Theories on ASEAN Security

Theoretical debates on whether or not ASEAN matters in the realm of security, are quite recent. Until the 1990s students of Southeast Asian affairs were unwilling to go out on a limb with theory and prediction, and even theoretically-oriented scholars cast doubts on the usefulness of theories on Asia. Over the last two decades, this picture has changed profoundly, and a prolific debate centered on a crucial question first raised by Kivimäki in ‘Power, Interest or Culture – is there a paradigm that explains the ASEAN political role best?’, has opened up. In an attempt to answer this question two major perspectives, realism and constructivism, have emerged in both academic and policy debates. While acknowledging that there are important insights to be gained from both perspectives, this monograph adopts the less common neoliberal institutionalist perspective as a mirror that reflects the state of security cooperation in Southeast Asia and by which its limits can be identified.

The concept of RSP, which can be located within an institutionalist approach to interstate cooperation, is illustrated and applied to the ASEAN case as the most fitting framework for the incremental building of cooperative security mechanisms and institutions, and for the management of regional cooperation and common security problems. The last section of this chapter suggests how to operationalize the ASEAN RSP through the security governance model, considered a suitable analytic device for this study’s empirical investigation and to evaluate ASEAN’s contribution to regional security.

Realism

During the Cold War realist arguments dominated the theoretical discourse on Southeast Asian security. Finding their roots in Thucydides’
representation of power politics as a law of human behavior, realist scholarship portrays international politics as a struggle for power among states. States operate in an anarchic world and are left alone to protect themselves because there is no higher authority capable of enforcing rules or order. Because anarchy creates insecurity they divide themselves into conflict groups with the consequence that competition is an enduring feature of international relations. For realists, states are the primary units of analysis and even if other actors, including regional organizations, flourish, these are seen as marginal and incapable of shaping the international system. Another proposition of realist assumptions is that states are rational actors, which are uniquely guided by their own interests and by considerations of power. State strategies are thus based on calculations about their position in the system. As a result, international relations are perceived to be a zero sum game, one in which a gain for one country is, inevitably, a loss for another. States are seen as being concerned only with maintaining their relative position in the system. The greater a state’s capabilities, the higher it is in the international hierarchy of power, and the greater its influence is at an international level. Thus, while stronger actors may be barely conditioned by the system, weaker actors do not have many options other than depending on the influence of great powers, considered to be the main guarantors of their security. Cooperation is temporary and extremely difficult, mostly motivated by selfish goals. The international order is viewed as erratic and the main recipe for peace and stability is the balance of power.

Accordingly, the realist idea of regional order is based on the existence of military defense pacts and alliances with major powers, formed to guard against, or deter, a commonly perceived foe. Since the end of World War II (Table 2.1) these alliances have dominated the security architecture of the Southeast Asian states and reflected the global bipolar division, which in Southeast Asia created two antagonistic camps: the ASEAN Five and Indochina. On the one front, there were: the, so-called, US led hub and spoke system of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) providing defense accords between the United States, Australia, Britain, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines