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PRESERVING THE PAST, BUILDING THE FUTURE: CULTURAL HERITAGE AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN ASEAN

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional integration regime composed of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, continues to consolidate itself as one of the most dynamic regions globally in economic terms.

«The total nominal GDP of the ten ASEAN nations measured in US dollar terms amounted to USD 3.6 trillion in 2022, more than doubling compared with total GDP of USD 1.6 trillion in 2009. The total size of the ASEAN economy was slightly larger than India in 2022, which had an estimated GDP of USD 3.5 trillion in that year» [1].

This growth has been driven by a range of factors, notably the manufacturing sector, services, and exports. The increasing interconnectedness of ASEAN member states has fostered unprecedented economic cooperation, reflecting an integration that, although not without challenges, has led the region toward a more prosperous future.

Regarding trade, ASEAN has also experienced a notable increase in both extra- and intra-regional trade.

«During the period of 2003–2023, total ASEAN trade in goods with both internal and external partners, experienced significant growth. In 2003, total ASEAN trade was valued at US\$ 871.8 billion. This figure increased to US\$ 2,533.1 billion in 2013, and to US\$ 3,560.1 billion in 2023. Intra-ASEAN trade accounted for approximately 22% of the total ASEAN trade during this period. The average annual growth rate was 8.0% for total ASEAN trade, 8.2% for extra-ASEAN, and 7.4% for intra-ASEAN. Notably, the growth rate of intra-ASEAN trade was lower than that of extra-ASEAN for both exports and imports» [2].

These figures reflect not only the strength of ASEAN's internal economy, but also the ability of member countries to cooperate across various sectors, from manufacturing to technology and services. This

economic integration enables the circulation of goods and services within the region, creating an increasingly relevant common market globally.

In addition to economic integration, ASEAN has expanded its trade relations through key agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which involves major economies like China, Japan, and Australia, among others. These agreements have allowed ASEAN member states to access broader markets and deepen their trade links with global economies.

On the other hand, ASEAN continues to be a preferred destination for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). «Against the decline in global FDI inflows, investment in ASEAN increased in 2023 but by less than 1 per cent, to \$230 billion (figure 1.1). This nevertheless marked another record year and the third consecutive year of increase for the region. Among developing regions, ASEAN remained the largest recipient of FDI. The region attracted 17 per cent of global FDI inflows, up from 16.5 per cent in 2022; its share has been growing each year since 2019» [3].

This foreign investment continues to drive the growth of key sectors such as infrastructure, technology, and trade, highlighting ASEAN's economic appeal on the global stage.

These positive outcomes are also due to interregional relations. Since its early efforts in 1977 to establish a dialogue with the European Community, ASEAN has successfully built relatively strong relations with various regional integration regimes. Undoubtedly, the most important relationship is with the European Union (EU), formalized with various legal instruments that have promoted trade exchanges and economic cooperation.

However, it is also true that because of factors such as political, economic, and security challenges, the EU often prefers to establish more profound relationships on a bilateral basis, meaning with individual ASEAN member states, which complicates the signing of an interregional free trade agreement.

ASEAN is composed of countries with different levels of economic development and varying political stances, which makes the negotiation of broad treaties complex. For this reason, in order to overcome these difficulties, the member states have often opted to set aside political problems and ideological differences in order to focus on their economic integration. It is not coincidental that ASEAN, with approximately 640 million consumers, is «[...] the eighth-largest economy in the world and the third-largest trading partner of the EU [...] outside Europe, after the U.S. and China. For its part, the EU [...] is ASEAN's third-largest trading partner, after China and the U.S.» [4].

At the same time, ASEAN has built a network of trade relations, albeit with varying levels of intensity, with third countries (Japan, Canada, the

United States, China, South Korea, Hong Kong, India, New Zealand, Pakistan) and regional integration regimes (Pacific Alliance, CELAC, Mercosur, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, Gulf Cooperation Council), consolidating itself as the main driver of Asian integration.

In this context, its capacity to forge common positions on regional security issues stands out, while its drive for economic development has been crucial for its centrality in regional and global institutions.

However, ASEAN also faces the challenge of achieving greater internal cohesion, as its members belong to different integration schemes and their political stances do not always align. This sometimes limits the ability of the integration regime to act in a unified manner.

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the efforts made to specifically increase intra-regional cohesion and the idea of a common identity, as a catalyst for integration, through the recognition of a shared cultural heritage. In the document titled «ASEAN Identity: Now and Beyond,» the following is stated:

«The values shared by ASEAN member states have existed in Southeast Asian countries long before the establishment of ASEAN. All characteristics, values and shared values as well as rich traditions in Southeast Asia, are part of our future vision and culture, as we progress in strengthening the ASEAN Community. A continuing process of acculturation will further enrich and strengthen the ASEAN Community. The traditions, customs and beliefs since the prehistoric era laid the foundation of the process of an ethnic community blending in Southeast Asia. Some of the local ethnics stayed in certain areas, and some migrated for survival. Those who migrated created a chain of interaction between ethnic groups. As a result, the process of acculturation of ethnics and cultures has continued throughout history» [5].

For this reason, ASEAN and its member states have adopted different strategies through the Socio-Cultural Pillar to, for example, engage citizens directly and ensure that they benefit from regional integration efforts, to engage younger generations in the ASEAN community, always keeping in mind respect for the individuality of each ASEAN member state and fostering among the people cultural respect, collaboration, and opportunities for mutual understanding.

In this regard, it is worth noting that in 2015, ASEAN leaders adopted the «Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2025: Forging the Future Together», which, among others, underscores the importance of promoting a shared cultural identity that respects diversity and allows ASEAN communities to work together toward common goals. However, the road has not been easy, and the member states themselves acknowledged in 2023 that

there was a need to redouble efforts to overcome the challenges of the complex regional and international situation and build a «[...] people-centered ASEAN Community, putting citizens at the heart of its development process, and capable of promoting balanced and sustainable progress across all regions, among countries, and different segments of society, ensuring that no one is left behind» [6].

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