

Regionalism or Ladder-Up: A Theoretical Perspective of Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Reactions to Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract : As a vital region to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have responded to the grand strategy differently. Some expressed fervent support, while others played the 'hedging' card between great powers. This paper explores the underlying rationale behind such complexity by proposing two theoretical explanations: a Regionalism Hypothesis, where countries respond with hedging, balancing, and bandwagoning behaviours in line with national interests and norm-based 'ASEAN-Way'; and a Ladder-up Hypothesis, where countries consider the initiative as an incentive to remove bottlenecks of climbing up the economic ladder in Rostow's stage of the growth model. By analysing reactions from Myanmar, Laos, Indonesia, and Singapore, two patterns are observed. On an empirical note, the more developed economies are more inclined to the Regionalist explanation. On a theoretical note, there has been a gradual convergence between the two explanations, given the impact of economic globalisation on ASEAN. This paper will contribute to the current theoretical vacancy in the study of ASEAN and BRI by capturing the particular norms shared by this regional entity.

Keywords : ASEAN, belt and road initiative, hedging, Rostow's stages of growth, regionalism

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