IN SEARCH OF AN ASEAN IDENTITY

Pham Quang Minh

“We are inescapably and forever part of Southeast Asia. But we must also never be limited to or be trapped by South-east Asia” (Bilahary 2005, 31).

Background

According to Article 1 of the ASEAN Charter, one of the purposes of ASEAN is “to promote an ASEAN identity through the fostering of greater awareness of the diverse cultures and heritage of the region” (ASEAN Secretariat 2011, 5). In the ASEAN Vision 2020 issued in December 1997 during the group’s annual meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, one of the directives was defined thus: “We envision the entire Southeast Asia to be, by 2020, an ASEAN community conscious of its ties of history, aware of its cultural heritage, and bound by a common regional identity”. The Vision also emphasized that the region will be one in which “all people enjoy equitable access to opportunities for total human development” under the heading “A Community of Caring Societies”. From these statements it appears that the organization is not only about political will, but also asks the people how they think of themselves as citizens, and whether they see themselves sharing one identity consisting of diverse cultures and heritage, tied together by history.

Looking back at the history of ASEAN, it is clear that the association’s founders adopted the Malay cultural practice of consultation and consensus building as operation processes in its rigid policy of non-interference. ASEAN realized how “Economic advancement and powerful governing bodies are essential aspects of developing a dynamic region, but they do not guarantee social cohesion or open societies. Instead a strong, participative, well-informed public are the hallmarks of open societies and dynamic regional bodies” (Jones 2004, 142). Therefore, ASEAN’s 2003 Social Development Report provided for a regional project to instill awareness of the ASEAN identity in primary education curricula.

What is the ASEAN identity? How did ASEAN construct this during its development? What core elements shape the ASEAN identity? How do its members consider the common identity? Such questions seem to be more important nowadays, with ASEAN trying to ask all its citizens to re-conceptualize their thinking: Do they think of themselves as citizens of the organization? Do they seem themselves as belonging to a common community? The ASEAN policy combines the expansive goals of government bodies on the one hand, and expectations regarding the fulfillment of duties and responsibilities by citizens, on the other. According to Wendt (1994, 386-390), when a corresponding sense of being and a shared destiny that means identity exist, international politics seems to be more stable and enduring, rather than ad hoc or opportunistic, as materialistic approaches would suggest.

ASEAN was founded in 1967 amidst the turbulence of the Cold War and the intense East-West rivalries. Looking back at this period, one could say that ASEAN had successfully played the big powers against each other. Therefore, ASEAN’s foundation and its success were used as strong arguments for realism. Its supporters saw ASEAN as the product of a “balance-of-power”. With the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and of the Cold War in 1989, Southeast Asia seemed to fall into a power vacuum populated by the overriding interests of states. By arguing that ASEAN still faces similar external threats like it did during the Cold War years, neo-realism perceived the need for ASEAN to balance these threats. In 1997, as Southeast Asia faced a financial crisis, we realized how great powers outside Southeast Asia still continued their dominance of ASEAN.

It is true that Southeast Asia cannot “escape” from the influence of outside great powers, as neo-realists have argued. But how can one explain the undoubted success that ASEAN has achieved during its forty long years of existence? Liberal institutionalism was right when it argued that ASEAN was a single force that could act as a regional conflict-mediator. As for the political question, ASEAN was successful in dealing with the outside world with a single voice. The series of ASEAN-led initiatives, including the establishment of a dialogue with the European Community in 1972, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989, the ASEAN Region Forum in 1994, the ASEAN-plus three meeting after 1997, and the East Asia Summit in
2005, were recognized by the world community. As for security issues, the Paris Agreement on the Cambodian conflict in 1991 and the peaceful settlement of the Spratly Islands are examples of the significant contributions of ASEAN. In the economic sector, ASEAN signed the agreement to establish an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992. Overall, liberal institutionalism argued that ASEAN is on the phase of institutional-building, and is actually doing this in its own special way—the “ASEAN way”.

Differently from both realism and liberalism, which focus more on material forces, constructivism has sought to explain state behavior by “inter-subjective factors,” including both material components like power and wealth, and spiritual elements such as norms, standards, policies, values, and traditions. Over its 40 years of existence, despite many challenges, ASEAN was able to develop and sustain its existence based on its own identity. This identity was reflected and represented in the so-called “ASEAN way” and the ASEAN Charter. Thanks to this common identity, ASEAN was able to act as a unique group in its regional forum and mechanisms such as APEC, ARF, ASEM, ASEAN Plus Three, East Asia Summit, and ADMM+. Although there are differences among ASEAN countries, they nonetheless share a common feature—that of “belonging together”, which reflects ASEAN’s motto of “unity in diversity”.

Theories on identity and their implications for ASEAN

The theories of identity are rich in their approaches (Schlenker 1980; Sheldon 1987; Yardley and Honess 1987; Turner 1987; Leary 1996; Abrams and Hogg 1999). Simon (2004) argues that identity is an expression or placeholder for social psychological processes dealing with self-definition or self-interpretation. However, the question refers to the function of identity. According to Simon, identity can help people provide themselves with a sense of belonging and a sense of distinctiveness. Identity can also help people “locate” themselves in social worlds. Last, but not least, identity can help provide people with self-respect and self-esteem (Simon 2004, 66-67).

Campbell (2000, 67) provides a more concrete definition: “The self-concept is a multi-faceted, dynamic construal that contains belief about one’s attributes as well as episodic and semantic memories about the self. It operates as a schema, controlling the processing of self-relevant information”.

In his “Self-Aspect Model of Identity”, Simon (2004) clarifies the main elements of a person’s self-concept including: personality traits (shy), abilities, physical features behavior characteristics, ideologies, social roles, language affiliations, and group memberships. He considers it important to distinguish between individual and collective identity. Individual identity refers to the self-definition of an individual as a unique person, while collective identity refers to the self-definition as a group membership.

Brewer and Gardner (1996, 84) distinguish three different levels of self-representation: the individual, the interpersonal, and the group. According to them, each level is appropriate to one self, namely the “personal self”, the “relational self,” and the “collective self”. Hecht (2005, 63) shares the same idea, arguing that an individual identifies him- or herself through his or her relationship with others. He regards a relationship as a unit of identity.

Simon (2004) also argues that despite the different levels and processes of self, they are, by nature, cognitive and social. This means that identity is a phenomenon consisting of both stable and enduring elements, and of such processes as interaction, negotiation, and construction.

From the Southeast Asian perspective, identity must be understood via conscious attempts by the leaders of the region, to overcome the region’s diversity and countervailing forces that might otherwise hinder the building of a peaceful, cooperative and prosperous region for its member states. These attempts at cooperation have played a key role in constructing the modern Southeast Asian identity.

Relating to the regional identity, in general, Southeast Asia, should be examined from two specific perspectives. First, the politics of Southeast Asia has a rich history and deals much with the different attempts of its representative leaders to build up its own space for political, economical, socio-cultural and strategic development, to confirm its existence and survival. The process of making Southeast Asia a coherent region has been long-winded and has consisted of a series of ups and downs. Second, the common assumption is that regional cooperation has played a decisive role in creating the modern Southeast
Asian identity. Through its international relations and interactions, Southeast Asia has developed regional patterns and characteristics, which help in recognizing its regional identity. In addition, this argument is important because, on the one hand, “the almost universal tendency of historians” has been “to focus on the constituent parts of Southeast Asia rather than to develop a perception of the region as a whole, as a suitable subject of study” (Legge 1992, 4-5). On the other hand, political scientists and security studies have neglected the questions regarding what constitutes the components of the regions and what makes the region exist (Acharya 2000, 1).

With the development of Southeast Asia itself and of Southeast Asian studies as a field of its own, a new approach has emerged for studying Southeast Asia: that of approaching the region from interdisciplin ary perspectives such as history, anthropology, international relations, comparative politics, etc. Most of these perspectives try to show the new importance of the region and regionalism. Regionalism was developed over several different stages beginning with the establishment of the Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) through inter-regional linkages within SEA, on to the creation of the first regional organization. The new ways of thinking about regions and regionness that have emerged consist of both cultural-historical, as well as political factors. If the first idea of inter-regional linkages is represented by the concept of the Mandala state of O.W. Wolters (1999), the research on “theatre state” of Clifford Geertz (1980), and the idea of “galactic polity” of Stanley Tambiah (1985), the second takes a look at the evolution of regionalism as a product of interaction. Through interaction, regionalism and regionness can develop norms, standards, values, policies, organization, and last, but not least, identity. In this way, we can say that identity is socially constructed.

The formation of the ASEAN identity

On 8 August 1967, ASEAN was created in Bangkok with the participation of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand. Although the Bangkok Declaration stated that ASEAN is open to “all States in the South-East Asian region subscribing to the aims, principles and purposes”, it did not define clear boundaries of the region itself.

The motivation of the ASEAN foundation was not only to “accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region,” but also “to promote regional peace and stability”. Whether consciously or unconsciously, considerations of national and regional security also figured largely in the minds of the founders of the ASEAN. In fact, the immediate motivation to form ASEAN was a common desire of its members for collective action toward external powers. According to Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1978), the formation of ASEAN helped the members “to have their interests taken into consideration when great powers make their compromises”. However, in comparison to external threats which could be considered differently, the ASEAN members shared a common perception of internal threats. This was explained by the fear of the national liberation movement in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and by the communist insurgency along the border areas between Malaysia and Thailand, and between Malaysia and Indonesia. The agreements regarding the common control of the border between Thailand and Malaysia in 1959, Indonesia and the Philippines in 1964 and between Indonesia and Malaysia in 1967 explained the strengthening of the bilateral security cooperation between ASEAN members.

The creation of ASEAN also marked tremendous changes in the Southeast Asian environment. First, with its final abandonment of Konfrontasi (confrontation), the New Order regime of President Suharto in Indonesia provided new impetus for regional integration. Second, since its separation from the Malaysian Federation in 1965, Singapore felt more secure upon joining a regional organization such as ASEAN. Third, the other ASEAN members like Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines also saw ASEAN as a tool for fostering and strengthening mutual trust and understanding among its members. Fourth, the creation of ASEAN also reflected changes in the rivalry between big powers. In the second half of
1960, the Soviet-China dispute and competition over Southeast Asia became public and tense. Meanwhile, the détente and rapprochement in the relationship between the US and the Soviet Union on the one hand, and between China and the US on the other, made countries in Southeast Asia worry that their security interests might be neglected or undermined. Fifth, the founding of ASEAN also reflected the regionalism trend in other parts of the world where three regional organizations were born: the Organization of American States (OAS), the Arab League, and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in the 1970s. Last, but not least, the Vietnam War and American aid extended to ASEAN members contributed to the economic growth and security of each country, as well as of ASEAN as whole. Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand profited much from the situation and experienced their best economic performance yet; the Philippines stagnated. Regardless, the common features of ASEAN economies were “uneven development, limited national integration and plural societies” (Dixon 1991, 50). Thus, all of them, externally through WB and IMF, and internally, had to seek a close alliance among the state, foreign enterprises, and domestic capitalists in their efforts to follow common economic policies such as economic liberalization and export-led development. According to Acharya (2000, 90), “while rejecting a military role for ASEAN, its members hoped that political cooperation would create an atmosphere of stability which in turn would facilitate economic growth”.

The birth of ASEAN, however, could not prevent the member states from experiencing conflicts. Very soon after the creation of ASEAN, the association faced a dispute over Sabah, between the Philippines and Malaysia, from April 1968 to December 1969. Thanks to diplomacy, measures, communication, and pressure, the foreign ministers during their meetings in Jakarta in August and in Bangkok in December 1968, were able to prevent the further escalation of the Sabah dispute which could have led to open armed conflicts and destroyed ASEAN. Moreover, the outcome of the Sabah dispute provided ASEAN the impetus to develop a new framework to build up a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in Southeast Asia in 1971. The ZOPFAN idea emphasized the importance of regional countries to “respect one another’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and not participate in activities likely to directly or indirectly threaten the security of another” (Ghazalie bin Shafie 1971, 115). However, the ZOPFAN framework encountered difficulties in implementation due to disagreements among member states with regard to the presence of the US in the region. A step forward in the establishment of a regional cooperation was the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) signed by member states at the First Summit in Bali, Indonesia in 1976. For the first time, the norms that formed the bases of ASEAN’s code of interstate behavior were signed. They included five fundamental principles: (i) mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all nations; (ii) the right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion, and coercion; (iii) non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; (iv) settlement of differences and disputes by peaceful means; (v) renunciation of the threat of use of force (ASEAN Secretariat).

The “ASEAN way” as core component of the ASEAN identity

Based on the main principles of TAC signed in 1976, despite challenges arising since its foundation, throughout its more than four decades of existence, ASEAN could prove to be a cohesive regional grouping with a distinctive and effective approach to peace, stability, and development. This “soft approach” to inter-state relations among member states was called the “ASEAN way”. The ASEAN way consisted of a set of institutions inclusive of norms, principles, rules, and decision-making procedures that were “soft institutions”. These institutions were based on convention and informal agreements rather than formal treaties. Connors et al. (2004, 80) contend that “The pillar of ASEAN is voluntarism not legalism”. The roots of such informal mechanism and voluntary procedures for decision-making could be found in the Malay culture of “musyawarah” (consultation) and “mufakat” (consensus). These characteristics of negotiation are very common in Southeast Asian countries including Vietnam.

The ASEAN way of diplomacy in Southeast Asia consists of six norms including sovereign equality; the non-recourse to the use of force and the peaceful settlement of conflicts; non-interference and non-intervention; the non-involvement of ASEAN to address unresolved bilateral conflicts between members; quiet diplomacy; mutual respect and tolerance (Haacke 2003, 1). In fact, the ASEAN emphasized quiet diplomacy and friendly negotiation.
“Musyawarah”, as explained by a former Indonesian Foreign Minister, means a setting in which negotiation would be considered “not as between opponents but as between friends and brothers” (Acharya 2000, 128). As members of a family, the ASEAN countries have never used Articles 13 to 17 under Chapter IV of TAC, in the settlement of disputes. According to this Treaty, whenever there are disputes among countries, there will be a High Council consisting of a ministerial-level representative from each member state that will take appropriate measures and encourage direct negotiations for a peaceful settlement. However, until now, the ASEAN members have never called a meeting of the High Council, though there had been a number of disputes among them. Almost all disputes among ASEAN members were solved in an informal way, without resorting to formal, multilateral measures.

The other example of the ASEAN way of informality was its relatively small bureaucratic apparatus reflected in the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, although there have been about 700 meetings of different levels of ASEAN officials.

Despite the fact that ASEAN had had to adapt to a new environment and situation by issuing legalistic documents, “soft regionalism” based on consultation and consensus remained the most important norm for ASEAN.

The six norms mentioned above provide the basis for four main principles of ASEAN. The first principle is “open regionalism” which means avoidance of discrimination among intra and extra regional actors, mutual commitments, and non-exclusive order maintenance. The second principle is “cooperative security” which means the opposite of a military bloc that implies exclusive membership, non-interference, respect for national identity, and territorial integrity. “Soft rule” is the third principle which means a non-legalistic approach to cooperation, a loose organizational structure, non-binding decision-making, networks, and the absence of any supra-national agencies. The last principle is “consensus building” which means moving forward by establishing broad support (Acharya 1997).

Despite the success of the ASEAN way, it faced a lot of critics. According to Estrella Solidum (1974) from the Philippines, the cooperation among ASEAN members would be more realistic and successful if it dealt with “safe” or non-sensitive issues. Because of the heterogeneous polities of ASEAN members, such matters of high politics like the establishment of military alliances or common markets would not be suitable to the early phase of cooperation. Malaysian expert Pushpa Thambipillai (1980) presented the point that ASEAN countries would not follow the process of community building as Karl Deutsch (1957) prescribed, not striving to build political community whenever there is according to Deutsch (1957, 6): “formal merger of two or more previously independent units into a single larger unit, with some type of common government after amalgamation”, but would prefer to preserve their own autonomy. Consequently, although the level and scope of interdependence among ASEAN members had been increasing, the member states of ASEAN still try to maintain their own identities by supporting the principle of non-interference in internal affairs.

The most important explanation for the obstacles encountered in the course of building a common identity would be the historical burdens. According to Korean expert Ching-si Ahn (1980), the explanation behind the slow process of regionalism of Southeast Asia could be found in its bitter memories of colonialism and the Second World War. ASEAN members are very reluctant to give up their sovereignty and independence, the achievement of which entailed a long, tough battle. The ASEAN secretariat continues not to make any decisions for or on behalf of its member states.

Until the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, there had been a strong belief in the ASEAN way of informal, soft, non-binding procedures. Then the crisis showed how ineffectively ASEAN was working and thus put an end to the procedures of ASEAN ideal model of development before depression and disintegration could set in. There were different points of view regarding this development, but one thing was clear: ASEAN lacked the economic resources and the institutional mechanisms to deal with the financial crisis. The third point of view saw the crisis as a chance for ASEAN to revitalize its spirit by developing new mechanisms of cooperation for Asia-Pacific and sub-regional levels like the ASEAN Plus Three Forum.

Following the crisis, Thailand, with the support of the Philippines, proposed that ASEAN’s non-interference principle should be replaced by so-called “flexible engagement”. This idea was, however, not accepted by majority of ASEAN members, but was nevertheless
believed in by then future ASEAN General Secretary Surin Pitsuvan (1998) observed:

In 31 years, diversity has become a problem for ASEAN... Diversity, which used to be a source of strength, has become a source of weakness... We have no freedom and flexibility of expressing our views concerning some members. We have to be silent because we are members of the family. This is not fair, not just.

Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN has witnessed a period whose emerging post-Cold War politico-economic structure Philip Cerny (2006) has characterized as being neo-medieval, whereby the transnational character of global exchanges undermines the traditional border and allegiances of the nation-states and “de-concentrates” loyalty as it deracinates identities.

In 2007, after four decades of existence, ASEAN could approve for the first time the most important document of Association: the ASEAN Charter which provided ASEAN a legal personality as an inter-governmental organization. This personality serves as the organizational identity, distinguished from the identities of its individual member states (ASEAN Secretariat 2011). The Charter is not only a reassertion of traditional practice, but is also a new call “to strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms...” (ASEAN Charter 2010, 4). It is, as well, a call to commit the Association to establishing an “ASEAN human rights body” (ASEAN 2010, 19).

Despite some renewal changes in its institutional measures and mechanisms, ASEAN is a state-driven process rooted in the consciousness of relative power, rather than a normatively regulated process. Its central objective was, and remains, the pragmatic one of sustaining regional order (Jones 2008).

In order to achieve a shared regional identity, the Vision of ASEAN suggests the enhancement of “human resource development in all sectors of the economy through quality education, upgrading of skills and capabilities, and training” (ASEAN Secretariat 2011). Without education, there are a number of policies that would not be achieved, for example, “creating a zone of peace ...respect for law and justice...economic development strategies in line with the aspiration of respective peoples...reduced poverty

and socio-economic disparities ...governance with the consent and greater participation of the people” (ASEAN Secretariat 2011). The education policy will focus on the following categories: an education representational structure to help regional education directions; civic education for multicultural society; and language and cultural issues (ASEAN Secretariat 2011).

The future of ASEAN depends much on education and the perception of young people. In 2007, a study carried out by Eric Thompson and Chulanee Thianthai in ten countries showed different perceptions and attitudes of students toward ASEAN. More than 75 percent of the 2,170 surveyed agreed with the statement “I feel I am a citizen of ASEAN”. This sentiment was strongest in Laos (96.0%), Cambodia (92.7%) and Vietnam (91.7%); and was weakest in Singapore (49.3%) and Myanmar (59.5%) (ASEAN Foundation 2008, 4-5). On the question: “In general, how familiar are you with ASEAN?”, only 60.7% of the students considered themselves “very or somewhat familiar with ASEAN”. If students from Vietnam and Laos showed their very good knowledge of ASEAN at 88.6% and 84.5%, respectively, some 90.3% of students from Myanmar and 49.7% from Singapore said they were a little familiar or not at all familiar with ASEAN (ASEAN Foundation 2007, 6-7).

On the issues crucial to cooperation, there were very diverse responses from the students across countries. In general, poverty reduction, education exchange and improvement, and science and technology development ranked highest among the issues. Students from Brunei and Malaysia considered health and disease control the most important, while those from Cambodia and Vietnam considered them the least important. If students across the region found natural resource and environmental management moderately important for ASEAN, the majority of them considered cultural preservation and promotion the least important issues (ASEAN Foundation 2007, 17).

Ever since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN seemed to have been facing more challenges, among them traditional and non-traditional security, competition between big powers, and, last but not least, the rise of China. On the one hand, during the last decade, China became the most important trade partner, ODA provider, and FDI investor for almost all ASEAN
members. But the rise of China and its military modernization were very much causes for concern among ASEAN countries, especially Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei that had sovereignty disputes with it over the South China Sea. The other six members of ASEAN preferred not to include the South China Sea issue in its agenda due to their relationship with the Mainland. Singapore, meanwhile, also shared the same concern, articulated by one official thus: “Our worst fear is to get two simultaneous phone calls, one from Washington and the other from Beijing, asking us to take sides in a conflict” (Lampton 2008, 164). Faced by a rising China, ASEAN should not consider it as a “threat”, but as a “possibility”, and therefore should continue to engage China to play a more positive, constructive and responsible role in regional and world affairs.

The ASEAN identity from the Vietnamese perspective

The year 1995 marked a turning point in the history of ASEAN as well as in Vietnamese foreign policy, as Vietnam became its seventh member. The relationship between Vietnam and ASEAN transformed from suspicion and distrust, to cooperation. For Vietnam, this meant ending a long period of hostility rooted in the Cold War. It also reflected a new environment for the region where ideological confrontation was replaced by the sharing of a common interest in the region’s peace, stability and prosperity. Along with its renovated open foreign policy, Vietnam expressed its will to become a friend and reliable partner with all countries in the world community striving for peace, cooperation, and friendship.

Vietnam’s ASEAN membership also meant a new identity for it because until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Vietnam had always acted as a member of the communist bloc. Amidst the bipolar world order then, there was division between Southeast Asian countries. The end of the Cold War ended this division and brought ASEAN to a real regional organization. Joining ASEAN meant for Vietnam, a coming back home.

Since joining ASEAN, Vietnam has followed and fulfilled all ASEAN policies pertaining to political, economic, as well as socio-cultural issues, inclusive of sensitive problems of the other members. It was Vietnam’s very membership that hastened the acceptance of Laos and Myanmar to the ASEAN in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. One can easily concur with the following statement: “Thus regionalism can perhaps be said to have become a part of Vietnam’s identity building. I therefore emphasize the political nature of identity building, in contrast to those views that emphasize the common cultural values behind regional identity” (Palmujoki 2007, 122). For Vietnam, the commitment to regional identity is a result of the political search for a state identity after the Cold War (Nguyen 2002, 206-120).

Besides the multiple gains Vietnam enjoyed from its ASEAN membership, ASEAN’s loose political structure offered Vietnam a flexible instrument to help mold its relationship with the region, as well as the expression of its identity. This does not mean that Vietnamese officials have ignored the problems of the ASEAN structure by emphasizing its national interests in the regional organization. This dynamic also limits the use of ASEAN when Vietnam faces global challenges, such as dealing with and accession to the WTO.

Whether its ASEAN membership has been as beneficial to the conduct of Vietnam’s foreign affairs as is generally assumed, has yet to be discussed. Does ASEAN indeed present a continuous golden opportunity for the management of Vietnam’s international relations; or would it be accurate for the country to view the Association as a golden cage, which offers clear opportunities in terms of the management of the regional order while also increasingly restricting Vietnam’s foreign policy options? According to some authors, in many ways, Vietnam has become one of the strongest supporters of the traditional approach to inter-governmental cooperation, which is characterized by a strict adherence to consensus building based on the lowest common denominator, non-binding decision-making, and non-interference (Dosch 2006, 236-237).

Concluding Remarks

The history of ASEAN reflects a process of identity-building whereby the regionalism of the 1970-1980s developed by ASEAN provided Southeast Asia a regional identity. The post-Cold War period linked with the wider Asia-Pacific region, whose foundation was laid by ASEAN. As expressed by, the outsider Southeast Asia became an organization of and for the region.

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Through its existence over four decades, ASEAN contributed to the region by maintaining regional unity and preventing any serious internal conflicts, and by establishing regional autonomy and self-reliance.

Despite its mixed impact on regional identity, through participation in ASEAN, “the people of Southeast Asia have come to accept as a matter of course their identification as Southeast Asian” (Andaya 1996).

The lack of resources, the economic crisis, and the rise of China attest to ASEAN’s abilities and its future. Without financial resources and material capacities, however, a number of ASEAN activities and plans continue to remain on paper.

The unity and identity of ASEAN and Southeast Asia depend much on the internal political will of member states, as well as on external factors such as globalization and great power relations.

NOTES

1 Interview of Author with Dr. Pranee Thiparat, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok on August 10, 2010.

2 According to Wolters, the mandala was a state system in Southeast Asia consisting of overlapping “circles of king”. Under the mandala system, the authority of the king was less direct and absolute. There were three circles in center-periphery relations. While the center was under the direct control of the king, the second surrounding circle was ruled by princes or governors. The third circle was made up of tributary states and remained mostly independent.

3 In “the theatre state” of Geertz, there was no single state that possessed the power of hegemony over the others. Instead, the states shared power with dozens of independent or semi-independent states.

4 Interview of Author with Prof. Dewi Fortuna Anwar, Advisor to Vice President of Indonesia in Jakarta, on January 2011.

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