ASIA SPECIAL

Southeast Asia: Imagining the region

The development of a regional Southeast Asian identity may not necessarily conform to the facts of geography, history, culture or politics. The notion of Southeast Asia as a homogenous cultural or geographic entity can indeed be overstated. But its social and political identity, derived from the conscious promotion of the regional concept by its states, societies, and peoples, is what makes it a distinct idea in the latter part of the 20th century.

by *Amitav Acharya*

Southeast Asia is an imagined region, its physical, political, social and cultural diversity being too immense to qualify it as having a distinctive personality. Yet, what gives it coherence must count as one of the finest acts of collective self-imagination undertaken by a region s nationalist political elite in the wake of their liberation from European and American colonialism. As with nationalism and nation-states, regions may be imagined , designed, constructed and defended.

This approach to the study of regions and regionalism shares many elements of the political scientist Benedict Anderson s approach to the study of nationalism and the nation-state, as set out in his work Imagined Communities (Verso, London,1991). There are many parallels between imagining the nation and imagining the region . Particularly, Anderson s focus on the collective imagining of the nation by a nationalist elite is mirrored in the Southeast Asian region-building as a process of elite socialisation. But drawing upon the work of some other scholars, it is also important to highlight the role of traditional political-cultural frameworks and pre-capitalist commerce in building modern social identities.

Indeed, the term proximities more accurately reflects the degree of socialisation and bonding evident in the case of Southeast Asia than communities , which is used to describe nations. Although a certain sense of community can develop within a region, as has been the case with Southeast Asia, the continued salience of state sovereignty (despite claims about its alleged obsolescence and erosion) makes regional communities fundamentally different from nation-states. Southeast Asia is still a region inhabited by highly sovereignty-conscious actors.

In the light of the tumultuous events of the past two years, it becomes additionally important to investigate the historical, material and social foundations of Southeast Asia as a region. These foundations are not tectonic plates, although they do sometimes collide and work at cross-purposes. However, none of these foundations are complete by themselves; and in the absence of an active and continuing process of social imagination and construction, the regional personality of Southeast Asia runs considerable risk of unravelling, notwithstanding strategic, economic and political imperatives to
the contrary. As the political scientist, Donald Emerson, once suggested: Nations come and go, why not regions .

The mandala of autonomous history

To a large extent, the conception of Southeast Asia as a region is a product of the historian s imagination. In the aftermath of the second world war, it was some Western scholars working on Southeast Asia who began to imagine its past as a distinctive region. They were rebelling against an excessively Indo-centric and Sino-centric view of Southeast Asia. What had been called Southeast Asian studies had been traditionally dominated by Indologists and Sinologists, many of whom saw the region as a cultural appendage of India and China, two of the older civilisations in the neighbourhood which had powerfully influenced the

assortment of mainland and maritime units that comprise today s Southeast Asia. In this sense, the region was east by south , that is, east of India and south of China, an expression that was as much a cultural statement as a geographic fact.

Moreover, as a result of the profound impact of the changes brought about by colonialism and Westernisation, many Southeast Asian historians have interested themselves primarily in external stimuli, to the detriment of the study of indigenous institutions from the D Joel Steinberg edited In Search of Southeast Asia (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1987). Post-war views of Southeast Asia, shaped by indigenous nationalist thinking and Western scholarship, begun to imagine Southeast Asia s cultural and ideational autonomy from India and China. Moreover, Southeast Asians were viewed not as passive recipients of Indian and Chinese ideas, but active borrowers and modifiers. They were to be cast as makers, rather than victims of history.

The demand for an autonomous history of Southeast Asia built upon the work of a Dutch economic historian Jacob Van Leur, who had as far back as 1932 challenged the notion that Indian cultural and political ideas were imposed on or imported into Southeast Asia through commerce (by Indian merchants or Vaisyas) and conquest (by Indian warriors, or Kshatriyas). Instead, Van Leur argued that Southeast Asian rulers had called upon Indian civilisation through the medium of the Brahmans, because Hindu political concepts helped them to enhance their legitimacy and organise their small territorial units into larger states. Historians pointed out that ancient Southeast Asians were actually quite selective in what they borrowed; ideas which they found useful and legitimising (such as the code of Manu or Kautilya s Arthshastra) were accepted, while those which did not fit into local traditions and beliefs (such as India s caste system) were rejected.

Van Leur s idea of the local initiative was joined by similar concepts. The art historian HG Quaritch Wales spoke of local genius which modified Hindu-Buddhist art and architecture by infusing it with local meaning and forms. And the historian OW Wolters coined the notion of localisation and relocalisation to describe how Southeast Asian borrowers adapted Indian, Chinese and other foreign ideas to fit indigenous traditions in the fields of religion, arts, law, poetry and politics. Responding to the demands for an autonomous history, the geographic size of Southeast Asia accepted by the area specialist and the policy-maker alike was reduced. No longer were parts of India and China included in the region. More importantly, as pointed out by Emmerson, Southeast Asia was no longer considered part of South Asia or East Asia, a crucial factor in the development of a regional concept.

Other historians also began to reconstruct Southeast Asia s past in ways that sought to uncover distinctive patterns of organisation and governance that dotted its ancient political landscape. The most famous of these was Wolters characterisation of pre-colonial polities in Southeast Asia as Mandalas. These lacked territorial specificity, but they did represent an acute concentration of political management and moral authority, which made it possible to speak of a distinctive political order in Southeast Asia.

For Wolters, despite being demographically fragmented , politically multicentered , and socially characterised by stubborn small-scale sub-regional identities , pre-modern Southeast Asia did develop a common pattern of intra-regional authority thanks to the patchwork of often overlapping mandalas, or circles of kings in each of which one king, identified with divine and universal authority and defined as the conqueror, claimed personal hegemony over the others, who in theory were bound to be his obedient allies and vassals . This historian identified several mandalas which existed between the seventh and the 14th centuries, the most prominent examples being Srivijaya, Angkor, Ayudhya, and the Majapahit. Wrote Wolters:

> A glance at some of the famous mandalas which adorn the textbooks of earlier
> Southeast Asian history shows that each of them increased flow of communications
> between some of the many centres in different parts of the region. We may too often
> tend to strike contrasts between these earlier states and the modern states as
> though great men in the past made exciting impressions in their own day but left
> nothing behind them of consequence. But there were some enduring consequences

which helped to reduce the multicentric character of earlier Southeast Asia. (In Search of Southeast Asia.)

Others joined Wolters in describing common and overlapping political forms in classical Southeast Asia: the Sri Lankan social-anthropologist who has worked extensively in Southeast Asia, Stanley Tambiah, for example, proposed the idea of galactic polities to describe the Buddhist political world of mainland Southeast Asia. While Wolters focused on court politics and the religious great traditions , Anthony Reid, another prominent historian of Southeast Asia, urged students of Southeast Asian history to focus instead on popular beliefs and social practices of ordinary Southeast Asians . He proposed that it was this which defined the the common ground among Southeast Asians, notwithstanding the region s bewildering variety of language, culture, and religion and its historic openness to foreign trade. Reid identified a number of such social institutions and practices which were absent in cultural India and China. For example in the concept of spirit or soul stuff animating living things, the prominence of women in descent, ritual matters, marketing and agriculture, and the importance of debt as a determinant of social obligations .

Even more importantly, Reid directed his attention to commercial interactions in building a pre-colonial region of Southeast Asia. In Reid s view, the period between the 15th century and 17th century constituted an age of commerce in Southeast Asia. During this period, Southeast Asian port cities, already having cultural and linguistic commonalities, were bound together in a structure of close economic interdependence. While the Indian Ocean trade network extended from eastern Africa and the Arabian peninsula to Japan, within this structure, the most intense commercial network was developed among the port cities of Southeast Asia.

Reid focuses on the high degree of commercial intercourse between the great maritime cities of Southeast Asia, such as Melaka, Pasai, Johor, Patani, Aceh and Brunei. The growth of intra-regional trade reduced cultural barriers, leading to the spread of Malay as the language of commerce. While the trade networks were pan-Asian, Reid found evidence that until the arrival of the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century, the trading links within the region continued to be more influential than those beyond it . Wrote Reid in Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680 (Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 1988-93):

> [M]aritime intercourse continued to link the peoples of Southeast Asia more tightly to one another than to outside influences down to the seventeenth century. The fact that Chinese and Indian influences came to most of the region by maritime trade, not by conquest or colonisation, appeared to ensure that Southeast Asia retained its distinctiveness even while borrowing numerous elements from those larger centres. What did not happen (with the partial exception of Vietnam) was that any part of the region established closer relations with China and India than with its neighbours in Southeast Asia.

This historical imagination of an autonomous Southeast Asia has not gone unchallenged. The critics argue that there is no firm archaeological evidence that decisively affirms Van Leur s idea of the local initiative . Reid has been accused of unduly reifying intra-Southeast Asian commercial transactions that could not realistically be isolated from the larger Indian Ocean network, as well as ignoring crucial mainland-maritime variations in classical (as well as contemporary) Southeast Asia s political and commercial landscape.

Meanwhile, Wolter s Mandala thesis has been attacked as an Indocentric notion (after all, Wolter was an Indologist), since it is impossible to prove the existence of this notion given the paucity of archaeological evidence. These criticisms, however, do not detract from the important influence the project of historical imagination has had in drawing attention to the regional identity of Southeast Asia. If regions are imagined constructs, then no one does a better job of offering legitimacy to the act of imagining than the historian who can claim familiarity with an era long gone by.

Conflict, communication, cooperation
The conception of Southeast Asia as a geo-strategic and political region of modern nation-

states draws from far more recent events in historical time. Its original reference point was Lord Mountbatten's Allied Command for Southeast Asia established during the second world war. The command, which was ironically headquartered in South Asia's Ceylon, helped to make Southeast Asia a "fixed and practical term even in the United States" during the war, notes Reid.

Another strand of Southeast Asia's geopolitical lineage came with accelerated decolonisation and the outbreak of the Cold War. Southeast Asia now acquired a growing familiarity as a "region of revolt" (to borrow the historian Milton Osborne's term), as "the Balkans of the Orient", and finally as a hotbed of communism and hence a key flashpoint of the Cold War. The region's proneness to strife became a distinctive feature, prompting the Southeast Asia specialist, Bernard K Gordon (The Dimensions of Conflict in Southeast Asia, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1966), to write that one of the factors "which makes Southeast Asia a "region" is the widespread incidence of conflict, along with some attempts at cooperation", and that "instability is the one feature of Southeast Asia that gives the region much of its contemporary importance".

Conflict, in Gordon's view, was a form of contact and communication, since much of it involved the interference of Southeast Asia's leaders in the affairs of neighbours. He wrote, "The region's leaders...have been thrust into intimate contact with their neighbours, often through conflict: the communications developed as a result are one factor which perhaps more than anything else compels us to accept the fact that a sense of "region" does now exist in Southeast Asia".

This negative strategic perception of Southeast Asia would not change until the 1970s, when the region finally shed its image as a conflict zone, especially in view of far more intense and enduring conflicts in neighbouring South Asia, West Asia and North Asia. Yet, where great-power geopolitics let off, domestic politics took over in defining Southeast Asia's regional identity in primarily negative terms. The new pro-Western states of Southeast Asia made a collective descent into authoritarianism in the course of the late 1960s and 1970s. While the European Community defined its regional identity as a grouping of liberal democracies, underpinned by the Kantian dictum that democracies avoid warring against each other, Southeast Asia developed its own version of illiberal peace, a regional system in which authoritarian states developed long-term habits of peaceful existence out of a common concern for regime survival.

Moreover, throughout the post-1975 period, Southeast Asia remained ideologically polarised. Vietnam, leading an Indochina bloc that included Laos and the auto-genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia (renamed "Kampuchea" by its captors), challenged the regional conception developed by its rival grouping that had organised itself since 1967 as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). While the latter professed to represent the whole of Southeast Asia, Vietnam laid a firm and coercive claim to Indochina as a distinctive and a "single strategic unit".

The East Asia historian, Wang Gungwu's, distinction between "moderate" and "revolutionary" types of nationalism elegantly explains the strategic polarisation of Southeast Asia as a by-product of the region's competing conceptions of nationalism. The three countries swept by revolutionary nationalisms Indonesia, Vietnam and Burma also proved to be least amenable to regional cooperation and identity-seeking at the outset of the postcolonial era. While Burma drifted toward isolationism, Sukarno's Indonesia proved expansionist. Communist Vietnam showed open contempt for ASEAN's vision of regional cooperation. Meanwhile, countries that experienced a more moderate nationalism, such as Malaysia and Thailand, played an instrumental role in regional cooperation.

The ASEAN-Indochina ideological polarisation between the mid-1970s and late 1980s, which is usually seen as a by-product of the Cold War, was thus not entirely unrelated to the political legacy of colonialism. The moderates and revolutionaries held radically different conceptions of Southeast Asia as a region. The revolutionaries rejected the idea of a region dominated by Western powers, while the moderates had more to fear from a region dominated by China. While the revolutionaries hoped for a confederated region, the moderates would only accept

regional cooperation based on the principle of equality and sovereignty. The moderates desired a region freely and multilaterally linked to the outside world, while the revolutionaries would accept this only if the communist powers were integral to this external linkage.

It was not until the final Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and the subsequent Paris Peace Agreement securing Cambodia's future as an independent nation that the decades-long polarisation of Southeast Asian finally ended. The regional elite was quick to point out that their forerunner's alleged dream of "one Southeast Asia" was now close to fruition. ASEAN quickly expanded its membership to include the 10 countries that the regional elites insisted were always meant to be part of Southeast Asia (thereby conveniently ignoring the fact that Sri Lanka had been invited to join as a founder-member of ASEAN, an invitation it had declined, much to its regret).

Even after the realisation of One Southeast Asia, however, old divisions have persisted. The integration of Indo-Chinese states, and more importantly, of Burma (Myanmar) into ASEAN, carried out with undue haste and with little advance planning — in marked contrast to the European Union's project of membership expansion — has proven to be a daunting task, a burden that has undermined Southeast Asian regionalism to a much greater extent than the economic crisis of 1997.

If the impact of political and strategic forces in the making of Southeast Asia was ambiguous and indeterminate, the other key material determinant in the form of intra-regional economic linkages was even more problematic. Colonialism had terminally damaged the "age of commerce" in Southeast Asia. The post-colonial nation-states of the region, like counterparts in other parts of the developing world, maintained closer economic links with the former metropolitan powers than with each other. Rather than being complementary, the raw material-producing economies of Southeast Asia were competitive and servicing their colonial masters.

Since economic interdependence was not a given, it had to be created. Yet, non-communist Southeast Asia was noticeably unsuccessful in organising itself into an economic region, despite professing this objective for over three decades. Intra-regional trade has seldom touched 20 percent of the region's total trade. Economic disparities among members have been accentuated by unruly membership expansion, thereby producing an economically divided Southeast Asia of "haves" and "have nots". The ASEAN Free Trade Area, the ultimate weapon that could deliver the idea of an economic region, is mired in uncertainties and exclusions (of items from the tariff-reduction list), as well as attempts by Singapore to leapfrog the region and develop free trade links with major economic powers outside.

Sub-regional cooperation (the so-called "growth triangles") seemed to be an appealing idea in the 1990s; but it is rarely spoken of these days, especially in the aftermath of the regional economic downturn. In the meantime, Southeast Asia remains more integrated with its northeast Asian neighbours, China, South Korea, Japan, than within itself. The emergence of macro-regional entities, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group and now the ASEAN Plus Three (ASEAN plus Japan, China and South Korea) unit attests to this reality.

Politically engineering a region-ness
As we see from the preceding analysis, Southeast Asia's claim to be a region cannot be entirely justified on the basis of strategic, political and economic factors and dynamics. To complete the analysis, we need to examine Southeast Asia's regional identity as a social construct. And as it exists, this identity is carved out of the manifest diversity and disjuncture among its constituent national units, through an act of political engineering by a group of like-minded elites who have nurtured and employed a wide variety of tools, including myths and symbols (such as the "ASEAN Way"), as well as a notions of collective identity (such as "One Southeast Asia").

A common culture is not adequate basis either of regional construction or of regional unity. If it were so, the Arab world should have been the most cohesive region in the world today. The quality of socialisation, ultimately, decides whether regions rise or disappear. The social construction of "region-ness" requires a continuous process of interaction and socialisation.

The original proponents of this socialisation were Southeast Asian nationalists.   The isolation of centuries had to be breached; lost ties had to be restored , wrote the Filipino policy-shaper Alejandro Melchor Jr in one of the most remarkable collection of essays on Southeast Asian area studies, Regionalism in Southeast Asia (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta, 1975). Unlike in Europe, regionalism in Southeast Asia has been made to serve the interest of nationalism.   The search for national solidarity and unity...is replicated, albeit on a broader scale and less urgent, but equally persistent, in the relations among nations of Southeast Asia , wrote Melchor.

Southeast Asia saw a dramatic phase of regional socialisation in the 1970s and 1980s, when ASEAN s founders set about a deliberate process of collective identity-building while recognising the cultural diversity of their members and fully respecting their sovereignty as nation-states. Unlike the European Union, this was not a sovereignty-defying project.

Supra-nationalism was incompatible with the long and hard-fought struggle against colonialism. But socialisation, especially elite socialisation, was undertaken as a way of reducing the tyranny of structural diversity and pre-empting post-colonial divisions from erupting into violent conflict. As a result, the original members of ASEAN have not fought a war against each other since 1967. Conflicts have been   swept under the carpet , admittedly to reappear now and then, but not as yet to a degree that could justify resort to war. Nationalism has not waned. It has been subsumed under a socially constructed framework of regionalism.

The expansion of ASEAN to assimilate Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Burma after the end of the Cold War represented a new phase in the process of regional construction. Sukhumbhand Paribatra, the former Thai deputy foreign minister, argued in a 1997 paper (delivered at a conference on   Asia in the XXI Century   at Hanoi) that having all 10 countries of Southeast Asia under the banner of a single regional grouping would   enhance the region s security and well-being , and represent   the fulfilment of a dream to create a region-wide organisation, which had begun some three decades before .

ocuments such as   Shared Destiny: Southeast Asia in the 21st Century , issued in 1993 at the launch of the ASEAN-Vietnam Task Force Draft, and   Southeast Asia Beyond the Year 2000: A Statement of Vision , issued in 1994 by the civil society group,   Citizens of Southeast Asia , attest to the fact, as political scientist, Carolina Hernandez, writes, that   one Southeast Asia...is a goal increasingly captivating the imagination and support of the region s political and other opinion leaders from academe, the media, the private sector, and other professionals   (in the paper   One Southeast Asia in the 21st Century: Opportunities and Challenges , presented at the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies convention, University of Laval, Quebec City, 1995).

There remain several gaps in the social construction of Southeast Asia as a region, gaps which this writer has discussed in his 2000 work, The Quest for Identity. Failure to extend the socialisation process from the elite level to the people at large is especially debilitating to the future of Southeast Asian regionalism. Regional coherence is undermined by the avoidable squabbling between the founding regionalist states, such as Singapore and Malaysia. Moreover, the social construction of Southeast Asia is being challenged by the forces of globalisation. The Asian economic crisis underscored the vulnerability of Southeast Asia to the forces of global capitalism, which has become deeply embedded into the regional national economies.

Over and above this, the region now faces a new menace, that of transnational terrorism. Whether Southeast Asia has actually become global terror s   second front   can and should be debated, since the claim often relies on uncertain and unverifiable evidence. Terrorism, however, does contain within it the potential to serve as a common focus of danger against which a new sense of purpose may be instilled into the region s floundering multilateralism. However, response to terror can engender division as much as unity; differing domestic circumstances and strategic priorities of Southeast Asian states can frustrate any effort to develop cohesion around this transnational threat.

The prospects of American support against the terrorist challenge is insufficient to hold the region together. To overcome this challenge and develop a new regional identity into the 21st century, Southeast Asia s states must return to the building block, and develop the political will to preserve their hard-earned regional identity. Increased regionalism, at the level of governments and civic organisations, is the only hope for the region to remain an entity in the face of dark clouds that have gathered on its horizons since the outbreak of the Asian economic crisis in 1997. But Southeast Asia will remain a politically important, if analytically fuzzier, notion as long as local governments and elites find it useful to advance their common economic, political, and geo-strategic interests and objectives. Regionalism and regional identity-building will continue to be a key determinant of the idea of region.