

**[Re]Negotiating East and Southeast Asia: Region, Regionalism and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. By Alice D. Ba. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009. Hardcover: 325pp.**

One of the rare points on which scholars of different theoretical persuasion seem to agree upon is that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has much to do with *talk*. Clefs open right away though, with some viewing the apparatus of ASEAN's chatter as somewhat meaningless if not, in more extreme assessments, simply pathological, while others take pains to show how it matters and indeed shapes social reality. Alice D. Ba's contribution to the study of ASEAN positions itself explicitly in the latter, and in doing so, identifies itself as a constructivist exploration into the rationales that undergird the founding and continued salience of ASEAN in the *talk* of Southeast Asian and East Asian security.

Ba's study is animated by two simple puzzles: how could a process of supposedly "weak cooperation" have contributed to the stabilization of relations between states in a region that had previously experienced armed conflict? And second, how could an organization of small powers in Southeast Asia create and frame the terms of much larger East Asian organizations involving the Great Powers? Theoretical approaches wedded to a materialist ontology are, in her view, unable to offer adequate answers to these questions. Indeed, their theoretical commitments blind them to the possibility of alternative answers. By foregrounding the role of "ideas" and a conception of cooperation that takes into account not only the negotiation of material interests but also social relations, practices and identities, Ba argues that a *process* of "dialoguing, arguing, framing, affirming, [and] negating" (p. 5) have produced norms of regional interaction, a culture of dialoguing and a range of cultural and institutional practices which constitute the organization itself. It is in this sense that talking has had causal effects, and hence, explains why ASEAN matters.

Divided into seven chapters, the narrative proceeds chronologically. Ba begins by setting up the theoretical positions pursued in the book by critiquing the utilitarian conceptions of cooperation in extant theories and by emphasizing the need to view regionalism not in terms of binding outcomes but as a "cumulative social process" (p. 19). She also locates the work within constructivist scholarship, specifically with regard to the value it adds to current formulations. Rather than focus on testing the strength or weakness of a norm at

a given moment her object is to highlight the “incremental process of socialization” which pays attention to the “content of norms and practices over time” (p. 23).

Chapter Two explores the constellation of domestic and international developments that made the regional idea a viable one: the ouster of Soekarno in 1966 by Suharto which moved Indonesia away from revolutionary politics in the region; the election of Ferdinand Marcos in 1965 which led to improved relations with Malaysia; and US intervention in Vietnam in 1964–65 which highlighted the link between domestic vulnerability and the threat of intervention besides heightening anxieties over the dependability of external powers in securing the region. Arguing that these historical and “structural” conditions provide a necessary but not sufficient explanation, Ba draws in, and underlines, the role of a set of agents, specifically regional elites who framed, incentivized and sold the idea of a regional organization as a basis for pursuing national security. These actors — notably Thanat Khoman of Thailand, Adam Malik of Indonesia and S. Rajaratnam of Singapore — were instrumental in nesting the regional idea within nationalist sensitivities, and were successful in tying domestic resilience to a need for regional resilience.

Ba is quite effective in highlighting the discourses and conceptual strategies by which regionalism was made “relevant to the priorities of nationalist construction, consolidation, and autonomy” (p. 67). Importantly, and in an idea similar to Amitav Acharya’s formulation of a “cognitive prior”, what emerges from this formative debating and discussing is an “agreed upon grammar” (p. 67) that would serve as an interpretive lens through which future leaders of ASEAN would continually refer to in addressing the appropriateness of their actions. Ba also highlights a subtle tension within the very act of ASEAN’s early attempt at regional cooperation, one which agents were well aware of: the impulse towards regional cooperation which went hand in hand with the dangers of over ambition and overstretch.

Ensuring that the scaffold of region building would not give away as unity was being cautiously constructed is further explored in Chapter Three, where Ba demonstrates how this tension informed the consensual and informal style of regional interaction, as well as the realistic goals and ambitions — as opposed to possibly divisive grand schemes — which elites set for ASEAN in its initial years. This is gleaned from three key debates from 1967 to 1978 which clarified ASEAN’s position with regard to three issues: how ASEAN states could seek security from extra-regional actors (which resulted in the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality); their stance towards

other Southeast Asian states especially Vietnam; and on how ASEAN states should relate to each other — a debate that led to a call for intra-trade liberalization via preferential trade agreements.

The remaining four chapters follow the ASEAN story into the post-Cold War period, and again, the terrain of debate remains the key focus in explicating changes within ASEAN as well as the expansion of its “process” beyond the region. Chapter Four is devoted to understanding the dynamics at the heart of ASEAN’s expansion within Southeast Asia, a process that was framed in the language of realizing the goal of “One Southeast”. Ba highlights how the coherence of the regional idea was tested by a range of divisions along varied axes: Muslim and non-Muslim members, rich and poor, mainland and insular, and liberal versus illiberal states. Ba notes how the regional idea seemed to be the principal source of unity as states negotiated their differences, with the ideas of resilience continuing to provide the “ideological prism, rhetorical frames and paths to action” (p. 102). The role of these interpretive frames continue into the remaining three chapters, which, to put it briefly, explore how regional ideas informed ASEAN’s move towards a more ambitious agenda of economic cooperation with an ASEAN Free Trade Area as well as its interaction with rival proposals for broader Asian projects in economic regionalism represented by the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation process and the East Asian Economic Caucus (Chapter Five), influenced its first attempt at security cooperation at a broad Asia-Pacific level which resulted in the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (Chapter Six), and has been an important conceptual and rhetorical base from which ASEAN sought to tackle the effects of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis on its own legitimacy and on how Southeast Asia should relate to global economic powers such as the United States. The core themes of Ba’s study are then brought together in a succinct conclusion.

There are two main reasons for highly recommending this study. First, the arguments advanced here are built on painstaking empirical work based on archival and interview-based study. Second, Ba’s book is by far the most incisive study of the unstated rationales that inform ASEAN’s founding and continued role in East Asian security. By way of criticism, one could point out that Ba’s study is methodologically underspecified. Debates and discourse take the centre stage in this study, but there is no discussion of the epistemological commitments that follow from doing so. While discourse analysis as a method is implicit, it is unclear what *kind* of discourse analysis is deployed, that is, one that takes language to be merely representational or

indeed generative. One finds both instances at work here, even though they involve distinct ontological positions. Further, while Ba engages extensively with extant International Relations theories, one wishes she could have also engaged with, and clarified her position with regard to, some of the classic antinomies of social theory, specifically, on agency and structure, and on the material and ideational aspects of social reality. Ba makes claims on both, for instance, when she refers to the “structural” context (p. 67) for the foundation of ASEAN coupled with the agency of regional elites, and the recurrent point on “interacting material-ideational forces” (p. 27). What remains unclear, however, is *how* agents and structure relate to each other, and *why* ideas are ontologically prior as she states them to be.

These points notwithstanding, Alice Ba’s study of ASEAN is an impressive accomplishment. With its comprehensive scope, sophisticated arguments, and lucid narrative, this book is essential reading for beginners and scholars alike.

---

DEEPAK NAIR is Associate Editor of *Contemporary Southeast Asia* and a Ph.D. student in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK.