Amitav Acharya (2014)

The most recent edition of Amitav Acharya’s Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order is an updated version of a centrepiece of constructivist scholarship regarding the study and development of regionalism in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The book’s overarching theoretical framework is based on constructivist International Relations (IR) theory, which draws its lineage from Karl Deutsch (p. 16). Deutsch argues that the ultimate end of a security community is the successful management of conflict — in other words, making war unthinkable among its members.¹ This stems from building a collective ‘we’ feeling among a security community’s members, who share similar socio-cultural norms, values and ideas/ideologies, which find expression and traction in the frequency and density of interactions between and among its members. Transactionalism via the increased density and frequency of social interactions shapes, builds and moulds identity formations, which are expressed in international institutions.

Acharya argues that ASEAN’s original five member states found common ground for cooperation based on the need to promote national stability and nation-building against external and internal forces. In order to achieve this, the core principles or constitutive norms of ASEAN were established with the aims of solidarity and regional autonomy during the Cold War. ASEAN’s constitutive norms are essentially the Westphalian principles of IR sovereignty, non-interference in the internal affairs of states, peaceful settlement of disputes

and — specific to ASEAN — avoidance of military pacts (although this is dubious, to say the least, when one considers defence alliances with the United States) (p. 56). The methods for achieving ASEAN’s goals are best known as the ‘ASEAN Way’, which Acharya posits as being derived from the Javanese village traditions of interpersonal negotiation consultation (musyawarah) and consensus (mufakat), twinned with informality and a non-legalistic procedure of non-voting (p. 44). He argues quite astutely that these norms of behaviour served ASEAN states well during the Cold War period, in rallying frontline ASEAN states in the face of the successful Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia to oust the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. Not only was the successful diplomatic front of ASEAN states maintained throughout the Vietnamese occupation, but through to the final Cambodian settlement of the Paris Peace Accords (p. 92).

After an update of ASEAN’s historical relations in the first four chapters, Acharya engages in more contemporary inter-regional institutional issues and debates — namely, the long-running South China Sea maritime dispute, the evolution and efficaciousness of the ASEAN Regional Forum and intra-ASEAN political–security development dynamics. The overarching theme of the final half of the book centres on the changing dynamic of ASEAN norms since enlargement, which included the CMLV states (that is, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam) and how their divergent interpretation and use of ASEAN’s normative stances have brought into question ASEAN unity and its ability to engage in substantially contentious issues.

Regarding the South China Sea dispute, Acharya argues that several factors have led to a fraying of solidarity. These include the divergent positions of ASEAN states with regard to China’s claims in the South China Sea, with frontline states such as the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam attempting to unite ASEAN against China, while non-frontline states such as Thailand and specifically Cambodia have served to fracture any pretence of ASEAN solidarity. He points towards the failed Code of Conduct process and Cambodia’s ASEAN chairmanship, where ASEAN for the first time in its history failed to release a joint communiqué because of Chinese influence via Cambodia against even mentioning the dispute (p. 131). This has forced ASEAN states to forge military alliances with the United States to counterbalance Chinese influence, the most striking of which is Vietnam recently allowing access by US naval vessels to the wartime base of Cam Ranh Bay. Greater economic interdependence, which was stimulated by the end of the Cold War and which led to the ASEAN Free-Trade Area (AFTA) and later the Asian crisis of 1997, has led to vastly increased cooperation, at least on paper, while not necessarily stimulating aggregate