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LEVELING THE DIGITAL PLAYING FIELD ACROSS SOUTHEAST ASIA: AN ASSESSMENT OF BRUNEI'S CONTRIBUTION

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Abstract: The article attempts to specify the extent to which Brunei can contribute to ASEAN-led digital projects and initiatives. As in the current circumstances digital support for trans-boundary cooperation is an indispensable success factor, the paper focuses on the presumable establishment of the unified digital area in Southeast Asia as an enabler of trans-boundary economic and commercial activity with an emphasis on moving to a single digital marketing area. Then, the author turns to discussing salient features of Brunei's modernization strategy, its economic and business practices, as well as doing business conditions. An analysis focusing on how Brunei's digital instruments are developed, from the perspective of its contribution to the already operational ASEAN-led multilateral initiatives, exemplified by ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), as well as its direction ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), is carried out. Arguably, although Brunei is far ahead of many of its ASEAN partners, it cannot be a fully-fledged participant of ASEAN-led multilateralism, especially as their digital support is gaining momentum. The paper takes a step forward in enriching knowledge of ASEAN-led multilateralism amidst its digital transformation in synergy with Brunei's contribution. As Russian and foreign scholars have not paid sufficient attention to Brunei's development and its policy towards the association, the main insights and assessments of the article have obvious academic novelty, as well as theoretical and practical significance.

Keywords: *digital transformation, Brunei, economic development, ASEAN, multilateral cooperation, digital marketing, AFTA*

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Научная статья. Политические науки

ВЫРАВНИВАНИЕ УСЛОВИЙ ЦИФРОВОГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА В ЮГО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ: ОЦЕНКА СОДЕЙСТВИЯ БРУНЕЯ

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Аннотация: В статье проведена попытка выявить, в какой степени Бруней может содействовать реализации цифровых проектов и инициатив АСЕАН. Учитывая, что в современных условиях цифровая поддержка трансграничного сотрудничества стала незаменимым условием его успешности, проводится анализ предполагаемого создания единого цифрового пространства АСЕАН как фактора осуществления трансграничной экономической и коммерческой деятельности с акцентом на формирование единого пространства цифрового маркетинга в ЮВА. Далее следует рассмотрение основных черт модернизационной стратегии Брунея, его экономических и коммерческих практик, условий ведения там предпринимательской деятельности. Проводится анализ уровня развитости цифровых инструментов страны в контексте ее содействия реализации уже работающих многосторонних инициатив Ассоциации на примере формирования Зоны свободной торговли АСЕАН (АФТА) и такого ее направления, как Соглашение АСЕАН о свободной торговле товарами (ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement – ATIGA, АТИГА). Сделан вывод, что, хотя Бруней опережает по уровню развития многих своих партнеров по АСЕАН, он не может полноценно включиться в асеановские многосторонние проекты и инициативы, тем более – в условиях их расширяющейся цифровой поддержки. Статья вносит вклад в обогащение знаний о форматах асеаноцентричного многостороннего сотрудничества в условиях его цифровой трансформации в увязке с содействием со стороны Брунея. Поскольку российские и зарубежные исследователи уделяют недостаточно внимания различным аспектам развития Брунея и его политике в отношении АСЕАН, основные положения, выводы и обобщающие оценки подготовленной статьи имеют очевидную научную новизну, а также теоретическую и практическую значимость.

Ключевые слова: *цифровая трансформация, Бруней, экономическое развитие, АСЕАН, многостороннее сотрудничество, цифровой маркетинг, АФТА*

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The year 2025 marks the establishment of the ASEAN Community 2.0. Although ASEAN's attempts to carry out this ambitious project are laudable, the association has to do a lot of extra work comparing to what it outlined in its visionary documents, in particular, the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025.

A task of paramount importance is to make Southeast Asia a unified economic and doing business area attractive to ASEAN and extra-regional companies. Realistically, its implementation includes narrowing digital imbalances between ASEAN member states, including the establishment of a single digital marketing area. Concerning the latter, much depends on the extent to which all ASEAN member states are ready to perform this collective task.

From a strategic perspective, Brunei may turn out to be a laggard. This is especially important since Brunei is ahead of other ASEAN member states across many economic and social criteria. Regrettably, however, Brunei does not contribute sufficiently to ASEAN-led multilateral projects and initiatives. To trace Brunei's readiness to participate in ASEAN's efforts to make Southeast Asia a digital-friendly area, through the prism of Brunei's digital instruments and against the digital transformation of regional and extra-regional FTA, is a timely and relevant exercise.

ASEAN's Anticipated Priorities: Digital Marketing as a Supplementary Factor of Regional Cooperation

Pursuing its objective to raise its influence on the global development, the association carries out integration projects and initiatives. Among them, the establishment of the ASEAN Community with the Economic Community (AEC) as a central pillar matters the strongest. The AEC aims at making Southeast Asia a unified production and doing business area attractive to the corporate sector in and beyond Southeast Asia. Part of this task relates to making Southeast Asia a unified digital marketing area.

Realistically, it is hardly expedient to expect that marketing practices across Southeast Asia may be unified, or even levelled, due to considerable cultural differences among ASEAN member states. Instead, ASEAN's single marketing policy on promoting its products in Southeast Asia and beyond is necessary. Several points are noteworthy in this regard.

From a strategic perspective, it is high time ASEAN created its own brand “Made in ASEAN” or “Offered by ASEAN”. Regrettably, ASEAN has neither producer nor consumer GVC established and managed exclusively by enterprises of its member states. On the other hand, however, the association aims to make Southeast Asia a single tourism area[1]. Needless to say that in current circumstances, it must be supported by digital tools. At present, these processes are mostly chaotic rather than well-organized.

Essential prerequisites for success in performing this task are in place. Notably, the association develops multiple digital initiatives as a self-sufficient track of its policy. They started in 1997 and have transformed from a narrow niche dialogue to a comprehensive and multi-directional cooperation aimed at performing a complete digital transformation of Southeast Asia. Notable initiatives include, but are not limited to, E-ASEAN Framework Agreement (2000), ASEAN Framework on Personal Data Protection (2016) ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Governance (2018), ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 (2021), ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics (2024), to mention just a few examples.

Across Southeast Asia, digital commercial practices of all sorts are in abundance. Specifically, fintech, healthtech, edtech and martech increase in popularity. The digitally-savvy population of Southeast Asian countries, with a median age only slightly above thirty years, responds positively. More to the point, Southeast Asians spend more time in the internet than people in other countries do[2]. A high rate of smartphone penetration along with increasing digital literacy add an extra impetus to these practices. Overall, the grass-root level is mature enough to make those practices trans-boundary and extend them to the whole Southeast Asia.

The development of trans-boundary e-commerce logistics in Southeast Asia is gaining momentum. Its main growth drivers include high internet penetration, the increasing popularity of content platforms, and rising consumer demand for fast delivery. In fact, 30% of consumers in ASEAN countries are willing to pay a premium price for faster shipping, while 91% are ready to spend more to be eligible for free shipping[3]. In these circumstances, partnerships of all sorts between e-commerce platforms and logistics companies are a new normal. Shopee launched Shopee Supported Logistics (SSL), an integrated service that offers a multi-directional approach to sales and delivery, while Lazada Global Fulfillment manages its own inventory stocks with an emphasis on technologically advanced solutions.

From a digital marketing perspective, it is remarkable that online games are popular across Southeast Asia. Main growth drivers include an ongoing digital transformation, the penetration of cheap smartphones, and urbanization. Arguably, e-sport matters the strongest. In 2024, the e-sport revenue in Southeast Asia accounted for 5.89 billion dollars, with projections for 7.37 billion dollars by 2027[4]. E-sport competitions are organized regularly, brands and influences use e-sport platforms for advertising and promotion campaigns. The aim is to create long-term customer experience simultaneously focusing on a game and associated with a brand or an influencer. Because of that, companies and individuals sponsor e-sport tournaments. In their turn, the governments of ASEAN member states support the development of e-sport, which is exemplified by Vietnam Game Development Alliance (VGDA), Esport Integrated Hub in Malaysia, etc.

Lastly, Southeast Asia is developing martech (marketing technologies) practices based on artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Marketers across Southeast Asia see AI as an assistant in omni-channel advertising, including targeting advertising across the web, mobile and TV, designing content for social media, producing videos, analyzing trends of customer preferences, tailoring product offerings to the target audience, increasing product personalization, etc. Main tools include AI-supported intellectual sensors, automated marketing research with high precision, AI-generated videos, music and pictures based on textual prompts, etc.

Martech-related examples in commercial practices across Southeast Asia are impressive. In 2019, Lazada introduced an AI-based search to expand consumers' choice. Other notable cases include the Chat-GPT-powered Lazzie-Chat that acts as a personal assistant in shopping. Shopee offers its users, mostly, MSME, an access to AI-powered chatbots, to overcome language barriers while performing online sales and delivery. Tokopedia also uses AI tools, as demonstrated by Tokopedia Care, to analyze consumers' perceptions and forecast their preferences. In the years to come, these practices are certain to expand exponentially and ripple well beyond individual ASEAN countries.

Notwithstanding this, there remain strong barriers to using AI tools across the region. The association finds it difficult to promote the AI agenda within its multilateral dialogue platforms. Since Southeast Asia is in between the Chinese and the American digital ecosystems, ASEAN and its member states may well slip into dependence on external actors, as the most popular content platforms in Southeast Asia are Chinese and American[5]. Martech practices cannot guarantee data privacy and be free from manipulations, as cyber-security in Southeast Asia is lax. As demonstrated above, problems that the regional digital transformation, part of which relates to digital marketing practices, is encountering are serious.

In sum, the afore-discussed developments lead to the following assessment. Although those obstacles are serious, a unified ASEAN policy on digital marketing may decrease their impact. Practically, it means an equal contribution from all ASEAN member states based on their upgraded digital tools. Arguably, it is beyond the realm of the possible in current circumstances. In this regard, Brunei's case is relevant.

Brunei: Navigating Complexities of Economic Modernization

Brunei stands out among other ASEAN member states across multiple criteria. It is a tiny state with the population of only 450.5 thousand people (as of 2023)[6]. Brunei enjoys a convenient geographic location to become a maritime hub. The country can boast of political stability, a rare strategic asset in the current circumstances, and well-educated population. Most importantly, Brunei offers its citizens very high living standards (in 2023, Brunei's GDP per capita was 33,508 dollars, second only to Singapore among ASEAN member states[7]), while both Brunei's and foreign companies enjoy favorable doing business conditions in the country.

The energy sector is the backbone of Brunei's economy. In 2024, 76.6% (8.489 billion dollars) of its overall merchandize export (11.075 billion dollars) accounted for HS Code 27 (mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes)[8]. As a result, the country is a classic example of "Dutch disease". Regrettably, the oil and gas sector is not the locomotive of the development of other industries, because of which Brunei is unable to fully participate in transboundary GVC (in car-making, consumer electronics etc.) spanning though Southeast Asia.

These factors set the parameters of Brunei's economic policy planning. In the Economic Blueprint 2021, as part of Brunei Vision 2035, there are "six aspirations", namely, a productive business environment, continuous learning, open and globally connected economy, the environment preservation, infrastructure to support and grow business, and good governance and public service excellence[9].

The country has many pressing issues to address. Underdeveloped logistics is a consequence of Brunei's industrial development. The logistics sector is expensive and inefficient, as Brunei's companies find it hardly expedient to enter the regional GVC and expand their presence there. In these circumstances, a vicious circle is evident. In order to improve its logistics, the country needs a large domestic market, which is not Brunei's case. Due to small inbound trade volumes, it is impractical to invest in logistics. As a result, the country has several 2PL companies and no 3PL and 4PL service providers. In the current circumstances, neither the government not the companies that operate GVC see strong reasons for investing in Brunei's logistics facilities and services.

Although there are five ports in the country, in terms of cargo throughput, 90% of cargo turnover (except oil and gas) goes through Muara port. It is the only deep-water seaport in the country. The development of other ports is not a pressing priority, as arriving cargo volumes are small. In terms of international air cargo loaded and unloaded, Brunei is far behind other ASEAN member states (in 2023, the corresponding figures accounted for 5.0 and 6.0 thousand tons respectively) with only Laos as an exception[10].

Discouragingly, underdeveloped and expensive logistics undermines MSME trans-boundary activity. In 2024, according to Asian Development Bank, "MSME accounted for 93.4% of all enterprises, employed 52.3 of the workforce, yet contributed just 5.9% of GDP"[11]. MSME operate mostly in the government sector (as contractors and subcontractors hired by the Brunei government). As the officials do not incentivize the corporate sector to enter and expand its presence in trans-boundary GVC across Southeast Asia, MSME are not active there.

This factor does not allow Brunei's corporate sector to participate in regional e-commerce collaborations. As discussed above, consumers in ASEAN member states are ready to pay a premium price for fast and convenient delivery. The latter has been and remains problematic for Brunei's companies.

To aggravate the problem, Brunei has few chances to become a regional financial center like, for instance, Singapore, or a center of Islamic finance like Malaysia. In both cases, financial services are premised on huge volumes of export and import. In 2023 (the latest figures available), Singapore's and Malaysia's trade to GDP ratios were 311.24% and 131,84% respectively[12,13]. Additionally, high internal consumption, developed financial tools and venues like government bonds, stock exchange markets, etc. strongly matter. It requires much time and resolve, and Brunei has to implement large-scale reforms to achieve even partially commensurate results. But even under an optimistic scenario, Brunei's domestic market is too small to incentivize investors to make the country a large financial hub. The more so since the presence of Malaysia with a full range of Islamic financial services, including Islamic banking, Islamic capital market etc., in the immediate vicinity will undermine Brunei's prospects. As stated by ASEAN Exchanges, "Malaysia is the largest Sukuk market globally, with 60% of its fixed income assets invested in Sukuks"[14]. Because of that, Brunei's financial services are conspicuously stagnant.

These factors have been impactful in shaping business practices and the government-business dialogue in Brunei. Remarkably, entrepreneurship is not popular among Bruneians, as they receive considerable social benefits, mostly, in the areas of housing, healthcare and education[15]. Because of that, Brunei's entrepreneurship ecosystem has several salient features. Since the country gained independence, the policy of "Rakyat Melayu" (Malay citizens), under which Malays-registered business enjoy privileges, has been implemented. Notwithstanding this, Bruneian Malays are reluctant to do business, including after their retirement, due to high living standards. This relates even to unemployed people, as their families provide them with sufficient financial support. As a result, the Ali Chandran phenomenon came into existence, mostly in the retail sector.

While Ali is a Malay name, the name Chandran refers to the ethnic Indians (as well as Bangladeshi and people from other South Asian states) in Brunei. At present, Chandran dominate the small retail, food and other market segments. In their turn, officials are "sleeping partners" who see those businesses as "side incomes". Contrary to business practices in the neighboring Malaysia, Bruneian Chinese prefer white-collar occupations, because of which there are not many Chinese entrepreneurs in Brunei's small business. This niche is exploited by former immigrants from South Asia.

A point to make individually relates to the difference between the "Ali Chandran" system on the one hand, and "Cukong" and "Ali-Baba" systems in Indonesia and Malaysia respectively on the other. While the Indonesian and the Malaysian business practices are premised on businesses with multi-million dollar turnover, the "Ali-Chandran" model relates to small businesses in the retail segment. Because of this, inter-ethnic conflicts are rare in Brunei.

State-owned enterprises (SOE) play an important role in Brunei's development. Brunei National Petroleum Company Sendirian Berhad is a prominent example. Established in 2002, the company is modelled after Indonesian and Malaysian energy firms and is owned by the government. Royal Brunei Airlines, Royal Brunei Technical Services, Telekom Brunei and other government-linked companies also deserve mentioning.

Brunei is an attractive country from a doing business perspective. The corporate tax is 18.5%, the second lowest indicator in Southeast Asia (after Singapore)[16]. Various tax exemptions are applicable to "Pioneer Service Companies". Personal income, sales and manufacturing are exempted from taxes. These factors make Brunei a focus of close attention of entrepreneurs from Southeast Asia and beyond.

There are several corporate programs in Brunei. In 2016, Darussalam Enterprise (DARe), which focuses mostly on MSME, was launched. Within the DARe framework, several initiatives are noteworthy. Main examples include Micro Bootcamp (learning the fundamental aspects of doing business), Accelerate Bootcamp (product development, drawing up a business plan etc.), Industry Business Academy (export and export markets specifics), Elevate Growth Program (assistance to MSME in entering foreign markets), to mention just a few cases. Apart from DARe, the program i-Usahawan that aims to help young entrepreneurs to start and develop their businesses, simultaneously building up and expanding connections with the government agencies is a relevant example.

Brunei has several venues aimed at fostering government-business dialogue. Mostly, they are presented by the Brunei Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Both platforms focus on strengthening ties between the corporate sector and the government agencies, as well as on providing companies with guidance and support.

In sum, Brunei is a classic welfare state with limited tools for diversifying its economic and business development. Due to high revenues from its energy sector and significant government subsidies, Brunei’s entrepreneurs are not willing to move beyond their present activity, namely, to integrate their businesses into regional global value chains. As a domino effect, this factor negatively impacts on Brunei’s digitalization-related initiatives, as well as its participation in regional free trade agreements.

The Digital Dimension of Brunei’s Policy: a Domestic and a Regional FTA Perspectives

Responding to the on-going digital transformation, Brunei carries out several digital projects and initiatives. From a visionary perspective, Brunei’s Digital Economy Masterplan 2025, launched in 2020, is the key document. Specifically, it aims to elevate Brunei to the level of Smart Nation. More specifically, it focuses upon four major tracks: government digitalization, industry digitalization, a thriving digital industry, and manpower and talent development[17].

Separately, in order to explore the ICT potential and improve the regulatory environment in the country, Brunei develops several projects. Among them, the most notable examples are the National Information Hub (a seamless approach to digital services provided by different government agencies)[18], and the Centralized Statistical System (integrates data provided by various stakeholders)[19].

Brunei launched several online databases. For instance, Brulaw, managed by Attorney General’s Chambers, is an aggregator of all Acts and

Orders in the country[20]. Surat Keliling, operated by the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Finance and Economy, presents government-issued rules and guidance materials that all the government agencies must obey. The National Centralised Database maintained by the E-Government National Center offers Database-as-a-Service that includes oracle database software licenses, backup services, disaster recovery services, etc. Reduced maintenance costs, data sharing and integration through Single Database Platform are seen as key outcomes. Government ministries and departments are expected to be main beneficiaries[21].

Although these efforts are remarkable, there remain serious obstacles. First, as discussed above, the country is not sufficiently present in the GVC spanning across Southeast Asia, as investors do not Brunei as a promising consumption market. Because of that, the country cannot enhance its competences in GVC digital support. As GVC are trans-boundary, it logically means preparing excessive work on their functionality, including free transfers of data, cybersecurity, etc. At present, the country has no relevant assets.

Simultaneously, Brunei has limited tools to respond to the rising servicization of economic regionalism. Notably, the share of the tertiary sector in the global GDP grows faster than that of other sectors. In this context, an important task for Brunei is to integrate its MSME into GVC, as services, as well as their digital support, are playing an increasingly prominent role in their functionality. Regrettably, Brunei's MSME have limited relevant competences.

Second, the country cannot increase its participation in ASEAN-led multilateral projects and initiatives due to their expanding digital transformation. Among major examples, ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) is especially noteworthy.

The journey to AFTA started in 1992. Launching that project, the ASEAN member states aimed to expand and diversify intra-ASEAN trade and, by extension, raise the competitiveness of their economies. Although AFTA deadlines changed several times, ASEAN had completed the project by 2018. The adoption of ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) and ASEAN Trade in Services Agreement (ATISA), which entered into force in 2010 and 2021 respectively, were milestone events.

Although a backbone of ASEAN economic integration, ATIGA does not respond to the practical realities. Despite the establishment of the Coordinating Committee on the Implementation of the ATIGA (CCA) and the ASEAN Trade Repository, the project encounters considerable difficulties. Part of them relates to the digital field. In 2019, all ASEAN countries joined the ASEAN Single Window Live Operation, which paved the way to adoption of ATIGA electronic Certificate of Origin (e-Form D, in effect since January 2024[22]). In March 2022, however, ASEAN economic ministers started negotiations on upgrading ATIGA[23], as there remain many important issues to address. Specifically, it is unclear how to regulate trade in digitalizable goods, namely, trade in online games, or how to tax digital advertising. If so, chapters on e-commerce, intellectual property protection in the digital field and other digitalization-related commitments must be included. This is all the more important since the association launched numerous digital initiatives, among which E-ASEAN Framework Agreement (2000), the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Data Governance (2018), the ASEAN Agreement on E-Commerce (2019), ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 (2021), as well as the ongoing negotiations on the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (started in 2023), matter the strongest. These documents evidence the evolution of ASEAN's approach to cooperation in the digital field, from a relatively narrow, "niche-focusing" track to devising comprehensive digital tools in order to support its on-going initiatives. This "widening" approach should embrace ASEAN-led trade initiatives, including ATIGA and, by extension, ATISA. Arguably, Brunei will find it difficult to contribute to an upgrade of these initiatives.

Simultaneously, there are other urgent tasks for Brunei to address. It should pay more attention to the implementation of the ASEAN Framework Agreement on the Facilitation of Goods in Transit (AFAFGIT), the ASEAN Framework Agreement on the Facilitation of Inter-State Transport (AFAFIST), and the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Multimodal Transport (AFAMT), to mention just a few examples of ASEAN-led initiatives. As the transport sector is undergoing a digital transformation, while Brunei's logistics and financial services are not well developed, the country is likely to face mounting problems in the years to come.

No less importantly, it is difficult to level the digital playing field across major free trade initiatives in which individual ASEAN member states participate. Main examples include Singapore-Australia Digital Economy Agreement, Singapore-UK Digital Economy Agreement, Korea Singapore Digital Partnership Agreement, Digital Economy Partnership Agreement and the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. Needless to say that their terms of digital cooperation are markedly different. If so, ASEAN finds it problematic to coordinate the digital agenda of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership as its pivotal initiative.

In the latter regard, ASEAN's growing digital dependence on China looms all the larger. Southeast Asia is part of China's Digital Silk Road, with infrastructure, content platforms and skill-training programs a policy tools. From an economic regionalism perspective, there are several notable undertakings, including ASEAN-China Smart City Cooperation Initiative (2019), China-ASEAN Digital Economy Partnership Initiative (2020), ASEAN-China Initiative on Enhancing Cooperation on E-Commerce (2023), to mention just a few examples. In 2016, the China-ASEAN Information Harbor was launched. In practical terms, China aims to link the development of industrial projects and the implementation of social programs along with promoting its digital tools and services. As a result, a China-oriented digital ecosystem, in which ASEAN and its member states are subordinates rather than equal partners, appears. This logically extents to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, as China intends to synergize the RCEP with the BRI and, by implication, the DSR tools. As differences between China and ASEAN, including those in the digital field, sharpen, it will pose new tough challenges for Brunei.

Third, Brunei has been unable to contribute to one of the key priorities of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), both to 2015 and to 2025, namely, the Global ASEAN. As the association aims to increase its influence on the global development, the digital component of its policy must become an active direction rather than a mere slogan. In this regard, the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools is a task that needs ASEAN's close attention. Arguably, ASEAN depends on its external partners in developing the AI-related agenda of its multilateral venues. If so, to foster it within ASEAN-led multilateral projects and initiatives is hardly expedient[24]. Simultaneously, since the AI advent is a global phenomenon, the association must strengthen the unity of its member states on AI-related issues. Because of this, a tangible contribution from every ASEAN country, with an emphasis on developing and upgrading national AI tools, is necessary. It is doubtful that Brunei will be a fully-fledged participant in performing this collective task.

These factors demonstrate that the digital environment in and beyond Southeast Asia becomes increasingly volatile, which imposes an additional burden on the association. In its turn, Brunei's journey to the digital transformation is at an early stage. If so, as exemplified by AFTA, the country is hardly able to support ASEAN-led projects and initiatives, to the detriment of ASEAN's common good in the digital field.

Conclusion

In current circumstances, ASEAN has to implement its policy in an increasingly competitive external environment. The anticipated economic shocks stemming mostly from Trump's triggering tariff policy make the overall global situation dangerously volatile. This is aggravated by the ongoing servicization of the world economy, with digitally delivered services as an individual track of economic activity looming all the larger. In light of that, levelling the digital playing field in Southeast Asia is a pressing priority, which both the association and its member states fully understand.

Against this backdrop, Brunei may undermine ASEAN's collective effort, specifically, concerning the implementation of ASEAN-led digital marketing initiatives. The latter are premised on already functioning assets like global value chains (although in Southeast Asia GVC are developed and operated by ASEAN external partners) and their digital support. In its turn, Brunei's economy and consumption market are too small to get involved in this cooperation. Although Brunei participates in many regional free trade initiatives, its GVC-related results have been modest to date, while a shift from the resource sectors is problematic.

ASEAN's integration policy is encountering an overlap of non-digital and digital gaps. Effective digital cooperation is constrained by variety of obstacles, mostly, by infrastructure imbalances between ASEAN's economic leaders and laggards. Brunei's example runs counter to this trend. From an economic and social perspective, Brunei is far ahead of many of its ASEAN partners, but it is hardly able to support ASEAN-led digital projects and initiatives. This factor illustrates that ASEAN encounters more problems than might be expected.

Accepting this reality, it is hardly reasonable to argue that Brunei will take on additional efforts to participate in ASEAN-led projects and initiatives, once they are implemented and gain traction. The country cannot perform this task due to lack of strategically important resources. Since Brunei has made steps to obtain them, and the results have been modest so far, this scenario is unlikely even in a mid-term perspective. In light of that, Brunei's will probably continue its "low profile" policy, to the disadvantage of ASEAN and ASEAN-led multilateralism.

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ

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