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Realism and constructivism in Southeast Asian security studies today: a review essay

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Abstract   The post-Cold War debate among positivist and post-positivist theorists of international security – particularly realists, liberals and constructivists – has not diminished. Both realism and constructivism have now been established as the key intellectual competitors in Southeast Asian security studies. Following a brief intellectual history of Southeast Asian security studies, this paper reviews the major works of two political scientists who are leading authorities: Michael Leifer, a professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science and a realist; and Amitav Acharya, a professor at York University and a constructivist. This review essay makes the following argument: constructivism is more insightful than balance-of-power realism, but it is more likely to conform to a sophisticated balance-of-threat theory – a form of 'minimalist' or 'soft' realism – which can help explain the daunting tasks of security–community building.

Keywords   Realism; balance of power; balance of threat; liberalism; constructivism; security community.

Introduction

The post-Cold War debate among positivist and post-positivist theorists of international security – particularly realists, liberals and constructivists – has not diminished. But which of these perspectives will enjoy the most academic attention? For Robert Keohane and others, rationalism and

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constructivism will (Katsenstein *et al*. 1998). Realists disagree (Jervis 1998; Walt 1998; Mearsheimer 1998).

Concerning Southeast Asia specifically, some scholars argue that neoliberalism and realism remain the two dominant theoretical perspectives in security studies, but that liberalism is likely to become more influential in the future (Simon 1995). For others, such as Barry Buzan and Gerald Segal, however, '[the] debate about East Asian security is dominated by two theories of the future', namely realism and liberalism, but the realists 'may be closer to the truth' (Buzan and Segal 1998: 96). In a preliminary assessment of contemporary studies on security in East Asia, Sorpong Peou contends that realism, liberalism, and constructivism have become the most prominent perspectives (Peou 2001). Of these, both realism and constructivism have now been established as the key intellectual competitors in Southeast Asian security studies.

This essay makes the following argument: constructivism is more insightful than 'balance-of-power' realism, but it is more likely to conform to a sophisticated balance-of-threat theory. Following a brief intellectual history of Southeast Asian security studies, I will review the major works of two leading political scientists: Michael Leifer, a former professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science and a realist; and Amitav Acharya, a professor at York University and a constructivist.[1]

Constructivism and realism in Southeast Asian security studies

Realism is the oldest perspective on Southeast Asian security. Neoliberalism once sought to challenge realism, but it lacks the empirical content necessary to prove itself worthy of proper recognition. Constructivism has now replaced neoliberalism as the most credible challenger to realism in Southeast Asian security studies.

Before assessing the intellectual application of realism to Southeast Asian security, it is helpful to describe briefly its intellectual history and basic assumptions, as well as its characterization of international relations and prescription for peace. Realism prevailed over idealism because of the Second World War and has long been recognized as the most prominent theory of war and peace, which is regarded as the most pressing issue in international politics. Although it has many variants (particularly those known as defensive and offensive positionalism), realism as a general approach has a number of characteristics: states are the principal actors in a world without common government; they are unitary and rational actors driven by self-interest; they operate in international anarchy and thus face threats from other states; within this self-help system, they are 'both offensively-oriented and defensively-oriented' (Mearsheimer 1998: 337).

Ideology and historical experience have little impact in realism. Realists downplay the 'democratic peace' thesis and disregard the impact of liberal and non-liberal values on state behavior (Mearsheimer 1998). And history does not matter: states have similar interests defined in terms of power regardless of time and space; war is a constant possibility, and there is no progress toward perpetual peace. As Robert Jervis puts it, 'To conceive of international politics as a Hobbesian state of nature means not that warfare is constant, but only that it is always a possibility and that actors understand this' (Jervis 1998: 986). International cooperation is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve because of the security dilemma as well as states' concerns about relative gains (Grieco 1988), but is more likely in a temporary military context. Balance-of-power systems are generally seen as the main recipe for peace and stability.

Until the late 1980s, realist-inclined scholarship had dominated Southeast Asian security studies. In Indo-China alone, there were three major wars, known as the First Indo-China War (1945–54), the Second Indo-China War (1965–73) and the Third Indo-China War (1978–89). The US involvement in the Second Indo-China War generated a large body of literature in strategic studies. It should thus come as no surprise that the literature on international relations of Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s 'were permeated with implicit realist assumptions regarding the nature of the international system' (Huxley 1996: 231). The literature further shows 'a preoccupation with how the region's communist states should adjust their foreign policies in light of the changing balance of great power involvement in the region' (Huxley 1996: 232), but 'these writings were largely not theoretically self-conscious' (Huxley 1996: 231).

Realism continues to be a key conceptual approach in Southeast Asian security studies. As with Northeast Asia, where realists have paid considerable attention to the 'China-threat' issue and the possibility of armed conflict in the South China Sea, Southeast Asia does not lack realist-inclined scholars. There is no 'peace dividend' in Southeast Asia after the Soviet collapse; some of them see the region as one rife with growing bilateral tensions after the Cold War, which 'provided a certain ideological coherence and congruent threat perceptions for ASEAN' (Ganesan 1999: 56). Jürgen Rüland defends the utility of realism in ASEAN whose 'policy mix is closer to the realist than the institutionalist pole' (Rüland 2000: 443). Of all the realists who have studied Southeast Asian security, however, Michael Leifer was no doubt the most influential. Known as the 'dean' of Southeast Asian security studies, he wrote extensively on this region and painted a realist picture (Leifer 1989, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2001).

The extent to which liberalism remains a theoretical vision for the future of Southeast Asia is not difficult to assess. Kantian internationalism, which posits that democracies have almost never fought each other, has never been influential in Southeast Asia: only three of the region's ten states have become liberal democracies: Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia,

all of which are young. The rest remain semi-democratic (Singapore, Malaysia and possibly Cambodia), communist (Laos and Vietnam), monarchical (Brunei), or under military rule (Burma). As shall be seen, institution building in this region has not rested on a democratic foundation.

Neoliberal institutionalism is an approach that has received more attention in Southeast Asian security studies. As a distinct theoretical perspective and a challenger to realism, this theory was first advanced by Robert Keohane, whose work stresses the importance of rationalism in explaining international regime formation and the existence of international institutions. This rationalist perspective draws on insights from economics in its emphasis on the virtue of transaction-cost reduction. Under conditions such as those modeled by non-cooperative prisoners' dilemma games, high transaction costs and asymmetrical uncertainty could lead to suboptimal outcomes. But neoliberal institutionalists see the benefit of institution building as a more effective way to cope with uncertainty rationally by helping states to achieve their objectives more efficiently. Institutions are significant; they provide information, which could help states overcome their worst-case assumption of each other's intentions in an uncertain, anarchic world. Information concerning the economic gains to be achieved from cooperation can help 'settle distributional conflicts' and assure member states 'that gains are evenly divided over time' (Keohane and Martin 1998: 390–1).

Neoliberal institutionalism shows some relevance in the study of Southeast Asian security. ASEAN regionalism based on economic cooperation manifest in the institutionalization of the ASEAN Free Trade Areas (AFTA) appears to lend some support to this theory. Sheldon Simon thus acknowledges that this perspective coexists with realism and the two may reinforce each other. Each of these two theories 'explains some of the variance in regional security outcomes but that increasingly neo-liberalism will explain more of the region's future security orientation' (Simon 1995: 7). So far, however, realists and constructivists alike have seen little utility in neoliberal institutionalism (Ganesan 1995), which 'have not been very relevant in explaining ASEAN's successes or failures, especially in the political and security arena' (Acharya 2000: 7). Also, 'the emergence and consolidation of ASEAN took place with fairly low levels of intra-mural transactions and interdependence' (Acharya 2000: 199).

More and more scholars have now turned to constructivism for insights in explaining ASEAN regionalism. Constructivism has increased in influence since the late 1980s and is said to possess more explanatory power than neoliberal institutionalism. The latter can explain the death of institutions whenever their members no longer have 'incentives to maintain them', but the former can account for their persistence when incentives no longer exist (Hopf 1998: 191). John Ruggie and Alexander Wendt represent this intellectual tradition. Constructivism takes into account the

importance of culture, ideas, ideology and socialization. State leaders are key actors in international politics, but cultural norms, values and identities (embedded in specific historical contexts) can shape or define their policy preferences. Constructivism rests on the basic assumption that the international system is socially constructed. Ideology, history and socialization matter. Material capabilities, for instance, do not explain why '500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons' (Wendt 1998: 418). As well, 'History matters', claims Wendt (Wendt 1998: 422).

Above all else, international anarchy is socially constructed: '[A]narchy is what states make of it' (Wendt 1992). 'An anarchy of friends differs from one of enemies, one of self-help from one of collective security, and these are all constituted by structures of shared knowledge' (Wendt 1998: 423). Anarchy can thus be transformed into a 'security community' defined as a 'social structure ... composed of shared knowledge in which states trust one another to resolve disputes without war' (Wendt 1998: 418).

It was not until the late 1980s that this cultural and sociological approach to security began to permeate Southeast Asian security studies. I do not argue that this post-positivist approach to Southeast Asian security had never been touched on before. In fact, Southeast Asia was the region that put to the test the assumptions and methodology of rational choice theory, a theory that became popular in the 1950s and early 1960s. Soon this theory encountered new challenges, especially after the US 'defeat' in the Vietnam War in the early 1970s. Although one of the world's two superpowers, the US failed to prevent its South Vietnamese ally from falling victim to communist North Vietnam. Realist theories of deterrence and coercion then came under scrutiny. Academic attention turned toward discursive factors (domestic contexts and cultural variables) that were believed to help explain why the US lost the war and why the Soviet Union had an advantage *vis-à-vis* the US (Desch 1998: 145–7). In as early as 1966, Bernard Gordon published his work, which was seen as 'the most important general survey of Southeast Asian international relations'. He refers to the writings of such scholars as Ernst Haas and Karl Deutsch (Huxley 1996: 231), whose theoretical insights have inspired today's constructivists. Arnfinn Jorgensen-Dahl's doctoral dissertation, completed in 1975 and published in 1982, was 'the first extended analysis of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia'. This study concluded that ASEAN 'represented "a significant move toward" a sense of community in the Deutschian conception within non-communist Southeast Asia' (Huxley 1996: 235). In 1986, Noordin Sopiee further took up the idea when describing ASEAN as a 'quasi-security community'. Since the late 1980s, other leading Western scholars, such as Barry Buzan and Sheldon Simon, also came to recognize ASEAN as a 'security community' (Huxley 1996: 237).

As a theoretical approach to Southeast Asian security, however, constructivism remained peripheral until the early 1990s. Writing in 1994,

Richard Higgott correctly argues that, 'Even the most sophisticated and conceptually oriented policy analyses of contemporary development and change in the Asia-Pacific region ignore the significance of underlying ideational questions' (Higgott 1994: 368). Constructivism has since made headway in Northeast Asian security studies (Johnston 1995; Katzenstein 1996; Berger 1996). While Johnston gives weight to 'domestic strategic culture', Katzenstein and Berger emphasize 'domestic political attitudes'. The same can be said of Southeast Asia, where the study of ASEAN regionalism and regional security and debate over 'Asian-values' have also engendered a growing number of sophisticated works with a constructivist bent. Identity, perception, norms, ideas, culture – all these discursive, or non-material, factors have been taken into account in security policy analysis (Higgott 1994; Alagappa 1998; Haacke 1999; Busse 1999; Acharya 1991, 2000, 2001).

Among the constructivists who have studied Southeast Asian security, Amitav Acharya is arguably the most authoritative. As the Cold War thawed in the early 1990s, he was among the first to conceptualize this region as a security community. In 2000, he published a major work entitled *The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia*. One year later, he produced another impressive volume: *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of a Regional Order. Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia* (Acharya 2001) has enjoyed lavish praise from two leading constructivists in security studies. Peter Katzenstein wrote (on the book's back cover): 'This ground-breaking study illuminates brilliantly ASEAN's novel approach to issues of national and international security. Theoretically sophisticated and contextually grounded, Amitav Acharya is the rare scholar who succeeds fully in engaging intellectuality both security and area specialists'. Also Emanuel Adler commends the book as 'one of the best, most interesting and comprehensive studies on ASEAN and offers a compelling rationale for the security community approach to international relations'.

On *The Quest for Identity*, Dianne Mauzy comments that she 'did not think that yet another book about ASEAN and efforts at regional cooperation could offer much that was very new or interesting. However, Amitav Acharya's book is interesting because of the breadth of the analysis and the fact that it goes beyond a strict international relations paradigm' (Mauzy 2000). In the book's preface, Anthony Reid makes a similar statement: 'This book is a landmark in the process it describes. Southeast Asia's "quest for identity", its imagining of a common destiny, has found a worthy chronicler and analyst in Amitav Acharya. ... For the first time in this field, he has pursued the origins of Southeast Asian identity and diplomacy into a distant pre-colonial past'. Michael Leifer, however, was far less generous: in his review of *The Quest for Identity*, for instance, he expressed his disagreement (Leifer, forthcoming).

Michael Leifer's realist perspective

I am reviewing Leifer's perspective first for several reasons: realism is much older than constructivism, and he believed realism explains Southeast Asian security better than alternative theories. There are at least three ways by which his realist perspective can be identified.

First, Leifer found unconvincing the liberal argument that international relations could be explained in terms of growing economic interdependence. Although ASEAN was formed out of the need for economic cooperation, 'Economic relations have been limited and disappointing in terms of expectations' (Leifer 1989: 141). Underneath Leifer's implicit criticism of liberalism also lies his belief that ASEAN's 'corporate interest . . . does not exist' (Leifer 1989: 141). In his view, 'economic cooperation [within ASEAN] has been obstructed by structural conflicts of interest' (Leifer 1989: 142).

Neither did he embrace neoliberal institutionalism. While he believed, as neoliberal institutionalists do, that multilateralism could help mitigate state behavior but would not transform the international system, he fundamentally refuted this theory. Multilateral undertakings are ineffective. ASEAN is an 'underdeveloped institution'. One example, often referred to in his criticism of institutionalism, was the perfunctory nature of the ASEAN High Council provided for in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation – a mechanism for peaceful settlement of disputes among the member states. This institutional provision 'has not yet been put into effect' (Leifer 1989: 150); the mechanism 'has never been constituted'. National interest reigns supreme, and regional machinery 'is distinguished by the primacy of the national foreign ministries' – the 'primacy' that 'reflects the national government's determination to prevent centrist tendencies from developing in the form of cooperate institutions with more than a minimal service function' (Leifer 1989: 142). The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was also viewed as analogous to 'Hebrew slaves in Egypt who were obliged to make bricks without straw' (Leifer 1996: 59). International institutions may be able to cope with some uncertainties, but they will never overcome the perennial 'problem of power', especially when powerful states or rising powers are bent on disrupting the status quo.

Second, Leifer did not share the kind of optimism found in constructivism, although he did consider ASEAN to be a sort of 'community'; to him, ASEAN was an 'internal collective security arrangement', a 'diplomatic community', and an 'embryonic security community' (Leifer 1989: 139, 157). However, ASEAN had 'never been more than an inter-government entity' with 'a strong disposition against any supranational tendency' (Leifer 1989: 153). For him, constructivism sheds little light on whatever regional cooperation ASEAN has achieved so far. Cultural tradition does not facilitate greater security cooperation (Leifer 1996: 59). In his words:

'ASEAN has not been able to promote security to the extent of forging a region-wide structure of relations based on common values and interests' (Leifer 1989: 157). ASEAN's regional 'identity' was largely the by-product of members' 'interests' that were shared but 'rarely held truly in common' (Leifer 1989: 148). ASEAN of course practiced the politics of consensus, but this 'practice . . . has never entailed full uniformity in foreign policy' (Leifer 1989: 144).

Third, Leifer's perspective could be deciphered in terms of his attempts to explain 'political cooperation' within the context of power politics. His analysis rested on basic realist assumptions: we live in 'a world without common government' (Leifer 1996: 57), where the 'problem of power' arises 'from the anarchical nature of international society' characterized by military competition that could not be addressed on a 'cooperative basis' or through multilateral diplomacy (Leifer 1996: 52, 53). To interpret interstate relations outside this framework 'would be the height of intellectual naivete' (Leifer 1996: 59). Such institutions as the ARF could only make modest contributions to a 'viable balance of power' and could work only when first meeting the prerequisite of a 'prior existence of a stable balance of power' (Leifer 1996: 57).

Although it is sometimes difficult to grasp his balance-of-power logic, it is possible to place him within the field of foreign policy analysis. His work did not explain balancing behavior in a way understood as an automatic mechanism for creating equilibrium in international politics, nor did it concentrate on a system of relationships among states. Rather, each state's policy of balance of power should be the subject of study. The term 'balance of power' meant the 'distribution of power' and was defined in imprecise terms as 'an actual policy of states' with 'a common goal which has been to deny the emergence of any undue [or menacing] dominance or hegemony' (Leifer 1986: 145; 1993: 274–5). Indonesia, for instance, 'dipped its toes into the waters of the balance of power' (Leifer 1996: 52). His book on Singapore's foreign policy further indicated his foreign-policy approach to balance-of-power politics (Leifer 2000).

For him, the process of alignment and realignment indicated it was a temporary dynamic and demonstrated the unreliable nature of security alliances. Progress in the realm of security cooperation 'can only be limited', and ASEAN would not be transformed into 'a different kind of corporate entity' (Leifer 1989: 158). Political cooperation is possible when states face common external foes. ASEAN achieved its cooperation in the late 1970s and 1980s, because their 'security interests . . . have a practical dimension'. In his words: 'the diplomatic solidarity of the six states can be mobilized to act as a deterrent of a limited kind in the face of an external threat to any of their number' (Leifer 1989: 157–8). 'The governments of ASEAN closed ranks' when facing 'Vietnamese and Laos hostility' after 1975 (Leifer 1989: 75). ASEAN's '[corporate] identity was recognized and confirmed as a consequence of the corporate challenge

posed to Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Kampuchea' (Leifer 1989: 152). The conflict in Cambodia served as 'the tangible basis of corporate solidarity' (Leifer 1989: 119). ASEAN thus conformed to balance-of-power logic: 'to prevent Vietnam from consolidating a position of dominance throughout Indochina which could have the effect of placing Thailand at a permanent geopolitical disadvantage' (Leifer 1989: 152). The member states were 'motivated by convergent considerations of principle, balance of power, and corporate solidarity' (Leifer 1989: 98). There were no moral bearings on their foreign policy actions: they, for instance, cooperated with China in assisting the Khmer Rouge during the 1980s, a force with a 'bestial record', 'as long as its demonic energies could be directed against the Vietnamese in Kampuchea' (Leifer 1989: 97).

Leifer's arguments were also centered on ASEAN's persistent intramural differences, which existed in the 1980s but had 'never been allowed to obstruct a public display of a corporate political consensus over Kampuchea' (Leifer 1989: 90). Members of ASEAN had fundamental differences of strategic perspective and generally had not shared a common view regarding external threats. Each state sought an independent path and often pursued a policy to enhance its own security interests. He thus seemed to echo the realist conviction that security alliances are by and large unreliable and impermanent, for the simple reason that they are not based on sustained interests, but only reflect a temporary balancing of power. As he put it: 'some partners in reconciliation would be likely to remain potential enemies' (Leifer 1989: 146).

A disciple of traditional realism, Leifer was prolific. The question is whether he was as 'realist' as he thought he was. More closely examined, his perspective often exhibited a degree of conceptual ambiguity and inconsistency and raised difficult questions, such as 'Do states in Southeast Asia balance power?' and 'What is power?'

Leifer often pointed out that ASEAN states did not behave according to balance-of-power logic. Domestic politics could also influence states' foreign policy-making, and domestic sources of foreign policy were readily acknowledged in his works. The domestically insecure Philippines, for instance, did not view Vietnam and China as immediate threats (Leifer 1989: 72) and was inclined toward the United States, whose military presence was seen 'as a way of managing domestic dissent' (Leifer 1989: 156). Israel President Chaim Herzog's visit to Singapore – another example of how domestic politics shapes foreign policy decisions – provoked furor by domestic elements in Malaysia (Leifer 1989: 144–7). The ASEAN security framework was basically defined in the context of 'internal collective security'. ASEAN was formed in response to domestic threats: its members experienced internal political weakness – rooted in such problems as internal insurgencies – and thus shared 'a common vulnerability to internal threats' (Leifer 1989: 1, 14). Such domestic factors, in my view, are consistent with non-realist theories (Levy and Barnett 1991, 1992),

and are inconsistent with balance-of-power logic, which focuses on the security dilemma inherent in international anarchy.

The evidence Leifer provided shows that states in ASEAN often failed to balance against powerful extra-regional states. The 1975 communist victories, subsequent communist hostilities and the Vietnamese invasion/occupation of Cambodia no doubt brought the ASEAN members to a higher level of political cooperation, but their behavior does not appear to fit nicely with balance-of-power logic. It was not power *per se* against which they sought to balance, otherwise they would not have turned to larger powers, such as China and the United States. The Soviet involvement in Indo-China was a factor, but the Soviet Union was an 'incomplete' superpower and was not as powerful as the United States. Following the Cold War, ASEAN states did not have 'a common strategic perspective', even in the midst of an external threat from the rising power of a revisionist China. ASEAN 'cannot . . . be expected to integrate Vietnam within a conventional collective defense structure designed to contain any creeping assertiveness in the region by China'; there was no 'lobby within ASEAN with an interest in so confronting China' (Leifer 1993: 274). Instead, ASEAN helped create the ARF – 'without provision for either collective defense or conventional collective security' – incapable of creating a balance of power (Leifer 1989: 53). 'The balance of power in the Asia-Pacific has been left primarily to the United States to uphold' (Leifer 1996: 58).

Leifer could of course counter-argue that ASEAN was a group of weak states ruled by illegitimate leaders, who were not always expected to form an alliance to balance a more militarily powerful Vietnam or China or even the US. ASEAN 'could not contemplate matching force with force' (Leifer 1989: 11). True, such behavior does not contradict balance-of-power logic, which assumes that weak states are more likely to bandwagon with the strong than try to balance against its power (Waltz 1979: 113).

Still, material power alone does not explain why some ASEAN states turned to China and the US for protection against a smaller power, Vietnam, or a weaker military bloc (the Soviet–Indo-Chinese alliance) during the 1980s. ASEAN states' behavior further raises the question of why they have since the 1990s let the US – the only superpower left in the world – balance against a weaker power, China. Singapore's foreign policy behavior particularly does not conform to balance-of-power logic: its reliance on the US – 'despite [the latter's] hegemonic role in shaping international regimes' (Leifer 2000: 102) – for protection against other powers weaker than the US.

More closely read, Leifer's thinking conforms to balance-of-threat logic: the concept of hegemony is not neutral or objective but dependent on how states perceive it. Singapore preferred to rely on the US because the latter was perceived as a benign hegemon, 'a protecting and not a menacing power' (Leifer 2000: 99). Domestic and external threats led to internal

collective security among the founding ASEAN members, but this behavior is compatible with balance-of-threat theory, which posits that weak states respond to the most dangerous threat to their survival by bandwagoning (Walt 1987: 29–31, 263). Threat perception is shaped by other non-realist variables. Leifer's work went beyond the concept of aggregate power – a source of threat – to include geographical proximity, ideology, ethnic and cultural identity, and historical legacy.

Singapore's foreign policy, for instance, sheds light on the 'tyranny of geography', which 'means that [it] cannot escape a locale in which problematic relations with close neighbors are permanent facts of political life' (Leifer 2000: 39).

Ideology also mattered in Leifer's security analysis. One of ASEAN's predecessors – the Association of Southeast Asia – had failed: Indonesian President Sukarno 'repudiated [it] because of its anti-Communist and pro-Western disposition' (Leifer 1989: 20). But Indonesia under Suharto 'exhibited a deep-seated hostility to Communism from its establishment in March 1966' (Leifer 1989: 91), thus making it possible for Indonesia to play a key role in ASEAN formation. Communist Indo-China posed a threat to anti-communist ASEAN states, subsequently forcing them to register 'a common political identity and purpose' (Leifer 1989: viii). With the Cold War over, they 'no longer regard Vietnam as the core of a communist menace in Indochina': they 'see the creed of communism as having withered away' (Leifer 1993: 277). This helped explain why ASEAN states feared communist China more than they feared the US.

Historical experience sometimes received similar attention in Leifer's security analysis, in both positive and negative ways. According to him, 'ASEAN was the institutional product of regional conflict resolution' (Leifer 1989: 17). Meanwhile, historical experience could be counted as another source of threat that shaped ASEAN states' different responses to external threats. Malaysia and Indonesia 'regarded China and not Vietnam as the main source of threat' (Leifer 1989: 11); they were more apprehensive about 'regional subordination' to extra-regional powers' strategic interests. History also helps explains this variation: '[T]he perceived shared experiences of the Indonesian and Vietnamese nationalist movements in challenging colonial rule' (Leifer 1989: 91). Material power and geographical proximity alone did not determine Singapore's deep-seated mistrust of its neighbors. Historical legacies matter: the experience of Confrontation, a 'messy divorce' from Malaysia, and racial antagonisms – all these remained the sources that kept Singapore in the state of vulnerability to its neighbors. Singapore also trusted the US more than it trusted Japan: Singapore accepted Japan's security role only 'within a defense structure dominated by the US' (Leifer 2000: 126). History seems to make all the difference: Japanese forces' invasion and occupation of Singapore in the early phase of the Pacific War 'left a far more bitter legacy than nearly a century and a half of British colonial rule' (Leifer 2000: 124).

Culture was also acknowledged, if not consciously privileged, in Leifer's writings, though often treated in an inconsistent fashion. Sometimes he treated culture as static: new members (Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) had no culture of consultation and consensus and were not expected to adapt well to the ASEAN political game (Leifer 1996: 48). This raises the question of how the founding members of ASEAN developed this culture in the first place. Sometimes he treated culture as dynamic: Indonesia's 'political culture' under Sukarno was 'radical' (Leifer 1989: 19), something that stood in the way of regional cooperation; under Suharto it was different, thus making cooperation with other states possible. At other times, culture was seen as varying from region to region; ASEAN's culture was different from that of Europe: its habit of consultation and consensus 'engendered a quasi-familial corporate culture', distinct from the 'recent European experience' of 'confidence building' (Leifer 1996: 31, 33). ASEAN lacks what Western Europe has: declaratory aspirations found in the Treaty of Rome, 'which still inspires the goals of the European Community' (Leifer 1993: 274). Read in this historical, cultural context, Leifer came close to being a constructivist.

Acharya's constructivist perspective

This section reviews Acharya's books, dissecting his ontological and epistemological claims and his rejection of liberalism and realism, double-checking the evidence he provides, and determining whether his theory supplements or supplants realism.

Acharya's books do recognize 'real-world' problems in Southeast Asia. Intra-ASEAN differences, intra-mural polarization, factionalism, interstate territorial disputes and outside intervention – all these 'posed a threat not only to the survival of some of the region's new states, but also to the prospects for regional order as a whole' (Acharya 2000: 4–5). These dangers were thus as 'real' to Acharya as they were to Leifer.

While acknowledging that states in the region have also practiced balance-of-power politics, Acharya differs from realists in that he sees this politico-military strategy as a social construct, and not the only option available to ASEAN. The group seeks 'to use multilateralism to moderate and maintain a stable balance of power' and sees 'multilateralism not as a substitute for US military supremacy and its bilateral alliances, but as a necessary complement to the latter' (Acharya 2000: 182). Multilateral security dialogues are seen by states in the region as a strategy that can 'supplement' a balance-of-power approach (Acharya 2000: 181). For Acharya, however, balance-of-power politics is subject to transformative logic. In the short term, multilateralism 'may help shape the balance of power by providing norms of restraint and avenues of confidence building among the major powers'. In the long term, however, 'it may even enable states to transcend the balance of power approach' (Acharya 2000: 184).

The theoretical foundation Acharya has built to explain international relations in Southeast Asia is rather ambitious, even radical; one that projects itself as a meta-theory that subsumes both realism and liberalism and ultimately supplants them. His books rely on evidence that ASEAN has somewhat transcended power politics: by the early 1990s, it had emerged as a 'nascent security community'. The concept of a 'security community' means that member states rule out war against each other and when in conflict seek to settle their differences in a peaceful manner, although they may not do so with non-member states. According to Acharya, 'by the early 1990s [the ASEAN] members could claim their grouping to be one of the most successful experiments in regional coop-eration in the developing world. At the heart of this claim was ASEAN's role in moderating intra-regional conflicts and significantly reducing the likelihood of war' (Acharya 2000: 5). The states in ASEAN did not behave according to the dictate of balance-of-power logic: they have not been bogged down in an arms race driven by the usual security dilemma dynamics, nor have small states – Singapore and Brunei in particular – grown increasingly vulnerable to the larger member states.

As a nascent security community, ASEAN rests on two key pillars: norms for collective action and identity-building initiatives. ASEAN's norms with transformative power include non-interference, non-use of force, regional autonomy, avoidance of collective defense and the practice of the 'ASEAN way'. The 'ASEAN way' includes the following characteristics: compro-mise, consensus building, ambiguity, avoidance of strict reciprocity and rejection of legally binding obligations. Acharya has further demonstrated that ASEAN member states' externally directed behaviors were generally norm-consistent. They abide by the norms of non-interference and non-use of force. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia (against non-interference) led to an outcry from ASEAN, which also showed a willingness to negotiate with Vietnam rather than to form a military alliance against it (non-use of force). The ASEAN 'policy of "constructive engagement"' – that led to the full admission of Burma as a member in 1997 – was also consistent with the norms of non-interference by other member states and by extra-regional powers (regional autonomy). Furthermore, ASEAN did not heed the call by Western powers to isolate and punish Burma for its domestic human rights violations. Regarding non-use of force, they have managed their conflicts peacefully.

ASEAN's collective identity is another crucial aspect of community building in Southeast Asia. A security community is defined as a social construct, evolving as 'a sort of an "imagined community"' – a vision which preceded rather than resulted from political, strategic and func-tional interactions and interdependence, and as such it must be under-stood in non-material terms. ASEAN is a community similar to Benedict Anderson's classic formulation of the nation-state as an 'imagined commu-nity' (Acharya 2001: 2). By collective identity, he does not suggest that

the region is not culturally diverse, although states in the region share some 'cultural similarities'. Neither does he see identity building as a process based on malignant hegemony in realist terms. In Southeast Asia, hierarchy had existed in the pre-colonial interstate system, but it was not based on 'relative preponderance of material power, military or economic'. When faced with centrifugal tendencies, the ruler 'resorted to ritual and symbol to hold the state together, instead of by carrying out a military expedition' (Acharya 2001: 28). He thus rejects the realist argument that hegemony or coercive power is fundamental to institution building. The region had a 'pacific tradition', but much of its 'commonality' and 'shared consciousness' was disrupted by colonial rule.

Acharya argues that the 'we feeling' in ASEAN does not rest on the liberal logic of economic interdependence or democracy (Acharya 2000: 194–5, 207–8). He traces the 'we feeling' back to the cultural and social process within the region. Both norm creation and identity formation are not simply the by-product of 'a common cultural identity' shared by its members because of 'the social and cultural diversity' among them (Acharya 2000: 194, 202). Wisely avoiding the pitfall of cultural determinism, he writes: '[I]n the case of ASEAN, it was not so much that culture created norms', but rather that 'norms also created culture' (Acharya 2000: 72). 'The ASEAN Way itself resulted not so much from preordained cultural sources' (Acharya 2000: 71); it 'emerged not only from the principles of interstate relations agreed to by the founders of ASEAN, but also from a subsequent and long-term process of interaction and adjustment' (Acharya 2000: 71–2). Norms and identity resulted from incremental socialization.

The process of regionalization is also shaped by local actors, who think regionally, as well as by social interactions; it 'was indigenously constructed rather than exogenously determined' (Acharya 2001: 166). Since the Second World War, 'the idea of one Southeast Asia has been consciously nurtured by regional élites' (Acharya 2001: 169). After the Second World War they made efforts to restore its 'cultural unity' and 'regional coherence' in the larger pan-Asian or Afro-Asian context (allowing leaders to meet one another), but not to create a regional identity. Although these efforts made important steps toward regionalism at the time, 'a Southeast Asian community remained a distant concept' (Acharya 2001: 51). But 'the "ASEAN Way" has been at the core of efforts to build a Southeast Asian regional identity in the modern era' (Acharya 2001: 29).

This sociological perspective highlights Acharya's main contention that norm creation and identity building transpire in the context of perceived threats from within and without national boundaries. Like realists, Acharya still believes that common perceptions of external threats induced, or will induce, ASEAN's unity and regional cohesion. Unlike realists, however, he asserts that community building within ASEAN also resulted from its members' shared perception of threats from within. Both external and

internal threats thus gave rise to ASEAN regionalism. In his words: '[T]he peaceful relations among the ASEAN members and hence its claim to be a regional security community owed much to common concerns over the domestic threat from communism and to cooperative efforts to balance Vietnamese power' (Acharya 2000: 102).

Acharya's perspective shows a lot of merit, although realists may come down hard on his optimism concerning the impact of norms and collective identity on state behavior. Leifer disagreed with *The Quest for Identity* in his contention that the idea of regional autonomy and identity in ASEAN remains elusive, as the group enlarged itself and promoted wider multilateralism (Leifer, forthcoming). Such inclusive regionalism, however, should not be seen as opposed to ASEAN's norms, such as non-use of force, non-interference, and avoidance of collective defense. Leifer had a point when he stated that 'there has never been a genuine *casus bellum* among ASEAN states' and that the so-called 'ASEAN way' 'has been possible because it has never really been put to the test' (Leifer, forthcoming). The counterpoint is raised by the questions: Why is this the case? Why have ASEAN states 'never had a genuine *casus bellum*'? Why has post-Cold War ASEAN not collapsed? Why have other states joined it? Other realists also contend that the post-Cold War bilateral tensions in ASEAN 'partially invalidate the "peace dividend"', but the adverb 'partially' – that 'none of these tensions deteriorated to the point of conflict' (Genesan 1999: 55) – does not fully validate realism, either.

My only criticism of Acharya's constructivism is that it appears a bit radical: he offers a noble vision that would transcend politics altogether. But evidence still shows little of how this vision might eventually come to pass. The jury is still out. When one talks about collective norms and identity, one must also question the degree of their impact on state behavior. It remains unclear why some ASEAN states' behavior was more norm-consistent and others' is less so. Indonesia and Malaysia, for instance, have adopted a regional approach that 'was fully consistent with' ASEAN's norm of regional autonomy (against military pacts). In contrast, Singapore and Thailand have sought 'close and direct backing from the major external powers, thereby compromising the norm of regional autonomy' (Acharya 2000: 82). Moreover, ASEAN's norms can also be undermined by material factors – membership size, for instance; non-interference could also erode as a result of membership expansion (Acharya 2000: 120, 123).

Although domestic threats – communist insurgencies, ethnic separatism – were factors that brought the ASEAN members together, it remains unclear why this was the case. Sometimes 'insurgency undermined regionalism' (Acharya 2001: 55); sometimes 'preoccupation with domestic problems diminished foreign policy capacity, including capacity for cooperation ventures and institutions' (Acharya 2001: 58). Domestic troubles could

also lead to interstate conflict. Sukarno, for instance, diverted 'attention from domestic problems through regional adventures which threatened the security of neighbors' (Acharya 2001: 60). Moreover, the 'authori- tarian peace' does not explain why the new members – Burma, Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam with authoritarian political systems, also afflicted by either communist insurgency or ethnic separatism – had refused to join ASEAN before 1995. It thus remains unclear why authoritarian states experiencing similar domestic problems behaved differently: why some agreed to form ASEAN, some refused to join, and others remained indif- ferent or even belligerent.

Notwithstanding Acharya's defense of the 'authoritarian peace', a closer reading of Acharya's work shows that liberal ideology also matters signif- icantly. ASEAN's norms and collective identity resulted from economic liberalism. Although they downgraded the Western model of democracy, the founding ASEAN regimes were anti-communist and 'pro-Western' and adopted 'market capitalism' (Acharya 2001: 69, 75, 89) with a commit- ment to 'the system of free enterprise' (Acharya 2001: 90) and a high degree of openness to the [capitalist] world economy' (Acharya 2001: 89). Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam had refused to join ASEAN until after they began to liberalize their economies. At times, Acharya acknowl- edges that liberal democracy is a prerequisite for successful community building. Burma's interest in regionalism 'ended with the collapse of its democratic experiment in March 1962' (Acharya 2001: 60). In his words: 'Burma provides the clearest case, where the retreat of democracy damp- ened the prospects for regional cooperation in Southeast Asia' (Acharya 2001: 59).

Acharya's books give a further impression that external factors seem more powerful than internal ones as variables explaining ASEAN regionalism. With the Cold War over, ASEAN's norms came 'under considerable stress' (Acharya 2000: 151). He has often criticized ASEAN multilateralism in ways that make realists smile. This raises another perti- nent question: under what circumstances did the ASEAN leaders create their norms and promote the 'ASEAN way'? If domestic problems created cooperative norms, collective identity and hence regionalism in ASEAN, why did the founding members of ASEAN wait until 1967? Southeast Asian regionalism results from anti-hegemonic policy. In his view, 'it was the powers challenging Japanese hegemony which gave Southeast Asia its name' (Acharya 2000: 34). The formation of ASEAN indeed also took place at the height of the Cold War, characterized by the rivalry between two superpowers – the US and the Soviet Union. By the mid-1960s, the Second Indo-China War had escalated; the US began to intervene in South Vietnam. By the late 1960s the US effort had failed and the Nixon doctrine called 'on America's regional allies to assume greater responsibilities for their own security' (Acharya 2000: 71). ASEAN held its 'historic summit' one year after the US withdrawal from Indo-China in 1975

(Acharya 2001: 94), a more important step toward security cooperation. The communist victories in Indo-China 'rekindled fears in ASEAN of Hanoi's old plan for an Indochina federation' (Acharya 2001: 107). ASEAN also feared Chinese and Soviet expansionism. Both Indonesia and Malaysia saw China as the long-term threat to Southeast Asia. Soviet '"hegemonism" made the ASEAN countries realize the need for a united purpose to the new form of great power rivalry' (Acharya 2000: 86). The Soviet penetration into Indo-China during the late 1970s 'was seen as dramatically enhancing its power projection capabilities in Southeast Asia' (Acharya 2001: 117). Post-Cold War ASEAN's unity and collective identity are still rooted in 'the growing military and economic power of China' – which 'evoked the most immediate concern in Southeast Asia' – as well as in the fear of Japan's re-militarization (Acharya 2001: 144).

ASEAN's fears concerning China and Japan do not appear to be associated with aggregate power, otherwise its member states would find the US more threatening than either of its Asian neighbors; rather, these fears seem to be determined by geographical proximity, ideology and historical legacies. Evidence provided by Acharya further conforms to balance-of-threat theory, which is not as 'realist' as its proponents claim it to be: he puts emphasis on both domestic and external threats to state or regime survival and acknowledges that liberal democracy has a pacifying effect on state behavior. If states in Southeast Asia have a tradition of resisting world or regional hegemony, which also characterizes ASEAN, then Acharya's theory validates balance-of-power logic. That said, the main reason for such anti-hegemonic resistance does not appear to lie in aggregate power alone. ASEAN members have engaged extra-regional great powers, but they have yet to form a countervailing military alliance: neither ASEAN nor the ARF has successfully replaced US military supremacy and its bilateral military alliances.

Conclusion

Constructivism has incorporated realism into its security analysis, but time will tell whether it will one day succeed in getting rid of the latter. Balance-of-power realists should also be careful about claiming that a balance of power is a sufficient condition for peace. Balance-of-power politics often leads to war (Doyle 1997). States also do not seem to behave according to balance-of-power logic. Realists could counter-argue that realism does not always see states as balancing power, but that those who fail to do so would put themselves at the mercy of the powerful. But such 'consequentialism' is descriptively inaccurate and more prescriptive than analytical. At times, Leifer's traditional realism appears a bit amorphous: power is not measured in precise terms, but rather recognized as something also shaped by non-material factors. Overall, his realism took into account not only aggregate power, but also other sources of danger, such as

geographical proximity, ideology, culture and history. All this often makes it difficult to distinguish his realism from constructivism, which openly acknowledges discursive factors.

Acharya's constructivism is closer to the truth than balance-of-power realism in that it seeks to explain regional security by looking at a wide range of ideational, inter-subjective as well as material factors. But his theory still lacks systematic treatment of security issues and runs the risks of trying to explain everything and nothing. More closely examined, it shows potential compatibility with a more sophisticated balance-of-threat theory that can also lend support to the idea of a 'security community'. More research is necessary, but one tentative conclusion can be drawn: a shared perception of internal and external threat, democracy and inter-national democratic institutions are powerful forces for overcoming sources of threat (i.e., aggregate power, geographical proximity, ideolog-ical conflict and bitter historical legacies). Until all of its members become stable democracies and unless there are effective regional democratic insti-tutions to help balance against threats among them, ASEAN will not mature as a security community. As stable democracies, they will not set themselves free from perennial political problems: even in today's mature democracies, lest one forget, many political problems continue to persist, and institutional checks and balances remain vital for the maintenance of domestic peace and freedom. A balance of threat without the pacifying effect of democratic values remains war prone, but a 'democratic zone' without a stable international democratic system may not enjoy perpetual peace either. Southeast Asia may thus serve as fertile ground for advancing 'minimalist' or 'soft' realism – a sophisticated balance-of-threat theory – if systematic analysis of material as well as discursive sources of danger to regime and national security can be made.

Note

1   This review was submitted to *The Pacific Review* before Professor Leifer passed away. I have been greatly stimulated by his superb contributions to Southeast Asian security studies. I found his perspective intellectually enriching. My tribute to him is that I continue to take his work very seriously.

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