

TOURISM CRISES AND REGIONALIZATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Globalization and regionalization are dominant trends in the world's economy as they stimulate economic integration and new forms of cooperation which affect the operation of the tourism industry. The emergence of growth triangles and development corridors, within the context of regionalization, is part of the governments' efforts to pursue certain broad economic objectives in one specific sub-region. This concept is also apparent in place marketing as the strategic alliances that are formed promote a set of countries, or parts of them, as single destinations. This paper, based on secondary data, seeks to examine whether tourism crises have had any effect on economic complementarities, comparative advantage and competitiveness of sub-region destinations in Southeast Asia. Although regionalism appears viable for many governments, this paper argues there are various constraints in operation and difficulties to overcome in terms of their contribution to tourism, especially when this region has often been struck by many crises of different types and magnitude in the past two decades. Thus, it seems timely to review existing mechanisms and consider whether they have a continued role in tourism expansion in the region.

Keywords: tourism crises, regionalization, Southeast Asia.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the regional context, regionalism is often used interchangeably with regionalization, and much effort has been devoted to the distinction between them. Chang (1998) defines regionalization as the integration process and regionalism as the outcome, while Hettne (2005) refers regionalism to the tendency and political commitment to organize the world in terms of region; more narrowly, the concept refers to a specific regional project. Payne (1980) recognizes a distinction with regionalization a method of international cooperation which enables the advantages of decision-making at a regional level to be reconciled with the preservation of the institution of the nation-state. This highlights the politics of regional economic cooperation when structures are created with new arenas for decision making, including in the field of tourism (Anderson *et al.*, 1995).

Much of the literature is concerned with international economic relations (Grugel and Hout, 1999; Lloyd, 1999), but regionalism has considerable implications for tourism. Smith (1996) defines a tourism region as a contiguous area that has been explicitly delineated by the researcher, planner or public agency as having some relevance for some aspect of tourism planning, development or analysis; such regions also serve marketing and administrative purposes. The term is frequently applied to sub-national units (Pearce, 1995) and their administrative structures (Pearce, 1992) rather than cross-border linkages, and regional

development is seen as means of ensuring a fairer distribution of the benefits of tourism (Pearce, 1997; Henderson, 2001).

The concept of tourist international region is increasingly apparent in place marketing where strategic alliances are formed to promote a set of countries, or parts of these, as single destinations (Hill and Shaw, 1995; Hollier, 1997; Seeking, 1987; Wing, 1989). Nevertheless, many studies argue that the success of this kind of arrangement depends on the degree of economic complementarity, geographical proximity, a favorable climate for investment, adequate infrastructure and global access. In view of this, the paper, based on secondary data, seeks to examine whether tourism crises have had any effects on economic complementarities, comparative advantage and competitiveness of sub-region destination in Southeast Asia, although regionalism appears viable for many governments.

2.0 REGIONALIZATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The concept of region is used differently in different disciplines. In the field of geography, regions are usually seen as subnational entities, either historical provinces (which could have become nation-states) or more recently created units. In international relations, regions are treated as supranational subsystems of the international system (Hettne, 2005). It is of some importance whether regions are seen as subsystems of the international system or as emerging regional formations with their own dynamics. The minimum definition of a world region is typically a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and a degree of mutual interdependence (Nye, 1971), and it has common ethnic, linguistic, cultural, social and historical bonds (Cantori and Spiegel, 1970). Even more comprehensively, regions can be differentiated in terms of social cohesiveness (ethnicity, race, language, religion, culture, history, consciousness of a common heritage), economic cohesiveness (trade patterns, economic complementarity), political cohesiveness (regime type, ideology), and organizational cohesiveness (existence of formal regional institutions) (Hurrell, 1995).

Many studies acknowledge the fact that there are no 'natural' regions; definitions of a 'region' vary according to the particular problem or question under investigation. It is widely accepted that it is how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and notions of 'regionness' that is critical: all regions are socially constructed and hence politically contested (Hettne, 2005). Thus, regionalization is a complex process of forming regions, whether they are consciously planned or caused by spontaneous processes; they can emerge by either means. More recently, the concept of region building (in analogy with nation building) has been employed to signify the 'ideas, dynamics and means that contribute to changing a geographical area into a politically-constructed community' (Rocher and Fort, 2005).

There are contrasts between Western and Asian experiences which are concealed by the use of the term regionalization to explain both regional blocs in the developed world and forms of cooperation amongst developing nations (Henderson, 2001). Axline (1994) writes the need to distinguish the term as a 'manifestation of neo-mercantalist policies on the part of industrialized countries ... and regional cooperation as a development policy on the part of the non-industrialized countries of the world'. The second approach is evident in Southeast Asia where economic changes, such as the adoption of export-oriented development strategies, have stimulated investment and trade within the region, leading to greater interdependence (Fukasaku, 1995).

Southeast Asia, one of the most diverse regions in the world, has lately been gaining ground among scholars outside the region (Wolters, 1982). More than ever before, the underlying similarities which are to be found throughout the region are stressed by historians, anthropologists, political scientists and linguists (Osborne, 1990:5). Regionalization in this part of the world began in 1960s which led to the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. 'Unity in diversity' is a catch-phrase often heard in discussions among academics and policy makers in this region; 'One Southeast Asia' and 'ASEAN-10' are other popular expressions. While there is no popular Southeast Asian identity, political leaders are generally committed to regional cooperation. It is argued that the future of ASEAN lies in its economic achievements, and this has generated much interest in the formation of 'micro-regionalism' and growth triangles, notably 'IMT Growth Triangle' – involving contiguous areas of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, 'IMS Growth Triangle' – involving Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, and 'East ASEAN Growth Area' – involving neighboring areas of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Brunei. Smith (1997) contested that the emergence of these sub-regions was an important development because it illustrated that small plans were much more likely to succeed than big ones, while it also had the effect of speeding up sub-regional and intra-regional economic cooperation.

The above examples are essentially cases of transboundary economic cooperation being promoted in the region, and these sub-regions project share a common development strategy based on the promotion of complementary specialization in national border territories. Specialization in this way is designed to attract investment by enabling investors to retain activities in close proximity while making use of contrasting environments (Grundy-Warr *et al.*, 1999). They argue that amongst the economic development growth triangles or sub-regions, three main points of contrast may be identified: i) economic differentiation, ii) geographical scope, and iii) implementation. Grundy-Warr and Perry (1998) further debate that the reasons for suggesting sub-regions are moves toward 'interdependent' rather than 'integrated borderlands'. Besides enhancing inflows of investment as mentioned above, these cooperative ventures also aim to align the capital, technology, and human resources of the more industrialized economies with the cheaper land, natural resources and labor of their less developed, neighboring countries (Chia, 1996). The sub-regions correspondingly intend to facilitate sub-regional cooperation in business and tourism, and to mitigate adverse market changes including tourism crises, which will be investigated in this paper.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper seeks to discuss whether tourism crises have had any effects on economic complementarities, comparative advantage and competitiveness of sub-region destinations in Southeast Asia, as mentioned above. Secondary data is used in this paper since analysts of social and economic changes consider secondary data essential, as it is impossible to conduct a new survey that can adequately capture past change and/or developments. Besides, secondary data analysis saves time that would otherwise be spent collecting data and, particularly in the case of quantitative data, provides larger and higher-quality databases derived from literature reviews, case studies, published texts and statistics from official publications. This wealth of background work means that secondary data generally have a pre-established degree of validity and reliability which need not be re-examined by the researchers who are re-using such data. The units of analysis will be the top five countries in 'ASEAN's six majors', which refer to the six largest economies in the area with economies many times larger than the remaining four

ASEAN countries. The top five countries, which are Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines, are also part of the IMT (northern) and IMS (southern) growth triangles and BIMP East ASEAN Growth Area (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Geographical Spread of Sub-Regions in Southeast Asia

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS ON TOURISM CRISES AND REGIONALIZATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asia has experienced various tourism crises and disasters during the past decades. According to a study by Ghaderi *et al.* (2012), the tourism industry in this region had been affected by various regional and global crises which had become crises for the tourism industry. These could be classified in terms of health (SARS, H1N1, Avian influenza), natural disasters (tsunami, Indonesian and Icelandic volcanic eruptions, climate change), terrorism and political instability (Bali bombings, unrest in Thailand, Iraq war, 2001 attacks in the USA) and economics (global downturn, fuel costs). Originating largely outside of one destination country, these crises were a matter of grave concern to the tourism industry and confirm the statement by Laws and Prideaux (2005, p. 3) that 'there is scope for a crisis that has a local or regional origin to have impacts that reach far beyond the geographic boundaries of the local area or the

region.' The spectrum and types of crises confronted indicate that the tourism industry is not immune to exogenous shocks and is highly dependent on existing and perceived levels of international safety and security. Crises in nearby and occasionally distant locations had a ripple effect which permeated the industry in one destination country in a manner previously observed by Lean and Smyth (2009).

The crises variably created repercussions in the regional markets and ceased tourism businesses for a certain period of time. Henderson (2002) discusses on a series of crises which affected Southeast Asia in 1997 and how they continued to reverberate until the end of decade and beyond. She also discusses how the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s led to other social and political crises in some countries in the region such as Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia. A few studies claimed that although regionalization sustained the challenges of the financial crisis of 1997, the aftermath resulted in contradictory consequences and assessments of regionalism in this part of the world. The crisis affected ASEAN in three significant ways: First, it undermined the confidence, born of economic success, which enabled ASEAN's assertiveness on the international stage; Second, ASEAN's inability to respond effectively to the crisis cast doubt on its aspirations to be an economic institution in the post-Cold War era. Thirdly, ASEAN could not address the crisis without violating the ASEAN Way. These latter two reveal limitations in ASEAN's abilities to function as a unified body (Narine, 2002: 184).

Indonesia was the most affected among the ten countries in the region, with its tourism industry suffered from both natural disasters such as tsunami, earthquake, the eruption of Mount Merapi near Yogyakarta, and human-induced crises such as Bali bombing, Jakarta bombing, global economic downturn. According to the statistics, some business stakeholders in destinations like Bali, Yogyakarta and Sumatra, reported a decline in their arrivals due to crisis events. At the same time, length of stay in classified hotels reduced from 8.58 to 7.69 nights and expenditure per person decreased from 137.38 to 129.75 US\$ per day in 2009 (Statistics Indonesia, 2010). The figures also showed a significant decrease in international tourist receipts by 14.3% in 2009 compared to 2008. The terrorist attacks in 2002 and subsequently in 2004 were worst shocks to Indonesia's tourism industry and its repercussions reached other countries in the region. Henderson (2002) discusses that, immediately after the Bali bombing, more travel advisories were published covering much of Southeast Asia's countries, and they were classified as 'high risk' nations. These travel bans created a sense of fear about personal safety and an environment of foreboding, with reluctance amongst tour operators in generating countries to sell Southeast Asian destinations (Henderson, 2002). Similarly, in the case of Philippines, the terrorist attacks related to Abu Sayaff rebel groups and fighters from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) that were originally part of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in southern Philippines, made Sabah in East Malaysia prone to rebellious attacks (Pengiran Bagul and Wan Hassan, 2007). The Abu Sayaff group was responsible for the kidnapping of tourists and locals at Sipadan Island and Pandanan Island in Sabah's East Coast in 2000 and because of this, Western governments issued travel advisory to Malaysia, specifically to Sabah.

Ghaderi *et al.* (2012) further argued that the force of the impacts from crises was partly determined by dependency on certain source markets and reflective of the volatility of tourist demand which fluctuates with changing economic, social, political and environmental circumstances. Susceptibility has a geographic dimension and a tour operator in their study spoke about how 'some tour packages consist of many countries and they have been cancelled

or postponed because of the crises. For example, when there is a package that involves Singapore–Malaysia–Thailand, if there is a crisis in one of these countries, the whole package may be cancelled.’ The consequences of the crises for business operations included cancellation and postponement of travel, declining tourist volumes, erosion of customer confidence and reduced incomes and profits. Hotel occupancies and airline load factors fell, corresponding to a general pattern whereby tourists alter their plans because of budgetary constraints and risks to personal safety and security at destinations (Mansfeld, 2006; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009). This was also true in the case of Philippines that the tourism industry lost an estimated US\$12 million in revenue after Hong Kong issued a travel advisory to the country, right after a bungled hostage rescue in 2010 that led to the deaths of eight of its nationals (Ong, 2011). The industry felt a reduction in international arrivals from Hong Kong and mainland China, and stakeholders in the Boracay resorts reported 800 rooms had been cancelled. In a related development, troubled economic times favored budget carriers because of their more affordable prices, compared to scheduled airlines which lost a considerable amount of revenue as travel patterns changed. A few national carriers in the region, such as Malaysia Airlines, was forced to revise its schedules and close loss making routes because of some slow down or decrease in demand at least for a short time.

It is clear from the above that many studies have found that tourism crises of various types are significantly affecting international tourism demand. The theory of tourism economics suggests that income and price-type factors are likely to play a central role in determining the demand for international tourism (Bond and Ladman, 1972). Various studies in tourism economics have identified a number of major determinants of international tourism demand: income level in the tourist’s country of origin, relative price of tourism, the price of tourism in substitute destinations and exchange rate (Kadir *et al.*, 2008). They argue that (i) if an increase in the price in Malaysia, for example, is found to have caused an increase in the demand for tourism in Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, then these countries could be considered to be substitute destinations for Malaysia, and (ii) if on the other hand, an increase in the price of tourism in Malaysia is subsequently followed by a decrease in the demand for tourism in these countries, then these countries could be viewed as complementary destinations for Malaysia. Kadir *et al.* (2008) revealed that the price of tourism is positively significant; the positive signs indicate that Philippines is a substitute destination for Malaysia. An increase in the arrivals of international tourists could be expected when there is an increase in price of tourism in the Philippines. However, for Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia, the estimated price elasticity indicates that these countries are insignificant in explaining tourism demand in Malaysia. Nonetheless, in the case of military coup that ousted then Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand has witnessed political instability, with the latest in a series of anti-government protests ended forcibly by the military in May 2010. Other ASEAN countries witnessed higher tourist arrivals when the political unrest in Thailand continued and drove tourists to neighboring destinations, especially Malaysia. Tour agencies continued to report the cancellation of bookings to Thailand, stimulating booms in nearby countries. The Thai Hotel Association (THA) reported that, in December 2008, which was supposed to be the high season, the average occupancy rate was between 20-30 per cent and in some high-end hotels even below 10 per cent (Cohen and Neal, 2010). Hotel occupancy rates continued to remain depressed throughout 2009, and Bangkok hotel occupancy rates in the first quarter of 2009 dropped by 20-30 per cent compared to the preceding year.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Regionalization in Southeast Asia is not synonymous with ASEAN, although it is by far the most visible expression. Regionalization that is deeper aspect than state-to-state cooperation has not been very successful. The region has been characterized by a form of reactionary regionalism, in which regional initiatives have frequently been a response to external factors and designed to mediate the impacts (Beeson, 2001). Leaving economics aside, sometimes a certain 'Southeast Asianness' is claimed to exist, either from a deep historical and cultural source (Mulder, 1992), and/or from a perceived political unity of a more recent date (Rajaretnam, 1991). One could argue that various regional trading and industrial cooperation schemes have never had any genuine political backing. Tighter interaction has been avoided because of the risk that any such would diminish the sovereignty of the various states. The inherent contradiction in achieving both regionalization and strengthening of the sovereign states is becoming progressively urgent for countries in this region to deal with, especially tourism crises. Interestingly though, 'micro-regionalism' has been more enthusiastically approached; 'growth circles' and 'growth triangles' have been high in fashion. In Southeast Asia, however, it is only the IMS triangle which has really been successful. This 'growth triangle logic' is highly interesting, breaking as it does with the strict Westphalian approach to economic growth.

In this region, as discussed earlier, tourism and travel make such a significant economic contribution that any downturn in the level of tourism demand and related activities due to sudden and unforeseen crises and shocks must be a cause of concern. Variations in the geographic scope of the crises can range from a single destination to national, subregional or even worldwide destinations. Each situation affects planning, response and recovery, and the relative frequency of crises and the perceived possibility of future occurrences make it increasingly important for destinations countries in the affected subregions in Southeast Asia to establish standard practices or re-examine existing practices for risk management and mitigation of the impact on the tourism industry. Crises do not recognize borders, thus, governments in this region are expected to lead the response and implement policies to offset downturns in tourist demand, and policymakers shall address the immediate issues of tourist safety and security, communication strategy, and choices of actions, since many policy measures would be costly to implement and vary in terms of their relative effectiveness. The ability to cooperate at all levels in this region is very critical; the crises have generated some display of regional unity, and destinations and brands that are usually highly competitive have ended up working together for the common good. Linking all direct and indirect stakeholders at the regional, national and local levels could help speed up the reaction time and strengthen effectiveness aimed at reducing or avoiding losses from disasters and crises.

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