

# Merit in security community studies

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In his recent review essay, Dr Nicholas Khoo (2004) displays his theoretical and methodological might and passes harsh empirical judgment on Professor Amitav Acharya's work on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a nascent security community (and, to a far lesser extent, on my work as well). Scholars interested in Southeast Asian security should seriously consider his bold claim concerning the need to 'bring the realist school of analysis back into Southeast Asian studies, and to point to the often overlooked, ossifying or negative impact that institutions have had on the international relations of Southeast Asia' (p. 44). However, I propose to respond to Khoo's realist attack on Acharya's constructivist claim about the institutional character of ASEAN in the following way: (i) summarizing Khoo's realist-institutionalist contention, his methodological challenge to constructivism, and his empirical ammunition; (ii) raising the question of the relevance of his theoretical claims; (iii) questioning his deductive reasoning; and (iv) urging him to do exactly what he faults Acharya for failing to do – namely gather empirical validation.

Let me summarize Khoo's basic points of contention. He makes clear the theoretical ground on which he stands: realist institutionalism, which he feels is superior not only to the type of constructivism Acharya embraces but also to both offensive and defensive realist perspectives, which he regards as 'simplistic' (p. 43). In his own view, 'the nascent ASEAN security community has arguably never existed' (p. 35). It is more appropriate to view the grouping as 'an imitation community' (p. 42). His great dissatisfaction with Acharya's academic work comes out of the fact that the latter critiques only neo-liberal institutionalism and neo-realism, perhaps to the neglect of realist institutionalism, and does not adequately explain why he privileges ASEAN's 'benign norms' but ignores the 'perverse norms' that undermine them.

Khoo throws down the methodological gauntlet: constructivists should focus on ‘perverse’ or ‘negative’ norms that ‘appear to give us greater purchase in understanding the organization’ (p. 37) and ‘could yield a significant contribution to both the constructivist research program in general, and Southeast Asian Studies in particular’ (p. 44). Along with Acharya and others, I am accused of focusing analytical attention only on ASEAN’s benign norms (p. 37).

Khoo’s apparent disappointment with Acharya’s faith in the benign norms of ASEAN also led him to emphasize ‘the importance of empirical validation’. He judges Acharya’s work as ‘weak’ largely because it makes ‘the case that his particular selection of norms had a “major impact” on ASEAN regionalism, and played a “central role” in the development of an ASEAN regional identity’ (p. 39). He cites Acharya’s work – that the ASEAN Way and its attendant norms have been ‘especially discredited following the outbreak of the regional economic crisis in 1997’ – to remind Acharya that his ‘skepticism is warranted’ (p. 39). Contrary to Acharya’s claim about positive norms, Khoo contends that the ASEAN norms either have ‘adverse consequences’ or have simply not been complied with. The ASEAN norm of ‘consensus has been difficult to establish’ (p. 40). ASEAN failed to ‘alter’ the Burmese military regime’s behavior and to moderate its human rights abuses. In other words, the ASEAN policy of constructive engagement did not work. The grouping’s ‘benign norms’ treated by Acharya as the independent variable have been ‘routinely violated’ (p. 39). The norm of interference in other states’ domestic affairs ‘appears to be a regularized pattern of behavior in Southeast Asia’ or ‘has occurred with depressing regularity’ (p. 40). He proves this point by citing unspecified examples of ‘intrusive recriminations between Malaysia and Singapore over border-territorial issues, as well as the burning of the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh by rioting Cambodians in early 2003’. He also charges that Acharya ignored Indonesia’s violation of the sovereignty norm vis-à-vis East Timor in 1975 and 1999 and focused only on the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (pp. 40–41).

The merit of Khoo’s critique lies in the awareness he seeks to raise about the possibility of constructivism being blind to the ‘reality’ that he illustrates. He is fair to the extent that he does not ‘deny the possible contribution of constructivism to Southeast Asian studies’ (p. 44).

Unfortunately, Khoo’s indictment of constructivists in general and of Acharya’s work in particular raises some troubling theoretical questions about the role of power and threat. He also incorrectly accuses Karl Deutsch and his colleagues, who pioneered the idea that Western Europeans succeeded in building a pluralistic security community, of mistaking ‘effect for cause’ by ignoring ‘a direct consequence of UN hegemony over Western Europe’ (p. 37). I do not think they were as naïve as Khoo believes, although he seems to treat

hegemonic power as the single most important independent variable. According to Adler and Barnett (1998, p. 50), ‘Deutsch posited that war or a common threat is a sufficient or necessary condition for generating an interest in a security community’. Other constructivists do not completely disregard power as an independent variable, either. Even Wendt’s social theory – steeped in identity – shows that material power still matters in explaining state behavior. Powerful states can lead weak ones, not vice versa. Leviathans can be mobilizing forces. In his own words, ‘A Lockean culture with 200 members will not change just because two of its members acquire a Kantian identity, unless perhaps they are also its only superpowers, in which case other states may follow suit’ (Wendt, 1999, p. 365). Other constructivists still believe that power matters, although they put emphasis on the positive images of powerful states, which may help explain the existence of Kantian regimes. According to some scholars, ‘power can be a magnet; a community formed around a group of *strong* powers creates the expectations that weaker states will be able to enjoy the security and potentially other benefits that are associated with that community’. In other words, ‘those powerful states who belong to the core of strength do not create security *per se*; rather, because of their positive images of security or material progress that are associated with powerful and successful states, security communities development around them’ (Adler and Barnett, 1998, p. 40). They regard the development of a security community as ‘not antagonistic to the language of power; indeed, it is *dependent on* it’ (p. 52). They add that ‘the existence of powerful states that are able to project a sense of purpose offer an idea of progress, and/or provide leadership around core issues can facilitate and stabilize this [nascent] phase’ (p. 52). I also think that Walt (1998, p. 43) is correct when noting that ‘some constructivists admit that ideas will have greater impact when backed by powerful states and reinforced by enduring material forces’.

Khoo’s realist-institutionalist disregard for constructivist and defensive realist work on the importance of threat is equally problematic. Khoo himself seems to recognize external threats as binding glues. In his own words, ‘The eventual communist victory posed a grave challenge to the fledgling ASEAN’ (p. 36). Other realists consider ASEAN to have been a ‘security community’ during the cold war, but now feel that this is no longer the case. Its members have since been driven apart by bilateral tensions owing to the breakdown of the bipolar international security structure that kept them together and the lack of a communist threat (Ganesan, 1995). Narine (1997, p. 977) makes a perceptive observation about the importance of external threat: ‘The dynamic between the weakness of these states and the reality of external threat helped to shape the ASEAN way of interaction.’ He adds that ‘even ASEAN’s push toward greater intra-ASEAN economic cooperation is largely a response to external forces’ (p. 978). Nischalke’s recent work, neither cited nor referred to

by Khoo, also raises a stimulating question about ASEAN as a regional security community. Although he questions the assumption that the association rests on a collective identity, Nischalke (2000, 2002) shows that the levels of norm compliance and shared interpretations of security issues ‘increased considerably in the 1992–1997 period’ and that this rosy picture developed ‘after Chinese assertiveness in 1992, causing a measurably higher convergence of meaning structures among ASEAN members’ (2002, p. 107). This form of convergence is more compatible with the realist precepts of power balancing. What Nischalke discovered is that ‘there is little sense of a regional community’ (p. 112). ASEAN states lack mutual identifications; they rely on security guarantees from outside powers rather than from one another: ‘intra-ASEAN security relations are subordinate to those with outside powers’ (p. 109). According to Nischalke, ‘Between 1992 and 1997 perspectives on security have largely converged on a dual strategy of “soft balancing” and multilateral cooperation’ (p. 108). Even Acharya (2003, p. 192) does not disregard the impact of external threats: ‘The “ASEAN Way” of problem-solving, which involves consultations and consensus and a habit of avoiding direct, public confrontation in the interest of corporate solidarity, was developed when the threat of communist expansion served as a cementing factor for its otherwise divided membership’.

I also share the constructivist view that ASEAN norms exist but find them useful to the extent that they help constitute a rallying point for ASEAN members, even if they do not single-handedly determine the grouping’s institutional development. As Nischalke (2002, p. 110) notes, ‘ASEAN functions best as a community if regional norms are challenged by outsiders’. Any unwarranted emphasis on collective identity as the main independent variable is misleading, however.

At the conceptual level, Khoo unfairly discredits ASEAN as a nascent security community without clarifying his understanding of the concept. His examples of ASEAN’s inability to resolve its members’ problems have little bearing: it is questionable whether they disqualify ASEAN from fitting Acharya’s description. It is worth bearing in mind that no proponents of the security community idea claim that members of a security community, particularly at the early stage that Acharya uses to characterize ASEAN, must have a perfect harmony of interest. According to Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (1998, p. 50), a nascent security community ‘is virtually indistinguishable from a strategic alliance, and there is no expectation that people of these states will have a shared identity or knowledge of the other’. At the initial stage, all states do is find a new way to promote their mutual security through the idea of ‘cooperative security’ aimed at nourishing ‘mutual trust’ (p. 51). Few security analysts who work on Southeast Asia are more aware of the intramural problems and bilateral tensions between ASEAN

members than Acharya. Based on the insights of leading political scientists such as Karl Deutsch and Kal Holsti, he makes it clear that one should expect members of a community at the early stage to have some serious differences or even to find themselves on opposite sides in some large international conflict; states even engage in actual mutual hostilities. They constitute a nascent community only because they do not resort to force or violence as the way to resolve their quarrels; they 'keep actual mutual hostilities to a minimum – or else refuse to fight each other altogether' (Acharya, 2003, pp. 154–155). Khoo seems to accept this definition, since he uncritically restates it as follows: 'Security communities are characterized by the absence of war, and the absence of significant organized preparations for war such as military contingency planning. Competitive military build-ups or arms races between members of the claimed security community should also not be present' (p. 38).

Methodologically, Khoo urges Acharya and other social constructivists – allow me to reiterate my faith in a democratic system of checks and balances or a constructive balance-of-power system guarding against the threat of evil – to pay attention to 'perverse norms'. Constructivists would be wise to heed his urging. But to fault Acharya for ignoring such norms is to divert attention from the analytical focus on ASEAN as a nascent security community.

I look forward to reading Khoo's more elaborate work (guided by realist institutionalism) on the negative impact of ASEAN's perverse norms, because what is said in his article only raises more methodological and empirical questions than solutions. He has a tendency to rely on deductive logic or to privilege it over inductive reasoning. We can detect his mode of analytical thinking in his claim that Acharya's work under review 'represents a missed opportunity to engage the burgeoning theoretical literature on sovereignty led by Stephen Krasner' (p. 41), a book that was published in 1999 but does not cover ASEAN, unlike Acharya's books, which were published only slightly later, in 2000 and 2001. His reference to the impressive work by Priess and Schweller (1997), who likewise say nothing about ASEAN, is also made to justify his theoretical claim about his superior realist-institutionalist understanding of the grouping. His point of contention – that the informal norm of interference in ASEAN states' domestic affairs has occurred with 'depressing regularity' – is based on a few dubious examples, such as the Cambodian riots attacking the Thai embassy and other Thai business interests, which are not damaging to the ASEAN formal norm of non-interference. He should feel free to think this way, since such informal norms may help shed more light on ASEAN, but he should not unduly distract the focus of his critique of Acharya's work on ASEAN as a nascent security community and its formal norms.

If Khoo wants to trump benign norms by privileging perverse ones, he must at least effectively answer this question of how often such perverse norms

prevail over benign ones. He fails to show an overall trend before 1967, when ASEAN was founded, and after, until the present. To cite a few examples (such as a Thai movie star's alleged claim that Cambodia's ancient Temple, Angkor Wat, belonged to Thailand – the claim that incited the riots; ASEAN's failure to promote human rights – is he also a liberal?; its members' experience with some intrusive recriminations; and their resort to international legal institutions) as the basis for disqualifying ASEAN as a nascent security community is to forget that only interstate war between its members can be considered by its proponents as unthinkable. We can overturn Acharya's research agenda when a war between ASEAN states breaks out, especially when it produces more than 1,000 casualties. But can Khoo's realist institutionalism better predict the future of ASEAN, and if so, how?

From an analytical point of view, Khoo should do what he suggests regarding 'the importance of empirical validation' (p. 39) by providing more concrete data (e.g. on competitive military build-ups or arms races and intra-ASEAN wars) to show that ASEAN members have complied with perverse norms that induce behavior contrary to their benign norms. The most powerful piece of evidence he cites to discredit Acharya's work is the Indonesian annexation of East Timor in 1975. As unfortunate as this tragic episode was, it poses no serious direct challenge to the ASEAN benign norm of non-interference. As he points out, Acharya believes that ASEAN's benign norms derive from two major sources: the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) adopted in 1976 (after the annexation) and the 'ASEAN Way' that evolved before and after that. To my knowledge, no constructivist would argue that new norms adopted through the process of socialization have an immediate, dramatic impact on state behavior. The 1999 atrocities that took place in East Timor were no doubt most appalling, but the obstacle that ASEAN faced then was not that it violated the norm of non-interference but that it held to it.

Khoo's rejection of ASEAN as a security community provides no substantial empirical support to validate 'the often overlooked ... negative impact that institutions have had on the international relations of Southeast Asia'. What type of negative impact has ASEAN had on international relations in the region? Such a sweeping statement smacks of his pleading for empirical validation. Just because the regional group has not been as effective as it should have been – especially when 'measured' in terms of Khoo's expectations – it does not make much sense to say it plays a negative role with adverse consequences. There should be no conceptual confusion between harmful, unhelpful, and limited effects. Any 'negative effect' proposition needs to be precisely formulated and must also be tested against empirical evidence in specific and comparative cases. What type of relationship had states in Southeast Asia had before they founded and joined ASEAN? We need to go that far

back, at least to the time when Indonesia and Malaysia ended their confrontation, in order to assess ASEAN's institutional performance.

A more credible contention by Khoo is that ASEAN was ineffective. He makes a correct observation that ASEAN failed 'to respond effectively to regional events' (p. 43). He cites two recent examples: the IMF's positive role in the Asian financial crisis and the Australian intervention. This is in line with Leifer (1999, p. 26), who describes the group as an ineffective 'diplomatic community' when playing a role in the Cambodia conflict after the Vietnamese invasion. Even in the face of Vietnam's likely hegemony, the ASEAN members failed to forge consensus. ASEAN 'has never been effectively responsible for regional peace-making'. Leifer contends that the association cannot be a model for others to emulate.

But we can still draw insights from positive lessons from ASEAN. To be sure, it has not been as effective as some of its proponents tend to exaggerate or would like to see happen, as Acharya often concedes – but ineffective compared with what? A realist, Nischalke (2002, p. 105), notes that 'ASEAN's incipial success is indisputable'. It would be more fair, therefore, if Acharya's critics were to define the concept of effectiveness in a comparative context. Do states in other Third World regions fare better without any such international institutions? If they charge that the ASEAN policy of constructive engagement toward Burma was ineffective, they must show that alternative strategies (such as ostracism, condemnation, and economic sanctions, as adopted by the United States and countries in Europe) have worked better.

Just because ASEAN is weak as a security community, one should not be incited into dumping its efforts as a totally useless policy exercise – useless compared with what? It is in the process of searching for additional or complementary means to help stabilize balance-of-threat systems – what I label 'constructive realism' (Peou, 1999) – that I think the work of Acharya merits our attention. Just because states retain perverse norms, we must not completely ignore existing benign norms, nor should we give up our efforts to promote them, so long as we do not completely ignore the reality of power. Although benign norms and power with a moral vision can serve as the foundation for community building, it is important for us to keep in mind what Khoo alerts us to – perverse norms, which must be kept in check. In fact, one can argue that democratic leadership driven by a vision for peace – tempered by a system of checks and balances or constructive balance-of-threat systems – may be the best way to peace and security (Peou, 2002).

In short, the purpose of this response is not to discredit Khoo's realist institutionalism but to urge him to state his theoretical proposition as clearly as possible and to provide a set of hypotheses for further empirical testing. Until relevant facts can be ascertained, none of us deserves to be misled by any theoretical abstraction. I still hope we can engage in constructive criticism of

each other's future work, reflecting on our inadequacies. Realists and constructivists should communicate with, rather than seek to destroy, each other. Our scholarship should thus not become weary of a normative commitment inspired by some moral vision, so long as it is tempered by empirical analysis that rises above policy rhetoric and academic polemics.

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