
AVIATION DIPLOMACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA A SOFT POWER STRATEGY IN THE REGION

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Abstract : Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a wave of economic decline to the aviation industry due to disruptions in the supply and demand chain. With a population of 650 million, ASEAN governments are obliged to support the recovery process following the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the aviation industry is opening up, an approach that is inclusive and appealing to the public to complement safety policy and liquidity support is necessary for the aviation industry. This research attempts to gain a deeper understanding of how aviation diplomacy could play a role in the regional connectivity agenda amid the rising importance of international aviation. This research proposes that aviation subjects as diplomatic actors are engaged in the diplomatic process, whereas in the context of soft power and multistakeholder diplomacy concept, the ASEAN government and airlines are drivers of regional connectivity. By employing qualitative methods with inductive logical thinking as the analysis framework, this research shows that air assets and air infrastructures are meaningful in three different ways; raising national and regional identity awareness, building political ties, and ensuring cross-border mobility. Thus, ASEAN governments shall continue to support the aviation industry and utilize aviation diplomacy as a soft power approach in the region.

KEYWORDS : ASEAN; Aviation Diplomacy; Connectivity; Soft Power; Southeast Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

At the 42nd ASEAN Anniversary celebration, ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan promoted people-to-people mobility in the region by inviting stakeholders from various ASEAN nationalities, including journalists, businessmen, academics, diplomats, and bureaucrats, to fly with him to three ASEAN capitals in one day to mark the launching of the ASEAN Community (Ong, 2009). His gesture was a symbolic indication of an effort to make ASEAN more relevant to the public as the aircraft carried his guests across international airports for the momentous celebration. This is an example of aviation diplomacy, or the use of air transport in diplomacy, which is the use of air assets to support foreign policy (Lespinois, 2012). It is also defined as various diplomatic processes and structures pursue within the context of civil aviation (Kobierecki, 2020).

The civil aviation has political significance towards sovereignty, defense, and national status (Dobson, 1993). Government negotiation in air service agreements is also an example of aviation diplomacy. It is, for instance, the case of the 1944 Chicago Convention when the U.S. dominance in shaping public international law on civil aviation was showcased. The diplomatic significance of aviation emanates from the unprecedented growth of the global air travel industry due to the waves of deregulation in the 1970s and the 1980s, which has resulted in cheaper air tickets. Aviation becomes a major economic driver underpinned by a growing number of global middle-income population. The global number of carried passengers has significantly increased from 0.9 billion passengers in 1987 to 3.97 billion in 2017 (World Bank, 2018). The ASEAN number of carried international passengers has increased from 120.5 million passengers in 2007 to 288.8 million passengers in 2017 (ASEANStats, 2020). This trend shows the increasing popularity of air travel, which constructed a straight way for political and diplomatic significance to be attached to civil aviation in Southeast Asia.

This research proposes that aviation subjects, or air assets, are significant tools to exercise soft power by taking into account the multistakeholder approach. Because in the case of aviation as tools for soft power, states mostly remain the key subject, but they often need other actors, such as airlines due to the particularity of the field. As such, national flag carriers can become symbols for national identity (Raguraman, 1997). The design of airports and air shows can trigger certain states' image to international audiences (Kobierecki, 2020). This shows that diplomacy has been substantially shifted beyond state actors, whereas the emergence of non-state actors has also played a significant role in diplomatic processes.

Despite its potential as tools to exercise soft power, the use of air assets and air infrastructure in diplomacy has yet to attract wide scholars' attention. This research found that air assets and air infrastructure can constitute tools for soft power in three different ways; raising national and regional identity awareness, building political ties, and ensuring cross-border mobility. This finding is timely since the COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted a heavy toll on the aviation industry, which resulted in liquidation and bankruptcy of airlines and airports due to serious cash burn instigated by travel restriction. People mobility was particularly hit, with a 60% decrease in the total number of passengers globally in 2020 (Economic Development Air Transport Bureau ICAO, 2021). With a population of 650 million, ASEAN governments are obliged to support the recovery process following the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the aviation industry is opening up, an approach that is inclusive and appealing to the public to complement safety policy and liquidity support is necessary for the aviation industry. Therefore, by focusing how aviation diplomacy could play a role in the regional connectivity agenda, this research bridges the gap between the political strategy and the

practice of diplomacy, both of which are significant in addressing contemporary economic and geopolitical challenges in ASEAN.

METHOD

This research aimed to analyze how aviation diplomacy could play a role in the ASEAN Connectivity agenda amid the rising importance of international aviation. Referring to such a purpose, this research is exploratory qualitative research whereas the data collection technique is mostly relied on secondary data and academic literature, involving research reports, scientific books, official documents, journal articles, expert opinions, speeches, and other kinds of publications. Furthermore, facts and findings are interpreted by exploiting inductive logical thinking for the data analysis technique through which the research question led the examination process to focus on exploring variables neglected by viewpoints in existing studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Airline Regulation and Regional Agreement in Southeast Asia

The government regulation of the airline is required to serve the public interest as it brings implication to the fares and market efficiency of the aviation industry. In 2004, ASEAN leaders mentioned the aviation industry as one of eleven priority sectors for economic integration (ASEAN, 2012). Subsequently, ASEAN member states implemented the ASEAN Open Skies Policy in 2015 and ratified the ASEAN Single Aviation Market (ASAM) protocols in 2016 aimed at opening a greater degree of liberalization of the regional market for the aviation industry. But, this liberalization process is still restrained. For example, to govern market access for international passenger air services, the 2009 ASEAN Multilateral Agreement on Air Services (MAAS) and 2010 ASEAN Multilateral Agreement for Full Liberalization of Passenger Air Services (MAFLPAS) mentioned non-cabotage principle within the internal border of ASEAN member states which don't allow foreign airlines to carry domestic passengers. The government of Indonesia showed inclination towards protectionism by prioritizing the domestic airlines' demand to protect their markets, over the liberalization of domestic aviation markets (Permana et al., 2020). The Philippine government used runway congestion and lack of slots at Manila's Ninoy Aquino international airport to prevent the ratification of the ASEAN agreement to liberalize market access rights (Tan, 2013). Regarding the ownership and control regulation, most ASEAN member states restricted the foreign ownerships to not more than 50% of the shareholding.

The ASEAN governments' unsteadiness towards ASAM implementation displays a lack of a united stand to regional commitments. Previously, the ASEAN government promised to ensure a "coordinated approach in the areas of aviation safety" (ASEAN, 2011). At the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, the implementation of aviation safety in ASEAN suffered

heavily due to a lack of policy harmonization and no uniform standards in seating capacity and COVID-19 testing within the region, confusing both airlines and passengers (Sobie, 2020). The ASEAN Air Transport Working Group (ATWG) held meetings in July and October 2020 (ASEAN, 2020a) and May and October 2021 (Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines, 2021; Department of Transportation Republic of the Philippines, 2021), a measure deemed too slow to facilitate recovery for the regional aviation industry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As noted above, there is a gap between the ASEAN people's desired level of aviation safety and security, and the ASEAN government's actual level of coordination in both areas, which shows the existing limitation in aviation diplomacy in the region. In this regard, different use of air assets and air infrastructure is desirable to project a meaningful ASEAN Community. It is noteworthy that, the principle of ASEAN Centrality – ASEAN establishment at the center of Asia-Pacific regional institutions – is at the heart of ASEAN corporate identity. Subsequently, this self-perception guides the development of the air transport network in the region. ASEAN leaders' rationale behind developing an integrated and sustainable air transport network is "to enable ASEAN to leverage its location at the crossroads of Northeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania to grow ASEAN's strategic significance to Asia" (ASEAN, 2011). This is important to maintain ASEAN's strategic location in international politics that in recent years plays a constructive role as a counterweight to great powers like the U.S. and China (Petri & Plummer, 2014).

Building National and ASEAN Identity

Along with the ASEAN motto, One Vision, One Identity, One Community, ASEAN leaders designated 2020 as the Year of ASEAN Identity aimed at creating public awareness on ASEAN (ASEAN, 2020b). However, ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples' Forum (ACSC/APF) stressed a lack of regional identity and unity as one of CSOs' top concerns in 2017 (Heinrich Böll Foundation, n.d.). To construct Southeast Asia's identity that is "socially and political constructed, through interactions amongst its governments and societies" (Acharya, 2017), ASEAN people need to experience ASEAN and participate in regional integration. As such, ASEAN stakeholders and citizens need to be facilitated to learn about ASEAN identity and ASEAN Community. ASEAN identity as soft power require tools and assets, whereby aviation diplomacy can contribute to this purpose.

The diplomatic significance of civil aviation gives way to airlines as a means for shaping a country's image, which has been used by governments in projecting the national identity internationally. It is, for instance, the case of Singapore Airlines that has successfully become a symbol of national pride. Every year, the Singapore Girl - the cabin crew and the airline icon - is showcased during the Singapore National Day Parade wearing a traditional dress, blue *sarong kebaya*, the trademark of Singapore Airlines. One of the keys for the airline's success is its brand positioning, of which broad themes is the Singapore

Girl. She is the leading figure in the international marketing and advertising campaign of Singapore Airlines. In 1993, the Singapore Girl's wax model became the only commercial figure installed at Madame Tussaud in London alongside the world leaders and personalities (Heracleous et al., 2006). Another national flag carrier, Thai Airways, also provided example how civil aviation projects country image through marketing campaign and by hosting events during Thailand's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2019. A low cost carrier, AirAsia, also provided collaboration with ASEAN by launching "I Love ASEAN" and "Sustainable ASEAN" liveries to celebrate ASEAN 50th and 52nd Anniversaries in Manila and Bangkok (Paul, 2019), adopted "Truly ASEAN" as its first tagline in 2008 and continue to tailor its brand identity by adding the ASEAN emblem in its aircraft since 2017 (Kositchothana, 2017), and launched the "Think ASEAN, Think AirAsia" campaign via social media and in-flight magazine (Mirtha, 2017).



Figure 1. ASEAN Summits 2019. (Reprinted from Thai Airways Website, by Thai Airways, 2019, retrieved from https://www.thaiairways.com/en_TH/news/news_announcement/news_detail/Asean_Summits_2019.page Copyright 2011 by Thai Airways.)



Figure 1. General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Prime Minister of Thailand, together with H.E. Dato Lim Jock Hoi, Secretary-General of ASEAN, visited the Thai Airways International Public Company Limited (THAI) exhibition booth at the Thailand Together event for the ASEAN Chairmanship 2019. (Reprinted from Thai Airways Website, by Thai Airways, 2019, retrieved from

https://www.thaiairways.com/en_NZ/news/news_announcement/news_detail/ASEAN_Chairmanship_2019.page Copyright 2011 by Thai Airways.)



Figure 2. AirAsia (Truly ASEAN Livery), HS-ABE, Airbus A320-216. (Reprinted from Wikimedia Commons website, by Anna Zvereva, 2019, retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AirAsia_\(Truly_ASEAN_Livery\),_HS-ABE,_Airbus_A320-216_\(40696562403\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AirAsia_(Truly_ASEAN_Livery),_HS-ABE,_Airbus_A320-216_(40696562403).jpg) Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.)

Furthermore, the design of the airport could serve the needs of regional branding, or projecting the region's identity. It is, for instance, the case of the ASEAN lane in international airports in Southeast Asia. This mechanism would incentivize ASEAN citizens to notice the ASEAN emblem, internalize their ASEAN identity, and take advantage of the assigned fast-track lane. ASEAN lane in international airports – a strategic measure under APSC Blueprint 2025 to promote ASEAN awareness - existed first in Thailand in 1995, followed by Malaysia, Viet Nam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar (Thu, 2017).



Figure 3. A view of the ASEAN Lane at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. (Reprinted from the reportingasean website, by Kavi Chongkittavorn, 2016, retrieved from <https://www.reportingasean.net/asean-lane-shows-asean-spirit-lack/> Copyright 2016 by reportingasean.)

Building Political Ties

As a geopolitical actor, ASEAN's self-perception as the center of Asia-Pacific regionalism and identity formation plays a role in shaping the other actor's foreign policy. It is, for instance, the case of ASEAN-EU relations where ASEAN's rank in the EU's external relations is elevated, from a low-profile-cum-inferior-normative-power, to an equal partner, a central power in Asia, and a distinctive model of regionalism (Xuechen, 2018). The conclusion on the ASEAN-EU Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement (AE CATA) on 2 June 2021 was regarded by the European Commissioner for Transport as "an important milestone in the EU's external aviation policy"¹. As the world's first bloc-to-bloc air transport agreement, the AE CATA stresses the importance of air connectivity between ASEAN and Europe. The AE CATA implementation will allow an increase in passenger and cargo services operation and routes expansion between the two regions. More significantly, the agreement also touches upon aviation safety, air traffic management, consumer protection, and environmental and social matters. This shows how aviation diplomacy, especially due to COVID-19 pandemic, becomes an important tool to support the ASEAN government agenda in opening new economic growth opportunities.

On country bilateral relations, the use of Thai Airways as a foreign policy tool has contributed to Thailand's diplomatic ties with other countries. Denmark established its first embassy in Thailand after both governments issued an agreement on air navigation and created Thai Airways International in 1960, a joint venture between the Scandinavian Airline and the Thai Airways (The Royal Danish Embassy, 2008). Further, Thai Airways International established a new route between Bangkok and Tehran in 2016, which was a precedence to the Iranian President Visit to Thailand (Thai Airways, 2016). To strengthen ties with the U.S., Thailand's "Shopping Diplomacy" in 2016 during Thai State Visit to the U.S. included the purchase of 20 Boeing aircraft for Thai Airways alongside 155,000 tons of coal and arms and military equipment (Busbarat, 2017).

Relatedly, the use of air assets during humanitarian intervention also contributes to political ties and provides significant tools for soft power. At a bilateral level, a state may use their air force as tools for humanitarian intervention, evacuation of nationals, peacekeeping, and propaganda. It is, for instance, the case of French dispatching air forces for humanitarian intervention when an earthquake hit Peru in 1970. The four Transalls contributed to stronger links between France and Peru. This significant French assistance supplemented strong historic ties that both countries already forged, resulted in Peru buying French Mirage aircraft in 1968, 1973, and 1982 (Lespinois, 2012).

Similarly, air operations during humanitarian intervention serve as tools to project soft power at the regional level. When an earthquake hit Bohol in the Philippines in 2013, the

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/air/news/2021-06-04-conclusion-asean-eu-comprehensive-air-transport-agreement_en

Royal Malaysia Air Force deployed two C-130s aircraft to transport the ASEAN's relief items from the UN Humanitarian Response Depot (UNHRD) warehouse in Malaysia to the Philippines (Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, 2019). This humanitarian response was coordinated by the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Center) through Disaster Emergency Logistic System for ASEAN (DELSA) mechanism, a regional priority under the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). Further, as an earthquake hit Central Sulawesi in 2018, Singapore deployed two C-130 aircrafts to help Indonesia (Salleh, 2018).

Former ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan had helped to establish the role of airports as the nexus of regional connectivity in Southeast Asia. When Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar, the ASEAN-UN framework designated Don Mueang airport in Thailand as a hub and staging point for transporting relief aid to Myanmar (ASEAN, 2008). Most of the time, air assets such as helicopters, planes, and other transport aircraft are deployed in humanitarian aid to conduct air-dropping supplies and transporting casualties during a disaster. On the other hand, the smooth conduct of aid supplies distribution and evacuation are greatly affected by infrastructure readiness, such as air traffic control and ground handling at the airport. In both cases, air assets and air infrastructure play a great role in ensuring humanitarian intervention success. Indeed, aviation diplomacy employs tools such as air assets and air infrastructure to support government agenda for bilateral, regional, and multilateral relations.

Building ASEAN Connectivity and Strengthening Regional Integration through Cross-Border Mobility

The air transportation network is essential for economic development and market integration in the region. As the number and frequency of aviation connections are highly correlated with economic growth, government policies towards air transport development are usually to secure domestic and international aviation connectivity (Njoya et al., 2018). The use of public service obligations (PSO) scheme in air transport is when the government opts to subsidize airline connections to non-profitable destinations for reasons of national interest as opposed to free-market conditions (Merkert & Williams, 2013). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining the levels of air transport connectivity is crucial to most governments because several unprofitable routes and airlines are expected to disappear for some time. Against this backdrop, most governments provide support to airlines to ensure economic activity and jobs as the pragmatic approach to mitigate the impacts (Abate et al., 2020).

Airports contribute to economies by sustaining services to airlines, transporting cargo, and moving passengers, and these are fundamental to the economic development of cities, countries, and regions. Due to the pandemic, airport revenues were particularly hit, with

an expected 54% decrease in the total airport revenues globally in 2021 compared to 2019 (Airports Council International, 2021). Further, the number of international airports can determine the network of air connections between ASEAN cities. For tourism development in ASEAN, major international hubs can attract more transit tourists to extend their stay. When an airport is characterized as efficient and convenient, it reflects the country's productiveness and spirit.

The development of international aviation has contributed to global interdependencies and cross-border people mobility. The presence of cross-border transports, such as airlines, can be pivotal to reducing the barrier on ASEAN citizens' mobility and increasing ASEAN's territorial integration. Improving cross-border accessibility is key to people-to-people mobility, regional connectivity, regional integration, and economic growth.

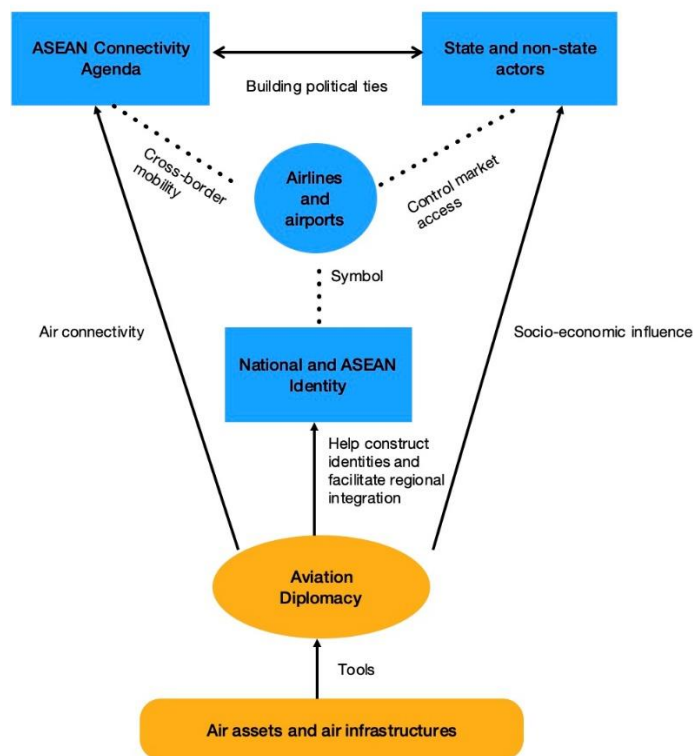


Figure 5. Conceptual Framework of Aviation Diplomacy in Southeast Asia. (Source: author's own)

CONCLUSION

In the globalization era, the increasing popularity of air travel has constructed a straight way for political and diplomatic significance to be attached to civil aviation. However, the role of aviation diplomacy in projecting ASEAN identity has yet to attract scholars' attention.

This research demonstrates that aviation diplomacy plays a role in projecting ASEAN identity by using air assets and air infrastructure as tools for soft power in three different ways. First, airlines can serve as symbols for national and regional identity. Second, the use of air operations as tools to build political ties, especially during a humanitarian intervention. Third, by designating air transportation networks and airports as the nexus of cross-border mobility and regional connectivity.

Based on the findings in this research, the role of aviation diplomacy towards the regional connectivity agenda can be accurately assessed, and more research on how the relationship between aviation diplomacy and soft power will be conducted in the future.

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