Blocking, attracting, imposing, and aligning: The utility of ASEAN forest and environmental regime policies for strong member states

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

International institutions, including ‘global regimes’ and ‘regional regimes’, address an increasing number of environmental issues. While in the past much attention was given to global regimes, a plethora of regional institutions and organizations (regional regimes) and their environmental policies have recently gained more momentum in political practice and attention in scholarship. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one such regime, and is actively developing its own policies relating to (e.g.) forests and the environment. These policies necessarily have to be useful for the regime’s member states; however, we further argue, that within the member states the regime’s policies especially have to be useful for specific member states’ bureaucracies, because it is they who actually develop the policies on behalf of the member states. Further, this paper aims to analyse the utility of ASEAN’s forest and environmental policy for specific member states and their responsible bureaucracies. Our analytical framework builds on regional regime theory, bureaucratic politics, and concepts of actor’s utility and interests. It differentiates the utility of the regional regime policies into several functions: (i) blocking unpleasant international initiatives, (ii) attracting international political or financial support, (iii) imposing rules on other member states, and (iv) aligning the interests of member states against external political opponents. Our results indicate that ASEAN’s environmental and forest policies serve all four functions. For instance, through ASEAN structures, Indonesia is blocking strict CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) regulation of ramin wood to maintain existing ramin protections and business, and the ASEAN Biodiversity Centre is found to be instrumental in blocking ambitious claims towards biodiversity from international actors. In addition, Malaysia and Singapore have imposed an ASEAN wildfire haze pollution agreement onto other member states in order to protect their directly affected interests in air quality and air traffic. ASEAN is also attracting to its members various international environmental funds in areas including climate change, community-based forestry, and sustainable peatland management. Last, member states under ASEAN actively align their positions in international climate negotiations as well as global forest deliberations to enhance their influence. We conclude that policies developed within regional regimes such as ASEAN are aligned with the interests of stronger member states, and their bureaucracies in particular. It remains unclear, however, how powerful these actors need to be in order to make this customization of regime policies valid for them. The results suggest that not only a potential hegemon, but also second or third powers may have this option. At the same time, member states’ activities do not seem to be conducted by states as unitary actors; instead, issue-specific actions are based on the interests of issue-relevant bureaucracies, which are in charge of representing a given member state in a given field of a regime’s policy.

1. Introduction

International institutions, including ‘global regimes’ and ‘regional regimes’, address an increasing number of environmental as well as other land use issues (Biermann and Pattberg, 2012; Robinson and Carson, 2015; Sahide et al., 2015; Fisher et al., 2017). While in the past much attention was given to global regimes, a plethora of regional institutions and organizations and their land use and environmental policies have recently gained more momentum in political practice and more attention in scholarship (Balsiger and Prys, 2016). The Associa-
tion of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one such regional regime, and one that has become highly relevant for forests and broader environmental issues (Wiersum et al., 2013; Overdevest and Zeitlin, 2014; Ekayani et al., 2016) based on emerging governance structures and by actively developing its own policies in those fields. In particular, this includes the ASEAN processes around the Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF) and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on the Environment (AMME), which in effect develop regional ASEAN forest and environmental policies (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008).

Such policies developed within international, more precisely regional, regimes necessarily have to be useful for the regime’s member states (Jetschke and Murray, 2012). However, we further argue, within the member states the regime’s policies have to be particularly useful for specific member states’ bureaucracies. According to bureaucratic politics theory, this is because it is these very administrative actors who actually develop the regime’s policies on behalf of the member states (Allison, 1971; Giessen et al., 2014).

ASEAN as a regional regime has already been reported to be useful to many of its member states at large (Elliott, 2000; Varkkey, 2012). It is unclear, however, how policies under a given regime play out as useful for specific members and member bureaucracies. The utility of regime policies for member states and bureaucracies can be broken down into four functions, we argue: blocking unpleasant international initiatives, attracting political and financial support to the regime members, imposing rules on other regime members, and aligning members for a joint political position.

Against this background, this paper aims to analyse the utility of ASEAN’s forest and environmental policies for specific member states and in particular their bureaucracies in terms of the proposed utility functions of a regime. In so doing, it addresses a research gap in the area of bureaucratic politics within regional regimes, and assesses actors’ behaviour in using the functions of the ASEAN regime to advance their interests on all substantial issues related to forestry and the environment. Furthermore, an empirical record is provided of relevant trends that have developed in issue-specific institutions under ASEAN.

We focus on regional regimes rather than regional organizations, because in doing so an analysis can be conducted on the influence of multiple relevant actors, especially bureaucratic actors, whose capacity to work independently through their respective structures and processes and those of the broader regime and political environment has traditionally been underestimated. Policy outputs can also be better investigated from the perspective of regional regimes, and the ways in which these outputs develop and deviate from their expected form may be more clearly understood (Martin, 2010; Benner et al., 2009). In contrast to the European Union (EU) style of regional integration, ASEAN has tended to serve as an intergovernmental forum rather than a supranational authority (Cuyvers et al., 2005). The ability of various involved actors to work cooperatively to achieve utility for multiple ASEAN members has been identified as a form of very soft diplomacy, and is commonly cited as the ‘ASEAN way’ (Acharya, 1998; Lian and Robinson, 2002; Cuyvers et al., 2005). Importantly, this involves much more than just the principle of non-intervention (Goh, 2003).

In the following chapter, we detail our methodology, including the theoretical framework, study propositions, and empirical approach and methods. Then, we present illustrative empirical results on the four utility functions of ASEAN forest and environmental policies, which we subsequently discuss. The article briefly concludes with some key insights from the case and proposals for theory development.

2. Methodology

2.1. Theoretical framework

2.1.1. Global and regional regimes

An international regime can be defined as a ‘set of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations’ (Krasner, 1982; Giessen, 2013). In the field of international forest-related cooperation, the concept has been identified as useful for empirical analyses (Rayner et al., 2010; Giessen, 2013). Yet, forest-related interventions remain influenced by multiple policy fields and inter-sector interactions (Humphreys, 2006; Hogl et al., 2009; Giessen and Krott, 2009).

Sets of principles, norms, and rules related to specific issues and enacted through the ASEAN regime are often codified into international treaties, convention texts, or other agreements. This process of transferring these principles, norms, rules, and resulting agreements into legislation, policy, and practice makes the former accessible and useful for analysis. In this context, regional regimes can be understood as those international regimes that exist between or among two or more states. Membership criteria are limited and are based on spatial or other crucial functional proximity and a lack of global aspirations in the context of the regional regime. Based on these two premises, the ASEAN regime for forestry and environmental issues can be understood as a network of regional institutional elements that conduct a wide array of activities aiming to address multiple issues regarding forestry and environmental politics. These networks and activities are organized hierarchically within and between the members and the issues to be addressed.

2.1.2. Regional bureaucracies

International bureaucracies are considered useful access points for the analysis of the policies of various regimes (Bierrmann and Siebenhüner, 2009). We may differentiate international bureaucracies into those of global and regional organizations (Jetschke and Murray, 2012; Jetschke and Lenz, 2013). Those acting at global level do this within regimes with no formal restrictions on membership; regional bureaucracies, in contrast, act within regimes that have spatial restrictions on membership. International bureaucracies are responsible, based on their regime framework, for making decisions that address specific problems on the basis of legal regime standards, and are charged with resolving those problems by developing and pursuing policies and implementing specific measures to address the issues at hand (adapted from Krott, 2005). In particular, it is a regime’s bureaucracy which enables the production of timely and well-adapted regime policies and plans of action that can move with changing political environments. In this process, bureaucracies pool a number of other important factors that influence regime policies (Weber, 1922; Peters, 2010); these may include provisions and policies of global regimes that are internally evaluated and have been selected for relevance; national and transnational private actors’ interests and power resources that interact in these spaces, as well as those of member states’ national bureaucracies are that have been evaluated and selected as potential allies or identified as political opponents; and discourses that are observed, evaluated, and developed in order to adequately position the regime. These functions of regional bureaucracies are fulfilled in the case of an international bureaucracy or in that of a secretariat located within one of the member states’ domestic governance structure. Therefore, by guiding action on behalf of the regional regime, bureaucratic procedures provide regimes with an efficient and organized set of rules that limit the involvement of individual actors in the process of implementing policy. Having said this, utilizing bureaucracy in this way is not without consequence; it means in particular that regional bureaucracies play a crucial role in the formulation of the regional regimes’ policies. Literature on the environmental and forest policies of international regimes has thus far neglected these considerations and interactions (with the exception of Bierrmann and Siebenhüner, 2009).

2.1.3. Explaining the utility of regional regimes: an interest-based and actor-centred approach

Interest-based, actor-centred, and bureaucracy-oriented approaches
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