

## Book Reviews

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***The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia.* By Amitav Acharya.** Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000. 169pp.

Before I read this book, I did not think that yet another book about ASEAN and efforts at regional co-operation could offer much that was very new or interesting. However, Amitav Acharya's concise book *is* interesting, because of the breadth of the analysis and the fact that it goes beyond a strict international relations paradigm. The study ranges over an assortment of perspectives, from anthropology and sociology, geography, history, to political science, political economy, and international relations. It also ventures beyond, but wisely does not completely reject, the now unfashionable realist school, while attempting a "bottom-up approach" (p. 13) centring on the efforts to construct a regional "identity". One effect of such a wide-ranging and thematically ambitious approach is that the book reads a bit like a collection of short stories, albeit with a central theme. The chapters are all connected through the concept of regionalism, yet they are somewhat discrete.

Acharya writes that a specific aim of his book is to investigate the impact of regionalism on the idea of regional identity (p. 2). More concretely, the Preface explains that the book seeks to show how ASEAN came to represent all ten countries of Southeast Asia, beginning with a consideration of the pre-colonial past (p. v). The author believes that there has been a shift from the Cold War geopolitical view of the region to a "regionalist conception of Southeast Asia as a region-for-itself, constructed by the collective political imagination of, and

political interactions among, its own inhabitants” (p. 3). This is appealing, because it views Southeast Asia as something more than a region always being “acted upon” by the great civilizations or the major powers. The author writes that while the various approaches to looking at regions are not mutually exclusive, in “exploring the regional concept of Southeast Asia, the book argues that regions are socially constructed, rather than geographically or ethnosocially pre-ordained” (p. 11). This reviewer concurs with the argument, to a point (traditions can be invented), but still believes that if geography is not destiny, it comes awfully close to being so.

Chapters 1 and 2 investigate the threads of regional identity from the scholarship on the pre-colonial era to the legacies of colonialism and the Cold War. In Chapter 1, Acharya investigates and analyses the “features of the pre-colonial pattern of inter-state relations” (the author qualifies the otherwise problematic use of the term “state”). Acharya makes quite a convincing case that relations between various “states” *did* exist — in terms of trade, diplomacy, and some cross-fertilization of ideas and practices, and that these have some bearing on the quest for a regional identity today. This is an important point, because while tradition can be invented, it cannot be invented out of nothing.

Colonialism subsequently had a destructive impact on regionalism, since the various colonial powers established fixed boundaries and did not engage with one another regionally. In the end, however, colonialism gave rise to nationalism and independence and some shared aspirations among emerging élites concerning economic and political modernization.

Chapter 3 more conventionally analyses the history and evolution of regional organizations, primarily ASEAN and its predecessors. Chapter 4 covers regional politics from Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in 1979 to the 1990s. The author writes that while Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia enhanced ASEAN’s unity, sense of purpose, and international reputation, in the end the Cambodia problem was resolved by the major powers. Acharya makes an astute observation that the move in the 1990s to seek closer relations with Indochina was inspired, in addition to the long-standing dream of regional unity, by the wish “to regain some initiative on issues of regional order in the post-Cambodia context” (p. 122).

Chapter 5 analyses the challenges and problems facing the ASEAN-10, regionalism, and a regional identity, while Chapter 6 briefly recapitulates the various regional themes in order to tie the chapters together. The challenges to ASEAN and regional co-operation at the end of the millennium are formidable, as the author notes. Unfortunately,

this section is quite short, which is a disappointment because Acharya is a highly reputable expert on this topic whose observations have much to offer.

Overall, this is a thought-provoking book, loaded with valuable observations and insights. It also provides a needed corrective to orientalist perspectives and to the sometimes tunnel vision of international relations scholars. It is highly recommended, and should be added to the reading lists of every Southeast Asia international relations course.

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***Environment and Development in the Straits of Malacca.* By Mark Cleary and Goh Kim Chuan.** London: Routledge, 2000. 214pp.

This study of the Straits of Malacca and the countries or parts of countries that abut on it invokes Fernard Braudel's Mediterranean: it "has no unity, but that created by the movements of men, the relationships they imply and the routes they follow ... an immense network of regular and causal connections, the life-giving bloodstream of the region" (p. 2). "It is this notion of unity through movement and causal flows of goods, ideas and peoples", the authors tell us, "that underlies our own conception of the Straits" (p. 2).

There is indeed a contrast not only in size. The Straits have been, at least since the fifth century, a major route for international traffic, initially involving India and China, then from the sixteenth century the Europeans, and in the twentieth, the Japanese. The point is well recognized by the authors. They give us a useful account of the challenges that internationalization currently presents, particularly because the Straits are a major route for the tankers that supply Japan with oil: "there is a dilemma between keeping the Straits open as a sea-lane of enormous economic importance and maintaining their ecology as to be a source of fishery resources and healthy marine life" (p. 173).

The Straits contrast, too, in the nature of the political divisions among the littoral countries. Those are much more recent than in the case of the Mediterranean, yet very real. For most of their history, the Straits formed a link among the principalities of the region, one or more of which asserted dominance over the others. It was only with the treaty