

# ASEAN-MERCOSUR cooperation: Breaking the barriers?

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## ABSTRACT

ASEAN and Mercosur are two regional organizations that exist in the modern world. Since globalization accelerates, both of these regional groups want deeper collaboration. Nonetheless, this study contends, using a comparative historical qualitative descriptive analysis that collaboration will fail due to the stumbling block character of the regional organization. Furthermore, neither regional groupings are generally not supportive of one another, thus why ASEAN and Mercosur should need more collaboration? The study then claims that ASEAN might learn how to apply the Mercosur model for its AEC, or ASEAN Economic Community, considering Mercosur intra-trade is more advanced than ASEAN intra-trade.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, ASEAN Economic Community, *Mercosur*, *Trade Bloc*, *Regionalization*

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## Cooperation ASEAN-MERCOSUR: ¿Rompiendo barreras?

### RESUMEN

La ASEAN y el Mercosur son dos organizaciones regionales que existen en el mundo moderno. Dado que la globalización se acelera, estos dos grupos regionales quieren una colaboración más profunda. Utilizando un análisis descriptivo, cualitativo, histórico y comparativo, este estudio sostiene que la colaboración fracasará debido al carácter de tropiezo de la organización regional. Además, ninguna de las agrupaciones regionales generalmente se apoya entre sí, por lo tanto, ¿por qué ASEAN y Mercosur deberían necesitar más colaboración? Luego, el estudio afirma que la ASEAN podría aprender a aplicar el modelo MERCOSUR para su AEC, o Comunidad Económica de la ASEAN, considerando que el comercio intra MERCOSUR está más avanzado que el comercio intracomunitario de la ASEAN.

**Palabras clave:** ASEAN, Comunidad Económica de la ASEAN, Mercosur, Bloque Comercial, Regionalización

### Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) are two regional organizations with a combined population of over 1.2 billion people and a GDP of more than \$11 trillion. ASEAN is composed of ten countries in Southeast Asia, while Mercosur comprises four countries in South America. Both organizations have made significant progress in terms of economic growth, trade, and development over the past few decades. ASEAN and Mercosur have been working to deepen their economic ties since the 1990s and their relationship has the potential to become a significant economic partnership.

Brand (1992) explained that a regional bloc is a joining of adjacent countries to create free trade zones or economic and monetary alliances is a worldwide phenomenon that is taking place in all regions of the world. Thus, ASEAN and Mercosur exist. While, Chase (2005) argued trade blocs are a mechanism and arrangements that are produced by the growth of multinational production sharing as multilateral production emerges.

ASEAN was founded in 1967 as a political and economic organization of Southeast Asian countries to promote economic cooperation, political stability, and regional integration. ASEAN's current member states include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. ASEAN countries have a combined GDP of over \$3 trillion, making it the fifth-largest economy in the world. A high economic growth, an expanding middle class, and a large pool of young workers characterize ASEAN's economies (ASEAN, 1967, 2021a).

ASEAN has made significant strides in terms of intra-regional trade and cooperation. In 1992, ASEAN established the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), which aims to eliminate tariffs on goods traded within the region. As a result of AFTA, intra-regional trade among ASEAN member states has increased significantly. In 2019, intra-ASEAN trade accounted for over 24% of ASEAN's total trade. ASEAN has also established several free trade agreements (FTAs) with other countries and regions, including China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union, which has helped to attract foreign investment into the region. Additionally, ASEAN has established the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which aims to create a single market and production base among ASEAN member states, allowing for the free flow of goods, services, investment, and skilled labor within the region (ASEAN, 2021a).

Mercosur was created in 1991 as a customs union between four South American countries to create a common market and promote economic integration. Today, it is made up of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Mercosur has a combined GDP of over \$3.5 trillion, making it the fourth-largest economy in the world. Mercosur's economies are rich in natural resources and have a large consumer market (Mercosur, 2021).

Mercosur has made significant progress in terms of intra-regional trade and cooperation. In 1995, Mercosur established the Mercosur Common Market, which aims to eliminate tariffs on goods traded within the region. As a result of the Common Market, intra-regional trade among Mercosur member states has increased significantly. In recent years, intra-Mercosur trade accounted for a significant mark of Mercosur's total trade (Lo Turco, 2003). Mercosur has also established several bilateral and multilateral trade agreements with other countries and regions, including the European Union and the Southern African Development Community. Additionally, Mercosur has established the Mercosur Structural Convergence Fund, which aims to promote infrastructure development and social cohesion within the region.

ASEAN and Mercosur member states have complementary economies, which make them ideal partners for economic cooperation. The ASEAN countries are major exporters of electronic goods, textiles, and automobiles, while Mercosur is a major exporter of agricultural and food products, minerals, and oil.

ASEAN and Mercosur have been working to deepen their economic ties since the 1990s and their relationship has the potential to become a significant economic partnership. In 1996, ASEAN and Mercosur signed a joint declaration to establish a framework for cooperation in trade and investment. In 2001, the two organizations signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a joint working group on trade and investment. The working group has since held several meetings to discuss ways to deepen economic ties between the two regions.

Despite the progress made in the past two decades, the economic ties between ASEAN and Mercosur remain relatively modest. In 2020, ASEAN's total trade with Mercosur was approximately \$5.5 billion, accounting for only 0.2% of ASEAN's total trade. The majority of the trade between the two regions consists of commodities, such as agricultural products, minerals, and fuel. There is significant potential for ASEAN and Mercosur to expand their economic ties in other areas, such as services, manufacturing, and technology. Therefore, why ASEAN and Mercosur should need more collaboration?

This article will explore the history of ASEAN-Mercosur relations, the current state of their economic ties, and the opportunities and challenges facing their relationship.

## **1. Research method**

A comparative history study is a research approach that studies anything in chronological order to develop an explanation that is valid in the sense of a specific time or location for validation of an argument explaining some concerns. According to Haupt (2001), comparative history as a method is a tool that studies the sequence of events or things to gain a full picture of what happened.

The method then uses the association to observe and produce arguments that lead to the resolution of the addressed difficulties or issues. Furthermore, the problems addressed should comprise two or more things that may be compared chronologically to provide an analysis of the problems discussed. If the things being compared crisscross in one another or form patterns that could be related to one

another, this indicates that they are observable for comparison. As a result, justification for analysis might be derived.

Another technique to compare things historically is to compare them event-by-event or sequences that occurred as the history of the objects/events is being generated rather than in literal chronological order. Despite occurring in a different temporal order, the progress explanation may be retracted as sequence meaning. This signifies that the events or objects being compared are of the same type, but the progression of the events/things may differ over time. For example, two similar companies could be compared even though their birth years are not in the same year. As a result, some events compared may differ from others, even if the two events analyzed are of the same or similar types.

In this work, the objects of comparison are two equivalent groups in nature; however, the advancement and the age of the organizations are different. The essence of comparative in this paper is to compare improvements and program that shows the coherency and cohesion of the two organizations. Thus, the two organizations could learn from one another to attain aims or goals that are shared in their core values.

ASEAN and Mercosur are two distinct but related organizations that will be the focus of this study. In terms of regional groupings or regional organizations, Mercosur and ASEAN are comparable organizations to those previously mentioned. The two organizations were founded in separate years, but because of their comparable organizational natures, it is still conceivable to compare how they might be able to benefit from one another's experiences to advance common values. Because of this, even though the two organizations' chronological chronology may differ, their common values of involvement and motivation among regional groupings are comparable. Additionally, the two organizations have carried out similar activities such as trading agreements, member expansion, economic zone administration, synchronization of customary law, and political arrangement. Therefore, the question is: *why ASEAN and Mercosur should need more collaboration?* Such a comparison must be made for the analysis to be thorough and all encompassing.

## **2. Result & discussion**

The same ideals and objectives of nations in Southeast Asia and South America served as the foundation for the founding of both ASEAN and Mercosur, the two regional organizations. To address economic issues in Southeast Asian and South American nations, Mercosur and

ASEAN members also have a strong economic cooperation corridor. The first ASEAN and Mercosur Ministerial Meeting took place on November 24, 2008, in Brasilia, Brazil, where the Ministers agreed that the two regional organizations' economic cooperation would result in something concrete and have a significant impact on the lives of people in each nation (ASEAN, 2021c). As a result, both ASEAN and Mercosur are aware that tight collaboration will enable them to tackle successfully all economic issues.

ASEAN and Mercosur relations do not always go well. Although they have agreed on several constructivist matters, the two regional organizations have not been able to execute some of the economic development discourses that they agreed on in 2008 in Brazil. This is marked by the stagnation of the relationship between the two regional organizations for 9 years, without any breakthrough in the relationship between the two. Therefore, the second Ministerial-level meeting was held again on September 22, 2017, on the sidelines of the 72<sup>nd</sup> UN high-level meeting in New York, United States of America (ASEAN, 2021c). At the second Ministerial meeting, it focused on strengthening and revitalizing relations between ASEAN and Mercosur member countries by producing several new agreements such as inter-regional cooperation in aspects of investment, trade, and economy (ASEAN, 2017).

Relations between ASEAN and Mercosur are not always successful. The two regional organizations have been unable to put into effect some of the economic development discourses they agreed upon in 2008 in Brazil, despite their shared agreement on several constructivist issues. The relationship between the two regional groups has been stagnant for nine years without any significant progress in that regard. As a result, the second Ministerial-level meeting occurred once more on September 22, 2017, in New York, USA, in conjunction with the 72<sup>nd</sup> UN high-level meeting (ASEAN, 2021c). It concentrated on fostering and reviving connections between ASEAN and Mercosur member countries at the second Ministerial level meeting by resulting in numerous new agreements, like

(i) Setting up a meeting of the committee of permanent representatives (CPR) and the ambassadors of the MERCOSUR member nations to create and enhance plans based on joint action;

(ii) Analyze the prospect of working with the ASEAN and Mercosur secretariats at the secretariat level. The Ministers also decided to expand partnerships in sustainable development in the areas of tourism, member-country connections, innovation, and inter-human relations.

However, such action is still required to support several of the agreements that have been made for them to be completed.

In terms of regional groupings for developing countries, ASEAN or Mercosur, for example, already has a history of blending regulations in the proliferation of their respective free trade area (FTA) cooperation, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which are large-scale or regional FTA arrangements. Further, the ASEAN plus dialogue partners mechanism that already in place should not be neglected in order to make way for ASEAN-Mercosur cooperation. ASEAN+3, +6, and East Asia Forum are some cooperation that ASEAN already possessed and to some extent, ASEAN traditional trading partners (Kawai, 2007).

This situation could establish the so-called Spaghetti or Noodle bowl effect in the future. The effect is the intertwining fragility of some overlapping cooperation (Kawai, 2009). All existing cooperation arrangements between ASEAN and Mercosur should be addressed first when the new cooperation arrangement process appears. As was already observed by the comparative history method, the barriers like the overlapping cooperation are a demonstration of poor management and planning of FTA proliferations and other cooperation between the two.

To advance toward a better well being conditions of regionalization cooperation, significant effort is required to reduce potential overlap and to develop more efficient and effective regulations for a successful economic expansion (OECD, 2005). In conclusion, the Spaghetti or Noodle Bowl effect should be addressed as part of the history from the standpoint of regionalism because, even if cooperation might appear necessary in today's highly connected world, the relationship should be efficient and successful. Since both regional groups already have their cooperation mechanisms, thus, the question *why ASEAN and Mercosur should need more collaboration?* Is valid to be analyzed through a deep comparison history analysis.

In general, ASEAN and Mercosur share similar historical foundations (Venturi, 2020). However, a difference has existed between these two regional organizations from the start. The difference lies in the focus of the establishment of the two regional organizations. Based on an awareness of the nations and countries in Southeast Asia, ASEAN was created to foster economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and connectedness among the region's much larger and interrelated peoples.

Since then, Mercosur has been established to limit the economic impact of strong countries, particularly the US, who are trying to weaken Latin America's economies by increasing their hegemony in global economics (Council of Foreign Relations, 2021). Nevertheless, Mercosur retains an openness and trust in its members that is particularly apparent in the interconnection of networking communities within them. The process of Cultural Exchange, which is carried out by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, has not been highlighted in Mercosur.

Further, each regional organization, like ASEAN or Mercosur, offers similarities and differences in organizational connections that can be learned from one another (Venturi, 2020). Both of them undoubtedly possess excellent principles that later guided their international policies in collaboration and diplomacy. What values, though, enable ASEAN and Mercosur—two regional organizations that happen to be located on separate continents—to relate positively to one another?

To create an organization that will then cooperate to meet issues in the future, something other than just political agreements between nations and countries was required for the creation of ASEAN (Simoes, Amorim, Dias, & Carvalho, 2014). It is vital to create a link that can unite regionalism with nationalism for this reason. As a result, the concepts of self-determination, national consolidation, and non-intervention, or the concept of national stability, are taken into consideration along with the concepts of unity, solidarity, and regional organization. These concepts served as the foundation of the so-called ASEAN-Way (ASEAN, 2021b; Tekunan, 2015).

In this way, regional economic blocs have pushed for liberalization inside their borders, promoting not only intra-regional but also inter-regional trade and factor-free movement (World Bank, 2000). The «new wave of regionalism» contrasted with the «old» one that took over from the 1950s to the early 1980s and consisted of many treaties for cooperation and association pushed in various regions, such as the European Union, Arab League, and NAFTA. Since the bipolar balancing system, which introduced transnational economic multilateralism alongside post-World War II state economic intervention, all of the new kind of functions has taken place (Simoes et al., 2014).

This has made money and trade flow feasible through the Neoliberal Economic Reforms in Latin America since the 1980s under the auspices of the Washington Consensus. When the Montevideo treaty of 1960 established LAFTA, seven countries from Latin America joined: Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Paraguay, and Peru. Each of these countries would like to have a Free Trade Area and a Single Market

throughout Latin America (United States International Trade Commission [USITC], 1962).

According to the historical explanation in the previous sentence, we can assume that ASEAN and Mercosur had the same values when they founded regional organizations, nationalism, and regionalism. This established the foundation of their organizational relationship at that point. ASEAN and Mercosur are both knowledgeable of the importance of mutual respect, nationalism, and public trust in the region are keys to uniting differences, regardless of political leanings, as well as the diversity of nations (Venturi, 2020).

Both ASEAN and Mercosur have a vision that forbids outside meddling in their countries' internal economic and political issues, particularly those of powerful nations. Then, Intal & Chen (2017) argued that mutual trust, shared vision, and respect for national values lead to economic integration that significantly raises the standard of living of ASEAN, and thus, also Mercosur citizens.

ASEAN and Mercosur both feature an enormous economic cooperation corridor that facilitates economic integration between their respective organizations. The two regional organizations' member nations maintain favorable trading relations. According to the ASEAN Secretariat Database, the two nations' relations were worth a total of US\$28.23 billion in 2019. Furthermore, the amount of FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) that Mercosur sent to ASEAN in 2019 was estimated at US\$ 17.46 billion (ASEAN, 2021c).

Moreover, ASEAN and Mercosur member countries have already connected through some cooperation (Kuwayama, 1999). These include the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which simply has formal level relations and takes no further action, then, the TPP, RCEP, and other cooperation. Additionally, as the United States is not present in the bilateral relationship between ASEAN and Mercosur, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has not been expanded and is therefore not coherently aligned. Furthermore, as Yuhas (2016) explained, the TPP is no longer in place. In addition, the East Asia Summit is only a political gathering rather than a trading union; however, it might be expanded in another direction to include other parties and interests, like Mercosur. Although Pearson & Vu (2020) pointed out that the US and China rivalry may push the regions over influences, it is difficult to maintain the conflict between China and the US since it could break the relationship between the members.

A large number of FTAs and cooperation have been set up due to the political economic integration that has developed throughout Asia, in particular within the Asia Pacific region. There is an unbreakable link

between this phenomenon and the extent of trade among Asia Pacific countries. One organization, APEC, connects the Asia-Pacific countries in the trade process, which is part of the political-economic integration process that was developed (Pizarro, 1999).

Then, there is one thing that is definitely when discussing APEC, a platform for Asia-Pacific nations to collaborate to solve economic challenges: there is a shared commitment within APEC to build economic cooperation more extensive. In the interest of effective and comprehensive solutions to economic challenges, are ASEAN and Mercosur both regional organizations with different continents able to collaborate well and replicate APEC? As mentioned by APEC (2021), APEC is a group for regional economic forum across the Asia and Pacific region.

All of us can agree that for all countries, whether they are developing or not, the economy is a major issue of integration, as argued by The International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2022). It is because the economy plays an important role in a large number of people's lives, and that is what most countries around the world prioritize. Most of the world's nations, in particular region with a various level of economic growth, such as ASEAN-Mercosur members, could find a major economic problem for integration.

The two regional organizations shall continue to work together on a comprehensive framework of economic integration, even now. Cooperation between the two Regional Organizations from different continents is expected to give a new solution in cases where APEC has not yet been able to cope with more significant issues of economics. To do this, Pizarro (1999) suggests that ASEAN-Mercosur could take measures such as liberalization of the economy in each member state while preventing economic exploitation within one Member State.

Additionally, ASEAN and Mercosur must prioritize their regionalist values to carry out effective economic integration that is significant for the economies of both organizations, as stated by Dianza (2022), ASEAN need to focus on its economic integration. Making significant changes, such as using local currency instead of foreign ones like the US Dollar, combined with extremely quick technology development throughout the globalization era can increase the value of trade between ASEAN and Mercosur. This is correlated with the recent dynamics of de-Dollarization that develop in BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) (Liu & Papa, 2022). Further, Indonesia as the largest economy in ASEAN would follow the same step like the BRICS nations (Helms, 2023). Moreover, through the statements above, we

could comprehend that Brazil and Indonesia could drive the ASEAN-Mercosur cooperation because these two countries are the largest in term of economy in their respective region. Not only that, Indonesia also the de-facto old brother or leader of ASEAN nations (Julianto, Mulyaman & Damaranti, 2022).

If ASEAN-Mercosur is set to see an expansion of economic and cooperation growth as to breaking the barriers, there has to be a wider and fairer economic integration. This means, the cooperation needs to be integrated in order to avoid the Spaghetti or Noodle Bowl effects. When APEC or similar cooperation is unable to come up with further ways to tackle effectively economic difficulties, these items will then become a new alternative for ASEAN and Mercosur relations.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, there are several opportunities for ASEAN and Mercosur to deepen their economic ties. First, the two regions have complementary economies. ASEAN is a major exporter of electronic goods, textiles, and automobiles, while Mercosur is a major exporter of agricultural and food products, minerals, and oil. This presents an opportunity for the two regions to increase their trade in complementary goods and services.

Second, ASEAN and Mercosur are both members of the World Trade Organization (WTO). This provides a framework for trade liberalization and cooperation between the two regions. ASEAN and Mercosur can work together to promote trade liberalization and address issues related to non-tariff barriers and trade facilitation.

Third, both ASEAN and Mercosur have established free trade agreements (FTAs) with other countries and regions. ASEAN has FTAs with China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union, while Mercosur has FTAs with the European Union and the Southern African Development Community. ASEAN and Mercosur can work to deepen their economic ties by exploring the possibility of establishing an FTA between the two regions.

Despite the opportunities, there are also several challenges facing ASEAN-Mercosur relations. First, the geographical distance between the two regions presents a logistical challenge for trade and investment. Second, there are significant differences in the level of economic development between the ASEAN and Mercosur member states. This can make it difficult to establish mutually beneficial economic cooperation. Third, there are political and cultural differences between the two regions that can make it challenging to establish a common

agenda for economic cooperation.

ASEAN-Mercosur relations have the potential to become a significant economic partnership. Despite the progress made in the past two decades, the economic ties between the two regions remain relatively modest. There are significant opportunities for ASEAN and Mercosur to deepen their economic ties by exploring the possibility of establishing an FTA, promoting trade liberalization, and expanding trade in complementary goods and services.

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