

# H-Net Reviews

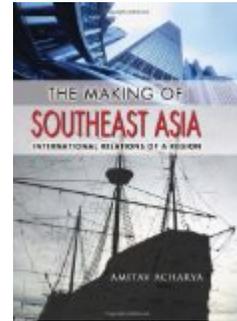
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Amitav Acharya. *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012. 240 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7736-2.

Reviewed by Shaun Narine (St. Thomas University)

Published on H-Diplo (September, 2013)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach



## Imagining a Region: Amitav Acharya and the Making of Southeast Asia

Amitav Acharya's new book *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of the Region* is a direct sequel to his book *The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia*, published by Oxford University Press in 2000. Acharya's basic concern is the following: to what extent is it possible to imagine Southeast Asia into existence as a distinct and meaningful political and geographical region? Acharya is widely regarded as the foremost scholar and champion of the application of constructivist thinking to Southeast Asia. This book reinforces that approach while still offering a subtle and complex analysis of regional identity in Southeast Asia. Ultimately, the book reflects Acharya's trademark skill in making the history and politics of Southeast Asia come alive. At the same time, however, the book vacillates between a realistic restraint in its analysis and a desire to find encouragement at the risk of exaggerating what is actually possible and plausible for Southeast Asian regional identity.

As Acharya notes, *The Making of Southeast Asia* incorporates and expands upon *The Quest for Identity*, adding two new chapters. Chapter 2 of the book updates the theoretical discussion and attempts to respond to some of the criticisms elicited by the earlier book. Chapter 8 delves deeply into the political, economic, and institutional developments that have shaped the region since 2000. The book consists of nine chapters. Besides the two chapters already mentioned, chapter 1 deals with the changing understanding of Southeast Asia. Chapter 3 begins the historical overview by discussing the pre-

colonial pattern of interstate relations in the region that is Southeast Asia today. In this chapter, Acharya draws on numerous scholars outside of political science, such as historians and archaeologists, to make the case that Southeast Asia had a past regional identity, suggesting that a new regional identity can be forged in the modern era. The chapter examines the historical impact of commerce and colonialism on the region. Chapter 4 "looks critically at the interrelationship between nationalism, regionalism and the Cold War international order Southeast Asia," paying special attention to nationalism (p. 13). Chapter 5 looks at the emergence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its influence on shaping a regional identity. Chapter 6 examines the conflict between ASEAN and Vietnam during the Cold War and discusses the domestic and international political forces that eventually ended those divisions. Chapter 7 looks at the period from the end of the Cold War to the start of the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Chapter 9 draws the conclusions of the book, "focusing on the rise and decline of the regional concept and the fluidity and uncertainty that the regionalist imagination of Southeast Asia faces today" (p. 15).

In 2001, I reviewed *The Quest for Identity* for the *Cancaps Bulletin*.<sup>[1]</sup> Many of the criticisms I made then apply to the current book. For example, Acharya's application of O. W. Wolter's concept of the *mandala* state to Southeast Asia is novel and extremely interesting. The *mandala* refers to the authority of a political center which radiates out in concentric circles, exercising decreasing

levels of control over local authority the further it moves away from the center. Thus, the king of an established empire delegates power to his vassals who, in turn, delegate power to their retainers. Mandalas can overlap with each other. In Southeast Asia, this arrangement characterized regional political interaction. But while Acharya uses the mandala to argue for a shared historical experience that could bind the region together, other scholars have used the same concept to argue that the mandala explains why divisions and diversity in Southeast Asia are too great to overcome.[2] This is not a criticism that Acharya directly addresses in *The Making of Southeast Asia*, though he clarifies his use of the mandala concept (discussed below). Moreover, the new book still underestimates the extent to which national and other identities trump any prospect of a strong regional identity, a theme I return to below. However, these are debates that have remained unchanged and unresolved for the past decade and which will continue to vex scholars of Southeast Asia for the foreseeable future.

One of the strongest contributions of the new book is found in chapter 2, where Acharya lays out his constructivist approach to studying a “region.” He emphasizes the need to move beyond material conceptions of regions to take into account the ideational forces that make regions. Essentially, regions can be created through the decision to imagine them into existence. He argues for the need to examine a region as more than the sum of its parts but as a distinct concept with distinct characteristics, separate from the countries that may exist within its borders. He strongly emphasizes the need to be aware of regional history. This is a key weakness of many studies of Southeast Asia, which tend to rely too much on examining contemporary events. It is here that Acharya makes an interesting clarification of the mandala concept by arguing that its primary purpose in examining history is to show how other scholars have imagined and explained Southeast Asia’s historical past in terms of its regional relations. Acharya argues that modern political scientists can imagine Southeast Asia through a similar intellectual process. He is not arguing that the mandala concept applies today nor does he even subscribe to the idea that understanding of the present lies in the past. He also notes that Southeast Asia has been imagined by outside historians and scholars, but also from the inside by Southeast Asian elites. Finally, he acknowledges that regions are fluid concepts with changing borders and the possibility of decline and demise.

Acharya’s approach to regionalism is subtle and sensible, but it also allows him to hedge his bets. Indeed, con-

trary to how his work is often portrayed, his approach to regional identity in this book is measured and cautious. Acharya is well aware of the challenges facing Southeast Asia, even as an imagined region. Thus, in chapter 8, as he evaluates the effects on ASEAN of globalization, the emergence of civil society regionalism, the rise of China and India, and the idea of an East Asian Community, it is striking that he feels that many of these forces can undermine whatever progress has been made towards a Southeast Asian regional identity. This is a sensible approach to evaluating the region. But the analysis also seems at odds with the focus on regional identity that motivates the rest of the book. Indeed, it appears that Acharya is trying to walk a careful line between those scholars who see a clear emergence of Southeast Asian identity in ASEAN and those who see no identity at all. Acharya shows how a regional identity can be created and he evaluates what progress has been made, but he is also well aware of how fluid and transitory a region can be. But this evaluation leads to the question: if, in the modern era, Southeast Asian identity can be so readily challenged by a changing global environment, then how substantial was it in the first place? What the book needs is a more unequivocal position: what does Acharya think the future holds for Southeast Asian regional identity?

I think it is clear that Southeast Asians share a regional identity. Demonstrating that such an identity exists is not really a surprise. The real question is whether or not this identity supersedes other, more important identities, such as national, ethnic, and religious identifications. The overwhelming evidence is that it does not. The states of Southeast Asia are still in the process of creating themselves as functioning states. As Acharya acknowledges, in the past, Southeast Asia’s leaders have used regionalism to strengthen and complement their efforts at state-building. ASEAN can be understood as a mutual agreement to respect each other’s sovereignty, increasing the room for states to develop into fully functioning political actors. I see no reason to argue that this has changed substantially. Indeed, the fragility of national development in the region is illustrated by the back-and-forth movement between democracy and autocracy in most of the regional states, most notably Thailand. Christopher Roberts has argued that “decades, rather than several years, will be necessary in order for the ASEAN states to develop the *capacity* and *intention* to truly consolidate along the lines of the ‘ASEAN community’ envisioned in the Bali Concord II.”[3] I agree with this assessment.

A weakness of the book is that it does not directly

address some critical events and indicators that touch strongly on the question of regional identity. For example, while the book mentions the many tensions that erupted across Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis and continued into the 2000s, it emphasizes that the states managed to avoid outright conflict (pp. 242-245). However, Acharya does not discuss the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple complex, though this appears to be an oversight, as evinced by his allusion to the crisis on page 246. Between 2008 and 2011, violence between the Thai and Cambodian militaries killed twenty soldiers and civilians on both sides, involved the exchange of heavy firepower and bombs, and created tens of thousands of refugees. This is a disturbing example of military action between two ASEAN states, the prevention of which is something that ASEAN has consistently claimed as its major achievement. Despite mediation from Indonesia, ASEAN strove to avoid discussing the conflict, apparently out of the desire to avoid appearing ineffective. Just as interesting, the conflict was sparked by the domestic, democratic politics of Thailand as the political opponents of Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's deposed prime minister, drew on Preah Vihear for its nationalist appeal and as a way to undermine the new Thaksin-affiliated government.[4] This observation underlines the complexity of democratic development in the region, something that Acharya supports in a fairly uncritical way.

In addition, Acharya does not pay much attention to the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) one of the three pillars of the new ASEAN Community, due to be established in 2015. He does mention it and ac-

knowledges the need to create more extensive civil society contacts, but he does not critically evaluate the ASCC (pp. 256-257). This is a curious omission because the task of creating an ASEAN identity largely falls under the purview of the ASCC. The circumstances of the ASCC's creation indicate that it was largely an afterthought, added to the idea of the ASEAN Community when the ASEAN states wanted the AC to appear interested in more than just security and economics.

Ultimately, *The Making of Southeast Asia* is a measured and substantial contribution to the theoretical and political debate over how to understand and conceptualize Southeast Asia and the quest for regional identity. Critics on both sides of the scholarly divide will find some support for their positions in Acharya's careful analysis.

#### Notes

[1]. Shaun Narine, "The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia," *CANCAPS Bulletin*, no. 29 (May 2001): 13-14.

[2]. Jurgen Ruland, "ASEAN and the Asian Crisis: Theoretical Implications and Practical Consequences for Southeast Asian Regionalism," *The Pacific Review* 13, no. 3 (2000): 438-49.

[3]. Christopher B. Roberts, *ASEAN Regionalism: Cooperation, Values and Institutionalisation* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2012), 187.

[4]. International Crisis Group, "Waging Peace: ASEAN and the Thai-Cambodian Border Conflict," *Asia Report*, no. 215 (December 6, 2011).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** Shaun Narine. Review of Acharya, Amitav, *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39197>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.