

Diffusing the EU Model of Regional Integration in Asia: Integration 'à la carte'?

Written by Anja Jetschke

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ANJA JETSCHKE, JUL 23 2013

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has emerged as one of the most successful regional integration efforts outside of Europe. In 2007, right in time for its fortieth anniversary, the organization adopted a Charter – a document outlining the central principles of cooperation between the member states. Since then ASEAN has lived up to its promise of overhauling its institutional structure by centralizing it and making it more efficient. In November last year, the ten member states, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, adopted an ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, which will be the first regional human rights instrument in the history of the region.

The sheer range of reforms undertaken by the organization is impressive. Member states have transformed ASEAN and especially its Secretariat into a thriving institution. The number of publications and reports produced by the organization has multiplied. Although internal and external challenges to the relevance of the organization, such as still lingering conflicts among members or the organization's sidelining in the South China Sea Dispute by China and the US, cannot be denied, ASEAN is on the way of becoming a Community.

Interestingly, some of the reforms adopted by ASEAN resemble European institutions and policies. This fact has sparked considerable debates among scholars and policy-makers (Jetschke 2009; Jetschke/Murray 2012; Wong 2012). Is ASEAN, whose 'ASEAN Way' had emerged as a model of regional integration of its own in the 1990s, following the EU as an example of deep regional integration? During the 1990s, ASEAN and Asian policy-makers regularly rejected this idea and pointed out their radically different principles of cooperation, such as their emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference, non-intervention and non-hierarchical forms of cooperation. Could it be that the EU is subtly influencing ASEAN's decisions on regional integration?

These questions are not only of academic relevance. Surely academics want to know where institutional design decisions come from. Do governments make decisions only in view of the specific cooperation problems that need to be resolved? Or do they also look at other regional organizations for solutions and models? And under what conditions do external models become influential? Policy-makers, on the other hand, want to know whether integration experiences in one region can be transplanted to other regions. A number of donor agencies already advise the secretariats of regional organizations on institutional reforms. Is it reasonable to recommend institutional reforms along the lines of the EU?

The claims that ASEAN is emulating or 'taking cues' from the EU originate from the institutional reforms as outlined in the ASEAN Charter and the subsequent 'Blueprints' for each ASEAN Community. ASEAN quite obviously has emulated the EU, yet, it has done so very selectively or 'à la carte'. Since the Vientiane Action Programme of 2004 ASEAN organizes its cooperation along three pillars, the Economic Community, the Political and Security Community and the Socio-Cultural Community, a parallel to the EU's three pillars, which were, however, dissolved with the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. ASEAN has also adopted the language of economic integration, in the sense that it seeks to achieve regional integration by promoting four freedoms, which only differ in nuances from the European four freedoms: freedom of trade, freedom of services, freedom of (skilled) labour and freedom of capital

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(ASEAN 2007). In terms of political integration and the setup of institutions, the Secretary-General's role is now informally described as the "Guardian of the Treaties" or representative of ASEAN's collective interests. Finally, the Committee of Permanent Representatives, a subsidiary ASEAN body responsible for coordinating the national ASEAN secretariats, supporting the ASEAN Community Councils, and for liaising with the Secretary-General has been deliberately modelled after the EU's Council of Permanent Representatives.

Most interestingly, ASEAN has adopted an integration method that is very similar to the EU's Open Method of Coordination (OMC). The OMC is an experimental approach formally adopted by the EU at its Lisbon Summit in 2000, which is "based on benchmarking of national progress towards common European objectives and organized mutual learning" obliging member states to "pool information, compare themselves to one another and reassess current policies and programmes in light of their relative performance" (Zielonka 2005: 194). The method lacks all the characteristics that typify the EU in the economic realm, most importantly its competence to sanction a member state's non-compliance. It was introduced, partly in reaction to criticism that the EU was too hierarchical and centralized and partly to improve coordination among member states in those areas in which the Commission has only an advisory role and cannot initiate legislation, such as in the area of Common and Foreign Security Policy or education. In these areas, the role of the Commission resembles the competences of ASEAN's Secretary-General. In the implementation of ASEAN's ambitious plans, the Secretariat will collect information on member states' policies, set benchmarks based on best practices and enable learning among members.

What explains ASEAN member states' decisions to choose from the EU's menu card of integration methods? Quite practically, there is an agreement in the ASEAN Secretariat, but also among member states, that EU practices can be used to resolve almost any integration problem that a regional organization faces. The OMC is a good example of this: even for regional organizations that defy the EU's centralized character and deep political integration, the EU has something to offer. Nevertheless, having an intuitive understanding of what is happening is different from scientifically explaining the decisions made by regional organizations.

The Drivers of Diffusion

In theoretical terms, the aforementioned phenomenon can best be explained by diffusion. Diffusion theories fully express the idea that the decisions made by members of a social system are not independent from one another. The decision of one member to adopt specific institutions and policies increases the likelihood that another member of the system makes a similar decision (Simmons/Elkins 2004). What causes such interdependent decision-making?

Five causal mechanisms are usually identified as the drivers of diffusion: learning, social learning, mimicking, competition and coercion. The interesting point about these mechanisms is that they involve very different factors resulting, however, in the adoption of similar institutions. In the case of rational learning it is information about the effectiveness of specific institutions that drives ASEAN members' decisions. The reasoning is as follows: ASEAN looked at other regional or international organizations because the member states faced specific cooperation problems that they needed to solve, especially after the financial crisis of 1997-98. The message coming from policy-makers in and outside Asia was that ASEAN needed to become more efficient (Tay et al. 2001). The EU, according to this theory, had a record of effective cooperation, especially in the economic realm, which offered ASEAN a laboratory of study. As a result, ASEAN has deepened its regional integration, but it has not copied all the EU institutions. Selectivity is quite typical of rational learning.

Very different factors drive the mechanism of social learning. Here, the reasoning is that actors learn more easily from close peers – the flow of ideas is mediated through existing communication channels or 'direct ties' in general. These ties can be any type of interaction that indexes the degree to which two regional organizations are likely to be aware of each other's policies and to serve as prominent referents for each other. They can result from geographical proximity, similar language, culture and colonial history or high levels of interaction. The very fact that the EU is one of ASEAN's largest trading partners makes ASEAN policy makers more aware of the developments in Europe than in Latin America, for example.

While information and direct ties drive the first two mechanisms, it is the search for social recognition and legitimacy

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that drives mimicry. Sociological institutionalists have shown that many organizations take up innovations because of the prestige and legitimacy these innovations are associated with, not because of their functionality. An indication of this mechanism is that organizations promise much in terms of programme activities but deliver little. ASEAN's gap between rhetoric and practice, which has been critically discussed by several scholars (Martin Jones/Smith 2002; Jetschke 2009), seems to provide support for this model.

Competitive pressures also drive the adoption of similar institutions. This mechanism is defined as "the imitation of the behaviour of others who are in a similar position in the social space, but not necessarily others with whom the potential adopter communicates" (Valente 1999: 14). Many regional organizations compete for foreign direct investment and other financial resources. Competition forces them to develop similar institutions signalling efficiency, rule-adherence and security for investors. Many ASEAN officials and scholars argue that the economic pressure from China and India compels structural reforms by ASEAN, interestingly not in the direction of becoming similar to these two economic giants but in terms of becoming similar to the EU, precisely because the EU is one of the few functioning examples of regional economic integration among sovereign states.

Soft coercion is an equally important driver of diffusion. The EU has implemented programme activities for many regions outside of Europe and has distributed a considerable amount of financial support to regional integration organizations around the globe (Farrell 2005; Farrell 2009; Lombaerde/Schulz 2009). An example is the regional integration support that the EU has given to ASEAN since 2003. The EU Commission, as part of a larger effort to support regional and global integration, has provided intensive training on the nuts and bolts of regional economic integration to ASEAN officials. One might reason that the millions of Euro the Commission has invested will influence the institutional structure of ASEAN, especially because the EU is an important trade partner, which has greater leverage over the states which trade with it.

None of the causal mechanisms exclusively explains ASEAN's adoption of some of the EU's features. Especially the close analysis of decisions, such as the European influence on the parts of the ASEAN Charter, reveals that various mechanisms are at play. A case has been made that ASEAN member states partially learned in light of the financial and political crisis at the end of 1999, and partially mimicked European norms (Jetschke/Murray 2012). We only begin to understand, however, how diffusion affects regional organizations worldwide therefore more research is necessary on the topic.

Will ASEAN Become a Southeast Asian EU?

Where do the recent institutional reforms take ASEAN? Will it closer resemble the EU in the future? Are these first signs of a more wholehearted embrace of the European integration experience in Asia? Definitely not. The differences between ASEAN and the EU are still greater than the similarities. Moreover, ASEAN has demonstrated through these very reforms that it remains very much true to itself. Its adoption of the OMC clearly shows that the organization is seeking methods for making its own integration efforts more efficient but that it will not depart from its long established principles of cooperation that have made the organization successful in the past. A transfer of sovereignty is still off limits for ASEAN (Chalermphanupap 2009).

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