

ASEAN Limited Centrality in Connectivity: Managing the China-Japan Infrastructure Competition

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Abstract : Scholars recommend the establishment of a multilateral coordination mechanism by ASEAN, such as an infrastructure forum, to contain the China-Japan infrastructure financing competition in the region. However, they do not systematically investigate the reasons for its absence. This paper aims to fill the gap by addressing the following question: Why has ASEAN been unable to set up any multilateral coordination mechanism to soften the China-Japan infrastructure financing competition? This paper argues that ASEAN has not been able to set up such a mechanism due to its limited centrality in connectivity. This limited centrality decreases ASEAN's ability to manage the China-Japan competition in a more comprehensive and coordinated way. Rather, ASEAN acts as a scope setter in connectivity, although this is not completely ineffective. This paper is divided into four sections. The first section explores the key tenets of the concept of ASEAN centrality in connectivity, which is under-examined in the current literature. The second section examines the extent to which ASEAN limited centrality in connectivity is being respected by China and Japan. The third section analyses how various stakeholders, such as ASEAN member states, their leaders and bureaucracy, and foreign private companies prevent ASEAN from attaining stronger centrality. The last section concludes and offers recommendations. Data is gathered using primary sources (official ASEAN, Chinese, and Japanese documents, interviews, etc.) and secondary material. By providing a nuanced analysis of ASEAN centrality in connectivity and developing a new operationalization of the concept, this paper aims to contribute to the international relations literature on ASEAN centrality. Initial findings suggest that while ASEAN limited centrality in connectivity has some effectiveness, it is not sufficient for setting up a multilateral coordination mechanism. While it represents a solid departure point, any potential possessed by ASEAN to evolve beyond a scope setter in connectivity is hampered by stakeholders involved in infrastructure development. While these players and their interactions can have both positive and negative effects on the scope set by ASEAN, it is unlikely that they would allow ASEAN to become the real central player. There can be no stronger ASEAN centrality in connectivity without ASEAN unity and neutrality. However, the last two factors are difficult to attain in the context of infrastructure development since ASEAN member states and stakeholders all have their styles and preferences. All other things being equal, these circumstances favor a loose, vague, and quasi-prescriptive arrangement among the relevant stakeholders.

Keywords : ASEAN centrality, China-Japan infrastructure competition, connectivity, scope setter

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