
“The “English School”, South East Asia, and Indonesia: Locating and Defending Productive “middle ground”

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengelaborasi bahwa perspektif pluralis dari kalangan mazhab Inggris (English School) menyediakan sejumlah kemungkinan analisis yang berguna dalam menganalisis kajian Asia Tenggara. Salah satu kontribusi paling penting dari mazhab Inggris adalah menempatkan analisis level menengah (middle ground) yang acapkali dilupakan dari debat teoritis yang ada. Hal ini bisa menjembatani diskursus yang dilakukan oleh berbagai pandangan, apakah mereka kaum realis dan konstruktivis atau realis dan kaum liberal. Hal ini juga bisa memberikan pemahaman yang lebih berorientasi sosial atas peran dari sebuah kekuatan besar – ASEAN, sebuah pemahaman yang memberi interpretasi yang lebih arif tentang Indonesia dan tantangan apa yang dihadapi.

Kata kunci: mazhab Inggris, middle ground, Asia Tenggara, pluralis

Abstract

This article elaborates that a pluralist English School perspective offers a number of possibilities that are useful in analysing SEA. Its prime contribution is to help locate the middle ground that is often missing from theoretical debates. Thus, it can bridge parallel discourses, whether they be realist and constructivist, or realist and liberal. It can also provide a socially oriented understanding of the role of great powers – an understanding that provides a much more subtle interpretation of what Indonesia offers the region, and the challenges it faces there.

Keywords: English School, middle ground, Southeast Asia, Pluralist

INTRODUCTION

“Theorizing” Southeast Asia (SEA) is notoriously problematic. Collections of theoretical perspectives (Acharya & Stubbs, 2006; Rüdland & Jetschke, 2008) attest to widely varying views, none of which is wholly satisfactory on its own. Realists account for the “power” elements of the SEA story, but not the “community” elements; liberals understand the institution-making impetus, but not the rather thin nature of these institutions; constructivists grasp the importance of ideas and norms, but sometimes give more weight to identity than the region can comfortably bear (Narine, 2006); left-oriented theories speak

powerfully to structural constraints, but less convincingly to agential strategies. None alone can tell a story that adequately captures all these many contradictory streams and strands.

Nor is this simply an academic conundrum. All observers – activists, diplomats, government officials, television viewers – have a political lens, whether they acknowledge it or not. The difficulties of framing SEA therefore do not stay comfortably within academia. They resurface at the level of expectations, perceptions and policy, both in SEA and beyond. How SEA is seen and talked about *matters*.

This article will suggest that the so-called “English School” (ES) of International Relations has a useful contribution to make, and is currently under-exploited. It will argue that the ES’s capacity to recognize and defend conceptual “in-between” spaces makes it a natural bridge between realist and constructivist, statist and liberal, or structural and agential interpretations. It therefore facilitates a more nuanced – and sometimes more positive – interpretation of the region’s dynamics, with implications for our understanding of both the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Indonesia’s role within it.

It is emphatically *not* being claimed that the ES is a complete, final, stand-alone answer to the problems of interpreting SEA’s politics. But its contribution, though partial, offers a valuable alternative view, which deserves greater attention.

Furthermore, this is a two-way, open-ended conversation. As Halliday notes, using a theory to look at a region should never be a one-directional affair (2009, 2). Regions have data and political cultures from which theories can and should learn. The ES is still developing, and input from SEA can usefully influence that development. There is a synergy here that has not yet been sufficiently exploited.

The argument will be developed as follows. The first section briefly reviews the key concepts that characterize the ES’s approach to International Relations, and relates this perspective to SEA. The second section suggests two areas where ES theory, by locating some useful middle ground, can provide a different view of SEA – and, turning the tables, the equivalent areas where the theory can gain from observing ASEAN’s experience. The third repeats this process, but looks more specifically at the example of Indonesia. The fourth section evaluates the usefulness of this theoretical approach, arguing that it makes a modest but positive contribution to our overall understanding of political dynamics in SEA, but contending, too, that the theoretical framework has much to learn from continued interaction with the region.

METHODOLOGY

THE ENGLISH SCHOOL AND ASEAN

Key ES ideas

The English School (ES) is best known for its concept of international society. The basic idea, Buzan explains, is quite simple: “Just as human beings as individuals live in societies which they both shape and are shaped by, so also states live in an international society which they shape and are shaped by” (2001, 477). But the international version is an anarchical society. Without a recognized “world government”, it has to rely on more complicated mechanisms for the establishment and maintenance of order. The ES’s hallmark, therefore, is an interest in the inter-state cooperation and socialization that still exist *despite* all the reasons they might be expected not to exist.

It attaches particular importance to the *institutions* that underpin that cooperation; however, it understands institutions not primarily in the sense of visible organizations, but in the sense of underlying sets of “habits and practices shaped towards the realisation of common goals” (Bull, 2002, 71). The existence of an international society therefore presupposes that a group of states have not only become aware of “common interests and common values”, but also understand themselves to be “bound by a common set of rules”, and share in “the working of common institutions”. Bull’s institutions include sovereignty, diplomacy, the balance of power, the managerial role of great powers, and international law (2002, 13, 39). However, institutions vary in accordance with the notions of legitimacy prevalent at any given time. Indeed, for Clark, it is the idea of legitimacy that makes an international society. Where there is a belief among states that they are bound to a certain set of institutions and practices, he argues, there is also an international society (2005, 23).

ES tradition, however, has never maintained that international society is the *only* dynamic at work in the world. The societal impulse shares the stage with powerful patterns of inter-state rivalry on the one hand, and various kinds of state-transcending ideology on the other. Wight’s “three traditions” (realism,

pragmatic internationalism, and universalism) clearly articulate a realm of political plurality (1991), and there is never any guarantee that the middle (societal) element in this conversation will survive (Bull, 2002, 39). While remaining aware of these competing strands, ES scholarship has traditionally focused on the middle-ground tradition of international society – precisely because this is the one that is most easily squeezed out by the loud voices of power and transnationalism on either side.

On a rough spectrum of ideas and theories, then, the ES's points of emphasis (on society, order, and inter-state social relations) would sit somewhere between realism (with its focus on anarchy, power, and inter-state competition) and the various transnational theories (liberal, Marxist, religious, and so on), which in different ways focus on *transcending* the state to reach emancipation in a borderless world. In its belief in the possibility of political progress, likewise, the ES sits somewhere between realism (where power patterns endlessly repeat themselves) and liberalism (which tends to the teleological). In its interpretation of power, it sits somewhere between realism (with its focus on material power) and constructivism (with its focus on ideational power).

It would be a mistake, however, to think of these categories as rigidly separated. They are more like pools of paint on a palette, which blend into each other at the edges. On a narrower theoretical spectrum – ranging, for example, from classical realism (à la Morgenthau), through ES ideas, to thin constructivism (à la Wendt) – there is considerable overlap at the edges.

It would also be a mistake to think of ES middle ground as the grey, watered-down zone of “not quite this” and “not quite that”. The middle ground, as depicted by ES scholars, is a pragmatic, creative, productive, and potentially progressive area. It is constantly under assault from political currents with more seductive slogans, but it is eminently worth defending.

Applying ES ideas to SEA

Whatever its overlaps and struggles, this middle-ground positioning allows the ES to facilitate conversations between a range of opposite poles, and this, it will be argued, is one of its major advantages in interpreting the politics of SEA.

International societies, according to ES scholars, are not all the same. “Thinner”, pluralist societies stress the values of individual state autonomy, diversity, and minimalism, while “thicker”, solidarist societies seek a more ambitious level of cooperation, in a wider range of areas, and with a higher tolerance of enforcement. ASEAN's pluralism, for example, is often contrasted with the European Union's solidarism.

Normatively, too, individual ES scholars also endorse different positions. “Pluralists” stress the virtues of gradualism, tolerance, and the preservation of diversity, while “solidarists” push for faster progress and higher goals, with the aim of more quickly reaching solutions to pressing problems. This article is written from a pluralist perspective. This is partly because that position best reflects where ASEAN currently finds itself (as will be discussed in the next section), but also because the vantage-point offered by a pluralist perspective gives better traction in isolating a distinctive ES position, and defending the middle ground that is so vital in SEA.

The ES also has interesting arguments to advance about the nature and role of non-state actors in SEA (see Quayle, forthcoming), but these are beyond the scope of the present article.

Early ES scholarship concentrated on the international society that manifested itself at a global level. More recently, however, interest has turned to “sub-global international societies” (Buzan, 2004; Buzan & Gonzalez-Pelaez, 2009; Hurrell, 2007). In this article, therefore, ASEAN will be understood as the organizational expression of a regional international society (a subfield of the global international society).

ASEAN does not technically need to exist for there to be an international society in the region. ES writers, keen not to distract attention from the

underlying institutions of international society, tend to portray inter-governmental organizations such as ASEAN as part of its "auxiliary framework" (Jackson, 2000, 105). Of course, ASEAN as an organization is important. It plays a significant role in symbolizing "a shared commitment to fundamental international institutions and principles" (Narine, 2006, 205), and in testifying to its members' desire to play a more demanding regional version of the international society game, in parallel with the minimal version that exists on a global level. But ASEAN is essentially a *symptom* of cooperation, not a *cause*. It is not surprising, then, that its hands are often tied. It is essentially the servant, not the master, of the international society that underlies it.

From the point of view of ES ideas, the international society observable in SEA has succeeded in identifying a number of common interests (reducing vulnerability, maintaining independence, resisting hegemonial threats inside and outside the region, protecting sovereignty, promoting economic growth, and bolstering regional order and stability) and common values (consultation, non-aggression, non-interference, and a sense of cultural distinctness). The common institutions it has formed (sovereignty, diplomacy, the pursuit of economic resilience, and socially organized balancing strategies, including the shaping of a role for great powers) reflect these interests and values, and indicate that SEA is essentially a pluralist society. The fact that many of these values and institutions are starting to shift, however, points to a society that is also investigating moves towards solidarism.

Scholarship that applies ES ideas to SEA is still fairly limited in scope. The idea that SEA can be seen as a regional international society, with ASEAN as the outward expression of some of its institutions, has been noted (Chong, 2009; Narine, 2006, 2008, 2009), as has the relevance to SEA, and to Asia more generally, of ES ideas about order (Alagappa, 2003) and power-balancing (Acharya, 2005; Emmers, 2003; Goh, 2007/08; Khong, 2005; Odgaard, 2007). Passing references note further potential connections

(for example, Acharya & Buzan, 2007, 289-290; Bellamy, 2005, 23; Buzan, 2004, 238). But much more remains to be explored.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

CLAIMING THE MIDDLE GROUND IN SEA

An ES perspective can bridge two very obvious gaps in the commentary on SEA: the realist/constructivist gap on the relative importance of the themes of power or community in the region; and the realist/liberal gap on ASEAN's community-building plans. This section will look at these in turn.

POWER AND COMMUNITY – CONTRADICTION OR SYNERGY?

It is hard to ignore a very definite power dynamic in SEA. An ever-present awareness of relative power and relative gain exists alongside a palpable sense of competition and jostling. But it is equally hard to ignore a very distinct community urge, with huge amounts of political energy expended on ASEAN processes and goals. Realist discourses tend to foreground the power narrative, and dismiss the region's community impulses as mere window-dressing. Constructivists, on the other hand, acknowledge the reality of community, but often express disappointment with the continued salience of power. Describing SEA in terms of only one of these themes is unsatisfactory. Yet theorists experience difficulty fitting both into a coherent framework.

There have been several attempts to resolve this dilemma. Some theorists have attempted to devise new theories, proposing "soft" realism (Peou, 2002, 135-136), or "realist institutionalism" (Khoo, 2004, 43-44), or "institutional realism" (He, 2006, 189, 195; 2008, 492), or "abridged realism" (Chong, 2006). But none of these solutions seems to fit the bill, as this problem continues to draw scholarly attention (Chiou, 2010, 373; Nesadurai, 2009, 104). As a result, eclecticism – combining elements from multiple theories – is often suggested as the best way forward (see, for example, Batabyal, 2004, 350, 368; Ganesan, 2003).

The ES, however, intrinsically combines ideas of power and community. Its concept of power is acutely aware of the salience of material factors, but also sees power as “a social relationship” (Northedge, 1976, 20, 127). Its concept of international society encapsulates the idea that a group of states can share common goals and develop common patterns of behaviour, while not entirely turning their backs on power considerations. And the ES’s societal dynamic, as noted above, positions itself between much starker forms of power on the one hand and community on the other.

It is therefore able to draw both narratives into an integrated whole. A pluralist English School approach need not share constructivist disappointment that SEA’s states still strive for a balance of power in the region and beyond (Acharya, 2001, 184-185; 2007, 37; 2006, 39; Busse & Maull, 1999), and would see no incompatibility here with their creation of ASEAN. It need not share realist surprise that SEA’s comparatively small states attempt to manage *extra*-regional powers by enmeshing them in frameworks such as ASEAN Plus Three (APT), or the East Asia Summit (EAS), since small powers have always contributed to creating a socially-managed balance of power (Wight, 1978, 160). In ES terms, none of these forums should require states to surrender their power-awareness at the door as they enter, but each provides opportunities – for small and large powers alike – to work on identifying the common interests and values that are an essential part of societal behaviour. “Me-first” realist behaviour is certainly visible in Southeast Asia, and disputes over the South China Sea are currently bringing these to the fore, but the power strand has not – as yet, anyway – fundamentally undermined what is essentially an internationalist orientation.

As well as overcoming some of the discursive incompatibilities of realist and constructivist narratives, this ES picture encourages a recalibration of expectations. States do not have to always move in unison, or forsake all their instincts for self-preservation, to qualify for membership of international society. The concept of international society exists to

explain the phenomenon of unlikely but actually existing cooperation. It can therefore readily provide a label for the activities of polities that have little practice in cooperating as sovereign states, and little incentive to trust each other, but nevertheless invest large amounts of time, money, and energy in promoting community-building activities. Rather than decrying the shortcomings of ASEAN, an ES perspective suggests modest gratification that its existence celebrates a desire and an ability to move beyond purely minimal levels of cooperation.

In this area, then, the ES has much to offer. It can capture the apparently incompatible power and community discourses in one theoretically and historically grounded package, and provide a more modest yardstick by which to evaluate ASEAN’s achievements.

The ES, however, also has much to learn from the region in this area. ES theory is still not clear on how regional international societies relate to the larger societies in which they are embedded. How does SEA’s international society, for example, connect with, or nest within, its broader East Asian or Asia-Pacific counterparts? If ASEAN is the superstructure of a deeper international society, is this also true of the APT or EAS? If so, how do these various levels of international society – building from the states represented in ASEAN, up through the APT and EAS, to the global level – actually relate to each other? Ongoing data from SEA will be crucial in learning how to answer that question.

ASEAN’S COMMUNITY-BUILDING GOALS – ASPIRATIONAL OR ACHIEVABLE?

The second discursive gap that ES narratives can help to bridge is the one that has opened up over ASEAN’s community-building plans. The Association has clear ambitions to become a qualitatively different kind of community, collaborating more deeply on a broader range of issues. But the painful slowness of progress in this direction attracts plenty of adverse commentary. Liberal discourses tend to urge ASEAN on to herculean (and as yet impracticable) feats of community-building, regularly proposing various

(usually extraordinarily complex and difficult) tasks as essential "tests" that ASEAN "must not fail" (there are many instances of this technique, but see, for example, Kavi Chongkittavorn, 2009; Miclat, 2009; So, 2009). Realist narratives, on the other hand, see ASEAN as, at best, a "diplomatic community" (Leifer, 2005, 138), and are highly sceptical of moves to create anything deeper. Over much of the commentary, there is a pall of pessimism. Ravenhill used to distinguish between ASEAN "boosters" and ASEAN "sceptics" (2009, 220). Now, however, boosters are rather too thin on the ground.

Again, the ES can clear some middle ground. Its scholars are acutely aware of the fragility of international cooperation, so its expectations of "community" are correspondingly modest. It therefore rejects the liberal view that ASEAN is fundamentally faulty because its cooperation has not yet taken off to higher levels. However, an ES lens also recognizes and values the *societal* element in international politics, and embraces the idea that societies can consolidate. Progress is difficult, but not impossible. It therefore rejects the realist view that cooperation can only ever be skin-deep.

The ES's focus on underlying *institutions* similarly acts as a reminder not to jeopardize the cooperative practices that have supported ASEAN up to now by trying to move too far too fast. This is by no means a redundant reminder. Many of the underlying institutions that were referred to in the previous section are already under strain. Concepts of sovereignty are shifting, but have not yet consolidated into something new; Indonesia's international profile has grown, prompting regional concerns about abandonment or domination; Myanmar is a constant challenge to the institution of diplomacy; and the pursuit of economic resilience is massively complicated by the vast socio-economic disparities that criss-cross the region. As new norms are forged, the ES acts as a reminder that the basic institutions that have so far undergirded cooperation developed in the particular way they did for a reason. The institution of sovereignty, for example, with its corollary of non-interference, developed

because of lack of trust. Modifying that institution *before* the underlying problem of lack of trust has been fixed is a possible route to trouble. If a bucket is being used to deal with the problem of a leaking roof, there is little to be gained by removing the bucket without first fixing the roof. Non-interference is the bucket, lack of trust the leak.

This is by no means a rejection of change. The institutions of international society are always evolving, and there is nothing abnormal about the challenges that have been posed to SEA's institutions in recent years. But from an ES perspective, effective and deep-rooted change depends on solid consensus.

The much-maligned ASEAN practice of consensus-building is a great frustration for observers who want to see ASEAN travel further and faster. But from a pluralist ES perspective, consensus – even though it might be painful to achieve – is a key criterion in determining the speed with which international societies can advance the scope of their cooperation. In other words, "solidarism" depends on genuine, consensual solidarity (Bull, 2002, 230-232, 305).

Enforcing more ambitious rules is one of the great problems of solidarism. If states agree to take their cooperation to higher levels, and agree on the rules on which that cooperation will be based, then there is theoretically no problem with the idea of those mutually agreed rules being enforced. But for those higher levels of cooperation to withstand the demands of enforcement, they need to have been reached through robust consensus. For enforcement to work, states need to willingly agree to stricter rules, and to the enforcement of those rules – not be coerced into that agreement. Consensus is the horse, and international law the cart – not vice versa (Vincent, 1990, 54-57).

With consensus – which does not, of course, have to equal unanimity, as traditional ASEAN practices make clear – there is no practical or ethical limit on the "thickness" of any given international society. It can be as ambitious as it likes. But without consensus, there are severe limits.

Consensus is not easy to forge. Bull notes that the

process implies a willingness not only to eliminate gross economic inequalities (2002, 314-316), but also to recognize very different values and institutions (1999, 155-156). *Global* international society struggles with both these elements. Its prosperous liberal core has had great difficulty with contemplating demands for serious redistribution – whether these demands are for a New International Economic Order, or for help with tackling climate change. It has not taken seriously the reality that fundamental disparities in economic positioning and the differing needs of individual states have a major bearing on the shape of global institutions (Buzan, 2010, 25). This liberal core of global international society has also found it difficult to accept difference. Lacking global ideological convergence, and too impatient to forge consensus, it has all too often resorted to coercion in promoting its values and interests, making many dubious decisions and strongly reinforcing the hierarchical characteristics of global international society in the process (Clark, 2009, 572-573, 580).

The coercive short-cut to solidarism easily goes wrong. Those who are coerced readily become resentful. And if the anticipated global power shift remains on track, managing by coercion from the liberal core will become an even less viable strategy (Bell, 2007, 43-47).

In terms of consensus-building practice, SEA has much to teach global international society. Whatever is made of the ASEAN Charter, it has to be acknowledged that the fact that it appeared at all was a major achievement for bridge-building diplomacy (Koh, Manalo, & Woon, 2009). Whatever the inadequacies of the ASEAN Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights, the fact that it was established at all is a huge step forward, and its Terms of Reference provide a host of norm-building opportunities (Haywood, Kaur, & Caballero-Anthony, 2010).

Yet, within SEA, too, the coercive route to solidarism – despite its dubious success at global level – often beckons too attractively as an alternative to a consensus-building that is deemed too frustrating and too slow. Demands for organizations, or rules, or

processes to be given “teeth” (that is, the capacity to coerce) are very understandable. But without securing genuine consensus on installing the teeth, they will never truly be able to bite – or may end up biting the wrong people. If solidarism-by-coercion is problematic at global level, and too apt to create careless winners and sore losers, it is doubly so within close geographical confines, and in a region where levels of inter-state trust are already low, and divisions already problematic. Consensus-building is easily criticized, but the precise nature of proposed alternatives to consensus is often left unexamined.

ES ideas therefore provide a valuable counter-narrative on the question of community-building in ASEAN. Unlike so much commentary, they do not undervalue pluralist cooperation, or insist that ASEAN has no utility until it dramatically raises its game. They call attention to the ever-present dangers of losing what is good in pursuit of what is better. And by foregrounding the role of consensus in solidarism, they shed a different light on a much maligned aspect of ASEAN practice.

But the theory also has a lot to learn. It can currently offer a diagnosis, but not much of a prescription. It therefore stands to gain hugely over the coming years from ongoing observation of ASEAN’s community-building practice. The ES’s solidarist scholars have traditionally focused on liberal ideals of democracy and human rights as routes to solidarism. But these are very difficult areas in which to forge consensus in SEA. Its pluralist scholars have too often been reluctant to contemplate solidarism at all. But this is not a satisfactory recipe for SEA, where ambition for a deeper community cannot and should not be simply turned off.

Some ES literature hints that a solidarist community can be built on the basis of other areas of consensus-building – such as identity, economics, or functional cooperation – but it offers few further pointers. It has much to learn from SEA, therefore, since these are precisely the areas where ASEAN is at work, doing its utmost to promote a regional sense of belonging that will smooth the way to more region-focused

policies, and striving to advance economic and other functional cooperation in a way that will bring more direct and material benefits to the region's population. In this sense, SEA resembles a giant construction site aimed at turning a pluralist society into a solidarist one, and ES understandings of community-building will be substantially enhanced by staying in touch with ASEAN's experiences over the next few years.

INDONESIA THROUGH AN ES LENS

ES perspectives are also useful in evaluating Indonesia's position, both as a regional power and a putative world power. The ES defines "great powers" not only in terms of their material status (the reach of their military, the size of their economy, the extent of their natural resources, and so on), but also in terms of their social status. By talking of great powers, Bull argues, "we imply ... the existence of a club with a rule of membership"; we imply that certain states are "accepted by one another and by international society at large as having a common pre-eminence" (2002, 194). There is therefore a marked societal element involved in defining great powers. They are in part *who we think they are*. Great powers are also generally considered by the rest of international society to have not only special rights but special duties in that society (Bull, 2002, 195-196). They may or may not live up to this expectation, but the idea that it is the responsibility of great powers to "do something" to solve pressing problems is common at all levels of political discussion.

Indonesia is the resident "great power" of SEA's regional international society. As an ASEAN member under President Suharto, it generally conformed to Bull's descriptions of societally oriented great-power behaviour, conscious of both rights and duties. Former ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino recalls that Indonesia was certainly "the big voice", and it was impossible to get things done without its consent, but "one of the strengths of ASEAN was that Indonesia lowered its profile, pretended that it was just like the others" (interview, Singapore, February

2010). As a democratic polity, however, obliged to mediate and reflect a range of domestic voices, Indonesia faces a much more difficult relationship. So does ASEAN. Even as early as the Habibie administration, Severino was told: "You cannot expect automatic Indonesian support for ASEAN any more" (cited interview).

Riding high in the world's press as "the new India", "a steady democratic light in a dark Southeast Asian tunnel", and a "regional role model" (Anon, 2009b; Manthorpe, 2009; Wehrfritz & Honorine, 2008), and buoyed by its presence in the G20, its inclusion (along with varying combinations of China, India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Australia, Brazil, and Russia) in putative groups such as an "Asian G6" or "KIA" or "BRIIC", and its sense of being "increasingly indispensable for Obama" (Emmerson, 2009; Ghosh, 2009; Jemadu, 2009; Parello-Plesner, 2009; Soesastro & Drysdale, 2009; Thee, 2010), Indonesia has experienced an international renaissance that has given relations with its SEA neighbours a very different edge. Leonard Sebastian, head of the Indonesia programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore, explains:

The Philippines and Thailand have had democratic transformations, but it hasn't affected them as much as it has affected Indonesia. The Indonesians, because of their size and their position, are courted by everyone – the Europeans, the Americans, the Australians, the Japanese. All have found an interesting new democratic friend. So, it's a completely new ball game. People come to Indonesia now. That gives them a great sense of importance. It's different, for example, for other countries in the region that have to work harder for that kind of recognition. Indonesia doesn't have to work that hard (interview, Singapore, January 2010).

This is a very challenging environment in which to be a regional "great power". Indonesia now feels – entirely understandably – that it has the international prestige and moral authority to advocate its model of democracy and human rights to the other ASEAN countries, and it clearly attempted to do that in

negotiations on the ASEAN Charter (Dosch, 2008, 533, 536-537, 543). This investment of diplomatic effort met with difficulties on two fronts, however. On the one hand, Indonesian pressure created resentment among some regional players (interview, Ralf Emmers, coordinator of the Multilateralism and Regionalism Programme, RSIS, Singapore, January 2010). Yet, on the other hand, the final document was still profoundly disappointing to many strands of opinion within Indonesia, leading to calls from prominent commentators for a readjustment of Indonesia's commitment to ASEAN (Anon, 2009a; Sukma, 2008a, 2008b; Wanandi, 2008).

Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa has clearly emphasized that "Indonesia's interests and ASEAN's interests ... are one and the same" (2010). Nevertheless, Indonesia's new status still occasions misgivings within the region (Budianto, 2010; Desker, 2010; Noor, 2009), and its international renaissance provokes "both anticipation and unease" (Anwar, 2010). Nor does democratization necessarily equate with easing the regionalization process (Rüland, 2009). As Emmers remarks, ASEAN's situation is now "messier". The inevitable complications of democracy may slow down moves toward integration on some fronts, and this is "a very sobering realization" for the region (cited interview).

A highly skilful political balancing act is therefore required is to project into ASEAN the norms and values that voting Indonesians very rightly want to see, while still keeping the ASEAN ship on an even keel. This is the old "policy dilemma" that ASEAN constantly faces in trying to juggle the competing aims of liberalization and unity (Katsumata, 2007, 38). Severino likewise welcomes the multitude of voices coming out of Indonesia, as it "expands the horizon", but he also notes the need for caution: "Would you try to force things, and run into failure, or try to build brick by brick? There are different notions of that in Indonesia" (cited interview).

Aside from championing new norms, great powers can also, according to Bull, play a role in the promotion of international order (2002, 200). Half-way

through its year as ASEAN's chair, and faced with very elevated expectations and a host of tough problems, Indonesia has arguably been doing a very good job of demonstrating how this role might be played.

It can be a thankless task, especially in the context of low levels of trust. In disputes such as that between Thailand and Cambodia, Indonesia's status as "regional big power" can count negatively, if it is suspected of "looking for a bigger political leverage within the organization" (Nugroho, 2011). Yet it is difficult to imagine any other ASEAN state that could have weighed in so authoritatively to rein in this conflict. Even if success is still elusive, Indonesia's determined efforts saved the organization a lot of face in the eyes of the world, showing clearly that "ASEAN no longer sweeps difficult problems under the carpet" (Sukma, 2011).

As a Thai opinion piece also notes, Jakarta's "ambition to transform ASEAN into a global game-changer" is indeed "something no other ASEAN member has so far dared to think of."; it is therefore "in the grouping's common interest to support Indonesia as chair, as ... [a]n Asean that is in tune with global changes and settings will benefit the whole regional community" (Anon, 2011). This is not, however, a function of Indonesia's role as *chair*, but of Indonesia's role as regional big power.

Again, on the South China Sea issue, if "ASEAN needs to remind Vietnam and the Philippines that the group as a whole cannot and should not be expected to blindly follow their national interests" (Tay, 2011), then it is arguably only Indonesia that has the diplomatic heft to do this.

Indonesia faces a fearsomely complex challenge. It needs to work for regional order by exerting the much-needed authority that only a regional power can, while avoiding the creation of *disorder* by provoking resentment and fear. It needs to cement the position of an "ASEAN community in a global community of nations", while avoiding too overtly giving the impression that it is helping ASEAN tackle its problems because it is "hoping to raise its global profile" (Bellman & Vaughn, 2011). But an ES vision of great

powers gives it a much broader space within which to develop that difficult role, and much more normative guidance, than a narrowly neorealist one (Zala, 2010).

Again, however, the ES's conceptions of power can also be much enhanced from continued observation of Indonesia's role not only as a regional power but also as a would-be world power. Ambitions for world-power status have been clearly articulated (Anon, 2010; Bellman & Vaughn, 2011; Yudhoyono, 2011). Yet, at the same time, many Indonesians – very conscious, perhaps, of a range of domestic challenges and of the difficulty of asserting authority within the region – are somewhat ambivalent about their country's global status. The ES clearly recognizes, as noted, the social dimensions of great-power status, but has as yet paid little attention to *self*-conceptualization as a factor in this status. Equally, it has much to learn about the way powers move from a regional to a global stage. Again, there is much scope for a profitable region-theory dialogue.

HOW USEFUL IS AN ES INTERPRETATION?

The ES has two clear drawbacks. Firstly, it is complex. With its consciousness of multiple dynamics at work in the world, and with its choice of pluralist or solidarist standpoints, it offers not so much *one* alternative lens as a whole range of calibrated options. The counter-argument here, however, is that at least there is a lens that fits SEA. Other theoretical viewpoints struggle, as the first section of this article showed, to deal coherently and holistically with the many disparate dynamics that animate the region.

The second drawback, from the point of view of some, is that the ES approach privileges "intentionality" – what is intended by practitioners, and what they understand themselves to be doing – rather than causality (Navari, 2009). It is therefore not equipped to pinpoint the precise circumstances that determine a "me-first" decision as opposed to a more socially responsible one, or predict when these circumstances might next occur. There is little that can be said in response to this objection – it is intrinsic to the nature of the material, and will remain a frustration

for those looking for a different type of explanatory leverage.

The ES's chief advantage, on the other hand, lies in opening up conceptual space. Its alternative narrative – combining both power and community impetuses in SEA, and rejecting both realist and liberal verdicts on ASEAN – can contribute to solving some of the discursive polarizations that trouble both analysis and action in SEA. It can also tell a rather different regional story, contesting what is often taken for granted, correcting imbalances, and enabling a different conceptualization of problems.

Its international society label, argues Wæver, symbolizes "a continued effort to keep open a vital thinking space" (1998, 129), and this space characteristically colonizes and defends the "productive middle ground" (Ayson, 2008, 54). Middle ground can bridge polarized discourses and resist hegemonic ones. Because it provides a different, more nuanced narrative, it can also enable a different response. ES perspectives on SEA suggest neither triumphalism nor despair – but rather patience. Whether in diplomacy, opinion-forming, or norm-changing, gradualism is the key.

But a region-theory dialogue does not flow only in one direction. The ES has much to learn from SEA – about the ways in which different levels of international society (from regional to global) interlock; about community-building in a heterogeneous and non-liberal environment; and about power projection in different contexts, and self-conceptualization as a factor in great-power recognition.

The participants in this conversation do not yet know each other very well. Exponents of an ES perspective have only just begun to pay attention to regions in general, and to SEA in particular. IR analysts in SEA, on the other hand, tend to be unfamiliar with the ES. The theories that have tended to be dominant in the region – first realism, then constructivism – are those that have gained traction in the US (Chong & Hamilton-Hart, 2009).

The implication of this article, however, is that it would be extremely useful for both theory and region to continue their dialogue.

This is all the more the case since the ES has already demonstrated cross-cultural appeal. Zhang notes that its ideas, despite their still limited influence, “find keenly receptive and responsive ears” in China, especially among younger scholars (2003, 100).

Ultimately, what is needed to understand SEA is home-grown theorization, evolving from the world-views and lived experiences of scholars born and bred *within* the region (Acharya & Buzan, 2007). But, at risk of sounding presumptuous, the genesis of the ES might also suggest one potential launching-pad for that region-generated theory. The ES evolved because its scholars located a paradox in international life – what we see and experience in the inter-state environment (a high degree of order brought about by states) is logically unexpected (because of an anarchic environment). It then discerned a third element that speaks to that paradox (the ability of states to form an international society, which then generates order). There is surely much that is paradoxical within SEA. But identifying these puzzles, and finding the “third element” that links them, is a task optimally undertaken by Southeast Asian scholars and practitioners.

In the meantime, it has been argued here, the ES can very modestly suggest alternative perspectives that help us to understand and talk about SEA differently and productively.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that a pluralist ES perspective offers a number of possibilities that are useful in analysing SEA. Its prime contribution is to help locate the middle ground that is often missing from theoretical debates. Thus, it can bridge parallel discourses, whether they be realist and constructivist, or realist and liberal. It can encourage a less critical evaluation of ASEAN, by providing a theoretical context for the moderate voices in the ASEAN debate, and by enabling a fresh look at the vexed question of consensus. It can also provide a socially oriented understanding of the role of great powers – an understanding that provides a much more subtle interpretation of what Indonesia offers the region, and the challenges it faces

there.

This is not a one-way process, however, and the theory can be substantially refined and extended by remaining in close dialogue with the region.

Commenting on Bull’s seminal account of international society, Hoffman writes that it may seem “sketchy” in places, but it inspires a research agenda that makes “all the competing paradigms look like dead-ends, or like short and narrow paths” (2002, xxix). This article sees paradigms as complementary, rather than competing. It is not proposing, as noted in the introduction, a “winner-takes-all” theoretical scenario. But it does maintain, with Hoffmann, that the region-theory dialogue it foregrounds is capable of opening up a range of neglected routes that lead in many new and interesting directions for both the ES and SEA.

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