'Mirror, mirror, on the wall': misplaced polarities in the study of Southeast Asian security

N. Ganesan

Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore, AS1, Level 4, 11 Arts Link, Singapore 117570.
Email: polganes@nus.edu.sg

Abstract

Recent interpretative literature on Southeast Asian security has led to a polarized debate between realists and constructivists. This article argues that the differences between the two seemingly irreconcilable approaches can be reconciled if the methodologies underlying the approaches are subjected to greater scrutiny. Generally, both approaches are sensitive to environmental conditions, both in terms of time and place. Additionally, realism is better suited to explain turbulence in Southeast Asian international relations, while constructivism is better suited during times of peace and prosperity.

1 Introduction

A controversial intellectual debate has erupted between scholars specializing in Southeast Asian security studies. This debate, which is essentially theoretical and drawing on two different traditions, has thus far been presented as a fundamentally conflictual one.[1] This article argues that the two schools – realism and constructivism – have been misrepresented as being mutually exclusive. On the contrary, there are a number of ways in which both schools of thought are amenable to reconciliation when properly examined. Accordingly, it is argued that a contextualization of the debate allows for greater levels of convergence between the two schools than the exclusivity attributed

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[1] The most recent and forceful articulation of this tension is Peou (2002). Peou regards Michael Leifer as the most articulate proponent of the realist approach and Amitav Acharya as the leading constructivist scholar.

to them. The context is the region of Southeast Asia that is collectively represented in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Élites who make policy pronouncements on behalf of these states who may be reasonably inferred to represent the interests of those states also fall within the contextual parameters. ASEAN is therefore understood as an entity in itself, a sum total of its parts and represented by statesmen who articulate policy positions on behalf of the constituent states. Such pronouncements may in turn be situationally contingent or time sensitive.

A number of caveats regarding the methodology that is used are in order at the outset. The first is that the archrealist would dismiss the treatment of ASEAN as a unit in itself. The reason for this observation is that realists regard states or units as the primary frame of reference for international transactions. Nonetheless, it needs to be acknowledged that neorealism and institutionalism that include non-state actors in their analysis of international relations are substantive offshoots of realism. Both offshoots are generally accepted in the political science literature as derivatives of realism.[2] As for the inclusion of policy élites, the simple dictum that states do not make policies but statesman do will suffice. Whereas some constructivists may dispute the inclusion of the state as the unit of analysis, they must surely acknowledge that all imaginings, pronouncements and procurement of norms are premised on the understanding that a group of states is acting in concert. The music of the orchestra is therefore the sum total of the output of individual musicians. In other words, the process of construction or deconstruction cannot be obtained except through the primary input of states, albeit transnational actors or interest groups are also capable of influencing international relations in general. Accordingly, the process obtains no form or volition without the active involvement of its participants, and, hence, interaction is not to be exclusively understood as discrete in itself. To argue that a process is significant and shapes a discourse is one thing and to argue that a discourse retains an existence in itself is something else altogether. Therefore, even constructivists have to acknowledge an interactive effect between states which may or may not be contextually relevant to the discourse that they produce.

The final clarification has to do with the concept of context or the location of this discourse. The term is used in this article to connote time and/or space, popular frames of reference in comparative politics. Time represents the utility of a particular historical conjunction when certain ideas take hold. Such a development may in turn be a function of evolutionary change as in the case of the emergence of states or revolutionary, as the changes to

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[2] For an excellent collection of readings surveying the history of realism and its offshoots, see Keohane (1984) and Baldwin (1993).

international relations brought about by the terrorist attacks on the United States on 9 September 2001. Space, on the other hand, is quite simply a reference to reasonably discrete geographical units, whether these are states or regions. For comparativists, these considerations are important since they inform researchers of the empirical context of findings and introduce rigour in research and control for the tradeoffs between internal validity or specificity and external validity or generalizability. The recognition of this tradeoff is important since this is one of the areas where constructivists can easily be faulted.

The rest of this paper is divided into three major sections. Section 2 is a theoretical and historical treatment of realism and constructivism. It identifies the major strands of thought within the two schools and their evolution within the discipline of political science. Section 3 locates the theoretical debate within the proper historical and contextual perspective in Southeast Asia. There are very specific reasons why the constructivist challenge to realist interpretations of the region was mounted in the 1990s. Section 4 brings the two schools of thought together and identifies where the two schools reach a measure of convergence and accommodation and where they continue to differ. It will be argued that within the Southeast Asian context, there are issue areas where both schools converge or at least how a proper contextual reading of the situation obtains convergence between them. Section 4 concludes by restating the central argument of this article and offering tentative conclusions on how both realism and constructivism relate to transitions in international relations. On the basis of the evidence presented in this article, it may be reasonably inferred that realists attribute transitions in international relations to substantive structural changes while constructivists utilize sociological observations to explain such transitions.

2 The theoretical and substantive positions of realism and constructivism

2.1 Realism: the establishment

The end of the Second World War was marked by an intense intellectual debate among theorists of international relations. This search was partly a function of the defeat of fascism in Europe. It was equally a function of the search to theoretically anchor the study of international relations. Two schools of thought, realism and liberalism, were the early contenders in this theoretical search.[3] The most significant difference, at the outset at least, was the realist predisposition in favour of states as the most basic and central unit

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3 A succinct summary of the theoretical evolution of postwar international relations is given by Leiber (1973).

of analysis in the study of international relations. Liberals, on the other hand, were more inclined towards supranationalism. Much of the inspiration of the liberals was drawn from European experiences and possibilities. Over time, when realism evolved to become the dominant paradigm, liberalism was often dismissed as an idealist notion from the 1930s, with all the attendant negative connotations.

The early doyen of realism was Hans Morgenthau, whose classic treatise *Politics Among Nations* (1978) continues to be the primary frame of reference among realists. Whereas realism as a school of thought is often associated with the Greek philosopher Thucydides and the Italian statesman Niccolò Machiavelli, Morgenthau was clearly regarded as the school's intellectual *force majeur*. Within the North American context, Kenneth Waltz was another major proponent of realism, while the English school often regards Hedley Bull as a major theorist from a similar worldview. Waltz emphasizes, among other things, the impact of the environment on a state's actions as well as the socialization between states in conditioning policy output (see Waltz, 1979, pp. 70–74). Hence, Waltz would regard as reductionist Morgenthau's notion of interstate behaviour as simply competitive acquisition of power. Similarly, for Hedley Bull, the concept of 'international society' or norms obtained through interstate transactions is critical to the containment of anarchy (see Bull, 1997, p. 17).

Liberals, on the other hand, were most closely associated with the works of David Mitrany (1966) and Ernst Haas (1967). As realism evolved to become the dominant paradigm, aided in no small measure by structural arrangements associated with the Cold War, it acquired both analytical and prescriptive value. Such value was equally aided and abetted by the intellectual hegemony of US theorists of international relations and the corresponding decline of European theorists in the same field. Additionally, the evolution of the United States as a superpower, its initiative in the Marshall Plan to reconstruct Europe, its lead role in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Western Europe, and the evolution of a competitive relationship with the Soviet Union and its own lead role in the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) that brought together Eastern Europe in an equally competitive relationship with NATO closely established US hegemony and realism in international relations.

Major theoretical premises of realist theory as expounded by Hans Morgenthau are firstly, that politics 'is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature' (Morgenthau, 1978, pp. 4–15). Accordingly, it is possible to develop a rational theory of politics on the basis of these objective laws. Secondly, politics between nations can be understood in terms of 'interest defined in terms of power'. This power-centric nature of state

behaviour is seen as being borne out on the basis of historical developments. Thirdly, state interest that is defined in power terms is an 'objective category that is universally valid'. However, the concept of power may be subject to change. Accordingly, the nature of state interest is specific to 'the political and cultural context within which foreign policy is formulated'. Fourthly, whereas realism is guided by moral principles in general, it is prudence, or the consequences that obtain from moral actions, that ultimately guide state action. Prudence is understood in terms of 'the consequences of alternative political actions', a rational judgement based on the potential outcomes of different courses of action. Fifthly, realism 'refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with moral laws that govern the universe'. Consequently, the morality of a state's action, while drawing on universal moral laws, is contingent on its own situation and the policy options available. Finally, realism subscribes to the autonomy of the political sphere and refuses to allow the norms of other domains to interfere in decision-making. In fact, not only is politics deemed a separate domain, but rather realism presupposes the primacy of the political realm. Later theorists like Kenneth Waltz and Robert Keohane introduced non-state actors and variables at the domestic and international levels to give realism a more holistic character while retaining the centrality of the state in purposeful action.

2.2 Constructivism: the detractors

The intellectual debate on the utility of realism in explaining and predicting international relations was seriously reopened in the 1990s. There were a number of specific events in the 1980s that resulted in this intellectual reconsideration. The rapid evaporation of the Cold War in the 1980s following Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension to power in the Soviet Union in 1985 was perhaps the single most important reason. Gorbachev's decision to positively engage the United States in seeking to reduce strategic nuclear weapons and build a more co-operative and less competitive relationship with Western countries in general was catalytic to the debate. Although the revolution begun by Gorbachev that is now referred to as the post-Cold War period or the new international order devoured its own leader, the change, once initiated, could no longer be contained. The failing Soviet economy and the velvet revolutions of Eastern Europe that ousted pro-Soviet dictatorial regimes eventually culminated in the implosion of the Soviet Union itself. By 1991, the bipolarity and competitive relationship between communism on the one hand, and liberal democracy and capitalism on the other, represented by the Soviet Union and the United States, respectively, ceased to exist.

The implosion of the Soviet Union had repercussions both for the study and practice of international relations. As when fascism was defeated after

the end of the Second World War, there was great rejoicing in the United States that communism had eventually failed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Hence Francis Fukuyama's now celebrated phrase, 'The end of history' (Fukuyama, 1989). The phrase bore with it the connotative value that human civilization had eventually witnessed the victory of a superior form of ideology and market economics that the West had propounded all along. Nonetheless, the collapse of the Soviet Union was not similarly interpreted by all analysts and practitioners alike. In fact there were at least three clearly discernible alternative trends.

The first trend evolved as an interpretation of developments in the 1980s, with a view to predicting the future trajectory of international relations. This trend was partly nourished by the positivist approach of correlating theory to empirical evidence and partly motivated by an attempt to reintroduce a measure of predictability in international relations – a task that had appeared almost impossible following the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, to name a few prominent examples. The first strand of this intellectual debate was therefore focused, like realism, on explanatory as well as predictive power. Broadly speaking, theorists were divided between unipolarity and multipolarity as organizing principles (Lane, 1993; Wagner, 1993; for differing conceptualizations of the post-Cold War world, see Goldgeier and McFaul, 1992; Vayryren, 1994). There was some measure of empirical evidence for both schools. The United States was far ahead of its closest competitor in terms of power and influence, seemingly substantiating unipolarity. At the same time, countries like France, Germany and Japan were clearly emerging as potential competitors to American power and influence. Hegemonic stability theory that could have accommodated a single country or a concert of powers also gained popularity (Krasner, 1983; Haggard and Simmons, 1987; Keohane, 1989). Hegemonic stability theory also became conflated with multilateralism and regime theory as policy instruments to obtain compliance with international norms.

A second reinterpretation of the collapse of communism was that whereas liberal democracy appeared the victor, the battle was hardly over. This school, which emphasized the utility of values, and in particular Asian values, claimed that the victory of liberal democracy was contingent and contextual. It was contingent on how international relations was broadly interpreted, and contextual in that large parts of the world had been ignored in the computation of reality. The truth of the matter, as argued by this school, is that thrift, hard work, a concern for the collective good or community, coupled with political stability, provided a potent mix that could easily challenge liberal democracy (e.g. Mahbubani, 1992, 1994; Kausikan, 1991;

Zakaria, 1994). Against the backdrop of political stability and spectacular economic growth in the 1970s and the 1980s, this school, comprising mostly countries from East Asia, felt sufficiently confident to contest Fukuyama's reading of the situation. This second school, while establishing itself in the political science literature, was clearly unable to dislodge the earlier thesis. Rather, it was often discredited as a call for the legitimization of authoritarian governments (Roy, 1994; Chan, 1997). This discourse appears to have died a natural death in recent times, especially after the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and its lengthy contagion effect. Newly industrialized countries in East Asia, at least for the time being, have come to realize that their growth and power is in turn contingent on a number of external variables that include international political stability and the existence of a liberal trading regime. The latter condition is necessary to obtain the benefits of export-led growth, as in the case of Japan, Korea, Singapore and Taiwan.

The third and most articulate challenge derives from constructivism. Drawing on the liberal tradition in terms of its emphasis on non-state variables in constructing an understanding of international relations, constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture, ideas and socialization in interpreting international relations (Wendt, 1992, 1994). If perceptions do indeed shape the policy preferences of élites, then a strategic convergence of such perceptions, culminating in at least a lowest common denominator of shared values, has the potential to fashion an alternative discourse to realism.[4] Adequate historical conjunctions like the post-Cold War period, for example, allow for the articulation of such a discourse. Consequently, for constructivists, there is an interactive effect between the convergence of specific cultural or ideological attributes and a favourable historical context. This is the reason why Wendt, in his now celebrated article, draws attention to particularistic variables that have a certain resonance among selected states at a specific time. Consequently, 'Anarchy is what states make of it.'

Constructivists essentially challenge the realist premise that anarchy obtains conditions that invoke mutual fear among states. Rather, they argue, anarchy has the equal potential to obtain norms of co-operative rather than competitive security. Accordingly, states are capable of evolving a culture of 'shared knowledge in which states trust one another to resolve disputes without war' (Wendt, 1998, p. 418). The popularity of multilateralism and the recourse to international regimes to resolve contentious disputes between states and the emergence of a much more pacific global culture in the 1980s also contributed to the popularity of constructivism. Additionally, despite

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4   So for example, it is argued that 'other help' rather than 'self help' may derive from an anarchical situation. See Mercer (1995).

the popularity of sovereign states in maintaining a deterrence capability to ensure the preservation of territoriality, sovereignty and core state interests, war – apart from some rare exceptions – had become an obsolete instrument of policy output. After all, even rogue states could be subdued through the imposition of sanctions that could in turn be tightly monitored and enforced, as in the case of Burma and Iran.

A few related observations are in order before appraising the geographical context of the debate – Southeast Asia, from where evidence has been derived by both schools to make their case. The first of these is that the Asian values debate that was earlier treated separately as a school in itself can be regarded as a concrete expression of constructivism. After all, the Asian values debate essentially comprised a convergence of opinion among prominent Asian élites that specific cultural attributes have implications for the development and prosperity of individual states. Secondly, realists typically dismiss constructivists because states continue to behave in terms of competitive national interests. In other words, collective identities can be interpreted as ways of enhancing state power through alignments or balance-of-power principles. Additionally, statesmen utter pronouncements on behalf of states, reinforcing the centrality of the latter in international relations. Policy pronouncements of élites are often crafted to suit the contextual requirements of specific situations and are not to be confused with actual policy output. Hence, there is the potential to confuse means and ends. Finally, in a worst-case scenario, such as during and after the Asian financial crisis, states naturally revert to first-order principles that are invariably state-centric in nature. Therefore, a discourse obtained from positive conditions is not to be confused with enduring first-order principles. To confuse the two is both misleading and factually inaccurate. To infer state motivations on the basis of such discourse merely serves to exaggerate the misrepresentation.

3 Southeast Asia – the context of the debate

The region called Southeast Asia is geographically located between India and China. The land border is represented by Burma to the west and Vietnam to the east and the maritime limits by the tip of the island of Sumatra that acts as the gateway to the Straits of Malacca and the Philippines in the Pacific Ocean. The southern maritime boundary is demarcated by Indonesia. Traditionally, the region is often divided into mainland Southeast Asia, comprising Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam; and maritime Southeast Asia, comprising Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. With the exception of Thailand, the entire region was colonized by European

powers, from the sixteenth century onwards (Steinberg, 1987, gives an account of the historical evolution of the region).

Political independence came to Southeast Asia following the end of the Second World War. Historians generally agree that independence came in two waves. The first wave, which began with negotiated independence for the Philippines in 1946 and Burma in 1948, was followed by Indonesia in 1949 after a combination of negotiations and warfare. It was then rapidly followed by Laos and Cambodia in 1953, and ended with the partition of North and South Vietnam in 1954 after the conclusion of the First Indochina War (to be discussed later). The second wave began with the negotiated independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957. In 1963, the federation was expanded to include the British territories of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, and Singapore, and renamed the Federation of Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore achieved political independence after separation from the Malaysian federation. In 1975, following the conclusion of the Second Indochina War (also to be discussed later), North and South Vietnam were reunited and renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Finally, in 1984, the United Kingdom removed its protectorate status from Brunei, allowing for its independence. East Timor, which seceded from Indonesia following the outcome of a referendum in 2000, is Southeast Asia's newest independent state. The discrete identity of the region is often attributed to the Second World War, since it was the South-east Asia Command (SEAC), an Anglo-American initiative, that negotiated for the return of territories to European colonization following the Japanese occupation and surrender of these territories in August 1945.

Most of the Southeast Asian states achieved their political independence at the height of the Cold War, and, as a result, invariably became embroiled in this conflict. The involvement of external powers in Southeast Asian security was exaggerated by a number of international developments in Asia (Alagappa, 1989; Ganesan, 2000). The first of these was the communist victory over the nationalist Kuomintang government in China in 1949. Mao Zedong, who led the communist forces to victory, was clearly committed to exporting the revolution across international borders, in defiance of the Western powers led by the United States. China's involvement in the Korean War from 1950 to 1953 that culminated in the division of the Korean peninsula into North and South Korea and subsequent military engagements with the United States over Taiwan in 1954 and 1958 hardened US resolve to contain communism in Asia.

In Southeast Asia, China provided moral and material support to the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in its independence struggle against the French that led to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This First

Indochina War had already involved US funding and material support for France. The conclusion of this war and the truce that came with it following the Geneva Accords that separated Vietnam into two halves was, however, short-lived. Hence, the Second Indochina War almost dovetailed into the First, attracting even greater US involvement. More importantly, the protracted and expansive nature of the conflict also involved Laos and Cambodia, the equivalent of the colonial French Indochinese Union. In additional, China also provided moral and material support to a number of other communist parties in the region, including the Burmese Communist Party (BCP), the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) and the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM).

Southeast Asian countries that were not directly involved in the Indochinese Wars became part of the Western international security system through a number of formal arrangements that provided for external security and a minimum defence capability. The most important of such arrangements involved the United States and its regional allies in the Philippines, South Vietnam and Thailand. Mutual defence treaties were signed with the Philippines and Thailand, while the United States was actively involved in supporting South Vietnamese governments in fighting communist forces until the conclusion of the Second Indochina War in 1975. It also included the Philippines and Thailand as members in the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) that came into effect in 1954. Finally, under the terms of the Military Bases Agreement (MBA) that was concluded with the Philippines in 1947, the United States maintained a significant military presence in Clark Airbase and Subic Bay until 1991. Both Thailand and the Philippines provided significant facilities and logistical support for the US war effort against revolutionary communism in Indochina.

In other parts of Southeast Asia, the United Kingdom served as the anchor power for its previous colonies. The Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) that was initially concluded with the Federation of Malaya in 1957 was subsequently extended in 1963 to cover the territories of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore. When AMDA lapsed in 1971, the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) that brought together the United Kingdom, Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore replaced it and remains in effect (Chin, 1974). Such arrangements were especially useful when Indonesia under President Sukarno launched a policy of military confrontation against Malaysia from 1963 to 1966. Whereas Sukarno flirted with both China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s, the country professed a commitment to neutrality and non-alignment, and its security concerns derived from domestic rather than external developments. Burma, which underwent significant domestic political turbulence in the 1950s, eventually

went into self-imposed isolationism after a successful coup led by Ne Win in 1962.

Suffice it to say, then, that the ideological conflicts that erupted in Europe during the Cold War were also mirrored in Southeast Asia, and the Indochinese Wars attracted significant external involvement. Whereas mainland Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, were embroiled in conflict for most of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, maritime Southeast Asia enjoyed relative calm. This calm received significant support from Indonesia following the alleged PKI-sponsored abortive coup of 1965 that in turn culminated in the overthrow of the Sukarno government and its replacement by Suharto's New Order government in July 1967. Unlike his predecessor, Suharto disavowed the confrontation policy towards Malaysia, severed diplomatic ties with China, adopted a pro-Western foreign policy output and sought regional leadership through conciliatory developmental policies.

It was within the framework of this policy of regional reconciliation that Indonesia eventually provided leadership for the regional organizational ASEAN that is at the centre of the present intellectual controversy.[5] There were two previous attempts at regional leadership in Southeast Asia. The first of these, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), which functioned from 1960 to 1963, brought together Malaya, the Philippines and Thailand. When the Malaysian federation was formed in 1963, Indonesia launched its military confrontation, while the Philippines severed diplomatic ties with Malaysia over a territorial dispute involving the state of Sabah on the island of Borneo. These interstate disputes led to the collapse of ASA, which was briefly revived in 1967 prior to the formation of ASEAN. A second attempt at regional organization, called MAPHILINDO, initiated by Indonesia in 1963, which sought to unite the people of a common cultural stock in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, was stillborn.

That ASEAN evolved within the framework of and in relation to the cessation of interstate disputes in maritime Southeast Asia is beyond dispute. In fact, ASEAN was created in August 1967, shortly after the Indonesian confrontation was brought to a formal end in July in Bangkok. However, given Indonesia's traditional sense of proprietary entitlement to order regional affairs and Sukarno's adventurist foreign policy and communist sympathies, it was almost a decade after ASEAN's formation that member countries utilized ASEAN in a serious and cohesive fashion. ASEAN's evolution and consolidation in the 1970s was directly correlated to the Vietnam War. In this regard, the Indochinese conflict was catalytic in transforming ASEAN (Leifer, 1989). On the basis of the historical evolution of Southeast

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5   On the importance of Indonesian leadership, see Smith (2000) and Leifer (1986, 2000).

Asia up to the time of the formation of ASEAN, Southeast Asia functioned well within the broader structural context of the Cold War. In effect, the region up to that point, and even beyond it, was both shaped and interpreted by realist ideas and norms. Attempts at forging a larger pan-Asian consensus along the lines of Sukarno's Bandung Conference of 1955, while supported by countries like India and China, essentially failed.

The earliest serious attempt by ASEAN to order regional affairs was in 1971 when member-states collectively declared the desire for Southeast Asia to be designated a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in a summit meeting convened in Kuala Lumpur. This declaration is generally viewed as a response to the significant changes taking place in the broader strategic environment, especially US diplomatic efforts to engage China in international relations. Although many of the ASEAN member-states, such as Thailand and the Philippines, were neither neutral nor in a position to enforce neutrality, ZOPFAN was broadly adopted. After all, being a signatory only required a declaration of intent rather than a firm commitment to a specific course of action.

Real political consolidation and progress for ASEAN actually came in 1976, a year after the communist victory in Vietnam. At a summit meeting in Indonesia, member-states agreed to establish a central secretariat in Jakarta and signed two explicitly political treaties. The first of these, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) called for the pacific settlement of interstate disputes. Accession to this treaty was later invoked as a prerequisite for membership in ASEAN in the 1990s for Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. The second treaty, the Treaty of ASEAN Concord, was an expression of co-ordinated political solidarity among member-states. Collectively, these developments are generally regarded as constituting substantive political convergence among member-states. Nonetheless, within the broader environment, it should be noted that China also challenged ASEAN throughout the 1970s.

ASEAN's greatest claim to fame, however, derived from its diplomatic lobby to deny the Vietnamese-installed regime in Cambodia in 1979 international political legitimacy (Alagappa, 1993). The Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia from 1979 to 1989, sometimes referred to as the Third Indochina War, derived, among other things, from the broader strategic motivations of the Soviet Union and China, each with a proxy in Vietnam and Cambodia, respectively. The ASEAN policy of denying Vietnam legitimacy for its Cambodian occupation was premised on two rationalizations that were in turn strongly championed by Singapore and Thailand. The first of these was that the Vietnamese occupation involved the naked aggression and occupation of a smaller sovereign country by a larger

one. Such conduct to reorder international relations in Southeast Asia was condemned as unacceptable and potentially precedent setting. The second rationalization was that the occupation had compromised the status of Cambodia as a buffer for Thai security against Vietnamese revolutionary communism.

On the basis of these rationalizations, ASEAN conducted a two-pronged policy to deny Vietnam international legitimacy for its Cambodian occupation. At the diplomatic front, this policy involved the retention of the United Nations seat for the government of Democratic Kampuchea (DK), or the Khmer Rouge, from 1979 to 1982. When the DK government's genocidal policies were publicized and widely condemned, ASEAN brought the Khmer Rouge into a political alliance of convenience with two other non-communist factions led by Norodom Sihanouk and Son Sann to form the Coalition of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) to make the claimants more amenable to international support. The CGDK lasted until 1989, when Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia and the UN intervened to restore peace. The second prong of this policy, which was not necessarily condoned by all ASEAN member-states, involved the Thai creation of safe sanctuaries for Cambodian resistance fighters on the Thai side of its border with Cambodia. This initiative received substantial moral and material support from China, which was in turn keen to contain Vietnam's regional ambitions. For Thailand, this policy was part of a broader strategic alignment with China against Vietnam following the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975 (Paribatra, 1987).

It was on the back of this diplomatic success and the UN involvement to restore peace in Cambodia that ASEAN expanded its membership to include all the remaining countries of Southeast Asia in the 1990s while continuing to be involved in maintaining regional security. Significant initiatives in this regard involved ASEAN membership in the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum (APEC) as part of a nucleic core in 1989 and the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994. Economic initiatives included the endorsement of sub-regional 'growth triangles' in 1992 and the agreement to eventually institutionalize an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) that was signed in 1993 with a gestation period that was slashed from the original fifteen years to nine, to be in place by 2002. As for membership expansion, Vietnam was inducted in 1995, Myanmar and Laos in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999 following the resolution of domestic conflict between Hun Sen and Norodom Ranarridh.

Quite apart from ASEAN's evolution and maturation in response to the broader regional environment, ASEAN, over time, also served a number of useful purposes to incumbent governments in member countries. Firstly, it

provided member countries with a comfortable level of familiarity and accommodation in the post-colonial period. Analysts of Southeast Asian security, especially those from within the region, often allude to the processes of *musyawarah* (consultation) and *mufakat* (consensus) that are central to the ASEAN decision-making process that is sometimes dubbed the 'ASEAN Way' (Saravamuttu and Thambipillai, 1985). In fact, the culture of regular consultation, consensual decision-making and conflict avoidance is central to the constructivist interpretation of Southeast Asian international relations. This culture, which is interactive with membership in ASEAN, has allowed constructivists to highlight the centrality of shared values in Southeast Asia. Secondly, ASEAN allowed for the evolution of strategically co-ordinated foreign and defence policies that clearly distinguished between friend and foe. This strategic convergence again fulfilled the criteria of existing shared norms. Thirdly, the absence of direct involvement in the Indochinese Wars allowed ASEAN member-states to co-ordinate socio-economic development and enhance regime legitimacy. Policy co-ordination in socio-economic matters and the observation of the legitimacy of incumbent governments, sometimes dubbed a policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member-states, also provides evidence in favour of constructivism. Fourthly, ASEAN allowed individual members to utilize a significantly larger regional platform to negotiate political issues and obtain economic concessions. This fourth observation, on the other hand, is central to realist interpretations of regional developments since ASEAN is quite simply viewed as a regional platform to further state interests. Finally, together with these advantages coupled with spectacular economic growth in the 1970s and the 1980s, member-states sought to expand their sphere of involvement in economic and political matters into the wider Asia Pacific arena in the 1990s. It is in distilling a cohesive set of values and attempting to influence broader developments where differing interpretations between scholars on the utility of realism and constructivism is embedded. The evolution of Southeast Asia as a region and ASEAN as a regional organization described thus far are essentially agreed upon historical developments. As to how these developments have been brought to bear for interpretive work is, however, another matter altogether.

4 Evaluating the factual evidence: realism and/or constructivism?

Both realist and constructivist interpretations of Southeast Asian security studies utilize the information presented thus far on regional political developments to substantiate their arguments. Not surprisingly, there is a wealth of evidence to support the assertions of both approaches. Apart from how and

what evidence has been utilized, there is actually a larger theoretical question. This question has to do with whether there is an analytical confusion between means and ends. To put it differently, is a sense of collective identity among states meant to empower them individually or does it connote an end in itself that in effect seeks to undermine the centrality of states? Framed in such a manner, it then becomes possible to distinguish between means and ends, with the latter being more important for purposes of judgement.

The realist interpretation is as much historically contingent as is the constructivist approach. The former, derived from an established tradition in international relations, was certainly the most popular construct in post-colonial Southeast Asia.[6] Regional developments and conflicts like the Indochina Wars were located within a broader structural bipolar context. Newly independent states that were anxious to safeguard their political independence found Western guarantees of their external security attractive. Such arrangements, however, embedded them well within a realist orientation of state-centric predispositions. Naturally, smaller states that regarded themselves more vulnerable than their larger counterparts subscribed more enthusiastically to realism given the philosophical premise of equality among sovereign states.

The constructivist interpretation, on the other hand, emphasizes an identity that is constructed and consciously articulated across states (e.g. Acharya, 1998, 2000). Drawing on a set of norms that are common among practising states and yet unique to the region, it is an argument against the centrality of states in policy output. Unlike realists, much of the constructivist evidence is drawn from the last two decades when the Cold War abated. Although there were previous attempts at the construction of such an identity, such as the Indonesian-inspired Afro-Asian Summit in 1953, the structural dictates and pulls of bipolarity made them untenable. Over and above the recent nature of the evidence, it is useful to note that culturally inspired articulations of exclusivity came on the back of decades of spectacular economic growth for the region that was interactive with such pronouncements. Additionally, quite apart from such articulations in international relations, the ensuing debates unleashed a value-laden debate on the utility of 'Western' values such as democracy, freedom and human rights for the developmental process in Asia. Some of the exuberance associated with this debate has, however, dissipated in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis that resulted in a good measure of introversion to attend to a

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6   Although Michael Leifer (1983, 1989, 1996, 2000) utilized a realist approach and wrote voluminously on Southeast Asian security studies, most of the American scholars during this period that examined Southeast Asian international relations, especially those examining the relationship between the major powers and Southeast Asia were of this genre as well (e.g. Colbert, 1977).

domestic agenda rather than attempts to recalibrate the wider regional environment. Asian states are now sensitized to the reality that their prosperity is at least partly contingent on broader structural stability in the external environment. They have also become sensitized to the reality that external actors can bring pressure to bear on domestic structures through different types of investments and divestments. Hence, the domestic security of states is actually a function of larger structural imperatives that point in the direction of realism.

The constructivist impulse among ASEAN member-states, especially in the articulations of its élites, is clearly evident. Celebrations of the 'ASEAN Way' and attempts to broaden this approach to include countries in the Asia-Pacific are also evident. Yet, this convergent identity was mediated by differences within ASEAN as well. So, for example, the Kuantan Initiative announced by Indonesia and Malaysia in 1980 threw the proverbial spanner into ASEAN efforts to resolve the Cambodian conflict, and Philippine and Thai initiatives to 'constructively engage' Myanmar in the 1990s are examples of such differences (Möller, 1997; Haacke, 1999). Therefore, the constructivist-styled consensual culture has traditionally been subjected to periodic bouts of state interests defined in realist terms. Most recently, in 2002, Malaysia's attempts to institutionalize the 'ASEAN + Three' concept with a headquarters in Kuala Lumpur during a summit meeting in Brunei also came to nothing. The constant spate of bilateral disputes between Myanmar and Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, and Malaysia and Singapore are also sobering reminders of state-centric élite perceptions and agendas (Ganesan, 1999). Consequently, realists should not have too much difficulty disproving the constructivist thesis. Hence, whereas constructivism is able to provide broad-based generalizations, it is often unable to explain away the specific motivations of individual states when the discourse appears less than unanimous. Accordingly, constructivism has a tendency to capture only broad-based trends rather than specific policies or outcomes.

The true test of whether constructivism or realism is more useful in understanding Southeast Asian international relations is actually in distinguishing a trajectory from an end product, as noted earlier. Notwithstanding the centrality of this question, it is arguable that the jury is still deliberating this outcome. After all, realists can argue that identities provide platforms for states to further their own interests just as constructivists can equally argue that collective identities transcend those of individual states. Nonetheless, it would appear that realism offers a better explanation during times of interstate turbulence while constructivism offers a better explanation during times of peace and prosperity. Additionally, constructivism, in emphasizing the importance of collective and shared values among states, offers a socio-

logical explanation for the transition from conflict and instability to peace and stability. Realists, on the other hand, have traditionally attributed such transition to structural changes in the international system. This differing empirical predisposition continues to be one of the major sources of tension between realist and constructivist interpretations of international relations. Accordingly, a useful way to distinguish between the utility of both schools is to come to an agreement that historical context and different methodologies are important intervening variables. Such a realization will allow analysts to establish at least a partially causal linkage between philosophical assumptions and their impact on interpretive literature. Additionally such an acknowledgement would allow both realists and constructivists to coexist with a measure of accommodation.

The present theoretical tension between the two schools is reminiscent of what Giovanni Sartori characterized as 'concept straining' and 'concept stretching' (Sartori, 1970). Realists are anxious to analyse the situation by straining it through state-centric lenses while constructivists are stretching the utility of identities beyond its relevance. As a result, both schools pit themselves against each other on the basis of fundamental disagreements. Nonetheless, it is arguable that both approaches are useful in relation to the intervening importance of historical context. Such an approach must, however, take into account the fact that dominant approaches often shape history itself, as was the case with realism after the Second World War. The dominant paradigm therefore obtains from and is nourished by its practitioners. Realists should not therefore discount the importance of ideas and identities in international relations as forces worthy of serious consideration while constructivists should not deny the utility of states and associated structures in explaining international relations.

5 Conclusion

An intellectual debate has arisen among scholars who study Southeast Asian security. This debate is characterized by mutually exclusive claims between realists and constructivists on the utility of their approaches to understanding Southeast Asian international relations. Whereas constructivism does pose a challenge to realist interpretations of Southeast Asian security, the two approaches have been wrongly presented as polar opposites. In effect, both approaches are useful in that identities are sometimes utilized to further state interests, while at other times they are utilized to project a larger regional identity. It is often difficult to decipher whether identity formation is a means to articulate state interests or an end onto itself. Additionally, both approaches have a utility that appears to be historically contingent. Realism is better placed to explain turbulence in Southeast Asian international relations,

while constructivism is better suited during times of peace and prosperity. Another major difference between the two approaches is the methodology that is employed to explain transitions in international relations. Whereas realists tend to highlight structural changes, constructivists prefer sociological explanations. Finally, rather than treating the two approaches as exclusive, scholarship on the region can benefit from a simultaneous utilization of both approaches while acknowledging their limitations. In fact, as Wendt himself has recently concluded, 'rationalism and constructivism are most fruitfully viewed as analytical tools' (Fearon and Wendt, 2001, p. 52). Consequently, to attach ontological attributes to analytical constructs is a misrepresentation of constructivism. In effect, the basic analytical distinction between rationalism and constructivism is that 'they view society from opposite vantage points – roughly speaking rationalism from the "bottom up" and constructivism from the "top-down"' (ibid., p. 53).

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