

The Multilateral Behaviour of Awkward Powers: A Thai Case Study

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This study examines the multilateral behaviour of Thailand, an awkward power, through the lens of the regional group formation (RGF) theory, using the formations of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) as examples. The RGF theory postulates that states establish smaller regional multilaterals to secure exclusive leadership and international recognition. However, Thailand's regional multilateralism and its manoeuvring in launching the ACD and the ACMECS unveiled deviation in multilateral behaviour. Specifically, Thailand's leadership in the ACMECS formation is consistent with the hypothetical explanation, whereas its bridging role in the ACD, inviting major Asian powers as founding members, deviates from the expected scenario derived from the theory. This discrepancy questions the applicability of the RGF theory to smaller powers, especially awkward ones, implicitly suggesting that their multilateral behaviour appears to be multifaceted. The study recommends theoretical refinement to better explain the behavioural nuances of non-major powers in regional multilateralism.

Keywords: ACD, ACMECS, awkward power, multilateral behaviour, Thailand

Since the 1980s, regional multilateralism—more commonly, albeit not identically, referred to as 'regionalism' or 'regional groupings'—has prevailed and evolved at multiple levels, from continental to sub-regional. Although varied in degree and context, several regional multilaterals outside the West have followed the steps of the European Union (EU) in their institutional development. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a template of non-Western multilateralism for developing nations, and the bodies under its umbrella are no exception (Katsumata, 2011). In academia, similar to policymakers who craft institutional design, regional multilateral models have largely been Euro-centric; that is, they have been constructed based on EU specificities. For instance, Balassa's (1961) theory of economic integration was modelled on multilateral groupings in Europe. However, it has been extensively adopted to explain regional multilateralism in Asian regions. Furthermore, the theory has been applied as a yardstick for the success or failure of regional multilaterals.

Models of regional multilateralism (e.g., Balassa's theory) have been heavily criticised for their EU-centrism and deep-seated Western-centric biases (Iroulo & Lenz, 2022). The rapid growth of multilateral institutions outside Europe, notably the ASEAN-centred regional architecture (Rahman, 2018), has encouraged scholarly efforts to theorise regional multilaterals grounded in non-EU-centric experiences (Acharya, 2011, 2012). For instance, Dent (2016) proposed a conceptual framework of analysis, drawn on regional multilateralism in East Asia, treating regionalism, in a broad sense, as a form of regional coherence, covering ordering structures, processes, and multilateral arrangements. However, the nation-state is not the unit of analysis (Dent, 2016); that is, it does not explain how a state will behave in regional multilateralism.

As the present study focuses on the behaviour of a state concerning regional multilateralism, Hamanaka's (2009, 2018, 2023) regional group formation (RGF) theory deserves attention. The theory provides assumptions demonstrating a hypothetical pattern of behaviour of a state when dealing with the formation of regional multilaterals and offers causal explanations about what drives a state to behave in the way it does. Arguably, the RGF theory has claimed its validity in explaining Japan's behaviour on regional multilateralism (Hamanaka, 2023).

The key theme of the RGF theory is pivotal to the logic of exclusivity among nations in regional multilateralism, especially in the early years of the multilaterals. In essence, the central argument is that ‘[it] is better to be the head of a small group than to hold a less powerful position in a large group’ (Hamanaka, 2009, p. 1). The RGF theory begins with *a priori* assumptions, as presented below:

- Assumption 1: All states are egoist in nature and intrinsically search for international status, which is always relative.
- Assumption 2: Holding the leading position in a regional multilateral, wherein the state assumes primacy over others, is beneficial overall, preponderantly, though not exclusively, because of status factors (e.g., prestige and recognition).

The inference of the two assumptions is forthright in terms of multilateral behaviour. To wit, *ceteris paribus*, an egoist state is driven to create a regional multilateral in which it can assume the number one position by excluding more powerful states to gain greater international recognition (Hamanaka, 2018, 2023). In other words, the multilateral behaviour of a state, especially a smaller one, is that it strives to form a smaller regional multilateral institution wherein it can assume the lead position by excluding larger rivals.

In this study, we examine the multilateral behaviour of ‘awkward powers’ in regional multilateralism—more precisely, regional multilateral formation—considering the RGF theory. An awkward power refers to ‘a state with significant capabilities and influence, which defies neat categorisations onto the conventional power hierarchies, on account of its contested, neglected or ambivalent international status’ (Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2022). That is to say, it is a state, which lacks existing literature appropriately explaining its politics and foreign relations.

Thailand has been identified as an awkward (middle) power (Freedman, 2022). Regarding regional multilateralism, Thailand has long experience as an initiator of several multilaterals at multiple levels (Busbarat, 2014). In 2002, it initiated the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), a continent-wide multilateral arrangement. A year later, it launched the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), a sub-regional multilateral mechanism. Yet, the literature on Thai-led regional multilateralism has remained scarce. Thus, Thailand is aptly used as our case study.

The objectives of the present study are three-fold:

- Explaining the behaviour of Thailand in regional multilateralism, based on the formations of the ACD and the ACMECS, using the RGF theory as the theoretical lens.
- Explicating whether the aforesaid theory would suffice to explain the Thai case, as mentioned above.
- Offering alternative explanations of the Thai multilateral behaviour, if the RGF theory is found to be insufficient.

Literature Review

As aforementioned, Thailand is labelled as an awkward power (Freedman, 2022), which implies that the existing literature on the nation’s politics and foreign policy has been contested and, to a certain extent, has paid little attention to Thai affairs (Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2022). This is truer in the case of Thailand’s regional multilateralism and the country’s multilateral behaviour. In this section, we review scholarly work on the preceding topic.

Regardless of the outcomes, Thailand has been an active pioneer in regional multilateralism at varied regional scopes, from Asia-wide to sub-regional (Busbarat, 2014). Bangkok played key roles in creating an array of multilaterals at the regional level, such as the ACD and the ACMECS. Regarding Thai behaviour in regional multilateralism, particularly in multilateral formation, leadership-seeking; that is, searching for leadership recognition, has driven Thailand’s efforts to establish new, ‘self-centring’ multilaterals (Busbarat, 2012, 2014; Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Thailand’s leadership-seeking behaviour appears to be bold in continental Southeast Asia (Busbarat, 2012; Chambers & Bunyavejchewin, 2019) where it has created smaller multilaterals—sometimes called ‘minilaterals’ (Singh & Teo, 2020)—such as the Quadrangle Economic Co-operation (QEC), established in the early 1990s. The QEC is a ‘self-centring’ minilateral, whereby Thailand could play a leading role. The Thaksin Shinawatra government established the ACMECS shortly before the QEC ceased (Chambers & Bunyavejchewin, 2019). The zenith of Thai behaviour in search for leadership recognition in regional multilateralism is the creation of

an Asia-wide multilateral, the ACD, which was the brainchild of the Thaksin government (Busbarat, 2014; Chachavalpongpun, 2010).

We further explain the formations of the ACD and the ACMECS to outline the multilateral behaviour of Thailand and determine if that behaviour is consistent with the hypothetical explanation of the RGF theory.

Method

In this study, we employed a case study method with process tracing for qualitative enquiry (Gerring, 2017; Maoz, 2002). The case study method has several advantages, making it a preferred methodology in political research. These include, *inter alia*, enabling the use of a process-tracing technique (Maoz, 2002). Hence, case study research goes beyond mere storytelling. Specifically, it incorporates ‘...the identification of a hypothesis or theory...[and] constructing testable hypotheses’ (Gerring, 2017).

According to Maoz (2002), incorporating a theory would outline a process, telling a story. The idiosyncratic feature of a case study method is the competence to match a hypothetical story, derived from a process of the theory, with reality. In other words, it exposes similarities and differences between the expected scenario and the actual event, whereby the latter includes the facts of the case.

Therefore, based on the assumptions of Hamanaka’s (2009, 2016, 2023) RGF theory, the hypothetical scenario concerning a state’s behaviour in the formations of regional multilaterals is driven by the pursuit of higher status; a smaller state creates a smaller regional multilateral, wherein it takes the lead by excluding its rivals from more powerful states.

Considering the hypothetical scenario, the following hypothesis (H1) was formulated:

H1: Thailand creates a smaller multilateral where it can assume exclusive leadership by excluding its rivals and stronger powers.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, we relied on data from both primary and secondary sources. The former was archival materials released by the Thai Foreign Ministry, made available at the formal request of the first author under the Official Information Law. The latter was publicly accessible scholarly publications.

Both primary and secondary data were closely read to outline real stories about the multilateral behaviour of Thailand in the ACD and the ACMECS. The actual stories were compared with the hypothetical explanation, thereby testing H1 derived from the RGF theory.

Results

Relevant Facts of Example I: ACD

The ACD is a continent-wide, multilateral association initiated by Thailand in June 2002. Even within the Asia-wide scope of membership, little is known about this association. Hence, rather than immediately undertaking hypothesis testing, this section begins with a brief account of the early development of the ACD from the Thai perspective.

Owing to its continent-wide aspirations, it may be difficult to accept that the ACD is the brainchild of the policymakers in Bangkok. For instance, Hamanaka (2009) suspected that the ‘...ACD was possibly proposed by Thailand on behalf of China’ (p. 192). Nevertheless, this observation is not true. Originally, the ACD was the product of a broad concept paper on Asian cooperation prepared by the advisory team of the former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, before his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party had a landslide victory in the 2001 general election. The Thaksin government had central foreign-policy goals, including, *inter alia*, gaining international prominence by differentiating the nation from the image of TPI (i.e., Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia). To achieve this goal, under Thaksin, Thailand assumed a proactive and leading role by linking East and South Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MFA], n.d.).

To make the TRT-led government’s policy campaign tangible, the Foreign Ministry materialised the party’s vague concept of Asian cooperation and connectivity into a proposal for the formation of a continent-wide

multilateral association. Its institutional design was based on ASEAN modalities. Nonetheless, the distinct features of the ACD process include informality, voluntarism, and non-institutionalisation (Ahmad, 2003).

As the realisation of pan-Asian multilateralism would consume excessive diplomatic and political capital, Thailand could not expend alone. Thus, decision-makers in Bangkok invited Beijing, Tokyo, and New Delhi to join the soon-to-be-established multilateral. Thailand believed that if these three nations—Asia's big powers—supported the initiative, their positive responses would generate political momentum for the ACD and smaller Asian nations would be willing to join (MFA, 2002a). In June 2002, the ACD was officially launched with 18 founding members, including China, India, Japan, and Indonesia (Bunyavejchewin & Nimmannorrawong, 2016).

Notably, convincing China and India to play active roles in the ACD was among the top priorities of Thai foreign affairs (MFA, 2003). For Thailand, China's support was deemed the decisive factor for the success of the inauguration and initial evolution of this new multilateral association (MFA, 2002b). In short, it was Thailand's deliberate decision to include Asia's big powers as the founding members of the ACD.

Consequently, the example of ACD does not support H1.

Relevant Facts of Example II: ACMECS

While promoting the Asia-wide multilateral, the Thaksin government launched a new sub-regional multilateral in continental Southeast Asia—the ACMECS—in which Thailand could take the lead. As the ACMECS has been extensively discussed in other studies (Chachavalpongpon, 2010; Sucharithanarugse, 2006), its commonly known details will not be repeated here. Instead, we shall turn to the ACMECS membership.

The ACMECS was initiated by Thailand in April 2003 with four founding members— Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. Vietnam was the only continental Southeast Asian nation excluded from the founding membership. Even though the rationale for excluding Vietnam has remained confidential, Thailand's enduring effort to split a Vietnam-led coalition might explain the reason for the exclusion (MFA, 1992). Regardless, the ACMECS served as a multilateral platform for Bangkok to play the role of a donor nation, self-promoting its higher status internationally.

Its status factors are evident. In March 2006, Cambodian Foreign Minister, Hor Namhong, invited Thai leaders to participate in the Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam (CLMV) Summit and proposed renaming the summit from 'CLMV' to 'CLMTV' ('T' for Thailand; MFA, 2006a). The message implied the potential merging of the ACMECS and the CLMV Cooperation. Thailand subtly dodged the summit participation and discreetly rejected the idea of the CLMTV. The unstated reasoning was that Thailand perceived the CLMV Cooperation as a 'recipients' multilateral forum' (MFA, 2006b). Joining the summit would produce a negative effect on the image of Thailand as a donor, which it sought for itself.

In consequence, the example of the ACMECS supports H1.

Discussion

The example of the ACD does not support H1, whereas the example of the ACMECS supports H1. All the founding members of the ACMECS (i.e., Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar) were weaker than Thailand in nearly all dimensions. By incorporating those countries into the ACMECS, a Thai-led small-scale multilateral, Thailand could easily take the number one position and assume leadership as a foreign aid donor (Chachavalpongpon, 2010). Vietnam was excluded, even though Hanoi (the capital of Vietnam) lagged behind Bangkok in the early 2000s. Nevertheless, considering Vietnam's latent power, notably the potential of the Vietnamese economy, and its political influence over Laos and Cambodia, it was safer for Bangkok to exclude Vietnam from the ACMECS membership, albeit only for a year. In addition, policymakers in Bangkok had historically perceived Hanoi as a rival, if not a threat (Viraphol, 1982). The exclusion of Vietnam from a smaller, self-centring multilateral was reasonable for Thailand. Hence, the RGF theory explains the multilateral behaviour of Thailand in establishing the ACMECS.

Contrary to the Thai behaviour regarding the ACMECS, the example of the ACD does not support the hypothesis derived from the RGF theory. Thailand invited a considerable number of Asia's big powers, including ASEAN leader, Indonesia, to join the continent-wide multilateral association as founding members. Ostensibly, during the ACD process, Thailand did not intend to acquire the number one position. Even if it would like to do so, it could not realise such an intention.

This is not to say that Thailand showed no political will to gain international status. Taking the lead of a smaller-scale multilateral is not the sole choice for an aspiring power to elevate its standing in the international hierarchy. For the ACD formation, policymakers in Bangkok expected the continent-wide multilateral to serve as a venue wherein Thailand could be in the international spotlight, allowing it to reap prestige, praise, and profile at varied levels. This was achieved by acting as a ‘bridge’ between world leaders from Asia’s major capitals and bringing them to sit at the same table and talk to each other. Accordingly, in pursuit of a higher status, smaller powers, especially awkward ones, like Thailand, could behave in ways other than creating smaller regional multilaterals to grasp exclusive leadership.

Hence, the RGF theory cannot explain the multilateral behaviour of Thailand in establishing the ACD. In this example, the ‘bridging behaviour’ is how Thailand manoeuvred to gain international recognition, elevating the nation’s position within a world community. Note that, since the early 1990s, Thailand’s regional multilateralism has regularly functioned as a bridge for outside powers, notably China, to have a multilateral dialogue with Southeast Asian nations and vice versa (Tungkeunkunt & Bunyavejchewin, 2022). This may hold for other awkward powers as well.

Conclusion

In this study, we examine the multilateral behaviour of awkward powers using Thailand’s regional multilateralism as a case study. We explain how Thailand behaved in the process of multilateral formation in light of the RGF theory, which has been validated through numerous cases of Japan’s multilateral behaviour (Hamanaka, 2023) and other major powers (Hamanaka, 2016). We took the ACD and the ACMECS as examples. Although the RGF theory could explain the Thai behaviour in the case of the ACMECS, it failed to explicate the ACD case.

The logic of exclusive leadership in regional multilateralism, the cornerstone of the RGF theory, does not hold when it comes to smaller powers, such as Thailand. The results indicate that the multilateral behaviour of creating a smaller self-centring multilateral to assume leadership and seek higher international standing is not the sole behaviour of a state in regional multilateralism.

Theoretically, as the Thai case implies, the RGF theory should be refined by diversifying the multilateral behaviour. Bridging should be incorporated into the theory’s hypothetical explanation. The multilateral behaviour of other awkward powers should be further explored.

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