Imagining Southeast Asia

In a book published at the dawn of the 21st century, I described Southeast Asia as an “imagined” region. Underlying my claim was that the region’s physical, political, social and cultural diversity was too immense to qualify it as a distinctive personality. Yet, what gave it coherence, I argued, must count as one of the finest acts of collective self-imagination undertaken by an area’s nationalist political elite in the wake of their liberation from European and American colonialism. My book, entitled, The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia, argued that as with nationalism and nation-states, regions may be "imagined", designed, constructed and defended.¹

Southeast Asia is a region built on shared human and physical characteristics and endeavours, external geopolitical and economic currents, and collective social imagination. But its claim to be a region should be seen as being based as much on the construction of a regional identity as on the sum total of shared physical attributes and functional interactions among its units. The development of a regional identity may not necessarily conform to the “facts” of geography, history, culture, or politics. The notion of Southeast Asia as a homogenous cultural or geographic entity can indeed be overstated. But its social and political identity, derived from the conscious promotion of the regional concept by its states, societies, and peoples, is what makes it a distinct idea in the latter part of the twentieth century.

In this brief essay, I revisit these themes, especially in the light of the tumultuous events of the past two years. Drawing upon this earlier work, I investigate the historical, material and social foundations of Southeast Asia as a region. These foundations are not tectonic

¹. Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities, Revised and Expanded Edition (London: Verso, 1991). My approach to the study of regions and regionalism shares many elements of Ben Anderson's approach to the study of nationalism and the nation-state. There are many parallels between "imagining the nation" and "imagining the region". Particularly, Anderson's focus on the collective "imagining" of the nation by a nationalist elite is mirrored in my explanation of Southeast Asian region-building as a process of elite socialization. But drawing upon the work of Wolters, Reid, and others, I place more emphasis on the role of traditional political-cultural frameworks and pre-capitalist commerce (while Anderson focusses on print capitalism) in building modern social identities. I also believe that the term "proximities" more accurately reflects the degree of socialisation and bonding evident in the case of Southeast Asia than the term "communities" used by Anderson to describe nations. Although a certain sense of community can develop within the region, as has been the case in Southeast Asia, the continued salience of state sovereignty (despite claims about its alleged obsolescence and erosion) makes regional communities fundamentally different from nation-states. Southeast Asia is still a region inhabited by highly sovereignty-conscious actors.
plates, although they do sometimes collide and work at cross-purposes. My main argument remains, however, that none of these foundations are complete by themselves; and that in the absence of an active and continuing process of social imagination and construction, the regional personality of Southeast Asia runs a considerable risk of unraveling, notwithstanding strategic, economic and political imperatives to the contrary. As Donald Emerson once suggested: “Nations come and go, why not region’s”.

Southeast Asia in the Historian’s Imagination

To a large extent, the conception of Southeast Asia as a region is a product of the historian’s imagination. In the aftermath of World War II, some Western historians working on Southeast Asia have begun to “imagine” its past as a distinctive region. They were rebelling against an excessively Indo-centric and Sino-centric view of Southeast Asia. What had been called “Southeast Asian studies” had been traditionally dominated by Indologists and Sinologists, many of whom saw the region as a cultural appendage of India and China, two of the older civilizations in the neighbourhood, which had left a powerful influence on the assortment of mainland and maritime units that comprise today’s Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia in this sense was “East by South”: i.e. East of India and South of China, an expression which was as much a cultural statement as a geographic fact.

Moreover, as a result of the profound impact of the changes brought about by colonialism and Westernization, “many Southeast Asian historians have interested themselves primarily in external stimuli, to the detriment of the study of indigenous institutions.” Post-War views of Southeast Asia, shaped by indigenous nationalist thinking and Western scholarship, begun to imagine Southeast Asia’s cultural and ideational autonomy from India and China. Moreover, Southeast Asians were viewed not as passive recipients of Indian and Chinese ideas, but active borrowers and modifiers. They were to be cast as makers, rather than victims of history. The demand for an “autonomous” history of Southeast Asia built upon the work of a Dutch economic historian Jacob Van Leur, who had in 1932 (translated into English in 1955) challenged the notion that Indian cultural and political ideas were imposed or imported onto Southeast Asia through commerce (by Indian merchants or Vaisyas) and conquest (by Indian warriors, or Khastriyas). Van Leur had argued that Southeast Asian rulers had “called upon” Indian civilization through the medium of the Brahmans, because Hindu political concepts helped them to enhance their legitimacy and organize their small territorial units into larger states. Historians pointed out that ancient Southeast Asians were actually quite selective in what they borrowed, ideas which they found useful and legitimizing (such as the Code of Manu or Kautilya’s Arthasastra) were accepted, while those which did not fit into local traditions and beliefs (such as the Indian caste system) were rejected.

Van Leur’s “idea of the local initiative” was joined by similar constructs. The art historian, H.G. Quaritch Wales, spoke of “local genius” who modified Hindu-Buddhist art and architecture by infusing it with local meaning and forms. And the historian O.W.

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2. Steinberg, ed., In Search of Southeast Asia, op.cit., p.1
Wolters coined the notion of “localization” and “relocalization” to describe how Southeast Asian borrowers adapted Indian, Chinese and other foreign ideas to fit indigenous traditions in the field of religion, arts, law, poetry and politics.

Inspired by demands for an “autonomous” history, the geographic size of Southeast Asia accepted by the area specialist and the policy-maker alike was reduced. No longer were India and China included in the region. More importantly, Southeast Asia was no longer considered part of South Asia or East Asia, a crucial factor in the development of a regional concept.  

Other historians also begun to reconstruct Southeast Asia’s past in ways that claimed to uncover distinctive patterns of spatial and organization and governance that dotted its ancient political landscape. The most famous of these was Wolters’ characterization of precolonial polities in Southeast Asia as *Mandalas*. These lacked territorial specificity, but they did represent an acute concentration of political management and moral authority which made it possible to speak of a distinctive political order in Southeast Asia. For Wolters, despite being "demographically fragmented", politically "multicentered", and socially "characterised by stubborn small-scale sub-regional identities", premodern Southeast Asia did develop a common pattern of intra-regional authority thanks to the "patchwork of often overlapping *mandalas*, or 'circles of kings' in each of which one king, identified with divine and universal authority and defined as the conqueror, claimed personal hegemony over the others, who in theory were bound to be his obedient allies and vassals". He identified several *mandalas* which existed between 7th and 14th centuries, the most prominent examples being Srivijaya, Angkor, Ayudhya, and the Majapahit.

A glance at some of the famous *mandalas* which adorn the textbooks of earlier Southeast Asian history shows that each of them increased flow of communications between some of the many centers in different parts of the region. We may too often tend to strike contrasts between these earlier states and the modern states as though great men in the past made exciting impressions in their own day but left nothing behind them of consequence. But there were some enduring consequences which helped to reduce the multicentric character of earlier Southeast Asia.

Others joined Wolters in describing common and overlapping political forms in classical Southeast Asia: Stanley Thambiah, for example, proposed the idea of “galactic polities” to describe the Buddhist political world of mainland Southeast Asia. While Wolters

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3. Emmerson, "Southeast Asia", op.cit., p.8
4. ibid., p.3
5. ibid., p.9
6. ibid., p.12
focused on court politics and the religious “great traditions”, Anthony Reid, another prominent historian of Southeast Asia, Reid urged students of Southeast Asian history to focus instead on “popular beliefs and social practices of ordinary Southeast Asians”. It is this which defined the “the common ground” among Southeast Asians, notwithstanding its “bewildering variety of language, culture, and religion” and its “historic openness” to foreign trade. Reid identified a number of such social institutions and practices, practices which were absent in cultural India and China: "the concept of spirit or ‘soul stuff’ animating living things, the prominence of women in descent, ritual matters, marketing and agriculture, and the importance of debt as a determinant of social obligations.”

Even more importantly, Reid directed his attention to commercial interactions in building a pre-colonial region of Southeast Asia. In Reid’s view, the period between the 15th Century and 17th Century constituted an age of commerce in Southeast Asia. During this period, Southeast Asian port cities, already sharing cultural and linguistic commonalities, were bound together in a structure of close economic interdependence. While the Indian Ocean trade network extended from eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula to Japan, within this structure the most intense commercial networking was developed among the port cities of Southeast Asia.

Reid focuses on the high degree of commercial intercourse connecting the great maritime cities of Southeast Asia, such as Melaka, Pasai, Johor, Patani, Aceh, and Brunei. The growth of intra-regional trade reduced cultural barriers, leading to the spread of Malay as the language of commerce. While the trade networks were pan-Asian, Reid found evidence that until the arrival of the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century, the "trading links within the region continued to be more influential than those beyond it.”

Maritime intercourse continued to link the peoples of Southeast Asia more tightly to one another than to outside influences down to the seventeenth century. The fact that Chinese and Indian influences came to most of the region by maritime trade, not by conquest or colonization, appeared to ensure that Southeast Asia retained its distinctiveness even while borrowing numerous elements from those larger centers. What did not happen (with the partial exception of Vietnam) was that any part of the region established closer relations with China and India than with its neighbours in Southeast Asia.

The historical imagination of Southeast Asia has not gone unchallenged. Its critics argue that no firm archeological evidence exists that can decisively affirm Van Leur’s Idea of the Local Initiative. Reid has been accused of unduly reifying intra-Southeast Asian commercial transactions which could not realistically be isolated from the larger Indian

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7. ibid., p.6

8. Reid, Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680, Volume One, op.cit., p.7

9. ibid., p.6
Ocean network and ignoring crucial mainland-maritime variations in classical (as well as contemporary) Southeast Asia’s political and commercial landscape. Wolter’s *Mandala*, has been attacked as an Indocentric notion (after all, Wolter was an Indologist); whose very existence cannot be proven given the paucity of archaeological evidence. Yet, these criticisms do not detract from the important influence the project of historical imagination has had in drawing attention to the regional identity of Southeast Asia. Regions are imagined constructs, and no one does a better job of offering legitimacy to the act of imagining than the historian who can claim familiarity with an era long gone by.

**Southeast Asia in the Modern Nation-State System**

The conception of Southeast Asia as a geo-strategic and political region of modern nation-states draws from far more recent events in historical time. Its original referent point was Lord Mountbatten’s Allied Command for Southeast Asia established during the Second World War. This command, which was ironically headquartered in Ceylon, helped to make Southeast Asia a "fixed and practical term even in the United States" during the Second World War.\(^\text{10}\) Another strand of Southeast Asia’s geopolitical lineage came with accelerated decolonization and the outbreak of the Cold War. Southeast Asia now acquired a growing familiarity as a “region of revolt” (to borrow Milton Osborne’s term), as “the Balkan’s of the Orient” (in Fisher’s vocabulary), and finally as a hotbed of communism and hence a key flashpoint of the Cold War. The region's proneness to strife became a distinctive feature, prompting comments by Bernard Gordon that one of the factors "which makes Southeast Asia a 'region' is the widespread incidence of conflict, along with some attempts at cooperation," and that "instability is the one feature of Southeast Asia that gives the region much of its contemporary importance."\(^\text{11}\) Conflict in his view was a form of contact and communication, since much of it involved the interference of Southeast Asia’s leaders in the affairs of neighbors. "The region's leaders...have been thrust into intimate contact with their neighbors, often through conflict: the communications developed as a result are one factor which perhaps more than anything else compels us to accept the fact that a sense of 'region' does now exist in Southeast Asia."\(^\text{12}\)

This negative strategic perception of Southeast Asia would not change until the 1970s, when the region finally shed its image as a conflict zone, especially in view of far more intense and enduring conflicts in neighbouring South Asia, West Asia and North Asia. Yet, where great power geopolitics let off, domestic politics took over in defining Southeast Asia’s regional identity in primarily negative terms. The new pro-Western states of Southeast Asia made a collective descent into authoritarianism in the course of the late 1960s and 70s. While the European Community defined its regional identity as a

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\(^{10}\) ibid., p.20


\(^{12}\) ibid., p.2
grouping of liberal democracies, underpinned by the Kantian dictum that democracies avoid warring against each other, Southeast Asia developed its own version of illiberal peace, a regional system in which authoritarian states developed long-term habits of peaceful existence out of a common concern for regime survival.

Moreover, throughout the post-1975 period, Southeast Asia remained ideologically polarized. Vietnam, leading an Indo-China bloc that included Laos and the autogenocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia (renamed by its captors as Kampuchea), challenged the regional conception developed by its rival grouping that had organized itself since 1967 as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. While the latter professed to represent the whole of Southeast Asia, Vietnam laid a firm and coercive claim to Indo-China as a distinctive and a “single strategic unit”.

Wang Gungwu’s distinction between “moderate” and “revolutionary” types of nationalism elegantly explains the strategic polarization of Southeast Asia as a by-product of the region’s competing conceptions of nationalism. The three countries swept by revolutionary nationalisms, in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Burma, also proved to be least amenable to regional identity and cooperation at the outset of the postcolonial era. While Burma drifted toward isolationism, Sukarno’s Indonesia proved expansionist. Communist Vietnam showed open contempt for ASEAN’s vision of regional cooperation. On the other hand, countries which experienced a more moderate nationalism, such as Malaysia and Thailand, played an instrumental role in regional cooperation. The ASEAN-Indochina ideological polarization between the mid-1970s and late 1980s, which is usually seen as a by-product of the Cold War, was thus not entirely unrelated to the political legacy of colonialism. The moderates and revolutionaries held radically different conceptions of Southeast Asia as a region. The revolutionaries rejected the idea of a region dominated by Western powers, while the moderates had more to fear from a region dominated by China. While the revolutionaries hoped for a confederated region, the moderates would only accept regional cooperation based on the principle of equality and sovereignty. The moderates desired a region freely and multilaterally linked to the outside world, while the revolutionaries would accept this only if the communist powers were integral to this external linkage.¹³

It was not until the final Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and the subsequent Paris Peace Agreement securing Cambodia’s future as an independent nation that the decades’-long polarization of Southeast Asian finally ended. Regional elites were quick to point out that their forerunner’s alleged dream of “one Southeast Asia” is now close to fruition. ASEAN quickly expanded its membership to include the 10 nations which regional elites insisted were always meant to be part of Southeast Asia (thereby conveniently ignoring the fact that Sri Lanka had been invited to join as a founder of ASEAN, an invitation it had declined, much to its latter regret). But even after the realization of the One Southeast Asian concept, old divisions have persisted. The integration of Indo-Chinese states, and more importantly, of Myanmar (Burma) into ASEAN, carried out with undue haste and with little advance planning (in marked

¹³ ibid., pp.125-135
contrast to the EU’s project of membership expansion) has proven to be a daunting task, a burden that has undermined Southeast Asian regionalism to a much greater extent than the economic crisis of 1997.

If the impact of political and strategic forces in the making of Southeast Asia was a ambiguous and indeterminate, the other key material determinant, intra-regional economic linkages were even more problematic. Colonialism had terminally damaged the “age of commerce” in Southeast Asia. Post-colonial Southeast Asian nations, like their counterparts in most other parts of the developing world, maintained closer economic links with their former colonial masters than with each other. Their raw material producing economies were competitive, rather than complimentary.

Since economic interdependence was not a given, it had to be created. Yet, non-communist Southeast Asia was noticeably unsuccessful in organizing itself into an economic region, despite professing this objective for over three decades. Intra-regional trade has seldom touched 20% of the region’s total trade. Economic diversity has been accentuated by unruly membership expansion. The ASEAN Free Trade Area, the ultimate weapon that could deliver the idea of an economic region, is mired in uncertainties and exclusions (of items from the tariff-reduction list), as well as attempts by Singapore to leapfrog the region and develop free trade links with major economic powers outside. Sub-regional cooperation (the so-called “growth triangles”) proved more appealing and hopeful in the 1990s; but is rarely spoken of these days, especially in the aftermath of the regional economic downturn. In the meantime, Southeast Asia remains more integrated with its Northeast Asian neighbours than within itself. The emergence of macro-regional entities, such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and now ASEAN Plus Three attests to this reality.

**Southeast Asia as a Social Construct**

As we see from the preceding analysis, Southeast Asia’s claim to be a region cannot be entirely justified on the basis of strategic, political and economic factors and dynamics. To make the story complete, we need to examine its regional identity as a social construct. It’s a construct carved out of the manifest diversity and disjuncture among its constituent national units, through an act of political engineering by a group of like-minded elites who have nurtured and employed a wide variety of tools, including myths and symbols (such as the “ASEAN Way”), as well as notions of collective identity (such as “One Southeast Asia”). A common culture is not an adequate basis neither of regional construction nor of regional unity; otherwise the Arab world should have been the most cohesive region in the world. The quality of socialization ultimately decides whether regions rise or disappear. The social construction of region-ness requires a continuous process of interaction and socialization.
The original proponents of socialization were Southeast Asian nationalists. "The isolation of centuries had to be breached; lost ties had to be restored." Unlike in Europe, regionalism in Southeast Asia has been made to serve the interest of nationalism. "The search for national solidarity and unity", wrote Philippino Alejandro Melchor in one of the most remarkable collection of essays on Southeast Asian regionalism, "...is replicated, albeit on a broader scale and less urgent, but equally persistent, in the relations among nations of Southeast Asia."

Southeast Asia saw a dramatic phase of socialization in the 1970s and 1980s, when ASEAN’s founders set about a deliberate process of collective identity-building while recognizing the cultural diversity of their members and fully respecting their sovereignty as nation-states. Unlike the European Union, this was not a sovereignty-defying project. Supranationalism was incompatible with their long and hard-fought struggle against colonialism. But socialization, especially elite socialization, was undertaken as a way of reducing the tyranny of structural diversity and preempting post-colonial divisions from erupting into violent conflict. As a result, the original members of ASEAN have not fought a war against each other since 1967. Conflicts have been “swept under the carpet”, admittedly to reappear now and then, but as yet to a degree that could justify resort to war. Nationalism has not waned, but subsumed under a socially constructed framework of regionalism.

The expansion of ASEAN to assimilate Vietnam, Cambodiam Laos and Mynamar after the end of the Cold War represented a new phase in the process of regional construction. Sukhumbhand Paribatra argued that the having all 10 countries of Southeast Asia under the banner of a single regional grouping would "enhance the region's security and well-being", and represent "the fulfillment of a dream to create a region-wide organisation, which had begun some three decades before..." Documents such as Shared Destiny: Southeast Asia in the 21st Century, issued in 1993, and Southeast Asia Beyond the Year 2000: A Statement of Vision, issued in 1994, attest to the fact, as Carolina Hernandez writes, that "one Southeast Asia...is a goal increasingly captivating the imagination and support of the region's political and other opinion leaders from academe, the media, the private sector, and other professionals."


There remain several gaps in the social construction of Southeast Asia as a region, gaps which I have extensively discussed in my 2000 book, *The Quest for Identity*. Failure to extend the socialization process from the elite level to the people at large is especially debilitating to the future of Southeast Asia. Regional coherence is undermined by the avoidable squabbling between the founding regionalist states, such as Singapore and Malaysia.

Moreover, the social construction of Southeast Asia is being challenged by the forces of globalization. The Asian economic crisis underscored the vulnerability of Southeast Asia to the forces of global capitalism, which has been deeply embedded in the region’s economies.

Over and above this, the region now faces a new menace, that of transnational terrorism. Whether Southeast Asia has actually become global terror’s Second Front can and should be debated; since the claim often relies on uncertain and unverifiable evidence. Terrorism has the potential to serve as a common danger against which a new sense of purpose can be instilled into the region’s floundering multilateralism. Terrorism can engender division as much as unity, however; differing domestic circumstances and strategic priorities of Southeast Asian states can frustrate any effort to develop cohesion around this transnational threat. The prospects for American support against the terrorist challenge is insufficient to hold the region together. To overcome this problem and develop a new regional identity into the 21st century, Southeast Asian states must return to the building block, and develop the political will to preserve their hard-earned regional identity.

Increased regionalism, at the level of governments and civic organizations, is the only hope for the region to remain a region in the face of dark clouds that have gathered on its horizons since the outbreak of the Asian economic crisis in 1997. But Southeast Asia will remain a politically important, if analytically fuzzier, notion as long as local governments and elites find it useful to advance their common economic, political, and geo-strategic interests and objectives. Regionalism and regional identity-building will continue to be a key determinant of the idea of region.