

# **Understanding ASEAN Air Transport Policy in the New Era: A New Interpretation of Regional Integration and Globalization**

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## **Abstract**

Integration of the skies has been attempted in regions beside the European Union, particularly in ASEAN and the African Union. Open skies policy is not a new idea and has been attempted and achieved on various scale. The ASEAN single aviation market is ASEAN's attempt at integrating its sky, based on the freedoms of single market in an economic community. Scholars have for decades seek to fully understand the effects and implications of such multilateral air transport agreements. However, the existing theories of regional integration that are largely based on the study of Europe's integration are inefficient and insufficient in providing clearer insights to the study of regional air integration. This study argues that the approach used by many studies of regional air integration, which uses the European Union as a benchmark for comparison does not realistically describe the rationale and effect of the various open skies policies of different regions. Therefore, this study seeks to reinterpret the existing theories of regional integration in order for a realistic understand of ASEAN's integration of the skies.

This study hope to achieve this by attempting to merge regional integration considerations across the ASEAN Single Aviation Market, reviewing aspects such as cultural, historical, political and societal factors. Cross-comparison with data from past pandemics and epidemics will also be conducted to gain insights about the relation between the changes in development of the air integration and the changes in effect from the current Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, this study seeks to also reinterpret the narrative of globalization by looking at the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic with respect to the insights gained from the understanding of ASEAN's integration of the air.

## **1. Introduction**

International air transport has only been around for a century, and yet within the period of man's ability to fly around the globe, air transportation has changed, evolved and been revolutionized countless times. The evolution of air transportation was largely affected by the advancement of technology, as well as the structure of the modern world, where hyperconnectivity pushed mankind to seek improvements in how we move people and goods. Revolution in air transportation also took place when we looked at how these changes to support the increasingly globalized and intertwined world would be regulated.

From the birth of flight until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the airline industry was under tight regulations with a strong sense of protectionism. In recent decades, globalization has taken place and the world became

evermore interconnected. This has influenced international air transport, which moved away from its traditional stance. Nations were steadily moving towards liberalization of their air transport industry, paving way for a new era of regulation. Airlines were able to cooperate on a large scale, partnerships and joint ventures were formed between airlines and industries of different nations.

Amongst the traditional bilateral air service agreements that formed the basis of liberalized skies between nations, the increasing integration of transnational regions has given rise to multilateral agreements in the aviation domain. Regional cooperation under the influence of globalization has resulted in the integration of several blocs besides the European Union (EU). Such political entities are attempted in regions such as Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia.

As most of the regional bloc's main aim is economic cooperation, the importance of transportation as a logistical backbone meant that integration and cooperation of air transport could not be overlooked. Starting with the EU's single aviation market, many regions have taken a look at open skies agreements that seek to liberalize the region's skies. While most attempts at regional open skies agreement are an aspiration of the success of the EU and roughly use the European Common Aviation Area (ECAA) as a basis. However, while the various other attempts at regional open skies agreement share their similarities with the ECAA, they differ greatly in several ways that are unique to each region.

Scholars have for many years, seek to fully understand the effects and implications of these multilateral air transport agreements. However, most theories are based on the study of the EU, which vastly differs from the other regions in ways such as history, culture, political stance, and state of development (Kousandi, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative to first understand the difference between the various regions before the existing theories can be reinterpreted to help us understand these multilateral air transport agreements. Furthermore, factors such as the increasingly shorten reoccurrences of the financial crisis, global events such as the covid-19 pandemic, as well as advancement in technology have all directly and indirectly affected how regional integration further develop. Our interpretation of regional integration must consider such factors if we are to fully understand the effects and implications of these multilateral air transport agreements.

## 2. Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to acknowledge that the various school of regional integration theory, which are mostly developed in order to understand the complex integration of the European region, is unable to efficiently provide the same insight for other regions, especially the complex region of Southeast Asia, which is the main focus of this study. This study is part of an ongoing doctoral research that seeks to understand the effect of changes in globalization caused by global event such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic on the airline industry, and in turn, seeks to determine if the development of the ASEAN Aviation Single Market is affected by the changes in the airline industry. Furthermore, this study seeks to develop a specific subset of theory that can be used to deepen our understanding of regional integration of the skies, utilizing the reinterpretation of existing regional integration theories. Existing theories were largely developed to understand the integration of the European countries after the world wars, where the fundamental development of the states was dominated by the rapidly rising secondary industries such as coal and steel, which were viewed as critical resources by the European nations for recovering after the world wars (Laursen, 2008). While the theories have been further developed by scholars to understand and predict deeper integration of advanced and modern economical models, they were still fundamentally based on the European style of regional integration (Rüland, 2006).

### **Current theory of regional integration**

The theories of regional integration stem from several classical schools of thought from international relations theory such as realism and liberalism. Amongst these are the two most prominent theories developed as a result of the study of Europe's integration and often used to study and predict regional integrations, Neofunctionalism and Liberal Intergovernmentalism. Naturally, they are also often used as a basis to understand the integration of regions outside of Europe.

Neofunctionalism is often regarded as the most distinguished theory of European integration. It is also the oldest theory that seeks to explain the process of European integration and has been pursued and updated by many scholars since. It argues that the integration between states will result in integration of more than one sector, as the integration of one sector will incentivise the integration of another, in order for the benefits of the integration to be fully captured. The central argument is that as integration progresses, non-state actors such as corporations, associations, and interest groups will likely aim to maximize their material pursuits, and will begin to realize that their goal will be better achieved by consolidating decisive power at a higher, supranational level. In turn, these supranational institutions with increasing decision-making power and influence will further accelerate the integration process, which will maximize the material objective of the actors in the domain.

Liberal Intergovernmentalism on the other hand differs from Neofunctionalism. Developed by blending intergovernmental institutionalism with liberalism under a rationalist approach, which considers the significance of institutions but at the same time does not disregard the importance of the influence of plural actors within domestic politics. While the ultimate goal is the same, which is maximizing the material objective of the actors in the domain, the Liberal Intergovernmentalism theory considers a variety of vastly complex elements in regional integration. In contrast to these material factors-based theories, there is also constructivism, which is based upon the idea that regional integration is being shaped by historically and socially constructed ideational factors rather than simply by material factors.

## **3. ASEAN Single Aviation Market**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, commonly known as ASEAN, is a political and economic union of 10 member states in the Southeast Asia region. The union aims to foster deeper intergovernmental cooperation and to promote and accelerate sociocultural, economic, and security integration between its members, and also with foreign countries in the Asia-Pacific by the means of forums such as the ASEAN Plus Three and ASEAN Plus Six (Kawai & Wignaraja, 2007). There is also a deep collaboration between ASEAN and China, due to the latter being a powerful country with significant influential power over the region (Wei, 2018).

In terms of economic integration, ASEAN seeks to establish a single market within the region, based on the four freedoms of the EU single market (Murray & Orcalli, 2012). Amongst the effort of economic integration is to establish a unified single aviation market, with the aim to liberalize and unify the inter-region air transportation network, which will better facilitate the movement of goods and people, and be beneficial in accelerating trade growth within ASEAN.

### **3.1. Background**

The move towards a single aviation market was not a newly established goal but rather embodied in many past declarations. In 2004, a landmark resolution at the 10<sup>th</sup> meeting of the ASEAN transport ministers (ATM) resulted in the adoption of the Action Plan for ASEAN Air Transportation Integration and Liberalization 2005-2015 and the

Roadmap for Integration of the Air Travel Sector (RIATS) incorporated into three agreements, the 2009 Multilateral Agreement on Air Services (MAAS), the 2009 Multilateral Agreement for the Full Liberalization of Air Freight Services (MAFLAFS), and the 2010 Multilateral Agreement for the Full Liberalization of Passenger Air Services (MAFLPAS) outlined several protocols which require the ratification of a certain number of members states in order to be enforced (Lee, 2019).

### 3.2. Rationale

Air liberalization is mainly achieved via two segments. Firstly, the relaxation of market access and ownership/control restrictions for international air transport. Historically, international air transport has mainly been governed by protectively written bilateral air services agreements (ASAs) with states stipulating mutual restrictions on market access and ownership and control. These include the designation of airlines by other states (which airlines and how many airlines may operate the agreed services), nationality requirements of designated airlines (ownership and control requirements), the routes which designated airlines are entitled to fly, frequency (caps on the number of flights flown over a given time period), and capacity (predetermined limits on the number of passengers and/or cargo carried) (Lee, 2016).

In an open skies agreement, the air services agreement liberalizes the rules governing international aviation markets and minimizes government intervention. However, most bilateral or multilateral open skies agreement does not necessarily mean that the regulations and government interventions are ideally minimized. Various degree of liberalization exists as different regions or nations seek their own iteration of multilateral liberalization. The main rationale for ASEAN to unite the aviation market stems from the gains from the increase in trade, while the aviation industry in the region will benefit from a more competitive market (Oum, T.H., 1996). In theory, a more competitive market will force the incumbent and new entrants to improve service quality, while at the same time, striving to lower costs on most fronts (Lee, 2015).

## 4. Post-Covid-19, a New Era

This study would also like to incorporate the recent development of global events, with a particular focus on the aviation industry and its related domain. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has sent ripples across a multitude of domains and affected global development in ways we are still trying to comprehend. This is especially critical in the aviation domain, as the industry is agile and ever-changing, and the development of air liberalization and international cooperation is still ongoing in many parts of the world (Suzumura et al., 2020). Furthermore, the convergence of the global economy and the intertwining of different sectors meant that the aviation sector is affected in ways other than the direct effect of border closures and travel restrictions (Law & Katekaew, 2022). The consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic will most likely be felt even in post-covid-19, where the change in policy direction results in a new paradigm on regional integration of the sky. Also, there is a need to understand the effect of the advancement in technology, coupled with the changes from the covid-19 pandemic aforementioned will have on both society and the economy, in order for us to understand and reinterpret the integration of regions or the globe.

## 5. Aeropolitics

The term Aeropolitics was defined as “the governance processes of air transport to be viewed from a global perspective, including consideration of the increasing impact of transnational interests and stakeholders on policy

formulation and execution” (Abeyratne, 2009) by Dr. Ruwantissa Abeyratne, a renowned aviation law and policy scholar, in his book with the same title. The term comprises of *aero*, which means air, and *politics*, suggesting that policy formulation and execution in the governance process are influenced by stakeholders and their interests when viewed from a global or transnational perspective. A similar term, *Aeroeconomics*, seeks to apply the principle of economics to the air transport industry. However, the study of air transport economics is largely geared towards the theoretical study of economics itself rather than the influence of external economic factors on air transport.

In this study, the term ‘Aeropolitics’ is kept broad in order to accommodate the largely intertwined elements of political and economic within the governance of international air transport. In terms of aeropolitics, this study seeks to build on the theory of intergovernmentalism and institutionalism, and argues that while it is agreed that global institutions were the result of globalism and are largely formed to foster multilateral cooperation, the same theory can be applied when scaled down to a regional scale. Furthermore, in the domain of aviation, regional integration of the sky will likely be explainable using intergovernmentalism where the integration process is primarily discussed by the individual states. However, the influential power of global institutions as a higher authority not within the integration process but within the domain itself, cannot be downplayed.

#### **Global Institution and Instrument in Aeropolitics**

The global institution in international air transport namely the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), which is a UN agency, and the International Air Transport Association (IATA), largely provides global oversight of the technicalities and legalities of air transport, as well as industry standards and operational practices in general. A key point that is also mentioned is that the theory of realism states that states tend to act in their self-interest within the international system (Jack, 2000), which is illustrated by the members of the ICAO being criticized for influencing decision-making. Similarly, the same is expectable when scaled down to a regional scale and such occurrence will likely be more prominent as regional cooperation increases, as pointed out in many scholarly works, which further complicates the situation as the same theory fails to explain other contradicting development in ASEAN.

## **6. Difference in Priority Amongst Member States**

Dy (2014) pointed out that before the conclusion of the ASEAN Single Aviation Market (ASAM), member states with the more developed aviation industry and stronger airlines such as Singapore and Malaysia have already started to negotiate bilateral ASAs with nations outside of ASEAN. On the other hand, member states such as Indonesia and the Philippines which have a large developing aviation domestic market and slightly less competitive airlines are actively focusing on strengthening their domestic market rather than putting much priority on the overall integration of the ASEAN sky. This is an example of the presence of elements of rationalism concept within the Liberal Intergovernmentalism theory in ASEAN and the ASAM.

Many scholars such as Lee (2015), Tan (2015), Dy (2014) and Lee (2019) also pointed out that ASEAN lacks a supranational institute to oversee the integration process. Unlike the EU, the lack of a supranational institute meant that the ASAM was implemented via a way of an incrementalistic approach (Tan, 2015). What is described here is a unique characteristic of ASEAN, also known as ‘the ASEAN way’ methodology. The ASEAN way approach is a non-interference and consensus-based decision-making process which is applied not only in ASAM’s case but in most decision-making processes of ASEAN. This is often criticized by scholars as it results in a slow decision-making process and being consensus-based means that goals, objectives, and implementation plans are usually agreed at the lowest common denominator amongst all the needs and agendas of member states.

Furthermore, The scope of ASAM differs from the ECAA in the sense the ECAA essentially redefines the boundary between the nature of flight networks within the EU. Flights within the EU have a unique status in which they are treated as domestic flights, but yet retain certain aspects of international rights. While ASAM on the other hand is modelled as a consensus of the member states towards integration of the skies. The protocols of the ASAM agreements do not change the status of the member states, nor does it truly alter the boundary and definition of networks within ASEAN.

## 7. Division within ASEAN

The ASAM also lack unity, which weakened its appeal for member states to view it as an instrument or bridge towards fostering positive competition, rather it could be seen as a threat to the strategic national interest, which most ASEAN view their national carrier and their domestic market as (Nugraha, 2020). In the first place, the division between the member states has resulted in members who seek to use ASAM for deeper liberalization and members who feel that the current implementation of ASAM is enough and would want to wait for their domestic industry to be ready before moving forward. Such protectionism sentiment is relatively strong in ASEAN and scholars such as Tan (2006) have pointed this out way before the ASAM was conceived, citing that the protectionism stance will cause a division of ASEAN and weak the region's aviation industry vis-à-vis foreign carriers. The weaken appeal for deeper participation in the integration of skies becomes a negative feedback loop that is difficult to break without a supranational authority.

On the other hand, scholars have predicted that such sentiments will gradually shift as member states develop and become more competitive, as viewed by the theory of globalization. However, with the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a narrative that a shift towards the reversal of globalization is occurring with nations as they move towards protectionism in order to shun the negative impact of disruption in the global logistics chain.

## 8. Limitation of Current Theory

The study argues that the concept of the work by Wang & Heinonen (2014) that builds on the institutionalist theory of Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), which is based on the assumption that the difference in economic, political, and social organizations in the world are caused by political and economic institutions rather than due to geographic or cultural factors does not apply to ASEAN. Instead, it is illustrated throughout the paper that the integration process of ASEAN involves various actors with different levels of autonomy operating at different levels of the process, which existing theories fail to explain efficiently. Furthermore, contradictions between the existing theories to explain the ASEAN regional integration, particularly the integration of the sky via the ASEAN Single Aviation Market. In simple terms, it is simply too difficult to comprehensively understand the complex nature of ASEAN regional integration by applying existing theories. Therefore, it is imperative to reinterpret the theories, which is a key objective of this study.

Many scholars often bring out the point that ASEAN does not have a supranational institution that oversees the integration of the sky, and criticize the lack of such an institution as a way why ASEAN does not integrate smoothly or integrate slowly. However, it is critical to understand that first and foremost, ASEAN is not the EU. Furthermore, the basis of the formation of ASEAN is not regional integration but a way of resolving security and fostering peace between the member states.

## 9. Reinterpretation of Globalization

This study seeks to explore a secondary objective, which is the possibility of a new form of globalization being present. The idea of a new form of globalization is relatively new but has been pursued and explored by many other scholarly works such as Schilirò (2020) and Rossi (2022). As most of these studies are exploratory in nature, many theories have been drawn in an attempt to support their claims on a new form of globalization. Some theories are the advancement of technology driving a new form of globalization as suggested by Schilirò (2020), while others many other such as Z.D. (2020) and Abdal & Ferreira (2021) see along the line of deglobalization but argues that deglobalization is merely another form of globalization.

This study seeks to reinterpret the narrative of globalization and agrees that there is a fundamental change in globalization and its effect, especially due to factors such as technology and the Covid-19 pandemic. As aforementioned, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about many changes. This study hopes to reinterpret the narrative of globalization by understanding if the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic are merely a transitional period or a fundamental change.

## 10. Methodology

The design of this study comprises a mixed-method in-depth case study approach where a qualitative analysis of relevant areas of both ASEAN and the ASEAN Single Aviation Market will be performed. The addition of descriptive statistics will be used to further elaborate the relevancy of any material such as thematic data to the study. One of the main objectives of this study is to merge regional integration considerations across ASAM, achieving the purpose of reinterpreting, or even redefining the theories. Causal factors and empirical data will be tested as the theories to illustrate the theoretical applicability of the theories. Additional background information outside of the aviation domain will also likely be used in order to for the study to have a better understanding of their respective mechanics and relation to the aviation domain.

However, the study differs from existing literature as the discussion about the differences or similarities between the theories will not be conducted in the analysis as the main purpose of the study is to understand the contradictions between theories and reality and the relevance of the theories to ASEAN.

Cross-comparison with data from past pandemics and epidemics will also be conducted such that any factors that lead to a difference in the effects between past and present pandemics can be captured, which may provide insights about the relation between the changes in development and the changes in effect from the pandemic.

Furthermore, it is imperative for this study to analyze and fully understand the domestic politics of each member state, other than just looking at the political arena both within and outside of the aviation domain. The relationship between the market domain and political domain must also be understood in order for the interpretation of theories to consider all aspects of regional integration, eliminating potential contradictions.

While there is a wide range of easily accessible ASEAN-related documents, many empirical data will likely be obtained from governmental sources. This can potentially add inaccuracies to this study in terms of biasness as governments often spin the situation into a more positive case than in reality (Krol, 2014). Also, ASEAN is known to emphasize informality and flexibility, a key feature of the ASEAN way (Kosandi, 2012). This means that there will be significant difficulty in obtaining key in-depth knowledge about the integration process which the study will require.

## 11. Conclusion

The sentiment for the formation of the regional bloc in the case of the EU and ASEAN is different. The EU was formed after the world war as a way to recover from the war and not only pool critical resources such as steel but also to come together and scrutinize the use of such war-critical materials in order to stabilize the peace recovery process. While, ASEAN was formed with the primary objective of security cooperation and stability of peace, the various nations which were once colonies of European empires were experiencing nationalist sentiment (Fox and Ismail, 2017), wanting to strengthen their nation first, before further participating in what they believe are radical developments for the region.

Furthermore, ASEAN subgroups like the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), and the Cambodia-Laos-Myanmar-Vietnam bunch (CLMV) have provided evidence that the regions remain divided for a variety of reasons. Such as Brunei hoping to become an aviation hub for connecting Europe and Australia, while Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia want to become the biggest regional hub for ASEAN.

Another key idea that will be utilized in this study to analyze the relevance between the rationale of member states and the integration process is that the characteristic of a slow process will likely lead to slow progress as the individual government might change within the timeframe and the political stance, priority, and idea might change along with it, resulting in another negative feedback loop.

Reinterpreting the current theories of regional integration in accordance with the integration process of ASEAN will allow further understanding of the underlying mechanism of ASAM, providing insights to not only strengthen the integration of ASEAN's sky but to eventually cement ASEAN's position as a strong region in the global aviation network. The paradigm of globalization as a framework points to the fact that it is not a worked-out framework but rather a potential developing narrative and this study hopes to provide a reinterpretation of it according to recent development.

The final aim of the doctoral study which this study is part of, will seek to use the reinterpreted theories of regional integration to rationalize and explain the development of ASAM. The study hopes that the reinterpreted theory will be able to explain the changes that is caused by the change in globalization.



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