The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia

A Review of a New Book by Amitav Acharya

Shaun Narine, Killam Postdoctoral Fellow, Institute of International Relations, University of British Columbia

In The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia, Amitav Acharya has presented an excellent and compelling historical overview of regional relations and regionalism in Southeast Asia. One of Acharya's stated objectives in writing the book is to address a lack of historical analysis among political scientists when it comes to examining Southeast Asia. Political scientists tend to begin examining regionalism in Southeast Asia in the aftermath of World War II, when the region was under the influence of the Allied South East Asian Command. As Acharya strongly demonstrates, however, Southeast Asia has had a history as a region _ and, perhaps, a regional identity _ that stretches back for centuries. This is an important book, which makes a valuable contribution towards the study of Southeast Asian regionalism by opening new areas for discussion and debate about this concept.

The book is divided into seven sections, including the introduction and conclusion. The introduction argues for the importance of understanding Southeast Asia as a "region" and offers an overview of previous attempts to do so. It presents the basic argument of the book: "regions are socially constructed, rather than geographically or ethnosocially pre-ordained … (r)e gions, like nation-states, are imagined communities." The international relations of Southeast Asia have been significantly influenced by the quest for regional identity.

Chapter One looks at pre-colonial Southeast Asia and establishes that extensive regional interactions were commonplace during this period. These interactions may have formed the basis of a regional identity. This is the most novel part of the book. Acharya examines O.W. Wolter's concept of the mandala state. Wolter characterized Southeast Asian relations during parts of the precolonial period as based around a central ruler whose authority extended outwards in the form of concentric circles. Outlying kingdoms enjoyed considerable independence but also recognized an allegiance to the centre. Within the mandala, the concept of statehood was not defined by territory but by social obligations and loyalties. Arguably, these patterns of interaction gave rise to a form of regional identity. This loosely-structured set of relations may be indicative of contemporary Southeast Asian relations. Chapter One also establishes the importance of intra-regional trade to precolonial Southeast Asia.

Chapter Two enters more familiar territory by exploring the role of nationalism in the post-World War Two/Cold War Southeast Asia. Regionalism was promoted for narrow, nationalist reasons. External threats eventually provided an impetus for the development of a more vibrant, self-reliant regionalism. Chapter Three provides an excellent assessment of the emergence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Chapter Four examines the political crises surrounding ASEAN and its management of
the Vietnam/Cambodia conflict. It goes on to discuss the end of that conflict and the Cold War, and the associated effects on the expansion of ASEAN. Chapter Five examines the problems and opportunities encountered by ASEAN as it tried to manage "one Southeast Asia" in the post-Cold War era.

During this period, ASEAN began to face difficulties with its own unity, even as it expanded its membership and activities. Acharya discusses how attempts to promote traditional values of non-intervention and the "ASEAN way" came into conflict with the efforts of Western countries to promote human rights and democracy in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN countries found themselves pressured by non-governmental organizations and other factions within their own states who were agitating for political change and supporting Western initiatives. Interestingly, this is an indication that the idea of regionalism may be spreading beyond Southeast Asian governments and into specific sections of the general public. At the same time, ASEAN has encountered numerous difficulties in consolidating its own sense of regional identity. Acharya discusses ASEAN's roles in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the Asian economic crisis and its effects on ASEAN. The crisis brought to the surface numerous tensions among the ASEAN states over such issues as human rights, democracy, economic interaction and globalization. It also caused some members to question further ASEAN's non-intervention principle.

The book concludes with an overview of its crucial points and with the observation that the regional identity that has been forming in Southeast Asia under ASEAN may now be at risk of unraveling. In the post-Cold War era, ASEAN's regional aspirations are being challenged by global forces. ASEAN's political functions are increasingly affected by relations between the great powers. The confidence that fuelled ASEAN's expansion in the 1990s has been undermined by subsequent events. Acharya concludes, however, that regional identity in Southeast Asia has been consciously promoted by regional elites. It has proven to be durable and flexible… and (has) managed to suit the exigencies of shifting external political, economic and strategic currents. It may well continue to do so in the future, provided there continues to exist a strong measure of collective political will on the part of Southeast Asian states and societies to adapt the regional concept to changing external and domestic circumstances, including the forces of globalisation.²

*The Quest for Identity* is an excellent discussion of regionalism in Southeast Asia. It is also a useful historical document, and could be read simply for the breadth and detail of its scholarship. Its greatest contribution, however, is in presenting a number of ideas with which to stimulate debate on the nature of the regionalism that may or may not be emerging in contemporary Southeast Asia. Acharya asserts that ASEAN is more than just a group of developing world states banding together for political influence. It has also served to "(reclaim) a regional identity whose historical foundations had been severely disrupted by colonialism."³ This is a bold claim, but also highly contentious. Does the *mandala* concept of the precolonial era really have much significance for analyses of Southeast Asia today? It seems that Southeast Asian countries are firmly committed to a Westphalian understanding of the international system. Does this leave room for a more informal understanding of regional relations?
In the case of ASEAN, institutional informality can easily be understood as an attempt by its members to preserve and protect their independence of action. Moreover, how to interpret the mandala concept is debatable. Acharya uses it as an example of historical Southeast Asian regionalism. Jurgen Ruland, however, cites the mandala concept in precolonial Southeast Asia as an expression and cause of a deeply-ingrained ethnocentrism which continues to dominate Southeast Asia today. This ethnocentrism is the root of deep-seated ethnic nationalisms in the region and, in Ruland's assessment, precludes the creation of any meaningful regional identity. According to Ruland, the mandala concept also promotes an understanding of the international system as predatory and unstable, thereby encouraging states to maintain their sovereign powers. It is clear that if the idea of the mandala is to have relevance to contemporary Southeast Asia, we must first engage a debate about the concept's historical legacy.

Drawing on my own biases, my own criticisms of the book lie in my feeling that Acharya is not sufficiently critical in some important areas, particularly his assessment of ASEAN. To cite one example, Acharya passes over the full implications of Thailand's 1988 decision to abandon ASEAN's common front in dealing with Vietnam. He clearly describes the events leading up to this decision, then briefly touches on the aftermath. He focuses, however, on the fact that Thailand's about-face, despite the discomfort it initially caused in Singapore and Indonesia, set the groundwork for ASEAN's eventual incorporation of Vietnam. Arguably, however, the much more important implication was the limited commitment to ASEAN — and, by extension, the commitment to regionalism — illustrated by Thailand's unilateral actions. ASEAN's overall handling of the Vietnam/Cambodia situation is fundamentally important because it illustrates the extent of intra-ASEAN cooperation, but it also demonstrates the real limitations of ASEAN's ability to act cooperatively and manage regional security. ASEAN's subsequent failures in the Asian economic crisis are not that surprising — indeed, they were entirely predictable — if we understand its activities during the Cambodian occupation in more critical terms.

Another criticism focuses around the concept of "imagined communities." The idea that a region can be imagined, much as national and ethnic identities are imagined, is compelling and logical. However, it is an argument that draws attention to a number of questions. First, what is the status of national identity in Southeast Asia? Most of the Southeast Asian states are still engaged in the process of creating themselves as states — in "imagining" larger national identities that transcend the narrow ethnic identities that now characterize the region. How does this ongoing process detract from their interest in, and ability to, imagine a region? Are the processes complementary, contradictory, or part of a more complex interaction? Second, raising the issue of identity formation always invites critics to look for other identities. Actors can have many different identities and these often conflict. It is not enough to show the existence of an identity; understanding its influence requires that we demonstrate its strength in relation to the other identities defining an actor. In Southeast Asia, a regional identity may exist, but there is powerful evidence that it is, at best, weak and subordinate to many other, more important self-identities held by regional states.

These points serve to illustrate the key point of this review, however. The Quest for Identity raises interesting questions that can serve as the basis for discussion and debate in the future. It engages the question of Southeast Asian regionalism at a particularly
important time. Today, Southeast Asia is still reeling from the effects of the economic crisis. Dealing with the aftermath of the crisis may be pushing the ASEAN countries towards a larger East Asian regional identity, or at least towards institutional structures that reflect common East Asian interests. Southeast Asian regionalism may be subsumed by these emerging structures, or it may find a new focus for its development as the weaker states of the region struggle to regain regional influence. The Quest for Identity is a strong starting point from which to begin our analysis of ongoing developments.

3. Acharya, p. 166.
5. Acharya, p. 121.