

What do the blind-sided see? Reapproaching regionalism in Southeast Asia

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Abstract The late Michael Leifer's association with an insecurity-focused realist approach to international affairs and his work on Southeast Asian regionalism inspire this question: How have the Asian financial crisis and the 'war on terror' affected the plausibility of insecurity-concerned realism compared with other ways of approaching regionalism in Southeast Asia?

Five general approaches (and featured themes) are presented: realism (insecurity), culturalism (identity), rationalism (interests), liberalism (institutions) and constructivism (ideas). By and large this sequence runs ontologically from the most to the least foundationalist perspective, and chronologically from the earliest to the newest fashion in the American study of international relations since the Second World War.

The Asian financial crisis and the 'war on terror' have, on balance, vindicated the extremes – realism on the one hand, constructivism on the other – while modestly enhancing the plausibility of culturalism and challenging the comparative intellectual advantages of rationalism and liberalism. But this result implies scholarly polarization less than it suggests a diverse repertoire of assumptions and priorities that are neither hermetically compartmentalized nor mutually exclusive.

Keywords Michael Leifer; Southeast Asia; Asian financial crisis; war on terror; regionalism; realism; culturalism; rationalism; liberalism; constructivism.

Michael Leifer was a prolific and wide-ranging scholar. The written record he left behind encompasses many sites and topics. Nevertheless, across Michael's four decades of publication, in the Southeast Asia-related books,

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monographs, chapters, articles, projects and conferences that he wrote, edited, ran or contributed to, the one concept whose frequency is unrivaled is *security*. In the titles of these works, from his first book in 1967 (*Cambodia: The Search for Security*) to his last conference paper in 2001 ('Promoting Security and Political Cooperation'), the word *security* occurs 20 times.²

Michael's focus on security reflected his understanding of its importance in the eyes of Southeast Asian states whose leaders were obliged time and again to deal with the *insecurity* of their region. Noteworthy, too, is the emphasis on vulnerability, a near-synonym of insecurity, in Michael's work on the foreign policies of Southeast Asian states. Not only did he make national vulnerability and regional entitlement the explanatory centerpiece of his insightful book on Indonesia's foreign policy (1983).³ In the subtitles he chose for a chapter and a book on the foreign policies of Vietnam (1995) and Singapore (2000), respectively, he pictured these states also 'Coping with Vulnerability'.

The attention Michael paid to insecurity supports my intention here to offer and discuss a set of analytic themes that are available to anyone who would craft an account of regionalism in Southeast Asia. I have borrowed the first such theme from Michael's work: *insecurity*. He also wrote about the others: *identity*, *interests*, *institutions* and *ideas*. I will argue that these five notions animate, respectively, these perspectives: realism, culturalism, rationalism, liberalism and constructivism. I will then introduce and interpret the Asian financial crisis in 1997–99 and the 'war on terror' since 2001 as systemic shocks with differentiating impacts on the relative plausibility of insecurity, identity, interests, institutions and ideas as conceptual keys to Southeast Asian regionalism.

My conclusion may be summarized as follows: taken together, these two shocks have differently affected the usefulness of the five outlooks as ways of understanding regionalism in Southeast Asia. In this context, the shocks have sharply increased the net analytic efficacy of *insecurity*-assuming realism and, to a lesser extent, *identity*-framing culturalism. At the same time, the crisis and the war have, again on balance, made *institution*-centered liberalist and *interest*-based rationalist assumptions somewhat less plausible, while considerably enhancing the utility of *idea*-featuring constructivism. Given the complexities and subjectivities involved, these judgements are meant to be read as mere estimates of rough magnitude relative to each other, not in relation to any absolute standard. Heuristic value, obviously, has no ratio scale.

Figure 1 visualizes this conclusion in crude form, without gradations to be added later. Pending these nuances, the *net* effect of the two shocks is summarized as having strengthened (+) or weakened (–), the adequacy of each approach for understanding regionalism in Southeast Asia. The sequencing of the five clusters in Figure 1 is not random. It reflects approximately how much and how intensely each approach assumes the givenness – the objective existence and resistance – of a putatively real world. Foundationalist epistemology thus defined decreases, if unevenly,

Plausibility:	(+)	(-)	(-)	(+)	(+)
Approach:	constructivism	liberalism	rationalism	culturalism	realism
Theme:	<i>ideas</i>	<i>institutions</i>	<i>interests</i>	<i>identity</i>	<i>insecurity</i>

Figure 1 How have the Asian financial crisis and the war on terror affected the plausibility of different thematic approaches to regionalism in Southeast Asia? A summary of the argument.

from right to left in Figure 1, that is, from realism to constructivism. This same right-to-left dimension also roughly corresponds to the precedence of these perspectives in American political science since the Second World War, from realism as the earliest to constructivism as the latest approach.

Clusters of political science

Before addressing the top row in Figure 1 – the impacts of events on perspectives – it will be helpful first to warrant the two rows lower down: the right-to-left sequence in which the approaches appear and the focus of each on a particular theme.

Ontology

Figure 1 runs leftward from portrayals of reality as basic and constraining to critiques of ‘reality’ as constructed and contingent – from insecurity as a root condition to ideas as creative projections. The exact position assigned to any approach in between these extremes will depend on how it is construed.

Farthest right, at the foundationalist end of the spectrum, realism is deeply axiomatic about the presence and significance of insecurity among sovereign states that necessarily respond to international anarchy and temporal uncertainty by maximizing their power or balancing or bandwagoning the power of other states. At the opposite end of Figure 1, constructivists are least inclined to characterize absolutely, directly and consistently the empirical world and how it works, given their preferred emphasis on the mediation of reality through perception and interpretation.

Compared with these extremes, the middle clusters in Figure 1 are more ambiguous and hence more arbitrarily ordered. Culturalism and rationalism advance no less confidently than realism does their respective core concepts – identity and interests. Yet culturalism and rationalism are less presumptive and more eclectic than realism when it comes to specifying prime actors, causal drivers and the nature of the environment in which action occurs.

The emphasis in realism on the state has no counterpart in culturalist and rationalist approaches. Culturalism encompasses multiple types and tiers of identity – personal or collective, ethnic or religious, original or diasporic, and subnational, national, regional or civilizational in scale. Comparably, in rationalist discourse, self-interests, group interests and national interests imply different units and levels of analysis.

Realism is not monolithic. There are classic and structural variants, and the prefix 'neo-' has been used to distinguish newer from older work. Yet arguably realism has remained, over time, the most consistent and coherent – the most fully paradigmatic – of the five approaches. Scholarly faith in the centrality of the state and the primacy of conflict and uncertainty in a world of states has continued to underpin and stabilize realism as an enterprise. As focal themes, identities and interests have proven more protean and therefore less conducive to enduring consensus inside the respective approaches that feature these concepts.

Liberalism focused on institutions is a case in point. A conservative outlook on institutions would take them as given and caution reformers against tinkering with what might not be broke. In so far as the state is itself an enduring institution, or a set of them, a conservative institutionalist approach would be located near realism. By linking institutions to liberalism, in contrast, I mean to characterize a perspective that focuses more on how democratic they are, and how they might be reformed to become more democratic. The malleability of institutions in this liberal view, its interest in democratic design, is closer to constructivism than it is to realism. Among other differences, democratic peace theory attributes to the accountability of domestic institutions a happy external effect that realism is inclined to deny.

The fifth and last approach, constructivism, asserts the power of ideas. Like realism, constructivism is diverse. Unlike realism, it features subjectivity and its projections. In the famous phrase of the pioneer constructivist Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it'. Thus did he challenge the traditional realist conviction that the world beyond state borders really is anarchic. But just as Wendt himself on this occasion was less of an anti-realist than his remark implies (1992: 424–5), constructivism in the study of international affairs should not be confused with, say, deconstruction in the study of literary texts. Compared with its originally French cousin, constructivism in political science is less venturesome in style and epistemology. I prefer therefore to distinguish it from the other approaches in Figure 1 by its preoccupation with ideas, their projection and their effects. Constructivism remains, nevertheless, among all five perspectives, the least similar to realism.

Chronology

Figure 1 also, if not quite exactly, replays intellectual history. In the study of international relations in the United States,⁴ the first school to emerge after the Second World War was realism, epitomized by Morgenthau (1948) and, later, Waltz (1959). Next came rationalism (Downs 1957; Riker 1962) and, close on its heels, culturalism (Almond and Verba 1963; Pye and Verba 1965). The latter two streams flowed more in political economy (PE) and comparative politics (CP), respectively, than in international relations (IR). But the assumptions and concerns driving them also surfaced in IR, suitably

adapted to fit that field's focus on foreign affairs. The liberalist critique of realism arrived later, beginning with Keohane and Nye (1977) and continuing through Keohane (1984). Only in the 1990s did constructivism fully challenge its predecessors, notably in Ruggie (1998) and Wendt (1999).

Overall, in what I hope is a tolerable oversimplification, in post-Second World War American political science one may periodize the arrival and rise of each of the five approaches roughly as follows: IR realism in the 1940s and 1950s; CP culturalism and PE rationalism in the 1950s and 1960s; IR liberalism in the 1970 and 1980s; and IR constructivism in the 1990s.

And just as these approaches amounted to downstream variations of older – often far older – rivers of thought, so did the post-war versions develop revisions with currents strong enough to alter their own mainstreams. In the rationalist tradition, for example, theorists of 'rational choice' refashioned the ancient notion of interest into a utility curve and matched it with other such curves in settings that were, if not game-theoretic, at least subject to quantification.

As for culturalism, in its structural-functionalist form as a search for congruence between attitudes and institutions, it took a beating from realists and rationalists in the 1970s and 1980s, but staged a partial recovery in a different guise starting in the 1990s, thanks notably to Samuel Huntington (1996), Harrison and Huntington (2000) and, most recently, Huntington (2004). At the height of modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s, political culture had covered a variety of survey-researchable values and attitudes. In the 1990s, in effect, Huntington shrank the scope of culture to identity. And where earlier culturalists in political science had studied civic beliefs conducive to democracy, his concern for identity had more pessimistic roots in the spectre of ethno-religious or civilizational conflicts injurious to security.

Ideology?

Does the right-to-left sequence in Figure 1 also correspond to a series of political standpoints, from realism as a preference of the Right to constructivism as an outlook of the Left?

Possibly. Michael Leifer was widely known for his realism. In a brief remark written in the wake of his passing, his London colleague John Sidel (2001), while acknowledging Michael's stature and the loss to Southeast Asian studies, located him on the political Right. As for Huntington, even a cursory scan of reviews of his culturalist scholarship would show that it is thought to belong on the Right. Comparably, one could argue for locating the liberal-institutionalist work of, say, Joseph Nye to the Left of Huntington's defenses of classically Western or Anglo-American identity but still to the Right of constructivism's suspicion of all ruling institutions.

But the correlation should not be overdrawn. Arranging internally diverse bodies of work by scholarly orientation is difficult enough. Imputing political differences to that same distribution risks making polemical what may

already be Procrustean. Sidel classified Leifer merely in passing, without explanation. Nor is it even clear what it means to be Right or Left in these post-Cold War times.⁵

In any case, students of ASEAN are not politically polarized into two camps: defenders of the Association at one end of the intellectual spectrum in Figure 1 versus critics at the other. Quite apart from increasing or reducing the analytic leverage of the five perspectives relative to one another, the impotence of ASEAN *qua* ASEAN in the face of financial turmoil and terrorist violence has weakened academic confidence in the Association across the political board. If realists are Right and constructivists are Left and the outlooks that separate them cluster in the political Middle – a controversial portrayal – these intellectually various observers would appear merely to have different reasons for questioning regionalism in Southeast Asia.

I turn now to the argument that the Asian financial crisis and the ‘war on terror’ have bolstered realism as an approach to Southeast Asia. I will then review, at uneven length, what these crises might imply for the other four approaches – culturalism, rationalism, liberalism and constructivism, in that right-to-left order. Realism will receive by far the most attention, given Michael Leifer’s association with that standpoint and the focus of this special issue on his work.

Realism reaffirmed

The Asian financial crisis (AFC) and the ‘war on terror’ (WOT) have vindicated a realist view of regionalism in Southeast Asia by reaffirming the insecurity of that part of the world.

Insecurity has been and remains the core theme of realism and the core concern of ASEAN. Insecurity spurred the formation of ASEAN – Indonesian *Konfrontasi* against Malaysia, the perceived threat of communism from inside and outside the region, and the prospective vacuum evoked by the dismantling of a British presence ‘east of Suez’ just as the Americans were losing their will to win the Vietnam War. Insecurity also motivated ASEAN’s most notable diplomatic success – mobilizing global opposition to the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia construed as a threat to ASEAN’s Thai ‘frontline state’. Meanwhile, following Indonesia’s lead, the Association extended its definition of security beyond mere protection against military attack to include the socio-economic and political ‘resilience’ of its member states.

Arguably, when the AFC and later the WOT struck, the importance and breadth of ASEAN’s commitment to regional security magnified the damage done to its reputation. For all its rhetoric, including pride in a uniquely consultative ‘ASEAN way’, the Association could neither prevent these crises nor move quickly to lessen the hurt they caused once under way.

It may be counter-argued that no reasonable person could have expected ASEAN to have foreseen and forestalled the AFC. The speculative attack

on the Thai baht in 1997 came as a bolt from the blue. But there were signs of impending danger prior to that collapse. Over the first thirty years of its existence, ASEAN had made various efforts to improve the region's economy. By 1996 one might have thought the organization would have had in place a warning mechanism that could have helped its members take steps, if not to prevent the crisis, at least to limit its scale and duration.

In pursuit of resilience, ASEAN might also have promoted economic and judicial reforms, including transparency, accountability and probity, which could have reduced the extent to which 'crony capitalism' had by 1997 weakened the immunity of local financial-legal systems to external shock. Instead, the first-ever meeting of ASEAN finance ministers was convened in March of that same year, nearly three decades after the organization's birth and merely four months before the baht's downfall in July.

Compared with the assault on the Thai currency, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001 occurred far beyond ASEAN's purview. A clandestine planning meeting does appear to have taken place in Malaysia in January 2000. But the US government was made aware of that event. It makes no sense to fault ASEAN for Washington's failure to anticipate the catastrophe of 11 September 2001 and arrest the hijackers before they could strike. One must also note that transnational threats such as piracy, smuggling and drugs, including terrorism, had been on ASEAN's agenda for discussion at least since December 1997, when the grouping instituted biennial meetings on these topics.

Nevertheless, what eventually galvanized ASEAN to move beyond talking about terrorism to acting against it came four years later in the form of foreign pressure and domestic experience. The pressure came from Washington in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, while the experience included a deadly series of bombings in Indonesia, first in October 2002 in Bali, and then in August 2003 and again in September 2004 in Jakarta, the city that hosts the ASEAN secretariat.

The AFC and the WOT did motivate ASEAN to take preventive steps against such threats. On the financial front these measures included an ASEAN Surveillance Process launched in October 1998 to promote early warning and peer review based on ostensibly full and candid exchanges of information among the member economies. The Process was originally to have been a Mechanism, but for the sake of member-state sovereignty that proposal was watered down (Soesastro 2001: 304). Only in May 2000 did the finance ministers of ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and South Korea), gathered in Thailand, announce their Chiang Mai Initiative. And one could question the adequacy of even that first significant regional defense against disruptive capital flows and gyrating exchange rates.⁶

In any event, by then, the damage had been done. From 1997 to 1999, per capita income in the ASEAN region was thought to have lost a third of its value (Mahathir [2001]). Indonesian GDP shrank 13 per cent in 1998. As for the WOT, its costs ran beyond the fatalities at bomb sites to include major

losses of income from tourism, especially in Bali and southern Thailand. There were political consequences, too. The AFC precipitated or facilitated changes of regime in three of the hardest-hit states – Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. On a lesser scale, by targeting Islamist violence, the WOT stoked controversy and conflict in the more or less Muslim areas of Southeast Asia, including parts of Cambodia, Myanmar and the Philippines.

Even if ASEAN itself is absolved of responsibility for these shocks, that judgement cannot flatten the spike in the insecurity of ASEAN's world to which the shocks gave rise. Nor does an analytic preference for extra-regional causes offer assurance that the region will not be hurt again by future turbulence along financial or terrorist lines. On the contrary, such an assessment highlights the ongoing vulnerability of Southeast Asia to struggles over power and wealth in a conflicted world over which ASEAN lacks control – a world that, for all the long-standing architecture of the international financial institutions and the United Nations, remains unpredictably volatile and insecure. The consonance with realist assumptions is obvious.

Admittedly, non-state actors were prominent in both the financial turbulence and the political violence that hit Southeast Asia. Traditionally, realism has featured the nature, behavior and interactions of states – expansionary, counter-balancing, bandwagoning and so on. Yet governments did not precipitate the AFC or the WOT. The financial crisis was triggered by individuals: hedge fund managers shorting the baht, the ringgit or the rupiah, while panicked borrowers and investors dumped these currencies for safer ones, accelerating the rout. The individuals who drove passenger jets into buildings in New York and Washington DC and into the Pennsylvania ground were not trained, armed and set in motion by a state. Nor were the perpetrators of subsequent attacks, including those in Southeast Asia. When Osama bin Laden changed fields, from the construction business to the terrorist business, he did not leave the private sector.

Realism's core theme, however, is insecurity not the state. In the Hobbesian view of the origin of the state, the condition – insecurity to the point of anarchy – precedes and justifies the existence of the actor – the state. Realists are by no means all Hobbesian. Yet there is rather more Hobbes than Locke in realism – more necessary force than social contract. When, in the interstices between states, private actors inadvertently or intentionally foment large-scale insecurity, as in the AFC and the WOT, their doings confirm the incipiently anarchic character of international relations. It is the difficulty states face in replacing insecurity with comity in that larger world that realism claims to be realistic about.

As for states and the unequal relations between them, on which realism insists, they were acutely if differently relevant to understanding the repercussions of the financial crisis and the terror war in Southeast Asia.

Consider the AFC: while it would be unfair to blame the AFC on the US Treasury, the United States had favored open capital markets, whose vulnerability to manipulation in countries lacking regulatory safeguards allowed

the crisis to occur. In this context, the pre-eminence of the world's sole superpower opened it to sharp rebukes from inside ASEAN. Washington was reproached for hostility, or indifference, or both – for torching the region's economies and then letting them burn.

The conspiracy charge came above all from then-prime minister of Malaysia Mahathir Mohamad. He did blame individuals, the investment-wizard-turned-political-philanthropist George Soros especially, and groups, including the Jews. But these charges were part of his broader indictment of the dominance of the West over the East in a world stacked in favor of the US and other already industrialized states.⁷ Whatever its accuracy, Mahathir's rhetoric and its implied call for counterforce, echoing his earlier proposal for an East Asian economic community independent of the West, were in cognitive synch with a standard realist scenario whereby the concentration of power in some states triggers offsetting moves by other states.

More widely in Southeast Asia, Washington was accused of indifference as the AFC spiraled on. This charge came with particular intensity from Bangkok when the Clinton administration chose not to extend direct bilateral help to the first victim of the crisis, Thailand. Later in 1997 the US president himself dismissed the AFC, then ravaging Thai finances, as a mere 'glitch in the road' (Skanderup 1998). Yet when the crisis threatened Seoul, Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin (2003: 228ff.) quickly committed American resources to a major effort to rescue the South Korean economy.

The lesson to be drawn from this sequence upheld realist assumptions: in a time of crisis, it was balance-of-power logic more than humanitarian need – strategy more than sympathy – that explained how a big power, faced with several ailing lesser powers, decided which one to assist. The Cold War was over in Southeast Asia, but not, at least not fully, in Northeast Asia. Who knew what an economic collapse south of the Korean DMZ would tempt the North to do? Who knew what the repercussions might be on strategically vital China and Japan? By this reasoning, what mattered most to Washington was not suffering but insecurity – realism's prime value. Measured by their respective potentials for insecurity, compared with the strategic risk in Korea, the shock to Thailand was not shocking enough to the United States.

Thailand had the misfortune to have been hit before the extent of the storm was apparent. By the time Washington decided to aid South Korea, it was clearer that the AFC had the potential to wreak global havoc, and that US help would be needed to prevent that from happening. Nonetheless, the American decision to assist Seoul was signally influenced by the strategic stakes on the Korean Peninsula, where the 38th parallel was a tripwire for US forces – stakes not present in the Thai case.⁸ One may wonder, for example, whether Thailand's travail would have earned a higher priority in Washington if the AFC had downed the baht not in 1997 but in the early 1980s, when Thailand was still a strategically valuable 'front-line state' against Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia – to use realist reasoning again.

The war on terror even more compellingly illustrates the importance of states – and their insecurity. I am not thinking of a causal line drawn backward from the jihadist hijackers of 11 September 2001 through al-Qaeda to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that hosted al-Qaeda's leader, bin Laden. Osama was hardly a minion of Mullah Omar. Nor do I have in mind the sponsorship of terrorism by the 'axis of evil' – Iraq, Iran and North Korea – notwithstanding the evidence for such activity on the part of Teheran and Pyongyang. Nor is it necessary to recall how, in the 1980s, Washington backed the mujahidin against Moscow's occupation of Afghanistan in a hot war by proxy between states waging the Cold War, or how American sponsorship of anti-communist violence by extreme Islamists strengthened their ability later to turn against their benefactor.

It is enough, instead, to note how the size and vigor of the official American response to 9/11 dramatized realism's priority on the uses of state power in conditions of insecurity. Under President George W. Bush, the American state invaded Afghanistan, ousted the Taliban, invaded Iraq, toppled Saddam Hussein, chased al-Qaeda around the world, and selectively helped affected states track down local terrorists, including Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia and Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines. Inside the Beltway around Washington DC, experts warned of biological, chemical and nuclear terrorism, including the chance of a 'dirty bomb'. The mixture of vulnerability and entitlement fueling American actions re-illustrated Leifer's insight about Indonesia on an extravagant scale.⁹ The mainly unilateral or bilateral character of these actions meanwhile fulfilled the realist expectation that in times of crisis a powerful state will tend to bypass multilateral institutions, except in so far as it can use them to ratify and thus amplify its chosen course.

By showing the limits of multilateralism, the war on terror supported a realist approach to regionalism. The threat of Islamist violence in South-east Asia was not equally felt by all ASEAN member states. From state to state, the threat elicited different reactions with different implications. These differences depended in no small part on whether the country in question had a Muslim majority (Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei); had a small Muslim minority some of whose leaders had taken up arms against the central government (Philippines, Thailand) or were actually or potentially estranged from it (Myanmar, Cambodia, Singapore); or had too few Muslims to make jihadism an issue (Vietnam, Laos). Vietnam actually benefited from the WOT in so far as inflows of tourism and investment were redirected toward it from less secure destinations. The state-by-state diversity of experiences of Islamist violence inhibited a fully or robustly regional answer to it.

This variety, together with the fixation of the United States on counter-terrorism, created unequal chances for states in Southeast Asia to gain from cooperating with Washington. The Philippines and Indonesia are a case in point. The presidents of these countries were the first heads of state or government in Southeast Asia to visit Washington after 9/11. They offered sympathy and support. Notwithstanding considerable ambivalence in the two

Southeast Asian societies toward American intentions, Manila and Jakarta cooperated with the US on counter-terrorism, and were eventually rewarded with substantial packages of aid. American–Singaporean security relations grew especially close. The selectively bilateral character of the ensuing pattern – one (US) hub and a few chosen spokes – diluted incentives at the ASEAN level to move beyond rhetorical assurances to a concrete joint strategy for fighting the war on terror.

Compared with multilateral relations among states, bilateral ones are more readily kept confidential. That benefit became still more valuable following the widely unpopular American occupation of Iraq, which by September 2004 the UN secretary general agreed was ‘illegal’ from the standpoint of the world body’s charter (BBC 2004). Even the appearance of signing on to an American war on terror that justified the occupation of Iraq would have been toxic for ASEAN. And even without that anathema, the necessary reliance of counter-terrorist efforts on closely guarded intelligence, secret pursuit, and timely interdiction would have made multilateralism, let alone the ‘ASEAN way’, seem less a method than an impediment.

This is not to deny ASEAN’s ability to express a consensus against anti-state violence in Southeast Asia. If the Chiang Mai Initiative was a regional response to the AFC, the declaration against terrorism adopted by the ASEAN Regional Forum at its meeting in Brunei in August 2002 was an adaptation to the WOT. Other declarations and steps could also be mentioned, including moves to set up counter-terrorism centers in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta.

Yet if Michael Leifer were looking over my shoulder as I write, I think he would caution against treating these initiatives as signs of robust originality, autonomy and proactivity on the part of ASEAN. I think he would resist this temptation toward institutionalist optimism. Certainly he did so in his essay on the ASEAN Regional Forum. The Forum in his eyes could not be understood except with reference to the major powers outside Southeast Asia. Their apparent tolerance of the grouping’s existence was essential to its work (Leifer 1996: 53). Without the involvement of the US, Japan and China, the organization would surely lose momentum – or so he strongly implied (pp. 59–60). As a grouping of distinctly lesser states, ASEAN itself was subject to their ‘intrinsic limitations’ (p. 58).

Without the participation of Japan, China and South Korea as partners with ASEAN’s members in currency-swapping arrangements, the Chiang Mai Initiative could not have been launched. US resources and incentives were comparably vital in encouraging the Southeast Asian states most affected by Islamist violence to bandwagon Washington’s counter-terror campaign – more or less discreetly, within domestically set limits, and for their own policy reasons.

Realist calculation works both ways, however. If the wagon is not making headway, why climb on? In 2004, as the American war wagon in Iraq bogged down, the Philippines and Thailand climbed off, withdrawing their token

non-combat contingents. Participation in that campaign by majority-Muslim Indonesia or Malaysia had been and remained out of the question. Among major ASEAN members, only Singapore continued, albeit with mounting worry, to support US policy in the Middle East. Yet advocates of regional unity in Southeast Asia were not about to treat the American state as a common enemy toward that end. And their reluctance, too, had a realist – Leiferesque – reason: a desire to include the United States along with China and Japan in a stable balance of regional power.

Other approaches

Culturalism (+)

The Asian financial crisis had a slightly negative net effect on the plausibility of an identity-focused approach to Southeast Asian regionalism. Culturalist perceptions were, however, substantiated by the war on terror, which magnified the salience of identity both inside and outside the region. The overall increase in the relevance of culturalism did not match the comparable affirmation of realism or constructivism, but it was noticeable nonetheless.

The AFC did tempt some to make a culturalist distinction between the putatively market-worshipping West and the supposedly community-minded East when blaming the former for the latter's travail. The anti-Semitic overtones of Mahathir's vitriol against the West illustrated this choice. Unlike his critique of the US and the IMF, however, his racist innuendo never really caught on. The financial crisis was never widely or convincingly accounted for in cultural terms. If anything, by abruptly ending Southeast Asia's 'economic miracle', the crisis damaged the plausibility of 'Asian values' as vital drivers of, and conceptual keys to, the success of the region.

The analytic impact of the WOT, on the other hand, was intensely culturalist. The muscular US responses to 9/11 and Saddam Hussein had a fiercely centrifugal effect on Islamist terrorism. By shattering al-Qaeda into more or less autonomous pieces while stoking anti-US sentiment across the Muslim world, Washington helped simultaneously to embed and arouse radical Islamism in local settings. A range of such contexts existed in culturally diverse Southeast Asia, where thwarted plots and violent acts linked to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) made the ASEAN region a candidate for the title of WOT's 'second front'.

JI's apparent desire to attach Muslim-majority Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei to the relatively Muslim southern fringes of Buddhist-majority Thailand and Catholic-majority Philippines in a neo-caliphate that would leave ASEAN in pieces is, surely, an impossible dream. It is also impossible, however, to doubt the (positive or negative) impact on regional cooperation of a war on terror that so centrally implicates the overlapping of religion, politics and violence, and thus recommends attention to culture and identity as constructs affecting the nature and course of regionalism in Southeast Asia.

The approaches in Figure 1 are evenly spaced. A more nuanced portrayal would place each perspective nearer to, or farther from, its neighbors depending on the extent to which it complements or contradicts them. A fuller analysis would also show changes in these distances – affinities and tensions – over time. Earlier in this article, for example, I noted that Samuel Huntington's culturalism, while featuring identity, seems realist in its preoccupation with insecurity on a global scale. A major intellectual consequence of the war on terror and its interpretation as a 'clash of civilizations' has been simultaneously to shorten the distance between realism and culturalism while lengthening the distance between culturalism and rationalism. At the rightward end of the spectrum, propelled in part by the WOT, realist and culturalist perspectives have begun to share concerns for identity *and* insecurity – and for the ways in which conflicts of identity give rise to insecurity while insecurity breeds strife between identities.

Rationalism (–)

The AFC and the WOT had, on balance, a negative effect on the plausibility of interest-focused rationalism as an approach to regionalism in Southeast Asia. The financial crisis did carry implications for economic regionalism that were amenable to rationalist explanation. Prior to the crisis, impatient at the pace of regional market liberalization, Singapore had begun to seek bilateral trade deals outside the region. The crisis confirmed Singapore's interest in making such deals. If regionalism meant developing closer economic ties with the neighbors, the AFC showed just how damaging over reliance on the neighborhood could be. Negotiating bilateral agreements with economies outside the region could be seen, in game terms, as hedging one's bets for the sake of an interest in greater and more stable market access.

Yet rationalism works best when change takes place incrementally in a system whose rules are known. The approach is less useful in sudden whirlwinds of change that overthrow expectations, provoke emotions and obscure the interests of the parties concerned. When a game gets 'out of hand', it ceases to be a game at all.¹⁰ In this respect, both the AFC and the WOT frustrated, at least temporarily, the rationalist preference for clear and measurable interests interacting to yield incremental change.

Even prior to the shocks, some aspects of ASEAN were ill-suited to rationalist assumptions. The Association's most notable accomplishment in the 1990s may have been its expansion to include all ten Southeast Asian states. The wisdom of that enlargement can be debated. But it cannot be explained without using the consummatory language of regional identity and security, quite apart from the late-joining members' instrumental interests in, say, economic gains.

Rationalism was neither entirely nor permanently disrupted by the force of the AFC and the WOT. On balance, however, these shocks showed the limits of a purely rationalist model of ASEAN. They did so not least by

raising the possibility of future explosions that might again sideswipe both regionalism and the case for thinking of it as a stable interplay of negotiation, coalition and interest – an ongoing game played in relative isolation from the larger, volatile and impinging world.

Liberalism (—)

The two shocks were also moderately unkind to liberalism as an approach to regionalism. Especially at analytic risk was that perspective's tendency to place faith in institutions generally and democratic ones in particular.

ASEAN could hardly be blamed for the waves of hot money sloshing around the global economy in the run-up to the AFC. Yet in 1997, at the mature age of thirty, the group still could not monitor its members closely enough to warn them of their exposure to danger, including the glaring deficiencies in their financial practices to which, later, the crisis would in part be traced. Nor, in the months prior to the AFC, had ASEAN been able to prevent illegal and intentional fires set in Kalimantan and Sumatra from spreading a haze thick enough to clog lungs and close schools in neighboring Malaysia and Singapore – a disaster with origins entirely within the region.¹¹

In liberalism's defense one could argue that democratic institutions might have made ASEAN surveillance and member compliance more likely. But this seems, at best, only partly correct. If democracy means reliance on voting, Indonesia might have been willing to submit to the will of the majority and end the haze, which by 1997 had become an almost perennial bane. That assumes, however, that enough members not affected by the smoke would have aligned themselves with those who were, rather than abstaining out of deference to the region's largest country. And if private entreaties to Indonesia to do something were ineffective, would the threat of being shamed in a public vote have made Indonesia comply? As for democracy inside the member countries, could that not actually have strengthened the resistance of member states to intrusions by ASEAN, including monitoring local flows of footloose portfolio investment and leveraged foreign exchange?

Eventually, in different ways, the affected states took ownership of the WOT in Southeast Asia. But in that process a different aspect of a liberalist focus on institutions was jeopardized: namely, optimism that *democratic* institutions were likely to prove especially effective. Unfortunately from this standpoint, the early stars of the WOT in Southeast Asia were illiberal Singapore and illiberal Malaysia, each with its own Internal Security Act. Indonesian resolve has since become more evident, and may strengthen further under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the ex-army officer democratically elected president of his country in September 2004. Yet it was also democratization that obliged SBY's predecessor, Megawati Sukarnoputri, to avoid publicly linking Islamism with terrorism lest elements in her Muslim constituency take offense. In Indonesia as of November 2004, JI had not even been declared illegal.

This is not to overestimate the damage done to liberalism. From the Association's poor record of managing the haze or the AFC, one could still infer a need to reform it as an institution along liberal lines – lines favorable to timely interventions that would have sacrificed the principle of state sovereignty for the benefit of human security. More liberal member governments may indeed be more prone to entertain the democratization of ASEAN itself, including the freedom to criticize across borders when a crisis can still be forestalled. It was the foreign ministers of relatively democratic Thailand and the Philippines who first argued that member-state sovereignty need not imply immunity from constructive intra-mural criticism. In this context, one could even join Amitav Acharya (2004) in hoping for 'participatory regionalism' in Southeast Asia.

Yet the history of ASEAN does not inspire confidence in such an outcome. Consider, for example, how the action of reaching across intra-ASEAN borders with good intentions has been renamed over time: from 'constructive intervention' to 'constructive engagement' to 'flexible engagement' to 'enhanced interaction'.

These concepts did not necessarily express a principled commitment to liberal institutions. At least as much, if not more so, they reflected a realist argument for national security: that only by insisting on each member's domestic vigilance – ecological, financial, even political – could all members protect themselves from the potentially disastrous consequences of allowing a preventable or manageable problem in any one member country to metastasize into a regional crisis. Liberalization, yes, but in security's name. The AFC and the WOT, by intensifying realist concerns, reinforced this tendency to downgrade liberal institutions to dispensers of due diligence and timely intelligence – a recipe for technocracy more than democracy.

Over time, consensus-seeking ASEAN diplomats edited and re-edited the clarity of 'constructive intervention' into the timidity of 'enhanced interaction' – a phrase so abstractly innocuous that one could no longer tell what it was a euphemism for. Acharya (2004: 130), while hoping for 'participatory regionalism', was realistic about its prospects: having strongly resisted 'post-sovereign regional norms' and shown 'no explicit commitment to democracy and human rights', ASEAN was not likely to become 'a democratic community' anytime soon. The horrors of 9/11 and the Bali bombings had 'diminished the space for civil society' in Southeast Asia. 'Homeland security' had 'assumed priority over human security' – the safety and dignity of individuals. In such conditions, ASEAN was more likely to reassert its traditional 'official regionalism' than experiment with a more participatory kind (p. 140).

Institutions still matter. The future is open. ASEAN will evolve. On balance, however, the AFC and the WOT have made it harder to approach ASEAN as an incipiently liberal affair. Operationally it is not even clear what the democratization of ASEAN would mean. Is voting really more democratic than consensus? Is public criticism more democratic than quiet

diplomacy? The risks of an endless war on terror in Southeast Asia, especially one linked to perceived American hubris, could reaffirm the prudence of quiet consensus inside ASEAN, postponing freer official speech.

Upside scenarios cannot be dismissed. An ASEAN success in negotiating liberalization with stability in Myanmar, for instance, might augur an 'ASEAN way' to democracy. In view of the sobering effects of the AFC and the WOT, however, even liberal analysts are unlikely to expect a short wait for this result.

Constructivism (+)

Reduced to mere faith in norms and the efficacy of the 'ASEAN way', constructivism suffered from the crisis and the war. But they upheld its focus on ideas.

More than any of the other approaches, idea-centered constructivism accommodates contingency and change, precisely the features one associates with crisis. Relative to the other perspectives, the constructivist universe is in flux. Ideas come and go, rise and fall, as things happen and people come to think differently about them. Mind-sets may outlast the conditions that gave rise to them. But underlying insecurity and collective identity, interests, and institutions are all less mutable than ideas. In so far as the AFC and the WOT were intensely changeful and bypassed ASEAN as an institution while upstaging – outdating? – its norms, constructivist precepts gained plausibility.

Nor was any other approach more suited to acknowledging the sense in which these shocks themselves were driven by ideas: the AFC by free-market fundamentalism and the WOT by its Islamist counterpart. Admittedly, these attributions are at best incomplete. Prior to the economic crisis, 'crony capitalism', the inverse of free-market thinking, had already weakened the capacity of local financial–legal systems to withstand external shock. As for 'the war on terror' in Southeast Asia after 9/11, it involved a double response – not only to domestic Islamist 'holy war', but also to secular American pressure to engage al-Qaeda on its presumed 'second front'.

Notice, however, how much these qualifications illustrate and thus reaffirm the utility of constructivist discourse. 'Crony capitalism', 'the war on terror', 'holy war', a 'second front' – these are all constructions. Almost as sudden as the AFC itself was the projection, in its wake, of 'crony capitalism', previously limited to the Philippines, to describe Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand as well. 'The war on terror' was, and in 2004 largely remained, a coinage of the Bush administration projected onto the larger world. Also subjective and self-serving were the 'holy war' that the jihadists claimed to be waging and the 'second front' label that war-metaphor-minded observers attached to Southeast Asia. What has mattered about these ideas is less their accuracy than their influence – precisely the constructivist point.

If the haze, the AFC and the WOT had never occurred, the 'ASEAN way' might still be intact, or at any rate less challenged. The Association's

hallmark pragmatism might have continued to keep second thoughts at bay. Instead, one crisis after another struck the region in clashes not of civilizations so much as ideas. In such a strenuously symbolic context, the idea of regionalism ASEAN-style has been, in effect, upstaged and drowned out by other constructions. Regionalist policy intellectuals have been stimulated to come up with new ideas – ‘ideas that have the common aim of trying to revitalize and even reinvent ASEAN’, to cite the impeccably constructivist ambition of a co-editor of, yes, *Reinventing ASEAN* (Tay 2001: xi).

While the literal reinvention of ASEAN is, of course, a conceit, a constructivist perspective nevertheless opens a vista of relevant questions. The AFC in Southeast Asia left in its wake grave doubts about the ‘Washington consensus’ in favor of deregulating markets and privatizing firms. Will it be replaced in Southeast Asia by an ‘ASEAN consensus’ that is market-sensitive but allows a greater economic role for the state and more attention to the social character of economic relations? How, if at all, might such a regionalist discourse encompass, say, the economic populism of the Thai government – ‘Thaksinomics’ – or Malaysia’s relatively successful imposition of partial capital controls in response to the AFC? As bilateral agreements between ASEAN and non-ASEAN economies proliferate, will the ASEAN Free Trade Area also have to be ‘reinvented’? If so, in what way, and based on what ideas for economic cooperation across such a diverse region? In light of the anticipated rotation of the chairmanship to Burma in 2006, how will ASEAN avoid guilt by association with ‘dictatorship’ against ‘democracy’?

These questions may sound premature. The ‘reinvention’ of ASEAN as an Economic, Socio-Cultural and Security Community, announced at the group’s 2003 summit in Bali, may turn out to have been little more than a rhetorical flourish adopted to indulge the meeting’s Indonesian host – the grouping’s *primus inter pares*, a realist might say. But as the novelty of these proposals suggests, it is also premature to conclude that, having survived thus far through creative adaptation, ASEAN has run out of ideas. Indeed, from a cynically realist perspective, what else does the Association have?

Full circle

That ASEAN should want to call itself a security community brings me full circle back to Michael Leifer. At the onset of this essay I illustrated his realist emphasis on insecurity by citing his interpretation of Indonesian foreign policy as a product of national vulnerability and regional entitlement. Vulnerability and entitlement are, of course, ideas. Had Leifer’s argument in that book (1983) been made by a constructivist, the ideas would have been situated mainly in texts – and probably critiqued in counter-texts as well. Michael instead rooted them in physical, social and historical conditions. Indonesia’s strategic location and ample natural resources really did make it vulnerable to foreign intervention. But these same features combined with the archipelago’s vast size to sustain in the minds of Indonesian leaders a

sense of regional entitlement – ‘a proprietary attitude’ toward Southeast Asia (p. ix).

That proprietary attitude – a mental construct – has suffered a series of debilitating shocks. Indonesia was hurt more by the AFC, and has been hurt more by the still unfolding WOT, than any other ASEAN country. Nor was Jakarta’s sense of entitlement boosted by its inability, in 1999, to stop the tiny half-island of East Timor from exiting Indonesia. Yet for all the damage done to Indonesian national self-esteem, one can glimpse in the decision taken in Bali to launch an ASEAN Security Community a muted expression of the same proprietary outlook that Michael noted. For, in the long run, who but the largest – by far the largest – member of ASEAN will be, or at any rate feel, most entitled to influence how Southeast Asia protects itself in an insecure world? A security community in this sense creates a leading role that awaits the time when the actor already cast (or self-cast) to play it will be healthy enough to do so.

It may seem paradoxical to have argued in this article that the AFC and the WOT have especially valorized realism and constructivism, the two perspectives on regionalism in Southeast Asia that are the least alike, ontologically, chronologically and, some might say, ideologically as well. But for all the differences that keep them apart, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. They are more like the different axioms, preferences, and logics of inference used by different blind persons touching different parts of the regionalist elephant – each toucher fitting whatever is at hand into what she or he already ‘knows’ is important, interesting and necessary to comprehend the animal as a whole.

But not all approaches are equally productive. What actually happens to the elephant redistributes the significance of what is being touched – its aspects – and the heuristic leverage of the set of assumptions, priorities and arguments favored by each toucher. In future, the identitarian aspect of regionalism could give way to the utilitarian use of ASEAN settings as games in which self-interested member states calculate and negotiate bargains on behalf of their material interests. In such an event, that instrumental aspect will become more salient, and a rationalist outlook on regionalism will become more insightful. Comparably, if ASEAN as an institution democratizes, that aspect will become more prominent while, correspondingly, liberalism gains analytic ground.

In the meantime, pending events (and shocks) still to come, realism, constructivism and to a lesser extent culturalism, as approaches to Southeast Asian regionalism, remain the main net beneficiaries of the Asian financial crisis and the war on terror.

Notes

- 1 For conversations or correspondence that helped me in writing or revising this essay I am grateful to – but, alas, cannot implicate – Jennifer Amyx, Ralf Emmers, Erik Kuhonta, Joseph Liow and Danny Unger.

- 2 Security was also prominent in the connotations of the next most common conceptual references, to the balance of power (5) and order (4). These figures were calculated from a bibliography of 115 items kindly made available to me by Ralf Emmers and Joseph Liow. Excluded from the list were the many volumes written by others but selected by Leifer for the Routledge 'Politics in Asia' series that he oversaw as general editor.
- 3 See Leifer (1983: xiv–xv, 111, 145, 155, 169–70, 173–4).
- 4 The United States is my own parochial intellectual 'home' (Emmerson 2004). An effort to show how its American provenance has colored and limited the literature I cite lies beyond my present scope.
- 5 The Right–Left dichotomy was not all that clear or consistent even during the Cold War. Before the incumbencies of Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping, was the Soviet Union Left of the United States, Right of Maoist China – or both? Were anti-communist social democrats in Europe and the US too Left to be Right, too Right to be Left – or both? Did such ambiguities jeopardize the utility of the distinction?

Post-Cold War developments have further destabilized these terms. It has become harder to argue that the Right harbors 'conservative' appreciations of continuity – tradition – and doubts about the virtue or necessity of change, while the Left advocates more or less 'radical' transformation – revolution – and considers change of some kind ongoing and unavoidable. Consider the activist faction among US President George W. Bush's foreign-policy advisers in the early 2000s (Mann 2004), whose reasons for wanting to invade Iraq included a desire to trigger the revolutionary democratization of the traditionally authoritarian Middle East. Universally known at the time as Right-wing 'neo-conservatives' they could also have been called 'anti-conservative' Leftists with 'neo-Leninist' impulses to spark, speed and channel historical change.
- 6 Twenty years before the AFC, in August 1977, an ASEAN Swap Arrangement was established to help central banks cope with modest and temporary shortages in liquidity. At the Chiang Mai meeting in 2000, ASA's scope was expanded to allow a member central bank to swap its own currency for major international currencies for up to six months in amounts up to double that member bank's existing financial commitment to ASA. Even so, as of 2002, these commitments – a mere \$150 million apiece from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, and much less than that from the other four ASEAN members combined – were still negligible compared with the likely size of flows in a crisis. Even if Bilateral Swap Agreements are included, the total sum available to a suddenly needy member economy is 'a drop in the ocean' of money that churns through global financial markets every day. (See Wang and Andersen 2002–03: 90–1, 93 ['drop'].)
- 7 'We are pushed to become a backward, weak race which is recolonised and having to serve others', Mahathir told a Malaysian audience in 1998. 'They [the West] are trying to destroy all we have built' (Symonds 1998; see also Mahathir 1999).
- 8 The US Treasury Secretary in 1997–99 was Robert Rubin. Looking back on the AFC, he contrasted the fall of 'an obscure currency, the Thai baht, in July 1997' (Rubin 2003: 212) with the severe risk to the world financial system posed by the AFC's arrival in South Korea the following October (pp. 228ff.; cf. p. 218). While stressing economic security, he acknowledged the geostrategic concerns of officials from the State and Defense Departments and the National Security Council. They favored a bilateral American contribution to what became an IMF-led \$17 billion package of support for Thailand. Rubin did not, and he won. But South Korea was 'a crucially important military ally' with 37,000 US troops stationed near its border with North Korea (p. 218), whose own troops reportedly had gone on a 'heightened state of alert' (p. 232). In this military-security league, Thailand

could not compete. In December, with Rubin's approval, the IMF announced a \$55 billion reform-and-rescue package for South Korea.

As for the AFC illustrating the (anti-realist) argument that states 'matter less, in the sense that forceful imperatives of the world economy take power away from them', Rubin (p. 215) flatly disagreed. 'To me, the opposite is true. The potential impact of any one country's problems on others means that national governments matter more – an ineffective government in one country can have a damaging impact beyond that country's borders'.

- 9 In 2004 the historian John Lewis Gaddis ascribed to Americans 'a level of vulnerability' not seen 'since they were living on the edge of a dangerous frontier 150 years ago', and agreed with President Bush that, facing 'sources of danger', the United States was entitled 'to take them out' (Chace 2004: 15, quoting Gaddis in *The New York Times Book Review*, 7 October 2004, p. 23).
- 10 It is in this context unsurprising that rational-choice theorizing should have been less popular among scholars in Southeast Asia than in the United States, a relatively orderly country unaccustomed to being overtaken by events it did not anticipate and could not control – at least prior to 9/11.
- 11 Later, two knowledgeable observers would list this environmental calamity, the economic crisis (the AFC), the emergency in East Timor (in 1999) and the enlargement of ASEAN as 'the four "E's" of embarrassment for ASEAN' (Tay and Estanislao 2001: 4). An updated review of the Association's performance in times of crisis would include medical emergencies such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian flu.

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