Book Reviews


As its publishers indicate, this book is a ‘new and expanded’ edition of a book first published by Oxford University Press in Singapore in 2000. Then entitled *The quest for identity. International relations of Southeast Asia*, it made a contribution not only to understanding ‘regionness’ in Southeast Asia, but also to the arguments within the discipline of International Relations (IR). Those have focused and in one form or another continue to focus on the alleged distinction between ‘realism’ and ‘constructivism’. Robert Crawford (2002) argued that same year that the discipline was in crisis. The extent to which the debates within IR have been affected by discussions of Southeast Asia may be open to question, but Acharya’s ‘constructivist’ approach was certainly helpful in widening the understanding of ASEAN and his book was widely and rightly praised. In the new edition the author reiterates his purpose: ‘to build a dialogue between area studies and disciplinary (international relations) approaches to the study of Southeast Asia’ (p. xii).

The word ‘imagined’, as Acharya says, may often be misunderstood as meaning ‘fabricated’ or ‘invented’ (p. 23). Arguably Ben Anderson’s conception of nations as ‘imagined communities’ has sometimes been misconstrued as meaning ‘invented’: my understanding of it would put more emphasis on the element of ‘imagining’ that makes sense of a community among people who have no personal knowledge of one another. ‘Southeast Asia’, Acharya suggests, is a community ‘imagined’ at least by an elite, and it is a convincing argument. Indeed a sub-title of my book *Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (2006) thus quoted Indonesia’s President Suharto: ‘the basic effort is promoting our Association is […] to foster the political will’.

That conclusion, however, does not endorse an undue emphasis on ‘constructivism’. If the IR discipline is in crisis—and a historian should
perhaps hesitate to comment on struggles within another discipline—its divisions should not be visited on the practitioners. The Southeast Asian statesmen who ‘imagined’ the Association of Southeast Asian Nations were also ‘realists’. In the original book and the revised edition, Acharya gives some account of its predecessor ASA, the Association of Southeast Asian States, but it is not put sufficiently into context. It was a Malayan initiative, undertaken soon after Malaya gained independence in 1957, at a time when the far larger state of Indonesia was pursuing with increasing force its claim to West Papua. The subsequent Konfrontasi is mentioned only briefly in the book. Yet it is hard to understand the emergence of ASEAN without reckoning with the disparate level of size and power among the post-colonial states of Southeast Asia. Its statesmen were surely realists and constructivists.

The book, the author insists, is about the international relations of the region, not international relations in the region (p. 16). Yet he recognises that the ‘quest for regional autonomy was initially shaped by a concern […] that regional conflicts not managed at regional level would invite intervention by outside powers’ (p. 173). The two issues can surely not be separated. It might be said that the statesmen of 1967 seized an opportunity to reduce the risk of outside interference that had so marked the history of the region. They had to fill the ‘power vacuum’ for themselves, as Singapore’s Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam, was to put it (pp. 139-40).

Acharya perhaps puts too little emphasis on a prime feature of ASEAN and the ‘ASEAN Way’. Amidst all the ‘regionness’, the statesmen insisted on national sovereignty, integrity and non-intervention, in contrast to the European statesmen upon whom students of regionalism have tended to concentrate. That has been the strength of ASEAN, and also perhaps its weakness: it survived because it did not attempt too much, though that opened it to criticism for doing too little.

The main additions the new edition offers include, in chapter 2, a discussion of regional concepts, and, in chapter 3, an account of the role of Southeast Asian studies themselves. The chapter on the period 1979-1991 seems to be unchanged, and now looks a little dated. The title of the following chapter has been changed from ‘Managing “One Southeast Asia” to ‘Constructing “One Southeast Asia”’, and it now concludes with an account of the ARF, the ASEAN Regional Forum, ‘an opportunity to project its subregional experience in security cooperation onto a larger regional arena and thereby
enhance its relevance and role as a regional institution in the post-Cold War era’ (p. 233). What was the conclusion of that chapter, ‘Globalization and the Crisis of Regional Identity’, now opens a new chapter.

In that, more or less the final one, Acharya has a great deal to cover: two economic crises, terrorism, SARS, haze, and the tsunami of 2004. His main focus, rightly, is on the extent to which Southeast Asia may be ‘a people’s region’ (p. 258), and his conclusion is that ASEAN has so far not done enough ‘to draw the citizenry and civil society into the ambit of regional interactions’ (p. 267). He does not question whether that is possible, but, as in the first edition, concludes that in the future Southeast Asia may continue to be ‘an imagined community’ (p. 301). The realist in your reviewer suggests that, as in the past, much will depend on the policies Indonesia pursues.

The attractiveness of the new edition is increased by the inclusion of three groups of photographs. The author intends them, perhaps rather quixotically, to be ‘supplementary’ rather than ‘merely illustrative’.

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References
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