

EuroSEAS Conference
26-28 August 2010
Gothenburg, Sweden

Critical Approaches to Southeast Asian Regionalism

The study of Southeast Asian regionalism by International Relations scholars has long been dominated by the debate between ‘bashers’ and ‘boosters’ of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, roughly corresponding to proponents of realist and constructivist interpretations of Southeast Asian regionalism. Discussion has centred around whether ASEAN’s thin institutions are a sign of weakness or evidence of the generation of regional norms and identities that can bring lasting peace. A range of third-generation, critical approaches are now emerging, however, which bypass this increasingly stale debate and seek instead to shed new light on regionalism and regional politics – wherein ASEAN is just one of many potential players. These approaches draw on methods from discourse analysis, historical sociology and political economy to investigate why Southeast Asian regionalism takes the institutional and ideological forms it does, drawing attention to, among other things, the determination of regional politics by social conflict within states, and the discursive construction of regional regimes. This panel explores the insights critical approaches can provide and their potential to contribute to broader International Relations theory.

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Chair TBC

Presenters, Papers and Abstracts

A Critical Turn in Asia-Pacific IR Theory? Challenges and Prospects

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Regionalism in Southeast Asia today is developing at a frenetic pace. Plans are afoot to establish the “ASEAN Community,” originally scheduled to be realized by the year 2020, by 2015 instead. Acutely aware that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the region’s principal international organization now into its fifth decade, has largely been a diplomatic community at best – that is, the exclusive preserve of statesmen – the ASEAN Community vision was thereby conceived by ASEAN’s leaders in 2003 to render ASEAN a “people-centred” organization. As envisioned in ASEAN’s Bali Concord II declaration issued in 2003, the Community will comprise three pillars, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), and the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community (ASCC). Not all are convinced, however, that this ambitious vision will materialize, not least where making ASEAN more human-focused is concerned. Not only critics but many ASEAN watchers point (correctly so) to the predominantly intergovernmental and heavily centralized character of the regional association, where few if any powers are delegated to independent agencies much less civil

society. Efforts by ASEAN leaders to engage civil society actors have been patchy at best, with the more democratic Southeast Asian nations (Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand) having greater success than others. At the regional level, platforms established to enhance interaction between ASEAN leaders and Southeast Asian civil society (e.g., ASEAN Peoples' Assembly or APA) have achieved precious little at blurring the state/civil society divide. Moreover, even the most progressive of the three "pillars" of regional community building, the AEC, has not, in the view of some economic analysts, been as successful in advancing regional economic cooperation and integration as initially thought.

Against this contested backdrop, this paper addresses three questions. First, in the light of social, economic, and political developments throughout Southeast Asia as a consequence of ongoing (and admittedly difficult) democratic transitions, are theories and concepts employed in the analysis and assessment of regionalism in Southeast Asia sufficiently "progressive" at tracking regional changes? Second, are extant theories and concepts still bound by Westphalian ideas and ideals that either fail to grasp new realities, or do they, as constitutive or representational practices, continue not only to delimit analytical understanding of Southeast Asian regionalism but effectively constrain policy efforts toward a more human-centred regional cooperation and integration? Third, to the extent the study of regionalism has advanced new ways of thinking, doing and being, do they also reflect new ways of envisioning sovereignty and subjectivity – or, if you will, new ways of thinking about Self and Other – in Southeast Asian regionalism? Whether ongoing democratization – and with it a growing participatory regionalism – in Southeast Asia, tenuous and uneven as it has been, has been met by a corresponding "democratization" in the theorization and conceptualization of regionalism in Southeast Asia, and if so their implications for regional life as such, are the concerns of this paper.

The Domestic Roots of Security Policy in Southeast Asia

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Abstract: Southeast Asian states are widely criticised for failing to tackle a growing array of transnational security threats. The dominant explanation for their inaction is the regional norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. This paper argues that such explanations are unconvincing, since adherence to non-interference is selective at best and thus demands an explanation in its own right. The paper critiques the statism of International Relations theory and the Copenhagen School's securitisation approach, arguing that they distract attention from the domestic social conflicts that actually determine the scope of regional security policy. An alternative analytical framework is proposed drawing on a branch of state theory. Case studies of regional policies towards Burma, environmental degradation and border conflicts then follow to illustrate the usefulness of this approach.

Contested Regionalism in Southeast Asia: The Politics of the Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline Project

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Abstract: This paper analyses the trans-ASEAN gas pipeline project (TAGP) as a way to reconceptualise regional dynamics in Southeast Asia and the forces shaping them – what we call ‘contested regionalism’. For this task, we propose an analytical framework based upon social conflict theory that delves within and beyond the state, and which places emphasis upon the roles of both material and ideological factors operating across time in the reordering of particular geographical spaces. The framework reveals that the tensions acting within and upon ASEAN and the TAGP influence regionalism in such a way that the gas pipeline project – much like other ‘regional’ projects – is unlikely to ever come close to fulfilling its brief of enhancing regional security and cohesion. What is more probable is that the project’s form will continue to be conditioned by entrenched politico-economic realities and the influence of dominant ideologies – factors which have the capacity to exacerbate existing regional animosities and disparities.

A Living Document: The ASEAN Charter and the Discursive Construction of Regionalism in Southeast Asia

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Recent developments in the states of Southeast Asia have been mirrored in the regional politics of ASEAN. The political discourse within ASEAN reflects both liberalisation and democratisation processes on the one hand and resistance and the desire for maintaining the status quo on the other. These contestations have challenged the seeming uniformity of ASEAN’s institutional discourse and affected the central ideas about regional governance. This essentially concerns the founding of an ASEAN Charter that can be seen as a performative moment in regional discourse and its political promises, including the promotion of democracy and the establishment of a human rights mechanism. Institutionalisation and legalisation, accountability and compliance, the inclusion of an emerging regional civil society – a strong myth – as well as other ideas about efficient regional governance have become central narratives in the Charter. While many observers have tended to evaluate ASEAN’s performance or tried to gauge the chances for implementing its decisions, the focus here will be rather on the enabling and impeding conditions of institutional discourse. Drawing on sociological perspectives of International Relations and discourse theory, I will analyse the discourse of community building within ASEAN, particularly the Charter, and try to develop a better understanding of how the discursive (re)production of regional politics is performed there.

Non-Traditional Security and New Modes of Security Governance in Southeast Asia

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In recent years, non-traditional (or non-military) security issues have become increasingly important to policymakers, practitioners and security analysts in Southeast Asia. The traditional concern of security policy in the region with preventing inter-state military conflict has been considerably supplemented with issues such as transnational terrorism, crime, piracy, people trafficking, infectious diseases and others. This shift is reflected in official ASEAN and governmental publications, as well as in the growing role of private security providers and specialists in defining, evaluating and managing these problems. Most observers

have tended to view the emergence of non-traditional concerns and concomitant efforts to manage these as a natural, though undesirable, accompaniment to the region's economic transformation and globalisation in particular. To the limited extent that this trend has been probed deeper explanations have drawn primarily on the securitisation framework of the Copenhagen School. These perspectives are incapable, however, of explaining why particular issues are securitised and, in particular, why they are governed one way or another. Drawing on the insights of political economy and critical political geography, this paper sets out a framework for examining new modes of security governance. It is argued that the rescaling of security 'beyond the state', associated with the emergence of non-traditional security issues, is both outcome and facilitator of a contested process of state transformation.