Globalization of ASEAN Competitiveness in the New World Balance of Powers: A Case Study of ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road Initiative

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Abstract

The research have objectives to focus the study on the major roles of globalization of ASEAN competiveness in New Silk Road strategy for playing as an important actor in new world balancer of powers in international arena. The study applied a documentary research methodology by data collection and comparative analysis of related documents. The research results and discussion found that the launching of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 emerged as a new balancer in the rivalry of world power between two superpowers: USA and China, together with three powers: Russia, India, and Japan; and four major regional groupings: European Union (EU), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), US Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) economic blocs. To counter the US-TPP offensive, China has launched the globalization of new Silk Road strategy initiative. ASEAN Community and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) alone shall not have enough strength to balance the power of all these major world powers. The unification of ASEAN and RCEP with other sub-regional cooperation in Southeast Asia: the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework, shall empower ASEAN's centrality and competitiveness with enough strength to play its major role as a balancer in the new world balance of powers. The research conclusion recommends that Thailand with other ASEAN members countries should take their initiative to launch the formation of new major regional groupings: the establishment of Mekong Economic Cooperation Association (MECA) by merging MRC and GMS in the Mekong Basin on the one hand; and the establishment of Indian Ocean Economic Cooperation (IOEC), which ASEAN, Indian sub-continent, Middle East and African countries in the Indian Ocean Basin, shall be grouping in a new regional organization on the other hand. To this end, Thailand and other members of ASEAN Community shall be emerged as a main center of ASEAN centrality by launching an ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road Initiative in the strategy of New Silk Road connectivity between Asia, Europe and Africa. Therefore, ASEAN can play their major roles as new balancer in the globalization of Sino-American rivalry for new world economic superpower.

Keywords: *Globalization, Asean Competitiveness, New World Balance of Powers, Asean-Siamese Silk Road initiative*

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาบทบาทของประชาคมอาเซียนในการเพิ่มความเป็น โลกาภิวัตน์การแข่งขันของอาเซียนในยุทธ์ศาสตร์เส้นทางสายไหมใหม่ ซึ่งจะเป็นผู้ถ่วงดุลแห่งอำนาจในเวทีระหว่างประเทศ โดยใช้วิธีการดำเนินการวิจัยเอกสาร (Documentary Research) โดยการรวบรวมเอกสารและวิเคราะห์เปรียบเทียบข้อมูลเอกสาร ผลการวิจัยพบว่า การสถาปนาประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน (AEC) ในปี ค.ศ. 2015 ได้เพิ่มบทบาทสำคัญในการแข่งขันของอาเซียนในฐานะเป็นผู้ถ่วงดุลแห่งอำนาจใหม่ในการแข่งขันระหว่างสองประเทศมหาอำนาจโลกหลังยุคสงครามเย็น คือ สหรัฐอเมริกาและจีน ร่วมกับประเทศอำนาจที่สามคือ รัสเซีย อินเดีย ญี่ปุ่น และการรวมกลุ่มภูมิภาคหลักสี่กลุ่มคือ สหภาพยุโรป (EU) ความร่วมมือทางเศรษฐกิจของเอเชีย-แปซิฟิก (APEC) ความเป็นหุ้นส่วนทรานสแปซิฟิกร่วม (TPP) และความร่วมมือ บราซิล-รัสเซีย-อินเดีย-จีน-แอฟริกาใต้ (BRICS) เพื่อต้านทานแนวรุก TPP ของสหรัฐอเมริกา จีนได้ริเริ่มข้อเสนอยุทธศาสตร์เส้นทางสายไหมใหม่ ลำพังประชาคมอาเซียนกับความเป็นหุ้นส่วนเศรษฐกิจบูรณาการภูมิภาคอาเซียน (RCEP) เพียงอย่างเดียวจะไม่มีความเข้มแข็งเพียงพอเพื่อถ่วงดุลพลังอำนาจสำคัญโลกทั้งหมดข้างต้นได้ การรวมกันเป็นปึกแผ่นของอาเซียนและ ความเป็นหุ้นส่วนเศรษฐกิจบูรณาการภูมิภาคอาเซียน (RCEP) เข้ากับกลุ่มความร่วมมืออนุภูมิภาคอื่นๆ ในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ คือ คณะกรรมาธิการแม่น้ำโขง (MRC) ความร่วมมืออนุภูมิภาคแม่น้ำโขงมากขึ้น (GMS) และกรอบความร่วมมือแม่น้ำโขง-ล้านช้าง (LMC) ก็จะเพิ่มพลังอำนาจแห่งอาเซียนและการแข่งขันที่เข้มแข็งเพียงพอในการแสดงบทบาทเป็นผู้ถ่วงดุลอำนาจที่สำคัญในระบบดุลแห่งอำนาจใหม่ของโลกได้ ดังนั้น การวิจัยนี้จึงมีข้อสรุปและข้อเสนอแนะว่า ประเทศไทยควรร่วมมือกับประเทศสมาชิกอาเซียนอื่นจัดทำข้อเสนอริเริ่มให้มีการรวมกลุ่มภูมิภาคใหม่ ประกอบด้วย การจัดตั้งสมาคมความร่วมมือทางเศรษฐกิจลุ่มน้ำโขง (Mekong Economic Cooperation Association: MECA) โดยควบรวมคณะกรรมาธิการแม่น้ำโขง (MRC) และความร่วมมืออนุภูมิภาคลุ่มน้ำโขง (GMS)ในภูมิภาคลุ่มน้ำโขงด้านหนึ่ง ร่วมกับการจัดตั้งองค์การความร่วมมือทางเศรษฐกิจแห่งมหาสมุทรอินเดีย (Indian Ocean Economic Cooperation: IOEC) ซึ่งรวมอาเซียนกับประเทศในอนุภูมิภาค

อินเดีย ตะวันออกกลางและแอฟริกาในภาคพื้นมหาสมุทรอินเดีย ดังนั้น ประเทศไทยและสมาชิกอาเซียนอื่นจึงต้องมีข้อเสนอริเริ่มเส้นทางสายไหมสยาม-อาเซียน เพื่อให้อาเซียนเป็นศูนย์กลางเพิ่มบทบาทเป็นผู้ถ่วงดุลใหม่ในการแข่งขันระหว่างสหรัฐอเมริกาและจีนในการครองความเป็นมหาอำนาจเศรษฐกิจโลกใหม่ในยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ปัจจุบัน

คำสำคัญ: *โลกาภิวัตน์ การแข่งขันของอาเซียน ดุลภาพแห่งอำนาจในโลกยุคใหม่ ข้อเสนอริเริ่มเส้นทางสายไหมสยาม-อาเซียน*

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1. Introduction

During the 20th century, many world Statesmen, such as Woodrow Wilson and Winston Churchill, used the term “new world order” to refer to a new period of history characterized by a dramatic change in world political thought and the balance of power after World War I and World War II. They all saw the period as an opportunity to implement idealistic proposals for global governance in the sense of new collective efforts to address worldwide problems that go beyond the capacity of individual nation-states to solve, while always respecting the right of nations to self-determination. These proposals led to the creation of international organizations: United Nations and its Specialized Agencies, NATO, SEATO; international regimes: World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Bretton Woods system and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which were calculated both to maintain a balance of power in favor of the United States and to regularize cooperation between nations, in order to achieve a peaceful phase of world capitalism. These creations in particular and liberal internationalism in general, however, were regularly criticized and opposed by American ultraconservative business nationalists from the 1930s on (Buchanan, Patrick J.,1999). The regionalism of European Community (now European Union) in Europe and ASEAN (now ASEAN Community) in Asia emerged as new balancing powers in American capitalism - Soviet communism rivalry. At the end of the Cold War, the globalization of new world order started with Sino-American rivalry for world economic superpower by initiative of TPP vs. New Silk Road strategies. The objective of the paper focuses on study to what extent and how ASEAN can globalize its ASEAN centrality and competiveness to play its major roles as a new balancing power in the imitative rivalry of TPP vs. New Silk Road strategies by launching its own initiative of ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road strategy. The research methodology applied the globalization strategy of world system (Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King, 1990; Andre Gunder Frank, 1998; Joseph E. Stiglitz, 2007) and international political economy approaches.

2. Evolution of world globalization in the postmodern age to the cold war era

Globalization is the process of international integration arising from the interchange of world views, ideas products, and other aspects of culture, as well as all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society. (Al-Rodhan, R.F. Nayef and Gérard Stoudmann, 2006; Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King, 1990). Advanced progress in information, telecommunications and transportation infrastructure, including the rise of the telegraph and its posterity the Internet, are major factors in globalization, generating further interdependence of economic, social, and cultural activities (Stever, H.Guyford, 1972: 44). Though scholars place the origins of globalization in modern times, others trace its history long before the European age of discovery and voyages to the New World. Some even trace the origins to the third millennium BCE (Frank, Andre Gunder, 1998:15). In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the connectivity of the world's economies and cultures grew very quickly due to advanced transportation, telecommunications and information technology.

The term globalization has been increasingly used since the mid-1980s and especially since the mid-1990s. In 2000, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) identified four basic aspects of globalization: trade and financial transactions, capital and investment movements, migration and movement of people, and the dissemination of knowledge (International Monetary Fund, 2000). Environmental challenges such as climate change, cross-boundary water and air pollution, and over-fishing in the ocean around the world are linked with globalization (Bridges,G., 2002:1). Globalizing processes affect and are affected therefore by business and work organization, economics, socio-cultural resources, and the natural environment.

3. Globalization and new world order after the end of the cold war era

In the early 1990s, the end of the Cold War has had a dual impact on the new world order (Muzaffer Ercan Yilmaz, 2008: 27). On the one hand, the Soviet military withdrawal from Eastern Europe and the Third World brought an end to the Cold War, allowed democratization to proceed in many states previously ruled by Marxist dictatorships. The reduction of East-West tension also resulted in a great decrease in inter-state conflicts, some of which occurred due to the superpower ideological rivalry during the Cold War. As a result, defense budgets in many parts of the world radically decreased (United States, Government Accountability Office, 2008: 45). On the other hand, it didn't mean that the world is now at peace. The collapse of the "Soviet Empire" was followed by the emergence, or reemergence, of many serious conflicts in several areas that had been relatively quiescent during the Cold War. Some of these new conflicts have been taking place within the former Soviet Union, such as the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the fighting in Chechnya. But some conflicts also erupted or intensified in several countries outside of it and many Third World conflicts in which the superpowers were not deeply involved during the Cold War have persisted after it, like the secessionist movements in India, Sri Lanka and Sudan. In this respect, ethno-political conflicts aside, there have been other threats to international order that are beyond the full control of major powers, even the United States, the victor of the Cold War. The most notable ones include religious militancy, international terrorism, various North-South conflicts, and severe competition over scarce resources. Thus, the end of the Cold War can be said to have brought about both stability and instability to international relations.

In his speech, "Toward a New World Order", delivered on September 11, 1990 during a joint session of the US Congress, President George H. W. Bush described his objectives for post-Cold War global governance in cooperation with post-Soviet states. He stated: (New World Order Speech, 1990:18)

"Until now, the world we've known has been a world divided – a world of barbed wire and concrete block, conflict and cold war. Now, we can see a new world coming into view. A world in which there is the very real prospect of a new world order. In the words of Winston Churchill, a "world order" in which "the principles of justice and fair play ... protect the weak against the strong ..." A world where the United Nations, freed from cold war stalemate, is poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders. A world in which freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations".

In the post-Cold War's international political economy scenario, some countries – India and China – has continued, as an emerging world growth center for a decade, to do extraordinary well, with India's annual growth exceeding 8 percent and China's exceeding 10 percent (Stiglitz, Joseph E.: 2007: 293). Although in both countries, discontent simmered overgrowing income inequality, and governments in both were trying actively to improve the plight of those in the rural sector, the divide continued to grow between those countries, which somehow had learned to manage globalization well enough that they could grow rapidly and stably, and other developing countries. Consequently, both China and India were emerging as new world economic powers to counter balance the United States and Japan, the original world economic power in the post-Second World War.

At the peak of East Asian economic crisis, Japan proposed establishing an *Asian Monetary Fund*, a cooperative movement among the countries of Asia, and generously offered to put in $100 billion to help finance it – funds badly needed to help restore the economies in the region. The United States and the IMF did everything they do to stop this; both were worried that an *Asian Monetary Fund* would undermine their influence in the region, and both were willing to put their own selfish concerns above well-being of those countries (Stiglitz, Joseph E.: 2007: 260-261).They succeeded inscuppering the proposal, but only a few years later, in May 2000, the members of the ASEAN, plus China, Japan, and South Korea meeting in Thailand sighed the *Chiangmai Initiative,* agreeing in effect to exchange reserves, to set up the beginning of a regional cooperative arrangement for a new regional reserve system that would enhance their ability and competitiveness to meet international financial crises.

4. Chinese initiative of globalization of new Silk Road strategy

Humans have interacted over long distances for thousands of years. The overland Silk Road (Figure 1) that connected Asia, Europe, and Africa is a good example of the transformative power of trans-regional exchange that existed in the "Old World". Philosophy, religion, language, the arts, and other aspects of culture spread and mixed as nations exchanged products and ideas. In both the 15th and 16th

centuries, the Europeans made important discoveries in their exploration of the oceans around the world, including the start of transatlantic travel to the "New World" of the Americas. Global movement of people, goods, and ideas expanded significantly in the following centuries. Early on in the 19th century, the development of new forms of transportation, such as the steamship and railroads, and telecommunications that "compressed" time and space allowed for increasingly rapid rates of global interchange (O'Rourke, Kevin H. and Jeffrey G. Williamson, 2000: 19). In the 20th century, road vehicles, intermodal transport, and airlines made transportation even faster than before. In the age of new information technology revolution, the advent of electronic communications and telecommunications, most notably mobile phones and the Internet, connected billions of people without frontiers in new ways by the year 2020.

The original Silk Road came into being during the westward expansion of China's Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), which forged trade networks throughout what are today the Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan, as well as modern-day Pakistan and India to the south. Those routes eventually extended over four thousand miles to Europe (Dascuta, Saibal: 2015). Eurasian and Central Asia was thus the epicenter of one of the first waves of globalization, connecting eastern and western world markets, spurring immense wealth, and intermixing cultural and religious traditions. Valuable Chinese silk, spices, jade, and other goods moved west while China received gold and other precious metals, ivory, and glass products. The route peaked during the first millennium, under the leadership of first the Roman and then Byzantine Empires, and the Tang dynasty (618–907) in China. However, the Crusades, as well as advances by the Mongols in Central Asia, dampened trade. By the sixteenth century, Asian commerce with Europe had largely shifted to maritime trade routes, which were cheaper and faster. Today, Eurasian and Central Asian countries are economically isolated, with intra-regional trade making up just 6.2 percent of all cross-border commerce. They are also heavily dependent on Russia, particularly remittances – which dropped 15 percent in 2014 due to Russia's economic woes.

The Chinese initiative of the New Silk Road (One Belt and One Road: OBOR) strategy, which comprises the Overland Silk Road and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, was launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, with the aim of building a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along the ancient Silk Road routes. The vision, once realized, will directly benefit 4.4 billion people (or about 63%) of the global population So far, over 60 countries and international organizations have expressed interest in active involvement in the construction of the Belt and the Road, while a number of major bilateral and multilateral projects have been under way. (Sun Ruijun, Wang Haiqing, Jiang Li, 2015). As many of China's neighbors are located along the routes, they will be not only primary partners of cooperation, but also major beneficiaries of the initiative, which fully embodies the basic principles of Chinese neighborhood diplomacy: amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness.

Figure 1 Map of the Overland Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road (From Map Data@2015 Google)

According to the map, the overland New Silk Road will begin from Xi'an in central China before stretching west through Lanzhou (Gansu province), Urumqi (Xinjiang), and Khorgas (Xinjiang), which is near the border with Kazakhstan. The Silk Road then runs southwest from Central Asia to northern Iran before swinging west through Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. From Istanbul, the Silk Road crosses the Bosporus Strait and heads northwest through Europe, including Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Germany. Reaching Duisburg in Germany, it swings north to Rotterdam in the Netherlands. From Rotterdam, the path runs south to Venice, Italy – where it meets up with the equally ambitious maritime Silk Road. The maritime Silk Road will begin in Quanzhou in Fujian province, and also hit Guangzhou (Guangdong province), Beihai (Guangxi), Haikou (Hainan) and Hanoi in Vietnam before heading south to the Malacca Strait. From Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, the maritime Silk Road heads to Kolkata in India and Colombo in Sri Lanka then crosses the rest of the Indian Ocean to Nairobi in Kenya. From Nairobi, the maritime Silk Road goes north around the Horn of Africa and moves through the Red Sea into the Mediterranean Sea,with a stop in Athens, Greece, before meeting the Overland Silk Road in Venice, Italy.

The maps of the overland and maritime New Silk Roads drive home the enormous scale of the projects: the two Silk Roads combined will create a massive loop linking three continents (Asia-Europe-Africa) and two oceans (Pacific Ocean-Indian Ocean). If any single image conveys China's ambitions to reclaim its place as new "Middle Kingdom," linked to the world by trade, economic and cultural exchanges (Miksic, John N: 2013). Even the name of the project, the Silk Road, is inextricably linked to China's past as a source of goods and information for the rest of the world. China's economic vision is no less expansive than the geographic vision (Ralph Kauz, 2010). The New Silk Road will bring new opportunities and a new future to China and every country along the road that is seeking to develop an economic cooperation area that stretches from the Western Pacific, Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean and Baltic Sea.

Despite this expansive goal, it's not quite clear yet exactly what will tie together the disparate countries along the overland and maritime New Silk Road. China has discussed building up infrastructure along the route, especially railways and ports more than simply speedy transportation. China envisions a trade network where goods are more abundant and trade is more high-end. China expects the economic contact along the New Silk Road to boost productivity in each country (Shannon Tiezzi, 2014). As part of this vision, China has repeatedly stressed its economic compatibility with many of the countries along the planned route, and offered technological assistance to countries in key industries. Moreover, China also envisions the New Silk Road as a region of more capital convergence and currency integration – in other words, a region where currency exchanges are fluid and easy. The Chinese currency renminbi is now becoming more widely used in Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Thailand and local currencies will be the dominant means of economic deals.

China has multiple reasons for pursuing the New Silk Road. Chinese President Xi Jinping has promoted a vision of a more assertive China, while the new normal of slowing growth puts pressure on the country's leadership to open new markets for its consumer goods and excess industrial capacity. Promoting economic development in the troubled western province of Xinjiang, where separatist violence has been on the upswing, is another major concern, as is securing long-term energy supplies to China (James McBride, 2015). China's strategy is conceived as a two-pronged effort. The first focuses on overland infrastructure development through Central Asia and Eurasia - the transcontinental overland "Silk Road Economic Belt" - while the second foresees the expansion of maritime shipping routes through the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea - the maritime Silk Road.

In 2013, President Xi told an audience in Kazakhstan that he wants to create a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, both westwards – through the mountainous former Soviet republics – and southward, toward Pakistan, India, and the rest of Southeast Asia. Such a network would also expand the international use of Chinese currency, the renminbi, in transactions throughout the whole region, while new infrastructure could break the bottleneck in Asian connectivity. The Asian Development Bank, highlighting the need for more such investments, estimates that the region faces a yearly infrastructure financing shortfall of nearly $800 billion. President Xi subsequently announced plans for the maritime Silk Road at the 2013 ASEAN in Indonesia. To accommodate expanding maritime trade traffic, China will invest in port development throughout the Indian Ocean, in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Pakistan.

In 2014, President Xi concluded deals worth $30 billion with Kazakhstan, $15 billion with Uzbekistan, and $3 billion with Kyrgyzstan, in addition to spending $1.4 billion to help revamp the port of Colombo, in Sri Lanka. By November 2014, China had announced the creation of a $40 billion Silk Road Fund (Suwatchai Songwanich, 2015). In 2015 China finalized plans for the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which aims for $100 billion in initial capital (James McBride, 2015). Despite opposition from the United States, the AIIB attracted fifty-seven founding members, including American allies such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia. The negative American reaction to the AIIB underscores the extent to which some American policymakers fear that China's efforts will undercut Western institutions like the World Bank and expand the influence of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional security and economic pact. The AIIB will make those countries less dependent and less vulnerable to Russia, which has been a central focus of American policy for decades. It will bring an enormous amount of capital into this region and others at a time when it seems to be pretty scarce.

China envisions economic exchanges to gain closer cultural and political ties with each of the countries along the New Silk Road - resulting in a new model of mutual respect and mutual trust. The Silk Road creates not just an economic trade route, but a community with common interests, fate, and responsibilities. The New Silk Road represents China's visions for an interdependent economic and political community stretching from East Asia to Western Europe and Africa (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). It is clear that China believes its principles will be the guiding force in this new community "China's wisdom for building an open world economy and open international relations is being drawn on more and more each day," (Shannon Tiezzi, 2014: 15). But for all the ambitious talk, details remain scarce on how this vision will be implemented. Many questions may be raised: Will the overland and maritime New Silk Roads be limited to a string of bilateral agreements between China and individual countries, or between China and regional groups like the European Union and ASEAN? Is there a grander vision, such as a regional free trade zone incorporating all the Silk Road countries? Or will China be the tie that binds it all together, with no special agreements directly linking, say, Kazakhstan and Germany? Or will it be possible to launch an initiative for a grander integration of the existing ASEAN Community with newly proposals of the creation of a Mekong Economic Cooperation Association (MECA) and of an Indian Ocean Economic Cooperation (IOEC) on the basis of an ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road Initiative?

5. Globalizing ASEAN competitiveness by launching ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road Initiative

After the first two decades when ASEAN had to experiment with a wide variety of active economic cooperation arrangements among its members and with externals friends and neighbors. (Sompong Sucharitkul, 2015: 7-8). ASEAN endeavors therefore to attain economic community after the launching of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, ready to strengthen its competitiveness in world trade system. ASEAN's economy is now closely connected with the globalization of world economy. ASEAN Charter will stay committed to the basic policy of opening-up; build a new pattern of ASEAN connectivity and all-round opening-up to integrate itself deeper into the world economic system. The initiative of new Silk Road strategy will enable ASEAN to further expand its regional connectivity, deepen its regional integration, enhance its competitiveness for opening-up, and strengthening its mutually beneficial cooperation with countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and the rest of the world. As a center of continental and insular ASEAN, Thailand shall take imitative to build up an ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road (ASSR) strategy, compatible linkages to Chinese overland and maritime Silk Road connectivity. To this end, ASEAN competitiveness is effectively committed to sharing more responsibilities and obligations within its capabilities, and making greater contributions to the peace and development of mankind in the enlarged transcontinental Asia-Europe-Africa connectivity by ASSR-ASEAN regional integration.

The researcher recommended that Thailand shall launch a new initiative of ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road (ASSR) strategy that will begin from Da Nang in central Vietnam to Savannakhet (Laos) – Mukdahan (Thailand), before stretching west through Mae Sod (Thailand) – Myawaddy (Myanmar) and then runs northwest to Chittagong – Dhaka (Bangladesh) through up-north India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project to New Delhi (India); that was an ambitious undertaking which was initially launched under the vestiges of the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and later incorporated into the transport sector of Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (Tanvi Pate, 2010), then runs northwest again though Pakistan and Afghanistan to join with Chinese

overland Silk Road in Tehran (Iran). The ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road together with the Chinese Silk Road then runs together southwest from Central Asia to northern Iran before swinging west through Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. From Istanbul, the ASEAN-Chinese Silk Road crosses the Bosporus Strait and heads northwest through Europe, including Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Germany. Reaching Duisburg in Germany, it swings north to Rotterdam in the Netherlands. From Rotterdam, the path runs south to Venice, Italy – where it meets up with the equally ambitious maritime Silk Road.

The said recommendation will be compliment to Chinese New Silk Road connectivity when President Xi Jinping together with Prime Minister Li Keqiang's trips to Southeast Asia ended up in some new revolutionary strategies to enhance China's connectivity for boosting cooperation with ASEAN countries. The new maritime Silk Road has been proposed and China has already started some cooperation tactics by funding infrastructure processes in member countries. (Lola Caballero Laporta, 2015: 4) However, there is still more convergence of interests than many might have noticed between development strategies of ASEAN and Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries, either collectively or individually. China has proposed strategic initiatives such as the New Silk Road (One Belt and One Road: OBOR strategy), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework (LMC; Xinhua, 2015: 1). ASEAN has for many years strived to realize a high-level integration of regional community, free flow of goods, services, capital, investment and skilled labor, facilitative institutional mechanisms, as well as deepened people-to-people interaction and understanding, to which enhanced connectivity is essential for the effective realization of ASEAN Community integration.

With shared goals, the Chinese New Silk Road (OBOR strategy), AIIB and LMC initiatives could play an enormous complementary role in the building of the ASEAN Community integration as well as the implementation of ASEAN member states' specified each development plans by providing financial, technological and personnel assistance, among others. The China-Thailand railway project, for which a launching ceremony was recently held in Thailand, could serve as an example of how the Belt and Road initiative is a joint "symphony" of Chinese New Silk Road and ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road played by all parties concerned on an equal footing, and brings benefits to all. ASEAN connectivity for regional integration and Chinese initiative for joint-building of overland and maritime Silk Road can complement each other. Based on equality and mutual benefit, the Chinese New Silk Road (OBOR strategy) initiative could be aligned with the development strategies of ASEAN-MEKONG of Southeast Asian countries and they make headways together to the benefit of regional growth, competitiveness, peace, and stability.

In 2010, ten Southeast Asian countries adopted the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity as their own guidelines on building "a well-connected ASEAN that will contribute towards a more competitive and resilient ASEAN" (Zhang Chunxiao, 2015: 2). The Master Plan identified a number of prioritized actions, including developing transport, energy and telecommunications infrastructure, reducing policy and institutional barriers, harmonizing relevant common rules and standards, encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as promoting cultural exchanges. Improved physical logistics, institutional and people-to-people connectivity is expected to help achieve the goals of facilitating ASEAN Community integration, boosting ASEAN's global competitiveness, enhancing ASEAN people's quality of life and well-being livelihood, as well as promoting regional economic and social development. Well-designed as the Master Plan is multiple challenges have been slowing its implementation, which include scarcity of financing resources, uneven levels of development within ASEAN and certain institutional obstacles. Efforts within the region are not enough to realize ASEAN integration, adding a large amount of external assistance is required. A considerable portion of ASEAN members are developing nations, some even comparatively impoverished, and thus they need help to bridge the wide gaps in infrastructure and economic development. Therefore, China set up the Silk Road Fund and spearheaded the establishment of the AIIB, both expected to finance of ASEAN connectivity projects in order to improve its infrastructure throughout the region both on land and at sea in the mainland-insular ASEAN connectivity.

China is appreciated for its "constructive role" in promoting regional connectivity through various initiatives including the establishment of the AIIB and the launch of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road that will not only connect China with the ASEAN, but also link them up with other countries and outer regions along the New Silk Road network. It would increase ASEAN competitiveness, spur economic growth and bring more opportunities for mutual benefit, such as the transport infrastructure for promotion of maritime commerce, disaster relief, search and rescue, and environmental protection and conservation.

Moreover, the New Silk Road will help expand regional economic partnership that lead to progressive cooperation between ASEAN members themselves and ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, and South Korea), and to create more competitiveness for ASEAN developing regions as a whole to connect better with more developed areas that bolster ASEAN regional connectivity, competitiveness, and prosperity.

A project of railway cooperation between Thailand and China was recently launched in central Thailand's Ayutthaya Province, which will be Thailand's first standard-gauge double-track railway line. The kickoff of the railway project marked a good start of Sino-Thai transportation cooperation, stressing it would boost the competitiveness of Thai economy and further propel Thai economic growth. Moreover, it could be viewed as an endeavor by the two countries to implement the New Silk Road initiative in which Thailand has a lot of untapped potential in promoting the implementation, given its geographic advantages as a key junction that connects mainland and maritime ASEAN member countries (Ralph Kauz, 2010). Stepped-up bilateral cooperation in developing infrastructure connectivity will not only help build Thailand into an increasingly important regional transport hub, but also play an exemplary role in improving regional connectivity and pushing forward the development of trans-Asian railway network.

The Thai government has drawn up the Strategic Framework for Development of Thailand's Transportation Infrastructure 2015-2022, which aims at a rapid and efficient railway network so as to achieve better connectivity between Thailand and other ASEAN countries, reinforce Thailand's position as a regional hub and seek more development opportunities. It was under the Strategic Framework that Thailand and China inked a Memorandum of Understanding on railway cooperation on December 19, 2014. In addition, the two countries are collaborating in building an 845-kilometer railway line, which uses 1.435-meter standard gauge with trains operating at top speeds of 160-180 kph. The project will use China's technology, standard and equipment (Zhang Chunxiao, 2015). Railway development is definitely helpful for Thailand to be advantageously located in the middle of Southeast Asia and is becoming more and more a center of manufacturing, logistics, distribution and training in the region. In this connection, Thailand's railways will lead all the way to Europe via China's railway network, making the country the real ASEAN transport and logistics hub in the future.

ASEAN is perhaps one of the most diverse regional groupings in the world, in terms of both economic development and political, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. There is a conspicuous divide between the six older and richer ASEAN members and four newer and poorer members, namely, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV countries). ASEAN's diversity, directly or indirectly, poses challenges to the region's integration process. ASEAN has come up with several initiatives in an attempt to close development gaps. The Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan and Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity envisions that enhancing intra-regional connectivity will promote ASEAN competitiveness, economic growth, and narrows its development gaps by sharing the benefits of growth with poorer groups and communities (Zhang Chunxiao, 2015: 3). In addition to ASEAN's own initiatives, Chinese New Silk Road initiative and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework will also help fill the gaps by bettering connectivity for lagging countries and lagging regions within Mekong countries, bringing their competitive advantages into full play, creating more opportunities for trade, investment, and growth. The LMC framework was proposed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in November 2014 when he attended the 17th China-ASEAN leaders' meeting. In November, 2015, China, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam officially launched the LMC framework, a new mechanism tasked with alleviating poverty, bridging development gaps and realizing full integration into regional and global economy.

At the first LMC foreign ministers meeting, participating officials decided to cooperate in three key areas, politico-security issues, economic affairs and sustainable development, as well as social affairs and people-to-people exchanges, which were correspond to the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, namely, the political-security community, the economic community, and the socio-cultural community. At this stage, there are several prioritized areas of cooperation under the LMC framework, including connectivity, industrial capacity cooperation, cross-border economic cooperation, as well as cooperation in water resources, agriculture and poverty reduction (Zhang Chunxiao, 2015). Closer cooperation among the six countries will promote economic and social development, enhance sustainable development and narrow the gaps among countries in the Greater Mekong sub-region so as to contribute more to ASEAN Community building and China-ASEAN cooperation. The LMC, if effectively implemented, will help raise the levels of economic development in underdeveloped areas along the Mekong River. Benefits from

unimpeded logistics and economic cooperation among the six countries along the Lancang-Mekong River would also be extended to other ASEAN countries, as a result of which China-ASEAN ties will be further augmented the connectivity of ASEAN competitiveness with the New Silk Road connectivity.

Under the China-United States rivalry, the global strategic transformations in Asia-Pacific were developed from ASEAN-centered and ASEAN-led arrangements. Such arrangements have been flexible and not rigidly rule-based in a diverse, rapidly transforming region. In this context, the East Asia Summit (EAS) originally comprised the 10 ASEAN member's states and six Dialogue partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea) and subsequently accepted the Russian Federation and the United States into its ranks (Chitriya Pinthong, 2015: 20). The inter-linked of Pacific Ocean with Indian Ocean in terms of economics, security and geopolitics, was recently emerged by not only the Chinese Maritime Silk Road, but also the idea of an Indo-Pacific Treaty proposed by Indonesia in ASEAN cycles. In addition, the connectivity between India and ASEAN – manifested in the Trilateral Highway project linking India, Myanmar, and Thailand – and the complementarity between India's look east-act east policies have help integrate India into the Asia-Pacific (Chitriya Pinthong, 2015: 21). Furthermore, the growing connectivity links between the Pacific Ocean – Indian Ocean continuum reflected the reality of more growing interdependence between the two oceans and enhanced ASEAN's competitiveness.

Both China and Japan are active in sub-regional cooperation in Southeast Asia, under various frameworks such as the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) and the ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation, and have significant bilateral projects in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand (Sarah Teo and Bhubhindar Singh. ed., 2014: 23). For this reason, the unification of ASEAN Community with other sub-regional cooperation in Southeast Asia, comprising the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), and Chinese proposed Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework shall empower ASEAN competitiveness with enough strength to play its major role as a balancer in the new world balance of powers. As a result, the researcher recommends that Thailand with other ASEAN members countries should take their initiative to launch an ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road and the formation of two new major regional groupings: the establishment of Mekong Economic Cooperation Association (MECA) by merging MRC and GMS in the Mekong Basin on the one hand; and the establishment of Indian Ocean Economic Cooperation (IOEC), which ASEAN, Indian sub-continent, Middle East, and African countries in the Indian Ocean Basin shall be grouping in a new regional organization on the other hand. To this end, Thailand and other members of ASEAN Community shall be emerged as a main center in the strategy of New Silk Road connectivity between Asia, Europe, and Africa. To this end, the cooperation of ASEAN Community in Asia and the European Union in Europe can play their major roles as new balancing power in the globalization of Sino-American rivalry and competition for world economic superpower.

6. Conclusion

With the globalization of its competiveness and connectivity in the New Silk Road strategy, ASEAN can play major roles as an important actor in new world balance of powers in international arena. The launching of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 emerged as a new balancer in the rivalry of world power between two superpowers: USA and China, together with three powers: Russia, India, and Japan; and four major regional groupings: European Union (EU), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), US Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) economic bloc. ASEAN Community and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) alone shall not have enough strength to balance the power of all these major world powers. Therefore, the unification of ASEAN and its RCEP with other sub-regional cooperation in Southeast Asia, comprising the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework, shall empower ASEAN's centrality and competitiveness with enough strength to play its major roles as a balancer in the new world balance of powers. For this reason, Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries has to adopt its own ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road strategy to counter balance with the Chinese New Silk Road initiative and the US Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), as the rivalry between the two superpowers in the new world balance of powers. To this end, Thailand and other members of ASEAN Community shall be emerged as a main center of ASEAN centrality by launching an ASEAN-Siamese Silk Road Initiative in the strategy of New Silk Road connectivity between Asia, Europe, and Africa. Therefore, ASEAN can play their major roles as new balancer in the globalization of Sino-American rivalry for new world economic superpower.

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