

ASEAN Perceptions of the Mekong Region: Discerning the Unfamiliar

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ABSTRACT

With the exception of Thailand, countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region are new members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Their entry into ASEAN marks a major shift from the Association's founding Cold War aims toward its development into a more robust regional framework for economic, political, and social exchange and integration. A crucial aspect of ASEAN's development is the perceptions of ASEAN members toward one another. This paper examines the perceptions held in five "old" ASEAN member states (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) toward newer ASEAN member countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region. The primary analysis is drawn from a survey conducted at leading universities in the five countries mentioned above. In a broad way, "cultural" and "economic" criteria play the largest role in perceptions of the relationship among countries in ASEAN. In almost every case, the countries of the GMS are conceptualized as closely similar to one another, with the exception of Thailand. A strong "clustering" of these countries can be seen in the perceptions of their ASEAN neighbors. However, this clustering effect is based more on unfamiliarity than clear knowledge about the connections between the GMS countries. Association of the GMS countries with economic underdevelopment and a history of conflict are the most common dominant themes cutting across all perceptions of the GMS among other ASEAN citizens. Yet, at the same time, the survey results reveal important differences in the specific criteria that prevail in different ASEAN countries. The analysis also reveals points of tension or ambiguity in the views of ASEAN neighbors toward the GMS countries, which in turn could be useful to build on in attempts to integrate the GMS countries into the wider ASEAN neighborhood and in developing a more familiar and positive perception of the GMS within ASEAN and globally.

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