

THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

by Amitav Acharya (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000)

This book is going to be controversial because it involves an international relations specialist trespassing, at least in the beginning of the book, into areas that area specialists consider their own turf. Some will object to this, and seek errors that indicate that the interloper really doesn't understand their property. Others, like the distinguished historian Anthony Reid, who contributes a preface, will welcome this "interloper's" interest. I concur. Of course, Acharya is not an outsider, being one of the world's leading scholars of Southeast Asia's international relations.

Acharya argues that the region identified today as Southeast Asia is not an invention of the West or particularly recent; many argue that the term for the region and idea of regionalism developed only since World War II. The author draws on historical work to suggest that, even if the peoples of Southeast Asia have not always "imagined" themselves as part of a distinctive region, there have been long historical relationships that mark out Southeast Asia as a region. This he suggests presages the development of regionalism in more recent times. In assessing the development of region and regionalism. Archarya looks at the history of Southeast Asia in Chapter 2, after a first chapter that sets out his argument. Chapters 3 to 5 are more in the style one expects of international relations, examining the development of regionalism, emphasising regional organisations, most especially, ASEAN.

It must be admitted that I have always found studies of regionalism in Southeast Asia dead boring. While I read this book, I was trying to understand why this is so. The answer is, I think, that Southeast Asian regionalism is the idea of governments and elites, and has little to do with the lives of farmer or worker. It always seems too obvious why organisations like ASEAN were formed, and whose interests they served. Regional organisations seem to have been contrived in the interests of the elites. A further contribution to boredom has been that few scholars seemed interested in locating regionalism in political economy, resulting in a mind-numbingly descriptive alphabet soup discussions of organisations and leaders.

From his opening chapter, however, Acharya seems to want to be different. His foray into history is not, in my view, entirely convincing. For example, the general point he makes, that diversity can be a marker of unity (Chapter 1), is not demonstrated. In discussing the states and the inter-state system of pre-colonial Southeast Asia, Acharya does not provide sufficient evidence of a unity, imagined or otherwise, that could constitute a potential for regionalism. Notions of *mandala* (Wolters), “galactic polity” (Tambiah) and “theatre state” (Geertz) are introduced, and critically assessed (Chapter 2). These are seen as a way to discuss states without clearly defined boundaries. However, Acharya is not entirely clear about how such notions relate to region. He is on firmer ground when he discusses trade as a possible forebear of region and regionalism. But even here, it remains unclear how Southeast Asian “states” (or was it rulers and their merchant allies) conceived of their own place in trade outside of a relationship to, for example, the imperial Chinese court.

But in applying Anderson's "imagined community" to regionalism, looking at trade, and making a strong argument that there was region before regionalism, Acharya is challenging the reader. Most importantly, he is arguing that Southeast Asia is not simply a region that responds to stimuli from outside powers. This is a welcome innovation in the study of Southeast Asia's international relations.

Towards the end of Chapter 2, the reader is quickly brought to the period of nationalism and decolonisation. It is from this point that the argument that there was a developing (elite) collective imagination of a region of Southeast Asia is clearer and more conventional. In the following chapters, discussing the period up to the Asian economic crisis, Acharya presents an analysis that attempts to locate, in domestic and international contexts, the development of what I identify as an elite regionalism.

Acharya's analysis of this recent period is impressive. It involves a range of insights from disciplines outside his own, demonstrating a broad knowledge and understanding of the multiple forces acting on a complex and diverse region. These are, then, strong chapters, and it is difficult to be critical. However, I would argue that, despite an analysis that includes political economy perspectives, Acharya essentially analyses the elite's position on regionalism. But there is no significant attention to the highly conservative regionalism these state elites have fashioned. In countering this, it would have been appropriate to give somewhat more weight to non-governmental regional initiatives. In addition, in presenting the development of ASEAN, Acharya sometimes skates a bit too

quickly over important disjunctures. Thailand's decision to finally break with ASEAN's long support for the murderous and repugnant Khmer Rouge deserves more attention. So too does ASEAN's support of the military dictatorship in Rangoon. Both of these issues raise important questions about domestic political versus regional interests.

But such criticisms should not be seen to detract from the contribution Acharya has made. He has moved the analysis of Southeast Asian regionalism forward, and quite substantially so. This is a book that can be used in teaching. While dealing with great complexity, Acharya is able to present his ideas clearly and concisely, so that undergraduates will not be overwhelmed. This is also a book that should be read and debated.

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Dear Kevin,

Thanks very much for sending me your review of *Quest for Identity*. Its thoughtful as well as balanced. I am flattered, notwithstanding your points of disagreement or criticism. I just wanted to make a few quick points.

First, about Chapter 1, I make it very clear that the concept of regional identity that I employ is based on an analysis of the work of several scholars, such as Wolters, Tambiah, etc. The long "historical relationships" you mention were not my discoveries, but were those "imagined" by a number of Southeast Asianists. Its the work of these scholars which I identify and analyze as my primary source. In other words, the purpose of Chapter 1 is to examine how the region of Southeast Asia has been "imagined" by certain scholars. "This outline relies heavily on attempts to 'imagine' Southeast Asia's pre-colonial past featuring regional patterns of statehood and inter-state relations." (p.37) To this end, I cite "constructs" (pp.20-21, and like those of *mandala*, and critique them (you point this aspect out, fairly).

In sum, the book investigates, critically, the act of imagining Southeast Asia. I donot assume a region, nor do I defend it uncritically. I will be grateful if this point could be brought out in your second para (p.1), especially the first two sentences which as they stand now may give a contrary impression.

Second, as it says on the last para on p.13, the book is "a selective historical analysis of the broad political, economic and strategic forces which have influenced the international relations of Southeast Asia *at the intra-regional level*." (emphasis original). It is because this level had been neglected in favor of analyses which highlight great power geopolitics. This means, providing a comprehensive narrative of Southeast Asian IR was not my purpose.

I make two claims about my approach. Its the first time that ideational forces such as identity and regional norms, rather than conventional great power geopolitics, have been given a central place in framing and investigating the IR of Southeast Asia. This reflects my IR background and bias, and my commitment to move IR towards greater recognition of the role of ideas and identity as analytic tools.

The other claim is the need for a regional, as opposed to a country-specific approach. Both have merits and demerits, but the point is that country studies vastly outnumber regional studies in the available literature. hence, the rationale for my book. One reason why some Cornell trained (such as Sidel) people are upset with me is that I try to go beyond country studies and even have a sentence that points critically to the Cornell school's preference for country studies without comparative perspective. (p.7)

Thus, the book speaks to the existing gulf between area studies scholars (who prefer country-specific approaches) versus discipline-based scholars such as myself (who prefer a regional approach, and thus naturally turn to regionalism). My book was an attempt to bridge the gulf. This might be a very helpful point to make.

Its a pity that people don't know the genesis of the book (this is my fault) that it was commissioned by Oxford Singapore as a textbook, and I was given a limit of 200 pages. There is not much I could do to expand various themes. Unfortunately, my publishers did not mention this; neither did I. Will it be possible for you to make a reference to this fact?

You are right about my state-centric approach. I do however try to amend by highlighting the role of civil society regionalism in my more recent articles, such as the paper for your conference last January. I also have written a number of papers on Human Rights which deal with civil society regionalism, although they are not reflected in this book.

Sidel's identification the errors in the book are based on misrepresentations. Nowhere in the book do I refer to PKI as a communist insurgency. The reference to insurgency is generic.

I make these points with all humility and its really upto you to see if any of these might be incorporated into your review without altering the fair-minded and balanced nature of your own assessment. Once again thanks for letting me have a look at your review and your generally positive assessment. That's really kind.

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