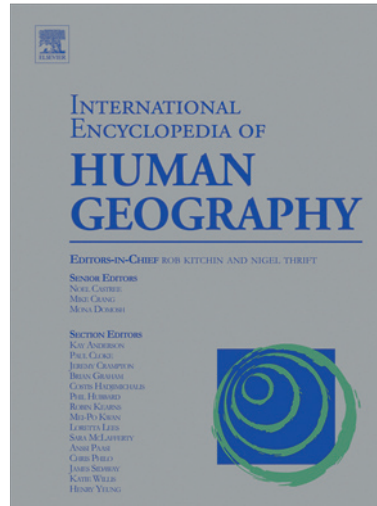


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Southeast Asia

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Glossary

ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Association of Southeast Asia A regional cooperative grouping of Malaya, Thailand, and the Philippines, which predated the formation of ASEAN.

Entrepôt A transshipment port rather than final destination along a trade route.

Eurocentric Ideology and other processes that take Europe as their primary point of reference.

Geo-Body Territorial dimensions of a polity produced through cultural processes and technologies, particularly mapping.

Maphilindo A proposed regional confederation of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, which predated the formation of ASEAN.

Plural Society A society composed of two or more culturally differentiated groups.

Polity A system of social–political organization, such as a city-state, nation-state, or kingdom.

Sanskrit Language of politics and scholarship through much of Southeast Asia in the first and early second-century CE; it originated in India.

SEATO Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.

Swidden A system of shifting cultivation in which land is prepared by cutting away and burning existing vegetation, commonly referred to as slash and burn.

Southeast Asia is a regional geographic construct. It refers to an area south of contemporary China and east of the subcontinent of contemporary India. The region of Southeast Asia is currently organized politically under the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which includes Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. These constructs and concepts of Southeast Asia as a region and ASEAN as a regional political forum are founded on a complex and contested spatial, physical geographic, social, and cultural processes.

Southeast Asia is currently more contested (less taken for granted) than some other regional concepts such as Africa, Asia, Europe, or Latin America. In many accounts, both past and present, Southeast Asia is presented as an artificial construct driven by exogenous geopolitics and cultural forces. Yet during the second half of the twentieth century, Southeast Asia has emerged as a locally relevant regional frame of reference, in ways that some

other well-known concepts, especially the Orient or Far East, have not.

Realism and Constructivism

In 1984, Donald Emmerson produced a key article on Southeast Asia, in which he contemplated whether the region should be considered more of a rose or a unicorn. The former, invoking Shakespeare's famous lines from *Romeo and Juliet*, implies that Southeast Asia is a name referring to something with an underlying reality not contingent on the process of naming or conceptualization itself. The unicorn, on the other hand, implies that Southeast Asia is primarily a product of creative imagination; only through the human cultural capacity to create order out of chaos does Southeast Asia come into being. In this latter case, the search for any underlying reality to Southeast Asia, apart from its cultural invocation in area studies writing or geopolitical maneuvering, is a chimera. Emmerson traces a process through which the imagined unicorn-like Southeast Asia was gradually emerging as a rose-like reality, a trend which has, if anything, consolidated since the 1980s.

Emmerson highlights the dominant and competing realist and constructivist approaches to Southeast Asia. The simplicity of this dichotomy covers not only a wide range of approaches, but also two very different aspects of realism and constructivism. On the one hand, each of these is a scholarly, theoretical standpoint. In this regard, realists favor descriptions and understandings of the region that focus on processes such as trade patterns, politics, geography, and the like that may or may not demonstrate Southeast Asian regionalism. Constructivists, from the standpoint of scholarship, focus on various more-or-less intentional or conscious processes through which Southeast Asia is brought into being – in other words, as a social and cultural construction. But constructivism and realism are also used in debates over Southeast Asia as an object itself, not in reference to the theoretical inclinations of particular scholars. Realism in this sense takes the region to contain an underlying, if evasive, unity while constructivism takes the region to be an area of relatively discontinuous cultural, economic, geographic, political, and social patterns woven together in various narratives of scholars and politicians more out of convenience than for any other reason. The distinction is important, since at least some scholars who are constructivists – emphasizing the social and cultural construction of reality – nevertheless take objects thus

constructed, such as Southeast Asia, to be no less real than products of other processes, such as geological systems or trade networks. A fair amount of scholarship on Southeast Asia is also marked by strident rejectionism or enthusiasm, of those who either vociferously reject the notion of regional legitimacy or authenticity and others who with equal vigor defend the notion of Southeast Asia as both legitimate and authentic.

The realist–constructivist debate cuts across many disciplinary fields – from history to political science to geography. The disciplines most actively involved in debates over the status of Southeast Asia as a region have been history and political science (specifically international relations specialists), with some interventions from geographers, anthropologists, and others. Most scholars working in these latter disciplines have been more concerned with examining spatial and social processes within the region rather than the status of Southeast Asia as a region *per se*. Nevertheless, the area studies focus, especially dominant in American universities, has been important in framing research as Southeast Asian studies.

Physical Geography

Southeast Asia is conventionally divided into mainland and maritime subregions. Maritime Southeast Asia encompasses the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagos and the Malay Peninsula, as well as the coastal regions of contemporary Vietnam on the South China Sea, the Bay of Siam, and the Bay of Bengal. This coastal, maritime, archipelagic region has been a major thoroughfare over millennia for trade connections stretching from the East Asian regions of China, Japan, and Korea through to India, the Arab peninsula, Africa, and the remote regions of Europe. Mainland Southeast Asia is defined by a series of river basins bordered on the north and west by mountain ranges which created a natural barrier to human interactions. These features created a unique propensity toward land-based isolation and sea-based interconnections both within the region and between the region and the rest of the world. They also account for a second dimension along which the human and physical geographies of the region intersect; that of highlands and lowlands. Highlands have historically been home to populations with subsistence economies based on swidden cultivation considered outside of or marginal to the lowland state societies organized around irrigated agriculture and trade. The relationship between lowland and highland populations continues to be a major area of scholarship, especially in anthropology (see [Figure 1](#)).

Since at least the middle of the first millennium CE, a series of mainland and maritime-based states have risen and fallen. The mainland states have been situated

primarily in the fertile river valleys of the Irrawaddy, Chao Phraya, Mekong, and Red Rivers. The latter two rivers in particular link the areas of contemporary Southern China, especially Yunnan province, to mainland Southeast Asia. In recent years, a new regional concept has gained some currency – the Greater Mekong Subregion, encompassing the five nation-states of mainland Southeast Asia and Yunnan province.

Physical geography did not determine the location and extent of state formation in a simple and straightforward fashion. But features of the mainland clearly contributed to the location and extent of various states, including current nation-states. Moving across mainland Southeast Asia from west to east, it is relatively easy to discern the natural features that have facilitated and hampered political and cultural integration within the region. The Irrawaddy and Chao Phraya river basins have been fertile soil for a succession of polities and currently form the center of the contemporary states of Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand. Forerunners of Myanmar and Thailand have played out a long-standing rivalry over many centuries, including numerous wars and border skirmishes, but neither has exerted sustained domination over the other. To the east of the Chao Phraya, the Khorat Plateau, bordered on the north and east by the middle Mekong, and the basin defined by the confluence great lake Tonlé Sap and lower Mekong, form two further natural lowland regions conducive to early state consolidation. The latter was the central site of the Angkorean empire, mainland Southeast Asia's most extensive, sustained and successful early polity, and now the territory of Cambodia. Contemporary Laos is situated on the northeastern portion of the Khorat Plateau, while the bulk of the plateau has been incorporated into Thailand. Historically, this middle region of the mainland has been the site of shifting, expanding, and contracting polities. Finally, much of the coastal strip of the mainland that is now the site of Vietnam was at an earlier point in history claimed by Champa, a constellation of more-or-less integrated ethno-linguistically Malay polities. Further north, the Red River Valley was home to the ethno-linguistically Kinh or Viet polity known as Dai Viet. For roughly the first millennium CE, the Red River basin was a direct vassal state of Imperial China. After achieving independence in CE 939, especially from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, the Dai Viet expanded down the length of the coast at the expense of the Cham states.

The mainland geography of mountains, highlands, river basins, and valleys insulated the region to some degree from overwhelming Sinic or Brahmanic influence, while the maritime geography connected the region to those neighboring civilizations. An important geographic feature of maritime Southeast Asia is the narrow Strait of Malacca, between the Malay Peninsula and the island of

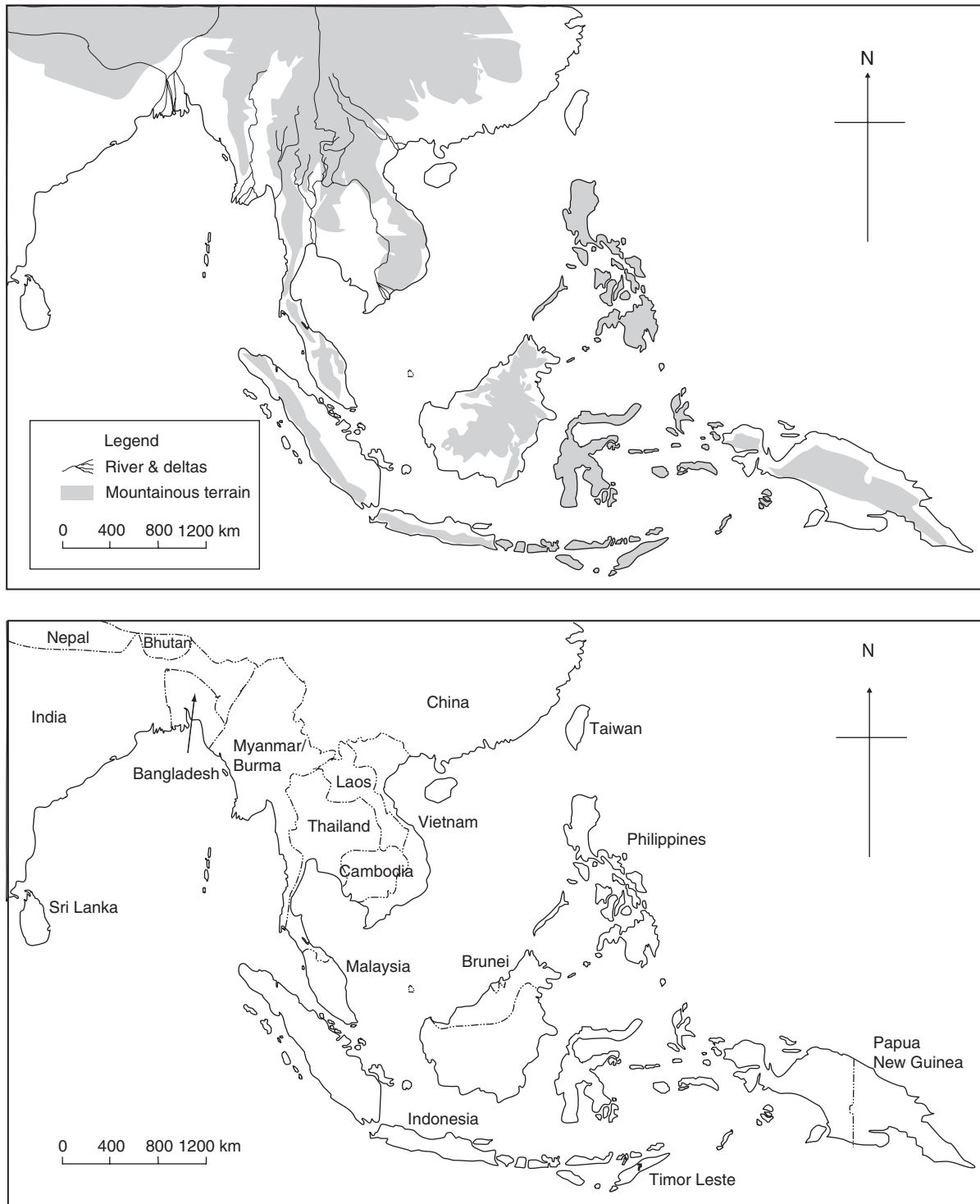


Figure 1 Two views of Southeastern Asia. From Kratoska, P. H., Raben, R. and Nordholt, H. S. (2005). *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Sumatra. A succession of port cities have thrived on establishing themselves as the preeminent *entrepôt* for trade flowing through this choke point of Asian maritime commerce. The most sustained power being the Srivijayan Empire centered on Jambi/Melayu on the East

coast of Sumatra from the eighth through twelfth centuries. Srivijaya was succeeded by Pasai, Malacca, and other lesser ports and later by competition between British and Dutch colonial powers contesting dominance over the Straits from either side of the waters. The

current economic preeminence of Singapore in the region is a testament in part to its inheritance of the mantle of foremost Malaccan Straits *entrepôt*. The Malacca Strait ports were supplemented and interconnected with other important *entrepôts* between the Malay Peninsula and southern China as well as throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

This mainland-maritime division of Southeast Asia was never a simple divide. Not only did trade form an ongoing basis of circulation of things, people, and ideas between mainland and islands, the archipelago was home to important inland polities, such as Mataram on the island of Java, and some mainland polities, such as the Ayutthaya located on the Chao Phraya river, were also maritime powers. But even with the regional systems and subsystems, conditioned at least in part by these features of the physical geography, Southeast Asia is still construed mainly as a residual category, as the lands south China and east of India. The region is defined as much by connectivity, a maritime crossroad of the Asian continent, as it is by demarcating boundaries.

Historical Antecedents

There is an active and ongoing debate among historians regarding the coherence of the region over many centuries or even millennia preceding its formalization in the past hundred or so years. Anthony Reid has argued that important intraregional connections can be identified especially in what he periodizes as the “early modern” period, or “age of commerce” from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. Reid argues that this was a historical era when Southeast Asia was operating as a regional sociocultural system, subsequently disrupted by the disintegrative effects of European colonialism under which colonial powers carved up the region and inhibited interactions among the indigenous populations. Reid’s thesis has been challenged by Victor Lieberman, who argues that Reid’s thesis may work for maritime or coastal Southeast Asia but is less applicable to the mainland. In Lieberman’s view, Reid also privileges intra-Southeast Asian connections at the expense of a more complex set of broader global and Eurasian processes. More generally, the work of Reid and others has been criticized for projecting a twentieth-century perception of Southeast Asia backward into the sixteenth century.

A useful historical antecedent for thinking about contemporary Southeast Asia is *Suvarnabhumi*, a Sanskrit term, meaning literally the golden land. References to *Suvarnabhumi* throughout Southeast Asia date to the first and early second millennia CE, described by Sheldon Pollock as an era of Sanskrit cosmopolitanism. Polities of Southeast Asia, such as Angkor, Pagan, Ayutthaya, Sri-vijaya, as well as a multitude of smaller entities were

culturally interrelated through the Sanskrit lingua franca which carried with it a loosely integrated set of political and cosmological beliefs related to Brahmanic traditions later to become known as Hinduism and Buddhism. A limited amount of historical (written) documentation and a greater wealth of archeological evidence demonstrate that a substantial circulation of goods, people, and ideas bound together (at least loosely) a region stretching from the Cham principalities of what is now south and central Vietnam to the Indian subcontinent and through the Indonesian archipelago and mainland Tai, Khmer, and Bamar polities (where Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar are now located). In this era, the Red River Delta was under direct Chinese political control and cultural influence and the Philippine archipelago was largely outside of the maritime flows of commerce and culture.

Suvarnabhumi remains a poetic inheritance in many places in contemporary Southeast Asia, reappearing in forms such as Charles Keyes’ *The Golden Peninsula*, the name of the new international airport in Bangkok, and references in the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur, where it is translated somewhat parochially as *tanah Melayu* (the Malay lands). But any sense of *Suvarnabhumi* as a substantial geopolitical region did not survive the disintegrative effects of European colonialism. With Islamization of maritime Malay polities from about the eleventh century onward, any regional sense of *Suvarnabhumi* was probably already very much on the wane well before the colonial era and in any event was never even remotely established to the extent that the concept of Southeast Asia became in the late twentieth century.

Nevertheless, *Suvarnabhumi* remains an instructive comparison to contemporary Southeast Asia, as its cogency derived from many analogous processes (insofar as it did become a relatively widespread signifier of a region stretching from contemporary Vietnam to the Indonesian archipelago and through the mainland Tai and Bamar polities – where Thailand and Myanmar are now located). The diffusion of the *Suvarnabhumi* concept rested on the diffusion of Sanskrit as a privileged language of religious and political discourse in the region, much as English is the preeminent *lingua franca* today. This was also the basis for intraregional political relations between polities and individuals who not only could communicate between mutually intelligible languages, but implicitly comprehended a political grammar and syntax of polities organized on principles described by Stanley Tambiah as “galactic polities” and O.W. Wolters as “mandala states.”

As useful as *Suvarnabhumi* may be for thinking about some of the region-forming processes, such as language, politics, cosmology, commerce, and the like, Southeast Asia as now understood is undoubtedly the cultural product of the past century.

Convenient Constructs and Contingent Devices

The use of Southeast Asia as a term to designate the region south of China and east of India appears only in idiosyncratic references prior to the twentieth century. From the sixteenth century onward, European colonial powers laid claim to their territories with terms such as the Netherlands East Indies and French Indochina. Only well into the twentieth century do we find Southeast Asia and variants used with regularity in different languages, including for instance *Asia Tenggara* in Malay and Indonesian, *Asia Akhane* in Thai and Lao, and *Đông Nam Á* in Vietnamese.

The Allied South East Asia Command established in 1943 during World War II is often cited as the earliest widely influential use of Southeast Asia. However, Shimizu Hajime has shown that by 1919, the term *Tonan Ajija* (literally Southeast Asia) had entered Japanese geography curriculum in modern state schools. Hajime argues that the displacement of earlier terms such as *nanyo* (South Seas, derived from the Chinese *nanyang*) played an important conceptual role in guiding Japan's military colonial expansion into the region in the subsequent decades. Hajime and others suggest that the Allied concept of Southeast Asia, therefore, was largely a reaction to Japanese imperial ideas and actions.

Following World War II, the idea of Southeast Asia received further support with the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), established as an American initiative to counter Chinese and Soviet influence in the region in the context of the Cold War. But from within the region, only the Philippines and Thailand were members of SEATO (others being Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States). The organization clearly had more to do with American Cold War activities than the ideas or interests of governments or people living in the region.

A very strong, if not dominant, stream of scholarship on Southeast Asia since the inception of the term in English-language discourse has focused largely on the SEATO-like constructions of the region. That is, the forces and ideas acting largely on the region from without, based on extra-regional interests and motives with only marginal interest or input from individuals, institutions, organizations, or states within the region. Likewise, much attention has been given to the establishment and role of Southeast Asian Studies in the United States particularly in the context of the Cold War, a central focus of Emmerson's important article.

In a 2005 article, Jim Glassman provides a useful review of this sort of external, Cold War driven conceptualization of Southeast Asia, focusing especially on English-language scholarship in the discipline of geography. Glassman

compares the environmental determinist approach of Charles Fisher to the pragmatic constructivist approach of Donald Fryer, a dichotomy played out in various ways across English-language social science and humanities scholarship. Glassman's approach also typifies the stream of scholarship that treats Southeast Asia as tinged with inauthenticity and largely ignores the role of governments and people within the region – who are acted upon, but are not themselves agents of the ideological and social processes constructing Southeast Asia.

Given the prevailing dominance of English-medium cosmopolitanism over the past century, English-language scholarship on Southeast Asia has been particularly powerful in shaping recent ideas about the region. One of the more significant effects is that English cosmopolitanism is plagued by a concern for authenticity of the other; that is to say authenticity of the native, conceived of as standing outside of the space and time of most English-language scholarship. Implicit standards of native purity lurk in the subtext of this scholarship; with the effect that the 'polluting' effects of foreign ideas – in particular the effects of English cosmopolitanism itself – are taken as signs of inauthentic regionalism. When such signs can be discerned, Southeast Asia is cast as a somehow less-than-worthy cultural construct.

Critiques of regionalism – of scholarship on the subject and of active diplomacy and interactions – are at their most vigorous carried off with a combination of cynical realism and rational-choice reductionism. Somewhat inexplicably, these arguments particularly in the realm of international relations scholarship take nation-states (which did not exist a century ago) to be real actors with real interests while casting Southeast Asian regionalism as an elite Panglossian fantasy. In a similar vein, many of the same authors as well as others insist that forces external to Southeast Asia – such as Cold War superpower actors and American-based scholars – must be understood as substantially instrumental in the formation of Southeast Asian regionalism, while intra-regional initiatives are to be understood as insubstantial, fleeting, and illusory.

Realizing Southeast Asia

Given the Anglo-American centered, English-medium biases of scholarship over the past several decades, the most underappreciated and discursively dismissed conditions of Southeast Asian regionalism are the initiatives undertaken from within the region. Amitav Acharya's succinct analysis of Southeast Asian regionalism published in 2000 made an important contribution to addressing this lacuna by developing the story of Southeast Asian regionalism with a focus on intraregional actors, but with less overt advocacy than found in much of the

writing of ASEAN enthusiasts. Acharya's thesis is that Southeast Asia has in many respects been realized – brought into being – through a combination of broad political, economic, social, and cultural conditions of the late twentieth century and the active role of Southeast Asian politicians and diplomats. He traces the cultivation of Emerson's rose, but with much greater attention to the local gardeners.

In the mid-twentieth century, the fraught and contested process of decolonization entrenched nationalism as the basis for new polities in the region. At the same time, European colonial powers were supplanted by Cold War superpowers of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China, each with their own designs on the region. While not dismissing the substantial effects of Cold War geopolitics on the region, the significance of Acharya's thesis is to undermine the overbearing, Washington, Moscow, or Beijing reading of the region as a theater in which their own passion play was performed, with local petty lords as bit players. Acharya reads the field instead from the point of view of the motives, desires, and activities of local actors, with the Cold War geopolitics, the retreat of Europe, and the rise of America, China, and the Soviet Union a backdrop. From within Southeast Asia, the master narrative is one of decolonization and the rise and normalization of nation-states, not the global maneuverings of Cold War superpowers.

From the post-World War II era through the 1990s a range of initiatives by actors within Southeast Asia aimed at establishing linkages transcending Cold War divisiveness. In 1946, for instance, Acharya notes that Ho Chi Minh was writing to the Prime Minister of Indonesia in an initiative to develop a "Federation of Free Peoples of Southern Asia" to include Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Burma, and Malaya. But in the early post-war period, when much of the region was involved in violent struggles over decolonization, an inchoate sense of regional distinctiveness was weak at best. Rather, Ho Chi Minh, Sukarno, and others had grander visions of broad Third World alliances. These initiatives undoubtedly reached their zenith in the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung. Such attempts at broad alliances waned in subsequent years, as their sheer scope made them diplomatically, strategically, and politically unworkable.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the first substantial initiatives toward a more modest and Southeast Asia focused internationalism were launched. These included the Association of Southeast Asia spearheaded by Malaysia's Tunku Abdul Rahman and Malphilindo (Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia) initiated by Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal. While each of these ideas was short lived, they set the stage for the August 1967 establishment of the ASEAN.

ASEAN was composed of the pro-capitalist and anticommunist governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, the

Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. In the first decades of its existence, it was commonly looked upon as a pro-capitalist block at odds with the Vietnamese-dominated pro-communist region of Indochina (including Laos and Cambodia) and with socialist Burma. Here again there is cause to see some dissonance between American and other external Cold War readings of the region and the primary concerns of actors within ASEAN and Southeast Asia. The anticommunist concerns of the ASEAN governments had far more to do with internal struggles for power in the context of making new nations than with ideological and geopolitical concerns of distant Cold War superpowers. The ASEAN governments were concerned with the countries of Indochina (and perhaps more so China) as communist states, but primarily to the extent that Vietnam or China might give support to the internal communist movements in each ASEAN country. From its inception, ASEAN had the aim to incorporate all of the countries considered geopolitically within Southeast Asia and its chief driving ideology was non-interference between territorially defined nation-states, not anticommunism.

From its founding through the 1990s, ASEAN did much to solidify the concept of Southeast Asia. The nation-state came to define both the limits and foundations of Southeast Asian regionalism. ASEAN developed as a mapped geo-body, in much the same way that its constituent members developed as territorially recognized polities, by cultural and political processes described in great detail by Thongchai Winichakul for Thailand. Various ambiguities were worked out, such as the status of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) – considered for inclusion in ASEAN at an early date, but eventually denied membership. And by the end of the 1990s, with the rapid dissolution of Cold War conditions and just as importantly the dissolution of serious internal communist threats with member states, ASEAN came to include its current ten-member states, incorporating Indochina and Myanmar (Burma). Of course, such historical closure is always subject to ongoing changes; the ambiguous status of newly independent Timor Leste (East Timor) being the most obvious example. Even at its most complete, the contemporary ASEAN-based notion of Southeast Asia remains contested within and beyond the region.

One of the most common bases of discursive dismissal (in frequent and almost reflexive discounting of local initiatives) is the Eurocentric concept of political regionalism as nation-state writ large. This is not just vaguely Eurocentric, but the very specific tendency to take Europe as the model for all political regionalisms. Europe and the political entity of the European Union is premised on an ethno-racial identity that is more than analogous to the idealized ethno-racial identities which (often problematically) underwrite the political legitimacy of nation-states. Europe and the European Union are

taken as prototypical of what a region should be and any entities that lack the characteristics of this prototype are then found wanting. This is grossly evident throughout assessments of Southeast Asia and ASEAN in particular.

The ASEAN community does not replicate a nation-state writ large so much as a plural society writ large. The strengths and weaknesses, possibilities, and limits of ASEAN reiterate those of plural societies more so than those of nation-states. It is worth recalling that the pre-eminent theorist of the plural society, J. S. Furnivall, was himself casting it as an unworkable construct of colonial machinations, in which the ability of natives to forge the common will of a European-type national society was thwarted by cultural divisions fostered by and for the benefit of European colonialists. At the same time, the conditions identified by Furnivall became political realities for postcolonial states and fostered multiculturalist political ideologies, such as Indonesia's 'Unity in Diversity'.

In Acharya's work and that of others of similar inclination, there is ongoing ambivalence toward the origins and legacy of Southeast Asian regionalism. It is possible – as Reid and others have done – to trace historical continuities into the present from the millennia old patterns of commerce and cultural diffusion, not to mention the physical geography and environment. Yet at the same time, it is easy to see how such sense of region is always contingent; a reality made and unmade through systemic political, economic, and social forces as much as through intentional human agency and imaginative practices. Southeast Asia has been an imaginative geographic construct for Westerners, Japanese, Chinese, and Soviets. Embodied at present in the form of ASEAN, Southeast Asia has also been substantively realized through indigenous imaginative practices. But realization at present is not the end of history. Moreover, Southeast Asia cum ASEAN remains as much an aspirational construct as a

realized entity. In parallel to the concept of 'nations of intent', developed by Shamsul A. B. to describe Malaysian nationalism, we could likewise consider ASEAN as a 'region of intent'. Southeast Asia is as much a process as a product or an object.

See also: Asia; Ethnicity; Geopolitics; Physical Geography and Human Geography; Place, Politics of; Political Geography; Regionalism; South Asia.

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