



ASEAN REGIONALISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GLOBAL SPATIAL POLITICS: A STUDY ON MARINE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN SEAS

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ABSTRACT

ASEAN regionalism is a complex and evolving process shaped by various actors and interactions. While previous studies often framed regionalism as the formation of regional intergovernmental organisations for integration, this study argues for a broader understanding that includes non-state actors, ecological dynamics, and geopolitical contexts. Drawing from critical geography, geopolitics, and area studies, this study proposes a novel analytical framework based on global spatial politics. It redefines regionalism as a spatial ideology and practice of region-construction aimed at controlling natural-social-technical space. This framework gives regions ontological status as actors in international relations and allows for a more nuanced understanding of ASEAN's role in regional governance. This study examines the historical evolution and multi-dimensional nature of ASEAN regionalism—covering security, economic integration, and environmental cooperation—with a particular focus on marine environmental protection. It highlights how ASEAN's environmental regionalism is shaped by both political will and the pressure of transboundary ecological issues. By integrating theoretical analysis with empirical observations, this study offers insights into ASEAN's capacity for spatial governance. This study also contributes to comparative regionalism studies by incorporating environmental dimensions often overlooked in traditional international relations frameworks. Ultimately, it suggests that global spatial politics can help reinterpret the processes of region formation in Southeast Asia beyond institutional and economic paradigms.

Keywords: Global spatial politics, ASEAN regionalism, environmental governance, blue economy, marine protection

INTRODUCTION

Regionalism in Southeast Asia has long been viewed through institutional and comparative lenses, particularly in contrast to the European Union (EU) model. However, such a narrow framework fails to capture the diverse and evolving nature of ASEAN regionalism. Rather

than emerging solely from state-driven initiatives or formal intergovernmental organisations, ASEAN regionalism is shaped by multiple actors—state and non-state—and by the complex interplay of geopolitical, ecological, and technological forces. This multidimensional reality challenges conventional understandings of how regions form, function, and exert influence in global politics.

This study posits that the concept of ASEAN regionalism can be reinterpreted through the lens of global spatial politics. Rather than treating regionalism as a fixed institutional arrangement, this framework conceptualises it as a dynamic spatial ideology and practice, seeking to shape, govern, and occasionally contest natural-social space. By adopting this approach, it is possible to assign ontological status to regions as active participants in international relations, rather than perceiving them as static geographic containers. This re-conceptualisation enables a more nuanced analysis of ASEAN's evolving role in both regional and global governance.

Methodologically, this study combines theoretical exploration with empirical case study. It examines ASEAN's historical development across three core dimensions—security cooperation, economic integration, and environmental governance—and pays special attention to marine environmental protection in the Southeast Asian seas. This study highlights how environmental regionalism in ASEAN, while less institutionalised, reflects deep-seated efforts to manage transboundary ecological risks and reaffirm ASEAN's centrality in shaping regional order. In doing so, this study also uncovers the agency of non-state actors, the influence of global supply chains, and the embeddedness of ecological concerns within broader geopolitical struggles.

By focusing on marine environmental protection as an illustrative case, this study makes two key contributions. First, it introduces global spatial politics as an original theoretical framework for understanding the formation and governance of regions. Second, it expands the field of comparative regionalism by foregrounding environmental dimensions that are often overlooked in mainstream international relations theories. These contributions are particularly timely, given growing environmental pressures, maritime tensions, and power rivalries in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN REGIONALISM: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

A substantial body of literature has examined ASEAN regionalism, often through a comparative lens with the EU. Some scholars have viewed the EU model as the normative benchmark, implying that ASEAN's efforts may fall short if they deviate from European integration model. However, this assumption has been challenged by scholars such as Acharya (2017), who argue that ASEAN's security practices are fundamentally distinct from those of other regions. Following the Second World War, ASEAN states coordinated to contain great-power rivalries in Southeast Asia, leading to the development of a regional framework for security cooperation in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific.

A hallmark of ASEAN's foreign policy has been the "ASEAN Way" – a diplomatic style characterised by informality, consensus-building, and respect for sovereignty. In the post-Cold War period, ASEAN positioned itself as a central actor in regional architecture, a role that was largely accepted and supported by external powers. ASEAN regionalism is thus distinct in being minimally institutionalised and led predominantly by small and middle powers. Acharya (1997) further argues that the "ASEAN Way" is not aimed at policy convergence in political or economic values but rests on procedural norms designed to safeguard sovereignty. This approach results in a regionalism typified by what some scholars have called "small horses pulling big carts" (Kim 2012: 111; Kun 2017: 50), highlighting ASEAN's ambitious regional objectives despite modest institutional capacities.

While these studies have significantly enhanced our understanding of ASEAN's distinctive regionalism, several important questions remain. First, how can we explain the variation in ASEAN regionalism across domains such as security, economic cooperation, and ecological governance? Second, what underlying factors drive the cyclical rise and decline of ASEAN regionalism over different historical periods (Felker 2001)?

Although security regionalism has been widely studied, ASEAN's economic regionalism also warrants attention. Since the 1950s, East Asia has witnessed a gradual but steady trend of economic integration. This has been reflected in the growth of intra-regional trade and investment, and the proliferation of international production networks and supply chains—especially those driven by Japanese multinational corporations. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) finds that economic regionalism in Asia was largely a product of functional interdependence rather than top-down political design (ADB 2008). As regional economies matured, East Asia emerged as a hub in global production systems, deepening market-driven economic interconnections.

This account aligns with Katzenstein's (1996) argument that economic regionalism in Asia is primarily shaped by market dynamics rather than political planning. From its founding in 1967 until the early 1990s, ASEAN remained a politically and security-oriented alliance with minimal focus on economic integration. However, the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis marked a turning point. In response, ASEAN countries undertook significant institutional reforms, resulting in the adoption of the ASEAN Charter (Oba 2019) and the establishment of ASEAN+3 as a platform for financial cooperation (Dent 2013). The later ASEAN+6 grouping played a key role in developing the New Regional Economic Order (NREO), particularly for developing countries in the Asia-Pacific. This NREO, distinct from the Washington Consensus, reflects a collective effort among developing states to craft a new blueprint for trade and economic integration. It also marks a transition in the ASEAN Way from a purely political or soft law principle to a flexible yet binding legal structure that reinforces regional governance (Chaisse and Hsieh 2023).

In recent decades, ASEAN regionalism has also expanded into environmental domains. The region's response to transboundary ecological issues, such as haze pollution and natural disasters, illustrates the growing importance of environmental governance. ASEAN's role in these areas does not resemble that of a dominant regional leader. Instead, it adopts the roles of convener, facilitator, or provider of regional public goods (Tan 2017). This functional diversity suggests that ASEAN practices regionalism differently across various sectors, raising the need for a more systematic exploration of its adaptive governance mechanisms.

ASEAN's historical evolution in the security domain also underscores its strategic flexibility. Member states have sought to navigate geopolitical shifts, including great power competition in East Asia and the rise of Indo-Pacific regionalism. ASEAN's ability to maintain its centrality amid these shifts has been critical (Yoshimatsu 2023). However, mainstream explanations often overemphasise external power structures while underestimating the role of intra-ASEAN dynamics and non-state actors in shaping regionalism from within.

These debates expose the conceptual limitations of existing approaches to regionalism. Scholars in international relations often define regionalism as a process of increasing political, economic, and cultural coherence among geographically proximate states (Dent 2013). Yet, such definitions tend to presuppose that integration is the primary or inevitable goal. In reality, major powers often employ regionalism to pursue strategic interests, while international organisations use it to maintain geopolitical balance (Quan and Xianwu 2021). These dynamics call for a more critical and comprehensive theoretical lens—one that can accommodate fragmented, multi-actor, and spatially contested forms of regional ordering.

In sum, ASEAN regionalism cannot be adequately understood through a single-dimensional or teleological model of integration. Its development has been contingent, multidimensional, and spatially uneven. A more grounded conceptual framework is needed to explain how ASEAN's regional practices are constructed, negotiated, and spatialised across time and issue domains. The next section proposes such a framework by introducing the concept of global spatial politics.

REGIONALISM AND REGIONS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF GLOBAL SPATIAL POLITICS

Debates on regionalism have long revolved around its historical evolution, most notably the distinction between so-called “old” and “new” regionalism. During the Cold War, old regionalism was characterised by strategic regions established by sovereign states to engage in geopolitical competition. In contrast, the new regionalism that emerged after the Cold War represented a transition from regional heterogeneity to homogeneity, defined by the convergence of cultural, security, economic, and political systems within specific regions (Hettne 2003).

Old regionalism primarily involved formal intergovernmental relations and the establishment of formal regional institutions, such as free trade agreements and security alliances. In comparison, new regionalism was closely associated with economic globalisation, and non-state actors became active agents within the context of structural transformations in global society. This form of regionalism was frequently promoted by both state and non-state actors, reflecting the growing need for cooperative responses to global challenges (Hettne et al. 1999; Söderbaum 2004; Börzel 2016).

However, Hettne (2003: 28) cautioned that referring to the new regionalism as the “second wave” may be misleading, arguing that old and new regionalisms can coexist. He emphasised that, in the post-Cold War context, strategic regions were transformed, expanding their functional domains beyond security to include development, ecology, and environmental governance. These developments illustrate that regionalism continues to evolve and remains an unfinished process (Hettne et al. 1999). As a result, scholars have increasingly turned to a new theoretical approach, comparative regionalism, to better understand the complexity and diversity of regional processes.

A review of the existing literature indicates that the conceptualisation of regionalism and regions is informed by three main theoretical perspectives (Paasi 2010). Nevertheless, these perspectives are deemed inadequate for a comprehensive comparative analysis of regionalism. Hence, a novel theoretical framework is necessary to enable more systematic and interdisciplinary research in the field.

The first approach, rooted in classical geographic traditions, conceptualises regions as discrete, bounded, and continuous geographical entities on the Earth's surface, each characterised by its own distinct features. In traditional geography, the identification of homogeneous physical regions was a common analytical method, and this logic has shaped the understanding of regions in international relations. For example, the world has long been divided by the concept of continents, a practice dating back to the ancient Greeks, who debated whether to divide the world into two (Europe and Asia) or three (Europe, Asia, and Africa) parts. It was not until the early sixteenth century, with the recognition of the Americas as the “new world”, that European geographers began adopting a four-continent model.

Drawing from this tradition, some international relations scholars define regionalism as the theory and practice of a group of geographically proximate countries promoting regional integration. This perspective places strong emphasis on geographical proximity as the

foundational geospatial condition for the emergence and development of regionalism. In traditional geopolitical analysis, geographical space was typically examined in relation to its natural characteristics. For instance, geographic distance has been treated as a variable in theories of power transition. One such theory posits that while power transitions within the same region have historically led to conflict, there is relatively limited evidence of war resulting from interregional power transitions (Ruizhi 2022).

Furthermore, traditional geopolitical thought assumes that states seek to control geographic space to ensure their survival, often interpreting state-controlled regions as exclusive and enclosed. In contrast, critical geopolitics introduces the concepts of de-sovereign territorialisation and de-politicisation of space, advocating for an open and shared spatial logic that challenges conventional notions of spatial closure. This approach significantly broadens the analytical lens of spatial politics by foregrounding the role of human agency in shaping and reconstructing space. However, critics argue that an overemphasis on openness neglects the persistent efforts of actors to regulate and govern space, which remains simultaneously open and constrained by particular social relations.

The second approach conceptualises regions as given statistical units. This view is commonly employed by international economic organisations such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). While this approach facilitates empirical research through the operationalisation of statistical indicators, it tends to treat regions as static and homogenous, failing to capture the dynamic and socially constructed nature of region formation. A key example of this method is the analysis of trade regionalism and economic integration through the measurement of global trade flows. Within this perspective, the concept of “regionness” refers to the extent to which issue areas previously governed at the national level are delegated to regional organisations—marking a process of regional integration (Emerson 2014; Lucia 2019).

This approach reflects the multifaceted nature of regionalism, which often involves the institutionalisation of cooperation through regional organisations. In some cases, regionalism is driven by major powers pursuing strategic or economic interests. In others, developing countries form regional alliances as a means of counterbalancing powerful external actors. This latter case has been termed “protective regionalism”, emerging as a strategic response to challenges such as geopolitical rivalry and globalisation (Börzel 2016: 46). Nonetheless, in both scenarios, states often hesitate to cede authority to regional institutions. Consequently, this approach offers a relatively narrow interpretation of regionalism and inadequately explains how regions are actively constructed through political processes.

The third approach views regions as products of social practices and discourses, constructed through political, cultural, economic, and power-based interactions. For example, during the Second World War, the United States (US) Ethnogeographic Board categorised strategically significant “world areas” and provided regional knowledge to the US military. In conjunction with wartime needs, regional experts produced a systematic classification of global regions, which continues to shape contemporary understandings—such as the term Southeast Asia—a region constructed through colonial and military discourses (Godehardt 2014).

Similarly, Marxist theory emphasises that the driving force of regional dynamics is capital accumulation, which interacts with the uneven development of global capitalism. Concepts such as the “heartland” and “rimland” (from classical geopolitics), the “core-periphery” structure of the international economy, “regulatory spaces,” and Bob Jessop’s “spatio-temporal fix” (in international political economy) all emphasise the role of social relations in shaping space (Lambach 2022: 286).

However, these approaches have often overlooked the ontological status of space itself. As Lambach (2022: 286) notes, “their main impetus is not to theorize space per se but to use space as a theoretical instrument to move forward debates about some other concept (such as security, global governance, or inequality)”. Echoing this, Bruno Latour argues that social systems cannot be fully understood without considering the non-human elements—such as technologies, objects, and physical landscapes—that help constitute them (Kleinschmidt and Strandsbjerg 2010). In his view, space is not a pre-existing entity but is constructed through interactions between human and non-human agents (Kleinschmidt and Strandsbjerg 2010).

Considering the aforementioned limitations in traditional approaches, this study seeks to establish a new framework for comparative regionalism studies grounded in spatial political analysis. This endeavour draws inspiration from recent academic efforts to establish global spatial politics as a new analytical paradigm. This approach argues that social space is essential to the existence of both human and non-human actors, and that such space comprises the environments—natural and social—within which actions occur. Social space functions not only as a medium through which ideas, resources, populations, and power circulate, but also as a contested domain over which actors strive to exercise control.

According to this framework, the formation of social space is influenced by two distinct but interrelated factors: (1) the natural-social spaces themselves and (2) the spatial relations among actors who attempt to control these spaces. The resulting spatial forms are thus shaped by the interplay between these two factors. Crucially, the construction of social space is not merely symbolic or discursive; it also involves material dimensions such as geography, technology, and non-human entities (Lambach 2022).

When applying this perspective to the study of regions in international relations, it is important to avoid geographical or geopolitical determinism. Instead, how changes in natural space—when mediated by specific techno-social conditions—influence region formation must be considered. While physical geography (e.g., terrain or distance) is relatively stable, developments in technology (such as high-speed rail and digital communication) and social transformation (e.g., the emergence of the information society) continually reshape natural-social space. These ongoing changes affect both the incentives and risks associated with political interaction (Starr 2013).

Furthermore, space is continuously constructed by various actors engaged in socio-political struggles. Although specific spatial arrangement may appear stable at times, they are inherently dynamic. The form and function of space are determined by a multitude of elements, including ideas, capital, people, and resources. Hence, regions can be understood as spatial constructs—imagined rather than given—and without fixed geographic boundaries (Grant et al. 2022). In this sense, space is not a passive container, but a product of ongoing social processes. Accordingly, the task of global spatial politics is to uncover how space is (re)produced through social relations (Gruby 2017).

This multidimensional analysis, illustrated in Figure 1, posits that regions are emergent constructs produced through the dynamic interaction between a natural-social space and the spatial relations that seek to organise it. This study conceptualises these spatial relations across three core dimensions: symbolic, productive and regulatory-legal. Within this framework, regionalism is defined as a purposive consciousness—the collective intention of actors to construct a particular social space under specific techno-social conditions. Regionalism unfolds through the interplay of these relations. It is advanced through symbolic narratives that frame shared challenges, such as the construction of a regional security crisis or the promotion of a Blue Economy vision. It is materialised through productive investments that create new infrastructures, such as railways and their associated supply chains. Ultimately, it is codified

through regulatory-legal instruments such as the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA), which is reinforced by Port State Control Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and translates intention into binding spatial regulation. It is through this tripartite dynamic that the ideas, values, and policy agendas of regionalism actively shape space, and by extension, world order (Söderbaum 2019).

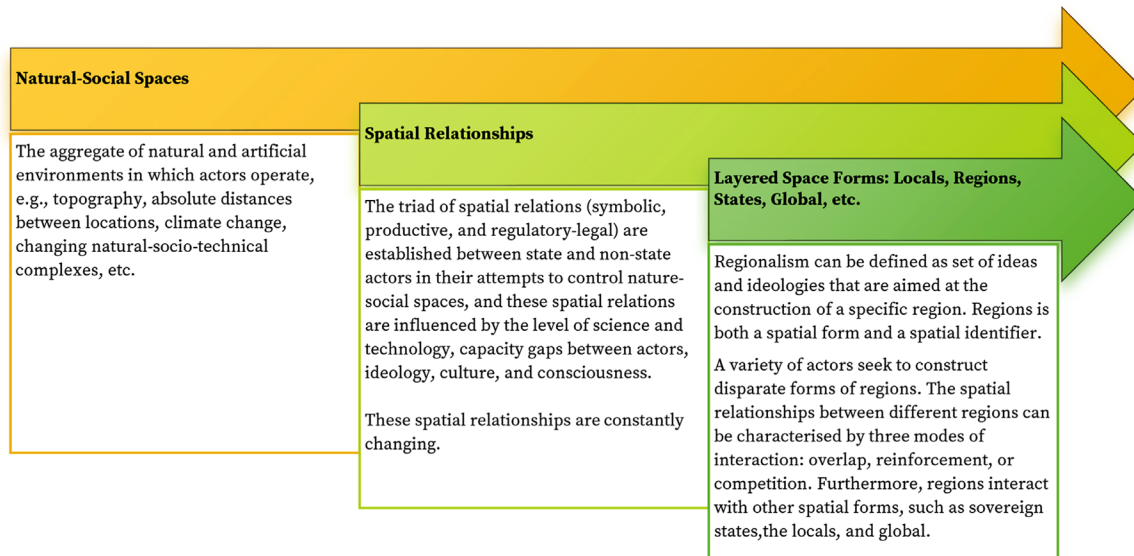


Figure 1: Regionalism and the process of region construction in international relations from the perspective of global spatial politics.

Natural-social space thus becomes a significant variable in regionalism. For example, enhanced infrastructure connectivity may increase interdependence and stimulate regional cooperation. Similarly, transboundary environmental degradation can generate a sense of shared ecological destiny and incentivise regional responses.

The construction of regions is a competitive and cooperative process involving diverse actors. Even among those who agree on the normative value of regionalism, disagreements may arise regarding the specific shape or scope of the region. Region-building can intersect, reinforce, or conflict with the construction of other spatial forms, such as the nation-state or local communities. Therefore, regions are best understood as dynamic spatial forms—neither static nor natural—that evolve in response to changing global conditions (Paes 2023). Regionalism and the regions it constructs are socio-historical phenomena shaped by shifts in global political, economic, and cultural relations, as well as evolving strategic visions (Lucia 2019).

To develop this new analytical framework, it is necessary to clarify two core concepts: spatial forms and spatial layers. Spatial forms refer to the norms and rules that define how space is constructed and scaled. For instance, spatial forms such as empires, localities, regions, sovereign states, and the globe all reflect distinct social constructions with different rules of interaction. These forms emerge through historical social practices and are continuously shaped by the actors that inhabit them.

Spatial layers, by contrast, emphasise the coexistence and interaction of different spatial forms. One layer (e.g., the state) may encompass or challenge another (e.g., a region). These layers are not closed systems but permeable and interdependent. The concept of layering highlights how various spatial scales interact and how social forces construct and reconstruct them based on prevailing conditions (Lambach 2022). Importantly, spatial layers may dissipate if the forces that sustain them weaken (Niemann 2000).

Within this framework, regions are granted ontological status. Traditional international relations often distinguish between international (macro) regions and subnational (micro) regions. These are generally treated as static and predefined entities, evaluated based on organisational structures or physical geography. However, such conceptions obscure the dynamic processes of regional formation and evolution. The new analytical model introduced here sees regions not as fixed outcomes but as socially constructed layers of space that interact with other forms such as states, localities, or empires. Regional layers may align with or contradict other spatial logics, but they should be understood as equally real and influential. In the widest interpretation, regions can be conceptualised as temporally variable, rapidly shifting spaces, comprising material and discursive social practices. Simultaneously, they establish media, contexts, and arenas for social agency and discourse (Wippel 2013).

Finally, this framework addresses a key shortcoming in state-centric international relations theory: the tendency to treat space as a closed, hierarchical container. By rethinking space as dynamic, multilayered, and contested, this study suggests that understanding regionalism requires attention to how regions are constructed in relation to—and sometimes in opposition to—other spatial forms. Regionalism, therefore, should be studied not only as a policy instrument but also as a spatial project shaped by human and non-human forces alike.

ASEAN REGIONALISM FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE MARINE ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN SEAS

There is a plethora of typologies of regionalism, including those pertaining to the economy, security, and the environment. Despite the long-standing practice of these forms of regionalism, the research literature has predominantly focused on economic and security regionalism (Balsiger and Van Deveer 2012). The environmental dimension of regional governance has been comparatively neglected in the fields of international relations, international environmental politics, and comparative regionalism (Obydenkova 2022). However, scholarly attention to environmental regionalism has recently begun to increase.

The literature on environmental regionalism can be broadly classified into two main categories. The first defined environmental regionalism as an initiative that seeks territorial environmental governance of transnational ecological regions, such as mountain ranges or river basins. The second examined how regional international organisations govern the environment in the context of comparative regionalism. It compared environmental governance practices among regional organisations such as the EU, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the ASEAN (Schreurs 2013; Haas 2016; Obydenkova 2022).

These two approaches respectively emphasise either the objective natural-social space or the spatial relations through which governance actors seek to control this objective space. Neither approach addressed the interrelations between the two dimensions and their synergy. While biophysical mechanisms played a role in constructing regional scales of environmental governance, the decision to make social arrangements to protect natural systems, such as watersheds and oceans, was to establish spatial relationships to exert control for certain purposes. Moreover, existing studies of environmental regionalism have been informed by conventional approaches to economic and security regionalism, which focus on regionalisation for the purposes of economic and security integration, and regions are conceptualised as intermediate entities between the state and the international system (Söderbaum 2019). Environmental regionalism has its own dynamics and unique characteristics, thus differentiating it from its economic and security counterparts. Accordingly, a new conceptual framework that moves beyond conventional analytical models is necessary to better understand environmental regionalism.

Environmental regionalism originates from efforts to manage or prevent the impacts and damage caused by human activities on natural resources, plant and animal species, the atmosphere, oceans, rivers, lakes, terrestrial habitats, and other ecosystem elements. At its core, environmental regionalism involves the coordination of policies and actions among relevant actors to mitigate the consequences of negative externalities (e.g., water pollution resulting from industrial discharges). When environmental regionalism is directed towards the protection of specific geographic eco-regions, it is often referred to as eco-regionalism. This form emphasises the importance of ecologically functional regions and highlights the roles of scientists and technocrats in environmental stewardship. Eco-regionalism typically advocates a state-led, top-down approach to priority-setting and integrated landscape planning with the goal of maintaining ecosystem functionality (Wolmer 2003).

Numerous regional arrangements have been established to protect specific ecological regions from the impacts of negative externalities. However, the individuals and organisations involved in these initiatives do not necessarily reside permanently within the physical boundaries of such regions; many transcend national borders and remain in flux. Given the dynamic and holistic nature of ecosystems, and the persistent misalignment between ecological boundaries and human-centred systems—such as administrative jurisdictions, economic structures, and social communities—ecological regionalism faces inherent limitations. The Blue Economy thus represents a paradigm shift in marine conservation: it moves beyond eco-regionalism's narrow focus on preventing pollution from entering ecological zones, towards reshaping Southeast Asia's socio-economic and natural spatial structures to minimise the production of pollution and other negative externalities at their source.

The following historical analysis of Southeast Asia's marine conservation practices demonstrates that environmental regionalism in the region has undergone a profound transformation, from protecting specific geographic areas or ecological zones to reconstructing maritime and terrestrial spaces through Blue Economy development, thereby embodying a new and more integrated philosophy of sustainability.

In his analysis of the institutional arrangements for environmental governance in Southeast Asian seas, Alexander (1982) observed that most regionalism-related activities in the Southeast Asian marine environment had thus far been more issue-specific than geographically specific to a particular marine area. For instance, fisheries organisations typically endeavoured to safeguard and manage specific fishery stocks. The geographical scope of these activities may be confined to certain regions within the Southeast Asian seas, or alternatively, extend to broader transboundary marine areas.

This type of regionalism may be characterised as eco-regionalism, as its primary objective lies in safeguarding specific marine ecosystems. To achieve this, a variety of eco-regionalism approaches have been implemented across the region, including the establishment of transboundary protected areas and marine protected areas. Over time, these efforts have given rise to a complex network comprising numerous regional institutions and individual actors engaged in the protection of Southeast Asian oceans.

Nevertheless, there remains no guarantee that these entities and individuals can respond constructively and effectively to the evolving challenges of marine conservation. Greater functional integration among the various regional organisations and institutions tasked with safeguarding the Southeast Asian seas is therefore necessary (Alexander 1982). However, institutional integration alone is insufficient; a comprehensive socio-spatial reengineering approach is also required to ensure long-term environmental resilience and governance efficacy.

While eco-regionalism has attempted to protect ecosystems and biological resources through the designation of protected areas, it has proven to be ineffective. On the one hand, the individuals and organisations involved in these initiatives do not always reside within the eco-regions; some transcend territorial borders and remain in flux, and air and water must be protected, but their fluidity poses the challenge of ensuring that industrial pollution from coastal countries does not threaten protected areas. On the other hand, marine resources cannot be exploited for human needs. To reconcile the ecological services of marine systems with the value of economic exploitation, the practice of regionalism in marine conservation in Southeast Asia has been transformed by the concept of Blue Economy and related policies, which will reshape spatial arrangements in Southeast Asia.

Within this context, the development of Blue Economy will entail a fundamental redesign of the natural, economic, and social spatial structures in Southeast Asia. The Blue Economy is a tangible application of sustainable development principles. It deploys market-based instruments to address environmental threats while seeking to alleviate persistent poverty and inequality by leveraging oceanic resources. However, the lack of coordination between marine and terrestrial activities poses risks to the oceans, which remain vulnerable to climate change, pollution, overfishing, and overexploitation. The Blue Economy represents a paradigm shift: it reconceptualises oceans not merely as protected zones but as spaces for economic development (Midlen 2021).

The Blue Economy, which is underpinned by environmental technologies and alternative fuels, represents a paradigm shift in which the marine environment is positioned as a driver of global economic growth and recovery. This shift in thinking sees the ontology of natural capital being applied to global ecology, with environmental problems being reframed as the result of market failures. This incorporation of market logics into environmental and conservation policies involves pricing the reproduction of nature through mechanisms such as ecosystem services and biodiversity derivatives, as well as through financial instruments like species banks and carbon trading. This pricing of nature's reproduction leads to a redefinition of what it means to be nature (Corson et al. 2013). To overcome the inherent paradoxes of eco-regionalism, the practice of marine environmental regionalism in Southeast Asia has undergone a significant transformation from eco-regionalism to sustainable regionalism with the development of the Blue Economy. This implies a fundamental shift in the traditional practice of eco-regionalism, which has been unable to prevent the impact of negative externalities with protected areas.

In the socially, culturally, and ecologically diverse region of Southeast Asia, the transition to a Blue Economy involves the interaction of international legal instruments—such as United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), The International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution From Ships (MARPOL), and the Port State Control MOUs—with the intricate dynamics of reality, resulting in a transformation of regional spatial construction.

UNCLOS provides the fundamental legal framework for international ocean governance, delineating maritime zones such as exclusive economic zones and obliging states to prevent pollution from both land- and sea-based sources. The concept of semi-enclosed seas under UNCLOS Articles 122–123 further encourages cooperation in areas where sovereignty remains contested. Building on this legal foundation, practical “low-politics” initiatives, such as the Partnership for Environment and Marine Studies (PEMSEA) and the United Nation Environment Programme/Global Environment Facility South China Sea Project, have brought countries together to pursue integrated coastal management even amid ongoing disputes. This demonstrates how legal spatial framing can shelve disputes and pursue joint protection, creating functional governance arrangements where comprehensive political agreements remain hard-to-reach.

MARPOL, in turn, prevents ship-based pollution by designating Special Areas and Emission Control Areas (ECAs) with strict discharge limits. Likewise, the Port State Control MOUs (e.g., the Tokyo MOU) establish a networked jurisdiction that enables states to enforce these standards on any foreign vessel entering their ports, regardless of where the initial violation occurred. Consequently, a substandard tanker operating within the ecologically sensitive Malacca Strait can be detained and fined in Singapore, a major maritime hub in the Southeast Asian seas. Taken together, these instruments create the regulatory fences and rules necessary to manage human activities at sea, gradually steering the region towards a network of effectively protected marine areas. However, while this polycentric yet fragmented governance system allows for tailored responses, it also risks gaps, overlaps, and inefficiencies, posing challenges to coherent and sustainable ocean governance.

Therefore, the transition to Blue Economy in the Southeast Asian seas constitutes not merely an economic or ecological endeavour but a complex legal-geographical process. The interaction of these legal spatial relations structures a governance system in which economic activities are channelled towards sustainability, ecological fragility is accorded special status, and enforcement becomes a shared regional responsibility. MARPOL designates Special Areas (under MARPOL Annexes I, II, IV, and V) and ECAs (under MARPOL Annex VI) where more stringent discharge or emission standards apply due to their unique ecological or environmental value. For example, MARPOL Annex VI mandates a global ship fuel sulphur cap of 0.5% together with ECAs caps of 0.1% in five designated ECAs. Furthermore, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) is introducing several amendments to MARPOL Annex VI that are expected to drive the IMO Net-Zero Framework into force in the coming years (IMO 2025; Marine Environment Protection Committee 2025). Therefore, MARPOL, which regulates pollution from sea-based sources such as oil, chemicals, sewage, and garbage, is also expected to expand to include mandatory greenhouse-gas emission reductions and a global carbon-pricing mechanism for shipping, thereby facilitating the further development of Blue Economy.

However, ASEAN faces significant obstacles in achieving uniform MARPOL enforcement due to diverse regulatory capacities, economic priorities, and limited institutional resources. There are currently no such designated areas, ECAs or Special Areas, in Southeast Asia waters. The absence of a designated ECA in Southeast Asia currently means that ships operating there must only comply with the global sulphur cap of 0.5%. As a regional hub for global trade, the environmental and health incentives for ASEAN countries' future action are substantial.

CHANGES IN ASEAN REGIONALISM FOR THE PROTECTION OF MARINE ENVIRONMENT

ASEAN member states play a key role in protecting Southeast Asia's marine environment. The evolution of environmental regionalism in these countries has been a dynamic process, shaped by historical developments. The analytical framework of global spatial politics outlined in this study enables us to gain insights into the historical transformation of ASEAN regionalism in protecting the region's oceans and seas. This is a crucial aspect of longitudinal comparative regionalism studies.

In its early eco-regionalism stage, ASEAN's marine environmental regionalism was marked by limited regional agency and weak institutional consolidation, laying the structural foundations of a fragmented governance trajectory. During the eco-regionalism phase, ASEAN countries played a passive role, while international organisations and extra-territorial countries assumed the primary responsibility of assisting ASEAN countries in developing the capacity to protect marine ecosystems. Even since 1997, when environmental issues began to gain significant

institutional traction on the ASEAN agenda, the institutionalisation of environmental governance arrangements at the ASEAN level has been both markedly slow and frequently uneven. ASEAN environmental regionalism has been predominantly shaped by the actions of ASEAN member states, rather than emerging from private, bottom-up processes. Consequently, it can be described as a vertical model of governance, as opposed to a networked horizontal one.

Most of the time, environmental cooperation among ASEAN countries has been limited to functional cooperation, which has been typified by an overreliance on national institutions, underdeveloped forms of institutionalism and a dearth of institutionalisation centred on regional institutions (Elliott 2011). In their engagement with the governance of the marine environment in Southeast Asia, ASEAN countries continue to adhere to the ASEAN Way, which entails seeking consensus based on the principle of non-interference.

It is notable that not all ASEAN countries participate in the relevant governance mechanisms for the protection of the marine environment in Southeast Asia in a unanimous manner. This is particularly evident in the context of the East Asian Seas Action Plan (EASAP) and the PEMSEA. In April 1981, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand endorsed EASAP. Subsequently, in 1994, Australia, Cambodia, China, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam joined the plan. However, in 2011, Australia withdrew from the mechanism. Currently, a significant number of ASEAN countries remain outside the PEMSEA framework. PEMSEA currently has eleven member countries: China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, Singapore, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. Thailand, Malaysia, and Brunei participate in relevant meetings as observers (see Centre for International Law 2019).

The regional arrangement pursued by eco-regionalism for the protection of the Southeast Asian marine environment calls for the participating countries to comply with the existing international treaties, rather than to conclude new legally binding regional treaties. Regarding institutional arrangements for cooperative governance of the marine environment in Southeast Asia, these are all “soft law”, such as action plans, memorandums of understanding, declarations, and so forth. Thus far, no legally binding agreement has been reached (Maggio 2019).

Taken together, these features reveal the structural limits of eco-regionalism as a governance framework for Southeast Asia’s marine environment. Under these conditions, the limitations of eco-regionalism in achieving the objective of safeguarding the marine ecosystem in Southeast Asia, coupled with the lack of active engagement from ASEAN member states, have constrained their capacity to fully harness the potential of the oceans for national economic advancement. In response, the ASEAN countries have initiated a more proactive approach, enhanced coordination and reshaped the economic and social landscape of Southeast Asia through an integrated land-sea strategy. This approach aims to achieve a balance between economic development and marine conservation, aligning with the concept of Blue Economy. It also marks a transition towards a phase of sustainable regionalism in the practice of environmental regionalism by the ASEAN countries.

There are several reasons for this. First, ASEAN countries rely heavily on the marine environment and resources of Southeast Asia for their prosperity and development, and they have certain common interests in protecting the marine environment and resources on which their economic development and people’s welfare depend. Most ASEAN member countries are maritime countries, and their economic development depends to a large extent on the development and utilisation of marine resources. Moreover, ASEAN countries are also dependent on the sea for food security. Marine fisheries production in the region is an important part of the economic activities of ASEAN coastal member countries, with Indonesia having the highest share of marine fisheries fishing in its overall gross national product, followed by Vietnam, Myanmar, and the Philippines.

Second, excessive economic development and fisheries fishing, among other things, have put enormous pressure on the marine environment in ASEAN. Compared to other regions, the population of the Southeast Asian region is more dependent on the sea for their livelihoods. This is evidenced by the share of the ocean economy in the region's gross domestic product, which is much higher than that of developed countries. Population growth, industrial economic growth, and rapid urbanisation of coastal areas in ASEAN member countries are all putting enormous pressure on the sustainability of coastal and marine resources (ASEAN 2018). It is estimated that half of the population of ASEAN already resides in urban areas, with the number of people living in cities expected to reach 70 million by 2025. Increasing urbanisation and growth in per capita consumption are expected to exacerbate plastic pollution in ASEAN countries.

Third, climate change is affecting Southeast Asia's oceans. Climate change will have a significant impact on Southeast Asia's marine environment throughout the 21st century. Coral reefs and species distributions will suffer, affecting biodiversity, fishers, and food security (Kay et al. 2023). In summary, the marine environment of Southeast Asia is confronted with a multitude of threats, including overfishing, destructive fishing practices, marine pollution from human activities such as debris and oil spills, irrational land development and use, and climate change.

To address these issues, in addition to strengthening policy and legal measures for the protection of the marine environment at the national level, ASEAN member states have also enhanced regional cooperation with the objective of accelerating the transition to Blue Economy. In this process, the practice of regionalism in ASEAN countries has undergone a shift from ecological regionalism to sustainable regionalism. This transformation encompasses not only the transformation of the relevant institution-building but also, at a deeper level, the economic and social spatial reconfiguration of ASEAN. This was driven by a variety of forces, including the initiatives of the ASEAN countries as well as the pressures of the natural ecosystems, which are reshaping the economy and society of ASEAN.

The regional framework for addressing the issue of marine debris in Southeast Asian seas has been established, with initial progress evident in pioneering national actions and financing tools. At the ASEAN Conference on Reducing Marine Debris held in Thailand in November 2017, member states recommended the adoption of land-sea integrated policies and the formulation of a regional plan of action to combat marine debris. Subsequently, the 34th ASEAN Summit in June 2019 adopted the Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris in the ASEAN Region and the ASEAN Framework of Action on Marine Debris (ASEAN 2021a). The ASEAN Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris (2021–2025) was developed from October 2019 to July 2020 through extensive consultation with relevant experts and stakeholders (ASEAN 2021a). As a follow-up, ASEAN has also set up the ASEAN Working Group on Coastal and Marine Environment (AWGCME) to ensure effective implementation of the strategic documents.

National plans to combat marine debris have been enacted by ASEAN countries. A 2015 study has found that six of these countries are among the twenty worst offenders for plastic waste. The main contributors to marine plastic pollution in the region are Indonesia (second), the Philippines (third), Vietnam (fourth), Thailand (sixth), Malaysia (eighth), and Myanmar (seventeenth) (Putri and Sabatira 2023). Indonesia has launched its ambitious Healthy and Waste-Free Oceans plan in 2025. Adopting a comprehensive source-to-sea approach, the programme targets waste from rivers, coastal areas, and maritime activities, aiming to reduce marine litter by 70% by 2029 (*AsiaOne* 2025). Similarly, the Philippines has pledged to achieve “zero waste to Philippine waters” by 2040 (Department of Environment and Natural Resources 2021: 10). ASEAN governments are expediting the implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). The Indonesian government's Ministry of Environment and Forestry initiated the Roadmap to Waste Reduction by Producers programme in 2019, compelling the manufacturing, food,

beverage, service, and retail sectors to submit comprehensive waste reduction plans. In 2022, the Philippines passed the EPR Act, which came into effect in January 2023, following the publication of its Implementing Rules and Regulations (Michikazu 2024).

The ADB (2024) has provided technical assistance and policy-based loans to Indonesia and the Philippines to promote a circular-economy approach targeting problematic and avoidable plastics, while addressing marine plastic waste through upstream research, capacity building, regional collaboration, and knowledge sharing. The Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) established the Regional Knowledge Centre for Marine Plastic Debris in 2019 to provide the ASEAN+3 member states with support in addressing emerging challenges associated with marine plastic debris. One of the missions of the Regional Knowledge Centre is to promote the private sector's innovative actions to counter plastic pollution.

Despite the evident progress in combating marine debris, numerous challenges persist (as shown in Table 1). The ASEAN Way, with its principle of non-interference, results in regional action plans being formulated as non-legally binding instruments. This shapes governance effects by focusing on coordination and knowledge-sharing rather than enforcement (Putri and Sabatira 2023). Furthermore, sustained success hinges on continuous collaboration among governments, industries, and civil society to establish a genuine circular-economy framework across Southeast Asia. While regional politics enables agenda-setting and partnership formation, the ultimate governance effect is determined at the national and municipal levels. The main challenge is to scale up these pioneering efforts by aligning policy, finance, and innovation to transform production systems—particularly packaging industries—while fostering sustainable lifestyle transitions and reshaping consumption practices towards reduced plastic waste.

In 2021, the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the Blue Economy was adopted. The Blue Economy was regarded as a priority for ASEAN collaboration, given its alignment with the three pillars of the ASEAN Community: the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (Ramli and Waskitho 2023). The ASEAN Leaders committed to promoting their Blue Economy through the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the Blue Economy, which emphasises the need for ASEAN countries to reach a consensus on Blue Economy and identifies the scope of cooperation and activities that ASEAN member states would be willing to undertake with external partners. The ASEAN Coordinating Council was also tasked to oversee the overall implementation of the declaration and to explore and develop models of Blue Economy cooperation (ASEAN 2021b).

In February 2023, the 32nd ASEAN Coordinating Council in Jakarta, Indonesia, agreed that the High-Level Task Force on ASEAN Economic Integration would oversee the implementation of the ASEAN Blue Economic Framework. In September 2023, at the 55th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework was adopted. The ASEAN member countries have collectively established a unified definition of Blue Economy, which serves as a framework for regional initiatives designed to optimise the economic potential of the region's marine and inland water resources.

Table 1: The marine debris governance in ASEAN: Implementation progress and obstacles

Phase	Key actions and mechanisms	Documented progress	Obstacles and challenges
Adoption and planning	1. Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris (2019) 2. ASEAN Framework of Action on Marine Debris (2019) 3. ASEAN Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris in the ASEAN Member States 2021–2025 (2021)	Regional Coordination: ASEAN has set up the AWGCME to ensure effective implementation.	Non-binding nature: As soft laws, these instruments lack legally binding force, leading to low compliance rates and allowing states to delay or avoid implementation.
Financing and implementation	1. Development bank loans and technical assistance (e.g., ADB) 2. National plans 3. Private sector initiatives	1. ADB technical assistance and policy-based loans 2. ERIA funding: The Regional Knowledge Centre for Marine Plastic Debris funds capacity-building initiatives 3. National plans: Indonesia's Healthy and Waste-Free Oceans plan and the Philippines' zero waste to Philippine waters 4. Multi-stakeholder partnerships: EPR schemes and corporate initiatives promote plastic circularity	1. Institutional and systemic gaps: unclear responsibilities, poor inter-agency coordination, and insufficient regulatory systems hinder multi-stakeholder collaboration 2. Market and infrastructural limits: scaling reuse systems and recycling businesses faces profitability and technological hurdles, requiring continuous policy support

The ASEAN definition of the Blue Economy is an integrated, holistic, cross-sectoral, and cross-stakeholder approach that generates value-added and value-chain benefits from oceans, seas, and fresh water in an inclusive and sustainable manner. To achieve sustainable development, the Blue Economy proposes a source-to-sea approach and an integrated, holistic, and participatory methodology that encompasses the sustainable utilisation and management of Blue Economy resources for the social and economic advancement of a diverse ASEAN. The ASEAN Blue Economy serves as a catalyst for the conventional marine sector, including fisheries, aquaculture, fish-only processing, and tourism. Additionally, it stimulates the growth of emerging sectors such as renewable energy, biotechnology, marine and freshwater-based research and education, and other sectors that utilise aquatic resources. Therefore, the Blue Economy will be a new engine for ASEAN's future economic growth (ASEAN 2023).

This transition from ecological to sustainable regionalism in ASEAN represents a paradigm shift—from addressing isolated environmental concerns to holistically integrating economic, social, and ecological objectives across both terrestrial and marine domains. This evolution, in turn, reconfigures the governance and contestation of space. Historically, marine protection efforts were primarily concerned with conservation and pollution control, which were often framed as developmental costs or constraints. Such approaches tended to address specific ecological issues, such as transboundary haze pollution or terrestrial biodiversity, through a predominantly land-based or sea-based and fragmented lens. In contrast, the emerging discourse on the Blue Economy and the promotion of new economic spaces and markets—such

as a potential China-ASEAN Blue Economy Common Market and regional circular-economy hubs—have fostered a more comprehensive and integrated governance architecture (*Xinhua* 2025). Encompassing marine spaces, coastal zones, and the urban-rural nexus, as exemplified by sustainable city initiatives, this approach simultaneously generates a dynamic reconfiguration of spatial relations.

The conventional regime, characterised by non-binding soft law and voluntary cooperation, was built upon an uncompromising respect for national sovereignty, inherently constraining enforcement capacity. The Blue Economy, as a new driver of regional governance, propels a gradual shift towards common standards and binding frameworks (e.g., sustainable finance taxonomies), even though fragmentation and soft law challenges persist.

The re-scaling of ocean space—driven by mechanisms such as Marine Spatial Planning, the demarcation of exclusive economic zones, and market-based environmental governance—is also a fundamentally political and contestable process. It reconfigures relations of power, access, and rights, inevitably creating distinct winners and losers. Coastal communities, for instance, often find their deep, place-based knowledge and customary rights marginalised by state-centric and market-led governance frameworks. Even participatory models such as co-management often confine communities to implementing pre-defined agendas determined by states or donors, rather than engaging them in genuine co-governance that entails shared strategic decision-making. Such dynamics may culminate in “green grabbing”, where community resources are appropriated for conservation, carbon-offsetting, or eco-tourism initiatives. Therefore, evaluating the success of ASEAN’s Blue Economy requires more than economic indicators; it calls for a critical assessment of progress towards “blue justice”, understood as the active protection of human rights and the meaningful inclusion of historically marginalised voices in the governance of their own livelihoods.

CONCLUSION

This study critically engages with the limitations of conventional comparative regionalism studies, which have largely adopted a state-centric and integration-focused perspective. Such approaches often neglect the roles of non-state actors and ignore the impact of socio-technical-natural systems in shaping regions. As a result, they fail to adequately explain the multidimensional evolution and spatial dynamics of regionalism, particularly in the case of ASEAN. To address these gaps, this study develops an alternative analytical framework grounded in global spatial politics. Within this framework, ASEAN regionalism is conceptualised not merely as institutional cooperation among states but as an ideological and strategic project pursued by diverse actors to produce a desired socio-spatial configuration. The analysis shows that region-building is a contested process, influenced not only by political intentions but also by the interactions of natural geography and technological infrastructures.

Applying this framework to ASEAN, this study offers a nuanced horizontal and vertical comparison of regionalism. Horizontally, it distinguishes ASEAN’s emphasis on safeguarding national autonomy in the context of geopolitical rivalries from the EU’s supranational integration agenda. Vertically, it traces the historical transformation of ASEAN regionalism from security cooperation to economic and environmental regionalism. The case study on marine environmental protection reveals that ASEAN’s environmental regionalism has shifted from a passive and fragmented model of eco-regionalism to a more integrated and proactive mode of sustainable regionalism. This transformation has been catalysed by the emergence of the Blue Economy, which not only introduces new institutional mechanisms but also reconfigures the natural-technological-economic-social space of Southeast Asia. The analysis

demonstrates that sustainable regionalism in ASEAN is both a response to global environmental challenges and a developmental strategy tied to maritime resources, climate change, and regional socio-economic resilience.

This study contributes to comparative regionalism literature by proposing the global spatial politics framework as a new lens to analyse how regions are constructed, contested, and governed in the twenty-first century. It offers an ontological status to regions as intermediate actors in international relations, capable of shaping global order. The ASEAN case illustrates how regional practices evolve in response to internal developmental needs and external pressures, highlighting the importance of spatial imaginaries and ecological rationalities in region-building.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the study was carried out without any financial or commercial ties that might be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

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