

The political economy of Southeast Asian states

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The role of Southeast Asian states in economic development has been at the centre of multiple debates. Relevant literature noted that part of the region was inspired by the East Asian development state model although, with the only exception of Singapore, state interventions generally lacked the level of strategic and effective coordination typical of Northeast Asia. An expansion of the regional multi-layered subcontracting system since the late 1980s progressively integrated all Southeast Asian countries in (largely foreign-led) production networks. The reorganization of the regional production system was accompanied by trade liberalization and policies aimed at attracting Foreign Direct Investment. The vulnerability inherent in export-oriented industrialization was a fundamental cause of the regional economic crisis 1997/98, but the post-crisis recovery was accompanied by a further intensification of the same FDI-led industrialization model, with a more prominent integration of new countries (notably Vietnam, and later on Cambodia in garment).

The economic miracle rhetoric promoted by the World Bank just ahead of the regional crisis was succeeded by a new discourse emphasizing the limits of industrial upgrading and catching up with the West and the first generation of Asian NIEs. The region is now presented by the same World Bank as engulfed in a “middle-income trap”. The “trap” debate does not deny the role of many countries as exporters of manufactured goods, but underlines the fact that GDP per capita growth is too slow to allow a convergence with industrialized countries.

Against this critical background the panel aims at exploring the role of Southeast Asian states in pursuing economic development during the last thirty years. On the one hand, the focus is on the interpretation of the policies that have been implemented to accompany FDI-led industrialization models. On the other hand, the attention is on the debates within the countries and on the alternative visions that have emerged, helping to shed light on national decision-making processes. The dependent position of Southeast Asian countries in foreign-led production networks and the hegemonic role of neoliberal discourses on development have certainly reduced the autonomy of national policies. At the same time, however, the recent global crisis has again emphasized the role of states within a globalized economy. The panel, therefore, is looking at how Southeast Asia states have coped with foreign influences but also at how institutions, competing interests and local power structures have contributed to shaping national policies.

This panel proposal is connected with the ongoing Horizon 2020 CRISEA, but we hope to receive paper proposals also from colleagues not involved in this project.

Single session

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