

***Whose Ideas Matter? Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism.***  
**By Amitav Acharya. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009. Hardcover: 189pp.**

People whose eyes glaze over at the mere thought of International Relations theory might be inclined to skip this book. They would be wrong. *Whose Ideas Matter?* is profoundly relevant to current policy issues, especially the future shape and content of Asian regional architecture.

Many Western policy-makers assume, consciously or not, that the process of globalization diffuses universal norms. These include the rule of law, majority voting, rules-based regional institutions, formal dispute settlement and enforcement procedures, and the right of the international community to insist on certain minimal standards of domestic behaviour. As Asian leaders try to build a closer community, so the reasoning goes, they should embrace these norms.

Asian regionalism, however, still stubbornly rejects formal and binding institutions, opting instead for consensus-based decision-making, avoidance of conflict, informal organization and non-interference in domestic affairs. Often called the “ASEAN Way”, this behaviour transcends Southeast Asia and influences the conduct of international affairs in the entire region. Most notably, in a part of the world still rife with security challenges, there is still no formal regional security institution. Some observers, Western and Asian alike, therefore dismiss the whole process of Asian community-building as nothing but a “talk shop”.

So what is taking Asians so long? This is the wrong question, asserts Amitav Acharya in this closely reasoned and historically well-researched book. He argues that scholars and policy-makers should shed their Euro-centric and US-dominated biases, not because they are politically incorrect but because they are historically inaccurate and analytically unsound.

Acharya’s overarching goal is to round out and expand what International Relations theory has to say about the diffusion of norms. He wants to shift the focus of the literature on norm diffusion “from the question of whether ideas matter, to which and whose ideas matter” (p. 168). Hence the title of the book. Drawing on extensive primary research dating back to the late 1940s, he argues that norm diffusion is a two-way and continuously interactive process.

To back up his contribution to theory with solid historical evidence, Acharya tackles two related puzzles. The first, framed in the

title of a 2002 article by Christopher Hemmer and Peter Katzenstein, is, “Why is there no NATO in Asia?” (*International Organization* 56, no. 3). Rejecting the Hemmer-Katzenstein conclusion that Americans saw Asians as “alien” and “inferior”, he broadens this question to ask why Asia did not develop a regional institution of any kind, not just a security institution (p. 75). The second puzzle, closely related to the first, is why Asian regionalism remains “underinstitutionalized and non-legalized” (p. 75).

Much of the book traces Asia’s post-1947 rejection of collective defence and elevation of non-intervention. Citing primary documents, Acharya demonstrates that “non-intervention was not a key demand of Asian leaders in the immediate postwar period” and was not included in the Asian Regional Conferences (ARCs) convened by Nehru (p. 34). Indeed, the principles infusing the ARCs included issues *within* the domestic jurisdiction of states, such as a ban on racial discrimination (p. 35). Not until the Bandung Conference of 1955 were the two core norms of sovereignty — non-intervention and sovereign equality — legitimized and expanded.

Acharya notes that some of the ingredients of the “ASEAN Way” came from the West. The Westphalian system established non-interference and the formal equality of nations as guiding norms. As for the avoidance of conflict, Nehru noted that Commonwealth meetings never discussed disputes between members, a practice that was carried over into the Bandung Conference (pp. 79–80) and continues today in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Commonwealth meetings also had flexible rules and consensus-based decision-making, not majority voting. Small wonder that ASEAN, the ARF and APEC function in the same way.

Acharya’s conclusions — that non-intervention had to be “actively constructed” (p. 36) and that much of the “ASEAN Way” both crystallized and expanded ideas and practices derived from the West — are profound. They torpedo the myth of a supposedly unchanging “Asian culture” as an explanation of international behaviour. They reveal that Asians both receive and initiate norms and ideas. And they highlight the possibility of normative change as a function of leadership.

*Whose Ideas Matter?* is blessedly short and surprisingly easy to read. The author’s prose is crisp and concise. There are a number of simple charts summarizing his arguments and his findings, along with photographs of several key documents. The bibliography is limited to primary sources, but the footnotes — helpfully located at the bottom of each page — contain a running summary and commentary on

a wide array of secondary sources. There is an appendix defining and discussing several key terms, such as “collective defence” and “common and cooperative security”.

Like many other experts on regional security and governance, the author pays little attention to economic issues. For Asian leaders, however, economic well-being contributes directly to stability, legitimacy and sovereignty — and hence to security. Acharya notes that Asian leaders rejected European-style economic integration in favour of “developmental regionalism” (p. 71), but he does not pursue the normative aspects of that choice.

Given the book’s relevance to a wider world (including Africa and Latin America, to which the book devotes eight pages), one wishes that the author had avoided phrases that smack of social science jargon. His central theme, “constitutive localization”, is a mouthful. He defines “the cognitive prior” as “an existing set of ideas, belief systems, and norms” (p. 21) and later as “existing beliefs and conduct” (p. 145). Why embroider on plain English? Fortunately, these and other terms that pepper International Relations theory, such as “agency” and “path dependency”, appear only rarely and do not drain energy from the book’s muscular logic.

Critics may scoff, but ASEAN has embodied and developed a normative order that now extends to the whole of Asia. Acharya’s findings remind us to set aside airless debates about “ideas” versus “power” as if the two were mutually incompatible. Asian regionalism derives its essence from ideas *about* power as well as from the domestic and international environment. *Whose Ideas Matter?* fills a gap not only in International Relations theory but also in our perceptions of Asian efforts to build a stable and prosperous community.

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