of increased natural disasters, population growth, sea level rise, threats to traditional livelihoods and food insecurity create an ideal context for large-scale displacement, both within Southeast Asia and from the highly vulnerable and densely populated neighbouring region of South Asia (Melsom, 2021). Migration issues have already caused tensions between some Southeast Asian states and flows of a greater magnitude could accentuate the frequency and urgency (Sagbakken et al., 2020).

### Assessing ASEAN's potential to mitigate stresses on regional interstate relations

#### Richard Stubbs' Framework for Assessing Regional Organisations

ASEAN's past performance is likely the most accurate indicator of its potential to manage future stresses on regional interstate relations. Stubbs (2019) proposes a theoretical framework for assessing the performance of regional institutions that is useful for assessing ASEAN's capacity in this area. The framework contains three criteria for analysing performance: effectiveness, legitimacy and efficiency.

ASEAN has historically been highly effective in managing stresses on regional interstate relations. This is a promising indicator of ASEAN's future capacity in this area. For Stubbs (2019), 'effectiveness' refers simply to the organisation's ability to produce desired results. In relation to ASEAN's capacity for managing interstate tensions, ASEAN's primary desired result can be said to be the absence of interstate conflict. In the words of Beeson (2020, p. 576), "The one thing you have to concede about ASEAN is that while the organisation has existed, intra-regional conflict has been a rarity." Since ASEAN was founded in 1967, relations among its member states have remained generally peaceful (Thompson & Chong, 2020).

While ASEAN has been successful in preventing outright interstate conflict between its members, this does not mean that it has been perfectly effective in managing interstate tensions. ASEAN has often proven itself incapable of resolving more complicated regional bilateral disputes. For example, it was Indonesia, and not ASEAN as an organisation, that in the 1990s took the lead in developing an informal approach to the Spratly Islands dispute by organising workshops aimed at managing potential conflicts (Acharya, 2000). This dispute was widely viewed by ASEAN governments as the major "flashpoint of conflict" in post-Cold War Southeast Asia. Additionally, some bilateral disagreements, such as over the Litigian and Sipadan islands have been ignored by ASEAN (Thompson & Chong, 2020). In these cases, parties have been forced to utilise the mechanisms of external multilateral institutions such as the ICJ.

According to Stubbs' model, ASEAN's capacity to cope with stresses on interstate relations caused by climate change will also be influenced by its legitimacy. Stubbs (2019) explains that 'legitimacy'...
can be conceptualised in two ways. A normative approach evaluates legitimacy through normative ethical standards, such as democracy and respect for human rights. A sociological approach examines whether key actors and social groups perceive the organisation as legitimate. Of these, sociological legitimacy is the form of legitimacy that will affect ASEAN’s ability to manage tensions in interstate relations. ASEAN sceptics have pointed out that ASEAN’s relatively informal institutional structure, weak decision-making process, limited capacity and inability to act decisively undermine ASEAN’s legitimacy (Stubbs, 2019). For example, Beeson (2020) has claimed that ASEAN’s failure to even begin to address the transboundary ‘haze problem’ that directly affects the health of many regional populations seriously undermines its claim to legitimacy. Others claim that ASEAN member governments see the organisation as legitimate due to its perceived contribution to regional economic growth, social progress and political stability, and also due to its respect for socially embedded regional values such as independence, non-interference, consensus decision-making and the peaceful settlement of disputes (Stubbs, 2019). While ASEAN is generally perceived as a legitimate actor, it is important to note that if it continues to fail to act decisively on a number of important issues, such as the rise of China (Beeson, 2019), this may reduce its legitimacy. Such an erosion of ASEAN’s legitimacy would undermine its capacity to effectively mitigate tensions in regional interstate relations.

Finally, ASEAN has proven itself to be a highly efficient mechanism for mitigating intraregional tensions. Stubbs’ model suggests that ASEAN’s capacity to manage stresses to regional interstate relations should not just be assessed in terms of its effectiveness in doing so but also its efficiency. ‘Efficiency’ refers to the ratio of resources used by an organisation to its output (Stubbs, 2019). A regional organisation’s outputs are dependent on its ability to mobilise resources. These resources generally come from member-states and can include money, manpower, facilities, and other goods. In this regard, ASEAN can be seen to be highly efficient as it has been highly effective in minimising intraregional conflict despite having limited access to resources. In 2018, member-state contributions totalled US$20 million and the ASEAN Secretariat had 300 staff (Stubbs, 2019). In comparison, the European Commission in the same year had 70,000 staff and a €27 billion administrative budget (Stubbs, 2019). According to Thompson and Chong (2020), ASEAN’s effectiveness in minimising interstate conflict is the result of its ability to build interpersonal trust by facilitating dialogue and cooperation among regional states through meetings and informal social gatherings. This is of course a much cheaper method than providing a formal bureaucratic framework for mediating disputes, as in the EU. ASEAN’s historical efficiency in minimising intraregional tensions can be seen as a positive indicator of its capacity to deal with future stresses on interstate relationships caused by the impacts of climate change.

‘The ASEAN Way’

When assessing the organisation’s effectiveness in managing bilateral tensions among its members, it is important to note that ASEAN was designed as a trust building mechanism to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among regional states, rather than as a platform for mediating disputes (Thompson & Chong, 2020). This preference for informal discussions, and avoidance of legal and formal procedures, is often referred to as the ‘ASEAN Way’. According to Singapore’s former foreign minister S. Jayakumar, “The ASEAN Way stresses informality, organisation minimalism, inclusiveness, intensive consultations leading to consensus and peaceful resolution of disputes.” (Cho & Kurtz, 2018) Acharya (2000) characterises the ASEAN Way as involving a focus on building trust, through a process of consultation, mutual accommodation and consensus, while displaying a general reluctance to build institutions and rely on rules and laws.

ASEAN’s capacity to build trust between member-states has had a significant positive effect on regional interstate relations and has reduced the risk of escalating bilateral tensions (Thompson & Chong, 2020). This is clearly evident from the fact that the region has not seen major interstate conflict since ASEAN’s creation in 1967 (Beeson, 2020). An important component of the ASEAN Way and its focus on trust-building, the principle of non-interference, has also constrained ASEAN from playing a constructive role in preventing or resolving domestic issues with regional implications (Acharya, 2000). While non-interference does help build trust between regional states, it can also be said to also have had a negative impact on interstate relations by failing to prevent or manage crises that have destabilised the region. An example of this was the Asian financial crisis, where ASEAN failed to take timely and effective action (Acharya, 2000). Therefore, while ASEAN’s focus on trust-building has allowed it to minimise interstate disputes, it has also constrained the organisation from dealing with many of the root causes of such disputes. Because of this, ASEAN’s capacity to mitigate the potential adverse impacts of the effects of climate change on intraregional relations may be reduced by its insistence on adhering to the principle of non-interference and avoiding formal procedures.

Legal instruments

Despite ASEAN’s traditional preference for informal consultation, formal rules and legal instruments do exist for the management of interstate disputes. The 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation provided parties with the option of requesting the formation of a High Council, which would conduct mediation and make recommendations (ASEAN, 1976). More recently, the 2010 Protocol to the ASEAN Charter on Dispute Settlement Mechanisms provided parties with the option of referring their dispute to the ASEAN Chair or Secretary-General (ASEAN, 2010).
These legal instruments involve three major limitations that constrain their effectiveness in managing bilateral disputes (Thompson & Chong, 2020). First, all three legal instruments mentioned above rely on voluntary compliance. In order for the dispute settlement process to proceed, the consent of all parties is required. Second, decision-making regarding the dispute settlement process is based on consensus. These decisions are made collectively by all ASEAN member states, including the parties to the dispute. Because of this, it is unlikely that a definitive solution between disagreeing parties will be reached. Third, these decisions are backed by weak capacity for enforcing decisions. These limitations have hindered past attempts at resolving interstate disputes. For example, in 1998, the Litigan and Sipadan islands dispute had to be referred to the ICJ after Indonesia’s request for a High Council was blocked by the Malaysian government (Butcher, 2013). Additionally, in 2010, Cambodia invoked the newly created ASEAN Charter, calling on Vietnam, then the ASEAN chair, to mediate the Preah Vihear dispute (Thompson & Chong, 2020). Thailand then blocked the dispute settlement process from proceeding further (Phan, 2013). As a result, the Cambodian government bypassed ASEAN and requested that the UNSC mediate the dispute (Singhaputargun, 2016). This outcome demonstrated a lack of confidence in ASEAN dispute settlement mechanisms. In light of the demonstrated limitations of ASEAN's legal instruments, significant reforms may be necessary for ASEAN to be a relevant and effective dispute settlement mechanism capable of managing the potential adverse effects of climate change on regional interstate relations.

ASEAN and economic interdependence

ASEAN has facilitated greater economic interdependence within the region, which is known to have peace-inducing effects (Keohane & Nye, 1973). Regional economic development of the European sort was never a professed goal of ASEAN. Maintaining extra-regional trade links has always been seen as more important than enhancing regional integration. Acharya (2000) argues that ASEAN’s focus on increasing extra-regional trade linkages relative to intra-regional trade means that it has actually lessened the peace-inducing pressures of economic interdependence within the region. However, the existence of AFTA seems to challenge this notion. Since the 1970s, ASEAN has taken major strides in liberalising and promoting intraregional trade and investment flows (Ishikawa, 2021). Since ASEAN’s formation, intraregional trade as a share of total regional trade has increased significantly (Lee et al., 2010) and Southeast Asia now has the highest level of economic integration of any Asian region (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

ASEAN and defence cooperation

ASEAN has also had a mitigating effect on regional interstate tensions through its facilitation of cooperative defence partnerships. Since ASEAN was created in 1967, its members have developed an increasingly sophisticated range of defence ties. These ties are bilateral, however they have been facilitated by ASEAN's capacity for relationship building (Acharya, 2000). Defence cooperation between ASEAN member states includes border region cooperation, intelligence sharing, joint exercises, exchange activities, regular high-level meetings, provision of training facilities and defence industry cooperation (Pedrason, 2017). ASEAN is yet to embrace defence multilateralism, largely due to concerns that such moves would appear threatening to Beijing (Acharya, 2000), however this does not preclude collective responses in times of need.

ASEAN and identity regional building

A key component of ASEAN's capacity to mitigate intraregional disputes is its ability to create a sense of regional identity. According to the concept of ‘security communities’ (Adler et al., 1998), a sense of community within a region creates mutual sympathy, trust and common interests that makes the large-scale use of violence unlikely or even unthinkable. There is disagreement over how much of a role ASEAN has played in the formation of this identity and even over whether this identity has emerged at all. Thompson and Chong (2020) assert that ASEAN has contributed to the formation of such an identity through its meetings and informal social gatherings that have built interpersonal trust. Acharya (2000) claims that ASEAN has had some success in creating a sense of a regional community at the level of political elites but this has often failed to restrain animosities at the societal level (Acharya, 2000).

The lack of regional interstate conflict in the period since its formation points towards ASEAN's effectiveness in regional identity building. Despite periodic tensions, ASEAN leaders have discounted the prospect of armed confrontation over territorial disputes (Acharya, 2000). However, regional disputes do often feature military deployments. This was seen with the dispatch of naval units by Indonesia and Malaysia near the disputed Sipadan and Litigan islands (Acharya, 2000). Overall, ASEAN can be said to have contributed to the formation of a regional identity that contributes positively to its capacity to manage potential interstate tensions caused by the effects of climate change.
China

The rise of China will likely continue to adversely influence ASEAN’s capacity to manage stresses to regional bilateral relations caused by the effects of climate change. China has employed a ‘divide and rule’ approach to regional diplomacy that has rendered ASEAN incapable of formulating effective collective responses to its rise (Beeson, 2020). This has been particularly apparent in the case of ASEAN’s response to territorial disputes in the South China Sea (Yahuda, 2019). These divisions have eroded ASEAN’s capacity to cooperate in other areas as well (Beeson, 2019). Because China will most likely continue to play a major role in regional diplomacy over at least the next few decades, it is important to consider how Beijing’s strategic use of divisive tactics may undermine ASEAN’s capacity to manage interstate tensions between its members caused by the impacts of climate change.

Reforms

ASEAN’s capacity to manage bilateral tensions caused by the effects of climate change could be improved through reforms. These reforms should focus on refining what has worked well in the past and anticipating future needs in a rapidly evolving geopolitical climate. Many aspects of ASEAN legal instruments constrain rather than facilitate action, to the point that they are of little use to parties seeking a meaningful resolution to a dispute (Thompson & Chong, 2020). Additionally, the ASEAN secretariat would benefit from more resources, allowing it to play a more meaningful and impactful role in intraregional dispute management. Therefore, ASEAN’s structure and legal instruments should be reviewed and amended. While it is important that ASEAN establishes formal processes for dispute resolution, its informal processes should also be retained. Informal events have allowed officials to establish rapport with their counterparts and resolve differences on the sidelines, out of the public eye. This has historically played a great role in minimising regional interstate tensions.

Conclusion

The effects of climate change threaten to destabilise international relations in Southeast Asia. There are two categories of potential scenarios that appear most likely to provide sources of tensions between regional states. The first of these involves increased competition over scarce resources, such as fish stocks in the South China Sea. The second involves large-scale population migration due to displacement.

ASEAN’s influence will certainly help to mitigate these strains on interstate relations. Its success in facilitating relationship building between key political actors and in creating a more integrated regional economy has allowed it to build trust between regional states.

However, ASEAN lacks effective legal mechanisms for dispute resolution and the principle of non-interference prevents it from addressing the root causes of interstate tensions. ASEAN’s capacity to prevent regional interstate tensions caused by the effects of climate change could therefore be increased through reforms to its structure and legal instruments.

While this essay has focused on assessing ASEAN’s capacity to manage interstate tensions caused by the flow-on effects of climate change, it is important to note that climate change will likely also have significant destabilising impacts within states. More analysis is necessary to assess ASEAN’s capacity to deal with these issues, which fall outside of the narrow focus of this essay.
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Glossary

AFTA - ASEAN Free Trade Area
ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EU – European Union
ICJ – International Court of Justice
IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
UN – United Nations
UNEP – United Nations Environmental Program
UNDESA – United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNSC – United Nations Security Council
Prospects and Challenges of an ASEAN-Japan-Australia Security Architecture

A Philippine Perspective

Lara Danielle Cartujano | Philippines

Abstract

In light of the changing security environment in Indo-Pacific, new security linkages are forming. During the time of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan has taken on a more proactive role in maintaining peace and security in Asia, which includes participating in ASEAN-led mechanisms, and enhancing defense cooperation with security partners in Southeast Asia and its special strategic partner, Australia. Likewise, ASEAN has been identified as a key regional driver of security that has seen increasing cooperation with Japan and Australia. With these developments, this article explored the prospects and challenges of a Japan-Australia-ASEAN security linkage after having been acknowledged as actors that can help maintain a rules-based order in the region. By drawing on key official documents, this article identified trends in the Indo-Pacific region, the shared security concerns of Japan, Australia, and ASEAN, and how they have approached these concerns. The article concludes that a Japan-Australia-ASEAN security architecture is a promising framework in balancing interests in the region, but ASEAN should be able to assert its centrality especially amidst being sandwiched in a U.S.-China conflict in the region. In the absence of a mum ASEAN about Indo-Pacific trends, it will be the strengthening Japan-Australia security partnership with their alliance with the U.S. as a cornerstone of their security policies, to balance a rising China.

Introduction

In August 2020, Shinzo Abe stepped down as Japan’s Prime Minister due to health reasons. Upon his resignation, Japan’s longest-serving Prime Minister leaves behind a legacy as the head of the state that pushed Japan to play a proactive role in maintaining peace and order in the region. The chief architect of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (simply known as “The Quad group of countries”) – comprised by the United States of America, Japan, Australia, and India – leaves this nascent security framework to his successors.

In light of the changing security environment in Asia-Pacific, as it now expands to the Indo-Pacific, Japan under Abe’s administration has participated in various ASEAN-led mechanisms and forums. Japan has also enhanced defense cooperation with their security partners in Southeast Asia, involving strengthened defense diplomacies, official development assistance, and military assistance programs (Pajon, 2013).

While the Abe-led Japan has bolstered its defense relations in SEA, Suga’s leadership has seen the advancement of Japan’s relations with Australia early on. On 17-18 November 2020, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison visited Japan, making him the first head of state to meet up with former Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, and also his first foreign trip since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The visit was considered an important trip both for the Japan-Australia bilateral (security) relations and the Quad with Japan being Australia’s key military relationship apart from the United States (McDermott, 2021).

On the other hand, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia (DFAT) (n.d.) considering ASEAN being at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, recognizes that Southeast Asia’s security situation will also affect Australia their security situation affects them as well.

Study Purpose and Research Question

In Asia-Pacific, some allies have been engaging in defense ties both with the United States, and now also with non-US treaty allies (i.e. India, Indonesia, Vietnam) due to the changing security environment in the region in which new security ties are being formed (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019).

With these developments, this article will explore the security linkage of three regional players in the Asia-Pacific – Japan-Australia-ASEAN – as actors that can help maintain a regional rules-based order. Thus, this article will aim to answer the question: What are the prospects and challenges of a Japan-Australia-ASEAN security architecture in the region?
This study hopes to contribute to the growing literature on the security issues surrounding the Indo-Pacific region, and a Japan-led regionalism, by examining this new security linkage.

The article’s objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the trends in the Indo-Pacific Region and shared concerns of Japan, Australia, and ASEAN
2. To discuss the interests and approach of Japan, Australia, and ASEAN towards the realization of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific
3. To analyze the prospects and challenges of a Japan-Australia-ASEAN security architecture in the region from a Philippine perspective

Literature Review

Evolution of Japan’s relations with ASEAN

Early literature on Japan’s role in security issues surrounding SEA have highlighted Japan’s economic diplomacy with SEA states, even becoming their main trading partner in the 60s and 70s (Khamchoo 1991, Dower 1993, Dower 1999). With the Fukuda Doctrine, Japan also became a social, political, and cultural partner of ASEAN member-states (Khamchoo,1991).

After the Cold War in the 1990s, military cooperation between Japan and ASEAN focused on human security that continues into the 2000s. (Lam 2006). In the late 2000s and early 2010, one of the main areas of cooperation has become the rise of China, when China drew a nine-dotted line map of the South China Sea, putting both Japan and Southeast Asia’s interests at risk (Leavitt 2005; Pajon 2013).

Japan also cooperates with ASEAN through bilateral security cooperation and multilateral engagements, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meetings Plus (ADMM+), the Intersessional Meeting on Maritime Security (ISM-MS) and Japan’s initiative of the ASEAN Maritime Security Forum (Pajon 2013). Tomotaka Shouji (n.d.) contends that Japan-ASEAN’s security multilateralism is largely driven by the US-Japan alliance and like-minded countries, in order to supplement their defense efforts and capability-building – for the realization of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision. Shouji (n.d.) further opines that Japan’s support for ASEAN’s capacity-building also goes outside the ADMM framework as some of the capacity-building efforts with Vietnam and the Philippines have also included Australia.

While regional security cooperation of ASEAN member states can be aligned with Japan’s FOIP pillars, FOIP is still perceived to be thinly veiled to counterbalance China (Shoji, n.d.) Satake (2019) argues, though, that the FOIP is another means for Japan to continuously engage with China, that the collective actions of the U.S., ASEAN, Australia, and other stakeholders all aim to uphold the rules-based order in the region to defend their vital interests without provoking China (Soeya, 2020). Satake (2019) adds that the expansion of the regional scope from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific creates a strategic space for further participation by more regional actors.

Middle Power Balancing in Indo-Pacific; Australia in Asia-Pacific Multilateralism

Literatures surrounding ASEAN’s role in mediating regional powers in the Indo-Pacific and being key to Japan’s FOIP regional strategy abound (Frost, 2008) (Satake, 2019)(Soeya, 2022)(Amador, n.d). Proposing the Middle Power Quad (MPQ) composed of Japan, Australia, India, and South Korea, Soeya (2020) further suggests an expanded ASEAN-MPQ framework that is devoid of United States and China participation, and would include more non-ASEAN member states. viewing the Japan-led FOIP as a means to enhance multilateral efforts in order to counterbalance China and its Belt and Road Initiative. It is also in this discourse wherein Australia is being seen as a key partner in maintaining a rules-based order in the region. Frost (2008) credits ASEAN for contributing to Australia’s security environment, as well.

Despite being recognized as a driver of regional security, ASEAN-centered multilateral processes have always been fraught with regard to their capability to provide peace and stability within the region (Quintos, 2014). Shoji (n.d.) contends that involving ASEAN member states into the growing Japan-Australia and Japan-India security cooperation with the United States would be difficult as they are adamant to challenge China. Soeya (2020) also opines that since the FOIP has been met with skepticism by ASEAN, the trilateral framework of Japan-Australia-India should make a clear conceptual distinction between the areas and agendas for middle-power cooperation.

Based on the literatures, the Japan-led regional security effort highlights ASEAN’s centrality which helps balance regional actors in the region while also engaging with Australia and India, and also making the US-Japan alliance the cornerstone of its foreign and defense policies. These developments have consequently presented challenges to ASEAN centrality as they are sandwiched in the US-China conflict.

Methodology

This article will document trends and shared concerns of Japan, Australia, and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region, followed by identifying their mutual areas of political-security. The article caps with the analysis of the prospects and challenges of a Japan-ASEAN-Australia security architecture. Drawing primarily on key official documents such as official defense white papers, government policy and government officials’ statements, this article will also refer to scholarly and academic articles about Japan, Australia, and ASEAN’s foreign and security policies, to include Filipino foreign relations and security experts. Open source English-language media reporting on Japan-Australia-ASEAN security cooperation activities will also be referenced.

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF AN ASEAN-JAPAN-AUSTRALIA SECURITY ARCHITECTURE
Discussion

Trends in the Indo-Pacific Region; Shared Areas of Concerns of Japan, Australia, and ASEAN

The Indo-Pacific Region is becoming another stage for strategic and geopolitical competition where various regional actors have been expanding and enhancing their security cooperation with other actors even outside of their bilateral cooperation with the U.S. (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019) (Galloway, 2021).

These developments can be attributed to the following trends in the region and the Quad’s shared areas of concern:

First is the concern for U.S. supremacy decline or abandonment in the region. U.S. allies in Asia are reflecting about their dependence on the U.S. and considering that they would have to pursue an independent and flexible foreign policy (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019).

Second is the rise of China and its assertiveness. Japan and Australia share the same concern around the East China Sea and the South China Sea, while Southeast Asian states have maritime and territorial disputes within the South China Sea as China claims territories within the exclusive economic zones of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam among others (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019) (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021).

Third are concerns on North Korea and its development of nuclear and chemical weapons which have compelled countries, such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, India, Philippines, and Vietnam to enhance their security cooperation with each other (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019). Japan and Australia have also agreed to work together in ensuring that the United Nations Security Council resolutions will be carried out which include repercussions for North Korea should they evade sanctions in light of unauthorized ship-to-ship transfers (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021). Japan and Australia are also working together for the resolution of North Korea’s abductions of Japanese citizens (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021).

Fourth is the situation in Myanmar in which Japan and Australia reaffirmed their steps to ensure that the Five Point of Consensus will also be carried out (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021). Fifth is the collective support of the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India for ASEAN’s centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific as key in preserving and promoting a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region (The Economic Times, 2019) (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021).

Japan’s interest and approach towards the Indo-Pacific

Former Japan Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had been proactively pushing for the renewed quadrilateral security architecture in light of the growing power and influence of China, and fears of U.S. decline or abandonment in the region. Hence, Japan has since expanded its security policy and partnership with India to compel China to focus on the Indian Ocean instead (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019). This also paved the way for Japan, Australia, and India to also pursue more security partnerships with other countries, particularly with like-minded middle powers, apart from their existing security architecture (Chanlett-Avery, 2018). This is also a way for Japan to go for more cost-effective measures in the defense industrial sector, and also for them to further build their international reputation (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019).

With Australia being Japan’s top energy supplier, Japan and Australia have elevated their special strategic partnership in 2017 by updating the acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA) and the negotiation of a visiting forces agreement (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019). With Australia being a U.S. treaty ally, as well, cooperation between the two countries make it easier since they use common practices and equipment (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019).

In 2018, the Japan-Australia special strategic partnership for the twenty-first century was established, followed by the setup of an annual 2 + 2 dialogue meetings of both countries’ defense and foreign ministers (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019). Japan and Australia also made arrangements surrounding the selling of defense hardware, holding a series various military exercises for their navies, armies, and air forces, and signing of the ACSA and information security agreements to allow the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to resupply ammunition of the Royal Australian Armed Forces with ammunition during operations (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al, 2019).

On 9 June 2021, the Foreign and Defense Ministers of Japan and Australia reaffirmed their special strategic partnership and shared strategic interests in the security, stability, and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021). In enhancing Japan-Australia security and defense cooperation, interoperability and more complex and sophisticated bilateral exercises by the JSDF and the Australian Defence Force (ADF) will be conducted (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021). Both sides also committed to ensure protection for both of the JSDF and ADF assets, weapons, and equipment, in compliance with existing laws (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021).

On the other hand, due to the tensions surrounding the South China Sea, Japan promoted bilateral and multilateral defense cooperation/exchanges and joint training exercises, and also supported capacity-building of Southeast Asian states (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021).
The security environment of the Indian and Pacific oceans, and Southeast Asia has bearings to Australia's prosperity, making Australia as one of the first countries to accept and adjust its foreign and defense policies around the the nascent vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (Lemahieu, 2020). Still firm in having a hand on how the region would be shaped, Australia will work with partners in the region, with the U.S. coming in first since Australia’s alliance with the U.S. is essential to their strategy (Green, 2019). Second is their effort to further engage China with its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, acknowledging China’s growing influence (Green, 2019).

The third partnership will be with Japan, India, South Korea, and Indonesia (Green, 2019). Partnerships include the so-called minilateral, the Triilateral Strategic Dialogue, and the Quad (Green, 2019). From these partnerships, Green (2019) highlights Japan as their special strategic partner in which the enhanced partnership includes increased engagements in infrastructure, security, intelligence, trade, and was furthered cemented with the securement of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al., 2019).

The fourth partnership is with ASEAN. Apart from being key economic partners, Australia acknowledges that Southeast Asia and ASEAN have even become more important to Australia (Green, 2019). In March 2018, former Australia Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull hosted the first ASEAN special summit in Australia, marking a new era in ASEAN-Australia relations. Following that summit, the Sydney Declaration was produced and outlined ASEAN and Australia’s areas of cooperation which encompasses “education, infrastructure, digital connectivity, smart cities, and women, peace and security” (Green, 2019). ASEAN and Australia also committed to enhancing our cooperation on maritime security, transnational crime and defense, as exemplified in the ten-year A$80 million counter-trafficking program that will support the region's efforts to stamp human trafficking (Green, 2019).

Australia also reaffirms its commitment to strengthening ASEAN-led forums, such as the ADMM+, ARF, most especially the East Asia Summit, wherein big players such as the United States, China, Japan, India and South Korea also discuss Indo-Pacific concepts, North Korea, issues surrounding the Rakhine State, the South China Sea, and cybersecurity and the threat of terrorism (Green, 2019).

ASEAN's Outlook in the Indo-Pacific

In 2019, ASEAN published the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific statement. Stating that since Southeast Asia lies at the heart of both Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean region, ASEAN takes on the role of shaping the economic and security architecture in the region.

The Outlook on the Indo-Pacific also puts emphasis on strengthening ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the East Asia Summit (EAS), ARF, ADMM-Plus, the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), and similar forums as the ASEAN Plus Ones (ASEAN, 2019).

The Outlook also outlines the areas of cooperation for the stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific. First is maritime cooperation, wherein by complying with international law, it is hoped that maritime issues will be prevented, managed, and resolved peacefully and comprehensively (ASEAN, 2019). Second, the Outlook reinforces that interconnectivity within Asia Pacific and the Indo Pacific would require building infrastructures, preservation and sustainability of marine resources would be tantamount (ASEAN, 2019). The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific received immense support from the Quad group of countries. The US, India, Australia and Japan are also supportive of ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN-led mechanisms (The Economic Times, 2019).

Conclusion

This study reviewed the current trends and perspectives regarding the changing geopolitical environment in the Indo-Pacific Region that is fast becoming another hotspot for geostrategic issues. With the progressing trends in the geopolitical environment stemming from Asia Pacific, which has now expanded to the Indo-Pacific, it is expected that more new security linkages will be formed as the need arises.

Right now, Japan, ASEAN, Australia, and the rest of the region are sandwiched between U.S.-China competition. From here on, Japan and Australia's special strategic partnership is expected to become stronger and is expected to be one of the forerunners in leading the security of the region as they will maintain U.S. engagement while balancing China and maintaining friendly relations with other Asian countries. To facilitate further cooperation between the JSDF and ADM, they would have to address concerns surrounding the RAA. Enabling both joint military training and exercises in each other's soils, the RAA will greatly enhance bilateral security and defense relations of both countries when ratified. It is still unclear, however, if Australia will accede to the death penalty in Japan should there be any casualties during the training exercises.

Both Japan and Australia also support ASEAN centrality, ASEAN-led mechanisms, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. With regards to the Indo-Pacific, however, caught between U.S.-China competition, ASEAN remains neutral. While some ASEAN member states recognize that U.S. supremacy in the region would be able to balance China’s assertiveness, their economic interdependence with China particularly with the Belt and Road Initiative render them mute. In this sense, ASEAN’s role as a driver of regional security remains at a crossroads.

Japan and Australia would have to fully engage and cooperate with ASEAN in various areas of cooperation.
They can also leverage their existing partnerships in engaging with ASEAN to present alternatives to the Belt and Road Initiative as the ASEAN Outlook in the Indo-Pacific itself puts heavy emphasis on connectivity and the alleviation of economic concerns. Australia is, after all, one of the biggest trading partners of ASEAN, and Japan’s official development assistance and comprehensive economic aids to Southeast Asia help keep its positive view from Southeast Asia states.

On the security front, Japan and Australia should also keep engaging with Southeast Asian member states with whom they share similar concerns on a bilateral level. The Philippines, for one, has been seeing more engagement with Australia, such as the Modified Land Mobile Training conducted by the Philippine Army and the ADF (Philippine Army, 2021). The 56th Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, General Jose C. Faustino, also states that the AFP acknowledges the importance the Indo-Pacific Endeavor initiated by the ADF (Armed Forces of the Philippines, 2021). Australian Ambassador, Steven Robinson, also expresses his pleasure for the opportunity have three Australian Navy vessels conducting exercises with the AFP in Philippines waters (Armed Forces of the Philippines, 2021).

The Indo-Pacific Endeavor 2021 was spearheaded by Australia as a means to “to enhance bilateral relations with Southeast Asian countries through military and other engagements” (Limos, 2021). On 25 September 25, the Philippines and Australia held exercises off the coast of Cabra Island in Mindoro where the Philippines sent the BRP Antonio Luna warship to the exercises, while Australia sent Her Majesty’s Australian Ships (HMAS) Canberra III, Anzac, and Sirius (Limos, 2021).

Also in September 2021, the Australian government donated PHP57 million worth of medical equipment, supplies, and personal protective equipment (PPE) to the AFP as part of the expanded coverage of Australia’s Defense Cooperation Program (Armed Forces of the Philippines, 2021).

Japan, on the other hand, has also identified the Philippines also as a key partner, having signed the Japan-Philippines Dialogue on Maritime and Oceanic Affairs in 2011, the Philippine-Japan Statement of Intent on Defense Cooperation and Exchanges in 2012, and elevating it by signing a Memorandum of Agreement on Defense and Cooperation and Exchanges in 2014. From 2016 onwards, Japan and the Philippines have been cooperating bilaterally through increased ship visits supplemented with diplomatic and economic aid, and also on a multilateral level during the annual U.S.-Philippines-Japan-Australia Balikatan exercises (Harold, Grossman, Harding, et al., 2019). A Japan-Australia-ASEAN security architecture is a promising framework in balancing interests in the region, but this lies with how ASEAN will act as a whole to balance external powers. As the Quad group of countries has expressed support in ASEAN-led mechanisms and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, concrete measures and projects should be implemented.


Bibliography


Where Are the Women: Australia’s Role in Mainstreaming Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda in ASEAN

Muhammad Anugrah Utama | Indonesia

Abstract

The security and stability of ASEAN are crucial for Australian strategic interests. However, in many religious or ethnic violence, terrorism, extremism, persecution, and the recent Rohingya conflict, women are often seen merely as a victim instead of an agent of peace. Unlike other regions, most conflicts in ASEAN are non-traditional in nature, thus women might have a traditional role in conflict resolution, but they are often not recognized. This paper aims to question where are women in peacebuilding and security efforts in ASEAN and Australia’s role in advancing the norm. This paper finds the potential in the ASEAN-Australia Women, Peace, and Security Dialogue conducted in 2018 and in 2021 to strengthen women empowerment in peace and security sector in ASEAN by emphasizing the role of Australia in introducing WPS norms to ASEAN and further recommends to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN in mainstreaming women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda.

Keyword: ASEAN; Australia; UNSCR 1325; Women Peace and Security

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) increasingly faces a constantly evolving array of security threats. Jurgen Ruland (2005) stated that in the last 10-15 years in ASEAN, traditional inter-state war and security threats such as arms races & territorial disputes have been replaced by non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, organized crime, migration, separatism, piracy, energy shortages, and many more. The Covid-19 pandemic – being a non-traditional security threat – brought attention to a more human dimension of security, as emphasized by Caballero-Anthony & Gong (2020). This issue falls more into the prism of non-traditional security issues which is often marginalized in the discussion of security studies as the privileged international entity, the state, is not the referent object.

While we see the increasing human dimension as a referent object, ASEAN still heavily relies on statist approaches based on power and national sovereignty (Caballero-Anthony, 2004). This approach structurally exclude a certain part of the human community in the peace and security process. One of the basic characteristics of past efforts is that women are heavily marginalized when it comes to maintaining security and building peace in the ASEAN region. Myanmar is one example where women are excluded from peace processes despite being most affected in the recent unrest with many losing their families and falling victim to sexual assault during conflicts (TNI, 2016). Women are not only victims, however, but are also often perpetrators as several ASEAN countries saw an increase in women combatants and terrorists. Recognizing the gender aspect and its exclusion in peacebuilding efforts is essential to create long-lasting peace in ASEAN.

The Women, Security, and Peace (WPS) agenda – coined by the UNSC Resolution 1325 – is based on the idea that peace is more long-lasting when women have equal participation in the prevention of violent conflict and peacebuilding. In ASEAN, only Indonesia and the Philippines to date have developed a national plan regarding the UNSCR 1325. ASEAN is yet to develop a regional action plan despite the African Union and European Union are already implementing their own. Some scholars have pointed out that the WPS agenda has lagged due to ASEAN’s institutional build-ups and capacities (Davies, 2016). The ASEAN way, especially non-intervention principles, and the fragmented and compartmentalized community is said to hamper the institutionalization of WPS norms, putting women empowerment out of political-security community.

However, since 2017, ASEAN has progressed rapidly as the organization issued its Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace, and Security to foster a collective view and commitment to the WPS agenda.
To catalyze the progress, the Australian government together with ASEAN held the ASEAN-Australian Women, Peace and Security Dialogue in 2018 and 2021. The Dialogue resulted in a recommendation regarding the implementation of the WPS agenda, one of its progresses includes the establishment of the ASEAN Women in Peace Registry. However, no significant progress made after, especially in the development of regional and action plans. This paper does not just stop by answering why the progress lagged, but also to answer how the process could be fostered and what role regional actors, especially Australia could play. Australia is chosen because of its past effort in institutionalizing WPS agenda and due to their strategic position and role in the region’s security, especially in ASEAN.

This paper argues that cooperation with Australia might strengthen women’s role in the peace and security sector in ASEAN by introducing norms about women’s political participation and leadership in decision-making. This paper underlines the marginalized role of women in peacebuilding and security efforts in ASEAN and Australia’s role in advancing the discourse through Australia’s ASEAN WPS initiative by taking lessons from the ASEAN-Australian Women, Peace and Security Dialogue in 2018 and 2021. It found out that the dialogue successfully put pressure and introduce global norm to ASEAN, however existing cognitive priors by local interlocutors hampers the progress of norm localization by putting women merely in socio-economic empowerment. To prove this argument, this paper will further draw on Pankhurst’s (2000) and Steans’ (1998) feminist approach to security & peacebuilding and Amitav Acharya’s norm localization theory (2004) to instigate the process of introducing the WPS norm to ASEAN by regional actor such as Australia.

The previous literature has focused its attention on why ASEAN fails to institutionalize the WPS norm. The first group of scholars focuses on the ASEAN Way and its infrastructure gaps (Nair, 2015) to explain the failure of institutionalization. While Davies (2016) focuses on the elite perception of women as a driver of socio-economic development, thus political participation is not seen as a priority. By reflecting upon the distinct characteristics of ASEAN, this research tends to side with the latter view, however, it sees the WPS agenda as a new norm introduced to the region and the intersubjectivity that circulates the norm adoption.

The previous literature has yet to decouple the WPS as a Western norm of gender equality with ASEAN’s gender norms. Therefore, as a new norm, there is a need to not just introduce the norm but to also translate it into local context as stated by Kunz (2021). This is why the role of norm entrepreneur and interlocutor, in this case Australia, ASEAN, and its member states are equally important. This paper has found that the political participation of women in peacebuilding and security policy is a norm that needs to be introduced in ASEAN. Further, the paper analyses Australia’s case of norm promotion through the ASEAN-Australian Women, Peace and Security Dialogue.

By filling the gap between theory and practice, this research is aimed to shed light on the progress of WPS agenda beyond its hardships and examines the role regional players, especially Australia, could play.

Methodology
This paper will conduct its research using a case study analysis on Australia’s role, especially in the ASEAN-Australian Women, Peace, and Security Dialogue to represent and prove how significant the role of regional actors is in promoting norms pertaining to gender equality in ASEAN. This research will utilize a socio-constructivist approach from Acharya (2004) in scrutinizing norm promotion in the context of ASEAN, be it at the regional level as an organization or at the national level as member states. Besides study cases, this research will use literature reviews in order to capture qualitative data based on secondary textual sources, especially journal articles, books, online articles, reports, and many more to complete our understanding of how the norms are interpreted globally and in ASEAN particularly.

Discussion
Centering Human as Security Referent Objects in ASEAN-Australia Relations
Historically, the Southeast Asia region was faced with lots of conventional security threats such as territorial disputes and arms races. During the post-colonial period, countries in Southeast Asia began negotiating overlapping territorial claims such as Singapore’s split from Malaysia, Timor Leste’s independence from Malaysia, and numerous border disputes (Jenne, 2017). During the cold war, the threat of interstate war was even more evident in the Indochina region such as Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia (Ruland, 2005). ASEAN’s infamous “ASEAN Way” doctrine of non-interference has long been materialized before the end of the Cold War as it is a way for ASEAN to hedge its domestic affairs, especially from external military threats by privileging state sovereignty. During this period, traditional security issues have privileged state as the only referent object and security threats were mainly military and territorial.

The end of the Cold War in the 1990s marked the shift of ASEAN states to consider non-traditional issues. During this period, Caballero-Anthony (2004) argued that security discourses in ASEAN have led to a broader view of security or “comprehensive security.” ASEAN member states began to consider economic, socio-cultural, and environmental aspects of security. After 9/11 terrorist attacks, ASEAN countries have begun to increasingly view the transnational dimension of attacks. However, Caballero-Anthony pointed out that security issues continue to be seen from the prism of state security. It is concluded that despite the changing security environment, ASEAN has been slow to adapt its approaches and has been relying on statist approach and sovereignty.
Since the 2000s, the prevalence of terrorist attacks, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and the condition in Burma has led to the rethinking and shift of security discourses in ASEAN (Nishikawa, 2010). Caballero-Anthony (2004)’s observation of statist approaches on power and national sovereignty has shifted to a more transnationalized approach of ASEAN as observed by Wibisono (2017) through ASEAN security infrastructures such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM). However, there have been growing critiques of how this process often excludes women’s participation despite women having become not only victims but often combatants and even mediators such as in the Aceh conflict (Lee, 2018).

It is evident that nowadays the threat with human security dimension is gaining prevalence even after the covid-19 pandemic. Religious, ethnic violence, terrorism, persecution of minority groups, and recent Rohingya conflict have been the attention of not only ASEAN member states, but also the international communities and regional actors, especially Australia. Australia’s threat perception has been always concerned with the security threats from the North (Bull, 1977). Being its immediate neighbor in the north, the security and stability of ASEAN states are strategic to Australia, especially considering the changing transnational nature of security in the region.

Australia has taken efforts in being a norm entrepreneur by advocating certain types of norms as means of conflict prevention and crisis management in the Indo-Pacific region (Carr & Baldino, 2015). Carr & Baldino also observed how the role of Australia as a middle-power is important in advocating a “pragmatic normative” approach to defense such as dialogue & practice, despite changing and complex security environment. Issues such as religious extremism, terrorism, ethnoreligious conflicts, and persecution of minorities are of human and normative dimensions and are not adequate to be solved through a merely state-centric approach that the ASEAN state focuses on. Seeing the involvement of women both as perpetrators, traditional mediators, and victims in these conflicts raises the urgency of introducing a gender-sensitive conflict reconciliation to ASEAN.

Locating Women in ASEAN and Member State’s Security Policies

Women in ASEAN’s conflict resolution and security sector reform (SSR) policies are often seen merely as a victim instead of an agency to peace itself. Their traditional role in conflict resolution and local peacebuilding efforts are often not recognized and marginalized. The absence of distinct regional action plan on the WPS Agenda nullified the aim to increase women’s participation in political or security discussions (Nair, 2015). Moreover, often security sector reform in ASEAN has yet recognized the gendered nature of conflicts. Women only constituted 13 percent of negotiators, 6 percent of mediators, while seven in 10 peace processes do not include women mediators (UNSC, 2020).

Steans (1998) highlighted the importance of recognizing the gendered nature of conflict in which conflicts often affect women differently. In ASEAN, we are now seeing the relevance of this theorization. First, we see the proliferation of sexual violence not just as a consequence of conflict but as a tactic in the Rakhine state (Bradley, 2019). Second, women are increasingly becoming perpetrators of conflict such as becoming suicide bomber terrorism in Indonesia. Third, women are losing their families, become vulnerable psychosocially and economically as they are dependent on the breadwinner, and often engage in revenge acts in Moro, Philippines (Dwyer & Cagoco-Guiam, n.d.).

Oftentimes, peacebuilding accords do not involve and do not recognize the role of women as traditional conflict resolvers, mediators, conciliators in the community, such as evident in the Aceh case in Indonesia (Lee, 2018). During the peace talks in Myanmar, despite women being the victim of sexual violence, only 14% of the participants of the Union Peace Conference were women, far from the target of 30% (MacGregor, 2016). Not just in Myanmar, but peace talks and antiterrorism in Thailand, Malaysia, and many ASEAN countries historically have been marginalizing women from involvement.

Pankhurst (2000) underlines the reduction of women as mere victims. By stressing the different experience and their role in peacebuilding, Pankhurst argues that peace is more long-lasting with the involvement of women. There is a need for ASEAN countries to see the gendered nature of conflict whereas women are not the only victim, but also an agent of peace, but several efforts should be made by member states. The UNSC Resolution 1325 serves as a basis for the idea that peace is more long-lasting when women are equal partners in the prevention of violent conflict and peacebuilding. UNSCR 1325 coined the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and is based on four pillars: Participation, Protection, Prevention, and Relief and Recovery.

However, ASEAN member states have progressed rapidly and made a huge milestone in 2017 by adopting a Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). ASEAN also has conducted the ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace, and Security. Despite this progress, many peacebuilding efforts were made without incorporating the values in the UNSCR 1325. Compared to other regional organizations such as the African and European Union, ASEAN currently is yet to have a WPS regional action plan. failed to recognize all forms of violence against women and fails to recognize the role of women in conflict prevention both in governance as well as in relief and recovery (Nair, 2015).

It is also important to take into consideration that countries in ASEAN have significant gaps in their progress towards realizing the WPS agenda.
In ASEAN only Indonesia and the Philippines to date have developed a national action plan based on UNSC Resolution 1325. The Philippines is the most progressive by having a very robust NAP, while Indonesia currently is progressing through gender-sensitive policy mainstreaming, including gender-sensitive deradicalization programs. Unfortunately, considerable efforts are yet to be seen in other ASEAN member states. Thus, the role of women in ASEAN and member states’ security policies are indeed increasingly recognized, but it does not progress significantly enough.

**ASEAN-Australia Women, Peace, and Security Dialogues & Progresses in ASEAN**

Australia is engaging ASEAN through the ASEAN-Australia Women, Peace & Security Dialogue in Melbourne, Australia. The first dialogue discussed the implementation of the WPS agenda in ASEAN while the second dialogue focuses more on practical matters such as recovery from Covid-19. Both dialogues are Australia’s commitment to introducing and strengthening the WPS norm in ASEAN. The first dialogue is a follow-up to the joint statement on WPS in 2017 in which regional stakeholders share lessons on the implementation of WPS agenda in ASEAN. During the second meeting, Australia even promised AUD 10 million for the strengthening of cooperation in women, peace, and security in the region. in exchange for commitment of elite leaders to enhance women’s leadership in decision-making (VGP, 2021).

The first dialogue discussed the importance of having a national action plan (NAPs) as a commitment for the government to mainstream the provision of the four pillars of UNSCR1325. The dialogue also encourages the establishment of WPS agenda on the regional level. The dialogue recognizes important pillars, institutions, mechanisms, and infrastructure in ASEAN’s WPS agenda, viewing these as building blocks of WPS agenda in ASEAN. The dialogue recognized important ASEAN mechanisms focusing on gender equality such as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance, and the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR).

This dialogue precipitated the ASEAN Women in Peace Registry (AWPR) in 2018 which is a creative initiative aimed at mobilizing resources and consolidating knowledge for capacity building and advocacy on a gendered approach to peace and conflict in the region (ASEAN, n.d.). The dialogue also paved the way for a more progressive WPS agenda. In 2019, ASEAN conducted its first Regional Symposium on Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and ASEAN WPS Advisory Group.

Moreover, the dialogue recognizes the “economic empowerment” as cognitive priors of the ASEAN countries. ASEAN (n.d.) recognizes the reinforcement and interconnectivity of women and peace and therefore the WPS agenda is seen through an economic integration perspective. Women’s economic empowerment is seen as a way to advance women’s agency in conflict prevention, resolution, and recovery (ASEAN, n.d.) With focuses on socio-cultural issues and economic empowerment, Australia is localizing its WPS promotion in the dialogue by recognizing these as a means for women’s involvement in the political security dimension.

Acharya’s (2004) theorization states that countries do not just accept norm promotion, but reconstruct the norm to fit the cognitive priors of the local people. The WPS agenda which is mostly talking about political participation of women is localized into socio-cultural and economic empowerment of women as a means to achieve participation in the security field. Davies (2016) further elaborated that women in ASEAN – especially among ASEAN elite leaders – are seen as non-political and belong to the socio-economic and development sphere. This can be seen in how institutions dealing with WPS are mostly within the socio-cultural community – the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) & the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC).

Other forms of norm localization are the usage of dialogue and recommendation as means to achieve the goal. The usage of dialogue instead of political statement, condemnation, or direct capacity-building from the Australian government is in line with the ASEAN way which is championing incremental and informal channels to cooperation, such as lengthy consultations and dialogues (Katsuyama, 2003). This pragmatic approach is even more evident in the second dialogue as it highlighted the sectoral and material aspects of the WPS agenda, including covid-recovery, increasing economic power of women, as well as challenges not just limited to conflict and violence, but also poverty and social inequality (VGP, 2021). This pragmatic approach engages the ASEAN and put pressure on ASEAN policymakers to develop a regional action plan, but seems not enough to transform and introduce norms in the domestic context.

The dialogue with Australian government is the process of introducing global norm a normative actor. However, these norms as Acharya (2004) emphasized are not directly adopted, but localized by interlocutors which is the ASEAN national governments and ASEAN policymakers themselves. This is why the norms are not localized uniformly, but generally accepted more and faster in some countries compared to the other. Currently, ASEAN is on the process of developing a regional action plan (ASEAN, 2022), but to date only two countries have a national action plan. The norms of non-intervention and consensus also made it difficult for these two countries to influence each other. This explains why the ASEAN organization and member states has been stagnant in institutionalizing the WPS norms both on regional and national level.
Conclusion

Different from Australia’s political participation approach, ASEAN has taken a more localized, grassroots, and socio-economic approach to the empowerment of women as a tool to catalyze the WPS agenda. This is reflected in ASEAN’s reference to the interconnectivity of “economics and peace” and articulating the WPS agenda in the context of economic integration in which women’s economic empowerment is seen as a means for the implementation of a long-term WPS agenda.

The ASEAN-Australia Dialogue on WPS recognizes these differences and adopted a more “localized” plan on ASEAN’s WPS. However, despite signs of progress, there is a need to increase women’s participation and leadership through political means such as negotiation of conflict resolutions, peacekeeping operations, agreements, policy, and decision-making. Socio-economic empowerment is important; however, it is not the only channel. Australia also needs to recognize the compartmentalization of ASEAN’s bureaucracy vertically (within institutions) and horizontally (within member states).

Australia could play a role by inducing norms and deconstructing gender roles stressing the importance of introducing a regional and national action plan which sets a standard on women’s participation and leadership in decision-making when it comes to political and security issues. The Australian government could capitalize on its bilateral relations with Indonesia and the Philippines – as these two countries progressed the most – to promote WPS agenda in ASEAN.

Australia could also put the attention also to political-security institutions in ASEAN and amplify how political participation and representation are essential means for women empowerment in the security area by making visible women in security, be it as a victim, mediators, or even perpetrators. This could be done by engaging ASEAN elites through dialogues and appointing a female representative or envoy. As Australia also aims to be a norm entrepreneur in the region, the government could expand Australia-ASEAN WPS Initiative to include Pacific countries as well while also not forgetting the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society.
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From 1974 when Australia became ASEAN’s first dialogue partner, to becoming its strategic partner in 2014, and finally acquiring a status of a ‘comprehensive strategic partner’ in 2021, ASEAN – Australia relations have been functionally expanding. As noted by Wood and He (2014), a complex and dynamic web of bi and multilateral engagements involving multiple domains has enveloped and persisted. Indeed, evinced by being a founding member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994, the East Asia Summit in 2007, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus in 2010, Australia has been intricately involved in the crafting of the Asian regional architecture. Within the economic sector, the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement has resulted in booming trade with the regional entity, culminating in Australia’s trade with ASEAN totalling an impressive trade volume of US$123 billion in 2019 putting ASEAN in Australia's top three for trading partners (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.).

As time would tell, those calls did not materialise and ASEAN-Australia relations, though still robust and healthy, are currently at a critical juncture. Beyond the flourishing relations lies a dwindling Australian perception of the strategic value of Southeast Asia in the context of the US-China competition. Terming it as a “Southeast Asia Step Down” due to the “Pacific Step-up” policy as Wyeth (2020) labelled Australia’s dwindling interests in the Southeast Asia region in favor of engagement with the South Pacific region since the Morrison administration. In this sense, the critical question lies: Have ASEAN–Australia relations reached their peak? And how can ASEAN-Australia relations be further enhanced? This paper will argue from the position that ASEAN and Australia still have much room to expand upon and that one underexplored avenue of ASEAN-Australia relations is that of transnational maritime security. By extension, this paper contends that cooperating in maritime security, three implications will arise. First, beyond the obvious case of closer cooperation with ASEAN, Australia can edge itself closer to the ‘Middle Ring’, which is increasingly gaining strategic value as Australia doubles down on its Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Additionally, ASEAN and Australia enjoy a solid social-cultural relationship, with substantial people-to-people exchanges across the two entities. In the year 2016, roughly 3 million Australian travellers visited ASEAN states, while more than a million travellers from Southeast Asia visited Australia (Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet [n.d.]). Australian universities are also home to more than 100 000 students from Southeast Asia (Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet [n.d.]). Such interactions on multiple dimensions certainly generated a web of complex interdependence between the two entities. In short, ASEAN – Australia relations can be viewed as blossoming and will remain robust for the near future. In fact, there was such optimism regarding ASEAN-Australia relations after Australia successfully hosted the ASEAN – Australia special summit in 2018 that renewed calls were made for the Turnbull government to join and integrate Australia into ASEAN (Cook, 2018).

As time would tell, those calls did not materialise and ASEAN-Australia relations, though still robust and healthy, are currently at a critical juncture. Beyond the flourishing relations lies a dwindling Australian perception of the strategic value of Southeast Asia in the context of the US-China competition. Terming it as a “Southeast Asia Step Down” due to the “Pacific Step-up” policy as Wyeth (2020) labelled Australia’s dwindling interests in the Southeast Asia region in favor of engagement with the South Pacific region since the Morrison administration. In this sense, the critical question lies: Have ASEAN–Australia relations reached their peak? And how can ASEAN-Australia relations be further enhanced? This paper will argue from the position that ASEAN and Australia still have much room to expand upon and that one underexplored avenue of ASEAN-Australia relations is that of transnational maritime security. By extension, this paper contends that cooperating in maritime security, three implications will arise. First, beyond the obvious case of closer cooperation with ASEAN, Australia can edge itself closer to the 'Middle Ring', which is increasingly gaining strategic value as Australia doubles down on its Indo-Pacific Strategy.
Second, by shedding light on the vast potential behind maritime cooperation, it opens an additional diplomatic angle which states can adopt to its repertoire of statesmanship. Lastly, this paper contributes to the theoretical debates on whether non-traditional security creates more avenues for cooperation or concerns as it proves that non-traditional security could be a new realm for cooperation amongst states.

**Australia: A Southeast Asian Step Down for Pacific Step Up?**

According to O’Keefe (2020), academic discourses about Chinese influence in the South Pacific have been steadily growing and are increasingly taking on a securitized edge. This alarming trend is further exacerbated by a report from the Lowy Institute that concluded there is a susceptibility amongst the Pacific countries to incur unsustainable debt owing to their structural weaknesses (Rajah, 2019). Consequently, this vulnerability could be exploited by China as the report cautioned that the Pacific countries could fall victim to China’s debt-trap diplomacy. To be sure, as Australia has long regarded the South Pacific as its sphere of influence, such a phenomenon has undoubtedly alarmed Canberra. Certainly, in Australia’s 2017 Foreign Policy White paper and 2016 Defense White Paper, the importance of the Pacific Islands was affirmed and underscored. Recognising that the stability and prosperity of the islands are intricately tied to that of Australia’s, the Australian government launched the ‘Pacific Step-up’ policy in 2017 to continually strengthen and deepen engagement with the Pacific islands. To date, the step-up policy has become one of Australia’s key foreign policy objectives. Australia has directed $1.44 billion worth of development assistance to the region in 2020-2021 and has enjoyed a remarkable increase in diplomatic overtures between Australian and Pacific leaders (Australian Government, n.d.).

Although scholars like Pearlman (2019) and Zhang (2020) have been quick to note that the Pacific Step Up is a clear move to counter Chinese advances in the Pacific, they remain skeptical of its effectiveness. Pearlman (2019) contended that the Step-Up program would be ineffectual as it fails to address the inherent problem of debt susceptibility of the Pacific countries. Zhang (2020) furthered that China may respond more assertively in the region if it perceives its interests, particularly its Belt and Road Initiative, are threatened by Australia. Scholars like Lemahieu (2020) and Wyeth (2020) added another dimension to this debate by highlighting the trade-off involved – terming it as a Southeast Asian step down for a Pacific Step up – and evidenced by a redirection of annual overseas development assistance from Asia to the Pacific nations. Citing Australia’s lack of diplomatic capacity, Wyeth regretted that Australia had to prioritise the Pacific countries over engagement with Southeast Asia even when Australia should be engaging with the Southeast Asia region to preserve the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. To be sure, similar calls were made by the U.S Ambassador to Australia, Arthur Culvahouse, who suggested Australia extend its engagement beyond the Pacific region to Southeast Asia (Tillett, 2020).

Indeed, Australia’s re-engagement with Southeast Asia would be critical to buttress its Indo-Pacific strategy. This is especially so when the Australian 2017 Foreign Policy White paper has denoted that Southeast Asia states constitute the ‘Middle Ring’ and “sits at the nexus of strategic competition in [the] Indo-Pacific” (Australian Government, n.d.). This denotes Southeast Asia’s indispensable status in Australia’s manoeuvring amidst the US-China competition. In fact, Medcalf (2020) suggested that Australian foreign policy ought to be premised upon middle powers’ cooperation in the absence of the United States as a security guarantor. Such propositions were affirmed by Lemahieu & Leng (2020) through the Asia Power Index report which highlighted that if great powers fail to establish primacy in Asia, middle powers will become more efficacious and influential to constitute the marginal difference. As such, although middle powers in isolation are ineffectual in influencing the regional order, collectively, middle powers could prove decisive in the ongoing US-China competition. Indeed, as surmised by Lemahieu (2020), as Australia and the middle powers of Southeast Asia share more overlaps of geographically derived interests than any other Indo-Pacific major powers, interactions with Southeast Asia would generate far-reaching effects on Australian diplomacy and foreign policy. Viewed this way, Australia’s re-engagement with ASEAN and Southeast Asia, home of a few middle powers, becomes pertinent and necessary. To this degree, ASEAN-Australia relations have room for improvement; thus, it has yet to reach its peak.

**Avenues for enhanced ASEAN-Australia Cooperation**

The next question then beckons: How can Australia strengthen and improve its relations with Southeast Asia? Given the fact that Australia and ASEAN relations appear solid and substantial across the political, economic, and social realm, as established in the previous paragraph, is there an avenue which Australia and ASEAN should look to foster stronger relations? Advancing Akaha’s (2002) point that the domain of non-traditional security opens up cooperative opportunities, this paper advocates that Australia and ASEAN can look towards the domain of non-traditional security to foster stronger relations. Specifically, this paper advances the notion that Australia and ASEAN should look to formulate more cooperative linkages in the promotion and maintenance of maritime security. According to McNicholas (2016), transnational crimes such as piracy, armed robbery at sea, trafficking of people and illicit goods, illegal fishing, and marine pollution constitute issues of maritime security. However, for simplicity and clarity’s sake, this paper will associate piracy as the prime concern of maritime security.

The reason for this emphasis on maritime security is twofold. Firstly, relative to the agenda of terrorism, cooperation between ASEAN and Australia in terms of maritime security is still underdeveloped. Since the Bali Bombing in 2003, the agenda of counter-terrorism has dominated ASEAN and Australian discussions on nontraditional security issues (Noortmann, 2014). AN UNEXPLORED AVENUE
The persistent attention towards terrorism appears to crowd out other equally pressing issues such as maritime crime. To be sure, the agendas of counter-terrorism and maritime security were both discussed through institutionalized frameworks such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. These agendas are also actualized through the agreed Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Partnership. However, the domain of counter-terrorism enjoys considerably more attention and is significantly better institutionalized than other non-traditional security issues. Indeed, on the agenda of counterterrorism alone, ASEAN and Australia have had two joint declarations in 2004 and 2016 reflecting the need to cooperate against international terrorism and further affirmed their commitment through the signing of a Memoranda of Understanding in 2018. This reflects the highly institutionalized nature of the counter-terrorism agenda which meant that Australia should look beyond its disproportionate attention towards terrorism and realize the huge cooperative potential that lies in the domain of maritime security.

Secondly and in conjunction with the first point, there is an urgent need for such a cooperative mechanism to be established. The lack of maritime security presents itself as an endemic issue in Southeast Asia. Certainly, the United Nations has labelled Southeast Asia waters as the most dangerous in the world (UN, 2014). In 2020, the International Maritime Bureau reported that there were 195 cases of piracy attacks, of which 32% occurred in Southeast Asia (IMB, 2020). This is contrasted to a total of 162 cases that occurred in the past year. In essence, piracy and maritime security, or lack thereof, is still very much a pertinent issue which the region must better tackle. This presents Australia with a valuable entry point and opportunities to foster cooperative linkages with the region.

**Australia and the provision of Maritime Security in Asia**

Evincéd by Figure 1 below detailing the critical sea lanes of communication, it is clear that global shipping is heavily reliant on the Malacca straits. Indeed, the Malacca straits is one of the busiest and vital chokepoints of the world and has earned the moniker of a major artery of the world’s economy (Mulyono, 2014). An estimation by Mak (2007) suggested that more than 60,000 vessels are sailing through the sea lanes of communication annually.

These vessels are responsible for transporting nearly 50% of the world’s crude oil, 66% of natural gases, and 30% of global trade (Li & Cheng, 2006; Mitropoulos, 2006).

These amount to roughly 50% of the annual global energy supplies and more than one trillion USD in goods and services annually. Thus, given that Australia is a major energy exporter and that Australia – Asian trade passes primarily through the Southeast Asia region, Australia has a stake in ensuring safe and continued access to the sea lanes. This is especially so when Australia’s total trade with Asia was valued at $132.9 billion, far outstripping trade with Europe ($40.5 billion, with the Middle East (9.8 billion), and Africa (5 billion) (Forbes, 2011).

Australia has placed a high premium in its protection of seaborne energy flow. The Australian government has tasked the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to protect shipping lanes as part of its defense policy to safeguard its trade vulnerability (Parliament of Australia, 2009). In other words, Australia possesses a legitimate justification and obligations, backed by its firm political will, to uphold and preserve security in the Southeast Asia waters. This places Australia in a befitting position to supplement Southeast Asian efforts in dealing with maritime security. The following section will examine existing efforts to combat maritime piracy. Shedding light on existing frameworks and arrangements would give a better indication of where Australia can engage the littoral states in security cooperation.

**Southeast Asian Efforts in Maritime Security**

**Local Efforts**

The littoral states of Southeast Asia – Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore – adopt a methodical approach by incorporating a combination of local level and regional level approaches towards maritime security. Individually among the littoral states, a designated state commission was appointed to oversee national maritime security within territorial waters. The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, Indonesian Bakorkamla, and the Singapore Navy function as the state commissions to maintain maritime law and order (Djalal, 2004), deter and apprehend pirates, and facilitate intelligence gathering within its sovereign waters (Bhar, n.d.). Additionally, these state commissions function as the bodies and point of contact for the coordination of anti-piracy efforts among the littoral states.

**Figure 1**

*Main shipping routes and strategic passages*

Source: Luo, 2013

Note. This figure displays the critical sea lanes of communication in the world.
Among the littoral states, two cooperative mechanisms - "Hot Pursuit" agreements and the Malacca Straits Patrol - are worth mentioning.

The "Hot Pursuit" agreements are established by Indonesia with Singapore and Malaysia respectively (Djalal, 2003). Based on these "Hot Pursuit" agreements, state A, which is pursuing pirates would be accorded with a 'limited' right to pursue the pirates by state B if the pirates attempt to escape through state B's territorial waters. Thus, under the framework of such agreements, foreign warships are now permissible to enter the sovereign waters of another state during a pirate pursuit, but only if the host state is informed (Mulyono, 2014). This is critical as prior to the availability of the 'Hot Pursuits' agreement, anti-piracy efforts could only be undertaken within one's jurisdiction (Mo, 2002). This means that pirates could exploit this loophole to avoid apprehension. Indeed, as Roach (2005) surmises, pirates, unlike law enforcement officials, do not respect maritime boundaries. Viewed this way, the 'Hot Pursuit' agreements bridge and reduce the maritime boundary loophole that pirates have been exploiting for years.

Working in tandem with the 'Hot Pursuit' agreements, the littoral states cooperate in a joint patrol initiative. Established in 2005, the Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP) is a collaborative effort between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore to jointly share assets, resources, and information to better counter-piracy. The MSP incorporates a multidimensional approach, encompassing and integrating joint operations with intelligence gathering. Under the broad framework of MSP lies secondary arrangements such as the Malacca Straits Sea Patrol (MSSP), Eyes-in-the-Sky initiative (EiS), and the Intelligence Exchange Group (IEG) (Singapore Ministry of Defence, 2015).

As the name suggests, the Malacca Straits Sea Patrol (MSSP) is a joint patrol involving around 20 naval assets, operating under the command of their respective state's defense directorate (Ali & Chen, 2004). As the MSSP is directly regulating and engaging pirates in the Straits, the MSSP is regarded as the prime deterrent and policing entity in the Malacca Straits. Certainly, for a successful patrol, the MSSP would rely on critical real-time information to be passed to the vessels. The “Eyes-in-the-Sky” (EiS) initiative was created in 2005 just for that purpose. The EiS is a joint maritime air patrol for air surveillance and intelligence gathering, in which the information gathered through EiS will be used to assist the MSSP during its patrols (Singapore Ministry of Defence, 2015). Lastly, realizing that there is a need to synthesize and coordinate efforts of MSSP and EiS, the MSP Intelligence Exchange Group (IEG) was instituted in 2006. As such, the IEG functions as an information sharing and dissemination entity to ensure quick responses so that air and sea assets could be rapidly deployed to counter-piracy activities (Singapore Ministry of Defence, 2015).

While such efforts are commendable, it is still inadequate given the high occurrence of piracy attacks in the region.

According to a report from the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Coggins and Kim (2014) noted that in comparison to counter-piracy efforts undertaken in the Gulf of Aden and Somalia, current counter-piracy measures and operations in Southeast Asia appears ineffectual in combating piracy given that occurrences of piracy attacks have remained high. Viewed this way, it suggests that current counter piracy efforts undertaken by the littoral states are merely adequate to control, not reduce, the occurrence of piracy attacks in the region. In this sense, Australia, with its vested interests, can come in and augment the maritime security issues of Southeast Asia.

Regional Efforts

To be sure, traces of Australian participation in maritime security could be detected at the regional level. Australia is one of 21 contracting countries in the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). ReCAAP came into force in 2006 and functions as the prime regional initiative to enhance cooperation against piracy. In brief, ReCAAP's Information Sharing Centre collects, coordinates, and disseminates information on maritime security that happened within a members' sovereign waters. At the same time, ReCAAP also functions as a platform for member states to foster cooperation and interoperability against piracy. Although scholars like Geiss & Petrig (2011) have noted that ReCAAP possesses neither an operational role nor enforcement mechanism in preserving maritime security, and is taken as a mere information exchange hub, Ho (2009) argues that ReCAAP possesses a functional property in that ReCAAP could become the lynchpin for regional cooperation in maritime security given its established network among the law enforcement bodies of the participating countries. That being established, and by extension, Australia can exploit the already formalized and established networks with the littoral states to reduce significant transaction costs in promoting ASEAN-Australia maritime cooperation. In this regard, this paper recommends that Australia leverages on existing institutional linkages with Southeast Asia to establish more functional and working relations with the littoral states to promote maritime security.

Integration of Australia into Southeast Asian maritime security framework

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to advise explicitly how Australia can do that, this paper will briefly mention some plausible suggestions for consideration. At the institutional level, by tapping into existing linkages with the littoral states, Australia would enjoy a relative ease of transition into a more proactive role in maritime security. This would mean an enlargement in the magnitude and frequency of bilateral or multilateral maritime patrols or even the incorporation of Australia into the MSP program. In any case, given the commonality of interests in desiring maritime stability, ASEAN-Australia ties would functionally expand and Australia's role in promoting maritime security can be subsequently institutionalized.
At the operational level, Australia can leverage on its maritime capabilities and experiences it acquired during counter-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden to better enhance the overall maritime capabilities of the littoral states. Through the provision of technical expertise to improve the operational skills, the capability gap that exists in the littoral states could be better addressed and thereby results in better policing of the waters. In any respect, this elucidates the point that functional and cooperative linkages between Australia and ASEAN are plentiful within the maritime security domain.

Conclusion

ASEAN-Australia relations are exponentially increasing, but beneath these robust relations lies a dangerous Australian (mis)perception that the Southeast Asia region is dwindling in strategic value. This results in a shift in Australian strategic focus - from Southeast Asia to the Pacific countries via the ‘Step up’ initiative. Undeniably, while the ‘Step up’ initiative is also part of Australia’s strategic manoeuvring against China, Australia’s ‘middle-ring’, comprising of middle power states in Southeast Asia, cannot be neglected. Particularly considering Australia’s desire to conduct its Indo-Pacific strategy. Indeed, calls have been intensifying for Australia to ‘re-engage’ Southeast Asia. However, these calls stop short at how Australia can re-engage and further strengthen ties with a region that is already well intertwined with one another.

As such, this paper puts forth the argument that the domain of maritime security is a relatively underexplored avenue that Australia can exploit to further build on functional linkages with the region. In brief, despite cooperation amongst littoral states in promoting maritime security, piracy issues continually plague the region, and certainly more assistance ought to be rendered. This generates a felicitous opportunity for Australia to strategically capitalize on to further enlarge relations with its ‘middle ring’. Indeed, befitting of existing linkages with the region, courtesy of its bilateral counter-piracy partnership with Indonesia and its involvement in ReCAAP, Australia’s cooperation with Southeast Asia in maritime security appears highly plausible and apparent. Australia, backed by its political will, maritime capacities, and capabilities, could supplement and bolster the littoral states’ efforts in maritime security while generating more avenues for ASEAN-Australia relations to functionally expand. In any case, suggestions for how cooperation can ensue could be plenty, but primarily it first lies in the awareness that the maritime domain is an avenue which Australia and ASEAN can exploit, to which this paper has successfully conveyed. To this end, further studies can be conducted to examine the intricacies and dynamics of cooperation between ASEAN-Australia in the maritime security domain.
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In March 2021, the inaugural summit-level meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as the Quad, was convened by the leaders of its four constituent members – the United States (U.S.), Japan, India and Australia (Sharma, 2021). The meeting marked the beginning of increased coordination on the behalf of the diplomatic forum, with the convention of several subsequent leaders’ summits then taking place throughout 2021, and again most recently in Tokyo on 24 May, 2022 (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.c). While the Quad has therefore been viewed as a “thinly-veiled containment strategy against China” and thus potential geopolitical destabiliser (Stromseth, 2021, para. 3). Secondly, owing to the Quad’s core Indo-Pacific focus, a number of ASEAN countries harbor concern as to the potential threat that the Quad may pose to its current standing as the region’s foremost diplomatic forum. Notwithstanding these anxieties, there is, in fact, good reason to believe that the prospect of productive ASEAN-Quad relations remains entirely plausible.

In a tacit nod of support for cooperation between the two entities, ASEAN’s ‘Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’ (AOIP), published in 2019, directly promotes the prospect of cooperation with other regional… mechanisms (p. 1). In particular, the statement emphasises the need for engagement across four key areas: maritime security, connectivity, the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, and economic involvement. This paper will consider the prospective avenues for ASEAN-Quad cooperation with regard to these areas, and propose a series of recommendations as to the most viable path forward for each. It will be argued that, in all instances, it is in the interest of both parties to pursue cooperation via the media of already-existing ASEAN-based institutions and initiatives, as opposed to the establishment of new and unprecedented fora. Ultimately, this facilitates an enhanced counterbalance to China’s emerging status as a global power; in turn providing affected ASEAN nations with greater foreign policy space and autonomy; while concurrently preserving ASEAN’s primacy within the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific and decreasing the likelihood of provoking hostility with Beijing.

This paper builds on an article by Dr. Evan A. Laksmana (2021, p. 110) titled ‘Whose Centrality, ASEAN and the Quad in the Indo-Pacific’, which deems effective ASEAN-Quad engagement as conditional upon two factors: the satisfaction of...
mutual strategic interests, and the utilisation of pre-existing ASEAN initiatives; such that the Quad serves as a “strategic filler, supporting and elevating” these. Laksmana (p. 111) argues that, notwithstanding Southeast Asian nations’ differing opinions of China, it would be unlikely for any to “turn [their] back on initiatives seeking to strengthen existing ASEAN-led mechanisms and institutions”. Adopting this same argument, this paper develops upon Laksmana’s contribution by accordingly setting forth real-world policy prescriptions for practical ASEAN-Quad engagement, in relation to the four aforementioned areas of cooperation outlined in the AOIP.

### Maritime Cooperation

Maritime cooperation is the first prospective avenue for ASEAN-Quad coordination underscored by the AOIP, with specific emphasis placed upon the peaceful settlement of unresolved maritime disputes. The outlook does not make explicit mention of any one dispute, though its sentiment speaks to an effort to mitigate heightened tensions between China and several ASEAN-member states regarding the collection of disputes in the South China Sea. Given that no Quad member state maintains a claim in the dispute, dialogue between ASEAN members and Beijing, first and foremost, should be emphasised. In particular, negotiations regarding the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) – a codified set of standards and regulations intended to reduce the risk of conflict within the dispute (Hoang, 2020) – should be pursued as a primary effort. An attempt to directly involve the Quad as a moderator in negotiations would only play into Beijing’s apprehension that the goal of dialogue is to establish “bloks to promote geopolitical competition” (Chakraverty, 2022, para. 5). This would risk inadvertently stoking escalation.

However, ASEAN-Quad cooperation with respect to maritime security – and security more broadly for that matter – should be sought via the consolidation of communication channels. To this end, a range of pre-existing dialogue fora, particularly the ‘ASEAN Plus’ mechanisms, could be leveraged. ASEAN Plus refers to a series of collaborative apparatus between ASEAN and varying arrangements of strategic partners (Chung, 2013). As Laksmana (2021, p. 111) notes, these have hitherto “been among the premier tools of the group in its efforts at regional architecture building”. Three key examples include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM+). All three mechanisms offer strategic dialogues through which matters of security and defence cooperation are discussed between ASEAN and ‘plus’ participants (Chung, 2013) where, in each case, ‘plus’ includes all four Quad members. Quad meetings have previously taken place on the sidelines of ARF and EAS summits (Dobell, 2021; Johnson, 2020). With foreign minister level meetings held annually for each of the three (About the ASEAN Defence Ministers, 2017; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021a; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021b), a more formalised ASEAN-Quad set-up could feasibly be established under the banner of any such platform.

This could precede the eventual development of a more discrete ASEAN-Quad security dialogue. Alongside the previously discussed forums, Isradanar (2021) suggests that Japan could serve as an effective interlocutor between ASEAN and the Quad, and thus a point of initial contact from which more significant channels of communication could be advanced. Isradanar (para. 5) argues that Japan is particularly well placed to act as a facilitator on account of its formal commitment to a so-called “heart-to-heart” relationship with its Southeast Asian partners, as laid out under the Fukuda Doctrine. This is bolstered, for Isradanar, by Japan’s guiding principle for defence cooperation with ASEAN, as enshrined in the Vientiane Vision (2016). It could likewise be argued that Japan’s non-involvement in the AUKUS pact, – a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the U.S. established in 2021 (Wintour, 2021) - provides it with another significant edge as a potentially advantageous intermediary. The establishment of the AUKUS strategic alliance notably heightened ASEAN states’ concern of the Quad’s possible challenge to ASEAN’s centrality and unity (Singh, 2021). In this way, Japan maintains a degree of neutrality where its Quad counterparts (save India) do not, and is therefore, from ASEAN’s perspective, poised as the most attractive and trustworthy go-between.

The ASEAN-plus annual meetings certainly provide a promising next-step with regard to the furtherance of ASEAN-Quad dialogue, and should be pursued. Because the next annual meetings for all three of the plus mechanisms will not take place until some undetermined time in 2023 however, communication with Japan is especially propitious in that it allows for this process of engagement to be expedited. Moreover, it allows for the development of stronger ASEAN-Quad relations prior to these potential meetings.

### Connectivity

The second domain of cooperation underscored in the AOIP is ‘connectivity’, where it emphasises that “initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region should complement and support the existing Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025” (p. 4). Connectivity, as defined in MPAC (2017, p. 8) itself, refers to the fostering of strong physical, institutional, and people-to-people linkages, which are in turn, intended to encourage “economic, political-security and socio-cultural” integration and growth. MPAC sets out key target areas of connectivity. Possible courses of action for ASEAN-Quad engagement within a selection of the proposed areas are outlined in the following section. In particular, a range of pre-existing initiatives introduced within the communique (The White House, 2021c) from the September 2021 Quad leaders’ summit are highlighted as potential starting points from which this engagement could be further developed.
Sustainable Infrastructure

MPAC (2017, p. 9) identifies sustainable infrastructure as the coordination of "existing resources to deliver support across the full life cycle of infrastructure projects in ASEAN". In this way, the Infrastructure Coordination Group (ICP), announced in the September 2021 summit communiqué, provides a direct avenue for cooperation. Indeed, the communiqué (para. 7) indicates that the group’s intention is to "coordinate technical assistance and capacity-building efforts, including with regional partners". As Hillman (2021) considers, however, flexibility in the implementation of this cooperation is key. That is, this may not necessarily mean the establishment of infrastructure projects under the banner of the ICP which, in every instance, oversee concurrent involvement on the behalf of all four Quad countries. Arguing for why this approach would be ill-considered, Hillman cites the way in which previous efforts to collectively steer projects have incited operational challenges that, in addition to obstacles encountered as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and leadership changes, ultimately hampered their effectiveness. For example, the Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership between the U.S., Japan and Australia announced in 2018 failed to achieve more than the establishment of a single sub-sea cable spur to Palau (Hillman, 2021).

Rather than all four Quad countries being involved in infrastructure projects simultaneously, multilateral alternatives between various configurations of Quad members and ASEAN nations as a collective, which seek to encapsulate principles for quality infrastructure investment as advocated by both fora, should be pursued. Japan’s Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (2015) offers an existing example of such an initiative. The venture endeavours to bolster investment in durable, environmentally friendly infrastructure throughout the Asian region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 2015). Similarly, the Blue Dot Network (BDN), formed by the U.S., Japan, and Australia in 2019, aims to “certify infrastructure projects that meet robust international quality standards” (U.S. Department of State, n.d., para. 1).3 Altogether, ASEAN-Quad cooperation should harness the new-found impetus for infrastructure-based collaboration which the formation of the ICP speaks to, in order to build upon and enhance the discussed projects, as well as establish new undertakings.

Launched in February 2022, Australia’s Partnership for Infrastructure (P4I) indicates that this may indeed be an appealing approach; one which the state intends to pursue. The P4I program encourages joint Australian-ASEAN sustainable infrastructure projects, with the initiative’s information website explicitly describing it as a means through which Australia “shares value with...partner governments and [ASEAN]” (Australian Government, para. 3).

Digital Innovation

In March, 2021, Quad leaders established a Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group (CETWG) to “ensure that technology standards are governed by shared interests and values” (Australian Government, 2021, para. 2). ASEAN could cooperate with the working group in order to move toward achieving its goals regarding digital innovation, as laid out in MPAC 2025, and, in so doing, realise the potential $US625 billion it believes can be harnessed from the digital technologies sector in ASEAN by 2030 (MPAC, 2017, p. 9).

The September 2021 summit communiqué highlighted specific issue points for Quad cooperation regarding digital connectivity. Indeed, through the forum of the CETWG, ASEAN countries could likewise be involved in Quad projects pertaining to these issue points. These include 5G deployment and diversification, the bolstering of supply-chain security for semiconductors and their vital components, and the monitoring of emerging technologies such as biotechnological scanning. As emergent areas of technological development, these initiatives represent significant opportunities for ASEAN-Quad cooperation into the future.

People Mobility

MPAC 2025 advocates that the process of people mobility between ASEAN nations should be improved via the betterment of visa application mechanisms, in particular for those traveling for tertiary education and vocational purposes. With regard to the mobility of peoples in the former category, the 2021 summit communiqué (para. 14) discusses the launch of the Quad fellowship program, which brings together “American, Japanese, Australian, and Indian masters and doctoral students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics to study in the [U.S.]”. Once the fellowship has been properly established, an ASEAN-Quad scholarship scheme under its banner, or alternatively as an offshoot, could be instated.

Although not addressed in the summit communiqué, a handful of worker schemes adopted by individual Quad members should likewise be highlighted as potential starting points for further ASEAN-Quad cooperation on the issue of people mobility. In 2019, for example, Japan launched its “Specified Skilled Worker” (SSW) visa status which is intended to attract workers from overseas associated with various specialised industrial fields (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, n.d.). While presently open to all foreign nationals, further incentives could be introduced for ASEAN residents specifically, and these likewise could be reciprocated for Japanese nationals seeking work in ASEAN countries in the form of a separate mobility scheme. Furthermore, a farm work visa available to nationals from ASEAN countries was announced by the Australian government in 2021 (Sullivan, 2021). In time, the visa could be extended across additional work sectors, and ASEAN countries could accordingly offer a similar visa to Australian nationals targeting their own in-demand sectors.
UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030

Ratified by the United Nations (UN) in 2015, the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs) are seventeen goals which serve as a “blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet” (Sustainable Development Goals, n.d., para. 1). Prospective means of ASEAN-Quad cooperation which could be pursued in relation to a number of the goals have already been addressed in preceding sections of this paper. The recommendations set forth regarding the sustainable infrastructure and digital innovation target areas of collaboration with regard to ‘connectivity’ would, for example, in turn address SDG 9 - ‘industry, innovation and infrastructure’ - aspiring to “build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation” (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p. 20).

In addition to those SDGs already touched upon, a goal presenting considerable opportunity for ASEAN-Quad Cooperation is SDG 13 - ‘climate action’. The AOIP (p. 5) explicitly promotes “cooperation with the ASEAN Center for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue... [with] other relevant institutions in the region”. Especially in light of the 2021 Quad summit communique’s underlined commitment to the establishment of green-shipping networks, clean-hydrogen partnerships, and more broadly, enhanced climate adaptation, resilience and preparedness, the Quad constitutes an appropriate regional institution.

Furthermore, in an effort to collaboratively work towards SDG 3 - ‘good health and well-being’, ASEAN could seek formalised coordination with the newly established Quad Vaccine Partnership. As it endeavours to “accelerate efforts to end Covid-19 and prepare for the next pandemic” in the Indo-Pacific (Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security, n.d., para 6), the initiative’s mission statement directly aligns with SDG 3’s focus on the promotion of “healthy lives and... well-being for all at all ages” (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p.16).

Economic and Other Possible Areas of Cooperation

Under the heading of ‘Other Possible Areas of Cooperation’, the AOIP lists a number of avenues of engagement for which recommended courses of action have already been expanded upon within this paper. These include; ‘Science, Technology Research and Development, and Smart Infrastructure’, ‘Digital Economy and the facilitation of cross border data flow’, and ‘Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction and Management’ (AOIP, p. 5). These avenues naturally present opportunities for accompanying economic engagement.

Additionally, the ‘Indo-Pacific economic framework’ (IPEF) announced by the Biden administration in May, 2022 (Arasasingham, et al., 2022), presents the most promising platform for economic cooperation going forward.


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For the past two decades, Australia has worked closely with its Mekong partners in promoting equitable and sustainable water resources management. Such assistance is critical as the Lower Mekong countries have been grappling with water resource scarcity and ecological hazards caused by climate change and unsustainable hydropower development. We argue that this behaviour on the part of Australia is a form of niche diplomacy – concentrating resources to address one specific international issue that yields worthy returns. Accordingly, two factors, namely (1) Australia’s unique expertise in sustainable water management and (2) its strategic interests in Southeast Asia, precipitated Australia’s engagement with the Mekong countries in water security. To enhance the effectiveness of its diplomatic activism in this field, Australia should encourage the Mekong countries to pursue non-hydro renewable energy, synergise its efforts with other major powers, and facilitate water policy dialogue between China and the Lower Mekong countries.

Keywords: Australia-Mekong relations, Mekong water security, niche diplomacy, water resources management

Introduction

For the past two decades, Australia has worked closely with its Mekong partners in promoting equitable and sustainable water resources management. Such assistance is critical as the Lower Mekong countries have been grappling with water resource scarcity and ecological hazards due to the combined impacts of climate change and unsustainable hydropower development. Yet, water security challenges in the Mekong pose no direct threat to Australia. What then are the drivers behind Canberra’s Mekong’s water diplomacy? We argue that this behaviour is a form of niche diplomacy – concentrating resources to address one specific international issue that yields worthy returns.

Two factors precipitated Australia’s engagement with the Mekong countries in water security, namely (1) Australia’s unique expertise in sustainable water management and (2) its strategic interests in Southeast Asia.

This study is divided into four main sections. The first part describes the water security situation in the Lower Mekong region and Australia’s assistance to the riparian countries. The second part explains the conceptual framework of the paper – niche diplomacy. Subsequently, we will examine the drivers behind Australia’s water diplomacy in the Mekong from the perspective of niche diplomacy. The final section concludes with brief recommendations on how Australia can further enhance the effectiveness of its diplomatic activism in this field.

Water Security Situation in the Mekong Region and Australia’s Assistance to the Mekong Countries

The Mekong River spans six countries, originating from Southern China then passing through Lower Mekong countries – Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, before entering the South China Sea. This vital waterway contributes significantly to the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB)’s impressive economic performance over the past few years, which registered an average growth of nearly 6% in 2017 (Open Development Mekong, 2018). It supplies water for agricultural activities and nutrient sediments for the natural fertilisation of the soil, allowing for greater harvests. Rice and fish – the two major food types in the region, depend much on the river’s water-borne resources. According to estimates, the total annual value of agricultural production and inland fisheries catch in the LMB is around $358 billion and $17 billion, respectively (Mekong River Commission, 2015; Wright et al., 2017). Meanwhile, the Mekong’s hydropower potential is viewed by some riparian countries as a pathway toward energy security and further economic growth.
Around 60 million people residing in downstream communities rely on the Mekong and its copious resources for their livelihoods. The diverse ethnic composition of the river-dweller population brings about rich cultural assets, and many important historical sites are located along the river (McElwee & Horowitz, 1999). Unfortunately, in recent years, the LMB has faced significant water security challenges that threaten to upend the region's food security and socio-economic progress.

**Current Challenges**

Vulnerable communities across the LMB have been grappling with diminishing livelihood and growing food insecurity caused by climate change. Rising temperatures and increased intensity and frequency of droughts, floods, and rainfall have strained infrastructure, agriculture, and fisheries in the LMB (Mekong River Commission, n.d.-a). The low-lying fertile Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, which produces half of the country's rice, is at great risk of rising sea levels and saltwater intrusion. However, climate disasters are hardly the sole culprits for ecological degradation in the region. While hydropower is a cheap and convenient energy source for Mekong riparian countries, its impact on the environment is highly concerning. In some cases, upstream hydroelectric dams held back large amounts of water during dry seasons, further exacerbating drought conditions in the lower reaches (Eyler & Weatherby, 2020; Kantoush et al., 2017). Moreover, these dams disrupt fish migration and block the flow of the sediments necessary to agricultural productivity and the prevention of saltwater intrusion in the LMB (Wright et al., 2017; Yoshida et al., 2020). At particular risk are Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake – one of the world's most fish-abundant freshwater lakes, and Vietnam's agriculture-rich Mekong Delta, where the supply of upstream sediments help keep the region from being inundated by saltwater (Hiebert, 2021). In other words, the lack of coordination among the Mekong countries regarding hydropower construction and operation have created artificial disasters, undermining the livelihoods of local farmers and fishers.

In addition to these negative impacts, there have been growing concerns over the geopolitical implications of China's Mekong dam development. As an upstream country, China has been the most zealous in building hydropower dams, with 11 constructed and several other planned facilities in its section of the Mekong. Beijing has also been investing and constructing dam projects in Laos and Cambodia, mostly on the Mekong tributaries (Hiebert, 2021). Meanwhile, as the most downstream country, Vietnam suffers the hardest from the deleterious effects of upstream Mekong dams. Experts warn that China's increasing control of the water flow through hydropower infrastructure could be used as a bargaining tool to strengthen China's strategic influence over the region, turning the Mekong into a geopolitical flashpoint (Hiebert, 2021; Kliem, 2020a).

**Australia’s Assistance to the Lower Mekong Countries**

The dire water security situation in the Mekong has received special attention from several external powers, including Australia. For the past two decades, Australia has worked with its Mekong partners in promoting equitable and sustainable water resources management through multilateral institutions and its own mechanisms. Since 2007, Canberra has sponsored the World Bank and the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in various water security-related activities in the LMB, such as developing transboundary water resources professionals, strengthening water resource management capacity, enhancing climate change adaptation, and improving agricultural infrastructure (Mekong River Commission, n.d.-b; Pech & Mather, 2017). Australia is a ‘Friend of the Mekong’ – a participating member in the US Lower Mekong Initiative that commenced in 2009. Renewed as the US-Mekong Partnership (USMP) under the Trump administration, this US-led mechanism aims to promote cooperation with the Lower Mekong countries in, inter alia, water governance and non-traditional security (U.S. Mission to ASEAN, 2021).

The past few years have witnessed considerable efforts by Australia to support their Mekong partners in water security. Australia’s Greater Mekong Water Resources Program (GMWRP), managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) from 2014 to 2019, engaged Mekong states and relevant stakeholders in policy dialogue to promote regional water, food, energy and environmental security (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.). Canberra recently implemented the Australia-Mekong Water Facility (AMWF) – an AU$9.86 million GMWRP investment program that runs from 2019 to 2023 with the goal to facilitate cooperation with governments in the region to study and respond to the current Mekong challenges (Australian Water Partnership, 2019a). In 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced the $232 million Mekong–Australia Partnership to step up Australia's engagement with the Mekong countries in several areas, including water security and climate change resilience (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021). Australia has also pledged AU$50 million toward the LMB’s sustainable development of water and other clean energy resources from 2019 until 2027 (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.).

Australian experts have provided technical assistance to their Mekong counterparts in balancing economic activities with sustainable utilisation of water resources. For example, in Laos, advisors from Canberra helped explore the Nam Ou Basin and survey the hydrological conditions of this branch of the Mekong River for hydropower development (International Finance Corporation, 2017). Australia has also worked with Laos in dam safety inspection (Australian Water Partnership, 2019). At the same time, under the GMWRP, hydropower developer working groups have been set up in Laos and Myanmar as a consultative mechanism to ensure
social, environmental, and governance safeguards in the hydropower sector (Pech & Mather, 2017, p. 21). With the support of the GMWRP, the NGO Oxfam Australia has actively promoted equitable transboundary water resource management by advocating for cooperation between riparian countries in dams construction and downstream water regulation, and greater participation of civil society in water decision-making (Pech & Mather, 2017, p. 9). In Vietnam, Australia supports Vietnam’s efforts to modernise its irrigation systems in drought-affected areas to boost agricultural productivity (Australian Water Partnership, 2019b). From 2011 to 2018, Australia partnered with Vietnam and Germany in the Integrated Coastal Management Program, which aimed at building climate resilience and sustainable economic growth in the Mekong Delta (GIZ, 2018). These are only a few examples of the many security-related initiatives that Australia has either led or endorsed across the LMB.

Having delineated the current water security situation in the Mekong and Australia’s assistance to the riparian countries, we will now focus on answering this paper’s research question: What are the drivers behind Canberra’s Mekong’s water diplomacy? The subsequent section will discuss the conceptual framework undergirding our thesis.

**Conceptual Framework: Niche Diplomacy**

A state’s material power and level of international influence, for the most part, determine how ambitious it can be in the international arena. Great powers, due to their possession of ample material resources and influence, are able to affect all domains, ranging from security to economic issues. On the other hand, small or minor powers are incapable of significantly affecting international affairs since they lack sufficient resources and reputation (Chapnick, 1999, p. 74). Those that lie in between these two extremes, often described as middle powers, with their limited but still substantial capabilities, can effectively assume a number of selective roles in regional or global governance (Cooper, 1997; Evans, 2011). This prototypical behaviour of middle powers was coined niche diplomacy by Gareth Evans – Australian Foreign Minister from 1988 to 1996, defining it as “concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover the field” (Evans, 2011).

To be able to conduct niche diplomacy, a state first needs to possess technical competence, high reputation, and sufficient resources that they can employ skillfully in a particular issue-area (Cooper, 1997). This specialisation then enables the state to assume selective roles in international affairs and become a major or leading actor in the specific domains that it chooses (Emmers & Teo, 2018, p. 25). Niche diplomacy may benefit the international community by contributing to the management of common challenges such as environmental issues or important questions regarding international peace and security. However, as Evans (1989) explains, states’ active contribution to international public goods even when there is no direct payoff is not the “equivalent of boy scout good deeds” but “an exercise in enlightened self-interest” (p.12).

In other words, states do not conduct niche diplomacy as a selfless act but as an investment that eventually generates tangible dividends. To sum up, niche diplomacy arises when a state (1) possesses the necessary expertise and resources to assume leadership in a specific area and (2) believes that doing so serves the country’s long-term interests.

Having proclaimed itself as middle power as early as the end of World War II, Australia assumed niche leadership in human rights, environmental goals (Cooper, 1997), non-proliferation of nuclear and chemical weapons (Cooper et al., 1993), counterterrorism, and peacekeeping keeping and peace-building (Emmers & Teo, 2018). We argue that water resource management assistance in the Mekong also constitutes a niche in Australia’s foreign policy. The subsequent sector will unpack the two factors precipitating niche diplomacy in this case: (1) Australia’s unique expertise in sustainable water management and (2) its strategic interests in Southeast Asia.

**Drivers of Australia’s Mekong Water Diplomacy**

**Expertise in Water Resources Management**

Australia’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper positst that water is a major component of its foreign policy agenda (Australian Government, 2017). This is because Australia is cognizant that there has been an increased demand for collaboration in the water sector from countries across the Indo-Pacific region amid growing water security challenges caused by climate change and other factors. Canberra identifies this as a niche where it could draw on specialist expertise and water resources management experience to help others follow a similar path (Australian Government, 2017, p. 240; The Australian Water Partnership, 2018).

Australia’s expertise in water resources management derives from its own experience in dealing with present water resources scarcity. As the world’s driest inhabited continent with unpredictable rainfall, Australia is prone to droughts. Naturally, its water management focuses on enhancing the country’s ability to cope with droughts (Doolan, 2016). Since the late 1990s, Australia has become even more adept in this regard. The major driving force behind this was the Millennium Drought that occurred in most of southern Australia from 1997 to 2010. As the most protracted and severe drought on record, it placed extreme pressure on the country’s agricultural industry and urban water supply, prompting a major nationwide water reform (Doolan et al., 2016). Notably, the Australian government devised the Murray-Darling River Basin Plan with the goal to balance water usage and environmental, social, and economic considerations while ensuring coordination between the four Australian states that the Basin covers (Murray–Darling Basin Authority, 2016).

Australia’s expertise in water resources management and (2) its strategic interests in water resource management assistance in the Mekong also constitutes a niche in Australia’s foreign policy. The subsequent sector will unpack the two factors precipitating niche diplomacy in this case: (1) Australia’s unique expertise in sustainable water management and (2) its strategic interests in Southeast Asia.
Due to its successful results, the Basin Plan subsequently became a global exemplar for river basin management in the context of climate change and shared water resources between different boundaries (The Australian Water Partnership, 2018, p. 10). This explains why since 2011, the MRC has tried to learn from the Murray-Darling Basin Authority’s experience (Mekong River Commission, n.d.).

Australia is now one of the most water-secure countries in the Indo-Pacific region, despite its extreme dry conditions (The Australian Water Partnership, 2018). There is considerable international interest in Australia’s experience in nationwide water reform, hydrological science, and building institutions critical to water reform (Australian Water Partnership, 2018). Australian researchers have also contributed significantly toward the field of river restoration and the innovations in observing river ecosystem health (Bunn et al., 2019, p. 1). For these reasons, Australia is undoubtedly an invaluable partner to the Mekong countries in water security. Simultaneously, the Mekong countries are important partners to Australia’s strategic interests.

**Strategic Interests**

Australia primarily engages in water diplomacy with countries in the Indo-Pacific region (see, Australian Water Partnership, n.d.) – its central operating environment. Yet, the water security partnership with LMB is particularly consequential as the sub-region is situated in Southeast Asia, which according to the DFAT, “sits at the nexus of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific and is vital to Australia’s security and prosperity” (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.).

In general, Southeast Asia, with its economic potentials and strategic location, occupies an important position in Australia’s foreign policy. Australia’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper highlights that Australia’s trade with ASEAN in 2016 was greater than with the United States (its second-biggest trading partner (Australian Government, 2017, p. 43). Crucially, Australia has a deep and enduring “stake in the security of Southeast Asia” as it perceives that any hostile forces seeking to attack Australia would have to operate in this region (Royal Australian Navy, 2010, p. 41). Thus, Australia strives to create extensive connections with Southeast Asian states across multiple areas, including development assistance, to promote regional stability and growth, which in turn promotes Australia’s long-term prosperity and security (Australian Government, 2017, p. 150). This thinking also applies to water security in the Mekong.

When asked why Australia assisted the lower Mekong countries with water resources management, Australian ambassador to Laos, John Williams, stressed the importance of fostering prosperity and stability in this sub-region to Australia’s interests. He said:

*The stability and prosperity of countries in the Lower Mekong region in Southeast Asia matter to us because of our proximity, the growing links between people in both our countries and regions, and because of the growing economic links between these countries. Having a stable, well-managed neighbourhood is a real positive for Australia in terms of our own prosperity and regional connections* (International Finance Cooperation, n.d.).

It is clear that Australia associates the well-being of the LMB to its interests in pursuing “prosperity and regional connections.” Yet, there is also an unspoken impetus for Australia’s deeper partnership with the Lower Mekong countries: concern over China’s rising geopolitical clout. In the past few years, China’s growing maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea has posed a direct threat to Australia’s vision for an open, inclusive, prosperous, and rules-based Indo-Pacific (Cook, 2021). In the Mekong region, China’s preeminent economic influence and tightening grip of the river through hydropower dams could make mainland Southeast Asia dependent on China at the expense of external players such as Australia (Wu, 2020; Xue, 2020). Indeed, Australia recognises that the Mekong region faces “heightened risks of disruption to the rules-based framework in place, unsustainable development, and greater debt and economic dependence by some Mekong countries.” An evaluative study of the GMWRP commissioned by the DFAT notes: “China is increasingly seen to take the leading role and shapes the rules of cooperation and more specifically, to make sure that external actors are more excluded from Greater Mekong inter-government policy dialogue” (Pech & Mather, 2017, p. xxvi).

In response to these developments, Canberra has sought closer ties with Southeast Asia, particularly with the Mekong countries. It has also backed America’s strategic competition with China, which brings about the stable Indo-Pacific order that Australia envisages (Australian Government, 2017, p. 4; Davis, 2020, p. 45). This dynamic plays out most conspicuously in the maritime domain, as showcased by frequent joint naval exercises between Australia and the United States and the recent nuclear-powered submarine deal between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom (also known as AUKUS). Helping mainland Southeast Asian countries achieve sustainable development and address water security in a strategic manner is another area where Canberra and Washington converge. The USMP, which Australia endorses as a Friend of the Mekong, aims at bolstering the Lower Mekong countries’ autonomy and economic independence, thereby reducing their dependency on China for development assistance (Kliem, 2020b, p. 5). Meanwhile, the AMWF seeks to boost “Australia’s influence in the management of the region’s strategic water resources.” (Australian Water Partnership, 2019a, emphasis added), which likely alludes to the strategic control of the water flow – a key factor in the growing context of hydropolitics.
To be sure, Australia does not necessarily see water diplomacy in the Mekong as a zero-sum game with China. In fact, China is also one of Australia’s Mekong partners, and the two cooperate in the GMWRP, among other water management programs (see Australian Water Partnership, 2018). However, Australia’s alignment with the United States and its suspicion of China’s activities in Southeast Asia suggest that Canberra is vying for influence with Beijing in the Mekong region.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

Water security challenges in the Mekong pose no direct threats to Australia. However, to secure long-term security and prosperity, Australia believes that it needs to build deeper ties with mainland Southeast Asia and compete with China’s growing influence in the Mekong. This ‘self-enlightened interest,’ coupled with Australia’s unique water resources management expertise, precipitated its Mekong’s water diplomacy.

Moving forward, Australia should help the Mekong countries reduce their reliance on hydropower by encouraging the development of alternatives such as solar and wind energy. To this end, Australia could partner with Japan and the United States as they have been promoting diversification of electricity mix in the LMB (Mekong - U.S. Partnership, n.d.). Australia should also synergise its initiatives with other major powers involved in the Mekong region, such as the European Union, South Korea, and India. Greater coordination among these players will help avoid institutional competition and overlapping agendas. Finally, Australia’s water partnership with both the Lower Mekong countries and China should enable it to facilitate greater water policy dialogue between all riparian Mekong countries amid the hydropower dam-building craze. However, the challenge is not to let geopolitical tensions impede Australia-China cooperation on environmental issues and climate change. Australia’s effective niche diplomacy in Mekong water security, therefore, necessitates a flexible foreign policy approach that allows both competition and cooperation with China.
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After Coup 2021:
Tu Mae Revolution in Myanmar

Min Thang | Myanmar

Abstract

Myanmar is an ethnically diverse nation that has been ruled by a military regime for almost 70 years. Since 2010, however, Myanmar is transitioning towards democracy and there has been some degree of reform in the nation’s politics. After the general election on the 8th November 2020, in which the National League for Democracy won in a landslide, a military coup seized power and overthrew the elected civilian government on the 1st of February 2021. The military has detained a number of politicians, artists, peaceful protesters, doctors, nurses, civil servants, and civilian leaders. That day thousands of people took to the street to protest in various cities, towns, and villages. The so called Generation Z (youth) is playing a key role in these anti-coup protests. Many of the youth are resisting the coup with hand made guns (known as ‘tu mae’ in Burmese).

This paper attempt to explains the Tu Mae Revolution and youth experiences in Myanmar. This paper studies the challenges faced by the youth and their resistance to the coup during the Covid-19 pandemic in Myanmar. The following piece will also examine the domestic and international responses to the ongoing military dictatorship-takingplace in Myanmar.

Key words : Australian Fishing Zones, Indonesia-Australia Maritime, Macassan Tribes, Youth

Introduction

Myanmar is ethnically diverse, there are eight major ethnicities, which include the Shan, Kachin, Rakhine, Chin, Mon, Karen amongst many others. Since the military came to power, most of the minority groups in Myanmar have been involved, at one time or another, in an insurgency against the oppressive regime (David, 1996, p. 23). Since gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar has been ruled by military regime after military regime, from Ne Win in the mid 20th century to Min Aung Hlaing today. These governments have continually suppressed political opposition as well as the general population. In 2011, Myanmar looked as if it was transitioning towards democratic governance. Sadly, this period ended abruptly.

On February 1, 2021, the military announced state of emergency for one year and extended up to 2023 and established the so-called State Administration Council (SAC).

The military of chief Min Aung Hlaing appointed himself as Prime Minister of Myanmar and created caretaker government. The SAC military have carried out mass killings, torture, arrests and other abuses against anti-coup protesters and civilians particularly youth. After the security force crackdown spread beyond cities and rural and ethnic minority areas. The following months civilians formed “local militias” with hand made gun and modern arms to resistance the SAC military in across Myanmar. The article provides a brief overview on Myanmar pre-and post-coup in Myanmar in general. The studies focus on author experiences, observations, youth, resistance, Australian, ASEAN, and international response. The clashes between EAOs, local militias and Tatmadaw Burmese people have experiences violent and disruptive that has affected the life of people and they are becoming internally displaced person (IDPs) within Myanmar and neighbour countries like India and Thailand.

I travelled to Chin State on January 2, 2022 from Yangon. Though it was not safe to travel and arrived on January 5, 2022 in Matupi, Chin state. The junta blocked all the roads and transports such as food and medicine and no one can come in and out from towns/cities to villages and villages to towns across Chin state. Fortunately, the military junta allowed me to go and see my father who was on the bed in the village. After reaching home my father looks at me with emotion and cries. On January 6-7 the military junta killed 10 civilians near my father’s village in Matupi, Chin state. The situation for the whole village was not safe and the village people are run from villages (some are sleeping/hiding in forest) and some run to the next village and to the India border. Even my youngest sister, who has taken cares of Daddy, also left my Dad and ran to Aizawl, Mizoram for safety. On January 13, 2022, Daddy call me and told me that Son the situation may be worse because the soldiers are roaming here and there, therefore, they may also come into our village.
Unrest in Myanmar: After Coup 2021

Prior to the coup, Myanmar faced significant challenges due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent ban on large gatherings. After the coup, however, the following weeks saw large-scale protests in cities and towns all over the nation with the masses calling for the release of all political detainees and the restoration of the elected government. 'Generation Z', in particular, is playing a pivotal role in these anti-coup protests. On 1 August 2021, Min Aung Hliang gave a televised address to the nation, six months into the coup and stated the national state of emergency would be extended for another two years. That same day, the SAC announced the formation of a new caretaker government and appointed Min Aung Hliang as Prime Minister and Soe Win as his Deputy Minister. The SAC also canceled the results of the November 8 elections in Myanmar. The newly appointed Prime Minister promised to hold a “free and fair multiparty general election” by August 2023 after the two-year state of emergency expires (Kyodo News, 2021).

Backgrounds and Situation of Myanmar

In terms of size, the total population of Myanmar is around 55 million spreads across 7 recognized states (Harihara, 2021, p. 51-52). This long-suffering nation has been plagued by various episodes of unrest with armed groups representing the various ethnic groups playing prevalent roles in the ongoing social and political unrest. Since 1962, the army has been viewed as the preserver of the Burma state (John, 1962, p. 9). After some years in power, this military government announced a referendum in May 2008 to approve a new constitution for the country as well as general elections for 2010. The military already had control of the new parliament with 25 percent of the seats and veto power over parliamentary decisions. The proposed constitution would guarantee the people's right to form political organizations, including unions (Erik, 2010, p. 82).

After the 2020 general election the Military and Paramilitary party (USDP) alleged there was voting fraud, but the NLD party and Union Election Commission (UEC) rejected the subsequent military report due to their own suspicions of electoral fraud. Then NLD called elected MPs to Naypyitaw to select the Amyotha and Pyithu chairman on 1 February, 2021, sadly early that morning the military seized power and detained all elected MPs in Naypyitaw for some time.

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Then NLD called elected MPs to Naypyitaw to select the Amyotha and Pyithu chairman on 1 February, 2021, sadly early that morning the military seized power and detained all elected MPs in Naypyitaw for some time. All phone lines; the Internet and all forms of social communication were cut off during the coup leaders, February 1, 2021, a military coup driven by the so-called State Administration Council (SAC) seized power from the elected civilian government and this paper attempts to bring forth an explanation as to why the young people of Myanmar took up arms (tu ma) to resist the coup. The reasoning and motivation behind these disaffected youths will form a key basis to this piece. More broadly, this paper will also present general information regarding the youth of Myanmar as well as their participation in political activism. In addition, an analysis will be undertaken to assess the varying responses from domestic and international communities throughout this latest political crisis.

Youth and Political Movement in Myanmar

Myanmar has suffered through one of the world’s longest running civil wars. The violence is often between the government and different ethnic armed groups (Rodger, 2018). Throughout the history of Myanmar, students and youth have led human rights and democracy movements (Matilda & Sarah, 2018, p. 3). Since independence the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) have been crucial in restoring and maintaining law and order. It is arguably the most important institution in Myanmar politics. In 1958 as the political situation began to decline, the civilian government of the time, at the intervention of some senior Tatmadaw commanders, agreed to transfer state power over to the Tatmadaw on October 1958. The Tatmadaw then formed the Caretaker Government to restore political stability and to hold general elections. General elections were held in February 1960 and state power was then transferred back to the elected government. As a political crisis threatened to emerge again, the Tatmadaw staged a military coup d’etat in the name of the Revolutionary Council (RC) on 2 March 1962. The RC rule came to an end only when a new constitution was promulgated and general elections were held to restore the constitutional government in 1974. Following this, on 18 September 1988, the Tatmadaw took over the state power yet again in the name of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (Maung, 2009, p. 1).

Based on this, the people of Myanmar have been facing one crisis after the other. This article, however, will focus on the most recent unrest. Prior to the 2020 coup, the military linked Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) had alleged irregularities and fraud in the elections conducted on November 8. The military demanded that the NLD disband Myanmar’s electoral body, the Union Election Commission (UEC), and recount all of the votes with the military’s assistance.

After a few days, millions of people opposing the coup commenced a peaceful protest, beating pots & pans on the evening of the 2nd of February. The coup leaders, however, cracked down on the demonstrators with violence as they tortured, arrested and killed citizens all while destroying their property.
Many civilians, mostly youth, escalated their opposition as they took up arms against the military dictatorship. This action precipitated armed conflict in different parts of the country.

People of Myanmar Struggling to Live and Die

The long-suffering people of Myanmar are presently faced with a tri-colon of crises: Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, and military coup. These issues mean the people are facing a shortage of food, medicine, oxygen, and now a financial crisis on account of the strain placed on the banking sector. The people of Myanmar are helpless and there is no hope for the future for the youth in almost all aspects of life. This unhinged political situation is not being aided by the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, as many citizens have lost their lives due to a lack of medication, vaccinations, and healthcare workers.

The economy is in ruin, with new investment drying up, the withdrawal of existing investments and the cessation of key international-backed infrastructure projects. Western business groups, including those from the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, and France have withdrawn from the country due to the coup with its cabinet members (The Irrawaddy, 2021). Banking systems have been paralyzed since the coup as hundreds of branches have closed their doors due to staff strikes. Companies are also struggling to pay salaries, as banks have stopped providing payroll services. Businesses are also suffering from a cash shortage as bank branches have closed down and the regime has ordered limits on cash withdrawals for both individuals and companies (The Irrawaddy, 2021).

Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)

The anti-coup resistance began with the CDM in February 2021, which saw non-violent protests spread through Myanmar. Many citizens and public servants deliberately refused to cooperate with the military as an institution (Jasnea & Roshni, 2021, p. 13). The medical healthcare workers, banking, the civil and public service spearheaded this movement which has brought the country to a halt. The military coup attempted to install replacement services but this has resulted in a non-functioning public service. Most of the staff at the center of the CDMers is comparatively young in departments like the Ministry of Education (ME) and the Ministries of Health and Sports (MHS), many senior people have since joined as well (Wolfgang, 2021, p. 2).

The military coup d'état has united the people of Myanmar. Many are calling for a new constitution to remove the military from politics once and for all. The majority of people in Myanmar is united in passionate opposition to the coup and has embraced the CDM. Since February, a well-organized, though organic and nominally leaderless, civil disobedience movement has taken hold. Everyone from healthcare workers, celebrities, civil servants, professors, lawyers, religious leaders, have all participated early on in the campaign (Thomas, 2021, p. 4). The people of Myanmar have gradually shifted their attention from the deadly virus to the pro-democracy movement. Despite protesters wearing facemasks, there is no social distancing as they chant slogans, sing songs of defiance and holding of placards.

The low rate of testing came after thousands of health workers including doctors and nurses walked out from hospitals, clinics and laboratories to join the CDM. The strike by health workers has stopped Covid-19 testing and shut down state-run hospitals across Myanmar (Union of Catholic Asia News, 2021).

Tu Mae Revolution

Since the coup in Myanmar started in February, different uprisings have been occurring across the country. The military has cracked down fiercely on the demonstrators with violence, as civilians have been arrested, killed, tortured and had their properties mercilessly destroyed. Under threat, civilians tried to protect themselves within the safety of their own homes. For instance, one particular ethnicity, the Chin, use handmade guns for hunting tu mae in Bamar and sa hnet in Chin. Hence, the Tu Mae revolution. Many of these individually produced weapons are licensed but many are without regulation. In opposition to the coup, the Chin youth formed the Chinland Defense Force (CDF). The CDF’s goals are to protect civilians from the military, the abolition of the 2008 Constitution, to end the dictatorship and to establish a federal union (CDF, Chin Myanmar, 2021). This also inspired the formation of the People’s Defense Force (PDF), which similarly aims to protect civilians from the coup’s repercussions. All of these groups are fighting against the military junta (Khonumthung News, 2021). There are widespread bombings and shootings become almost everyday happenings, most of Burmese people are no longer feel safe and with fear.

These forces have stated that once their revolution is realized they will return their weapons and dissolve the defense force. On the 10th of September 2021, the military escalated the situation by using excessive force through the deployment of jet fighters and combat helicopters to attack ethnic forces in Lungler village of Thantlang, Chin State. The situation triggered a strong response by the civilian forces in the area, however, in response the military burned down 164 houses to ash in Thantlang. These events exemplify the dire situation in Myanmar is placed in with civilian groups being crushed by an authoritarian military dictatorship, which is threatening all strata of Myanmar’s society. The youth, by large, have led the resistance against the SAC. However, the prospects hinted the government won’t back down despite the damage being done. From February 1, 2021 to April 30, 2022 the military and its affiliated groups burned down approximately 11,417 civilian houses at 296 locations. Chin state alone the military burned down 1,147 houses into an ash reported by Data for Myanmar (Data for Myanmar, 2021).

International Response

The international community has widely condemned the coup while some countries, especially China, have proceeded with limited accommodations to the junta, often under the argument of non-interference. Russia also supports it directly (Wolfgang, 2021, p. 2). According to Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) on the 29 of April, 1803 people are now dead and 10449 people are currently under detention (AAPP, 2021). There appears to be no end to the violence, despite pleas and condemnations from the whole world. Some have called for the United Nations to act based on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle.
But R2P tools fall short of military intervention while favoring measures like embargoes, sanctions or International Criminal Court prosecution, which may not move the needle. It is unclear whether the targeted sanctions preferred by the likes of the United States and United Kingdom would change the Tatmadaw generals’ calculus. In any case, UN Security Council (UNSC) actions are likely stuck with Russia and China holding veto powers. Vietnam, the UNSC president in April, does not appear keen to prioritize the Myanmar crisis, which it deems an “internal affair” (Lina & Evan, 2021, p. 6).

On February 22, the EU Foreign Affairs Council declared that the results of Myanmar’s November 2020 election had to be respected and the legitimate civilian government restored. The council also expressed its concern for the worsening situation and its commitment to support civil society, human rights, and particularly journalists. Furthermore, the EU threatened “those directly responsible” with sanctions but left the door open for collaboration with “those willing to support democracy, the rule of law and good governance” (Kimana, 2021). China called for all parties in Myanmar to properly handle their differences under the rule of law and legal framework to maintain political and social stability. The American President threatened to re-impose sanctions on Myanmar and called for a concerted international response to press them to relinquish power. Similarly, India supports the process of democratic transition in Myanmar (Drishtiias Media, 2021).

The European Parliament has voted to support Myanmar’s shadow government and its parliamentary committee as the legitimate representatives of Myanmar, becoming the first international legislative body to officially endorse the organizations behind the fight against military rule. In a resolution adopted on 7 October 2021, the European Parliament said it “supports the CRPH and the NUG as the only legitimate representatives of the democratic wishes of the people of Myanmar,” referring to the NUG and CPRH, both of which were formed by ousted elected NLD lawmakers and their ethnic allies in the wake of the February 1 takeover. The motion was passed with 647 votes in favor, two against and 31 abstentions. In its resolution, the European Parliament also condemned the Myanmar military’s violent response to protesters, as well as its human rights violations against the people following the coup. Before EU resolution on Myanmar, the French Senate voted unanimously to recognize the NUG. If the French Parliament’s lower house approves the vote, France will become the first country to be officially recognizing Myanmar’s shadow government (The Irrawaddy, 2021).

**ASEAN Response**

Brunei Darussalam’s the Chair of ASEAN released a statement on the 1st of February 2021. As ASEAN chair, which promoted adherence to the principles of democracy, the rule of law and good governance, respect for and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the importance of dialogue, reconciliation and the return to normalcy under the will and interests of the people of Myanmar (Forum-Asia, 2021, p. 7). Brunei also called for ‘dialogue among all parties, reconciliation and the return to normalcy.’

Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia expressed concern, while Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines noted that this was Myanmar’s ‘internal affair’ (Drishtiias Media, 2021).

On the 24th April 2021, ASEAN leaders held meetings in Jakarta and the group issued a “five-point consensus” on Myanmar. This called for an immediate cessation of violence, a constructive dialogue among all parties facilitated by a Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair and assisted by the Secretary General, the provision of humanitarian assistance and the visit by an ASEAN delegation to Myanmar. These are three primary outcomes to achieve: ending violence, delivering aid, and an inclusive dialogue among all stakeholders in Myanmar. The other two stipulated outcomes, the appointment of a Special Envoy and the visit to Myanmar are the primary methods in place to deliver these first three outcomes (Evan, 2021). These points were not agreed by the Myanmar coup. In response, ASEAN called an emergency meeting on the 15th of August 2021 in Brunei, the foreign ministers of the regional bloc all agreed that the Myanmar junta chief would not be invited to the October 26-28 2021 ASEAN summit. Instead, it was decided, “to invite a non-political representative from Myanmar” to the summit (Down News, 2021). As such, Min Aung Hliang was excluded from the ASEAN meeting. Eventually, no representative from Myanmar was able to attend the ASEAN meeting.

**Australian Response**

Australia’s response has been limited to Myanmar’s coup. Burmese people such as civil society and non-government organizations (NGO) have been urged to impose targeted sanctions and be more active in its diplomacy through face-to-face meetings and shuttle diplomacy. Australia has been described as weak, slow and ineffective and accused of prioritizing trade over human rights. While Australia has put its name on statements condemning the coup in international bodies including the United Nations it is not enough. Australia has decided that the best tactical approach is to work with and through ASEAN (Melissa, 2021). The Australian government must expand sanctions on the Myanmar military and its business interests. This basic measure has already been taken by most of Australia’s allies. A special emergency session will provide Australia and other member states with a platform to push for meaningful actions against the junta in Myanmar, which should include a global arms embargo on the Myanmar military; targeted sanctions against military business interests and associates; referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court and, eventually, the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces to protect the civilian population (Shane, 2021).

While Australia is perceived to have not done enough in the worsening situation, they have suspended its defense cooperation with Myanmar and is redirecting humanitarian aid because of the military takeover of the government and ongoing detention of an Australian citizen. Australia has also announced it had suspended a defense-training program with Myanmar worth about 1.5 million Australian dollars over five years. In addition, Australian humanitarian aid will be directed away from the Myanmar government and government-related entities. Instead, it will focus on the immediate humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable and poor in Myanmar (Arab News, 2021).
Conclusion

Historically, youth have been at the forefront of democracy struggles in Myanmar. Since the coup 2021, youth have led uprisings across the country. Sadly, the youth are struggling to fight against the coup owing to their flimsy handmade guns, the Covid-19 pandemic, a food shortage, as well as a dwindling supply of medication across the country. Therefore, not only the people of Myanmar who have a responsibility to support Burmese people in their historic struggle but also the ASEAN and international community who must stand up to support the struggling citizens who are suffering under a military regime. Thousands of civilians are homeless and many are becoming Internal Displaced People’s (IDPs) within Myanmar while many are fleeing to neighboring countries. In this situation international community including neighbours’ countries like India, Thailand, and Malaysia to accept and support Myanmar IDPs within host country for temporarily. Myanmar faced treble crisis therefore, international community need help in between SAC, EAOs, PDF/CDF, and NUG for peace talk and conflict resolution for the people of Myanmar. Without intervention of international community on the crisis of Myanmar there will be no peace and path to democracy instead it be more in conflict and bloodshed civil war in battlefield and devastation. The international community needs to seek, a diplomatic dialogue, solution for Myanmar towards a path of federal democracy.

The coup is source of suffering. After taking arms by local militias, the widespread violence has led thousands of civilians to flee into different parts of Myanmar and across borders. What are the response of the SAC and NUG to be the people of Myanmar and at large? And what will be the response of international community on the SAC and NUG? These political crisis will be an end without the help of international community. The SAC response to the third waves Covid-19 pandemic has been detrimental to the overall health of citizens who are suffering under an ill-prepared regime who are in the process of constructing a crematorium that could burn up to 3,000 bodies a day’ (Reuters, 2021). For more than a year now, the ASEAN, Australian, UN, and international community has failed to act and meet its goals of supporting the rule of law and human rights. Instead they are emphasizing sanctions, raising toothless concerns, and condemning the coup with words rather than action. The measures thus far have been ineffective, as citizens are made to feel alone and abandoned by international actors. There is little doubt that the international community must do more than sanction and condemn in order to support the people of Myanmar who are leading the charge against gross injustice.
Digital Trade Between Australia and Vietnam for Agricultural Organic Products in the Post-Pandemic Era: Opportunities and Challenges

Nguyen Mai Ngoc & Do Huu Thanh | Vietnam

Abstract

Countries, both developed and developing, are growing at a faster pace compared to traditional methods, thanks to the advancement of e-commerce platforms, digital integration, state-of-the-art science, and technological innovations. Countries like Vietnam are exploring the possibilities of new products, and markets, stretching out with a global perspective. Among various fields, the Vietnamese agricultural area embraces the latest developments in the industry, for example, widespread mechanized, sophisticated, organic farming, which could come on par with Australian standards. Bilateral trade between Australia and Vietnam in organic farming and organic farm products will be an opportunity in the coming decades. Supported by various digital platforms and technology, everything related to a product, from planting, harvesting, packaging, branding, marketing, and logistics, until the final delivery could be traced and monitored. Although the future looks bright, there are challenges to overcome, which include but are not limited to clear policies, updated technologies, better infrastructure, government support to promote new markets, facing pandemics, etc. This chapter analyses the possibilities of advanced organic farming and bilateral trade of organic products between Australia and Vietnam which could be expanded to a global level later.

Key words: COVID-19, Digital Trade, Organic products, Technological innovations

Introduction

The digitalization of the economy and society is a revolutionary trend that offers great promise while also posing not only significant opportunities but also obstacles, particularly in agriculture and food sectors (OECD, 2015). This shift has major direct and indirect implications, including increased innovation, altered market conditions, and the emergence of new business models. Vietnam is exploring the opportunities of new products and markets with a global perspective. Among the diverse fields of agriculture, organic products are selected as a potential product for Vietnam and Australia trading as both Vietnamese and Australian organic farming has embraced the latest developments in the industry, for example, state-of-the-art and sophisticated farming practices. In that vein, bilateral trade between Australia and Vietnam in organic products is an opportunity in the coming decades. Assisted by various digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet-of-Things (IoT), Big Data, etc., digital trade reduces transaction costs, facilitates participation in global value chains, and improves market access. For businesses, digital trade offers significant efficiency gains and competitive advantages, especially organic businesses in this case. In addition, it is essential to implement digital trade for the sake of post-COVID Recovery for organic products businesses. Although the future looks bright, there are challenges to overcome which include the gap in development regarding digital platforms, technologies, clear policies, etc. The next parts will explore the possibilities consisting of opportunities and challenges of digital bilateral trade of organic products between Australia and Vietnam for the sake of post-pandemic recovery and then propose the recommendations to mitigate the challenges.

Overview of Organic Agriculture and Organic Market

Organic Agriculture and Market in Australia

Overall, with the potential of 35 million hectares of organic farmland (the largest amount in the world), Australia's organic industry contributes $2.6 billion to the country's economy per year (Jessica, 2021). Industry revenue is forecast to grow at an annualized 16.1% over the five years through 2023-24, to reach $4.5 billion (Flanders, 2019).

Within the industry, food grocery is the main entry point for shoppers to buy certified organic products, which accounts for over 90% of certified organic sales (Australian Organic, 2021). Therein, dairy and meat are currently the most popular organic products, while there are growing demands
for chemical-free fruits and vegetables as well (Jenni, n.d.). In the past year, about 9 million Australian households purchased organic products for the better quality and sustainability offered. Furthermore, more than 1 in 10 Australians (12%) are reported to consider themselves to be highly committed organic purchasers, outpacing roughly 40% or more of their annual grocery spend on organic food products (Remedios, 2018).

With regards to export opportunities, since the global organic industry is the fastest-growing food category, with demand outstripping supply in most developed economies, Australia has huge potential because it owns the largest area of certified organic land with over 12.3 million hectares still available (Flanders, 2019). Moreover, recently, a $100,000 Australian Government grant will be used by Australian Organic Ltd to support the trade of organic products through a national education program focused on access to the UK and European markets.

However, there are still some areas of improvement for the Australian organic industry. First, attaining certification here is still a voluntary process and therefore each individual producer has the freedom to get their products certified or not (Jessica, 2021). This, however, means that consumers have no guarantee that ‘organic’ claims made are truthful, and thus their confidence is lowered, and the industry’s reputation is negatively affected (Dominique & Alexandra, 2017). Plus, since the organic farming industry mainly consists of small operators and the organic farming techniques are not yet as efficient as those used in conventional farming, the industry remains highly fragmented, and it is difficult to maintain consistency in the quantity and quality of produce (Flanders, 2019).

Organic Agriculture and Market in Vietnam

There are many types of organic farmers in Vietnam: the traditional organic farmers, the reformed organic farmers, and certified organic farmers. Although it is difficult to embrace an accurate estimate of the number of organic farmers in Vietnam, it is rational to say that each of these groups contains a numerically small number of farmers compared to the vast majority of conventional farmers in Vietnam.

Vietnam is among the top producers of coffee and rice in the world, but it appears that very little of the production of either of these crops is organically certified (Thanh, 2020). There is also very little information available on organic rice farming in Vietnam, although reference is made to it in a number of websites and news articles.

The main organic products in Vietnam are spices such as cinnamon, star anise and pepper, fruit, cashews, tea, and some vegetables (USDA, 2021). Organic aquaculture, particularly shrimp farming, is also an important part of the organic industry in Vietnam (Jonell & Henriksson, 2015).

Nowadays, around 90 percent of the organic production is destined for export, mainly to Europe and the USA. The local market of organic vegetables is very underdeveloped, with only small amounts of organic vegetables and tea being sold mostly to foreigners or wealthy Vietnamese in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh and various five-star resorts and restaurants around the countries. Although the Vietnamese government supports the production, establishment of the certification system, and the labeling, “ORGANIC VEGETABLES”, the consumers don’t disbelieve this label. This causes complete failure in the organic product market in Vietnam. However, it is anticipated that the organic product market in Vietnam in the future will expand higher because Vietnam has a big market with inhabitants of over 87 million. The populations in urban areas have more incomes and can purchase organic products at a high price. Moreover, the consumers in urban areas have become more attentive to buying safe and healthy food.

Table 1
Summary of Australia and Vietnam Organic Agriculture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>Vietnam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural Area</td>
<td>409.7 m ha</td>
<td>27,986,390 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arable Land</td>
<td>47.7 m ha</td>
<td>6,988,300 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Imported Value</td>
<td>$10.4 billion</td>
<td>$12.8 billions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certified Organic Agriculture</td>
<td>12,001.72% ha</td>
<td>120,000 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certified Organic Agriculture % of agricultural land</td>
<td>2.95%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic Retail Sales (USD)</td>
<td>$2.6 billion</td>
<td>$330 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic Exports (USD)</td>
<td>$4,813,020</td>
<td>$9,486,062</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Development of Digital Trade of Organic Agricultural Products

Digital Trade

Digital trade encompasses digitally enabled transactions in trade in goods and services, which can be either digitally or physically delivered among consumers, firms, and governments. Empowered by
the recent technological development, digital trade has become the new trend since businesses can now reduce the cost of sharing ideas across borders and connect different actors along the value chain, thus overcoming many of the constraints associated with engaging in international markets and shifting sources of comparative advantage. Amid the COVID-19 situation, as the economic and social responses are triggered in a highly digitally connected global population, digital trade is increasingly adopted by various nations and will play a crucial role in a post-pandemic data-driven era. An example of a successful digitally enabled trade is the collaboration between Australia and New Zealand. Australia developed an e-invoicing standard which was then implemented in 2018 by the New Zealand Government to support trans-Tasman use. The alignment of e-invoicing standards was estimated to deliver AUD30bn in savings over 10 years in Australia and New Zealand. Both governments, later, have adopted the Peppol interoperability framework for e-invoicing to increase opportunities for businesses trading globally.

**Australia’s Digital Trade Development in Organic Agriculture Products**

Digital trade is highly important for Australia to trade with the rest of the world, as it provides prospective opportunities for Australian firms to reach out to more global clients while also boosting economic growth (DFAT, n.d.). According to the Export Council of Australia, digital exports in Australia were valued at roughly $6 billion in 2017, making it the country’s fourth-largest export sector, and this figure is expected to increase by 210 percent by 2030 (ECA, 2017). Around half of the Australian firms are now involved in the digital economy to either a considerable or an entire extent, and this percentage is expected to rise in the future (AIBS, 2018).

Australia was the 16th country to have signed the free trade agreement (FTAs), which sought to improve its access to key markets in the neighbourhood and the wider world. Australia’s domestic governance regime interfaces with foreign ones, shaping the ease with which its companies can share data with their peers abroad (Dean, 2018). The country uses an ‘a mix of federal, state, and territory laws’ to manage data privacy and data protection, hence the immediate domestic boundaries between closed and shared data (Dla Piper, n.d.). In 2017, Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade made protecting personal information from unauthorized disclosure and fostering cross-border data transfers two of its main objectives (DFAT, n.d.).

The Australian governments pay considerable attention to improving the digital infrastructures as they roll out the NBN (national broadband network), providing ubiquitous access to high-speed wholesale broadband to support dozens of retail service providers to deliver the opportunities of the digital age to households and businesses in the country. As a result, Australians are having access to world-class digital infrastructure in their personal and working lives, which enables reliable, secure, and affordable access to high-speed broadband and mobile communications. In the future, the Government is investing a further $84.8 million to expand the Regional Connectivity Program to continue to improve internet and mobile services in regional and remote Australia that are outside the NBN fixed-line footprint.

The two most popular e-commerce platforms for selling organic products in Australia are the big supermarket chains Woolworth (20.4 million monthly visits) and Coles (14.8 million monthly visits). They rank in third and fourth place respectively among all e-commerce sites, indicating the high number of people shopping for food and groceries online in the country.

**Vietnam’s Digital Trade Development in Organic Agriculture Products**

Vietnam’s economy heavily relies on trade, it is one of the world’s top 30 net exporters and amongst the top 5 markets by exports and imports relative to GDP (OEC, n.d.). Digital trade is important for Vietnam to increase its export base, help firms leverage digital technologies for productivity benefits, and transition the country towards a productivity-driven growth trajectory.

Affordable internet access has made Vietnam a booming e-commerce market. The revenue in the e-commerce market amounts to US$3,385 million in 2020 and is expected to register an annual growth rate of 7.1%, resulting in a market volume of US$3,352 million by 2024, according to Statista (2020).

In a study commissioned by the Hinrich Foundation (2019), the economic value of digital-trade enabled benefits to the Vietnamese economy is estimated to be worth VND81 trillion (US$3.35 billion) in 2018 and would grow 12-fold to reach VND 953 trillion (US$42 billion) by 2030. The main opportunity for harnessing digital trade lies in sectors such as infrastructure, financial services, and manufacturing (Box & Lopez-Gonzalez, 2017). The growth in digital exports is being driven by expanding digital infrastructure services and online video advertising (Elia et al., 2021).

Regarding the e-commerce platform for agricultural products, especially organic products, it is essential to support Vietnamese farmers. In the current conditions, the distribution of farming products on e-commerce platforms is considered an effective and sustainable solution to support farmers. Since the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic had hit lychees farmers in Bac Giang province hard, the e-Commerce and Digital Economy Agency (IDEA) has rushed to work with six big e-commerce platforms in Vietnam including Sendo, Voso (Viettel Post), Tiki, Shopee, Postmart (Vietnam Post), and Lazada to have plans to meet all lychee orders. Since the second
Since the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic had hit lychees farmers in Bac Giang province hard, the e-Commerce and Digital Economy Agency (IDEA) has rushed to work with six big e-commerce platforms in Việt Nam including Sendo, Voso (Viettel Post), Tiki, Shopee, Postmart (Vietnam Post), and Lazada to have plans to meet all lychee orders. Since the beginning of the year, Voso has put 3,727 suppliers on the platform, up 586 percent compared to the same period in 2020 (VNS, 2021). Postmart launched its program to support farmers in Bắc Giang Province selling their lychees on May 19 (VNS, 2021). At that time, there were 1,000 to 2,000 orders a day on e-commerce platforms. However, in recent days, sales have surged up to 10,000-12,000, bringing the total amount to 40 to 50 tonnes a day. The booming of an e-commerce platform for lychees in the second wave of the pandemic is such a milestone for the future trend of e-commerce for agricultural products in Vietnam.

**Possibilities Analysis**

**From Australia to Vietnam**

**Challenges**

1. **Weak penetration in organic sectors in Vietnam’s e-commerce**

   As mentioned, in Australia, there is no strict process implemented to ensure the quality of “organic-labeled” products, making consumers uncertain when buying (Schremmer 2021). Whereas not only are the local organic producers in Vietnam paying higher and higher attention to products’ quality, but the organic market in this country is also increasingly quality-oriented since most importers here have strict certification processes (Ly 2020). In addition, in Vietnam’s E-commerce landscape, fashion, beauty & personal care, book & music, and IT & mobile are what Vietnamese buyers purchase the most recently, leaving small rooms for organic products to be bought online (Eurocham, 2020).

2. **Poor e-payment in Vietnam**

   Another challenge when exporting organic products from Australia to Vietnam is the minimal access to digital financial services people in the latter country have. In 2020, credit card penetration and mobile money account penetration were at 4.1% and 3.5% respectively in the population aged 15+ (see Table 2). Since cash is still the primary means of transaction or “king” in Vietnam, it is harder to sell goods online and attract lots of buyers in this nation.

**Opportunities**

Because of its large available organic area as well as its reputation for high-quality organic products, Australia has a huge potential to export its goods to various parts of the world. Among those, Vietnam should be the chosen destination because this nation is a relatively untapped market for imported organic food and beverage products.

The reason for this is that Vietnam is having a growing middle-class, higher disposable income, and increased concerns about health, combined with a limited domestic population (Nguyen, 2021). Moreover, although organic packaged food is a niche category in Vietnam, the number of categories with organic variants has increased, with snacks, baby food, formula, and drinking milk leading innovation and becoming more competitive in general (Global Organic Trade, n.d.). Recently in September 2021, supported by the Australian government, the “Promoting organic food certification & trade between Australia and Vietnam” event has been successfully held, with the participation of more than 150 delegates from both countries. Interestingly, online trading was mentioned as one of the key topics to be discussed during the whole project, marking the prospective collaboration of the two countries in organic products’ digital trade (VNA, 2021).

**From Vietnam to Australia**

**Challenges**

1. **Australia’s strict biosecurity and organic certifications**

   Since Australia is extremely open regarding its cross-border digital trade, the key challenge that raises the barrier for Vietnam agricultural products to enter the Australian market is the strict federal body responsible for enforcing Australia’s quarantine of goods regulations, including issuing permits and inspecting shipments.

   The Australian government enforces its quarantine measures very seriously. Aside from issues relating to the importation of fresh food and animals, Australia’s quarantine measures cover other imported products such as farms, mining, and construction machinery, some packaged foods, and other products that may pose a contamination risk to Australia’s agricultural industry or natural environment. There may also be seasonal biosecurity measures in place by the Australian government, such as those used to contain the spread of brown marmorated stink bugs, that a wide range of Vietnam organic exporters will need to comply with. According to Gapon (2016), Vietnam is one of the native countries of brown marmorated stink bugs.

   Regarding organic products importation, Australia only allows certified organic products from other countries. Furthermore, certified operations will need to check with Australia Certified Organic (ACO) for compliance with any imported products (Australian Organic, n.d.). In the context of Vietnam’s organic farming, certified organic farming is fairly a phenomenon that accounts for only 0.5% of agricultural land since becoming certified organic is riddled with bureaucratic processes and requires dropping money every step of the way. In that vein, it has led to the narrow market access for Vietnam to Australia organic food trade due to the strict requirements of certified organic products standards.
Opportunities

1. Demand and supply matching

As there is still great potential for organic agricultural development in Vietnam, the opportunity for organic agricultural products from Vietnam to enter Australia is very promising in the near future. Mekong Organics has been selected by the Australian government to implement a project to promote the development of organic agricultural technology, certification, and trade between Vietnam and Australia within the framework of the Australia-Vietnam Enhanced Economic Engagement Grant pilot program.

According to Vietnam Plus (2021), the market for organic agriculture products in Australia reached 2.5 billion AUD (equivalent to nearly 2 billion USD) in 2019. Furthermore, based on the above analysis of the current Australian organic market, it is obvious that the market has been constantly growing. Specifically, it is associated with a wide variety of products such as processed and beauty products, and garments appearing more and more in farmers' markets, supermarkets, restaurants, and cafes.

However, domestic production in Australia has not yet met the needs of consumers (Vietnam Plus, 2021). Due to lower supply than demand in the organic agricultural product market in Australia, the potential of organic agricultural products from Vietnam to enter this market is quite high in the coming years, especially processed products such as sauces, jams, and canned fruits, dried and frozen vegetables. Furthermore, it is easier for processed products to be imported into Australia (Australian Government, 2020).

In light of the assistance of cross-border e-commerce, it is considered a “green lane” to bring Vietnamese organic products to Australian customers, creating an effective channel to help firms and local farmers access Australia’s market in the urgent of the new normal. The diversity of e-commerce platforms that allow international trade activities such as Amazon Global Selling, Shopee, Lazada, Voso, Alibaba, etc. have been the new playground for Vietnamese local organic farmers to digitally open to Australia’s market. According to the Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC) (2021), selling directly on cross-border e-commerce platforms was one of the quickest ways to connect products with customers, expand markets and increase export revenue. Cross-border e-commerce platforms were one of the quickest ways to connect products with customers, expand markets and increase export revenue. This minimizes intermediary and operating costs and distributes products to end-users in Australia’s organic market. At the same time, it is also an opportunity for small and medium-sized enterprises to join the “big playing field,” entering large markets such as Australia where many barriers exist, and it is costly to trade in the traditional way.

Recommendations

1. Blockchain Applications

Regarding the differences in the certification of organic products between Australia and Vietnam, the blockchain application is highly recommended to overcome such a challenge.

Blockchain is a shared, immutable ledger that facilitates the process of recording transactions and tracking assets in a business network. Virtually anything of value can be tracked and traded on a blockchain network, which reduces risk, and cuts costs for all involved.

Blockchain is ideal for delivering that information because it provides immediate, shared and completely transparent information stored on an immutable ledger that can be accessed only by permission network members. A blockchain network can track orders, payments, accounts, production, and much more. And because members share a single view of the truth, businesses can see all details of a transaction end to end, giving them greater confidence, as well as new efficiencies and opportunities.

The potential applications of blockchain technology across a range of industries from financial, and industrial, to social have been of great interest to companies and research institutes (Ge et al., 2017). Although blockchain technology itself has been researched frequently lately, a study comparing eight blockchain projects affirmed that blockchain application in the food supply chain is still rare, and information about technical implementation is not detailed.

To improve information management of agri-food transactions, blockchain was found to be of great relevance in the agri-food sector in the Netherlands (Ge et al., 2017). Wolfert et al. (2018) position blockchain as a core technology within the “cyber-physical management cycle of agricultural food production” with other technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), big data analytics, and artificial intelligence. In this cycle, public decision-making can rely on the concept of smart farming that monitors, analyzes, and controls farming (Wolfert et al., 2018).

In relation to the organic food traceability criteria, immutability and decentralization of data using blockchain have the most impact on alleviating issues concerning certification fraud, transparency throughout the supply chain, and the use of common data elements.

Organic trade is built on trust among chain partners in the system of certification and in the certification and inspection bodies performing their duties (Canavari, Pignatti & Spadoni, 2006). Up and until the selling point to the consumer, all chain partners handling the organic produce must be certified.
For this paper, the following information system of food traceability will be applied to monitor the quality of organic products between Australia and Vietnam from Farm to end-consumers (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**
**Food Traceability Information System**

In relation to the application of blockchain technology, when adding smart contracts to a blockchain solution, it becomes possible to implement and execute business processes across organization boundaries (Razon, 2019). A smart contract can be seen as a digitized business agreement between Australian and Vietnamese businesses, which can be triggered automatically when certain criteria are met to validate and verify the organic chain partners. Based on Figure 1, blockchain is responsible for sharing information in terms of both internal and external traceability. Regarding food safety and quality regulations, since Vietnam has not yet had its own internal organic certification, the AOC, Australian organic certification, will be applied for Vietnamese organic certification accessing the market.

**Figure 2**
**The fundamental structure of a food traceability system**

The key explanation of how blockchain can improve the organic food traceability in relation to the matching quality standards of two countries is the combination of “chain discovery” and “data capture and visualization”. By doing so, the Vietnamese organic products can be certified successfully based on Australian Certified Organic from farming to consuming stages.

### 2. Establishment of banks and payment intermediaries

Vietnam acknowledges the limitation regarding digital trade infrastructure, especially the development of digital payment for consumers in the country, that is why striving for better e-payment service is one of the key strategies in Vietnam’s policy. The Vietnamese government and the State Bank have issued several mechanisms and policies to expand the e-payment and digital payment systems, with the goal of having 80 percent of the population have an e-payment account and a 50 percent rate of e-commerce payments by 2025 (Nhat, 2021). To provide this service to the people, several banks and payment intermediaries have been established (NDO, 2019). An effective solution that can help to widely deploy low-cost digital payment services is to use telecommunications network infrastructure just like in other countries.

### Conclusion

Through the analysis of organic agriculture and market as well as the development of digital trade to deliver organic products between Vietnam and Australia, this paper has listed various opportunities for prospective trading collaboration between the two countries including growing digital platforms and supply-demand matching. However, certain challenges regarding the poor e-payment network in Vietnam and Australia’s strict biosecurity and organic certifications do pose enormous constraints to the digital trade of organic products between the two. Therefore, the paper suggests that the application of blockchain technology and better e-payment services should be the focus to promote the digital trade of organic products between Vietnam and Australia. Only when the products and the digital enablers between Vietnam and Australia are sufficient, will the traders in both countries be able to take advantage of the growing consumer demand for organic products and thus conduct profitable trading activities across borders.


**Bibliography**


ASEAN-Australia relations can be traced back to more than five decades ago. The partnership between both has been evolving across the three community pillars in ASEAN. At the first annual ASEAN-Australia summit on 27 October 2021, ASEAN and Australia upgraded their cooperation by establishing ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), and Australia is strongly focused on the implementation of CSP, including the new package of “Australia for ASEAN Futures Initiatives”. In terms of economic cooperation, Australia is an important trading partner for ASEAN and contrariwise. The economic cooperation between the two partners has successfully grown since the establishment of ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA), a comprehensive free trade agreement between ASEAN, Australian and New Zealand.

This agreement has brought a variety of promising opportunities and benefits for ASEAN and Australia towards sustainable economic growth by facilitating the movement of goods and services along with transparent market and investment regimes across the 12 signatory countries. ASEAN has become the second largest trading partner for Australia, with ASEAN trade amounting up to $113.7 billion in the period of 2019-2020. Additionally, Australia was the seventh largest trading partner of ASEAN in 2018 (DFAT, n.d.).

Economic cooperation between ASEAN and Australia has become increasingly significant with the outbreak of COVID-19. With growing capacities of digitalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies in leading to growth and development, the digital economy has become a stepping stone for economic recovery. Hence, it presents a crucial sector of cooperation for ASEAN-Australia partnership. ASEAN and Australia have emphasized their commitment to promoting the digital economy, which can be seen in the Plan of Action to implement the ASEAN-Australia Strategic Partnership (2020-2024) (ASEAN, 2019). In addition to the existing efforts to facilitate the digital economy between ASEAN and Australia, this paper will propose seamless trade cooperation (cross-border paperless trade), data security, and capacity building (improvement of MSME’s participation in digital economy), as priority areas for ASEAN-Australia cooperation in harnessing the digital economy’s potential to achieve a sustainable economic recovery.

**Key words**: ASEAN, Australia, COVID-19, Digital Economy

**Introduction**

ASEAN-Australia relations can be traced back to more than five decades ago. The partnership between both has been evolving across the three community pillars in ASEAN. At the first annual ASEAN-Australia summit on 27 October 2021, ASEAN and Australia upgraded their cooperation by establishing ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), and Australia is strongly focused on the implementation of CSP, including the new package of “Australia for ASEAN Futures Initiatives”. In terms of economic cooperation, Australia is an important trading partner for ASEAN and contrariwise. The economic cooperation between the two partners has successfully grown since the establishment of ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA), a comprehensive free trade agreement between ASEAN, Australian and New Zealand.

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The evolving technological transformation combined with the need to adapt and ensure the resiliency of economic activities has made the digital economy the focal point for economic growth. The digital economy refers to the economic activities that utilize digital tools including digital infrastructure, digital technologies, digital services and data (OECD, 2020a). Cloud Computing, the Internet of Things, Big Data, the internet, and other software and hardware devices are being utilized to drive the digitization of the global economy, ultimately transforming the nature of markets, production, logistics, business activities, and interaction between consumers and producers. The digital economy has a variety of benefits due to its potential to facilitate the interaction and flow of goods and services between consumers and producers worldwide, reduce transaction costs, boost productivity and competitiveness, and generate revenues. According to Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2021, p. 194), Asia accounted for over 58% of total sales revenue in 2019, with China displaying the most e-commerce activity in the region. At the same time, the user accounts of e-commerce are approximately 3.2 billion users, in which 60% of users are in Asia (Figure 1). Moreover, the upsurge in Asia’s internet bandwidth by 33 times from 2010 to 2019 has also contributed to an increase in internet use in addition to rising data flow from e-commerce and other digital platforms (ADB, 2021, p. 7). This data demonstrates that countries in Asia are becoming increasingly engaged in e-commerce activities, especially in recent years with the growth rate of internet bandwidth.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>World</th>
<th>Asia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number (million)</td>
<td>Growth Rate (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Media</td>
<td>1,438.3</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-Commerce</td>
<td>3,770.8</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-Services</td>
<td>815.4</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Travel</td>
<td>987.6</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>626.6</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AdTech-exposed internet users</td>
<td>4,198.5</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ADB (2021)

### COVID-19 Disruptions on Economic Activities and Cross-border Trade Flows

With the outbreak of COVID-19, border closures, quarantine requirements, lockdowns, and other related measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 imposed by countries around the globe have accelerated the transition of economic activities to an online mode. The emergence of new technologies and the improvement of digital connections, including the widespread use of internet bandwidth, have helped businesses to stay afloat in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Business owners are able to operate their businesses and interact with consumers remotely as well as maintain their normal business activities. For instance, many Australian small businesses turned to e-commerce during the lockdown - with 259,000 small and medium enterprises moving online, added $2.4 billion in revenue for Australian businesses in the first half of 2020 (Burtt & Lee, 2020). In a simple term, COVID-19 has increased propensity to engage more in e-commerce activities as part of the digital economy.

On an international scale, COVID-19 brought disruption to cross-border trade flow and raised trade costs, as a result of new trade measures put in place by governments to contain the spread of the pandemic. Those trade measures included additional border controls, new protocols, new documentation requirements for traders and shippers, and costs from the disruption of transport, logistics, and supply chain (OECD, 2020c, 2020b). All of these disruptions have become barriers to cross-border trade flow and the global economy. Consequently, global and regional trade have decreased. In the first half of 2020, intra-regional trade between the Southeast Asian, Pacific, and Oceania economies saw a decline by around 20% and over 10% year-on-year respectively (Figure 2) (ADB, 2021, p. 3).

### Figure 1

[Intraregional Trade Value Growth Asia (% y-o-y)](source: ADB (2021))
To adapt to the ongoing pandemic and achieve a sustainable economic recovery, countries must closely monitor trade facilitation measures which possess the capability to smoothen border processes in a fast paced and safe manner with minimal physical interaction in cross-border digital trade.

“Trade facilitation measures – such as digitizing and streamlining border processes – speed up processing while reducing person-to-person interactions” (OECD, 2020c).

Existing ASEAN-Australia Cooperation in Digital Economy

With the potential of the digital economy in driving economic growth and ensuring adaptability and sustainability of the economy, ASEAN and Australia have cooperated and collaborated to ensure they reap more trade benefits from the digital economy. Noticeably, e-commerce, a part of the digital economy with the potential to serve as a catalyst for economic recovery, was included in AANZFTA with articles focusing on cooperation in electronic commerce, paperless trading, online data protection, and online consumer protections. During the pandemic, trade has increasingly transitioned itself from trade in tangible goods to trade in services and cross-border data flow. Therefore, countries must adopt new technologies, open data flow, and minimize border frictions, which can be smoothen by international standards (Standards Australia, n.d.). Thus, to further facilitate trade between ASEAN and Australia, the ASEAN-Australia Digital Trade Standards Cooperation Initiative, which serves as a stepping stone towards international digital trade standards, was announced. This initiative seeks to raise awareness on international standards that enable improvement in digital trade and economic integration whilst also seeking to address barriers preventing the awareness and adoption of international standards in digital trade across ASEAN and Australia (Standards Australia, 2018). Australia leverages support for ASEAN to advance their digital integration, including e-commerce, by providing support for the implementation of the ASEAN Agreement on Electronic Commerce and the ASEAN Digital Integration Framework Action Plan as well as continue to strengthen cooperation to create more opportunities for trade and investment (ASEAN, 2019). Additionally, to further reap the benefits of the digital economy and to fully transform towards a digitally-enabled economy, potential areas for ASEAN and Australia to further cooperate can be identified.

Potential Areas for ASEAN-Australia Cooperation

Seamless Trade Cooperation (Cross-border paperless trade)

Digital trade has become a focal point for growth and development and the best stimulus to foster and promote cross-border flow of goods and services during the pandemic due to its potentials in reducing trade costs and accelerating trade procedures. To facilitate and fully harness the benefits of digital trade, digitization of customs information and management, seamless and efficient flow of data, and electronic documents, play a vital role. Therefore, it is necessary for ASEAN and Australia to increase investment and cooperation to promote the implementation of these new generation digital trade facilitation measures, such as cross-border paperless trade. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) (2017, p. 20), cross-border paperless trade is defined as “an exchange of trade-related data and documents not only within the country, but also within stakeholders among the entire international supply chain.” The measures of cross-border paperless trade include cross-border exchange of electronic data, electronic exchange of certificate of origin, sanitary and phytosanitary certificates, and laws and regulations for electronic transactions. Currently, in ASEAN, the implementation rate of cross-border paperless trade in 2017 was approximately 30% whereas the implementation rate across all measures of cross-border paperless trade was still in an early stage of development (Figure 3) (UNESCAP, 2017, p. 10). Nevertheless, the implementation rate has signified that ASEAN has been moving forward in promoting cross-border paperless trade, primarily through the ASEAN Single Window, an advanced cross-border paperless trade initiative. Australia, on the other hand, has led the implementation of cross-border paperless trade and also worked to incorporate paperless trading and electronic cross-border transfer of information in their agreements with other countries, including in AANZFTA.

Figure 2
Implementation of "Cross-border Paperless Trade) Measures in ASEAN

To achieve a seamless cross-border paperless trade between ASEAN and Australia, the legal recognition of trade related data and documents among both countries is required. Hence, close-knit cooperation between the two partners in three important areas are vital to promote cross-border paperless trade across the region.

First, ASEAN and Australia must work together to find a harmonized and consistent approach for cross-border paperless trade which can be learned, adapted, and customized from the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific. Based on Article 8 and 9
of the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific, countries must mutually agree on an equivalent level of reliability between data or documents to be exchanged. ASEAN and Australia should establish a mutual recognition mechanism for electronic trade, trade-related data and documents to harmonize data and simplify documentation. To do this, the two partners shall work together multilaterally to discuss steps to recognize each other's data and electronic documentation by discussing data simplification to facilitate the exchange of data, reducing e-document information complexity, working on the consistency of the meaning and the format of the data and document to be traded electronically, and ensuring the standardization of trade-related data and documents to fit with international standard.

Second, it is important also to establish a mutually-agreed set of laws and regulations which are necessary to support and ensure the smooth implementation of cross-border paperless trade while also ensuring that the laws and regulations conform with international laws and other relevant regional regulations. Drawing from a legal readiness checklist of cross-border paperless trade by UNESCAP (2019), in order to promote cross-border paperless trade, ASEAN and Australia must create laws and regulations for (1) information security and data confidentiality, (2) regulations for data accuracy and integrity when sharing across borders, and (3) laws and regulations for data or information sharing and accessing among government agencies. Moreover, laws and regulations for cross-border trade dispute settlements between the two partners should also be taken into account. In this regard, there must be a committee in charge of solving any electronic transactions or electronic trade disputes.

Third, ASEAN and Australia shall craft a roadmap detailing the schedules to promote cross-border paperless trade and further establish a committee or a body to monitor and evaluate the trade implementation process to ensure a fruitful implementation of the measures.

Data Security

The digital economy relies on cross-border data access, usage and exchange. Data connects firms and customers together across countries, enables management of global production networks, and reduces transaction costs. Moreover, an enhanced and efficient data flow also increases an efficient cross-border movement of goods and services, including paperless trading, online payment of customs duties, and e-certificate. Free flow of data was estimated to have contributed $2.8 trillion to the global economy in 2014 and is estimated to grow up to $11 trillion by 2025 (Joshua & Peter, 2018). However, when doing business digitally (e-commerce), it is inevitable that customers' data, data related to suppliers or operations are recorded everyday during business or trade transactions. Therefore, this requires attention on data security to protect trade-related data from unauthorized access. This protection will serve as a complimentary step to boost the implementation and promotion of cross-border paperless trade across ASEAN and Australia. Since data protection is becoming increasingly important for the digital economy, ASEAN has established frameworks for data protection, such as the ASEAN Framework on Personal Data Protection (2016) and the ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Governance (2018). Australia also has domestic laws and regulations in place for data security. Furthermore, the key provision Australia pursues in trade agreements to enable digital trade is online protection of personal information which is related to the establishment of a legal framework to protect consumers' personal data on e-commerce from unauthorized access. For cross-border paperless trade and e-commerce between ASEAN and Australia to develop fruitfully and transparently in the digital era where free flow of data is becoming increasingly relevant combining with the era of the pandemic where there is an increasing need to reduce physical contact, ASEAN and Australia must post their cooperation and collaboration on data security.

ASEAN and Australia shall establish a coherence law and regulation to protect confidentiality of data and prevent it from unauthorized access. Moreover, both partners must enhance commitment in existing dialogue, such as the ‘ASEAN-Australia Cyber Policy Dialogue’, to further promote awareness and deepen cooperation in relation to cybersecurity and digital trade issues to ensure economic prosperity. It is also significant for both parties to continue to adhere to existing agreements including AANZFTA (Articles 6 and 7), and Plan of Action to implement ASEAN-Australia Strategic Partnership (2020-2024) which emphasizes the promotion of open, secure, accessible, and peaceful Information and Communications Technology (ICT) environment, and the promotion of a rule-based cyberspace in conformity with international laws.

Finally, both partners must enhance their cooperation on areas of mutual interests in digital trade including cybersecurity matters, improve joint efforts in building trust and capacity, exchanging experiences, and information sharing.

Capacity Building for MSMEs across ASEAN and Australia

With the entrance into the digital era and the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN and Australia have shifted their focus to utilize digital technologies to develop and promote business and productivity. With this digital transformation, SMEs and MSMEs in both ASEAN and Australia have utilized technology to align themselves with the digital economy in order to seize opportunities for growth. In ASEAN, MSMEs compose of different variations of firms, including micro-companies consisting of one or two people, startups that grow and scale quickly, and small and medium-sized firms in a traditional or innovative sector. These firms represent approximately 97% to 99% of firms and contribute to around 60-80% of total employment across the region (Giulia & Lina, 2020).
MSMEs also have a significant presence in the Australian economy. There are approximately 2.2 million MSMEs in Australia which represent 57% of total GDP and 67% of total employment (Moula, 2019). This number shows that MSMEs are important and are the backbone for economic growth in ASEAN and Australia. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for MSMEs in both ASEAN and Australia to digitize their businesses to ensure operational sustainability and to effectively seize benefits from the digital economy. For instance, 259,000 Australian SMEs have moved to an online mode for their businesses to stay afloat. In ASEAN, many MSMEs have turned to e-commerce activities, in which 67% of MSME owners interviewed said adopting e-commerce was one of their biggest steps toward digitalization (Burtt & Lee, 2020; ERIA, 2019, p. 6). However, despite the need to digitize their businesses, MSMEs are still not tech-savvy or fully digitalized enough to build or transform themselves to keep up with the fast pace growth of technology in the digital economy. For example, only 10% of MSMEs in ASEAN that were interviewed fell into the advanced level (usage of advanced technologies like big data) while 56% and 34% fell into basic (usage of email, WhatsApp, Ms Office, etc.) and intermediate level (usage of website, social media, e-commerce sites) respectively (Figure 4) (ERIA, 2019). This is due to difficulties, including the lack of resources, shortage of expertise, and limited knowledge of digitalization faced by MSMEs across ASEAN. Those difficulties; however, can be lessened or alleviated with Australian cooperation whereby Australia as a leading country in the digital economy can leverage help for MSMEs in ASEAN to grow in three ways.

### Figure 3
State of MSME Digitalization in ASEAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Digitalisation</th>
<th>Digital Tools/Processes</th>
<th>% of Digitalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Microsoft Office, email, WhatsApp, personal computer, mobile phones</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online presence</td>
<td>Website, social media, e-commerce sites, tablets, printers</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>ERP, CRM, analytics, big data, business scanners, inventory management, imaging devices</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EIRA (2019)

Firstly, capacity building of MSMEs is vital to build and improve expertise on digitalization. Australia can leverage their help to build capacity and boost MSMEs participation in the digital economy through technological transfer which can be done through support in implementing the ASEAN Plan of Action on Science, Technology, and Innovation (APASTI 2016-2025). The third strategic thrust of APASTI puts emphasis on the establishment of partnerships with dialogue partners to nurture the areas of science, technology, and innovation to further support MSMEs, knowledge creation, and boost competitiveness (ASEAN, 2017). In this case, based on this Plan of Action, ASEAN and Australia can discuss establishing joint funding and a cross-border technology transfer mechanism like a mentorship program or further cooperation with MSMEs across ASEAN and Australia in order to increase cross-border technological transfer. Secondly, to deal with insufficient knowledge of digitalization faced by MSMEs, it is important that ASEAN and Australia jointly organize workshop programs to disseminate information related to the digital economy, international market access of a particular sector, and how to be well-prepared to participate in the digital economy and global supply chain. Recently, business owners and officials representing ASEAN, Australia, and New Zealand have come together under a workshop titled ‘Capacity Building Programme for MSME on International Prepared Food Standards in AANZFTA’ to increase knowledge and skills in the prepared food sector for MSMEs. This contributes to greater participation of MSMEs in the regional value chain (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2019). If the efforts can be maintained, MSMEs’ information sphere will be bigger and reachable to MSMEs across countries. Finally, dialogue exchanges between MSME owners in ASEAN and Australia shall also be frequently held. In this case, the dialogue exchanges will enable MSME owners across ASEAN and Australia to share practical experiences, challenges, and views for greater awareness and smoother participation in the digital economy.

### Conclusion
ASEAN-Australia economic cooperation, particularly in the digital economy, has become increasingly important to advocate for a fully digital-enabled economy to harness opportunities and benefits for a sustainable economic recovery in the post-COVID-19 era. There are three proposed potential areas for ASEAN and Australia to further collaborate on to harness benefits from the digital economy.

Firstly, it is necessary for ASEAN and Australia to cooperate together to promote the implementation of new generation digital trade facilitation measures, such as cross-border paperless trade, to achieve seamless and efficient flow of trade, data, and electronic documents. In return, this will accelerate...
Trade procedures, reduce costs, and reduce COVID-19 risks. To do so, ASEAN and Australia must find a harmonized and consistent approach for cross-border paperless trade by establishing: (1) a mutual recognition mechanism for electronic trade, trade-related data and documents to harmonize data and simplify documentation, (2) a set of laws and regulations which are necessary to support and ensure the smooth implementation of cross-border paperless trade, and (3) a monitoring body to monitor and evaluate the implementation process of cross-border paperless trade.

Secondly, data security is one of the proposed potential areas for ASEAN and Australia to push for more cooperation as the digital economy itself also relies on cross-border data access, usage and exchange. Therefore, it is vital for ASEAN and Australia to: (1) establish a coherence law and regulation to protect the confidentiality of data and prevent it from unauthorized access, (2) further strengthen commitment in adhering to existing dialogue 'ASEAN-Australia Cyber Policy Dialogue' and existing agreements including AANZFTA (Art. 6 and 7), and POA to implement the ASEAN-Australia Strategic Partnership (2020-2024).

Finally, it is vital to building the capacity of MSMEs, the backbone for economic growth, across ASEAN and Australia for MSMEs to overcome difficulties when embracing digitalization. This would increase their participation in the digital economy and regional and global supply chains. In this proposed area, Australia can leverage assistance in terms of capacity building for ASEAN MSMEs by supporting the implementation of the ASEAN Plan of Action on Science, Technology, and Innovation (APASTI 2016-2025) where ASEAN and Australia can discuss to establish joint funding and cross-border technology transfer mechanism like mentorship programs for MSMEs across ASEAN and Australia. Moreover, ASEAN and Australia must organize dialogue exchanges as well as jointly organize workshop programs to disseminate information related to the digital economy, international market access of a particular sector, and how to be well-prepared to participate in the digital economy and global supply chain.
Challenges to Burgeoning ASEAN-Australia Renewable Energy Trade: An Ex-Ante Analysis

Quah Say Jye | Singapore

Abstract

Developments in the field of renewable energy trade in the Indo-Pacific have the potential to spur decarbonisation, as well as have important geopolitical implications. The Asia-Australia Power Link (AAPL), is set to export enough solar energy to Singapore to power 15-20% of its homes, and lay the basis to a regional grid. The project would also allow Australia to begin shifting its energy export industry from primarily coal mining – an unsustainable model – to renewables. Yet, a deeper analysis of potential obstructions that might paralyse this burgeoning relationship is in order. This paper takes an ex-ante approach to highlight key issues within the political economy, focusing specifically on the Australian domestic coal industry. It concludes by pointing to possible areas of future research.

Key words: ASEAN-Australia relations; Asia-Australia Power Link; political economy; renewable energy

Introduction

It is by now uncontroversial to name the Indo-Pacific as the key arena of geopolitical contestation in the first half of the 21st century. It is also not controversial to identify climate change and decarbonisation as the biggest global challenge in the same period. These two factors give ample reason for analysts and scholars alike to pay attention to the developing renewable energy trade within the Indo-Pacific, which has the potential to provide states a cost-effective method to decarbonise, as well as to bring important geopolitical implications.

This paper seeks to map out the current state of the renewable energy trade projects between states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Australia, providing an analysis of future challenges in an ex-ante fashion. Given the brevity of the medium, this analysis merely sets out the contours of the issue and its stakes, and does not directly offer policy recommendations or an in-depth study. In particular, the paper identifies the Australian coal industry as a major actor that has the potential to scupper the growing developments.

This is not meant to reduce the challenges to a single factor, but merely to identify a major one.

This paper will proceed as follows. The next section outlines the developments in renewable energy trade between ASEAN states and Australia, and how all parties stand to benefit. After which, the paper outlines an analysis on the Australian coal industry, and how it is a potential spoiler in these growing developments. The paper concludes by pointing to areas of future research.

Renewable Energy Trade in ASEAN-Australia

Proposed projects concerning renewable energy trade in Southeast Asia have greatly stepped up in 2021. Singapore, recognised in the UN Framework Convention as an “alternative energy disadvantaged country” unable to indigenously produce sufficient renewable energy, has been the central player in importing renewables in the region (Singapore Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment 2020). To recalibrate its energy trilemma through meeting its decarbonisation goals as well as strengthening its energy security, Singapore has planned to import 4 Gigawatts (GW), or 30% of its electricity needs, from low-carbon sources by 2035 (Lim 2021b).

This has led to multiple plans concerning renewable energy trade, with subsea cables running through the Indo-Pacific. Plans include building a USD$2 billion floating solar farm and energy storage system with a combined capacity of 7 GW peak in Indonesia’s Riau islands (Zhu 2021). The project aims to provide 1 GW of non-intermittent low-carbon clean energy for both Singapore and Indonesia, and Batam also stands to benefit through skills transfers, with over 3,000 locals involved in the project (Sunseap 2021). Plans are also in place for a trial run to bring 100 MW of electricity generated by hydropower from Laos to Singapore, via Thailand and Malaysia. Singaporean officials have noted that they regard these deals between themselves and their Southeast Asian neighbours as initial steps

1 Briefly, the energy trilemma refers to the need to balance between three factors - energy affordability, security, and sustainability

86 ASEAN-AUSTRALIA REVIEW 2021
towards the establishment of a functioning ASEAN Power Grid (APG) based on renewable energy, allowing ASEAN states to tap into the abundance of clean energy potential, and create energy efficiency and security for the entire region (Shi Ning 2021).

Yet, the direct decarbonisation benefits of these projects are dwarfed by Australian company Sun Cable’s USD$30 billion megaproject named the Australia-Asia Power Link (AAPL), which aims to facilitate “the integration of technologies to establish a solar energy infrastructure network that will provide Darwin and Singapore with competitively priced, dispatchable, high volume renewable electricity” (Sun Cable 2021a). Previous scholarly literature has explored prospects of renewable energy trade between Asia and Australia (see e.g. Jamil and Gong 2016; Halawa et. al 2018), but none have accounted for this recent development, which is best positioned to ensure the successful fulfillment of this potential.

While due to “commercial sensitivities” not all details of the AAPL can be shared, public information allows some insight into the initiative (Ang 2021). The company aims to be able to dispatch solar energy in 2027 from a 12,000-hectare, 28 million solar panel farm in the northern Australian desert to Singapore through a sea cable that runs over 4,000km. The project, which has gained Major Project Status from the Commonwealth government, aims to be able to export enough energy to power 15-20% of Singapore’s total electricity needs, with an export capacity of 2.2 GW (Hannam 2021). The project is stated to reach 17-20 GW of capacity, with a storage facility of 36-42 GW. Granted, the project conspicuously runs through Indonesian sovereign waters, and not directly between Australia and Singapore, giving Indonesia an effective veto over the project. On this note, recent news of high-level Indonesian officials not only approving but recommending the route through Indonesian waters seems to have cleared an important roadblock to the realisation of the project.

The project aims to create economic benefits, with estimates stating that the project will lead to the creation of over 12,000 jobs across the three countries, and generate an export revenue of AU$52 billion (Vorrrath 2021). This is further emphasised by how the Joint Vision Statement of the Singapore Australia Green Economy Agreement (GEA) focuses heavily on job creation and economic trade (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2021a). Importantly, while none of the renewable energy produced would be exported to Indonesia, Sun Cable has committed to around USD$2.5 billion of investments as well as knowledge transfer with two academic institutions within Indonesia (Macdonald-Smith and Connors 2021). The investments focus on infrastructure construction, and include a renewable energy transmission system and a marine repair base. The infrastructure and knowledge gains can lay the basis for the development of Indonesia’s own renewable energy industry, and therefore act as an indirect method to boost renewable energy prospects. Moreover, in the official press conference announcing the deal, Coordinating Minister of Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Pandjaitan revealed that Indonesia was exploring more avenues to extend the project, dovetailing with signs that relations between Australia and Indonesia regarding the climate will strengthen in the coming years (Mathews 2021). In any case, the project has led analysts to note that it could spur greater momentum for Indonesia to further export renewable energy to the rest of the region. This, together with earlier announcements surrounding the project have also emphasised how it can lay the basis for the APG, would amplify the long-term effects and prospects for decarbonising the region.

Figure 1

Sun Cable’s route


If the AAPL manages to be the important first step towards the development of the APG, or a Australia-Asia energy grid (Halawa et. al 2018), the gains in energy efficiency and energy security would be considerable. Sun Cable’s research notes that greater grid connectivity in the Asia-Pacific in general could create over 800,000 jobs, spur high rates of decarbonisation, lead to significant cost savings in the long run, and allow the strengthening of public finance by mitigating the need for fossil fuel subsidies (Sun Cable 2021b). This would also help ASEAN reach its goal of having 23% of its energy mix come from renewable energies.

The AAPL also has security implications. Given ASEAN’s strategic location in the Indo-Pacific, these projects acquire a further strategic significance and become an extra-ordinary form of trade. In the context of looming climate change, which threatens to reshape the world order and create a new strategic context, the geopolitical implications of climate change make renewable energy trade a key strategic issue. It might fulfil Australia’s stated intentions to become a green exporting superpower, which brings with it geopolitical heft (Smyth 2021). Together with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), Australia has also pledged to focus on making resilient clean-energy supply chains, where Australia can provide vital raw materials to ensure that decarbonisation plans can come to fruition (Reuters 2021). This would make Australia a key geopolitical player in the coming decades.
Of note is an even larger project, the Asian Renewable Energy Hub (AREH), which had planned to export 26 GW of renewable energy from Western Australia to various Asian nations, including Singapore (The Straits Times 2021). Similar to AAPL, the project is a private and nongovernment-driven enterprise, yet the project differs from AAPL in several ways. Firstly, the AREH uses not just solar energy, but also wind. Secondly, while the project had initially planned to transmit wind and solar energy through an undersea cable to places like Singapore, in 2020 it changed plans to instead target the production of green hydrogen and ammonia at a large scale, with the process powered by clean energy. Lastly, the AREH project targets not merely Southeast Asian nations but also East Asian nations like Japan and South Korea as importers and is not as directly relevant to ASEAN-Australia relations as compared to the AAPL. Despite giving the project's initial iteration "major project status", the project faced a setback in June 2021 when the Australian government rejected plans for the expanded version to go ahead, citing environmental damage. Those behind the AREH are appealing the decision and are not giving up, labelling the decision as "perplexing" and "premature" (Carroll 2021). It remains to be seen how this angle develops, and analysts will be prudent to keep an eye on the issue.

**The Political Economy of Coal and Renewable Energy Exports in Australia**

With the state of renewable energy trade between ASEAN and Australia explained, we may now move on to analyse the potential roadblocks. This section provides an ex-ante analysis of the potential spoilers of this growing renewable energy trade, examining key issues within the political economy. In particular, the role of coal industries in Australia are highlighted. Australia and Indonesia are the top two coal exporters worldwide, and prior scholarship or reports have noted coal's political influence in both countries (e.g. Baer 2016; Atteridge et. al 2018), but due to space constraints this paper's scope will only extend to the former. It remains to be seen how these powerful industries and political coalitions would react to escalating interest in renewable energy, and this section hints at the uncertainties.

This paper springs off recent scholarship which details how climate change policies are not driven by rational calculations within a collective action problem, but by distributional conflict, or the domestic coalitions that oppose or support climate action (Akin and Mildenberger 2020; Colgan et. al 2020). In other words, an analysis of the failure or success of climate change-based action, of which renewable energy trade is a key example, is found usually within the factions within domestic political economies, as opposed to the an autonomous "national interest" that characterises an entire state (and is primarily found in foreign rather than domestic policy).

**Symbiotic Relationship Between Australian State and Coal Industry**

In Australia, the coal industry has been politically influential for as far back as the 18th century when its coal reserves were first discovered. Scholarship has traced this close historical relationship between the state and coal industries, and has observed that Australian policy is strongly influenced by coal industry interests (Baer 2016). From the late 20th century onwards when climate change became a major political issue, and coal was implicated as a key source of greenhouse gas emissions, the legitimacy and status of the coal industry came under unprecedented pressure.

This has led to different strategies to reinforce the symbiotic relationship between the state and coal industries, including using discursive strategies to establish ideological hegemony – or, simplistically put, to have the interests of the coal industry also be concurrently perceived as the interests of the national whole (Stutzer et. al 2021; McKnight and Hobbs 2013). This method implies that the legitimacy of the coal industry is also contingent on wider societal institutions like the media. This is not to say that traditional strategies like direct lobbying are any less relevant, nor have structural advantages for the coal industry been diminished. Over AUSD$16 million was donated by the mining industry to major political national parties in Australia from 2006 to 2016, and a "revolving-door" between the key private sector figures in the coal industry and government positions has remained (Stutzer et. al 2021; Baer 2016). As of October 2021, the industry retains a strong foothold in Canberra and employs around 40,000 Australians across several mining towns located in swing constituencies (Mao 2021). The industry contributes around AUSD$50 billion a year to the Australian economy, though a large majority of the profits have not gone to the public purse.

Any transition towards renewable energy export or consumption, including the slated renewable energy trade from Australia to Singapore via Indonesia, would threaten their steady profits and political influence, as it might provide a springboard towards a general energy transition that moves away from both the export and domestic use of coal. In fact, Sun Cable's research on the carbon savings of their project explicitly hinges on the assumption that their electricity would “displace coal” (Sun Cable 2021b). This would entail subsequent policy changes, such as further restrictions on new coal plants or the removal of subsidies for downstream investments, the latter again mentioned by Sun Cable as an implication of the AAPL. A recent study also noted that the Australian fossil fuel industry could be left with over USD$200 billion in stranded assets by 2036 (Watts et. al 2021).
Volatile Climate Politics

Despite the potential benefits to the several parties, evidence exists that the Australian position on renewable energy exports is not settled and is the subject of the political challenge, and it remains to be seen if domestic coal industries would be able to derail renewable energy projects through their lobbying efforts. Given that the Australian position is not insulated from political challenges and is the subject of political compromise and bargaining between different interest groups, the future of renewable energy trade is not altogether secure. In other words, while the currently governing state elites might follow the Singaporean and Australian vision of a “rules-based and open trading system” guiding energy transition (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2021a), domestic political forces might destabilise the relationship and commitment to this vision. This, in turn, represents a possible future challenge for the success of the AAPL.

Australia’s recent internal dynamics with relation to issues generally related to climate change serve as an example to show the volatile nature of the issue, where political elites have to walk a tightrope in balancing contradictory political interests. Former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull had previously attempted to move the country towards renewables, only to be ousted by his own party, a large portion of which is strongly backed by coal interests (Scott 2021; Crowley 2021). With an election in May 2022, current Prime Minister Scott Morrison will have his hands full balancing the different interests of the nation, including regular Australians, who, polls show, on one hand demand much stronger climate action and renewable energy, especially after devastating forest fires (Crowe 2021; Quicke 2021), but on the other are divided over the phasing out of coal power in the next decade, and also show a reluctance to stop exports (Toscano and Foley 2021). Australia’s recent commitment to net-zero emissions by 2050 just ahead of COP26 was not done without significant infighting, and these political dynamics make it unclear if sitting Australian political powers can withstand the political pressure to pull through with exporting renewable energy to Southeast Asia.

Figure 2

Australian public opinion on climate change and renewable energy

![Figure 2](Image)


This can further be seen by the contradictory signals from the Australian government. Despite their green ambitions, key Australian officials have reaffirmed their commitment to the coal industry, and the industry continues to receive around AUS$10 billion in subsidies a year (Mao 2021). A leaked report ahead of COP26 showed how Australian representatives lobbied IPCC scientists to remove references to analyses of how fossil fuel lobbyists contributed to the watering down of action on climate in Australia (Rowlatt and Gerken 2021). Furthermore, the Australian position is coloured by how it needs to manage its reputation, and risks losing the confidence of financial markets and international partners if it is considered a climate change pariah that does not pull its weight in international affairs (Murphy 2021a; 2021b). The recent strong statements on climate action, for example, come after discussion with the United States (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2021b), and might well be the result of United States diplomatic pressure, possibly in exchange for security cooperation in the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) project. Australia’s position therefore is subject to diplomatic pressure, and can be expected to shift as international trends change. The victory of a climate change denying-Republican government in the future, for example, might again sway the Australian political calculus.

Conclusion

Though renewable energy trade between ASEAN member states and Australia shows promise, there are still possible obstructions that might impede its success. While this paper has highlighted a major one – the Australian coal industry – future scholarship should look more closely at other issues including the Indonesian coal industry, technical challenges in scaling up bilateral trade to a functioning APG, and the role of civil society. This can build off prior literature tackling similar issues (see e.g. Halawa et. al 2018).
With its strategic position in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN-Australia relations will only grow in significance in the coming years ahead. Renewable energy trade provides a promising avenue to build stronger relations for a worthy cause, also providing benefits to different parties. Seeing projects like the AAPL to its fruition, and hopefully lay the basis of a regional grid, should be of the utmost priority.
Bibliography


A Feminist Economic Analysis of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and the Pacific

Taylah Leigh Spirovski | Australia

Abstract

Humanitarian emergencies exacerbate existing gender gaps. The COVID-19 pandemic reaches far beyond its public health implications and disproportionately affects women: in work, in economic independence and security, by increasing the demand for domestic and care work, and exacerbating stress and poor mental health levels. Unravelling the gendered divisions of labor, the correlation between marginalized identities and informal work and the intersectionalities of women’s oppression will explicate the severe consequences had on gender equality in Asia and the Pacific region. Ultimately, only a gender-responsive and intersectional approach to a post-pandemic recovery can redress existing inequalities and mitigate gender-relating challenges moving forward.

Key words: Care, COVID-19, feminist economics, gender equality

Introduction

Alongside a plethora of global disruption, the COVID-19 pandemic has left many women across Asia and the Pacific (and all over the world) in a state worse than they were before. The gendered impacts of COVID-19, including the vulnerability of women in the workforce, a further marginalized identity and higher levels of stress and poor mental health, have had grave consequences for women’s careers, health and economic independence and security. The extraordinary upheaval the pandemic caused within households, particularly the increased demand for unpaid care and domestic work, will continue to implicate women’s lives disproportionately unless adequate public and social policies, targeted investment and new economic paradigms are put in place - an urgent task for governments, workplaces and peak bodies.

Feminist economics - how to effect the structural change required from its absence

COVID-19 is otherwise known as a humanitarian crisis - one that has starkly exposed long-lived, systemic social problems. Specifically, the pandemic has revealed plainly the gendered divisions of labor, the pervasively gendered understanding of household production and how domestic and care responsibilities are disproportionately shouldered by women (Seck et al, 2021; UN Women, 2021a). Regrettably, many nations within Asia and the Pacific were ill-equipped to tackle these issues off the back of the pandemic (UN Women 2020), predominantly due to their lack of prior embracement of feminist economics in policy, funding and investment. Feminist economics is the collaboration of feminist scholarship and the discipline of economics represented through a paradigm shift: one that starts with gendered assumptions embedded in macroeconomic policies and models and moves to a gender-aware, inclusive and intersectional understanding of economic policy (Ferber and Nelson, 2003).

The practical reality is, many economic policies do not align with social and environmental goals, largely because they are based on a restrictive comprehension of economic growth, free markets and gross domestic product (Günseli et al, 2009; Ferber and Nelson, 2003). This means that gender equality, social justice and sustainability are not the foundations of government approaches to recovery (UN Women, 2021a) and as a result, are not (and will not be) able to address intersecting inequalities, or implement any egalitarian value systems the more developed nations of the region claim to have. Policymakers can advance gender justice by seeking detailed data on gender, race, ethnicity, disability, age, sexuality and more, and applying it to their post-pandemic recoveries. Women’s lived experiences are moulded by these intersectionalities, which (to varying degrees) multiply inequalities (ILO, 2020b).
In order for this to form part of the broader analytical framework and agenda, data collection methods should be adjusted to reflect the priority of acquiring this information. Such data should then work to inform the policies and funding that seek to address the issues within intersecting inequalities. Branding the varying, disproportionate impacts experienced by women as mere ‘compounded disadvantages’ is a surface-level extrapolation that will always be limited in affecting practical and meaningful change in their lives. Some academics have expressed that this historic lack of nuance in data and policy represents the failing social contracts that governments across the region have with their populations (GIWL, 2021, p. 11), mainly because many economies are deficient in holistic and meaningful gender-transformative policy. Moving forward, affirmative action first requires the unravelling of social, historical, institutional (and often colonial) narratives from which these patterns of discrimination are conceived (UN Women, 2021a, p. 8). Practically, this would look like the combination of disaggregated data, as well as an extensive analysis of ideas, interests, power structures and institutions that maintain varying types of oppression in women’s lives (UN Women, 2021a, p. 8).

The disproportionate effects of paid, unpaid and underpaid domestic and care work on women

COVID-19 continues to cause great disruption in many lives. Successive lockdowns impact the ability to work, while simultaneously increasing the demand for domestic and care work (and homeschooling for households with children). In this, it is mostly women that bear the additional responsibility working and living during the pandemic requires, at the expense of their own mental health and economic security. In Asia and the Pacific region, women and girls spend up to 11 times more of their day than men and boys on unpaid care and domestic work (albeit variations across the region, with the greatest share in Pakistan, followed by Cambodia and Turkey, while comparatively, the lowest share is in Australia, Kyrgyz Republic and New Zealand) (UN Women, 2018, p. 94).

The failure of society to assign adequate value and pecuniary reward to unpaid care and domestic work is born from the connection between marginalized identity and informal work. Meaning, identities such as race and class directly affect the volume and quality of care work required. Women in many countries are more likely to report job losses than men. Seck et al (2021) used data from a number of countries in Asia and the Pacific to show the disproportionate economic impacts experienced between paid and unpaid work during the pandemic and have suffered a slow recovery among women who are economically more dependent on paid employment. Flaws: the standard size approach put forward by neoliberal economics was a contributing factor to, and sound explanation for, why women were among the first to lose their earnings at the start of the COVID-19 crisis. Women in these countries find themselves ‘occupational downgrading’ (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011), where they engage low-status and low-quality jobs (below their skill levels) because of having to perform a higher share of unpaid care work. This is also the explanation for the gendered division of labor across the region, including the labor market segmentation of the healthcare industry and education sector where women are over-concentrated (Ferrant et al, 2014). The cumulative effect of the gendered divisions of labor are the pervasive gender wage gaps that remain. Higher inequalities in unpaid care work is positively correlated to higher inequality in wages (OECD, 2019).

In countries within East Asia, South Asia and the Pacific, women spend twice as much time as men in caring activities, while they earn only approximately 65% of what their male counterparts earn for the same job (Ferrant and Thim, 2019).

The “standard size” approach to economic empowerment is ineffective because it makes the assumption that men and women face the same constraints in both public and private life (Ferber and Nelson, 2003). The COVID-19 crisis exposed these flaws: the standard size approach put forward by neoliberal economics was a contributing factor to, and sound explanation for, why women were among the first to lose their earnings at the start of the pandemic and have suffered a slow recovery among other things since. Seck et al (2021) used data from a series of Rapid Gender Assessment Surveys to investigate the socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19 on women’s and men’s lives in Asia and the Pacific. They discovered that on average, women were more likely to lose working hours relative to men and often more likely to report job losses than men.
Women also reported larger declines in unemployment benefits and state assistance. In addition to this, worsening mental health emerged as a critical area affecting women disproportionately.

In Asia and the Pacific, official statistics state that the pandemic led women's employment to decrease by 3.8%, compared to a decline of 2.9% for men (ILO, 2021, figure 2). The number of men in employment is expected to rise by 3% by the end of 2021, which would more than offset the job losses that occurred in 2020. Contrastingly, women's employment losses will not be compensated by the predicted 3.2% rise for them. In light of the above, this will expedite the decrease in women's employment rates observed in the region over the past 15 years (ILO, 2021). What is also of great concern is the underestimation of these figures, given that official labour market statistics do not account for the loss of jobs and livelihoods in the informal economy. This is particularly problematic and demonstrates the dire need for a new economic paradigm and gender-responsive policy. There are deeply entrenched gender inequalities in the economic domain that affect women's quality of life overall. The consequences women face in lieu of this include less capacity to explore and enjoy political and public life, leisure, learning and other personal and social activities. Though, governments are also falling short of their potential. The International Labor Organization estimates that closing the gender gap in economic participation could add US$3.2 trillion to the Asia and Pacific regional economies (ILO, 2017). The author is aware that certain groups may need the incentive to iron out gender inequality.

Women are over-concentrated in the healthcare industry as well as the social work and education sector (Kabeer et al, 2021). This labour market segmentation also evidences their higher risk of exposure to infection, given that workplaces such as hospitals, medical practices, aged and domestic care facilities, early childhood education centres, schools and the like were significant channels for the transmission of COVID-19. The pandemic has taught many of us that care workers in these fields is essential, yet health risks and economic penalties for those workers persist. It is widely acknowledged, particularly in Australia (Craig and Churchill, 2021), that support for the healthcare/care sector has been inadequate and often gender-blind, lacking adequate resources, funding and public policy (UN Women, 2021a; AHHA 2020). Moreover, the social recognition and appreciation paid healthcare workers have now received in abundance because of the pandemic, has not so significantly changed social attitudes to unpaid care work. As such, it is a pertinent time to use the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to reconstruct health care systems (among other things), with sustainability and equality driving the discussion.

The positive correlation between the pandemic and women's mental health decline

Alongside what would be clear from logic in light of the above, there is strong evidence to show that in many settings, women's mental health has been more negatively affected than men's by COVID-19 (Emerge, 2020; UN Women, 2020). Generally, gender differentiates the levels of stress, anxiety and behaviour experienced by people (Emerge, 2020). Accordingly, women have experienced higher levels of stress coping with the pandemic as well as a greater emotional impact due to increased pressures of care and domestic work (de Paz Nieves et al, 2021). For women in the healthcare, social work and the education sector, the double burden they faced of longer shifts at work and additional work in the home (Ferrant et al, 2014) shows they are more likely to experience a steeper deterioration in mental and emotional wellbeing (Kabeer et al, 2021), in addition to their increased risks of infection because of greater mobility outside of the home. Lastly, given that the bulk of women’s “extra” time is being spent on unpaid care work, be it routine housework or caring responsibilities, time for personal care has significantly decreased where women are left with less time for sleeping and leisure (ILO, 2020a; Craig and Churchill, 2021).

COVID-19 and our children (our future)

Of all global disruptions the pandemic has prompted, education of the world's children is likely to have some of the worst repercussions. UNICEF's regional situation analysis (2021) states that across Asia, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, twenty-seven million children have been waiting for more than a year to return to their classrooms. The breakdown of the data reveals that this is also perpetuating gender inequalities like the gender disparity in completion rates worsening (prominent among the poorest households) and the digital divide widening, where girls are far less likely to own or have access to digital devices and fewer opportunities to gain digital literacy skills (UNICEF, 2021, p. 36). Pre-pandemic, more than fifteen million girls across East Asia and the Pacific were not enrolled and able to gain an education, this figure was halved from thirty million only in the last two decades after concentrated efforts by governments across the region (UNICEF, 2021, p. 33). These achievements of girls’ access to education are under a large threat by the pandemic’s school closures, where a large percentage of children, particularly the most vulnerable, are expected not to return to school once finally able. In order to effectively mitigate these projected failures, UNICEF has emphasised the need for a focus shift to marginalised children (including young children, girls and children with disabilities) and further, differentiating what they each require at different ages and in different contexts. In other words, identifying, understanding and addressing intersectionality is how to effect change.
A Feminist Economic Analysis of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and the Pacific

A New Economic Paradigm

The pursuit of sustainable and socially just economies begins with gender-responsive policy and culture. This means discarding nascent initiatives, exclusionary politics and environmental destruction. In order to effect transformative change, data needs to be intersectional, the health industry and the informal sector need adequate government support and protection, and investment in social policies need to be targeted. Importantly, the voices of diverse women across Asia and the Pacific region should be driving the narrative and leading the strategies and solutions working to address their issues. Depleting unpaid care and domestic work as if it were a limitless resource is not done without cost or consequence, as demonstrated above. Accordingly, it is time to position care as a public good, more than a commodity, choice or family obligation, the fabric of society (UN Women, 2021a, p. 39). Because care provides both tangible and intangible benefits to societies and economies, it has the characteristics of a public good. Because of this, people should feel empowered to seek improvements in care arrangements and correction when those arrangements are failing. By positing care securely in the public realm, rather than merely a private issue for individuals to solve, countries will be able to unravel the gendered divisions of labour and see progress among the inequalities of the region.

Across the globe, unprecedented monetary and fiscal policies were reactively and responsively put in place to soften the blows of the pandemic in multiple sectors. Many fiscal stimulus packages have been greater than those in the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, but only a few are directed at gender-responsive measures, like strengthening women’s economic security (by channelling resources to female-dominated sectors) or social protection policies that supports those with care responsibilities in coping with the rising demand of unpaid care (ILO, 2021). According to the United Nations Development Programme’s COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker (which monitors responses taken by governments worldwide to tackle the pandemic), of all individuals that make up the COVID-19 Task Force in Asia, only 15% are women (UNDP, 2021). In Asia, only 35 measures have been put in place to address unpaid care, even shockingly lower in the Pacific region where only 14 measures are in place (UNDP, 2021). For comparison, Europe leading the charge has 113 measures in place to address unpaid care. Asia is more than four times the size of Europe.

Moving forward, it is critical that countries across Asia and the Pacific region integrate a gender lens into their economic, social and workplace policies (UN Women, 2021b). As discussed above, the way to start is with refined research and analysis on current measures, particularly those put in place to tackle the economic downturn driven by the pandemic. This would allow governments to see granularly how beneficial certain policies and packages actually were for: the increased demand in paid and unpaid care and domestic work, women’s economic security and for people generally with varying socioeconomic circumstances (Craig and Churchill, 2021, p. 323). It is after this that governments will be in a position to narrow gender disparity, reduce gender pay gaps and bolster legal protections and economic advantages for domestic and care workers (those paid and unpaid). The dire need to address unpaid care work is gaining traction on the global policy agenda. Growing bodies of new data continue to reveal the ways women have globally shouldered a bigger share of negative economic impacts in the wake of COVID-19 than men have. Growing analysis continues to reveal (as feminist economists have for some time) why many countries like those in Asia and the Pacific discussed above did not have robust, intersectional or gender-responsive frameworks in place to withstand those shocks. Like most, the issues described in this article, which are powering the barriers to equality, are symptoms of pervading societal norms on gender roles and society’s characterisation of women as ‘the other’ (Beauvoir, 1989). In order to set our hands to these issues (and effect practical change) - which forms part of a broader architecture supporting global gender equality - the long-held limits to women’s lives should be recognised and from there, actively addressed with targeted policy and investment.
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Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed nations an opportunity to redesign their economies through green recovery solutions. Today, as the market grows, businesses are required to implement green solutions for survival imperatives such as strategic plans to endure the current climate crisis. According to a study conducted by Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2015, a rise in ASEAN’s entrepreneurship has dominated the creative and entrepreneurial industries driven by young and ambitious entrepreneurs. Commonly, youth-led green entrepreneurs build their companies around resolving environmental concerns by utilizing business practices in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (17 SDGs). This includes cutting global emissions, as well as reducing energy and resource consumption following the vision and goals stated by the UN General Assembly in 2015.

Brunei Darussalam’s economy is significantly dominated by oil and gas industries for its exports, revenue, and commercial opportunities. In the Wawasan Brunei 2035 (Brunei Vision 2035) framework, Goal 3: Dynamic and Sustainable Economy strives to transform and strengthen the nation into an advanced high-income country involving technology to accelerate the non-oil and gas sector of the economy resulting in aspired national outcomes: 1) high growth in output and productivity, and investment; 2) economic diversification via innovative services utilizing technology, and expanding trading network for revenues; 3) low unemployment rate enforcing greater jobs creation and workforce mobility, and 4) macroeconomic stability ensuring domestic and foreign investors.

In its effort to diversify from oil dependency, Brunei has been introducing non-oil and gas sectors, including agriculture, fisheries, and tourism services for many years, however, these sectors still fail to transform. Amidst COVID-19, the labor force participation from non-locals in Brunei Darussalam in 2020 has declined, following the traveling entry restrictions from the Sultanate during the pandemic preventing additional foreign workforces thus opening recruitment for local employment. Additionally, as Brunei flourishes with local-owned businesses in the market, it has been creating job opportunities for youth employment in the private sector. Conversely, in the context of Australia’s agriculture industry, it is a major agricultural producer offering investments in the agribusiness and food industries. Australia is one of the largest export-oriented agricultural sectors as its network of free trade agreements (FTAs) provides commodity exports across Asia-Pacific.

This article will primarily highlight the people-to-people relationship between Brunei-Australia employing economic cooperation for evolving the agriculture and agri-food sector. This discourse aims to identify the youth across Asia-Pacific, particularly Brunei and Australia as case studies by addressing the skills gap in the labor market, delivering green solutions through innovation adoption as well as further outlining Australia’s dynamic industry of agriculture to develop Brunei’s growing agribusinesses and agripreneurship for ‘the Future of Food’. This paper will explore how rethinking agriculture in Brunei-Australia relations can leverage the agri-food industry for food productivity and sustainability by 2050 with the adoption of technologies and entrepreneurial skills from the youth as drivers of the green market across regions.

Feeding the Future: Youth, Agriculture and Technology

With the world’s population rising by over a third, the market demand for food will continue to grow between 2009 and 2050, projecting the trend to reach 3 billion tonnes by 2050, with 2.1 billion tonnes since 2009.

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5. Australian Trade and Investment Commission, Investment Opportunities in Australian Agribusiness and Food.
The projections show that the world requires to raise food production by ‘70 percent to feed the world. Although, how much is enough? Producing enough food does not assure food security as hunger still exists today due to a lack of proper access to food. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, more than a quarter of a billion people are facing food shortages and starvation, exposing the inequalities of our global food systems (see more in Figure 1). The ever-changing trends of the Agri-Food Industry start with the awareness of the agricultural systems—non-food and food products including livestock, fisheries, and forestry—to improve the livelihoods and health of the people in the areas of social, economic, and environmental aspects. Agriculture utilizes major natural resources from the ecosystem and contributes to climate change - loss of biodiversity, pollution, and emission of greenhouse gases, however, it is also affected by climate change. Hence the world should produce more with fewer resources encouraging modernization of agricultural systems to embark on a green revolution.

Figure 1
Reimagining and redesigning our food systems

Figure 2
Snapshot of Australia’s Agricultural Workforce in 2016

Source: ABARES Insights

Asia-Pacific is the world’s largest agricultural producer, employing one-fifth of the total workforce and occupying greater than half of the region’s geographical land. It is expected to lead the world’s agricultural growth and is forecasted to grow over 2017-2030.³ Asia-Pacific will continue to dominate the region’s output inducing farm modernization and digitalization, and productivity in agribusiness for future development.⁴ According to the Economic Report of Asia-Pacific: Agricultural Perspectives 2016, the technology investment for farm-business connectivity utilizes mobile communication technology to help reinforce the food supply, such as the rural e-commerce platform, Alibaba Taobao for connecting farmers to consumers across China. This high penetration level of mobile applications is seen as the blueprint for similar developments for ASEAN markets.⁵

Digitization in the New Normal has demonstrated the rise in the use of technology for education and economic progress. In alignment with ASEAN’s Five-Year Youth Work Plan 2016-2020, it is highlighted that the next review and restructuring of the post-2020 agenda will focus on creating the momentum of accelerating digital transformation in the region – “promoting digital skills capabilities, and providing more funding to support youths in the gig economy and entrepreneurs”⁶ – noting approximately 62% of the work plan pertains youth volunteering and exchange programs.⁷ In this digital era, there are plenty of job opportunities for youth to participate, in this context, in agriculture to spur economic development, including the involvement of service providers and entrepreneurship using technology. The implementation of science, technology, and innovations in the agricultural industry leads to the missing link in modern agriculture.

6 FAO, Global Agriculture Towards 2050, October, 2009, HLEF2050_Global_Agriculture.pdf
7 FAO, The Role of Women In Agriculture, March, 2011.
10 Ibid.

A Recipe for a Nourishing Friendship
Under the circumstances of the recurring climate crisis and COVID-19 disruptions, the adoption of technology in agriculture can contribute to overall agricultural productivity as well as an increase in youth employability.

**Farming Crisis as Coronavirus Bites**

**Global Food Supply Chain Disruptions**

The pandemic has significantly hindered global food commerce affecting a drop in employment, taxation, and export revenues, and correspondingly facing the challenges of feeding millions of hungry population. By redesigning a more resilient food system for accessibility of proper food and nutrition to evenly distribute to the most vulnerable communities, it is crucial to invest in agricultural research and labor skills to promote sustainable farming methods. As COVID-19 reshapes the world causing economic development disruptions, the coronavirus has been affecting behavioral changes among consumers. These worldwide behavioral changes are due to the negative shock of COVID-19 as well as the fear of food supply chain disruption. Consequently, many have turned to flock to supermarkets, excessively stockpiling trolleys full of essentials and food from grocery stores and retailers. The aftermath? Shortages, food price inflation, and wastage of food.15

**Local Level: Challenges in Brunei**

Brunei has encountered livestock insufficiency and disruption in the food supply during the pandemic as a result of only 0.54% of the nation’s agriculture industry subsidy.16 With the exception of Brunei’s poultry production and self-sufficient rice production, the country still falls short in targeting its output goals – “the fisheries output cannot meet demand, concerns on food safety, and incomplete projects such as the Bio-Innovation Corridor” 17 due to the incompetence of its project planners and improving tourism infrastructure.18 It has been slow in developing agricultural initiatives and this has greatly affected the nation’s ability to feed the Sultanate’s population of approximately 400,000 people. Brunei continues to rely heavily on imported food supply and livestock for local consumption. Additionally, the COVID-19 lockdown has significantly influenced consumerist behavior, including food purchases and changes in consumption habits. Brunei depends on the agricultural industry more than ever.

**The Current Outlook of Brunei and Australia Agricultural Sectors**

**Growing Agriculture and Agripreneurship in Brunei**

“My government has and will open opportunities in agriculture as wide as possible. Farming should be pursued by anyone. It is not limited to those who own hundreds of hectares (before deciding to farm), people can also farm in their homes or in vases with produce such as vegetables and chilies.” 19

A statement by His Majesty of Brunei Darussalam, 2018

Recently in 2015, Brunei Darussalam adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) upon achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In alignment with its national vision, Wawasan Brunei 2035, the Sultanate has made progress in building and comprehensively reporting the successes and collective efforts toward the national goals: 1) Educated, Highly-Skilled and Accomplished People, 2) High Quality of Life, and 3) A Dynamic and Sustainable Economy. This section will further elaborate on the third national vision, concerning the social skills gap in Brunei’s agriculture and agribusinesses as well as exemplify existing programs in Brunei to encourage economic diversification in the non-oil and gas sectors.

In the review of Brunei Darussalam Agriculture and Agrifood Statistics in Brief 2020, the agriculture sector recorded the highest ever production of broiler and paddy production yield in 2020 with 26,000 metric tonnes (Mt) and 4,000 metric tonnes (Mt), respectively (see more in Figure 3). These statistical data are showing upgrowth in the industry and have increased by 9.94% value at B$470.86 million, of which B$267.17 million derives from the livestock industry; B$53.46 million from the crop industry; and B$150.23 million from the agri-food processing industry. Furthermore, in 2015, the government undertook several steps to strengthen agriculture’s position in livestock production outputs to minimize the reliance on imports of livestock from Australia. This added value to its economic development as the rising demand for halal food in Brunei has introduced new food industry growth trends. The development of Halal and Islamic goods and services in the nation is a leading industry growth trends. The development of Halal and Islamic goods and services in the nation is a leading opportunity to encourage Bruneian-owned micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to collaborate with larger agencies, including products and commodities to acquire international assistance and networking.20 Agribusinesses and the local agripreneurs can help Brunei’s new developments in the agri-food industry and the business ecosystem to fulfill gaps in the current market.

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16 Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Brunei, Brunei Darussalam Agriculture & Agrifood Statistics in Brief 2020.
18 Ibid.
19 Aaron Wong, “No More Excuses for not Developing Agriculture, says His Majesty”, BIZ Brunei, 2018.
20 Read more in Brunei Darussalam Agriculture & Agrifood Statistics in Brief 2020
Some of the topics from the Agriculture Department consist of various sessions: Roles of Education in Supporting Agricultural Sector; Usage of Technology in Increasing Farm Production and Productivity; Challenges and Opportunities in Increasing Productivity and Production; Farming Perspective; The Role of Livestock Industry in Supporting Food Security for Livestock Commodities; and Funding and Investment Opportunities in Agriculture Sectors.

- **Exposure Programme for Youth with the Potential**
  
  This program is a project scheme for participants aged between 18-45 who are interested in venturing into agriculture and agribusiness. The program was introduced in 2018 to serve the purpose to support the **Strategic Plan of the Department of Agriculture and Agrifood 2016-2022**, involving more than 80 youths in 5 series of programs. It aims to expose agricultural enterprises as profitable businesses focusing on the adoption of technology systems.

- **Projek Rintis (Pilot Project Agriculture)**
  
  A government initiative offering 2 hectares of land for each application of the project to utilize within two years, with permission to expand after a successful venture.

- **Financial institutions such as i-Usahawan, Darussalam Enterprise (DARe), LiveWIRE, and many more emerging agencies are providing training, consultancy, grants, and funding opportunities for entrepreneurs.**

**Moving Forward with Australian Agriculture 4.0**

"Bosch is investing in Australia as an Agriculture 4.0 development hub for three major reasons: its rich history as a world-leading producer of agricultural commodities; the strength of its agricultural research and scientific capabilities; and the food and agriculture industry's willingness to trial and adopt new solutions. Our investments in and partnerships with Australian institutions is testament to Australia's strengths in technologies that will lead the next revolution in agriculture."

Gavin Smith, President, Bosch Australia

Australia is known for its reputation as a leading agricultural producer in developing commercialization, scale, and source for the next generation of agriculture and food technologies. Its determination to thrive in the ‘ag-tech and food-tech sectors’ compromising collaborations among farmers, startups, scaleups and enterprises, incubators, industry groups, world-leading universities, and research institutions. Although Australia’s diversity in developing its strong commercialization potential, like many others, Australia’s agriculture industry was affected by the coronavirus. Australia in 2020 faced devastating bushfires and severe drought affecting its livestock and crop production. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia’s agricultural sector lack labor as they depend on many seasonal and overseas workers, notably in the horticulture and grain industries.

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23 James Kim, “Venture into Agriculture”, Borneo Bulletin, 2021


Nevertheless, despite these challenges, Australia managed to improve its food productivity as a result of innovative solutions from post-COVID recovery by including online livestock auctions and contact-free goods transfers.27

The varying solutions and innovations undergoing in Australia to curb COVID-19 disruptions to the food supply chains, according to KPMG Australia insights, are identified in the following.28

- Rethinking supply chains by increasing digitization and use of analytics to generate 'smart' supply chains such as intelligent automation, blockchain, IoT, machine learning, and predictive analytics
- Shifting towards cashless, and contactless payments and delivery methods of transactions
- Adoption of AI, advanced track and trace, and IoT devices for Australia's Food safety and supply chain surety

In addition, Australia Agriculture 4.0 manages to address key challenges in its agriculture and agri-food sector through new technologies and practices with science and technology-based solutions to respond to any ever-changing consumer demand for food; research and development (R&D) activities; climate crisis including COVID-19 recovery. Nevertheless, Australia is constantly offering opportunities for investment and partnership in Agriculture 4.0; agribusiness research and consultation; investment opportunities in Australian Agribusiness and Food for food production and advanced food processing.29

**Figure 4**

**Agriculture 4.0: The Future of Farming Technology**


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27 Ibid.
29 See more in Australian Trade and Investment Commission, Investment Opportunities in Australian Agribusiness and Food

**Recommendations**

**Next Step: Brunei-Australia Fusion for Future Agripreneurship**

The existing agricultural initiatives in Brunei Darussalam may be sufficient on a domestic scale, however, this article aims to address the importance of people-to-people relations, particularly the Brunei-Australia partnership, for influential outcomes. The recommendation is in three parts, in which each proposed approach aspires to harness the capabilities of youth for the agri-food industry. By allowing young agripreneurs to pursue further, the Asia-Pacific cooperation can assist in expanding local-based projects across regions with gained knowledge, greater expertise, and valuable experience.

- **Farm Successor Incubation Program** - to develop a 2-year incubation program for youth pursuing in the agriculture and agri-food industry. The program focuses on participants from Higher Institutions, graduates, and young agripreneurs (beginner-intermediate level) between the ages of 18-25 years to prepare them for a future-ready career in agriculture after their education. This scheme is designed to secure monitor support from the government, and additional financial agencies and investors with regular monitoring and evaluation for measuring the impact of each success and journey. It can benefit participants to foster the next generation of farm successors from professional experts and mentors in the industry from Brunei and Australia. The participants have the advantage to thrive in an ASEAN-Australia competition after the incubator period which will be co-organized with this program.

- **Young Farmers Exchange Fellowship** - to open an exchange program for fellowship between the ages of 25-35 years. This program offers 6 or 12 months of learning courses in agriculture and business development. It is divided into two cycles – the first cycle is running in Brunei with a curated hybrid course conducted by the organization from Brunei and Australia; the second cycle is completed in the partnering organization, Australia under co-matching schemes (participants will be matched with suitable institutions and agencies to work with, accordingly to their field in the agricultural industry). There will be a traveling and living expenses allowance provided for the second cycle for each fellow cohort.

- **Innovative Agribusiness Association** – to create a hub for conducting quarterly seminars and consultations in Brunei Darussalam. It is a council association among professional farmers, food producers, and entrepreneurs and practitioners from the agriculture and food sectors. Regulatory assessment and reviews of the national strategic plans are required for reporting and evaluation. The quarterly meetings are to render support for the development of the agricultural sector as well as continuously align each agency with the objectives of Wawasan Brunei 2035 and Sustainable Development Goals 2030. The councils will integrate with other ASEAN-Australian delegates for collaboration.
Agriculture and Agri-Food Industry play a multipurpose role in our economy. Agriculture provides most of the world’s food; economic system for many countries; important for international trade and revenues; and employability. In a post-pandemic world, digitization and modernization in the agriculture practices and food systems are required to constantly integrate science and technology-based solutions for better food productivity and prevention of future crisis. This article argues how Brunei-Australia relations can assist an oil and gas-dominated Sultanate to strive for agricultural development to diversify its economic growth. As the government of Brunei and its youths emerge into agriculture and agribusiness, the young agripreneurs are believed to be Brunei’s successors in pioneering a resilient and sustainable food future for Brunei’s market. Moreover, the urgent need to recover from COVID-19 has revealed the importance of science, technology, and innovation as well as Asia-Pacific cooperation to drive further a better supply chain and food systems. What better way to connect people around the world with food?

Recommendations

A Recipe for a Nourishing Friendship
Bibliography


Bibliography


The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted Indonesia’s economic activity for the past 2 years, which forced setbacks such as plummeting unemployment rate which accounted for 8.75 million people as of February 2021 according to the National Bureau of Statistics. This high number of unemployment, which for 11.45% dominated by vocational graduates, furthermore became a caution within Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) discourse who stands as a pillar within Indonesia 2045 President Jokowi’s vision to develop generations stacked with skilled workforces.

Nevertheless due to pandemic disruption, various frameworks should be well-utilized by Indonesia through embracing potential TVET cooperation concerning the skilled workforces. This can be further explored after Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (IA-CEPA) comes into effect, after decade of multiple negotiations and further expected as a significant economic platform for both countries which not only have amassed two-way trade records of USD 7 billion in recent years, but also addressing potential TVET cooperation in regards to skilled workforces through Skill Development Project as part of IA-CEPA Side Letter.

A profound TVET cooperation between Indonesia-Australia would mean an encouraging step for mutual gain since Australia’s standing as one of global benchmarks for a successful TVET system, with 4.2 million TVET students attending 4,200 training institutions (2018), while the 2045 Indonesia Vision constitutes skilled workforces with mastery in science and technology as part of the main pillars, including those come from vocational graduate segment. Frankly said, the concerted efforts of both countries could be maximised under the entails of IA-CEPA framework for eyeing the stated mission to become a joint-regional economic powerhouse.

Key words: IACEPA, TVET, Unemployment, Skilled Workforces, Skill Development Project

Introduction

Unemployment Conditions in Indonesia due to COVID Impact

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has been disrupted Indonesia’s economic activity in the last 2 years, shortly after the entry of the virus officially confirmed by Government of Indonesia in early March 2020. The outbreak of the virus apparently prompted gradual economic setback, followed by severe impacts toward some of the economic pillars including workforce, particularly the unemployed. Based on the data from Indonesia National Bureau of Statistics (BPS), there is an increasing trend of unemployment during recent waves of pandemic accounted for 6.93 million and 8.75 million in February 2020 to February 2021 respectively (y-o-y) (BPS, 2021). The deducted comparison between two-year briefly shows us the surging pattern of unemployment which numbered for 1.82 million.

Unemployment trend in Indonesia is currently dominated by graduates of vocational institutions whereas this group is often projected as main core for the goal of developing human capital, as one the pillars of the 2045 Indonesia vision commenced by Indonesia President Joko Widodo in 2019. Adversely, the waves of pandemic which struck domestic economic sectors as well as triggering further calamities including massive unemployment influx dominated by the vocational graduates segment undoubtedly deliver an alarmed signal for the pillar’s objective of establishing future generations with abundant skilled workforces.

The high share of unemployment from particularly vocational graduates by 11.45% could not be approached lightly. As the vocational graduates would be assigned the role as the backbone of Indonesia’s future workforces, this case along with numerous concerns consisting of low productivity towards the prospect of imminent automation trends will set a considerable constraint for Indonesia’s ambition.
Indonesia workforce’s productivity could be gauged as less industrious. At least when it comes by comparison with numerous regional peers. In 2019, Indonesia workforce’s productivity recorded a 74.4% productivity rate, trailing behind the likes of Malaysia (76.6%), Laos (76.7%), Vietnam (80%), Thailand (80.1%), and Singapore (82.7%).

However, it might be unwise to rule out if this discussion will steadily roll as a mere problem without any viable solution. In light of the global pandemic, the importance of international cooperation must be perceived as instrumental. In the case of Indonesia, the TVET system has long been a concern which has prompted the world fourth most populous country to engage throughout international cooperation frameworks such as with Germany within the tailored Indonesia-German Institute (IGI) and Sustainable Economic Development through Technical and Vocational Education and Training (SED-TVET) since early 2000s. Both of the above-mentioned projects could easily be cited as the trailblazers in regards to Indonesia-featured TVET international cooperation frameworks since the predecessors could hardly be found otherwise.

Reflecting on the preceding engagements of Indonesia in the international stage to enhance their TVET system, vibrant cooperation between Indonesia and another benchmark country within TVET discourse must be taken into account. A successful partnership with Germany with distant geographical proximity must unfold a leeway for similar proliferation with other such strategic partners nearby, thereby the list emerges for the neighbourhood countries which are inseparable from Australia.

This line popped up due to the assigned status of Australia as a well-known TVET benchmark in which Indonesia could attempt to maximize any best practice stemming from Australia’s experience, further supported by a convenient proximity both countries have to assure the wellbeing of cooperation and its applicability. Australia comes into status as one of the global TVET benchmarks with 4.2 million TVET students attending 4,200 registered training institutions in 2018, event represent the 24% of Australia’s total population in the same period. These enormous numbers which showed the vast potentials of Indonesia-Australia which falls under the importance of international cooperation must be perceived as instrumental. In the case of Indonesia, the TVET system has long been a concern which has prompted the world fourth most populous country to engage throughout international cooperation frameworks such as with Germany within the tailored Indonesia-German Institute (IGI) and Sustainable Economic Development through Technical and Vocational Education and Training (SED-TVET) since early 2000s. Both of the above-mentioned projects could easily be cited as the trailblazers in regards to Indonesia-featured TVET international cooperation frameworks since the predecessors could hardly be found otherwise.

With the commencement of Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IA-CEPA) as the newest cooperation framework comes into force starting from June 2020, the circulating discussions upon exploring the TVET cooperation framework between two countries will light up. Probably an immediate question arises, why IA-CEPA?

**IA-CEPA as a Prominent Cooperation Framework for Indonesia-Australia**

IA-CEPA is an economic cooperation framework established by Indonesia and Australia from multiple negotiation rounds beginning in 2012, which would later be formalized through a signatory agreement in March 4, 2019. IA-CEPA formulated with the distinct traits with preceding Free Trade Area scheme which also involves both Indonesia-Australia under the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA), since it regulates vast array of economic cooperation in terms of removing tariff barriers, expansion of wider market access, enhancing human capital development programs, and encouraging investment opportunities for both countries.

IA-CEPA sets the main purpose to shape both countries as a joint-regional economic powerhouse with Indonesia projected as a manufacturing giant while Australia assigned the role as a preferred yet reliable supplier country. IA-CEPA as portrayed by its’ abbreviation, is considered as one of the most comprehensive trade agreements since it also covers a wide range of organizational bodies from the Joint Committee at the Ministerial Level and a handful of various Sectoral Committees for instance the Committee on Trade and Goods, the Committee on Trade in Services, the Committee on Investment, Financial Services Committee, Committee on Intellectual Property, Committee on Agricultural Cooperation, Committee on Sanitary/Phytosanitary Matters, Ad-Hoc Committee on Environmental Affairs, followed by Sub-committees, Working Groups, and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)s.

The availability of various organizational bodies within IA-CEPA would draw an advantageous matter since the heterogeneous roles performed by those bodies will subsequently venture them to address greater range of economic issues faced by both parties, as well as to enhance degree of agility and flexibility since IA-CEPA concluded as a living agreement which bound as subject of any future update if needed. In case of dynamic circumstances and different views occur between both countries, these bodies are functioning as consultative mechanisms to help resolve the issues.

Discussion in addressing the breathtaking economic potentials of Indonesia-Australia which falls under the scheme of IA-CEPA must not be neglected. A year following entry into force in 2020, IA-CEPA has influenced the considerable boost on engaged trade values by both countries. This can further be shown by the graph below:

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11 Ibid.
This is down to the IA-CEPA framework itself which constitutes not only in regards to goods and services matter by tariffs reduction to opening up of wider market access, but also shed light into the addressing of a particular workforce’s issue which is undoubtedly distressed by the event of global pandemic as lot of industrial sectors struggled with bankruptcy—resulted in workers’ furlough or dismissal and eventually stretched the possible opportunities within labour market.

This literature also has mentioned terms regarding TVET cooperation framework between both countries, nevertheless, more in an overall explanation and not peculiarly dig into TVET as focal point of discussion. Therefore, the writer would like to propose an idea of writing which discussing the issue of TVET cooperation as main topic, by utilizing and maximizing on what IA-CEPA already had—such as Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Indonesia-Australia Skills Development Project signed in 2019 as attached to the Side Letter of Economic Cooperation to facilitate any workplace exchange either skills training designed for Indonesia workforces as beneficiaries. The Skills Development Project will further assist cross-border engagement by application of travel schemes between Indonesia-Australia for the next 9 years since the MoU has been signed.

Important insights sought from the writing of previous author are circulating from the brief history which igniting IA-CEPA establishment beginning from pieces of feasibility study, formal commencement of the first round of negotiation, the delayed stage in 2015*, resuming of negotiation rounds, to eventually be wrapped up by signatories between both Trade Ministers in 2019 and entry into force a year afterwards.16

Apart from primarily concerning TVET-associated matters, this writing also intends to complement and reiterate perspectives of cooperation frameworks in human capital/resources development issues which comes as one of the priority areas but not stated primarily within since it was attached at the Side Letter and subsequently risk them for attaining less spotlights. Since IA-CEPA takes form as a living agreement, it is subject to the agile adjustment depending on future necessities which suppose both parties to deal through a flexible platform such as consultation mechanism and eventually design them be deftly revised round the clock.

Methodology

This writing applies a qualitative method to conduct research with secondary data sources from several open-access journals, books, and mass media outlets as the backbone findings along with additional primary data sources gathered from writers’ experiences during his previous working time at Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs (CMEA). The respective unit in which the writers previously worked is dealing the most with macro-economic issues as well as particular workforce/labor issues and is proven to solidify and advance the research findings.

Literature Review

The first literature review referred to by the writer is a publication titled as A New Platform for Deepening Economic Ties written in tandem by Dr. Poppy Winanti & Kyle Springer. This literature explains IA-CEPA as a platform to bind and intensify Indonesia-Australia cooperation in trade sectors and other surrounding matters. Furthermore it conveys that despite the sense of broad bilateral mechanism between both countries, a joint and concerted mechanism to facilitate a wide array of trade engagement starting from primary issues of trade and investment to a more particular issue of workforce’s skill-training is deemed missing. 15

Thereby the presence of IA-CEPA with capacity to oversee the interest of both countries in terms of trade and investment, which encompassing potential trade value of no less than US$ 7 million prior to 2021 could be mutually adjudged as timely.

In 2019 and 2020, Indonesia-Australia cumulative trade values amassed USD 7.84 and 7.15 billion respectively. Despite the relatively similar value by 7 billion, it’s tangible if trade value in 2020 alone suffers from sizable decline as a rapid impact from the global pandemic which disrupts both countries’ interaction to commit trade activities. The latter year as the IA-CEPA eventually takes effect, trade value among both countries’ is enjoying a significant boost for almost (+5.5 billion) compared to the last 2 years, or by 76,4%. IA-CEPA’s role to evoke a compelling and a more intensive cooperation apart from last years’ economic blow unquestionably asserts its role as main binding force between two countries with floating hope if the accomplishment within traditional scope of trade engagement would trigger a domino effect. Particularly toward attached Side Letter’s areas for example the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Indonesia-Australia Skill Development Project, to address a potential collaboration between two parties in concerning the skilled workforces and TVET.

This writing applies a qualitative method to conduct research with secondary data sources from several open-access journals, books, and mass media outlets as the backbone findings along with additional primary data sources gathered from writers’ experiences during his previous working time at Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs (CMEA). The respective unit in which the writers previously worked is dealing the most with macro-economic issues as well as particular workforce/labor issues and is proven to solidify and advance the research findings.

14 Ibid.
16 *The delayed stage refers to paused IA-CEPA negotiation process due to strained circumstances between two countries in the respective years.
The gathered data sources also consist of several economic data from numerous open resources such as trade data garnered from the official website of Indonesia Ministry of Trade to further consolidate the delivery of writers’ arguments.

**Methodology**

IA-CEPA which primarily constitutes trade and investment matters at glance, further also spanning their attention by addressing TVET area, as attached inside the Side Letter of Economic Cooperation next to IA-CEPA. This was further pursued through the availability of a much-detailed mechanism namely the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Indonesia-Australia Skills Development Project which was signed in 2019.11 MoU by it means counted as a legal instrument which constitutes a formalized legal basis to implement any activity as stated therein, in this case the Skills Development Project once the agreement’s entry into force.

Skills Development Project carries out a plan to deliver skill capacity building to Indonesia workforces within the cooperation framework of IA-CEPA, including by enabling a short-term workplace exchange mechanism (in Australia companies) to deepen participants’ exposure with daily-life at foreign companies, thus eventually forging them to possess the required skills to be able to fulfill the demands settled by international standards.

Exposure matter mentioned in this case is critical to immerse them in dealing with actual demands of becoming a skilled workforce in the likes of customisation of practising English language for the workplace daily basis. Since English is not a native yet an active language specifically for Indonesia vocational graduates, but this scheme grants them access to deeply interact with Australian natives and expected to bring them to crack the language barrier as one of the main modalities as skilled workforces who are fulfilling international standards and competing within abroad job/labour markets.

Another modalities which further can be pursued by Indonesia workforces and undoubtedly from the segment of vocational graduates is the important transfer knowledge or transfer technology. The technological prowess no doubt will determine the faith of job/labour markets in recruiting the new intake of what they deemed as a skilled workforce. Programs offered under the Skills Development Project framework will push Indonesian vocational graduates as participants to maximize their ability through utilization of present technologies. The technologies’ terms as mentioned above, could be vastly expanded to the issue of digital skills’ grasping for vocational graduates.

At present the digital skills mostly stand as a bare minimum prerequisite to proceed jobseekers (including vocational graduates) into their desired job vacancies and the competitive job/labour market, and rise higher into prominence by the experience of global pandemic which leads to diminishing role of TVET’s physical-based infrastructures in favor of digital-based infrastructures.

Indonesian vocational graduates under this prevailing framework however, could expedite the available opportunity since the technological prowess stipulated as one of the pillars of 2045 Indonesia Vision in Human Capital Development and Mastery of Science and Technology. Moreover it aligns well with Indonesia preceding initiative to establish a firm engagement between people and technology in emphasis of Industrial Revolution 4.0 Era through Making Indonesia 4.0 Blueprint issued by Indonesia Ministry of Industry (2018).20

With the offered quota of Skill Development Project which numbered for approximately 1500 participants for five years and runs for about 6 months, this prevails as a bridging opportunity for Indonesia-Australia to foster a more tight-knit cooperation of TVET under the light of IA-CEPA framework. To call the present cooperation upon the TVET theme between two countries as “perfect” probably debatable, but both parties could thankfully rely themselves into the flexible and agile traits attained by the agreement which serve as an encouraging space for the cooperation to keep flourishing. This cooperation framework is also certainly unable to emerge as a shortcut to immediately resolve the high number of Indonesian vocational graduates (11.45%) which are acutely jeopardized by the pandemic’s impact. Instead this connecting framework is subject to enormous improvements of all parties and acts as a stiff pioneering foothold between Indonesia and its neighbouring country to progressively step towards more advancing stages to create sort of skilled Indonesian workforces of vocational graduates’ group which satisfy the demand of international job/labour market and the 2045 Vision by President Jokowi. Reflecting to the above-mentioned explanations, the writers would like to state various recommendations to the betterment of current Skill Development Project under IA-CEPA in hope if this framework can assist to embrace Indonesia’s workforces / vocational graduates’ potential to the fullest.

**Recommendations**

A **Mapping the Demands / Expectations of Australian Companies toward Participants**

In order to achieve a seamless engagement between both countries as IA-CEPA parties particularly under the case of Skilled Development Project with Indonesia participants of vocational graduate as the subject, the writer are on his view if a moduled form of Australia companies’ demands/expectations is crucial for the participant’s reference before their arrival to undertake the training. This recommendation derived from the idea that these participants are departing from relatively different areas and cultures, and consequently are under the need of an appropriate adjustment to mitigate any potential shock.

The clarity of companies’ demands/expectations thus would come valuable for the participants to encourage their efforts in reducing any existing difference between the present and latter environment.


110
A more formalized module could also help Indonesian institutions to prepare their students accordingly in accordance with settled expectations of the destination companies to ensure a maximum delivery and engagement between participants and their workplace. The less time required by the participants to adapt with the expected work cultures by companies will assist them to gain as much experience and knowledge as possible. This two-way approach also will also satisfy the companies since their demands are much likely to be fulfilled by well-adapted participants.

B Mainstreaming Skill Certification/License by Both Countries
The term of certification or license cannot be overlooked within the realm of workforce’s issue. Both documents act as a legal validation upon skill development training programs experienced by participants which enables them an access to particular job vacancies or an entry towards job/labour markets. However, it’s commonly practicable if each country has different forms of certification, including the required indicators, standards, to the degrees of certification itself. In regards to this issue, the writer subsequently proposes a recommendation to mainstream skill certification or license with similar purpose, to address the importance of reducing available standard gaps between both parties.

Throughout this case, the writer is well aware if the mainstreaming certification process is far from easy and cannot be instantly carried out. However, since it comes to the urgency of mitigating risk of considerable gaps between the training providers and the participants, the step-by-step harmonization can be mustered thoroughly. The mainstreaming process would involve various stakeholders including the responsible certifications bureau from each respective countries, for instance Indonesia could be well-represented by National Professional Certification Agency (BNSP) and Australia by the Australian Industry Skills Committee (AISC) and the Australian Skills and Quality Authority (ASQA).

A more mainstream certification standard, as of writer opinion, will draw vast opportunities for the cooperation stages between Indonesia and Australia under IA-CEPA framework and the following Skill Development Project. This argument could be extracted since the Indonesian workforces or vocational graduates which have declared met Australian standards will obtain easier access in entering Australia companies as the registered yet internationally skilled workforces, eventually leading to gradual process of reducing the unemployment. While on the other hand, Australia could benefit from future Indonesian workforces from the vocational graduates segment which come under a full-fledged status as ‘skilled’ workforces by international standards, to accelerate both countries’ ambition as a regional powerhouse with Indonesia assuming a manufacturing role and Australia serving as a preferable supplier.

Mapping the Demands / Expectations of Australian Companies toward Participants In order to achieve a seamless engagement between both countries as IA-CEPA parties particularly under the case of Skilled Development Project with Indonesia participants of vocational graduate as the subject, the writer are on his view if a module form of Australia companies’ demands/expectations is crucial for the participant’s reference before their arrival to undertake the training. This recommendation derived from the idea that these participants are departing from relatively different areas and cultures, and consequently are under the need of an appropriate adjustment to mitigate any potential shock. The clarity of companies’ demands/expectations thus would come valuable for the participants to encourage their efforts in reducing any existing difference between the present and latter environment.

Conclusion
The IA-CEPA as a comprehensive cooperation framework which entails vast array of economic activities’ arrangements from trade tariffs reduction to particular issue of TVET and skilled workforces under the tailored Skill Development Project, could be regarded as a significant platform to foster Indonesia-Australia’s engagement in a more tight-knit TVET cooperation due to the detailed structures underneath and the agile trait of agreement to adjust the future needs. Despite this framework is yet to act as a shortcut to eradicate the Indonesian unemployment problem dominated by 11.45% vocational graduates, the advanced progress is assured through the important provision of workplace exchange programs as well as transfer technology in particular concerning grasp of digital skills, added by consideration if both respective parties currently stepping into a growing importance and strategic role in the region with flourishing trend of economic engagement. IA-CEPA under specific programs carried by Skill Development Project thereby serves the role which align both of the Indonesia 2045 Vision to develop future generations of skilled workforces with mastery in science and technology and joint-ambition of both respective parties as a regional economic powerhouse. Skill Development Project also presents an encouraging space of betterment which addressed by writer’s recommendation through the addition of moduled companies’ expectations toward participant and the need to mainstreaming both countries certification and standards one step at a time.

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Book/E-Book


Press Release


Mass Media Outlets


SOCIO-CULTURAL COOPERATION
Thinking Outside the Box:
Using COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Education Reform across ASEAN and Australia

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Abstract

This article considers the impacts of COVID-19 on education across the globe, with a particular focus on Australia and the developing ASEAN nations (particularly the Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand). Indicators show that COVID will cause ongoing impacts for young people and has brought light to the flaws in education. In light of these impacts, the education systems and their shortcomings will be explored and viable avenues for reform will be considered. This article highlights the ability of both ASEAN nations and Australia to learn from each other. However, it will focus primarily on what Australia can learn from alternative education practices, such as Non-formal education seen in ASEAN nations. During the preliminary stages of research, evidence suggests that many of the educational struggles faced in Australia are replicated in the ASEAN nations, particularly developing countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia. This indicates that Australia could replicate successful programs in ASEAN nations, considering the local community and their needs.

Introduction

Australia is facing an education recession. Outcome indicators between rural and remote students and metropolitan students are not improving. International standardised testing results are on a steady decline (ACER, 2019) and Australian students have experienced numerous weeks of online learning.

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on every aspect of our lives. Lockdowns globally have seen 188 countries close their schools’ doors and adapt innovative models to educate students during a time of crisis (UNICEF, 2020). Predictions show 100 million to 1 billion students falling behind in their education as a result of school closures with disadvantaged students, such as rural and remote students, most at risk (UNICEF, 2020a & UNESCO, 2021). During lockdowns the vast majority (83%) of countries used an online or broadcasting platform to provide education, however 31% of students globally do not have access to these methods (UNICEF, 2020a).

In Australia 46% of students were identified as being at risk of experiencing significant negative impacts on learning and their wellbeing as a result of COVID-19 (Brown, 2020). The ongoing impacts of COVID-19 is anticipated to have impacts on education and students for years to come, particularly for our most disadvantaged students, with the learning gap anticipated to increase 3 times faster during online learning. The ongoing disruptions and impacts of COVID-19 do however provide a prime opportunity for governments globally to reconsider how we approach education. In Australia there is a large disparity between the educational outcomes of students from metropolitan areas and rural and remote students. Many of these difficulties are also faced by ASEAN nations providing an opportunity for collaboration and learning between Australia and ASEAN to improve outcomes for students. Education is essential, it impacts the wellbeing and prosperity of both students and nations. Education drives economics, increases tolerance and reduces conflicts. Education allows society to progress and we must ensure that it is equitable, accessible and relevant. In the wake of COVID-19 we must ensure that education is being protected and utilise this opportunity to consider what aspects of education are most beneficial to our students.

Literature Review

When considering the academic and political backdrop for this article there are two key areas to consider: education within Australia and non-formal education programs generally. Within Australian education there are 2 key issues; recent standards-based reform and the educational outcomes gap between rural and remote students and metropolitan students as well as between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Owen, 2019; Ford 2013; Guenther, Bat and Osborne, 2013; Shay and Heck, 2015; Fenwick and Cooper, 2012 & Fenwick, 2012). Australia has experienced a period of standards-based reform and the educational outcomes gap between rural and remote students and metropolitan students as well as between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Owen, 2019; Ford 2013; Guenther, Bat and Osborne, 2013; Shay and Heck, 2015; Fenwick and Cooper, 2012 & Fenwick, 2012). Standards based reform establishes a set of criteria a student is expected to achieve in each year level (Fenwick and Cooper, 2012 & Fenwick, 2012). This is intended to
create equal requirements for all students which is believed to reduce the limiting of student’s skills through differentiation (Fenwick and Cooper, 2012 & Fenwick, 2012). Standards based reform is a neoliberal policy implemented to deliver quantitative, testable measures of academic performance (Owen, 2019; Fenwick and Cooper, 2012 & Fenwick, 2012). By design the Australian National Curriculum does not cater nor establish flexibility for the consideration of schools’ local needs (Owen, 2019), instead constraining innovation (Mills, te Riele, McGregor and Baruotsis, 2017). Teachers are resistant to this change, some due to a lack of understanding of the concept (Fenwick and Cooper, 2012) and some because they see it as undermining their professional autonomy and ability to connect with and cater for their student’s needs (Owen, 2019 & Fenwick 2012). These reforms have not seen an improvement with international standardised testing, with Australia’s results steadily falling over the last 7 testing cycles (OECD, 2019). Within Australia there are a small number of flexible and alternative schools available to allow students to attain their secondary schooling certificate, however these schools remain largely on the margins of education and are only able to cater for a small number of students, despite their potential to influence mainstream education (Mills, te Riele. McGregor and Baruotsis, 2017 & Shay and Heck, 2015).

Education within Australia routinely sees educational outcomes disparities between rural and remote students and their metropolitan counterparts, as well as between Indigenous and Non-indigenous students (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021; Guenther, Bat and Osborne, 2013 & Ford, 2013). Most believe this disparity is a product of historical racism and inequity, such as secondary education not being widely available in rural and remote areas (where large numbers of Indigenous communities are located) until the 1980’s (Shay and Heck, 2015 & Ford, 2013). There are also arguments to be made that the discourse surrounding education disparity in Australia is allowing for inaction as it dismisses the results as culturally inappropriate or a result of history instead of taking responsibility and action (Ford, 2013 & Guenther, Bat and Osborne, 2013).

Non-formal education (NFE) is generally agreed to be education delivered outside, or alternatively to, formal education (Brennan, 1997 & Romi and Schmida 2009). Though there is much debate as to whether this definition is clear enough, this definition is adequate to understand NFE programs in the sphere of ASEAN and Australia. Expansion of this definition could see it include key features of Non-formal education, such as the utilisation of flexibility, adaptability and the prioritisation of developing the individual (Romi and Schmida 2009). It is clear NFE is diametrically opposed with the measurable outcome-based approach of standards-based reform seen in Australia (Owen, 2019; Fenwick and Cooper, 2012 & Fenwick, 2012). NFE has primarily been used in the Global South where weaker or less established systems allow for flexibility and NGO’s to establish processes (Brennan, 1997 & Romi and Schmida 2009).

Methodology
This article will utilise a parallel case argument, assuming that if the respective cases of Australia and the developing ASEAN nations exhibit enough similarities then what has worked in the ASEAN nations can reasonably be assumed to work in Australia, with minimal adaptations. This is based on the assumption that the framework will be replicable and able to adapt to the cultural and social needs of specific Australian communities. If Australia and ASEAN face similar difficulties within their education system then frameworks and non-formal education programs that have worked to address these similar issues in ASEAN should be able to be applied in Australia theoretically. It must be noted however that Australia has a more established education system that is centralised so implementing these programs could be difficult, hence the focus on theoretical applicability.

This article will be employing both an objective and subjective epistemology, assuming that there is a cultural lens and subjectivity to education and improving educational outcomes and attitudes as well as an aspect of quantitative data such as standardised testing results as a marker of improved outcomes. The basis of this research is that if students report better attitudes towards schools, have higher attendance and retention rates then the education reform is successful, particularly when paired with improved standardised testing results.

In order to compare both Australia and ASEAN’s education systems and struggles this article will be reviewing and analysing existing literature, government documents and United Nations reports. There will also be analysis of programs utilised in the ASEAN nations and their strengths and weaknesses as well as what area they aim to address. Research will also be conducted into the current attitudes in Australia regarding reform and addressing the education gap in order to ascertain the environment and challenges implementing alternative education systems could face.

Discussion
State of Education in Australia
Australia’s position on international education rankings fluctuates between 30th and 39th out of 41 high to middle income countries depending on the data used, however it has consistently been in the bottom third for education equality (UNICEF, 2017 & UNICEF, 2018). Australia contributes more per student in education relative to GDP than any other nation, however there has been a noticeable disparity in student’s results as between Indigenous and Non-indigenous students and their metropolitan counterparts, as well as an aspect of quantitative data such as standardised testing results as a marker of improved outcomes. The basis of this research is that if students report better attitudes towards schools, have higher attendance and retention rates then the education reform is successful, particularly when paired with improved standardised testing results.

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Climate Change and Security in Southeast Asia
Australia’s policy surrounding education is conflictual. It both does not occur in reality and does not follow research findings. Australia has implemented a system of standards-based reform which has led to the implementation of a national curriculum (Fenwick and Cooper, 2012 & Fenwick, 2012). This curriculum establishes a set of criteria that each student is expected to reach according to their year level (Fenwick and Cooper, 2012 & Fenwick, 2012). Unfortunately, standards-based reform and the implementation of a rigid national curriculum as seen in Australia do not allow educators to tailor the curriculum to the needs and interests of the community in which they serve (Mills, te Riele, McGregor and Baroutsis, 2017; Fenwick and Cooper, 2012 & Fenwick, 2012). For example the Australian curriculum has a large focus on white colonial history which does not consider the impacts or needs of majority Indigenous communities (Shay, 2017 & Ford, 2013). Standards based reform also assumes that students have achieved the previous years skills meaning students who fall behind one year can find it incredibly difficult to ever catch back up to minimum standards (Fenwick, 2012).

Australia has drastic educational disparities between rural and metropolitan students educational outcomes, as well as between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous educational outcomes (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2013 & Ford, 2013). An analysis of Australia’s educational history shows that since colonisation education programs have been designed to further white privilege (Ford, 2013).

Secondary schooling was not easily accessible for rural and remote students until 40 years ago in the 1980’s (Ford, 2013). The sheer size of Australia means there is difficulties in reach all students, particularly rural and remote students. As a result of this and the historic shortcomings of education for rural communities, rural schools experience high teacher turnover, lack of access to opportunities (both whilst at school and upon graduation), less belief in education and an irrelevant curriculum as well as an inability to tailor the curriculum to students needs, particularly as a result of standards-based reform (Lamb, Glover and Walstab, 2014; Guenther, Bat and Osborne, 2013 Fenwick, 2013 & Ford, 2013). These factors mean that rural and remote students face much lower educational achievements (Lamb, Glover and Walstab, 2014; Guenther, Bat and Osborne, 2013 & Ford, 2013).

Despite efforts in recent years to improve the educational outcomes of Indigenous students, particularly their attendance, attendance levels have been slowly declining between 2014 and 2018, slipping from 83.5% in 2014 to 82% in 2018 (See fig. 2) which is nearly 10 points lower than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017 & Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019). Due to these clear gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous students, States have set targets to improve the educational outcomes, however the government has made little effort to enforce structural reform that addresses the barriers faced by Indigenous students, instead working within a broken system which has not seen any significant improvements (Ford, 2013). Due to the
ongoing impacts of COVID-19 it is unclear just how big of an impact remote learning will have on students, however initial data is not promising for disadvantaged students. Disadvantaged students are more likely to have skipped school during remote learning and it is believed that the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students could triple during lockdown periods (Carey, 2020; Sonnemann and Hunter, 2021a & Sonnemann and Hunter, 2021b).

Climate Change and Security in Southeast Asia were controversial after years of unrest as they were seen to give the ethnic minorities power and legitimacy however these programs are now incredibly successful (Lee, Watt and Frawley, 2014). Students who identify as belonging to an ethnic minority and do not speak Khmer at home demonstrated better maths skills over a three year period attending a bilingual school than their counterparts in a monolingual school (Lee, Watt and Frawley, 2014). There were statistically insignificant differences in literature and Khmer performance (Lee, Watt and Frawley, 2014).

Maths outcomes between rural and metropolitan students are very concerning in Australia, particularly with Indigenous students. Establishing bilingual schools has the potential to address this, particularly considering the number of rural Indigenous communities that do not speak English at home. Bilingual schools were used in the Northern Territory during the late 20th century, however after community backlash they were subsequently abolished.

Philippines

Despite the Philippines being considered a middle income country, many students are unable to access education. Under 80% of students will finish primary education. In the 2018 PISA testing the Philippines had the lowest results in reading, on par with the Dominican Republic (OECD, 2019a). Prior to COVID-19 there were an estimated 2 million students out of education (Unicef, 2019a), with lockdowns and home learning continuing for a second year there are fears that COVID-19 could cause a “lost generation” of children (Gutierrez and Bilefsky, 2021). This is particularly evident for students in rural and remote areas, as most do not have access to the internet or a computer (Gutierrez and Bilefsky, 2021). COVID-19 has perpetuated many of the issues facing education in the Philippines with students falling behind and staff shortages increasing (Gutierrez and Bilefsky, 2021).

Despite numerous struggles facing education, many of which are shared with Australia, the Philippines has utilised NFE practices to bridge societal divides. NFE has also been used in response to civil unrest in Zamboanga city. In 2013 the city was considered to be under siege and during the 3 week unrest over 100,000 residents were made homeless (Labor, 2018). In response to the hostilities the government worked with NGOs to develop an Alternative Learning System, an art education program, to engage out of school young people in education and teach them peacekeeping skills (Labor, 2018). Students who were involved in the program were able to take an exam and receive their high school diploma (Labor, 2018). Participants reported developing an understanding of what peace means and improvement in their communication and interpersonal skills (Labor, 2018). This program created a creative outlet for young people to explore their experiences during the unrest as well as develop problem solving and peacekeeping skills to supplement their education (Labor, 2018).
The art education program in Zamboanga City is a prime example of how NFE can be utilised in response to societal needs, which is applicable in Australian communities, particularly where students are experiencing the impacts of intergenerational trauma.

**Thailand**

Every child in Thailand is entitled to attend school regardless of their background (Unicef, 2019). At a primary level, this is largely realised, however at a secondary level education inequality becomes more pronounced (Unicef, 2019). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, living with disabilities or migrants particularly struggle to access education (Unicef, 2019). Thailand’s PISAs results are generally declining with COVID-19-triggered school closures expected to accelerate this decline (World Bank, 2020). Despite amplified disparities in secondary education, Thailand did outperform the Philippines and Indonesia (World Bank, 2020).

Education disadvantage is amplified in disadvantaged communities such as rural and remote communities. In response to this, NFE has been utilised in particularly disadvantaged areas. These schools have varying success; however, a prime example is the Menchai Bamboo School located in the Buriram Province (Rawat, Bouchon and Nair, 2015). This school utilises student-driven innovation to provide flexible and accessible education for local students (Rawat, Bouchon and Nair, 2015). The Menchai Bamboo School is centrally located for students and community members to access (Rawat, Bouchon and Nair, 2015). Based on the three pillars of education, development and social enterprise, students are the centre of all decisions and actions (Rawat, Bouchon and Nair, 2015). The school supplements these pillars with the belief that students and young people can contribute to society and be good citizens regardless of their backgrounds (Rawat, Bouchon and Nair, 2015). The Menchai Bamboo School utilises a flexible timetable that allows the school to schedule holidays during harvest periods so students can support their families during busy agricultural times including responsive term dates that allow students to support their families and have established flexible and responsive systems that prepare students for life beyond school. The Menchai Bamboo School is believed to have stimulated the local economy, improved education achievement rates and increased tourism to the region (Rawat, Bouchon and Nair, 2015). This is a prime example of how NFE can be utilised through a partnership with the community in order to create an accessible way for local students to learn life skills as well as receive their education whilst also stimulating the local economy. This system of NFE however is a large move away from traditional education making its applicability within the current Australian context questionable and dependent on community investment.

**Conclusion**

Although it is too early to tell the full impacts of COVID-19 on education across Australia and ASEAN, global trends show that it is disadvantaged students that will have been impacted the most (Carey, 2020; Sonnemann and Hunter, 2021a & Sonnemann and Hunter, 2021b). COVID-19 forced education to change almost overnight, showing the flexibility and adaptability education can employ (Carey, 2020). For Australia the shift to remote learning was arguably one of the biggest shifts in education, despite standards-based reforms being introduced, education in Australia has remained largely unchanged since federation in 1901 (Fenwick, 2012; Fenwick and Cooper, 2012 & Ford, 2013). As our regions begin to emerge from the devastating impacts of COVID-19 we should be considering what sort of education and ‘normal’ we want to return to (Zhao, 2020). COVID-19 offers a prime opportunity for the region to consider where education is thriving and areas in which it falls short, utilise the flexibility used during initial lockdowns and consider the most disadvantaged students who have the most to gain from education (Zhao, 2020 & Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021).

Despite very different contexts, Australia and many of the developing ASEAN countries, such as Cambodia, the Philippines and Thailand, face very similar difficulties when it comes to delivering equitable education. All of these countries have rural populations which tend to be low socioeconomic and difficult to access, as well as difficult to staff due to low adult literacy rates in rural regions. Australia continues to enforce the same curriculum and school structure in these regions as they do in metropolitan areas, despite the unique and complex circumstances each community has. High numbers of NGOs in developing ASEAN nations paired with receptive governments has meant that countries such as Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines have all utilised Non-formal education catered to the needs of the community (Rawat, Bouchon and Nair, 2015; Labor, 2018 & Lee, Watt and Frawley, 2014). Schools such as the Menchai Bamboo School in Thailand and Bilingual schools for Indigenous minorities in Cambodia have created partnerships with the communities they serve (Rawat, Bouchon and Nair, 2015 & Lee, Watt and Frawley, 2014). They have identified barriers to education faced by young people and their families and have established flexible and responsive systems that prepare students for life beyond school. The Menchai Bamboo School has even stimulated economic growth within the region through simple measures such as creating responsive term dates that allow students to support their families during busy agricultural times including during harvest (Rawat, Bouchon and Nair, 2015). Bilingual schools in Cambodia have improved Indigenous attendance rates (an area identified as a concern by the Australian Government) (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017 & Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019), as well as increased retention rates for females and produced students that outperform students from a similar background that attend monolingual schools (Lee, Watt and Frawley, 2014).
Australia could learn a lot from these ASEAN nations. Introducing flexibility into schools, particularly rural schools, has the potential to drastically improve educational outcomes. If done with consideration, Australia could see improved attendance rates and more equitable standardised testing results. Implementing these changes will not change the educational landscape overnight but is likely to result in small, incremental changes that allow students to become better connected, take ownership of their school and education and to feel heard. COVID-19 offers a prime opportunity for countries across the globe to reconsider the education that they deliver. Australia should take this opportunity to reflect on the impact of education on rural and remote students and learn from the flexible and adaptive models of Non-formal education demonstrated in ASEAN nations.
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Climate Change and Security in Southeast Asia

121


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The release of Hollywood’s Crazy Rich Asians (2018) in 2018 marked two critical directions. Firstly, that the appeal of South-East Asian stories transcends borders. To date, the Singaporean-set film is the highest-grossing romantic comedy of the past ten years (Deng, 2021, p. 170). Secondly, that the dominance of Hollywood eclipses ASEAN’s emerging screen industries, compromising the region’s capacity to tell their own stories. While the all-Asian cast of Crazy Rich Asians was a major step towards diversity in Hollywood, only 33% of ASEAN-produced films are released outside the country of their origin (UNESCO, 2019a).

Co-production in film and television offers the unique ability to maximise collaborative potential and creative diversity between countries. Australia and ASEAN are well-positioned to maximise the strengths of each other’s creative industries, but there is a lack of drive in the region to fully realise this. Australia’s bias towards Hollywood may fail to see the untapped potential in establishing a strong regional film and television body built on mutual support, rather than sacrificing local industries to more dominant markets. While there have been regional efforts within ASEAN to create a shared film and television agency, these have not come to fruition. Nonetheless, they exemplify the need for more regional film and television arrangements. However, there is also a tendency for co-production arrangements to emphasise financial as opposed to creative opportunities. Going forward, Australia and ASEAN should seek to develop more co-production partnerships purposed to support local projects and emerging creatives, especially as the industry recuperates from the setbacks of the past two years.

**Key words**: arts and culture, co-production, creative industries, film and television

**Introduction**

The release of Hollywood’s Crazy Rich Asians (2018) in 2018 marked two critical directions. Firstly, that the appeal of South-East Asian stories transcends borders. To date, the Singaporean-set film is the highest-grossing romantic comedy of the past ten years (Deng, 2021, p. 170). Secondly, that the dominance of Hollywood eclipses ASEAN’s emerging screen industries, compromising the region’s capacity to tell their own stories. While the all-Asian cast of Crazy Rich Asians was a major step towards diversity in Hollywood, only 33% of ASEAN-produced films are released outside the country of their origin (UNESCO, 2019a).

Setting the Scene: Understanding Australia’s Co-Production Guidelines in an ASEAN Context

The Asia-Pacific region is home to the world’s largest film and television markets. According to recent figures, which, albeit, are six years old, Asia-Pacific’s creative industries collectively generate 12.7 million jobs and US$743 billion in revenues (UNESCO, 2015). Despite international box office sales decreasing by almost 70% as a consequence of COVID-19, the Asia-Pacific box office market was still worth twice the combined market of Europe, Africa and the Middle East in 2020 (MPA, 2020, p. 35). These trends have garnered significant attention for their lucrative growth, paving an optimistic road in light of the pandemic. Earlier this year, the ASEAN Secretariat and the Asian Development Bank co-organised a webinar titled “Creative Economy for Sustainable Development: Potential, Challenges, and Ways Forward” (2021). At the webinar, Jonathan Tan Ghee Tiang – Head of Culture and Information Division, Sustainable Development Director at the ASEAN Secretariat – described the creative economy as “an important sector that requires help
for recovery, and at the same time, an important driver to assist the region's recovery" (Tiong, 2021).

UNESCO (2019b) defines international co-production as "involving financial participation of one or more producers of national origin and one or more producers from other countries" (2019). While co-production arrangements are inherently appealing for creating a shared pool of resources, international co-productions are burdened by this emphasis on value for money. Co-production offers the unique opportunity to maximise creative output and cultural diversity, though is also too often treated as an instrument to attract foreign direct investment. Historically, co-production agreements were first imposed after World War II by Europe and the United States to protect their local industries and promote nationalist interests (Parc & Messerlin, 2020). It is important to reflect on this history in the contemporary international landscape. While the state of film and television today is extremely globalised, elements of protectionism and nationalist dominance through co-production remain.

Australia first implemented an official co-production treaty program in 1986 and has since established formal partnerships with 11 countries, signing Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) with France and New Zealand (Screen Australia, 2021a). An MOU has "less-than-treaty status" but "the same practical and regulatory effect as a treaty" (Screen Australia, 2012, p. 2). Australia's current treaty partners are Canada, China, the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Israel, Singapore, South Africa, the Republic of Korea, and Malaysia. On the whole, Australia offers several subsidies to boost investment from international productions, including location grants and post-production offsets (Ausfilm, 2021). However, production funding grants are only available to official treaty and MOU partners (Screen Australia, 2021b). Moreover, official partners can access the producer offset subsidy without being bound to content or setting restrictions. Countries who are not official co-production partners with Australia must meet a "significant Australian content test" to be eligible for the producer offset, which is a tax rebate of up to 40% (Screen Australia, 2021c). Consequently, Australia's international film and television co-productions fall into two categories: (1) those under treaties and are "official" arrangements, and (2) those that are not under treaties and are "unofficial" arrangements (Wagenfeld & Verhoeven, 2021, p. 57). These forms of co-production mirror the European Audiovisual Observatory's (2018) model of co-ventures, where different co-production arrangements have different legalities (i.e. treaty, non-treaty/ less-than-treaty). Understanding international co-productions as "co-ventures" provides a definition beyond merely financial dimensions to also consider legal, cultural, and historical dynamics.

Along these "official" vs. "unofficial" lines of co-production, patterns of national dominance within co-productions become visible. From 2010-2020, there have been 79 official co-productions (Screen Australia, 2021d) and 199 unofficial co-productions where countries collaborated with Australia on post-production, digital and visual (PDV) effects (Screen Australia, 2021e, p. 34). Australia's most frequent "official" partner is Canada, with 26 Australian/ Canada projects out of the total 79 co-productions in the past five years (Screen Australia, 2021c). Australia's most frequent unofficial partner is the United States, with 156 titles out of the total 199, accounting for 78% of unofficial co-production titles in the past ten years (Screen Australia, 2021e, p. 34). According to its official government website, the "Australian International Co-production Program encourages creative exchange between partner countries and the development of screen projects of cultural significance" (Office for the Arts, 2021). While co-production arrangements – whether official or unofficial – have evidently been touted as institutional supports for increased cultural diversity in Australia's film and television industry, the case is that it has so far reinforced Hollywood's dominance. That is not to discredit the improving diversity of North America's film and television repertoire in the past ten years. Out of Australia's eight unofficial co-productions last year, one was Marvel's first Asian-lead superhero, Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021) (Screen Australia, 2021d, p. 38). It must also be made clear that the United States and Canada were the first countries to collaborate with Australia on co-ventures. American studios first established film distribution branches in Australia in 1918 (AFC, 2005), and Canada signed a co-production treaty with Australia in 1990 (Screen Australia, 2021f). Both the United States and Canada have already established key networks for their Australian co-productions, while countries who have just signed treaties or started unofficially co-producing with Australia are only now beginning their partnerships. That is also not to deny the employment, resources, and publicity that all co-productions, irrespective of their country origins, bring.

Still, the fact that there has been little change in Australia's co-production dynamics from the 20th century until today illustrates that current co-production policies remain favourable towards already-dominant global players within film and television rather than providing a real opportunity to boost creative endeavours much closer to home. That is ironic, and perhaps not conducive to Australia's own film and television industry which is suffering from a "distribution crisis" of its local content and is a "periphery" film & TV market just like ASEAN (Harris, 2013; Lobato, 2008).

In Focus: Paving the Way for Regional Film & Television Co-productions from an ASEAN Perspective

Promoting a harmonised regional film industry has swerved in and out of ASEAN's agenda. It is a priority often put on ASEAN's table by external organisations and networks seeking to engage the ASEAN region in co-production, rather than by ASEAN autonomously. In 2011, the Asian Film Commissions Network (AFCNet) – Asia's largest non-profit film industry body – made "vigorous efforts" to include ASEAN member states into its network and programs (de la Rosa, 2015, pp. 11). AFCNet's core aim is "to contribute to local economies through improved
systems and infrastructure” (2020). In response to the AFCNet’s moves, an official ASEAN Committee was established to support the AFCNet’s ASEAN integration, and the Film Development Council of the Philippines was selected to lead this task force (de la Rosa, 2015, p. 11-12). One of their priorities was to consult between ASEAN members to coordinate their presence within the AFCNet; while Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand were already AFCNet members, Brunei, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam were not. These consultations “revealed the immediate need to unify lead government agencies in charge of film development within ASEAN” (de la Rosa, 2015, p. 12). One solution was to have a regular forum run by ASEAN for national film agencies in the region to discuss and coordinate policies. This idea was presented to the ASEAN Secretariat which supported a “FILM ASEAN” forum, but unfortunately, the AFCNET-ASEAN Committee disbanded shortly after.

Between 2013-2014, meetings were held to organise FILM ASEAN. However, whether FILM ASEAN ever became a permanent group is unclear. In 2017, ASEAN representatives went to the 20th Vietnam Film Festival to present the ASEAN Film Awards for the first time, and a roundtable discussion on “ASEAN Film Industries – the Access to the World” was held (ASEAN, 2017). The Deputy Secretary-General for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community at the time, Vongthep Arthakaivalvatee, expressed the use of film to spread pride in ASEAN’s shared identity and to promote cross-cultural production. ASEAN’s efforts in developing a regional film and television industry remained inconsistent and unsustainable, with few media statements about appearances at local film festivals and promises that failed to materialize. In his presentation at the ADB-ASEAN webinar titled Creative Economy for Sustainable Development: Potential, Challenges, and Ways Forward, Tiong also mentioned that there is “ongoing discussion to establish a cross-sectoral ASEAN regional mechanism for promotion and development of the creative economy” (Tiong, 2021). This is hopeful and implies that ASEAN is prioritising creative industries in the region’s post-COVID recovery, but only time will tell how far this is put into action.

Throughout the history of film and television in the region, ASEAN-Australian co-production relations have also been marred by an exploitative dynamic. Between the 1950s-1980s, the authoritative governments of Indonesia and the Philippines made both countries attractive destinations for cheap productions and labour, particularly by American studios. This dynamic further served to diffuse Australia’s interactions within the regional film industry (Barker and Imanjaya, 2020). While Southeast Asia’s cheap productions and labour during this time opened the region up to an influx of co-production, the creation of these films in Southeast Asia was often rendered “invisible” because they showcased Anglo-Saxon actors, Western narratives, and entirely English scripts (p. 236).

Lobato (2008) in his article Secret lives of Asian Australian cinema: offshore labour in transnational film industries explores the tension between Australian film studios using Southeast Asia for cheap production, as well as the former’s collaboration with regional producers and staff to support transnational sub-genres such as Australian-Philippino action films. Today, Indonesia and the Philippines remain attractive co-production partners. However, the region has collectively developed a strong track record of successful international productions. Notably, the 2018 film Crazy Rich Asians (2018) was shot in Singapore and Malaysia, and featured Southeast Asian actors as well as a distinctly Asian narrative. The film made over $238.5 million at the box office, received two Golden Globe nominations, and was the highest-grossing romantic comedy of the 2010s. Recently, Israel’s Survivor has also chosen to shoot its upcoming series in the Philippines (FDCP, 2021). However, unless there is more support for local stories on local screens, South-East Asian countries risk being used as ‘invisible’ co-production partners by bigger players in the global film and television market.

Getting the Frame Right: Benefits and Challenges around ASEAN-Australian Co-productions

Australia is uniquely positioned in the global film market for its comprehensive film funding structure, highly skilled labour force, advanced studio technologies, and unique locations – but its local industry risks being captured by North American ventures. Just a stone’s throw away, considering the market size of Southeast Asia’s creative industry as the world’s largest, there is significant opportunity for more regional collaboration. One is through Australia establishing more formal treaties with Southeast Asian countries. Though, it must be ensured that the financial incentives offered through these arrangements, such as subsidies, do not perpetuate the “exploitative” dynamic that Australian-Asian cinema has experienced, and does genuinely support culturally diverse storytelling (Parc, 2020; Parc & Messerlin, 2020).

Moreover, streaming platforms cannot be expected to support regional co-production. Only 1.7% of Netflix Australia’s catalogue is Australian content (Stevens, 2020). Netflix is also notorious for taking away all rights from the producer. Danish producer, Anders Kjærhauge, expressed the importance of regional co-production agreements over streaming giants:

“In Denmark, when Netflix does a ‘Netflix original’ it looks good on paper and maybe also financially, but actually the producer retains no rights. You more or less become a production service provider for their platform. So in order to continue to work as an independent Danish production company, co-productions are a necessity for us.” (Hamnett-Jamart, 2018, p. )
Positively, there has been a rise in local subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services, with Singaporean streaming platform ‘Viu’ has taken over Netflix in South-East Asian subscriptions this year (Frater, 2020). These local SVOD services have the advantage of being more familiar to ASEAN production communities and knowing their own markets better, but continue to be challenged by the gigantic forces of Western SVODs such as Netflix, HBO, and Disney+ (Shackleton, 2021).

The growth of ASEAN’s creative industries is closely watched in Australia, but there is a lack of further engagement besides this. In 2013, Screen Australia published a report titled Common Ground: Opportunities for Australian screen partnerships in Asia with recommendations to strengthen Asia-Australia co-production. In the report, producers from the region expressed that:

“...the lack of access to rebates made available through the presence of a treaty limited their ability to contribute finances into a production... the perspectives shared indicated that opportunities continue to be missed. However, at the same time, some producers and SPAA suggested that co-productions would not suit all projects.” (p. 8)

This observation highlights that there is not only a demand for more official co-production treaties in the region, but a need for “unofficial” co-production initiatives as well, so that projects which may not be able to access official co-production treaties can still benefit from collaborative arrangements. One example of an unofficial co-production program is the Australian-Indonesian Fast Track Film Co-Production Initiative organised by Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in 2018. As Australia does not yet have an official treaty with Indonesia, this program facilitates unofficial co-production opportunities which foster people-to-people connections and cross-cultural relations for film. The programme ran from 2018-2021, and was likely impacted by COVID-19, though the existence of this initiative itself provides a valuable example for strengthening regional co-production beyond treaties and subsidies.

The 2013 Common Ground report also highlighted the importance of establishing co-production treaties to genuinely nurture culturally diverse storytelling:

“Local broadcasters pointed out that official co-production status allowed for shared creative control with Asian region partners where content needed to conform to local content requirements on Australian television. In these cases, the absence of a co-production treaty means that collaboration is restricted to a production services outsourcing arrangement with regional partners.” (p.8).

Historically, co-production treaties do have the tendency to evolve into erosive, unproductive arrangements if there is an emphasis on financial incentives and subsidies. It must be remembered, however, that treaties nonetheless have the innate potential to nurture genuinely diverse storytelling when the balance between economic and cultural investment is struck.

Taking the Shot: Maximising ASEAN-Australia Co-productions for a Post-COVID Future

Australia appears more likely to sign formal treaties with countries who have strong national film agencies and clear lines of government support that encourage high quality production, but this should not be sole indicators for suitability. Singapore was Australia’s first treaty partner from ASEAN, with the city-state being a particularly attractive destination as South-East Asia’s biggest creative industry (Srirunhabood & Alegre, 2021) and significant government funding for its artistic and cultural capacities (Khoo, 2014). Similarly, Malaysia has also recently acquired an official co-production treaty with Australia (Evans, 2021) on the back of the country’s increasingly successful domestic productions (Scott, 2019) and the allocation of USD$44 million to Malaysia’s creative industries under the 2022 Budget (Babulal, 2021). Such characteristics appear to be the benchmarks for an official treaty with Australia, but Australia should seek to be more proactive and engage widely beyond treaties to maximise the region’s co-production potential in the post-COVID climate.

Ideally, ASEAN could adopt a model like the Council of Europe’s Convention on Cinematographic Co-production as a shared platform to make “cinematographic co-productions more systematic and easier to construct” (COE, 2021). The Convention on Cinematographic Co-production was established in 1994 to reconcile the “Europudding” trap where European co-productions skimped on representing cross-cultural stories to exploit the financial offerings of a co-production arrangement (Bengesser, 2019, pp. 418-419). Alongside the Convention, the Council of Europe have also established “Eurimages” – a regional “cultural support” fund which provides soft loans and subsidies for European co-productions (Eurimages, 2021). These two instruments have increased co-productions in Europe between both small and large powers, though Mitric (2020) notes that “by prioritising cultural and political impact... most of these co-productions struggle to find (non-national) audiences and almost never recoup what has been invested” (p. 74). Evidently, there needs to be a balance between economic and cultural agendas when designing co-production treaties and initiatives. Nonetheless, the Convention and Eurimages are valuable examples of regional governance for film and television co-production, and their policy evolutions afford many lessons for ASEAN to learn from.
Moreover, strengthening private-public networks further bolsters regional co-production capacities, where partnerships between professional bodies (such as AFCNet), streaming companies, national film and television agencies, production houses, and broadcasters are geared towards supporting local stories (Collins, Landman & Bye, 2019; Potter, 2021). Developing a robust regional film industry aligns with “ASEAN’s 2025:Forging Ahead Together” plan under points E.2 (i) Encourage and support creative industry and pursuits, such as film, music, and animation, and; B.3. (iv) Enhance regional mechanisms to promote asset creation and commercialisation, including the development of supporting schemes for MSMEs and creative sectors (2015).

Australia and ASEAN could also look to the Korean model of cultural policy, where heavier state support and funding have enabled the rise of its cultural export economy (Lee, 2019; Lee, 2021). Though, it must be kept in mind that coordinating state-heavy policies for the ASEAN-Australian region involves much more intricacies and considerations than in the context of a single nation-state.

While the pandemic has put unavoidable hurdles on film and television production, the past two years have also proven how adaptable the industry can be in the face of crises. The development of filming bubbles – where cast and crew are not allowed to leave a designated set or area for a period of time – has brought jobs and projects back, creating a safe environment for a return to work (Sandberg, 2020). In the Philippines, television networks have also developed filming bubbles to bring shoots back (Requintina, 2021). These measures illustrate the capacity of film and television to contribute key recovery outputs in the post-COVID-19 context, where shoots and projects can quickly adapt despite such volatile settings. Moreover, supporting the film and television industry has spill-over effects on tourism, hospitality, and other services in the long term. As the region seeks to coordinate its capacities towards post-COVID-19 recovery, it is valuable to consider the role of the creative industries moving forward.

Back in Australia, the country’s national film and television policies are stifled by a focus on commerce rather than finding a balance between business and culture. Hambly (2020) outlines how this has developed and transpired in recent years. Instead of creating policies to invigorate the role of film in understanding and exploring culture, recent film policy reforms “have focused on the detrimental effect of the recalibration to film financing” (p. 128). This follows Parc’s position where an emphasis on subsidies and financial incentives in co-production policy compromises the capacity for co-production to foster creativity and cultural diversity. One of Australia’s most prolific recent features was The Dressmaker (2015), produced by Sue Maslin, which collected $21 million at the box office, equaling Mad Max: Fury Road (2015). Last year, Maslin criticised the Australian government’s decision to cut the producer offset by 10% for feature films:

“It doesn’t add up to features being financed in the short or medium term, unless we revert to being solely a location and crew base for offshore [Hollywood] productions” (Quinn and Samios, 2020).

This year, those cuts were reversed. In light of these changes, Maslin remarks that while the post-COVID-19 boom of Australian film and television is optimistic, this growth should not be taken for granted.

“Australian movies have delivered a record-breaking box office performance in 2020/21 in the absence of Hollywood products. But the seismic industry changes in the past 12 months have meant that all of us – producers, distributors and exhibitors – need to look at new ways to do business, raise finance and grow audiences. On the back of restoring the 40 per cent Producer Offset, the time is right for us to come together and have a long overdue conversation about working together more strategically going forward.” (Keast, 2021).

Conclusion

For ASEAN-Australia to make the most out of their co-production capacities, the region must work together to not only maximise collaborative opportunities, but also exchange knowledge to support each other’s national institutions and policies for film and television. Australia has a well-structured film and television industry, with a federal film and television body (Screen Australia) as well as supporting agencies in each state (Screen NSW, Film Victoria, Screenwest, etc) and other private bodies (such as AusFilm). ASEAN can look to Australia’s example to build productive networks for film and television in the region. However, Australia currently lacks any real policy initiatives with ASEAN for film and television, despite having strong foundations to implement more official co-production arrangements with its regional counterparts.

The only ASEAN countries Australia has official co-production treaties with are Singapore and Malaysia, indicating that Australia is only interested in seeking official partnerships with countries which have high-growth creative industries. This neglects the potential of emerging industries and creatives in ASEAN. Unofficial co-production programs – such as multi-year grants or initiatives – provide critical support to crews and projects from ASEAN countries until they have an official co-production treaty with Australia. Establishing a regional body such as Europe’s Convention on Cinematographic Co-production would encourage more film and television collaboration in the region by minimising administrative barriers and making co-productions accessible from a centralised system. In the post-COVID-19 context, strengthening regional film and television arrangements not only maximises the value of the creative industries, but also its spill-over effects to other sectors such as hospitality and tourism.
Most importantly, the region must look beyond co-productions as a financial opportunity, but as a partnership which genuinely supports homegrown stories and voices.
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Australia's international education sector is in a troubled state, with record declines in student enrolment and interest from prospective students. Despite this, global demand for international education has remained relatively steady, even seeing slight increases in interest. Yet it is important to understand the various dimensions involved in why Australia is particularly affected. This article seeks to understand why such trends exist and propose possible recommendations and/or courses of action to enhance Australia's image in the international education sector to foster mutual social, economic, and cultural developments between Australia and the greater Asia-Pacific region.

**Abstract**

Australia is one of the premier destinations for international students, known for its excellent higher education institutions, multicultural society, and proximity to the greater Asia-Pacific region. Home to seven of the world's Top 100 universities as per the Quacquarelli Symonds 2022 rankings and hosting over 700,000 international students in 2019, Australia has built a reputation as a sought-after study destination. Yet this reputation came to a grinding halt as the COVID-19 pandemic rolled over, where a global recession alimented by restrictions on human mobility resulted in changing attitudes towards international education. Australia's international education sector was especially hard-hit, seeing record declines in student enrolment and decreased interest among prospective international students as their "study destination of choice" (IDP Connect, n.d.). However, the same cannot be said for a number of other international study destinations abroad, with the likes of Canada and the United Kingdom seeing renewed interest amongst international students (Anderson, 2022). With a multi-billion dollar industry on the line, coupled with the many socio-cultural and political benefits that the international education sector provides, Australia's next moves should be guided thoroughly.

**Key words:** Australia, education, international students,

**Introduction**

Australia's international education sector is in a troubled state, with record declines in student enrolment and interest from prospective students. Despite this, global demand for international education has remained relatively steady, even seeing slight increases in interest. Yet it is important to understand the various dimensions involved in why Australia is particularly affected. This article seeks to understand why such trends exist and propose possible recommendations and/or courses of action to enhance Australia's image in the international education sector to foster mutual social, economic, and cultural developments between Australia and the greater Asia-Pacific region.

However, international enrolments in Australia began to see a decline since the onset of the pandemic, spelling disaster for several higher education institutions. Additionally, the country has seen decreased interest among the international student market. A survey conducted by IDP Connect revealed that Australia originally took a 20% share of the international student market in India in 2019. That number has since fallen to 9%, citing issues such as online learning set-ups and limited post-graduation work opportunities relative to the country's competitors (Study International, 2021). Such sentiments have been evident in other markets as well. China – Australia's largest source of international students – has only seen a mild decline in international enrolment, yet this is partially due to the fact that many Chinese students follow a foundation year program which usually leads to their enrolment in a tertiary institution. Additionally, as political tensions arise, this number is poised to go down in the future should ties between the two countries deteriorate. Despite this, there has been a gradual rise in interest from the Southeast Asian market, namely Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia (IDP Connect, n.d.).
Multiple factors contribute towards the gradual departure of international students from considering Australia as a study destination. One of them includes a lack of financial support, be it through temporary financial assistance such as government loans and enhanced flexibility on working hours on student visas, or one-time relief packages that could help supplement the costs of living for many international students, especially during the pandemic. Compared with countries such as Canada and New Zealand, the Australian government has offered little in terms of assistance at the national level, with many international students in financially-tight situations mostly receiving help from charities, and a few non-government-related organizations. A few exceptions exist, such as the City of Melbourne council offering an “international student fund,” but this option was limited to a few local councils, and most assistance programs primarily provided assistance with food and shelter. This stands in stark contrast to Canada, where students were given payments of 500 CAD per week for up to 16 weeks, or in New Zealand, international students were not separated from citizens when it comes to Covid-19 relief payments (Quinn, 2020). While it is expected that international students fund their entire education, the lack of action from the Australian government, especially in a unique situation such as the pandemic, indicates a lack of concern for the welfare of international students. This has subsequently led to declining student perceptions of Australia as a destination for international education.

Another popular issue revolves around entry restrictions. While Australia has been relatively unscathed by the pandemic, inbound restrictions have been detrimental to the majority of international students, as the highly restrictive policies concerning the entry of international students to Australia for study forced many to take their classes online, often paying for full sticker price despite the lack of access to most of their university’s facilities. This has also caused many students to miss out on face-to-face learning, which creates a better learning setup than the online alternative. Current policies regarding the entry of international students have also been mixed. As it stands, Australia has started to allow quarantine-free uncapped flights for fully-vaccinated Australians stuck abroad, yet parts of the country still refuse to let international students in even with the same vaccination status. Additionally, a number of plans involving the return of international students to Australia involve “two-week quarantine in a designated facility,” regardless of citizenship or vaccination status. This raises concerns about possible expenditures that may incur for the student, and also creates an additional headache for students when considering where to study abroad. This is in stark contrast to policies in other countries, where international students have been mostly accepted for entry as their purpose was deemed “essential.” Currently, many students are even allowed to enter quarantine-free to these countries, with the main requirement being proof of full vaccination or negative test results (IDP Connect, n.d.).

Another potentially negative contributing factor would be lingering general negative views of Australians towards international students, especially towards Asian students as racism towards this racial group has spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic (Harrison, 2020). Despite all the positive contributions of international students towards the Australian economy and society, misconceptions and implicit racial biases still persist. International students were believed to “steal the spots of domestic students” or are “only using an Australian education as a pathway to permanent residency.” The former, in essence, is false, as international students actually help in increasing the funding of Australian universities. Thereby, allowing them to provide higher-quality education and more university places as a result of higher financial capacity owed in part to the financial contributions that international students provide. While to some extent the latter is true, the majority of international students come back to their respective countries after their studies. Meanwhile, international students who elect to stay in Australia provide a valuable set of highly-skilled young immigrants that generally have clean criminal records and are well-equipped to integrate into the Australian economy and society. Additionally, programs such as regional migration schemes help resolve issues pertaining to a lack of talent in various regions in rural Australia, which also allows the respective economies of these regions to prosper and also introduces these places to a taste of racial and cultural diversity, which creates more vibrant communities as a whole. These myths and misconceptions are worth dispelling, especially as it impacts Australia’s development in becoming a diverse, multicultural society.

Lastly, it is also worth mentioning what Australia has done to keep or enhance international student enrolment. Australia has long enjoyed its geographical advantages with Asia, where its close proximity to a large market combined with its climate advantages have made it an attractive destination to international students. Yet there has generally been a minimal number of promotional campaigns being run by the Australian government in a similar nature to that of the United States (EducationUSA) and Canada (EduCanada). This affects the visibility of Australia as a prospective study destination, and much untapped potential remains in terms of recruiting international students to study in Australia.

Discussion and Recommendations

It is certain that Australia has many issues to tackle with regard to improving the recruitment of international students. Despite the number of challenges the country faces, there are still a number of possible courses of action for Australia to take in reclaiming and perhaps even renewing its popularity among international students.

Currently, one of the key issues in bringing back international students to Australia involves entry requirements. While some states have recently announced quarantine-free entry for international students, as their purpose was deemed “essential.” Currently, many students are even allowed to enter quarantine-free to these countries, with the main requirement being proof of full vaccination or negative test results (IDP Connect, n.d.).
students to Australia involves entry requirements. While some states have recently announced quarantine-free entry for international students, others are still requiring that they go under quarantine for two weeks – regardless of vaccination status – which adds a burden to the cost of education for students. Additionally, states like Western Australia have not even announced a plan to let international students back into the state to pursue their studies, further acting as a deterrent for international students who want to fully benefit from the tuition and fees they pay by being on campus for their full college experience. This fragmented and uncoordinated response only leads to confusion amongst prospective international students.

State governments should also consider providing emergency financial relief services to students currently on Australian shores. Examples include loans with little or no interest rates or one-time financial relief packages which help keep financially struggling students enrolled in universities, at least until they are able to regain their pre-pandemic socioeconomic status or find a job to help pay off their loans.

Universities should also consider expanded post-graduation employment opportunities – both onshore and offshore – to facilitate a smooth transition from university to employment/further graduate study and maintain Australia’s attractiveness to international students. Programs include expanded internships with a variety of companies both inside and outside Australia, “co-op” programs similar to those found in the United States and Canada which provides students with a real, immersive job experience. These programs will help students build connections with companies, and can make their experience with transitioning from college to the job market much easier.

Opportunities for inter-university exchange programs with Australian and ASEAN universities should also be increased. Countries such as Japan, the United States, and South Korea have large-scale exchange programs which help attract prospective students by giving them a taste of the college experience in their respective countries (Adams, Leventhal, and Connelly, 2012). These are often done in conjunction with scholarship programs to entice students to consider such activities. By doing so, Australia can market an immersive college experience through these exchange programs, which can increase the interest of prospective students to study in Australia for undergraduate or graduate study.

Governments projects facilitated by ASEAN states may also be beneficial to this endeavour. Providing scholarships, exchange programmes, or special seminars facilitated by ASEAN states would help fuel interests amongst ASEAN students to study in Australia, helping them gain exposure to a multicultural and dynamic society, providing a unique yet valuable experience that could function as an asset in the international business sector or even the ever-changing socio-cultural dynamics in the workplace. Additionally, these programs could help provide otherwise less financially capable students - especially those who show potential or commendable talent within their fields - to utilize the various opportunities that could be offered in Australia that would otherwise be unavailable in their home countries.

Lastly, it is important that the Australian government and universities should raise awareness on the importance of international students and their contributions to Australian society, be it through information campaigns or diversity-related events. These help dispel race-related biases that may exist within local communities and clear up misconceptions on international students.

**Conclusion**

Australia’s international education sector is in an unfortunate position, with the prolonged lack of action from the federal government ultimately resulting in a loss of potential consumers who would have otherwise studied in the country. While damage has already been done, there are still various avenues and opportunities to attract international students in the future and reposition Australia’s reputation as one of the leading study destinations for prospective international students. Through the implementation of a variety of policies, including programs involving better recruitment processes, enhanced exchange programs, targeted scholarship programs, expanded post-graduation employment opportunities both in and out of Australia, informational initiatives on the contributions of international students to Australian society, and tapping other potential markets, Australia can regain and perhaps even improve its attractiveness as an international study destination.
Bibliography


Chapter 3

"Brain-drain" - The Reality:
A Case from Vietnam's Students of Countries Studies

Tran Huynh Bao Khanh & Nguyen Thanh Phuong | Myanmar

Abstract
Globalization has come to an unprecedented point in its history of development, which enables the free flow of people and ideas around the world. The movement of young intellectuals to developed countries to settle and find employment has led to the problem of "brain-drain" in several developing countries. This study aims to explore the effects of the Countries Studies field on the realities of "brain-drain" in the ASEAN-Australia region, with a focus on the shifting mindset of local Vietnamese on what "brain-drain" actually is. The study also wishes to discuss how young intellectuals’ experiences of working internationally can contribute to their homeland.

Employing qualitative - explanatory and descriptive methods, this study focuses on Vietnamese university students and workers under 30 who both work in Vietnam and the ASEAN-Australia region, their professions and their perspectives on the ideal workplace and the contribution to their homeland. The study will gather data from participants’ surveys and field observations at several international companies and organizations in Vietnam to answer the research questions: How has the perception of "brain-drain" changed for students of Countries Studies in Vietnam, and; How will the trend of working abroad change in the future?

Introduction
The study on a specific country is called Countries Studies (đất nước học) in the northern region and Area Studies (khu vực học) in the southern region of Vietnam such as Vietnamese Studies, Thai Studies, Japanese Studies. Countries Studies or Area Studies is defined as the smallest scale of Regional Studies, which are often categorized into different regions and countries of interest (Phan, 2015). Regional Studies on the other hand studies on the subcontinent or continent such as South East Asia Studies, Asia Studies. In this study, we would like to use the term Countries Studies to clarify our research as well as avoid misunderstanding between the definition of Area Studies and Regional Studies.

Body and Literature Review
The issue of brain drain has long been a point of convergence, not only in the academic fields but more so in everyday life (Docquier & Rapoport, 2006). Developed countries are often the recipient of migrants from developing and underdeveloped countries to provide manual and intellectual labor. Regarding brain gain, this can be seen as developed countries being unable to create enough labor to meet the needs of all of their economic sectors, thus, they must rely on a variety of methods to import foreign labor. For example, governments may opt to hire foreign workers directly or to first educate foreign students at their higher education institutions before hiring them. Another popular way for nations to invest in their human capital is sponsorship in studying abroad with a commitment to return to the homeland after graduation. Those with education or job experience gained abroad might contribute to the growth of their nation. This will facilitate the circulation of brainpower both geographically and intellectually. It is a brain circulation when intellectual immigrants take advantage of high-quality working conditions from developing to developed nations. Working overseas allows an immigrant to donate their earnings to their homeland, and owing to the currency gap, relatives in their hometown may lead a prosperous life through such remittance. The best example of how remittances contribute significantly to a country’s economy is Vietnam from the 2000s to the 2020s ("Vietnam - Remittance Inflows To GDP - 2022 Data 2023 Forecast 2000-2020 Historical", n.d.), contribute 6.3432 % to the country’s GDP in 2020.
This research aims to study the relationship between brain drain and brain gain through immigration and analyze the concept of brain drain from Countries Studies' perspective. As globalization reaches a new height, the field of Countries Studies can be said to be one of the strategies employed by many nations to create an impact globally, to exert influence on another country without invading it through the education of its culture, language and ideology. It helps non-superpowers gain alliances through economic cooperation and cultural exchange. The promotion of Countries Studies allows for non-super powers to exert a kind of soft power that can influence foreign citizens and generate international recognition. Take an example of South Korea, their military power is limited due to the appearance of Americans in the Korean Peninsula. Thanks to Hallyu (Korean wave), the country gains recognition through music, drama, fashion, and commercials to establish a form of cultural domination worldwide. (Fiaz, 2020). Korean Studies, therefore, are established rapidly in both western and eastern states' universities.

This study focuses on two majors, Thai Studies and Australian Studies, in the Vietnamese context. From the research outcome, we would like to point out how Countries Studies can enhance the learner’s capacity and motivate them to contribute more to their country.

Methodology

Employing qualitative - explanatory and descriptive methods, this study focuses on Vietnamese university students and workers under 30 who both work in Vietnam and the ASEAN - Australia region, their professions, their perspectives on the ideal workplace and their contribution to their homeland. It includes in-depth, structured interviews with students and employees from Thai Studies and Australian Studies at Ho Chi Minh University of Social Sciences and Humanities to conclude that the country of residence is not a significant determinant of participants' contribution to their homeland. The article also discusses the role of living abroad as an influence on the participants' mindset about brain drain and workflow in the globalization era.

Discussion

Part 1: Situation of migrant workers working abroad

According to the International Labor Organization report 2021, the population of Vietnamese workers abroad is more than 560,000, gathered largely in Taiwan, Japan, Republic of Korea, consisting of two-thirds in total (ILO, 2021). Thailand consists of 50000 Vietnamese workers. According to the Australian Home Affairs website (2019), the Vietnamese-born population has risen significantly in the 2010s accounting for 1.0 % of the country's population. On the education aspect, for the latest report from student visa and Temporary Graduate visa program report, the number of Vietnamese students visa applications lodged in the first half of 2021 ranked 8 worldwide and only behind Philippines (ranked 6) in ASEAN. And also the number of Vietnamese Postgraduate Research Sector visa applications granted in the first half of 2021 where the students were in Australia ranked fourth after China, India and Saudi Arabia worldwide, consisting of 5.7 % in 2021 (Australian Home Affairs Office, 2021). Based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Migration Australia report, Vietnamese temporary visas rose from 197,820 in June 2009 to 262,910 in June 2019 with the huge number of migrant workers and students.

For temporary visa category from 2016 - 2020:
- International students including all education levels such as Foreign Affairs or Defense representatives are 43687 in total.
- Skilled stream migration: 904
- Working holiday: 1624

For permanent visa category from 2016 - 2020: 21547 in total. Skilled and business investment consists of one-third of the population (7705).

Part 2: The reality of the concept of brain-drain

Four interviewees have attended BA Degree in Thai Studies and Australian Studies from Ho Chi Minh University of Social Sciences and Humanities, the leading university on social sciences research in the south of Vietnam. All of the interviewees belong to Millennials and Gen Z generations, those who have adapted to great change in Vietnam during the economy’s reform (Đổi Mới in Vietnamese) and the globalization era. The university is also a pioneer in teaching “new” foreign languages which did not have a historically political impact on Vietnam; such as German, Thai, Indonesian besides more common languages such as English, Russian, Chinese, French.

Interview results from people with a Countries Study background (students and alumni)

In total, four people were interviewed for this case study. Two participants are undergraduates and the other two are young professionals. As for Australian
Studies, one is currently a junior year student while another has completed her degree and is holding a position as a social worker. For Thai Studies, the employees own a fan page and TikTok channel on Thai language teaching. A summary of participants’ demographics can be found in Table 1 below, with names being pseudonyms to preserve participants’ anonymity.

**Table 1**

**Participants’ Demographic**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (as of 2023)</th>
<th>Major/Field of study at university</th>
<th>Current position</th>
<th>Future goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Thai Studies. Teacher and Thai Teacher</td>
<td>Working in Thailand for a while then come back to Vietnam and work for a Thai enterprise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jinn</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Thai Studies. Student. Thai language teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Australian Studies. NSO officer</td>
<td>Finish Graduate degrees and settle in Canada</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Li</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Australian Studies. Student.</td>
<td>Graduate and find a job in the Australian Consulate or an Australian company</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Thai Studies students, both have a good impression of Thailand and pay a huge interest in the country before attending university. The situation is similar to those coming from an Australian Studies background, and they also indicated a keen interest in working in Australia after graduation. The Thai Studies students stated they would like to continue the tie by working in Thailand for an amount of time rather than engaging in the social media field to promote more Thai products in Vietnam’s market.

Regarding those of Australian Studies, both gave the impression of a willingness to continue their connection with the country. While the ongoing student wants to seek chances to work with the Australian Consulate in Ho Chi Minh city or some companies with links to Australia, the graduated participant indicated that even though she would like to explore interests in Australia, she is currently working as a social worker, which is outside of her major in university. The reason for living or working abroad, or brain-drain, varies for the two interviewees from Australian Studies. While the ongoing student perceives this as an “out-of-control” situation and a threat to the economy due to the “loss of talents”, the graduated one stated that she sees this more like “brain circulation”. She went on to explain her perspective, which indicated some knowledge of the matter, that nowadays, due to the frequent exchange between countries, it is not unusual to see a person working one or more jobs in one or more countries. This means that they can contribute to the economy of both countries. The researchers hypothesized that age and experience may be the factors contributing to this difference in how our participants view the concept of “brain drain”. Furthermore, the economic differences between Vietnam and Australia might be an underlying reason for these views.

As for students of Thai Studies, there is consensus between them that “brain-drain” is a source of motivation for the development of a country. The reason is that to not lose talents, a country must strive to meet their expectations in terms of job security and environment. In return, if provided an enriching and challenging environment to thrive, these talents will not have any incentives to leave their country and therefore, the problem of brain drain shall be curbed. Based on the interview results, the researchers concluded that brain drain is not a matter of great concern for these participants, as Thailand and Vietnam are similar in terms of the cultural and economic situation and are geographically close.

**Answering research question 1: How has the perception of brain drain changed for the participants?**

In the case of this research, the perception of brain drain has changed positively, specifically reflected in their reasoning behind it. After having attended Countries Studies, the participants tend to view it as an inevitability, a result of globalization, and brain drain can also act as a force for positive growth. This is in contrast to the popular belief that brain drain is a negative issue that causes damage to the country’s economy. The development in transportation is another discovery during the research. There is a correlation between the development of air transportation and the decision of young intellectuals to work abroad. As Vietnamese society values the strong bond of the family generation (Van Bich, 2013, p.22), the older generations believe that working abroad limits the chance to take care of their elders carefully and therefore decrease people’s determination to work far away from home. The growth of flights around Australia-ASEAN regions have ameliorated the concern and enabled migrant workers to visit their family more frequently. Airfare issues can also be solved by the high income from working abroad and also the money from the “handbags trade”, purchasing quality products in Thailand or Australia and then reselling them in Vietnam for profit. Working abroad is also considered an asset as the person has more experience than someone only exposed to domestic working environments, according to interviewees’ opinions, as they believe that by adding achievements in working abroad, they can easily reach a high salary or high position in a company.

For Thai Studies, the participants pointed out that, to them, Countries Studies are not the main driver for their immigration, however, this program can act as the “bridge” to connect them and target countries, or else they can find one way or another to achieve their dream of going abroad. By studying the program in university, they have more chances, through scholarships or other forms of cooperation, to travel to other countries. Regarding Australian Studies, while both participants agree that Countries Studies provide them with the right attitude and necessary skills as well as background knowledge to enable them to work in Australia or areas related to Australia,
the chances of getting a scholarship for them is much less due to the high demand and the competition. This is reflected in the experience of Ms Hoa, the graduated student who is currently not taking part in any work related to Australian Studies and is planning for a post-graduate diploma in Canada. She stated that the chances for her to have a high-earning job after the diploma in Canada are much higher than in Australia, hence her choice to divert.

Redefining brain-drain. Answering research question 2: How will the trend of working abroad change in the future?

Moving abroad is a trend in the globalization era

The study of other countries has long been present in education in Vietnam. During the feudal period from X to mid-XIX century, under the great influence of China, the ideas of philosophy and governance mostly based on Confucianism were adapted to Vietnam hierarchy and taught nationwide to pupils by Vietnamese Confucianists beside lessons from Taoism and Buddhism (Complete Annals of Đại Việt - Ngô Sĩ Liên / Vietnamese imperial examination - Nguyễn Thị Chân Quỳnh), the young intellectuals will then participate Confucian court examination with the graduate taking a position in court or civil service. During the French colonial period, Vietnam was exposed to Western education and for the first time exposed to scientific research, which was different from the traditional Sinology, which was stereotyped despite being transformed to reflect the Vietnam spirit. The “Dong Du ” (Eastward) movement in the early 20th century also witnessed patriotic Confucianists like Phan Boi Chau translating Chinese books from the Japanese language contributing to the development of language that people often call Sino-Vietnamese words of Japanese origin. These studies are localized in nature, that is, the Vietnamese people only selected the knowledge suitable for them at that period, but did not study the country comprehensively.

After 1945, education in Vietnam prospered when the number of illiterate people decreased significantly. The university system expanded and Countries Studies began to flourish. At this time, the disciplines called “Language Study” where the main focus was the language and then spread to culture, politics, philosophy, religion and geography. Some branches of Language Study can be mentioned such as English, Russian and especially French Linguistic and Literature due to the influence of the intellectual generations trained in France (State Records And Archives Management Department Of Viet Nam, 2021).

In the early 1990s, the political situation in Vietnam underwent significant changes. This promotes cooperation between Vietnam and many countries such as ASEAN and the EU, leading to a strong development of the regional studies industry. The University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi are leading institutions for social science research, both opening disciplines in the area of study that were originally Oriental Studies (including subjects such as Thai, Indo, Australian, Arabian studies...) can then be separated into small regional disciplines. Through the establishment of the above industries and Vietnam’s accession to ASEAN (July 28, 1995), the country has suitable human resources to contribute to Vietnam’s development and the region’s integration.

Through the formation of regional studies, migration and work abroad are promoted more and become more diversified. Vietnamese not only choose “advanced” countries such as the US, Western Europe or Japan, Korea and Australia but also middle-class countries with the mentality that they can receive many other learning opportunities besides the developed countries mentioned above as well as improving income. Countries like Thailand will take advantage of that opportunity to promote the country, build soft power and attract more attention from other countries. A typical example that can be mentioned is the example of Korea with the K-Wave, through the K-Wave, Koreans have attracted more attention from all over the world, especially young people thanks to the K-Wave. Korean studies have been studied in many countries around the world, bringing great benefits in terms of politics, economy, culture, education and so on.

Moving Abroad Increases The Ability to Contribute to The Homeland (Income, Knowledge, Long-term Cooperation)

One undeniable benefit of moving abroad is the high value of remittance in the employee's home country, thanks to the currency disparity. Based on the latest data from the World Bank (2020), Vietnam stands in the top ten remittance recipients with more than 17 billion Dollars in 2020 (five per cent of the country’s GDP) from both Vietnamese who have naturalized and temporary residents.

Figure 2

Top 10 Remittances Recipients in 2020

Source: World Bank
This trend is reflected in the responses of our participants, as all of them answered that they would like to return to Vietnam after a certain amount of time living abroad. Interestingly, the participants tend to be uncertain about the duration of time for staying abroad, albeit having detailed plans for themselves and even their families (i.e. participants living in Australia). This can be attributed to the factors such as the receiving country’s policy, or the change in the socio-economic status of the participant. They often mention seeking new, “better” employment opportunities as a great incentive for moving abroad and the higher income which in part they would send to their families in Vietnam as a remittance. The correlation between their background of Countries Studies and the willingness to contribute to both countries is reflected in this tendency, as the participants feel the need to “payback” to the country which provided them with certain benefits in higher education while maintaining the identity of a devoting Vietnamese citizen. One case which sparked the interest of the researchers was that of one of the research participants, Hoa, a graduate of Australia Studies who is currently furthering her post-graduate diploma in Canada. Upon detailed discussion of her decision to move to Canada instead of Australia, it was revealed that it was made based on the preferable immigration policy of Canada, and she stated: “In Canada, the immigration scheme is more suitable to my academic level, financial background and I can find a good job suitable to my major easier than in Australia.” This factor was not in the researcher’s initial expectations, as Canada is a variable that guided this particular interviewee in a different direction, and could potentially impact her actual contribution to either Vietnam or Australia. This leaves room for further research on the impact of other opportunities in a third (or more) country on the matter of brain drain as seen from the Countries Studies perspective. Although the pattern is unclear as it was only the answer from one participant, it remains a point of consideration in this research.

**Conclusion**

Studying the influence of Countries Studies as an academic field with relation to brain drain is a significant contribution to future research in both brain drain and Countries Studies. This research topic is a pioneering one, therefore, certain limitations such as time constraints and sampling of participants could mean there are factors whose dimensions have yet to be reached. The researchers are hopeful that further studies into the matter could provide greater insight into the dynamics between Countries Studies as an academic field, and the broader picture of brain drain, perhaps now should be referred to as “brain circulation” after the findings have been concluded. The impact of higher education in the field of Countries Studies has influenced its students in their mindset, besides age and experience, going beyond their expectations upon choosing to follow this academic pathway. It can be said that Countries Studies broadened the students’ horizon, and can lead them onto becoming not only a “bridge” between their country of study and Vietnam but also open them to more chances of experiencing the global education and labor market. A trend that can be seen in the foreseeable future is that there will be more Vietnamese students motivated by Countries Studies to promote brain circulation in regional countries like Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and Australia. Not only will they enjoy a diverse educational experience but also will be open to more job opportunities that would benefit both countries should these students become such global citizens.
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Climate Change and Security in Southeast Asia
Decolonizing Sociocultural Norms Invoked Against Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH) in the Philippines: Opportunities for Reflective Cooperation and Collaboration

Felyjane Leray | Philippines

Abstract

With the significant prevalence of adolescent fertility (ages 10-19) among ASEAN countries, comprehensive and even reiterative recommendations to address this phenomenon are extensive. However, despite numerous calls and attempts to address this, reports have shown that sociocultural norms remain a major limiting factor in shaping a state's legal and developmental-based interventions. In this light, this paper dissects three prevailing norms — sex as taboo, instigation of shame and guilt, and stigma around abortion — commonly invoked with Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH), as contextualized in the Philippines. Through archival research, the article reflects on the cultural underpinnings that shape societal guidelines as avenues for reflective cooperation and collaboration. The need for reshaping narratives is called upon and recommendations are then discussed.

Key words: adolescent fertility, Philippines, sexual and reproductive health, sociocultural norms

Introduction

According to the United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA's) latest gender, rights, and human capital data, seven out of the ten ASEAN member countries have at least 28 adolescent births per 1000 girls aged 15-19 (UNFPA, 2021). This data correlates with each country’s prevalence of child marriage. Yet, although the overall trend of adolescent births across the world and across ASEAN are decreasing (Rosling et al., 2018; UNFPA, 2021), adolescent fertility remains to be one of the pressing priorities for the ASEAN member states, as reflected in ASEAN's first Youth Development Index (2017). Specifically, the Philippines remains to have one of the highest average adolescent fertility rates, two percentage points higher than the ASEAN average of 37 births per 1,000 (ASEAN, 2020).

Apart from the physical and psychological complications of bearing children at an early age, state concerns over adolescent pregnancy usually involve the socioeconomic implications on the overall development of the country, especially on reaping the benefits of demographic dividend. Hence, if increasing adolescent fertility negatively affects the progress of a country's national development, it is only proper to address the factors facilitating its prevalence. Focusing on three commonly observed norms in the Philippine context, this paper will problematize and decolonize the conditions it necessitates. The paper will show that the root causes of adolescent fertility are intrinsically embedded and rooted in a country's cultural fabric of traditional moralistic norms and beliefs, making interventions selective and restrictive. Addressing this requires a reflective criticism of a nation’s history and extractive modification of discriminatory norms. The paper will draw upon published reports, narratives, and studies, with a limited and particular focus on the norms of present-day Roman Catholic Filipinos, who comprise 79.5% (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017) of the Philippine population.

Literature Review

Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH) Rights in the Philippines

The Philippines has laws and regulations in place that guarantee access to adolescent sexual and reproductive health care. The enactment of Republic Act No. 10354 in 2012 - commonly known as Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health (RPRH) - intends to ensure this. Yet, its implementation did not come without challenges and it remains one of the most controversial topics that divide public sentiment. At the time of writing, provisions involving minors' access to family planning and reproductive health services such as contraception (Section 7.b) and the provision of legal and medically safe reproductive health procedures (Section 23-A.2-i), without parental consent, are still nullified by the Philippine Supreme Court (Bernal, 2014).

1 Cambodia (57), Indonesia (36), Lao PDR (83), Myanmar (28), Philippines (39), Thailand (38), and Vietnam (30).
2 Adolescent fertility rate is one of the indicators under Domain 3: Employment and Opportunity.
3 Given that adolescent pregnancies are mostly unplanned, teenage mothers’ quality of children are expected to be at risk.
4 The demographic dividend is the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population’s age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population (15 to 64) is larger than the non-working-age share of the population (14 and younger, and 65 and older) (UNFPA, 2016). Other ASEAN countries have already benefited or are currently benefiting from it (e.g., Singapore, Indonesia).
5 The paper does not intend to treat Roman Catholic Filipinos as a homogenous entity since variations among the community exist. The common beliefs and norms observed by most of the Christian Filipinos vis-à-vis sexual and reproductive health is the primary reason for the focus.
The state acknowledges that at the root of the rising number of adolescent pregnancies are engendered patterns of discrimination, deep-seated norms and attitudes that normalize and justify violence against women and children, lack of information and education, vulnerability and exclusion of women and children living in remote and rural areas (pg. 2).

The Cultural Standard

To understand adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights restrictions in the Philippines, it is important to understand the dynamics of a typical Roman Christian Filipino family and the role an adolescent member plays.

Filipinos have been normally described as family centered and close-knit (Tarroja, 2010). The Filipino family's structure is traditionally extended but has been found to be shifting more to a nuclear family system. Both male and female members hold important roles but due to the predominant patriarchal system in the country, the family ascribes more decision-making power and responsibility to men. Authority goes vertically downwards mainly based on age, while the division of labor is based on age and gender (Medina 1991/2009). The family is also expected to conform with the shared beliefs and norms in exchange for community approval and inclusion.

The family is considered to be a vital component of Philippine society, which is dynamic and actively changing. Particularly, family values have been found to be evolving as family and societal structures are also changing (Morillo et al, 2013). As discussed by Medina (1991/2009), the Christian Filipino family is in transition from the traditional-oriented kinship-dominated type to modern-industrial families oriented towards rational norms and values (pg. 276). Yet, the co-existence of the traditional-conservative (predominant in rural areas) and modern-liberal (predominant in urban areas) views and values have formed a ‘duality’ of norms between the older and younger members of the family, consequently creating a ‘generation gap’. Nonetheless, since the majority of the family households in the Philippines are still in rural communities, most of the traditional moralistic Filipino beliefs and norms have endured and continue to play an important role in influencing young Filipinos today.

Adolescence among Filipinos is perceived as a natural and inevitable process of human development. It passes unnoticed except for the circumcision of the boy and the first menstruation of the girl (Medina, 1991/2009 pg. 228). However, growing up in Filipino society means more than the expected physiological and biological changes as it comes with cultural standards and expectations which vary according to age and gender. For instance, basic household tasks such as sweeping the floor are taught when a child is old enough to understand how things work. As the child grows older, depending on a family’s socioeconomic privilege, they are expected to focus on their education while also providing a helping hand around the household and even economic needs when necessary. Moreover, as young members of the family, they are expected to not directly participate in the decision-making process. Since Filipino children are generally raised to honor and respect their elders, any form of unsolicited comments are usually seen as a transgression and disrespectful.

Social expectations for adolescents are gendered, especially in rural areas where permissive and liberal views are not prevalent. For instance, it is crucial that (adolescent) women learn how to manage household responsibilities—from cooking to cleaning—as she is expected to assume such responsibility when she becomes a mother. (Adolescent) men, on the other hand, are conditioned to be the providers for the family. Although gender stereotypes are slowly fading due to rapid urbanization and as more people receive higher education, especially in urban areas, gender-based expectations are still pervasive in most Filipino communities. Overall, given the expected ‘compliant’, age- and gender-based role of adolescents within Filipino families, it is sensible that the same framework is applied to their reproductive and sexual lives.

The Norms inhibiting Legal and Developmental Interventions

Sex as taboo

Culture always plays a role in molding individual sexual urges towards a collective norm, and such sexual norms vary from culture to culture (Kottak C., 2017). Norms are cultural standards or guidelines that enable individuals to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behavior in a given society (Kottak N., 2002 as cited from Kottak C., 2017). These ‘standards or guidelines’ are usually unwritten but are learned, shared, and integrated into society's way of life, especially expectations. One vital element of a norm is its ability to become embedded and form part of the ‘status quo’, normalizing what is perceived as the ideal and ‘standard’. This makes new opposing beliefs difficult to accept and integrate into the general model of peoples’ worldview.

In the Philippines, one prominent cultural norm relating to adolescent sexual and reproductive health is the non-discussion of sexual and reproductive health itself. Like most ASEAN member countries, narratives surrounding sex, sexuality, and reproduction remain a sensitive and uncomfortable topic, despite being a normal and natural experience for humans. The rationale behind this can be mainly...
attributed to the teachings of the most dominant religion in the country, which can be traced back to Spanish colonialism (1521-1898). For Roman Catholicism, sex is considered to be a private matter, and an open discussion is considered inappropriate since it should only be discussed within the purview of marriage and procreation, thereby discouraging open communication among community members, which subsequently perpetuates negative perceptions towards premarital sex, especially for women. Nevertheless, studies have shown that openness to experience in sexual and reproductive communication can inhibit adolescent fertility. For example, Carba (2004) found that the quality of communication between Filipino mothers and daughters about sex determines the latter’s tendency to delay early sexual intercourse.

**Instigation of Shame and Guilt**

For norms to perpetuate and endure, sanctions play a vital role in discouraging opposing and ‘undesirable’ behavior. In the context of Filipino adolescent sexuality and reproductive rights, “norms dictate that a woman should be chaste, pure, and ‘untouched’ at the time of marriage” (Medina, 1991/2009 pg. 121). In contrast, the sexual escapades and exploration of men are tolerated and even celebrated. Men are permitted to have more sexual freedom, yet women are chastised for it. Women who were known to have done so are usually met with antagonistic perceptions related to the concepts of ‘(im)purity’ vis-à-vis ‘virginity’, ‘value’, and ‘honor’. The narratives surrounding such images revolve around the Filipino’s double standard of sexual morality where it ends up shaming the individual and generating guilt (most times, at the women’s expense). This general notion has shaped peoples’ consciousness and perception of what is ‘appropriate’, ultimately influencing (adolescent) women’s behavior in accessing safe contraception, sexual and reproductive education, and abortion services.

It is common to hear moralistic suppression messaging and censorship in attempts to ‘prevent’ adolescents from exploring their sexual and reproductive lives. Yet, studies have shown that attempts in doing so have proved ineffective (e.g., Dillon & Cherry, 2014). Although strict societal norms may regulate behaviors of adolescents to some extent, the latest Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Annual Report (POPCOM and DOH 2021, pg. 68) shows that although live births are decreasing for 15 to 19 year olds, it is increasing for 10 to 14-year olds. The prevalence can be attributed to various reasons. For example, Habito et al. (2021) identified three major pathways of why adolescent pregnancy occurs: deliberate early unions; disgrasa (accident) in romantic relationships; and experienced adversities and disadvantages (e.g., poverty). Nonetheless, regardless of the reason, the prevalence of fertility and live births itself shows how adolescents’ participation in the sexual and reproductive arena is inevitable.

**Stigma Against Abortion**

The Philippines’ norms towards abortion can also be traced back to its Spanish colonial roots. Abortion was [first] criminalized through the Penal Code of 1870 under Spanish colonial rule, and the criminal provisions were incorporated into the Revised Penal Code passed in 1930 under the U.S. Occupation of the Philippines (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018). Discussion towards abortion is usually accompanied by persecution as most believe it is wrong to ‘kill a life’ since a baby is considered a ‘blessing’. Killing an unborn child also invokes the discussion of ‘dis’honor’ not only of the individual but to the whole family itself, making the concern a family affair. As noted by Gipson (2011), stigma in the Philippines is intricately linked to notions of sin and gaba, serving as moral and religious parameters of acceptable versus deviant behavior.

These negative perceptions force women with medical complications and in an unwanted or unplanned pregnancy to commit risky and life-threatening methods of abortion when desperate. Women and children who have experienced abuse and rape also find themselves forced to take their pregnancy to full-term despite the disadvantage and vulnerable situation they are already in. For pregnant adolescents, especially those who are still living under their parents’ roof, more often than not, the lack of safe and legal abortion options forces them to enter into early unions or marriages, halting any educational pursuits. According to Padilla (2016), there are an estimated 610,000 induced abortions in the Philippines and 1000 deaths of women are associated to abortion-related complications each year.

**Discussion**

Sexual norms and practices vary widely from culture to culture (Kottak C., 2017). Thus, this article has taken the Philippine context as a case study to show how social norms shape societal guidelines in encouraging and discouraging adolescent fertility rates. By briefly discussing the most prevalent social norms concerning adolescent sexual and reproductive rights, the research has specifically highlighted the way that these norms restrict legal reformation and developmental intervention in this space. Despite today's technological and medical advances, it has been shown how the Roman Christian Filipinos' norms remain to be one of the conservative sectors in the context of ASRH.

Firstly, the link between present Christian Filipinos' cultural standard and its corresponding norms on sexual and reproductive rights is discussed in parallel with the acquired beliefs during Spanish colonization. Given its enduring influence, it is crucial to recognize the way these norms perpetuate in Filipino society today, limiting the options available for people, especially women and girls, to control and make decisions about their bodies. It is essential to recognize that cultural norms have historical underpinnings, and understanding how they became...
So is crucial in challenging its roots and in crafting new narratives. Unfortunately, the institutionalized educational system in the Philippines only incorporates the historical lens to a limited extent. It also came to the point where the Philippine history subject was fully removed from the high school curriculum in 2014. An alternative would be to integrate a historical lens into the Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE) curriculum. However, the CSE is yet to be fully integrated into the Philippine educational system.

Secondly, given the adolescents’ general low social status on the basis of age in the private household space, it makes sense how this approach extends to their personal individual lives, as manifested through their sexual and reproductive rights. Parental consent is required for the adolescent to access family planning services, such as contraceptives and post-abortion care (miscarriage). Although the Department of Health (POPCOM and DOH, 2021 pg. 52) had expressed to support “all women 15-49 years old rather than just focusing on married women”, this leaves out those younger adolescents that also need reproductive health care access since the average menarche of the Philippines is 13 years old (DRDF & UPPI, 2014 pg. 15). It is also important to note that most adolescent pregnancies according to the latest data are not sired by adolescent fathers (PSA, 2021 pg. 6) and it is assumed that abuse and gender-based violence are factors in facilitating its prevalence. In this sense, many adolescents navigate their sexual development without proper legal state protection and support, making the state’s alarm at increasing prevalence of adolescent fertility ironic.

Open discussion of sexuality and reproductive rights is now one of the advocacy focuses of the leading agencies overseeing ASRH. An example is encouraging open conversations between parents and children through the Konektado Tayo (We are Connected) campaign on Facebook, as one of the most popular virtual platforms in the country. This is a good starting intervention, yet other platforms (e.g., Youtube) and other members of reference networks must also be engaged to combat social norms towards shame and guilt in the long term. Apart from the family and kin, Medina (1991/2009) notes that peers or ‘barkada’ and religious actors (UNFPA- UNICEF, 2020 pg. 12) also serve as influential figures that developmental interventions can tap into. Confronting social stigma, shame, or guilt in accessing reproductive services requires changing stories and narratives of body autonomy and honor, which the family and religious sector can contribute to. This also entails changing narratives surrounding purity, virginity, and value.

Thirdly, it is expected that Filipino society will continue to change and adapt new norms as the world becomes more connected and integrated. In fact, a report shows that the new generation of adolescents today are more susceptible to adopting new beliefs and practices towards sexuality and reproductive rights (Pew Research Center, 2019). This should be taken advantage of in attempts to increase normalization of discussions around sexual and reproductive health. Since people in urban areas tend to be more receptive to new ideas and practices, major campaigns can start within these areas and allow the process of diffusion to take its course to the rural areas, particularly in confronting discriminatory narratives of old models. Their also brings in the importance of properly educating adolescents and ensuring that they stay in school, since education is shown to be the most significant variable of delaying first births (e.g., Rosling et al., 2018; Juan et al., 2019 pg. 22). Yet, campaigns can only do so much without the necessary structural systemic changes. The document also underscores the importance of responsive evidence-based sexual and reproductive health services regardless of age, gender, and marital status. The state itself has to reflect and confront its biases that influence its legal framework and developmental programs, given that it is primarily governed by politicians with conservative perspectives.

**Conclusion**

Restrictive and conservative cultural norms have not been effective in preventing adolescents from engaging and exploring their sexual lives and preventing others from taking advantage of their vulnerable situation. Instead, it only limits adolescents’ knowledge of and access to safe avenues, due to justified fears of being criticized and judged. This realization, as manifested in national and international data, should have already prompted the state to shift gears. Adolescent members of society are becoming active sexual agents and it is the state’s responsibility to ensure proper guidance on how to navigate it safely, without shame and guilt.

Breaking traditional models of harmful sociocultural norms requires active and collective reflection, confrontation, and revision of old narratives. This will not come easily since breaking old models will be long, challenging, and at times, outright painful. In this respect, the youth, along with familial and other societal sectors’ engagement are vital in the reframing of the discourse surrounding adolescent fertility.

Lastly, the article recommends the following as points for reflective cooperation and collaboration:

- Adolescents’ agency within the household must be recognized and must be extended in the public space. Adolescents’ engagement in familial discussions must be promoted to nurture a safe space for them. This includes hearing their opinions on private and public topics.
- ASRH requires the decolonization of harmful norms. It is crucial to nurture the importance of a historical lens in understanding the present state of adolescent sexual and reproductive rights, thus the recommendation for the incorporation of history as a subject either in the Philippine educational curriculum or CSE. Understanding why certain changes must be adopted can only be accepted when people genuinely understand how
the present came to be. Knowing the need for sexual and reproductive rights must sit upon the historical narratives of struggle and discrimination, which have had negative implications on vulnerable and marginalized groups affected by the absence of the needed services and interventions.

- Consider lowering the minimum age to access sexual and reproductive health services given the average menarche of adolescent Filipino women. Also, it is integral to promote adolescent men’s participation in ASRH and increase educational and contraceptive services for men, since fertility responsibility must not be heavily ascribed to only women.

- Lastly, although awareness is critical in changing norms, confronting harmful beliefs passed down from generation to generation is vital. Doing so must be reflected in the policies and developmental interventions of the state. This requires that the people leading the state itself must confront their embedded norms and expectations of today’s adolescents, whether in the Philippines or across ASEAN more broadly.
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Transnational Youth Networks Across Asia-Pacific:
Addressing the Role, Challenges and Opportunities on Youth Participation in Sustainable Development Goals, Youth Diplomacy and Decision-Making in the Midst of Post-Pandemic

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Abstract

According to the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), 750 million young people aged 15 to 24 years live in the Asia-Pacific region, which accounts for 60% of the world’s youth population. Post-pandemic multifaceted crises, racial discrimination, gender inequality and unemployment crisis are overwhelmingly affecting young people across Asia-Pacific. Furthermore, Asia-Pacific youth still remain on the margins despite being a considerably large population with regard to participation in the sustainable development goals, youth diplomacy and decision-making. This article discusses and addresses the role, challenges and opportunities of transnational youth networks (TYNs) in empowering youth participation from diverse backgrounds in the midst of post-pandemic. Such youth networks generate immersive educational aspects that are distinctive in youth diplomacy and build positive youth development that assists in achieving the Youth2030 strategy, a United Nations system-wide youth strategy in encouraging its involvement of youth through peace, security, and sustainable development. This article further explores how these transnational youth networks can advance and empower youth participation in creating a stronger ecosystem for youth development towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda across Asia-Pacific.

Lockdowns were imposed after several weeks of uncontrollable outbreak worldwide created an unparalleled disruption in how everything is delivered. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a possibility that the TYNs would become much more divided, eristic, and belligerent. However, throughout the pandemic, cooperative virtual engagement within youth nationally and internationally became TYN’s foundation for an even expedient and equitable settlement of the dispute.

Youth diplomacy is a variety of measures in which young people are engaged in national interests and collaborate with other young people all over the world to accomplish a long-term international strategy. Youth diplomacy aims to advance national interest through the masses of the world’s young people, recognition, informing, influencing international audiences, sending messages to other audiences, the spread of dialogue among youth, carrying out international models and exercising global management, the world's elites' friendship with each other, and believing in national humanitarian strategies through the use of innovative and fervent young people.

The United Nations launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda in 2015 as a blueprint for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all Youth Networks During the Pandemic by 2030. Even though most member states are enthused about the COVID-19 epidemic, it has the potential to prolong and even jeopardise the implementation of several of those goals. Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the establishment of TYNs was advocated as a means to advance public diplomacy, particularly in relation to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda. UNICEF has been in the forefront of establishing widespread networks of youth volunteers empowered to rise to hardships distinctive to their communities to meet their needs. The establishment of this network, which had been led exclusively by young volunteers, proved capable of moving efficiently through the stages of volunteer recruitment, identification of

Post-pandemic Pedagogy: Bridging the Divide Digitally

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a seismic transformation throughout every aspect of the society including the transnational youth network (TYNs). TYNs is broadly defined as a cross-disciplinary professional organisation with members under the age of 40 that hallmark in maintaining a versatile range of descriptions, and selected based on a competitive process that analyses accomplishments. These include member selection based on professional achievements, decision-making capability enablement toward a strategic measure, and the use of each member's unique experiential expertise.
A nuclear family is mainly composed of the parents and children.

A holistic approach to accomplishing common goals, dialogue and proactive networking that leverages a pandemic era becoming a strong medium of platform has been digitally revolutionised in the post-community needs both locally and globally. TYNs’ makers, they also inspire them to become problem developers, dynamic young leaders and change makers, they also inspire them to become problem developers. Young people’s voices are largely neglected by society, therefore making it extremely difficult for them to participate in decision-making processes. TYNs’ role in Asia-Pacific do so much more beyond developing dynamic young leaders and change makers, they also inspire them to become problem solvers who can directly influence and address community needs both locally and globally. TYNs’ platform has been digitally revolutionised in the post-pandemic era becoming a strong medium of dialogue and proactive networking that leverages a holistic approach to accomplishing common goals, also including advancing the sustainable development goals in the respective local community. The age of TYN members is also a significant characteristic that does more justice to their roles, since it demonstrates a diverse range of influence based on their professional and personal achievements. Thus, it interconnects with how TYNs have such a dynamic and ever-changing effect on youth diplomacy activity. This is because these people’s interactions and interchange of ideas can shape their personalities, making them more open to accepting others from a diverse range of backgrounds, having a favourable effect on public diplomacy activities.

This has been seen as proposed by Payne, the youth diplomacy. It’s rare to find a true public diplomacy for youth focusing in depth on youth decision-making, where they raise issues, advocate for them, and lead the implementation of the solution. TYNs bring upon youth diplomacy in finding ways to bring about change, creating and building a rise in the number of youth diplomats in this era who believe in the construction of a better tomorrow. TYNs also promotes long-term interpersonal relations, which have been believed to impact diplomatic relations.

Figure 1

Schematic Representation of a SLOC Network

Note: This shows a schematic representation of a SLOC network composed of individuals interconnected among themselves in a local network.

The SLOC structure of TYNs shown on figure 1 necessitated the development of online social media platforms in the 2000s. Figure 1 also shows how connections between members of different local networks convey important educational and diplomatic aspects. Likewise, as these networks enhance educational skills throughout the world, they may have an indirect influence on SDGs. Furthermore, considering they encourage projects that are aligned with the UN SDGs, they have the capability to have a significant influence on the agenda.

Such a network structure does, in fact, resemble SLOC systems. For social innovation systems, Manzini suggested the concept of small, local, open, and connected networks (SLOC) where he explained that

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6 A nuclear family is mainly composed of the parents and children.
it might become a tremendous social attractor, capable of igniting, catalysing, and steering a broad variety of social participants, innovative processes, and design initiatives. From the 2000s forward, networks have had increasingly decentralised structures, resulting in local networks with global interconnectivity.

Figure 2
'SLOC' scenario

The 'SLOC' model based on Figure 5 developed by Manzini articulates the concept of a small, local, open, and connected scenario. Social innovation examples in this case are small, place-based initiatives, dispersed networks, and local solutions to satisfy the needs of the community and integrate socio-technical solutions together through the digital revolution. Thus, by establishing a culture outside of the industrial paradigm, this scenario re-engages action in everyday life.

Figure 3
'SLOC' scenario adapted to 'SLOW' model by Emily Ballantyne-Brodie

While 'connected' implies digital interconnectivity, Figure 6 by Manzini presents an updated paradigm inside which 'woven' refers towards a more human relational manner. Citizens, designers, and local governments collaborate to establish a new culture that seems to be slow, local, open, and woven into the specificities of each location. Connecting like-minded people by having collective actions and aspirations specifications are crucial parts of a SLOC network (Small, Local, Open and Connected: Resilient Systems and Sustainable Qualities).

Besides, TYNs are formed up of prominent individuals from a diverse range of fields indicating that myriad challenges were faced amid post-pandemic due to the digitalisation revolution and transition. One of the challenges faced by youth networks includes being left out of policy and decision-making processes due to their status as non-state actors. Government-sponsored grants for young, independent entrepreneurs and volunteer organizations are in limited supply. Addressing government regulations is currently a key impediment to the use of non-governmental suppliers, and these restrictions, in turn, prevent governments from sponsoring youth-led initiatives. Aside from the dominance of a culture that places a great value on social and tribal status, one of the most commonly discussed challenges to meaningful and productive youth participation in decision-making was youth acknowledging they lacked capacity and expertise. Geographical barriers are additionally a dimension that needs to be taken into consideration that could be an impediment for youth across Asia-Pacific. Last but not least, a lack of financial resources is a big restricting barrier for youth in Asia-Pacific to participate in TYNs, as 'internet' or 'technological devices' may be a luxury for them, considering that youth in many parts of Asia-Pacific are also facing poverty and struggling to ensure livelihoods.

Transnational Youth Networks to Advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were introduced by the United Nations in 2015 as a blueprint for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all. According to dynamic mathematical models, efforts to address goals 4–16 have a significant influence on goal 1, poverty eradication. As a result, extending healthcare technology access has an influence on the economic projections. Indeed, numerous studies have found that the pandemic has exacerbated global inequalities, and that governments ought implement the necessary action to address these challenges. UNICEF has been in the forefront of establishing remote networks of youth volunteers empowered to respond to difficulties distinctive to their communities to meet these needs.
# Table 1

## Non-Exhaustive List of TYNs across Asia-Pacific

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYN</th>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Year Launched</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Governance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Asia-Pacific Indigenous Youth Network (APIYN)                       | [https://asiayoungi

[178x35]net/](https://asiayoungi.net/)                              | 2002          | SDC 4 | By providing platforms, venues, and spaces for indigenous youth in the region to participate in local, national, regional, and international processes while empowering youth, especially from the Pacific as a distinct region as most of its active members are in Asia. |
| Asia-Pacific Youth with Disabilities Solidarity - APYDS            | [https://web.fac

[178x35]ebook.com/APYDSto

[178x35]wardsinclusion/tr

[178x35]efpage-internal](https://web.facebook.com/APYDSto wardsinclusion/tr efnage-internal) | 2018          | SDC 4, 8, 10, 17 | In Asia-Pacific countries, it is a solidarity organisation of disabled youth is leading the charge for inclusion. For persons with disabilities, we work on policies, projects, and programmes. We will not leave anyone behind. |
| World Youth Alliance - Asia Pacific (WYA-AP)                       | [https://www.wya

[178x35]net/press-release/me

[178x35]et-out-wya-asia-

[178x35]pacific-clubs-and-chapters/](https://www.wyane t/press-release/met-out-wya-asia-pacific-clubs-and-chapters/) | Established 1999 | SDC 4, 16 | WYA-AP is powered by young people who use their passion for human dignity to make a significant difference. A Chapter is a formally recognized local branch of WYA members who volunteer to handle a wide range of activities in support of the organization's goals. Here are a few of WYA Asia Pacific's active clubs and chapters in Asia-Pacific that are working to promote human dignity in their various educational institutions. |
| Youth LEAD                                                          | [https://www.youth

[178x35]leadasp.org/](https://www.youthleadasp.org/)                     | In the Asia Pacific region, Youth LEAD works with young people who are at higher risk of HIV exposure, with the goal of creating an inclusive region where the human rights of young key affected people are respected and the impact of HIV and AIDS is mitigated through meaningful participation of young key affected populations in HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support. | SDC 3, 4 | SDCs 3, 4 |
| Asia-Pacific Interagency Network on Youth (APINY)                  | [https://asiapacifo

[178x35]outh.net/](https://asiapacificOUTH.net/)                        | All SDGs      | The United Nations Interagency Network on Youth (hereinafter the Asia-Pacific Interagency Network on Youth, or “APINY”) aims to improve the effectiveness of UN work in youth development by strengthening collaboration and peer-exchange among relevant UN entities, civic society organisations, and youth, while respecting and harnessing the benefits of their individual strengths and unique approaches and mandates. In the spirit of UN coherence and cooperation. |
| Asia Pacific Youth Service (APYouths)                              | [https://apyouths.or

[178x35]g/](https://apyouths.org/)                                         | 2015          | SDC 4, 8 | Asia Pacific Youth Service is the biggest social media youth community engagement. The idea is to share an opportunity of any youth program and career as well to provide a place where young people with their community and organization can easily and freely promote their project or program. |
| The Asia-Pacific Youth Employment Network (APIYouthNet)            | [https://medium.co

[178x35]/asia-pacific-you

| ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership (AASYP)                | [https://aasyp.or

[178x35]g](https://aasyp.org)                                            | 2019          | SDC 4, 8, 13 and more | Scholars and alumni of the New Colombo Plan established the ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership (AASYP), recognizing there is an imperative need of understanding and knowledge between Southeast Asians and Australians. AASYP's programmes include AASYP RESUP 2021, which aims to uplift and support youth across Southeast Asia and Australia to develop ideas that significantly create long-term impact in their respective communities (SDG4 and SDG7), and AAVLP 2022, which brings together 50 influential young leaders to discuss and exchange ideas in addressing the critical issues affecting the region for sustainable impact across the region (SDC13). |
Following these introductory remarks, Table 1 is set to provide a non-exhaustive list of some of the most relevant TYNs across Asia-Pacific, together with their main features. The selection of these TYN was made based on using different search engines and keywords such as “transnational”, “youth”, “young”, “network”, “leadership”, and “Asia-Pacific”. Table 1 illustrates that the underlying purpose of the TYNs addressed here would be to educate and inspire youth across Asia-Pacific achieving common goals. The most recent TYNs, in particular, are particularly committed to supporting the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals agenda.

Although the SDGs appeared to be intrinsically connected in conception, a structured system linkage analysis revealed a significant asymmetry between SDGs 1-3 and the remaining goals26. Transnational activities focused on SDGs 4-16 have such a significant influence on SDGs 1-3, with minimal association in the opposite direction. This means that focusing educational efforts through TYNs, for example, will reduce poverty and hunger27. Thus, understanding that SDGs goals are interrelated, governments and local non-profit organisations that advocate for SDGs goals agenda to support, influence and increase sponsored grants that are in limited supply that indirectly uplift communities, progresses the indicators of many SDGs goals to reach Youth2030.

SLOC systems as discussed earlier also have been identified that it also advances the UN SDGs agenda. According to UNESCO, for goal 16 specifically 16.7, to encourage youth participation, organisations and strategies such as youth advisory groups or youth networks for proactive civic engagement may well be formed. Similarly, youth who protest peacefully for social change and inspire those who use social networking sites must also be recognized and supported in their civic engagement activities28. An example to be taken into consideration for many TYNs, Undi 18, a Malaysian National Organisation focuses on youth-centric agenda and democratic reforms in bridging the gap between politicians, policymakers, and youth. In 2021, youth from diverse races and backgrounds came together and held many peaceful protests, programs, and activities especially through using social networking sites had proven to be highly proactive as voices of youth in Malaysia have been recognised to be a part of policy and decision-making processes as well as successfully advocated in lowering the voting age in Malaysia. Thus, it also creates opportunities for future government-sponsored grants to advance the initiatives made by the youth network as well.

Transnational youth networks’ educational and public diplomacy components transition to digitalisation amid post-pandemic are essential. However, various stakeholders especially the government should give more attention to internet coverage, connectivity and technology in local communities especially youth as it helps to enhance and ultimately gives accessibility for education, employment and more youth participation through TYNs. Even though spreading awareness and advocating for sustainable development goals sometimes appeared to be challenging tasks, they may be accomplished without much difficulty through expertise, mentoring programs, resources, and connections that these transnational youth network provides especially to youth across Asia-Pacific.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is vital that young people as well as immediate stakeholders, educate themselves and increase awareness through a transnational youth network. The development of youth networks capable of recognising and addressing issues distinctive to their communities will not only develop solutions particularly applicable to their goals, but will also advance a common global agenda, all without the need for direct government support29. As discussed and stressed on the examples listed here, it should serve as models and inspiration where the formation of such networks as well as continued development of youth networks encourage engagement from youth across Asia-Pacific speaks, develops and solves solve global issues and advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.


Bibliography
