Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order by Amitav Acharya
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chapters on Malaysia and the Philippines. This opens a highly critical agenda for future research into the dynamics of Chinese business beyond the current recognition of internal differences or “cleavages” among different Chinese business communities in Asia. While there is no shortage of excellent historical analysis of the emergence of Chinese business in Asia, very few published works have considered the dynamics and transformations of Chinese business systems in Asia (including their actors, families and firms). I hope readers of Chinese Business in South-East Asia will be inspired by what the book is not about in their own creative thinking and future research.

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Amitav Acharya’s new book is part of the indispensable Politics in Asia series edited by the late Michael Leifer of the London School of Economics. While Acharya places his work within the constructivist theory of the security community, it is readily accessible not only to scholars but to the general reader interested in the dynamics of recent Southeast Asian history and politics.

The five original members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, coalesced in 1967 as the domino theory of communist expansion in Southeast Asia reached its zenith. The end of the Vietnam conflict did not assuage the concerns of its neighbours, especially following the occupation of Cambodia in 1978, and division quickly surfaced over which constituted the greater threat: Vietnam or China.

Unlike Western Europe, where economic complementarity and common political values had led naturally to regional integration, ASEAN took several years to develop agreed norms, and these had more to do with agreed measures to protect the sovereignty of member states than with regional integration. Thirty-five years after its inception, ASEAN remains an incongruent grouping of sovereign states, ranging from the rich entrepot of Singapore to Cambodia, one of the poorest nations of Asia.

One concludes that ASEAN reached its apogee as a force for regional order in the 1980s as the fulcrum for the peace process in Cambodia. Member states were obligated to seek peaceful resolutions to territorial disputes, while holding fast to the doctrine of non-intervention. Again, the only major break with this latter principle has been in regard to Cambodia, and that only before its accession to ASEAN. As to economic development, ASEAN was
able only infrequently to bring concerted demands to bear on the developed West.

ASEAN did reach out collectively to the wider world, however, first through the Post Ministerial Committees to which were initially invited the main “donor” nations: Australia, Canada, the U.S.A., Japan and New Zealand. Later came the concept of the ASEAN regional forum, which for the first time drew China into discussions of regional security, including confidence-building measures.

The expansion of ASEAN to include “all ten” Southeast Asian nations, largely as a counterweight to perceived pressures from China, ironically weakened its cohesion. Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, while happily grasping the symbolic legitimacy conferred by accession had neither the resources nor the political culture to permit easy integration, either in economic terms or in their approach to democratic development and human rights. And ASEAN failed entirely to develop any common policy to deal with the “meltdown” of 1997-98.

Acharya correctly concludes that ASEAN now faces a serious challenge to reinvent itself. That said, however, the habit of consultation persists at the highest levels, and provides opportunities to head off potential intramural conflicts, be they territorial or economic. ASEAN can still play a constructive collective role in approaching numerous “human security” challenges such as social development and health standards. And, glacial though its progress may be, the ASEAN Regional Forum remains a valuable mechanism for interaction with major Asia Pacific countries on a widening range of global political and security issues.

The book has been painstakingly researched, with great attention to detail. It is indexed with precision, and includes useful capsule chronologies and charts, as well as excellent suggestions for further reading: an invaluable resource for every student of the region.

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The contents of the Atlas of Laos are identical to that of the original French version, which appeared a few months earlier. Grouped under ten chapters, the topics range from settlement and population dynamics to trade and tourism, education, health and culture, but also include, among other things,