

Will the Real ASEAN Please Stand Up?
Security, Community, and Democracy in Southeast Asia

by

Donald K. Emmerson

Southeast Asia Forum
Stanford University
Encina Hall E-301
616 Serra Street
Stanford CA
94305-6055
USA

tel 650-724-6403

fax 650 723 6530

email <emmerson@stanford.edu>

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In 2007 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will be forty years old. Yet the most basic questions about it remain controversial. What exactly is it? An organization? A discourse? An arrangement? A regime? A concert? A community? None, one, some, or all of the above? Has it succeeded? Or has it failed? Both? To what extent? How? Why? And through what paradigm should a scholar approach such questions? Constructivism? Liberalism? Rationalism? Culturalism? Realism? (See Emmerson 2005.) Realist institutionalism? (Khoo 2004.) Constructive or soft realism? (Peou 2005, 2002.) None, one, some, or all of the above? Who knows?

Arguing ASEAN: Two Views

Philippine political scientist Estrella Solidum was a graduate student when ASEAN began. She saw it “as the wave of the future in Southeast Asia” (Solidum 2003: vi). She was not disappointed. She watched it grow into a “community” based on cooperation (p. vii). She came to admire the Association’s “beliefs, practices, structures, responses, and values”—in a phrase, “the ASEAN Way”—as the veritable “prototype of an ASEAN culture” (p. 93).

Looking back on the Association in 2003, Solidum saw nothing but success:

With the highest commitment to its goals of peace, freedom, stability, prosperity, rule of law, and security, unwavering observance of all the principles which it had adopted from its establishment, and constantly mindful of the need for newer and appropriate strategies and building blocks, to achieve the aspirations of the people, ASEAN has remained vibrant and relevant as the 21st century has begun. ASEAN has been able to respond and adapt to the changing conditions at the regional and international levels in coherent ways. ASEAN has engaged more friends and partners in all its cooperative endeavours, and within itself, the members have remained cohesive. The ideal of ASEAN toward which it is moving in the 21st century is summed up in its ASEAN Vision 2020 which is “a concert of Southeast Asian nations, outward-looking, living in peace, stability, and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in development, and in a community of caring societies” [222].

Security in Southeast Asia was not merely an ASEAN achievement in Solidum’s eyes. It was an ASEAN product. Security was “the enjoyment of the ASEAN values of peace, economic, social and cultural development, cooperation, political stability, and regional stability and progress” (p. 202). By way of evidence for this definition, she cited

- (a) ASEAN entities and gatherings, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Senior Officials Meetings, the ASEAN Secretariat, and the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies whose “Track Two” diplomacy brought officials in their personal capacity together with non-governmental experts to discuss regional problems;
- (b) ASEAN documents, such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (1976) and the Hanoi Plan of Action (1998); and
- (c) ASEAN concepts such as “the ASEAN Way” whose norms and rules were “mutual-restraint and low-key behavior” and the “non-use of force, non-interference in each other’s domestic affairs, and mutual respect” (pp. 203-204).

David Martin Jones, a professor of government in Australia formerly resident in Singapore, expressed a different view:

ASEAN is neither a security nor an economic community, either in being or in prospect. It is, in fact, an imitation community [comparable to a fake state whose insecure and illegitimate leaders, ensconced through bogus elections or military coups, wield unrestrained power over those whom they rule]. Such insecurity translated to a regional level produces a rhetorical and institutional shell. The shell delivers declarations, holds ministerial meetings, and even supports a secretariat, but beyond the

flatulent musings of aging autocrats or postmodern constructivists pontificating in Track Two fora nothing of substance eventuates. However, because Southeast Asia's political elites along with their academic fellow travelers have invested so heavily in ASEAN's "alternative security" discourse, it is regarded as impolite to point out [the Association's] essentially ersatz quality [Jones and Smith 2001: 285].

In the same year that Solidum's encomium to ASEAN appeared, Jones wrote that the Association "increasingly resembles other failed postcolonial Cold War organizations like the Non Aligned Movement, the Organisation of African Unity and the Arab League" (Jones 2003: 43). Far from accepting her portrait of a vibrant, relevant, adaptable, coherent, cohesive—in a word, successful—community, for Jones it was time "to cope with the fallout from the slow motion disintegration of ASEAN" (p. 44), as if that degeneration were already well underway. Southeast Asia itself, as a region, had been and remained a mirage—"a 'region' that never was" (Jones and Smith 2002: 108-109).

Solidum did not describe Southeast Asia as a region that always was. But in her account (2003: 1), "the concept of 'Southeast Asia' begins with a patchwork of continuous settlements where inhabitants lived from about 2000 B.C." She cited the practice of reckoning descent equally through males and females as a general and long-standing feature of the area (p. 2). She defined "region" in generously constructivist terms as "an analytic concept created by the selection of features relevant to the interest of the student or to the problem at hand" (p. 11). From her own selection of bilateral kinship as a distinguishing feature of ancient Southeast Asia, one could, therefore, infer the discernible existence of a "region" millennia before modern states arose.

It would be hard to imagine two more opposite assessments. ASEAN's skeptics may find Solidum's enthusiasm naïve. The Association's fans may wince at Jones' remarks. But the polarity of these assessments highlights vital issues. So, less starkly, does the chain of thought that runs dialectically from Acharya 2001 through Khoo 2004 and on to Peou ([2005]) and Ba ([2005]) in this issue of *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*. In this respect, Solidum and Jones, like Acharya through Ba, have done the field of ASEAN studies a favor.

I will not enumerate and analyze the many ways in which these scholars disagree. I will not try to complete the sequence from Solidum's thesis to Jones' antithesis by offering a synthesis. I lack the space, time, and knowledge, not to mention the talent, to answer to my own satisfaction, let alone an expert reader's, all the questions posed in my opening paragraph. Instead, with apologies to that reader, I will make a methodological suggestion:

The tasks of defining, explaining, and assessing ASEAN are necessarily related. But that is all the more reason to keep them analytically distinct. Is the Association a "security community"? Or is it an "imitation community"? The best response to such loaded questions is to unpack their assumptions; come up with a "thin" description of ASEAN

usable by disagreeing scholars because it does not privilege any one explanation or assessment; select and specify variables; cast them in operational form; rephrase a preferred explanation as a falsifiable causal proposition; carefully subject the proposition to empirical evidence; compare it with alternative hypotheses similarly subjected to evidence; and thus reach an assessment that neither inspires nor skews the process from which it results. It is in this context that I will compare “thick” and “thin” versions of ASEAN as a security community and try to decide between them.

My suggestion is not a counsel of scientism, positivism, or perfection. The study of knowledge and knowing—epistemology—is at least as controversial as the study of ASEAN. There is no catechism from Methodology 101 whose incantation will settle all scholarly disputes. Such is the nature of *social science*. Analytically, ASEAN is a moving target. And because we can never be absolutely or permanently sure of our nontrivial generalizations about it, dissensus is not just helpful; it is essential. Polemics are useful; they make us think big. Pedantics are too; they make us think small. But there is also room for thinking in the middle range, where creativity and consistency mix, for better or for worse. Managing that mix for the better is my concern here.

Five Dominos in a Row

For Amitav Acharya, in the path-breaking book (2001) that triggered the sequence of comments by Khoo (2004), Peou ([2005]), and Ba ([2005]), the notion of a security community (or SC) has four layers. It is a *particular description*. The description implies a *propositional concept*. The concept implies an *analytic framework*. And the framework, in turn, connotes a *general theory* of international relations. In these respects, for Acharya, the idea of an SC does quadruple duty.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with such richness. Acharya’s book argues the utility of the idea of a security community for understanding and evaluating the Association. Implicit in this project is the confirmation, or at least the illustration, of the description-definition-concept-framework-theory of security communities by the Southeast Asian case. In the voluminous but traditionally atheoretical field of ASEAN studies, Acharya’s agenda is refreshingly ambitious.

Nor does his agenda encompass all the layers of meaning implied by the notion of an SC. There is another and even more ambitious way of entertaining the notion of a “security community,” namely, as a *normative project*. Acharya was wise not to explore this fifth sense of the term; the first four kept him busy enough. But if SCs really are uniquely good at making and keeping international peace, it follows that we ought to have more of them around—and therefore that policy priority should be given to their sustenance and replication around the world.

The latest book on SCs known to me, for example, concludes by looking beyond empirical-academic discourse to recommend, with reference to Karl Deutsch (who first popularized the concept), that “Deutsch’s vision should be brought squarely back into the mainstream of practical and normative thinking about world politics” (Bellamy 2004:

188). Charles Tilly (1998) ended an earlier essay on the subject by invoking policy even more explicitly. After arguing for the existence of thriving and internally irenic SCs in pre-modern times, he concluded: “Just as deliberate human action brought most earlier international communities into operation, we can even imagine designing international security communities that incorporate age-old assurances of trust, reciprocity, and mutual identity” (Tilly 1998: 411).

Now consider the very different questions for ASEAN that these five distinct levels of meaning hierarchically imply:

- 1) a particular description: Does ASEAN fit the basic definition of a security community?
- 2) a propositional concept: If ASEAN is a security community by definition, is it also an SC in an explanatory sense?
- 3) an analytic framework: If ASEAN is a security community by definition and explanation, does it also authenticate the empirical and logical autonomy of an SC as one among other distinctive kinds of security arrangements?
- 4) a general theory: If ASEAN is a security community in all of the above three senses, does it also validate, at least for Southeast Asia, a more or less constructivist approach to international security, if not international relations more broadly, that is superior to the neo-realist and neo-liberal alternatives?
- 5) a normative project: If the general theory is valid, for ASEAN and a range of other security communities, does it follow that the creating and sustaining security communities should be a policy goal of governments, international organizations, social movements, and other relevant bodies throughout the world, coming together to ensure global peace?

In his own book Acharya (2001: 16) summarized the basic definition of a security community developed four decades earlier by Karl Deutsch:

A security community, as Deutsch [1961: 98] defined it, is a group that has “become integrated,” where integration is defined as the attainment of a sense of community, accompanied by formal or informal institutions or practices, sufficiently strong and widespread to assure peaceful change among members of a group with “reasonable” certainty over a “long period of time.” Such communities could either be “amalgamated” through the formal political merger of the participating units, or remain “pluralistic,” in which case the members retain their independence and sovereignty.

Adler and Barnett (1998a: 3) further condensed this definition: “Deutsch observed a pluralistic security community whenever states become integrated to the point that they

have a sense of community, which, in turn, creates the assurance that they will settle their differences short of war.”

This is not what Clifford Geertz (1973) would call a “thin description.” On the contrary, it illustrates or connotes all five of the semantic layers cited above. A security community in these summary terms is a particular description in that to qualify for that title the entity in question—here, ASEAN or Southeast Asia—must have attained a sense of community. It is a propositional concept in that confirming its existence requires evidence that this sense of community has been causally responsible for the maintenance of peace among group members with reasonable certainty for a long time. The concept offers an analytic framework insofar as various entities can fruitfully be compared by these criteria. The framework suggests a general theory to the extent that such comparisons affirm the superiority of constructivist explanations of regional peace over other approaches. And the theory implies a normative project if the constructivist account can be made sufficiently prescriptive, feasible, and persuasive to key actors to inform a new global agenda for peace.

The most systematic and empirical way of approaching the idea of an SC in such manifold contexts would be to translate each of these possibilities into an investigative task, starting at the definitional level and proceeding onward depending on the results. If ASEAN does not fit the definition, there is no point in proceeding to the concept; if the concept cannot be confirmed, testing the analytic framework is premature; and so on through the normative project to establish and sustain security communities around the world using ASEAN as an inspiration if not a model. For purposes of research and policy, a security community is a domino chain.

Sensing Community

With reference to the first domino in the chain: Has ASEAN attained a sense of community or not? In the large and still burgeoning library of ASEAN studies, this remains a consequentially neglected question. The neglect is consequential because unless this question can be answered positively, based neither on assumption or assertion but on independently verifiable empirical evidence, ASEAN cannot *objectively* be considered a security community at all. (The italics connote an epistemologically controversial shortcut to be considered below.)

The idea of a “sense of community” is slippery. Devising a plausible but usable definition of a “sense of community” will take careful thought. But it should not prove an impossible task. And various methods already exist whereby one might empirically discover the absence or presence, and the extent, of such a “sense” operationally defined. These methods include transaction mapping, survey research, and content analysis.

Karl Deutsch was one of my professors in graduate school. I was one of his teaching assistants and knew him well. Mapping the directions and relative densities of traffic in goods, people, and information within and across borders over time—trade, travel, flows of mail, and so on—was crucial to his research on security communities. Acharya, Adler,

and Barnett are well aware of the transactional focus of Deutsch's approach, but in their efforts to revive his perspective this aspect has been set aside.

Acharya makes four critiques of "transactionalism." First, he writes, even if two-way flows show interdependence, such a finding need not imply peace (p. 33). This is true, but is interdependence unrelated either to a sense of community or to a stable regional peace? Or is it a necessary but insufficient condition of these phenomena? Elsewhere (p. 21) Acharya defines an SC to include "significant functional cooperation and integration." But even if that indicates something other than interdependence, would the volume of transborder transactions not be one useful measure of it?

Second, for Acharya, because regional interdependence in the West is more advanced than in the non-West, including Southeast Asia, using that criterion to define SCs underestimates the chance that ASEAN may be one after all (33). And because Western countries that might be members of SCs are wealthier and more democratic on average than their developing-country counterparts, and because prosperous democracies are more capable and tolerant of transborder communications, measuring transactions among more authoritarian or less prosperous states, including those in ASEAN, would again tilt the analytic playing field against declaring ASEAN a security community (34).

Here an accurate premise yields a questionable inference. That a given case—ASEAN—scores low on a measure should not preclude the measure's use. It is precisely the dispersion of cases up and down a scale that suits it to the purpose of comparison. Regionalism without interdependence or high-volume transactions among its members is an intriguing idea, but it would have to be justified empirically before it could be used as a universal standard of SC-ness. If there is no universal standard, if each case requires its own yardstick, then the concept itself cannot be used comparatively, and there would be no point in attempting steps 3 through 5 above. No framework, no theory, no project. As instances of a general phenomenon, SCs would cease to exist.

Acharya's third point against using transactions is that merely counting them ignores their content and thus cannot reveal the presence or absence of a sense of community (n. 21 on pp. 41-42). Fair enough, but like his first argument, this one does not distinguish between the necessity and the sufficiency of cross-border communications as a hypothetically facilitating condition.

The neglect of transactions in ASEAN security studies has had several unfortunate effects. By privileging qualitative over quantitative methods, it has encouraged face-value description and interpretive narration over systematically empirical comparison. The importance constructivists place on the wishful invention and projection of identity already makes them vulnerable to the suspicion that the "imagined community" they portray is what they would like it to be. Transaction flows are helpful in this context because they would exist even if there were no scholars interested in studying them.

Constructivist scholars are interested in studying norms. Unlike counted transactions, quoted norms have content. But this shift in attention incurs a serious cost. It privileges elite declarations over mass behavior. This is much less of a problem for Acharya (2001), who devotes far more of his book to ASEAN's history than to its documents, than it is for Solidum (2003), whose showcasing of these texts, credence in their efficacy, and reliance on official sources verges on arguing that ASEAN is whatever its leaders say it is.

According to the another ASEAN scholar, Michael Haas, as quoted on the back cover of her book, Prof. Solidum,

who has been called “Ms. ASEAN,” has at long last produced the definitive work on ASEAN. While nearly all other scholars rely on secondary sources and make countless misstatements about the organization, . . . Solidum consults primary sources and interviews government officials to offer the most authoritative treatment ever penned on ASEAN as a political organization that has brought about a united front in a region formerly beset by internecine conflict.

In principle, reliance on primary sources is an asset to scholarship. Presumably, compared with secondary sources, they are closer to actual circumstances—hence primary. In her book, however, what Solidum means by primary is official. Had she interviewed government officials for their possibly authoritative accounts, consulted knowledgeable critics of ASEAN (including ex-officials) for their alternative views, and then made up her own mind, she would have illustrated the value of obtaining original evidence. But her endnotes credit no interviews at all. Her book relies instead on a selection of secondary writings about ASEAN and, above all, on official ASEAN statements. Her single most frequently cited source is the Association's 1998-99 annual report. The uncritical nature of her conclusions surely reflects her method.

Organization or Region?

The elite bias of official accounts and of scholarship based upon them raises another question: In the phrase “sense of community,” what community is meant? Is it ASEAN the organization? Or is the region known as Southeast Asia? The expansion of the Association to include all ten countries in the area—East Timor's status aside—has enabled observers to speak and write about the “ASEAN region” and mean Southeast Asia. Synonymy disguises metonymy whereby the part is confused with the whole. To say that a sense of community exists inside ASEAN as an organization is roughly equivalent to discovering loyalty within a firm, esprit de corps in a military unit, or solidarity among members of a social movement.

The members of ASEAN are states. They are represented by officials acting in their official capacities—on Track I. These officials have been meeting under ASEAN auspices for nearly four decades. ASEAN gatherings of one sort or another number in the hundreds annually. Pending needed empirical research on continuity versus turnover

among these attendees, one may note the longevity in office of key leaders (Lee Kuan Yew, Suharto, Mahathir Mohamad) and, to a lesser extent, their ministers and staffs—ASEAN-goers all. Also striking is the continuity evident among ASEAN figures with semi-official or unofficial status who have traveled frequently from one ASEAN event to another on Track II, where officials supposedly set aside their titles and speak their minds in the company of scholars, businesspeople, and others from the private sector. Among key leaders of the Track II-managing think tanks in the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), continuity probably has exceeded even that of their counterparts inside government—though empirical research is desirable on this point, too.

In such conditions, it would be surprising if these ASEAN elites had *not* developed among themselves some form of group identity, including a sense of community.

In order to make this point it is not necessary to endorse the polemical tone of Jones' previously cited disdain for "the flatulent musings of aging autocrats" and "postmodern constructivists" among the "academic fellow travelers" of ASEAN's political elites "pontificating in Track Two fora" where "nothing of substance eventuates." For beneath his invective lies a question worth exploring: Just how ineffectively self-referential the Association has been? By the same token, less passionately enamored observers of ASEAN ought not let the hyperbolic enthusiasm of Solidum become an excuse to dismiss her conclusions without seeing how they, too, stand up against evidence and reason.

ASEAN has ten members. Southeast Asia has half a billion. It would indeed be amazing if all of those people shared a common "sense of community"—or even knew what ASEAN was. Here, too, lies an agenda for further empirical research. Where in the region and among what segments of its population are knowledge of and support for ASEAN most and least present, why, and with implications for the constructivist argument in its enlarged version: that identity has bred comity not merely inside the elite club known as ASEAN but across the ASEAN region as well, that is, across Southeast Asia?

Further democratization, if it occurs, may make foreign policies more accountable, and as the range of relevant actors and conditions expands, students of ASEAN should find it harder and harder to explain regional peace, if it continues, by limiting themselves to the norms listed in declarations of official intent on Track I and their elucidation by "unofficial officials" and policy intellectuals on Track II. In this respect a new frontier for ASEAN studies may be emerging on Track III and beyond. Priority questions in this new context could include the nature and role of the ASEAN People's Assembly that has been meeting periodically in recent years. Will it turn out to have been a coopted body—Track II in disguise? Or will it become a platform for criticizing the Association and suggesting alternatives to its policies—possibly even to its norms?

A Date with a Junta

The most controversial of ASEAN's norms is non-interference in the domestic affairs of a member state. On this score, Jones (and Smith 2002: 108) not only dismissed the constructivist understanding of ASEAN. They found the Association to be, if anything, "*anti-constructivist*" in that the norm of non-interference

negates any expression of regional identity. ASEAN's irresolvable paradox is that while it is intended to establish the notion of Southeast Asia, it calls on its members to recognize that there is no such entity. This implacable commitment to noninterference constitutes ASEAN's core weakness. It is simply a *non sequitur* to build a community among neighboring states on the basis of official indifference to those neighbors.

Well, no. If confusing ASEAN with Southeast Asia is a perspectival hazard of constructivists—the organization conflated with the region—the critics of that perspective should be careful not to confuse two kinds of regional organization. ASEAN may or may not have turned Southeast Asia into a security community. But to my knowledge no constructivist—certainly not Acharya—has been so blind as to claim that Southeast Asia in Deutschian terms is an "amalgamated" SC, that is, one whose constituent states have been merged into a single superstate. Far from "negat[ing] any expression of regional identity," the norm of non-interference is entirely compatible with—and even, conceivably, in constructivist phrasing, constitutive of—a "pluralistic" SC whose members retain their respective sovereignties intact. The paradox is that analysts as knowledgeable as Jones and Smith should have chosen to judge ASEAN by a standard that it never meant to meet—indeed that it intended *not* to meet.

Nor is it fair to equate non-interference in a member government's affairs with indifference toward that government. Indifference toward the victims of official abuses that might have been prevented or moderated by such interference, yes. But not toward the abusing government. Toward it, the norm of non-interference reflects solicitude—the opposite of indifference.

The real challenge to ASEAN's coherence lies not in the chance that amalgamation could jeopardize non-interference or vice versa. Amalgamation is not even remotely in prospect. The challenge is democratization.

Among the Association's more or less authoritarian governments, none has earned more international opprobrium for suppressing democracy and violating human rights than have the generals in Yangon, Myanmar (or Rangoon, Burma). The chair of ASEAN's standing committee rotates alphabetically every year from one member state to another. The incoming chair also hosts the Association's annual summit and ministerial conference. If these traditions are kept, Myanmar will, for the first time ever, assume the chair in July 2006, host the 12th summit in Myanmar toward the end of that year, and do the same for the ministerial meeting to follow in July 2007, before relinquishing the chair to the Philippines.

As of February 2005, ASEAN's website still listed Myanmar as scheduled to assume leadership in 2006. It is difficult to imagine that the junta in Yangon will be denied this role. But if the military dictatorship does take major steps toward democracy, it is also hard to picture the American secretary of state cavorting on a stage in Myanmar in July 2007 as part of the evening of skits that normally takes place when ASEAN's foreign ministers meet with their dialogue partners. Nor would the European Union be eager to embarrass itself with a high-level delegation that could be seen as endorsing such a notoriously tyrannical regime. Inside ASEAN, the challenge of averting a possible public-relations disaster in 2006-2007 could exacerbate existing tensions between the more democratic member states that are willing to loosen the no-interference rule and the more autocratic ones that are not.

In 1993, over ten years ago, the Association's foreign ministers (quoted in Muntarbhorn 2003) agreed that ASEAN should "consider the establishment of an appropriate regional mechanism on human rights." But nothing official ever came of this idea, not even a tentative sketch of what such a mechanism might look like or do. Toward the end of the 1990s, however, as if to compensate for official inaction on Track I, actors on Tracks II and III began to move .

Indonesia's democratic transition had begun in 1998. Soon thereafter, on the initiative of its member think tank in Jakarta, ASEAN-ISIS starting planning the launch of a non-governmental ASEAN People's Assembly (APA). In 2000, at its inaugural meeting in Indonesia, APA urged transforming the Association into a body "of the people, by the people, for the people" of Southeast Asia (APA 2001). Drawn from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, the phrase connoted an "American way" more than the "ASEAN way."

In 2001, still on Track III, the first Workshop for an ASEAN Regional Mechanism (WARM) was convened—again not by coincidence in Indonesia—to reheat the foreign ministers' willingness, frozen since 1993, to consider such an arrangement. A series of meetings of APA and WARM ensued in Thailand and the Philippines, countries whose (by ASEAN standards) democratic governments had for some time differed with Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore over the sanctity of the no-meddling norm.

Sukma's Way

In June 2003 Rizal Sukma, an Indonesian analyst with the Centre for Strategic and International Security that had organized the first APA, presented a paper to a seminar convened by the Indonesian mission to the United Nations in New York. He argued, in explicitly Deutschian terms, that ASEAN was not a security community at all. It was merely a security regime. Nor was he interested in either of Deutsch's two models: a pluralistic SC of still-sovereign states or an amalgamated SC of ex-sovereign ones. He argued instead that ASEAN should become a "comprehensive security community [CSC] more attuned to the region's own needs and characteristics"—a potentially sweeping arrangement that would go beyond military security to give equal importance to the non-

military kind, and beyond war-prevention “to prevent and resolve conflicts and disorder” as well (Sukma 2003: [2]).

Sukma endorsed non-interference and acknowledged member sovereignty as, respectively, ASEAN’s “main feature” and “highest principle.” But he did not want those norms to preclude the cooperative involvement of member states, “through an agreed mechanism” in two types of domestic concerns: trans-boundary issues with regional impacts, presumably including narcotics trafficking, trans-border pollution, maritime piracy, and the like; and humanitarian crises such as natural disasters and “gross violations of human rights”—the proposal that ASEAN had frozen since 1993. Sukma argued that an “appropriate mechanism” along these lines could help ASEAN governments become more willing to offer each other “friendly” advice, and “less reactive” when criticized by “voices of civil society” in other member states. Finally, he wrote, if “internal conflict” loomed inside a member state, ASEAN should be able to engage in peace-keeping operations in that country with the consent of its government. In Sukma’s vision of a CSC, “security should encompass every aspect of life” (pp. 2-4).

Sukma’s timing was impeccable. In June 2003 Indonesia was poised to occupy ASEAN’s chair. While preparing for an unprecedented string of democratic elections at home in 2004, Jakarta was looking for ideas to pursue during its impending year in the regional limelight. Typically each incumbent-to-be hopes to influence the course of the Association during its time at the helm, and Indonesia was no exception. (Nor, in theory, is Myanmar as it looks to its own chairmanship in 2006, which worries liberals in the region.) Sukma’s paper was a contribution to Jakarta’s search for a theme to distinguish its year in the chair.

The upshot of that effort was the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (or Bali Concord II, or BC2). It was adopted by the ten heads of government gathered on that Indonesian island in October 2003 just four months after Sukma had delivered his paper in New York.

In the Bali Concord II, ASEAN (2003) explicitly committed itself to becoming a “Security Community” (ASC)—and an “Economic” and “Socio-Cultural Community” to boot. The members of this ASC would not be amalgamated. They would retain sovereignty. They did not want a joint foreign policy. Instead they subscribed to “comprehensive security” in a way that fell short of Sukma’s proposal without contradicting it.

Sukma had mentioned human rights. BC2 did not. But while Sukma had not mentioned democracy, BC2 did, and for the first time at such a high level of official scripture. The “ASEAN Vision 2020” statement issued in unsigned form six years before had upheld elements associated with “democracy”—government by consent, empowered civil societies, the rule of law—but had not actually used the word (ASEAN 1997). BC2, in contrast, envisaged an ASEAN Security Community that would lift cooperation “to a higher plane,” where the region’s countries would “live at peace with one another and

with the world at large in a just, *democratic* and harmonious environment” (ASEAN 2003: Art. A1; italics added).

That was the only reference to the democracy in the text of Bali Concord II. But the prospect of mentioning it even once was enough to trigger intense debate during the drafting process. By one insider’s account (an “Asian diplomat” quoted in Strengthening 2003), the dispute pitted Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, who argued to include the term, against Brunei, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, who ““objected to the promotion of democracy as an ASEAN objective.”” Though Singapore’s position was not mentioned, one can imagine its contingent to have fallen in, or closer to, the latter camp.

In any event, democracy quickly became a standard reference in ASEAN rhetoric, as in the Vientiane Action Plan later adopted to implement the ASC by growing “a *democratic*, tolerant, participatory and transparent community in Southeast Asia” (ASEAN 2004; italics added).

There may be less here than meets the eye. In the 20th century the meaning of democracy was enlarged in propaganda to encompass its opposite. Prime Minister Bounnhang Vorachith signed Bali Concord 2 on behalf of “the Lao People’s Democratic Republic.” Even the Burmese generals say they favor democracy. Still conspicuously absent in ASEAN statements is the “L word”—liberal, as in liberal democracy. As if to discourage possibly liberal interpretations of the “D word” inside ASEAN now that the latter is in use, the Association has reemphasized member sovereignty. While citing democracy once, BC2 reaffirmed state sovereignty thrice: in the “fundamental importance” of non-interference inside ASEAN, in the right of its members to be “free from outside interference in their internal affairs,” and in their corresponding obligation to uphold the non-interference principle (ASEAN 2003).

Did Sukma fail or succeed? For now, on balance, he seems to have failed. But beneath the ambiguous language, tension is building, as ASEAN’s date with a Burmese chair in 2006 grows nearer. The norm of non-interference does not negate *any* expression of regional identity. But if ASEAN wants to become a more than security community, and especially if it wishes to become a liberal democratic one, then it will have to clean its house. If member sentiment in favor of such a step increases in, say, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, while opposition to it hardens in, for example, Brunei, Laos, Myanmar, Singapore, and Vietnam, ASEAN’s incoherence could further its irrelevance. It is difficult to imagine the Association winding up. But it is not hard to imagine it winding down.

Thick or Thin?

Is ASEAN a security community? My answer is a limited and provisional yes: *ASEAN is a thin security community*.

The organization does appear to meet Deutsch's minimal requirement that there be "a real assurance that [members] will not fight each other physically, but will settle their disputes in some other way" (Deutsch et al. 1957: 5). But ASEAN is thin. It is thin in that its member states retain full sovereignty. Their SC is what Deutsch called pluralistic. Jakarta is not Brussels. The supranational or sovereignty-pooling thickness associated with full-blown European regionalism is political science fiction in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN is a thin security community in other respects as well. Security within the region is still, most reliably, and least controversially defined in narrow terms as the expectation of inter-state peace. Security in the region is more evident than community. And the actual extent to which a sense of community may have caused security is not (yet) known. Security may have engendered whatever regional sense of community there is, not—or more than—the reverse. Non-constructivist explanations of security may account for the phenomenon better than constructivist ones. In order to accept the idea that ASEAN is a thin SC, one need not believe in the power of norms to make and keep peace. Faith in the "ASEAN way" is not required. Pending empirical evidence to the contrary, a thin SC is, in effect, agnostic about causation.

This conclusion is an invitation to further empirical research. Even within the narrower limits of a thin security community, factual satisfaction is needed: more and better evidence, first, that the assurance of inter-state peace in Southeast Asia is indeed "real" or reliable now and in the future; and second, that ASEAN really is a "community" in a non-trivial meaning of that much abused term.

No assurance of peace can be permanently reliable, of course. The future cannot be known. But the long absence of inter-state war in Southeast Asia does support the first conclusion, while the second is at least in keeping with the equally long history of ASEAN and the sheer breadth and density of its interactions. In the latest documented period of 12 months from 1 June 2003 through 31 May 2004, for example, ASEAN organized 541 meetings that were governmental in nature (ASEAN n.d.). And that total could be greatly enlarged by adding to it all the contemporaneous events involving the Association or its name on Tracks II and III. One might also note that although a few people attended many of these events, they were by no means all attended by the same people.

But one ought not exaggerate ASEAN's ability to sink social roots. In November 2000, Jose Almonte, a Filipino who as President Fidel Ramos' national security adviser had acquired intimate knowledge of the Association, urged it to relate "to the daily lives of ordinary Southeast Asians"—to enable them "to feel they too 'own' the Southeast Asian community." ASEAN in his opinion was not yet "a true regional community" (Almonte 2001). Almonte was addressing the first ASEAN People's Assembly, gathered on Indonesia's Batam island.

Neither should one overestimate the mutual admiration of the organization's political elites. At about the time that Almonte spoke on Batam, an ASEAN summit was underway next door in Singapore. Hours after the latter event, Indonesia's president at

the time, Abdurrahman Wahid, accused the city-state of being a bad neighbor, caring only for profits, and ignoring the ethnically distinctive societies to the north and south of it. “Singaporeans underestimate the Malays,” Wahid said. “They think we do not exist.” As far as he was concerned, Singapore’s then-prime minister Goh could jolly well “go his own way. And we can also go our own way. ... We can do well without Singapore” (England 2000).

Compared with thick version of ASEAN-as-an-SC, an advantage of the thinner version is that such examples of critique and candor threaten it less. Problematic and vulnerable by comparison are the more presumptively constructivist understandings of what a security community is. It is easier to question empirically, if not disconfirm, an interpretation that privileges elite norms and community feelings as explanations of a phenomenon as broad, complex, and multivariate as regional security surely is. Pending better evidence to the contrary, ASEAN does not appear to qualify as a security community in these thicker terms.

Several arguments point in this skeptical direction. First, the living scholar who delved furthest into the matter, Amitav Acharya, a constructivist, could not make up his mind whether the Association had become even a “nascent” security community, while another knowledgeable analyst, Rizal Sukma, concluded that it was still a security regime.

Second, by finally deciding to become a security community by 2020, the Association (ASEAN 2004) admitted, in effect, that it was not one yet. ASEAN may not have known what it really was. In social science a self-report is a datum not a conclusion. But an analyst needs strong evidence before arguing that an organization really is what it says it is not.

Third, the thickly descriptive evidence is not—yet?—in. For an SC to exist by constructivist standards, it must be more than a community whose members are merely in sufficient regular contact to sufficient perceived instrumental benefit not to want to quit from the arrangement to which they all belong. The organization must also matter to its members emotionally, in shared identification with and loyalty to the organization, expressed in a clear and evident sense of community.

Such a sense may well prevail inside the limited circles that guide and manage ASEAN, notwithstanding the impatience, annoyance, candor, and resort to national interest that can surface in corridor conversations, or in Wahid’s on-the-record outburst. But analysts of ASEAN to my knowledge still lack independent, reliable, and properly empirical data on the existence and nature of emotional solidarity with the organization among its elites, including who shares such feelings, how intense they are, and how they have changed over time.

Nor are reliably comprehensive data yet available on these dimensions, to my knowledge, at lower social levels farther removed from the Association’s activities and statements. What sense of belonging to ASEAN or to Southeast Asia—two very different things—do hundreds of millions of Almonte’s “ordinary Southeast Asians” actually feel? How have

such feelings changed over time? How many Southeast Asians even know enough about ASEAN or Southeast Asia to entertain a sense of community with either one? Before reaching causal judgments, analysts also need to know how much of such a community sense to attribute to ASEAN's own doings, and how much of it has flowed from other circumstances—education, commerce, travel, and telecommunications, to mention a few. Has ASEAN been making waves of regional identity? Or merely surfing them? More broadly still, if ASEAN is an imagined community, how real—how concrete, interpersonal, or experiential—can its sense of community be?

Fourth and finally, even if the requisite sense of community can be shown to exist, is that what has caused peace to be kept among ASEAN's members ever since the group was formed—that and the claimed power of ASEAN's irenic norms, internalized as beliefs, to stop one member from attacking another? Or should peace be explained on other grounds: physical deterrence; material interdependence; wanting to develop one's economy free of wartime disruption or damages; or even a personal ethical calculus acquired prior to ASEAN's creation or without reference to its rhetoric? What mix of these two sets of conditions—ASEAN and non-ASEAN—best accounts for the result? And what proportional responsibility for intramural peace would ASEAN and its norms need to have before it could be called an SC? These queries have so far proven easier to pose than answer.

ASEAN has never been, is not, and does not wish to become an amalgamated security community. It is far too early to endorse the speculation by Estrella Solidum that ASEAN is the prototype of a Southeast Asian culture. Viewed in the context of diverse societies that have evolved in place over thousands of years, ASEAN's norms are still too artificial and too thinly spread to play that role. As for David Martin Jones' judgment that ASEAN has no prospect of becoming a security community, it is too early to accept that foreclosure if we diversify what is meant by an SC to include its thinner variations—pluralistic SCs that do not succeed by dint of identity and norms alone, and are not expected to. By this same token, however, Jones may be right to doubt that ASEAN will ever become a fully amalgamated SC, or even a pluralistic one whose members keep both the peace and their sovereignty but do so thanks to a sense of community inspired by norms—the venerable “ASEAN way”—without reference to other rationales or conditions.

Were he alive today, what would Professor Deutsch think about the revival of his idea so many decades after its coinage? What would he think about the discourse it has provoked, including its championing, in name at least, by the rulers of half a billion Southeast Asians?

I think he would smile. Not dreamily, with Solidum. Not ironically, with Jones. Just a smile that his model has come so far and been made to do so much. Too much? That I leave to the reader to decide.

[3 March 2005]

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