

***ASEAN Regionalism: Cooperation, Values, and Institutionalization.* By Christopher B. Roberts. Routledge, London, 2012. Hardcover: 257pp.**

How do you organize a regional grouping in the most diverse region of the world? This question has bedeviled Southeast Asian leaders since the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967.

It has often been said that regionalism requires shared values to facilitate cooperation and to reduce the misunderstandings that frequently arise from cultural and political differences. Unlike Europe, which shares a common Christian foundation of sorts, Southeast Asia has had no similar sense of common bonding. It was understood not as a region but a crossroads for Indian, Chinese, Muslim and Western civilizations. The idea of Southeast Asia as a region is of recent origin and its general acceptance was a product of regionalism, ASEAN and its predecessor, the Association of Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, despite the lack of cultural and political commonalities, ASEAN not only managed to survive but to expand, both in terms of membership and function, to the point where it became a model for similar enterprises in other regions. ASEAN has succeeded because of the common bonds that were created between the political elites of member states, and in particular their foreign ministries. Leaders would work together in the “ASEAN way” according to which decisions were made by consensus avoiding any interference in each other’s domestic affairs. They played golf to get to know each other and sang karaoke in carefully managed events to promote personal ties. They demonstrated that regionalism in Southeast Asia could work in a culturally dissimilar context, unlike Europe.

Constructivists would claim that norms of cooperation were established between the political elites, strengthening regional cooperation and overcoming the barriers created by political and cultural diversity. Constructivists understand ASEAN as a grand norm building project in which declarations are made by the leaders which stimulate cooperative behaviour and promote the region’s steady integration. Realists, however, cringe at what they regard as ASEAN rhetoric and critically examine the empirical record to assess its success or otherwise. Christopher Roberts’ detailed study of ASEAN is the latest in a long line of works on the topic that include Arnfinn Jorgensen-Dahl (1982), Michael Leifer (1989) and Shaun Narine (2002).

In the first part of the book Roberts strongly reflects the exuberance of the Constructivists and their buoyant enthusiasm for the ASEAN norm building project. In the second part Roberts takes on the role of a Realist as he identifies the great gap between declaration and performance. Roberts utilizes two related concepts to trace ASEAN's recent development and to assess its performance. One is Karl Deutsch's idea of a "security community" which emerges as a major theme in his work. The notion was adopted by Indonesia's Foreign Ministry when it proposed an ASEAN "security community" and was incorporated in the Bali Concorde II Declaration of 2003. This declaration set the goal of an "ASEAN community" which would be composed of economic, socio-cultural and security communities. The deadline was 2020, but later it was brought forward to 2015 in the hope that a shortened time-frame would stimulate greater efforts. According to Roberts, a security community is created when political, economic and security cooperation reaches a very high level where there are "dependable expectations of peaceful change" (p. 32). The second concept is "complex integration" which is understood as a high level of political, economic and cultural integration. The two concepts are interchangeable as one can be understood in terms of the other; complex integration is achieved when a security community is created.

After this Constructivist/Liberal Institutional beginning, Roberts examines ASEAN's performance utilizing the results of extensive fieldwork — he conducted 150 interviews and two surveys with 919 respondents. When Roberts tests ASEAN in this way he finds it "high in ambition and low in performance" (p. 101). One major problem with ASEAN, as explained in chapter five, is the authoritarian-democratic divide in ASEAN which widened with the democratization of Indonesia after 1998. Democracies such as Indonesia and the Philippines lined up against authoritarian members, such as Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in pressing for participatory regionalism, and the involvement of civil society in the drafting of the ASEAN Charter. The ASEAN Charter was accepted at the 13th ASEAN Summit in 2007 and its intention was to strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and promote the rule of law and human rights. As long as this divide exists, ASEAN cannot go too far in this proposed direction, and this exposes its declarations as well-meaning but toothless.

Chapter six focuses on Myanmar and highlights ASEAN's frustration in dealing with a member that repeatedly ignored it

over its human rights record. The Myanmar political elite, Roberts explains, does not identify with ASEAN and used the organization for its own purposes. Was Myanmar's membership a mistake? Perhaps it could have been delayed so that the Myanmar ruling military would have taken ASEAN more seriously. Robert's surveys of elite opinion in chapter seven uncovers a surprising level of distrust between ASEAN members and weak collective identification with the organization. He concludes, somewhat ruefully, that ASEAN is not a security community "in any form" and has revealed only "medium to low levels of complex integration" (p. 184). However, Roberts finds that significant progress has been made in terms of economic integration which is the most promising area of cooperation for ASEAN. The book highlights the yawning disparity between the impressive declarations that ASEAN leaders have endorsed and its actual achievements. He finds that the much vaunted "ASEAN way" has been a hindrance to the further development of ASEAN, as consensus and non-interference tie the organization to what the least developed and most authoritarian members will accept.

Difficult questions arise from the book: what will happen to ASEAN when the deadline for the ASEAN security community passes in 2015 without appreciable progress? Would ASEAN resort to further declarations with new deadlines or will it, as Roberts hopes, finally get around to asking for binding commitments from its members to render the organization more effective? ASEAN, indeed, will face a crossroads. Greater compliance will be required from its members or it will face the prospect of irrelevance. As well as highlighting these dilemmas the book is also a mine of useful information on ASEAN which should keep it on reading lists on the topic for many years to come. Errors do creep into the most carefully edited texts and on page 183 it is not the "lack of distrust" which is the problem in ASEAN but the lack of trust.

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