

# **ASEAN developments seen from the outside**

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## Introduction

What does it mean to see developments in the ASEAN "from the outside"? I take this to mean that I should neither concentrate on any of the Southeast Asian countries in particular nor on their relations with each other, but instead look at the place of Southeast Asia in world affairs. My task as a political historian must be to deepen our discussion by delving into the past, and broaden our understanding by applying a global perspective. In this I will seek assistance from a Norwegian compatriot, Mr. Frederik Bolling, who visited East India and China 1670–73, arriving on a Dutch ship. I came here with Singapore and Malaysian airlines.

530 million people now live in the ten member states of ASEAN. This is well over two thirds of the population in the whole continent of Europe. Southeast Asia is indeed likely to catch up with Europe demographically at some point in this century. On the other hand, Southeast Asia has only a little more than one third of the population in each of its two neighbour regions. On a demographic map, Southeast Asia looks as if it were squeezed between the 1,3 billion South Asians and the 1,4 billion Northeast Asians. When the demographic map is combined with a political map, the impression is reinforced by the fact that Southeast Asia is divided in ten states, whereas the two neighbouring regions are dominated by two mega-states.

Frederik Bolling did not have access to demographic statistics, but he registered the multitude of nations in the East Indies. Batavia, he claimed, was a meeting place for all the nations of the world, except black Africans. In his *East Indian Travelogue (Oost-Indiske Reise-Bog)*, which was published in Copenhagen in 1677, he listed 37 heathen nations in Batavia and 15 Christian. Virtually all of them spoke Malay, he said, a language valued as highly in East India as Latin in Europe. Mr Bolling studied some Malay and wrote a little Latin-Danish-Malay dictionary (on his return journey, as a prisoner of the English, he would also learn their language).

Throughout its history Southeast Asia has been a maritime region and a crossroads of civilisations. The French historian Denys Lombard has in a three-volume book on Java, *Le carrefour javanais* (The Javanese crossroads) treated the Javanese culture as an onion. In the first volume he peels off its Western layer, in the

second the Chinese, Islamic and Indian layers underneath. In the third volume he looks for legacies from the concentric local kingdoms that dominated the Southeast Asian archipelago in a distant path. Like in an onion, however, Lombard could not find a uniquely indigenous Javanese cultural chore.<sup>1</sup> The American historian and political scientist Benedict Anderson has written in a famous essay that the Javanese political culture constitutes a "unique amalgam".<sup>2</sup> However, another expert outsider, the Australian Anthony Reid (who now heads a research institute in California), has tried to single out a number of specifically Southeast Asian features that give the region its personality: houses built on poles, the dominance of rice and fish in the diet, palm trees, the chewing of betel, the prominence of women, the idea that all things are animated with a spirit, the importance of debts in determining social obligation, and maritime intercourse on the "warm and placid" South China Sea.<sup>3</sup>

The main Southeast Asian populations have lived close to the sea. Peasants, landowners and governments have not attributed a low status to fishermen and seafarers they way they have in China. In Southeast Asia the marginalised minorities have rather been the aboriginals living deep in the forests. All of Southeast Asia differs in this respect from China, except Vietnam where the peasants in the coastal lowlands have also lived with their backs to the sea. Thus not only the highland minorities, but also the boat people in the coastal villages have lived precariously on the margin of Vietnamese society, just like in China.

To outsiders Southeast Asia has not only been interesting for its resources and its many different nations, but also as a thoroughfare. Ships from China, Japan and the Ryukyus would sail through the South China Sea, the maritime heart of Southeast Asia, to link up with trade networks in the Indian Ocean. When Frederik Belling's ship sailed north from Batavia, passing Singapore, crossing the Gulf of Siam and turning north at the island Poulo Condor, two Chinese junks appeared, apparently on their way from Japan with a rich cargo. The Dutch ship captain decided to attack them, but the cannons were fired too early so the bullets dropped in the sea. The junks fled into shallow waters where the Dutch ship could not sail, and the hunt had to be

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<sup>1</sup> Denys Lombard. *Le carrefour javanais. Essays d'histoire globale*. Vol. I: *Les limites de l'occidentalisation*. Vol. II: *Les réseaux asiatiques*. Vol. III: *L'héritage des royaumes concentriques*. Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson. "The idea of power in Javanese culture." in *Language and Power, Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Reid. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988 (vol. 1), 1995 (vol. 2).

abandoned. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, European ships took part in the rich Asian trade, competing with the local ships, and forming little colonies at strategic locations: Melaka, Manila, Batavia, eventually Singapore and Saigon. "Hollanderne hafver faste plasser ved Soekanten udi de Hedenske Konge-Riger" (The Dutch have fixed locations at the seaboard in the heathen kingdoms), wrote Frederik Bølling. For three centuries the Europeans were primarily traders and missionaries, but with the industrial revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Europeans gained such superiority technologically, economically and militarily that they ended up as colonial masters in all of Southeast Asia except in the kingdom of Siam. Frederik Bølling knew this would happen already by 1677, although at that time the Europeans had not yet outdistanced Asians in terms of production and technology: Only in two places in the world could one find white elephants, said Bølling, in Ceylon and Siam. And it was said that if a white elephant met a dark-skinned elephant, then the dark elephant would kneel down in front of him, wherefrom Bølling concluded that "de svarte Hedninger skal blifve de hvide Christne underdanige" (the black heathens will become subservient to the white Christians). This was not yet always the case. Bølling had noticed in Batavia how the Javanese looked at the Dutch with a bad eye.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Southeast Asia was an arena of confrontation between the world's major economic, military, political and ethno-religious forces. The area was colonised by five different Western powers, which introduced European science, drew up maps, demarcated borders, had new roads and ports built, and established European-style administrations. Through widespread abuse and exploitation, the European colonialists provoked a surge of nationalist and communist movements. These movements also depended on inter-regional networks. Some were inspired by Japan, some by the Guomindang in China, and some by Soviet Russia. Several of them wanted to form federations across the borders imposed by the Europeans. Eventually, however, just as in Africa, the borders of the nation-states that emerged from the decolonisation process were to coincide with those established in the colonial period.

The Southeast Asian nations followed different trajectories in the decolonisation period. The independent Siam transformed itself to the constitutional nation-state Thailand. The Philippines and Burma obtained their independence, along with India and Sri Lanka, shortly after the Second World War through decisions in Washington and London. Indonesia and Vietnam declared their independence when

Japan surrendered in 1945, but the Dutch and French returned so they had to fight for their independence until 1949 and 1954 respectively. Malaya, Cambodia and Laos went through a more drawn-out and orderly decolonisation process, while the colonial power in cooperation with the local elite, repressed communist movements.

Both Indochina and Indonesia went through insurgencies and internal wars. Indonesia also tried to prevent the creation of Malaysia in 1963, but gave up its policy of *konfrontasi* after Suharto had seized power in 1965. This was the immediate background for the successful creation of ASEAN, in 1967, at the height of US intervention in Vietnam. Southeast Asia was deeply divided by the cold war, and ASEAN was an organisation of non-communist states, held together by a common concern for preventing communism to spread from China and Indochina into the rest of Southeast Asia.

When the cold war ended globally, the relationship between ASEAN and Vietnam also improved. In 1989, Vietnam withdrew its forces from Cambodia, which it had invaded in 1978, and Vietnam gained ASEAN membership in 1995. With the inclusion of Laos, Burma and Cambodia over the next three years, ASEAN became a regional organisation for all of Southeast Asia. The post-cold war period also had its ideological divisions. Think tanks and politicians in Malaysia and Singapore developed an agenda based on "Asian values" that would explain the region's extraordinary economic growth and prevent excessive Western influence. This agenda was controversial in the region itself, although most people realise that Southeast Asia need some kind of overarching regional identity that cuts across divisions based on religion or political ideology. If there were to be a 'clash of civilisations' in this world, then Southeast Asia would be among the regions to suffer most. It is no coincidence that Samuel Huntington, in his book *Clash of Civilizations* gave the South China Sea the same role in an imagined Third World War as Sarajevo had in the First World War.

Towards the end of the cold war, the importance of ASEAN increased significantly. Despite the fact that it does not include any of Asia's three great powers (China, Japan, India), and also has very little leverage vis-à-vis its member states, ASEAN has played a key role in all attempts to establish regional dialogue and co-operation in East Asia, the Asia-Pacific and Asia in general. ASEAN has organised Southeast Asian summits and has involved external powers in dialogues. The willingness of the Southeast Asian nations to put aside their own differences in order

to promote regional co-operation was essential to improving regional relations in the whole of Pacific Asia in the 1980s and 1990s.

Clearly, ASEAN has been more successful in widening its membership and establishing multilateral frameworks for consultation with others, than in deepening cooperation among its own membership. Southeast Asia is not much integrated internally. The Malay language, in two slightly different versions, has been turned into the national language of Malaysia and Indonesia, but it is no longer a lingua franca for traders from everywhere in the world. English has taken over that role. Few Southeast Asians learn the language of other Southeast Asian states. Most of the Southeast Asian countries have stronger economic and communicational links with Northeast Asia, some also with the United States, than they have with each other. This does not, however, apply to South Asia. By contrast to earlier historical periods, there was relatively little trade and communication between India and Southeast Asia in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (but this may be about to change). At present, it seems reasonable to consider Southeast Asia a part of a larger East Asian region that is distinguishable from South and Central Asia.

How can we explain that ASEAN has been such a prominent actor in regional cooperation when the region it represents is so little integrated internally? There are two main reasons. The first is that the Southeast Asian nations, despite their many differences, all see ASEAN as a possible guarantee against Northeast Asian, notably Chinese, hegemony. By combining their forces, they have a better chance of defending their interests, such as in the dispute over maritime delimitation and sovereignty to islands in the "warm and placid" South China Sea. The other reason for ASEAN's prominence in international affairs is the lack of cooperation in Northeast Asia, due to the division of Korea, the conflict over the status of Taiwan, and the historical animosities between Japan and China. The continued lack of trust between China and Japan does not only make it necessary for the United States to maintain its military presence, but also leaves ASEAN with a main responsibility for instigating cooperation and confidence among all the East Asian states.

This has given ASEAN several roles. It has tried to play them all at the same time. First, it has widened its own membership to include all ten Southeast Asian states, while upholding plans to create an internal free trade area (AFTA). Second, it has promoted cooperation with Northeast Asia through the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) and the instigation of a new framework for East Asian Cooperation at

the summit meeting in Manila last November (1999). Thirdly, since 1995 it has engaged the European Union in ASEM (ASEAN-Europe Meetings). This was after all the ASEAN member states had joined the cross-Pacific cooperation forum APEC, where Europeans of course are excluded. And ASEAN has been instrumental in creating an even larger framework for dialogues about security in the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), where India and Russia take part alongside the United States and the European Union. The result is a time-consuming multilateral imbroglio, and a considerable degree of uncertainty as to what issues should be resolved under which institutional framework. By trying to do everything at the same time, ASEAN does not seem to produce very tangible results, although its role in preventive diplomacy should not be ignored. A famous local saying is that it is better to "jaw jaw" than to "war war". To talk is better than to fight.

The current institutional imbroglio cannot, however, last forever. To meet the challenges of globalisation, the Southeast Asians as well as the Northeast Asians need effective multilateral institutions. And choices made in East Asia may have a tremendous impact on the global institutional architecture. Today there seem to be three main roads ahead for the global political community:

The first is to downplay regional institutions and let the global multilateral organisations have an increasingly authoritative role: the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, the IMF and others. This would enhance the influence of small countries with a global agenda but a weak position in its region, like Norway. It could also lay the foundation for global democracy in the future.

The other road leads to a unipolar world, dominated by the United States. This would be a world where the European Union fails to realise its current aims and where East Asia remains divided. Europeans and Asians would then have little say in global affairs, but would compete with each other for America's favour. The two cross-ocean organisations, NATO and APEC, would be instruments for maintaining the commitment of the United States to ensuring security in Europe, the oil-producing Middle East, and (through its alliance with Japan) in East Asia, and also for keeping the enormous American market open to foreign products.

The third road is regional. It leads to a world built on a triangular power structure: America, East Asia and Europe, with increasing economic, political and military integration in each block. This would marginalise Africa, Russia and South Asia, but triangles may be more stable than a unipolar structure. The main reason why

this road does not seem open today is not in Europe. The European Union has got quite far in terms of integration, and is about to establish a political agenda that will be distinguishable from that of the United States. The main factor blocking the road to a triangular world is the lack of trust and cooperation among the Northeast Asian states. This, of course, is the same factor that continues to ensure ASEAN its prominent role in regional 'jaw jaw'-ing.

The question is then if ASEAN can continue to play its many key roles in the decade that has just started, and how it will play its roles? Much remains to be done. The institutional infrastructures for co-operation in the fields of security, politics and economic regulation remain weak. In the last few years, the ASEAN countries have also been weakened:

- ASEAN was unable to get in the forefront of fighting the regional financial and economic crisis during 1997–99. This task was mostly left to individual states, with assistance, advice and pressure from the IMF and the World Bank. ASEAN did not have sufficient financial clout to play the role it wanted.
- ASEAN has broadened its membership to include Vietnam, Laos, Burma (Myanmar) and Cambodia. With a membership of ten states, the risk of internal division is greater than at the time when the organisation consisted only of its five founding members.
- Indonesia, the largest state in ASEAN, is still in crisis, and is in danger of political fragmentation and chaos. Thus Indonesia will find it difficult to play the stabilising role in the region that it did play during President Suharto's long reign (1965/67–98). However, it is interesting that Indonesia's new democratically elected president, Abdurahman Wahid, has seen the problem so clearly. Immediately after his election he set out to reinstate Indonesia as a stabilising power, and to cultivate his relations with China, the overseas Chinese community, the USA, Japan and other countries.
- An ideological cleavage has emerged between those of ASEAN's member states who are committed to liberal democracy (the Philippines, Thailand, at present also Indonesia) and those who give emphasis to defending the right of every nation to choose its own form of government (Malaysia, Singapore,



Brunei, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos). The latter form a majority in ASEAN.

- A new independent state, East Timor, is about to emerge. If it can overcome its internal divisions, it is likely to be dedicated to “Western”, democratic values, and to maintain a close relationship with Australia.

In the autumn of 1999 the crisis within ASEAN manifested itself in several incidents in the South China Sea, but just before the summit the ASEAN members managed to agree on a proposal for a “code-of-conduct”, which is now being negotiated with China. This is a positive sign.

While ASEAN has been in crisis, and Japan has been hampered by a stagnating economy, the People’s Republic of China has increased its leverage and influence in the region. This has several reasons:

- Although China resisted the temptation to devalue its currency, the Chinese economy got relatively unscathed through the Asian crisis. China has maintained an impressive economic growth (although there are serious structural problems in the Chinese economy).
- The PRC has significantly improved the quality of its regional diplomacy, with a new generation taking over important diplomatic posts abroad. The new diplomats have no background in the old ideological struggles within the greater Chinese community, but represent a normal (although large and ambitious) state in relations with other governments.
- China has embraced and benefited from the “Asian Values” discourse of Malaysia and Singapore, which has consisted in defending regional regimes against Western interference.
- China has also enlisted support from Russia and the new Central Asian states for its defence of national sovereignty. Thus China has become the leader of a camp defending a principle which used to be revered also in the West.
- China has acted with a certain degree of restraint in its regional environment and has thus managed to promote its national security interests, and embark on the modernisation of its military forces, without inflicting serious damage to its relations with other states (perhaps except the Philippines, and Taiwan).

- China has become a net importer of oil, and now also natural gas. This means that Beijing will see a need to protect the sea-lanes from the Middle East through the South China Sea. This need is likely to be translated both into a further naval build-up and a more active diplomatic posture in Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. The role of the PRC, provided it stays strong and united, will be gradually transformed from that of a regional to a global power.

All of this adds up to a situation where ASEAN, in everything it does, will have to consider the China factor. The relationship to China will have high priority in all the Southeast Asian capitals. There is at present a possibility that East Asia will slide into its own version of the formerly global "cold war". China takes the lead in a camp opposing Western interventionism, while the US tries to bolster the nations who have adopted electoral democracy: Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. The problem for China, and other states in that camp, is that they will continue to depend on access to loans from multilateral agencies, investments from trans-national companies with basis in the USA, Japan and Europe, and unimpeded access to American and European markets. Thus they will be inclined to avoid open conflict with "the West", and try to combine a reasonably friendly relationship with the USA and Europe with ideological and diplomatic rearguard actions to build alliances behind the non-interference principle.

Two test cases for global power relations at the moment are the Chinese application for WTO membership, and the choice of the new leader of the International Monetary Fund. For the IMF post, the world's three leading regions have one candidate each: the German Koch-Weser, the Japanese Eisuke Sakakibara and the American Stanley Fisher. With the compromise solution reached two years ago for the World Trade Organisation fresh in our minds, it is safe to predict that there will be many similar disputes in the future.

I will now return to the perspective of my European homeland. Please allow me to call it that although I come from Norway. Frederik Bolling also referred to Europe as "Fæderne-landet" (the Fatherland). For almost a decade now, the European approach to East Asia has been ambivalent because the following goals and interests are difficult to reconcile:

- Promote humanitarian values (this tends to align Europe with the USA, and with democratic opposition movements in Asia).
- Play up to home audiences critical of authoritarian regimes (this works in the same direction).
- Promote regional co-operation in Pacific Asia, under inspiration from the European Union (this induces Europeans to take a conciliatory attitude to Asian regimes, since state to state co-operation must build on existing regimes).
- Increase Europe's short-term influence (works in the same direction).
- Sell European products in Asia, in competition with Japan and the USA (this increases the temptation to downpedal criticism of Asian regimes).

A scenario where APEC becomes an important organisation is not in Europe's interest. If APEC dominates, then Europe will need to bolster ASEM as a Euro-Asian alternative, but ASEM will never be able to match APEC in importance. Instead of trying to develop the specifically Asia-European ASEM framework, we Europeans should rather formulate a strategy for enhancing our cooperation with Asian nations in the global, multilateral institutions, while also leaving room for increased regional co-operation in Asia itself. Such a strategy must, however, be combined with a principled defence for European values, not perhaps for the superiority of white Christians, as Frederik Bolling would have it, but for universal human rights, social equity and democracy.

On a final note, however, I will do like Frederik Bolling, and apologise for mistakes and misjudgements caused by lack of information the latest ASEAN developments. Before concluding his travelogue, Bolling asked his readers to realise that "udi Oost-Indien saa vel forandris alting som udi vort Land saa at der er nu stoer forskiel baade paa deris Politie, som paa deris Religion, frem for der hafver været for tyfve Aar" (in the East Indies everything changes just like in our country so there is now much both in their politics and their religion which differs from what it was like twenty years ago.) Even from the perspective of a distant outsider, it is striking how much change Southeast Asia has gone through over the last twenty years. And Southeast Asia will continue to change.