



Southeast Asian Peace Revisited: A Call for More Comprehensive Explanation

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Abstract

Many authors have tried to explain why Southeast Asia has been able to successfully maintain regional peace and stability. However, far from being able to provide convincing and commonly accepted answer, the current theories suffer from competing explanations and leave the puzzle unresolved. This paper explains the cause of this stalemate and finds that there are characteristics specific to Southeast Asia that collectively determine the nature of its transformation, namely diversity, colonial experience, culture of indeterminacy, and underdeveloped and non-complementary economy. As result of these characteristics, there are diverse factors that shape its peace evolution, there is no dominant driver of peace, and the region evolves incrementally. The paper argues that, in turn these lead to a serious methodological challenge for research on Southeast Asian peace. The paper concludes by offering some suggestions to overcome the challenge.

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INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia was among the site of the world's deadliest wars causing a number of massacres and man-made catastrophes (Tønnesson et al., 2013). The region was marked with conflicts and wars both among and within states, prompting commentators to regard it as Balkans of Asia (Fisher, 1962). So-called Indochina or mainland part of Southeast Asia was a battleground for most of 1945-1989. It not only witnessed hostilities of long historical standing among nations notably among the Burmese, the Thai, the Khmer, and the Vietnamese, but also hosted rivalries among world great powers such as the United States (US), China, Soviet Union, and France. Likewise, maritime part of Southeast Asia was marked with several disputes involving the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Notably, the period of *konfrontasi* (confrontation) marked culmination of tension between Indonesia and Malaysia as well as Singapore where low intensity combat nearly turned to an open war.

However, the picture started to change notably since 1970s and the dark era was then replaced by stable relations and stronger regional cooperation. Nowadays, Southeast Asia has often been praised as a peaceful region (Acharya, 1998, p. 199; Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2022, p. 1079; Narine, 1998, p. 195; Nischalke, 2000, p. 89).

What turned the region from war to peace? Many researchers have tried to provide the answer, mostly relying on grand theories of international relations. However, they offer competing explanations, leading to unresolved debate and even misleading perception. The supporters of liberalism often cite such factors as economic cooperation and regional institutions as the driver of peaceful transition in the region. They suggest that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a regional institution has provided a venue for its member states to resolve conflicts and prioritise peaceful settlement of disputes and has planted strong governance of peace e.g. through the adoption of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017; Snitwongse, 1998). In the same vein, economic cooperation was deemed crucial as it led to increased trade and investment, which in turn strengthened stability in the region (Stubbs, 2019, p. 928). On the other hand, those who follow the wisdom of realism underscore the crucial roles of great powers and self-help behaviour of Southeast Asian nations in an anarchic environment (Narine, 1998). Critics of ASEAN specifically suggest that it was extra-regional power balances that produced peace in the region, not ASEAN (Stubbs, 2019, p. 929). Meanwhile, other scholars examined the roles of values, norms and identity in this transformation, in line with the logic of constructivism (Haacke, 2003). The idea is that countries in the region share some common values and cultures that have vital roles in promoting regional transformation.

Recently, few researchers have tried to find out the cause of these competing and disintegrated theories and proposed new approaches (Beeson, 2019; Foot & Goh, 2019). An important contribution resulting from this work is raised awareness that Southeast Asia is a diverse region and it shapes the region's trajectory. As Mark Beeson rightly points out:

One of the reasons that the scholarly debate about South-East Asia in particular and East Asia more generally is so inconclusive is that the subject matter is so heterogeneous. It is possible to find evidence to support a variety of, often competing, claims and theses in the region's bewildering array of political practices, economic structures and strategic relations (Beeson, 2019, p. 3).

Contradictory findings often emerge due to different methodological, epistemological and even ontological divisions and differences in the way scholars approach the region. To remedy this picture, Beeson observes the need for an 'eclectic' view of both the subject matter in question and of the best way to make sense of it, which is shared by other scholar (Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2022). In similar vein, Paul advocates for a hybrid approach in understanding peace in Southeast Asia (Paul, 2022). Foot and Goh propose a Conjunctions Analytical Framework that explores what happens at the conjunctions of the regional-global and the unit-systemic levels of analysis (Foot & Goh, 2019). Meanwhile, Barry Buzan introduced "security complex" to Southeast Asian studies to better capture the dynamics of security development in the region especially among actors at domestic, regional and global levels (Buzan, 1988).

Despite the distinct contribution of this work, it is uncertain how it can resolve the problem in Southeast Asian studies. Although it has been suggested that certain factors contribute to the emergence of competing theories, there is no comprehensive explanation about the factors themselves and, more importantly, there is lack of explanation of how they lead to competing theories. Exception can be made to the work of Foot and Goh, nevertheless, their depiction of the region's characteristics is limited to three aspects namely duality, hybridity, and contingency. Furthermore, although some scholars have offered new strategies, the proponents have not discussed and compared how the proposed strategies can address the very challenge in Southeast Asian studies.

This paper tries to fill this gap by exploring characteristics and conditions of Southeast Asia and explaining how they prevent researchers in international politics from establishing solid theories on Southeast Asian peace. In addition, the paper offers possible scenarios for future research.

This paper is expected to bring contribution to the literature on Southeast Asian peace and security by illuminating the drivers and barriers of regional transformation which could assist researchers in formulating and executing more methodologically sound research. The author believes that this contribution is important since, as Beeson warns, the inconclusive debates are likely to continue as long as observers hold different assumptions about the region and the sorts of forces and dynamics that are actually likely to determine consequential diplomatic and strategic outcomes (Beeson, 2019, p. 4). Furthermore, clarifying how the region transformed conflicts to peace and stability is crucial given that Southeast Asian emerges again as venue for great power competition in the 21st century, now between the US and China.

METHODS

This paper employs an in-depth desk research to explore the debate on as well as dynamics of peace processes in Southeast Asia. The researcher collects qualitative data by extensively consulting literature on the subject especially views from leading experts in Southeast Asian studies.

The data are analysed descriptively which involve a comparative undertaking in studying different views on Southeast Asian peace especially from three major schools namely realism, liberalism, and constructivism. In doing so, the research makes use of the frameworks offered by the study of regionalism in analysing the drivers of and barriers to cooperation and conflicts. In particular, this piece is informed by the concept introduced by Cantori and Spiegel in *International Regions: A Comparative Approach to Five Subordinate Systems* (Cantori & Spiegel, 1969), coupled by the works of Walter Mattli (Mattli, 1999) as well as Volgy and Rhamey (Volgy & Rhamey Jr., 2018), which elaborate factors and conditions that drive regional actors to conflicts or peaceful cooperation and shed light on the mechanism for such correlation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Partial Explanations on the Sources of Peace in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian peace and stability have received attention from experts, especially Asian and western scholars. In their analysis, they utilise wisdom from major international relations theories, especially realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Beyond these three, some other traditions such as English School sometimes influence the debate but only insignificantly. Therefore, this paper will focus on these three theories in analysing the debate.

Realism is utilised by many authors. Two variants of realism have strong influence in Southeast Asian literature: classical realism and neorealism. Realists usually underscore the anarchic nature of international system and assume inevitability of conflicts. For them, peace and stability in the region are explained by balance of power and the roles of hegemon (Capie, 2012; Emmers, 2003; He, 2008; Leifer, 1996; Narine, 1998). In particular, scholars such as Michael Leifer (Leifer, 1996), Paul Dibb (Dibb, 2000), and Gerald Segal (Segal, 1990) assume that a US-led balance of power has been the chief provider of the security and prosperity of Southeast Asia as well as other Asian countries (Acharya & Tan, 2005, p. 38). Economic interdependence is not considered as an important factor (Narine, 1998, p. 203). In the same vein, classical and neorealists see regional institutions such as ASEAN as a mere reflection of members' calculations of their respective national interests and therefore remain sceptical about their roles in formulating and sustaining peace (Beeson, 2009b).

Nevertheless, the assertion that great powers involvement brought peace to the region entails doubt. As an expert suggests, great power involvement takes the shape of competition, cooperation, dominance, and disengagement (Miller & Kagan, 1997). Great powers

often take sides and provide support to certain groups, which exacerbates conflicts. The allies of the great power too are often involved and the great powers are not able to prevent them from engaging in conflict. In the case at hand, balance of power prism has difficulty in explaining the number of destabilising wars in Southeast Asia as well as broader East Asian region e.g. Korea, Vietnam, Vietnam-Cambodia, and China-Vietnam (Paul, 2022).

It is also important to note that post-Cold war era was indicated by arm build-up among some Southeast Asian countries, making the logic of realism questionable. At the same time, despite American hegemony, history shows that states in the region put significant resources to build and strengthen institutional frameworks without the US taking the lead. They include ASEAN and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). In fact, some experts view that the US itself did not give serious attention to the region since Southeast Asia was not particularly salient in the US' overall grand strategy compared to other regions such as the Middle East or Europe (Acharya & Tan, 2005, p. 39).

In short, realists fail to take into account micro-level dynamics that can shape peaceful outcomes. This is not to say that the power structure did not have effect at all. The fact that external actors were involved already complicated the constellation, making it more difficult to calculate the costs and benefits of initiating a war. Internally, power balance among Southeast Asian countries might also help reduce feasibility of war. Southeast Asian countries are still relatively weak in term of power and there is no significant power gap among them. Indonesia could have become more powerful than other countries but its economy was too weak to be a regional hegemon (Buzan, 1988, p. 5). This means that hard power did not pose serious threats among Southeast Asian countries and initiating war was a less rational choice.

Moving on to liberalism, experts have extensively examined the roles of economic interdependence, institutions, and democracy in driving peace in the region (Pempel, 2022). With regard to economic interdependence, the key assumption is that ASEAN's continuing emphasis on regional economic cooperation and integration suggests that member states have embraced the liberal ideals of commercial peace (Goldsmith, 2007; Haftel & Hofmann, 2017; Peou, 2002). There is rich literature on this correlation, given the long-standing economic cooperation among ASEAN countries.

There is no doubt that desire to attract foreign investment necessitates peaceful enabling environment, and economic cooperation among ASEAN countries definitely contributes to maintenance of peace in the region. Nevertheless, the central liberal argument that economic incentives eventually spill over to closer political cooperation and stability is not without limitation (Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2022, p. 1085). Intra-ASEAN trade and investment flows remain weak and ASEAN countries continue to impose high level of non-tariff barriers, and the regional body is still far from achieving a single market and a common production base. Tang analyses the level of economic interdependence between Southeast Asian dyads and finds that from 1950 to 2000 the level was generally low with a mean ratio of 0.0032 (0.0001), except Singapore and Malaysia (Tang, 2012, pp. 392–394). After analysing the data on economic

interdependence together with the onset of militarized inter-state disputes between Southeast Asian states, Tang concludes that leaders of the nations avoided inter-state conflicts only because they wanted to promote open trade regimes, thus peaceful change in the region had nothing to do with regional economic interdependence.

Likewise, liberal democracy as a cause of peace has little value, since even in the post-Cold War era most of the governments in the region were not liberal democracies (Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2022, pp. 1084–1085). The frequency of democratic dyads in the region in the period of 1946–2008 was only about 2.3%, whereas non-democratic dyads constituted 73% (Tang, 2012, p. 392). Despite such low level of democracy, development of regional norms and structures to prevent conflict continued to evolve in the region, indicating that democracy was not a significant factor.

Institutions are also frequently cited as an important cause. ASEAN, ASEAN-led institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Plus Three (APT), various agreements adopted by ASEAN, as well as other regional bodies in Asia such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are suggested to play a unique and decisive role in fostering regional stability. Among others, the argument goes that such institutions are responsible for a process of socialization and confidence building that has led to a radical decline in the incidence of inter-state war (Kivimäki, 2016). Relying on a historical institutional approach, Stubbs and Mitrea posit further that ASEAN evolves and serves as a regional platform for member countries to reap the benefit from global economic changes (Stubbs & Mitrea, 2017).

Although there is merit in this suggestion, the effects of institutions should be treated with great caution. First of all, Southeast Asian institutional framework mainly deals with socio-economic issues. Institutional set up in political security field is rather scarce and weak (Paul, 2022, p. 12). Second, many experts have criticised ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms for their weakness and lack of authority, and remain sceptic for their effectiveness. Despite holding more than 1500 meetings in a year, ASEAN's actual impacts on key economic, political and strategic issues have been very modest (Beeson, 2019, p. 8). Some authors even portray ASEAN as under-achieving, ineffective, "talking shop", and an 'imitation community' (Beeson, 2009a, 2016; Jones & Smith, 2006, pp. 44–73; Narine, 2009). In part, this is due to ASEAN member countries' unwillingness to invest real power in regional institutions and reluctance to constrain their autonomy (Foot, 2014).

Unlike realism and liberalism, constructivists highlight ASEAN's reliance on dialogue and consultation, the practice of consensus and self-restraint, peaceful resolution of disputes, and the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference to prevent inter-state disputes from escalating into open conflict (Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2022, p. 1085; Nischalke, 2000). Constructivism has helped explain the evolution of ASEAN since its establishment in 1967 by identifying and paying close attention to the role of norms and collective identities (Acharya, 2001; Ba, 2009). It is suggested that certain norms have developed into a common identity and

prevented the countries from war (Busse, 1999).

However, the existing constructivist work suffers from at least two major shortcomings. First, constructivists tend to over-estimate the notion of regional identity in the region while exploring ASEAN at the expense of enduring national identities and the notion of nationalism (Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2022, pp. 1081–1086). In fact, the former US ambassador to Thailand, Kenneth Young, observed that Southeast Asia is a so-called region without any feeling for community, without much sense of shared values and with few common institutions (Acharya, 1998, pp. 206–207). Secondly, the researchers under this group have not provided comprehensive explanation on how regional values are formed e.g. how different factors contribute to their formation, and how exactly those values distinctively prevent conflicts (Garofano, 2002). This triggers question as to whether or not ASEAN's norms such non-interference were a unique feature of ASEAN (Khoo, 2004).

Development of Peace in Southeast Asia

The above discussion shows that the factors commonly cited by realists, liberalists, and constructivists indeed contribute to peaceful transformation in Southeast Asia but only partially. Individually, none of these theories is able to provide reliable and conclusive explanation. Why is it so? The author found that there are four mutually-reinforcing characteristics of the region that serve as root cause of this problem, namely diversity, colonial experience, culture of indeterminacy, and underdeveloped and non-complementary economy. These four characteristics collectively shape the nature and extent of peace development in the region and in turn, as shown at the end of this section, bring a methodological challenge to researchers in studying Southeast Asian peace.

Diversity

Southeast Asia is well known as a region of diversity. The eleven nations share different history, culture, ethnicity, language, religion, political system, economic policies, development level, geographical condition, and military power, to name a few (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020; Jönsson, 2010; Sealy et al., 2022). From advanced and high-human development countries such as Singapore and Brunei Darussalam to nations that still face challenges in providing basic needs such as Myanmar; from strong Islamic values such as Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia to Catholic culture such as the Philippines and Timor-Leste; from archipelagic state (Indonesia) to city-state (Singapore), all are present in this region. Politically, different types of regimes govern Southeast Asian states, from democratic, semi-democratic, monarchy, to military regime (Brandýs, 2012, p. 320). The countries also share different attitudes toward development ideology such as communism and capitalism, which contributes to different preference of alignment with great powers. Not only among the states, diversity also marks the society within the states.

Three points need to be noted here. First, the heterogeneity indicates that there are diverse factors that collectively influence relations among Southeast Asian countries. Second, many of the differences are deeply rooted in societal values. In the Narrative of ASEAN Identity, they are regarded as inherited values, defined as values that the people of Southeast Asia region ascribe to,

which have been passed on for generations through the natural process of human interaction (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020, p. 3). Development of such values took place long before emergence of modern interaction, including during the era of ancient kingdoms. Third, on the one hand, diversity can be a strength of a region and be positive for exchanges such as the case of different but complementary resources, but on the other hand, many of the differences constrain the process of socialisation, development of common identity, sense of “we-ness”, and cohesion. Obviously, this frustrates the process of regional integration. In fact, many scholars and politicians argue that Southeast Asia and its neighbours are too culturally “diverse” to achieve a deep political and economic integration (Berkofsky, n.d., p. 16). Integration-lowering effect of diversity in Southeast Asia is relatively strong, compared to other regions. For instance, Cantori and Spiegel compare Southeast Asia with other regions and find that the Southeast Asian mainland core is the least cohesive, while noting that regional communication remains minimal (Cantori & Spiegel, 1969, p. 366). This is mainly due to the diversity, coupled with an overlapping series of ethnic, ideological, territorial, and historical rivalries among the members of this region aggravated by the interference of external powers. Collectively, these three contribute to preventing likelihood of radical and attributable changes in the development of peace in the region. In part, this is also why constructivism always fails to provide convincing account of the region’s peace trajectory.

Colonial experience

Most Southeast Asian countries share long history of colonisation during which the Southeast Asian people experienced brutal slavery and suffering. It took bloody wars and innocent lives to put imperialism to an end and for the countries to finally gain independence. This tragedy became deeply rooted in the memory of Southeast Asian people and shaped their perception of outsiders.

On the one hand, this shared experience can foster solidarity among Southeast Asian nations. On the other hand, it could limit the extent of socialisation and regional integration. For instance, the struggle for independence triggered the notion of nationalism and, more importantly, sovereignty became non-negotiable for these nations. These remarkably determine the nature of their relations with other countries including in the area of security. Here, two observations emerge. First, national interests are prioritised over regional or global interests. This is evident in the behaviour of ASEAN member states. In the area of security issues, the states prioritise to strengthen national security and put minimum efforts in regional security arrangement (Kusuma-Atmadja, 1990). The countries were always reluctant to take collective actions when the region faced security challenges such as the conflict in Myanmar, East Timor, and South China sea dispute. To the extent cooperation is needed, the countries prefer to take individual move. In many cases, this happens at the expense of weakening regional solidarity as illustrated by the countries’ differing positions towards AUKUS (Umar & Santoso, 2023). In the area of economic cooperation, different reactions of ASEAN countries toward non-ASEAN-led economic agreements illustrate this point, including the differing positions

toward the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as well as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). In the context of infrastructure financing, Mueller comprehensively elaborates how ASEAN countries individually prioritise national projects at the expense of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (Mueller, 2021).

Second, the countries strongly reject external powers – including other Southeast Asian countries – to interfere in domestic affairs. The governments strive to maintain autonomy and the hard-fought sovereignty. Manifestation of this includes preservation of non-alignment and ASEAN guiding principles such as non-interference and consensus-based decision-making. In turn, these principles further hinder the development of interaction leading to social learning that underpins the emergence of a collective identity (Collins, 2013, p. 8). At the same time, ASEAN countries are not inclined towards supranational body to govern regional relations like the case of the European Union. They are also unwilling to invest real power in regional bodies, resulting in weak institutionalism (Foot, 2014, pp. 205–206). All of these do not bode well with possibility of significant changes in the region and weaken predictors of peace held by traditional theories such as liberal institutionalism or balance of power.

Culture of indeterminacy

Indeterminacy is strongly reflected in the behaviour of Southeast Asian nations. They do not want to take stark or decisive selection over available options or possibilities. Instead, they maintain flexibility and choose incremental steps that do not foreclose future options (Foot & Goh, 2019, p. 5). In their cooperation, they do not take bold actions and instead maintain moderate moves with low possible risks and costs. This behaviour further explains preservation of the ASEAN Way and the guiding principles of ASEAN such as informality and consensus-based decision making.

This tradition has its root in cultural heritage that is unique to Southeast Asia, especially *musyawarah* (consultation) and *mufakat* (consensus). *Musyawarah* and *mufakat* are a form of peaceful consultation on the basis of equality, respect, politeness, tolerance and understanding with overtones of kinship and common interests (Acharya, 2001, p. 68). They are described as a soft diplomacy and promote an amalgamation of the most acceptable views of each and every member in a socio-psychological setting in which all parties have power over each other, as opposed to sabre-rattling, gunboat diplomacy of Western / colonial powers (Mak, 1995).

Musyawarah and *mufakat* indeed can help maintain harmonious relations and prevent escalation of disputes. At the same time, however, this way of bargaining obviously could only produce low-hanging fruits that are unlikely to result in significant changes. As can be seen in ASEAN, negotiations involving sensitive issues or stark differences among member states can take years and if a consensus cannot be found then the matter is left unresolved to be returned to at a more apposite time when a consensus can be achieved (Collins, 2013, p. 35). This way, the countries can gloss over national differences that cannot be reconciled and conflicts are ‘swept under the carpet’ (Acharya, 2001, p. 84). Consequently, regional platforms are geared more towards conflict avoidance rather than

conflict resolution.

The way ASEAN dealt with the conflict in Myanmar illustrates the consequences of this habit. Despite criticisms, ASEAN only took moderate action by adopting the Five Point Consensus in 2021 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021), which has not brought meaningful impacts in addressing the humanitarian crisis. In the area of economic cooperation, for instance ASEAN economic agreements have frequently been criticised for failing to provide a decisive dispute settlement body (Jones & Smith, 2006). Nevertheless, member states never took bold action to significantly change the status quo.

The culture of indeterminacy is also evident in Southeast Asian countries' long tradition of non-alignment (Engel, 2019) and hedging in their relations with major powers (Nedić, 2022). In facing the US-China rivalry, it is observed that the countries cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another and try to maintain constructive relations with both Washington and Beijing (Goh, 2005; Stromseth, 2019).

In short, the culture of indeterminacy is not conducive for transformative changes. Consequently, the process toward development of peace can only occur incrementally.

Underdeveloped and non-complementary economy

Southeast Asian nations are mainly developing (some are least-developed) country. They are still struggling with development, eradicating poverty, promoting industrialisation, and fostering enabling environment to attract foreign capital. This could bring some positive force for solidarity. For instance, many of them face similar development challenges, providing incentives for exchanges of experience which in turn is conducive for socialisation and unity. Study also confirms that the efforts of these countries to develop their economy through liberal capitalist trajectory help constraint conflict (Tang, 2012).

Nevertheless, the pacifying effects of underdevelopment are not without limit. For instance, the conflict-restraining effect of the countries' efforts to pursue liberal capitalist trajectory appears only to the extent that their efforts pay off (Hsueh, 2016). When their economy does not perform well, their leaders tend to emphasize the nation building issues, such as provoking territorial disputes, to keep their ruling legitimacy.

Due to underdevelopment, nation- and state-building remains a top priority for many of these countries, which often drives their foreign policy. This reinforces the primacy of national interest, tendency to focus on short-term gains, and sometimes could result in egoistical behaviour as they compete for foreign capital and lessen regional solidarity (Collins, 2013, p. 31). As they focus on addressing development challenges, regional security is put less in the priority and receives less resources. Instead, security is pursued domestically by addressing structural violence caused by poverty and underdevelopment, exclusion, and injustice. This behaviour is predicted by subaltern realism which posits that developing countries tend to formulate regional relations from the perspective of doing what is needed to further the state-building process and are more concerned

with relative gains and short-term benefits (Narine, 2009).

In line with their level of development, many Southeast Asian countries do not have advanced capacity and technology to spur their production. Meanwhile, industrialised countries outside the region are technologically equipped to produce quality products efficiently and, therefore, are in a better position to supply goods and services into the region. At the same time, economic cohesion – the extent of complementarity in economic resources – among Southeast Asian countries is weak. Among the five regions studied by Cantori and Spiegel, Southeast Asia stands as the least economically cohesive region (Cantori & Spiegel, 1969, p. 365). These realities explain why intra-ASEAN trade volume is relatively low. In part, they also explain low people mobility among the countries. Countries with less dynamic economy are unlikely to attract foreign visitors, more so if connectivity infrastructures remain poor. For business community, non-complementarity of economy makes Southeast Asian countries less attractive to trade with.

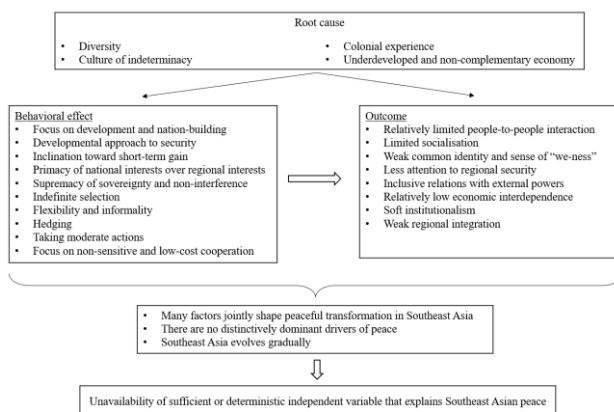
According to theory of regionalism, the consequence is that meaningful regional integration is unlikely to occur given that integration requires demand from a regional group who stands to reap important gains from integration (Mattli, 1999, p. 16). In fact, non-complementary of economic resources could serve as divisive factor for the regional development. Many Southeast Asian countries are primary producers and their exports such as rice, rubber and tin are often in competition for limited world markets (Henderson, 1956, p. 70).

Collectively, the four root causes above mean the following for Southeast Asian peace. First, there are diverse factors that shape evolution of Southeast Asia including its peace development. The factors interact with one another and some of them move in opposing direction e.g. promoting and hindering peaceful transformation. Second, there is no dominant driver of peace. Engine of peace such as economic interdependence, institutions, and common identity cannot produce significant push given that they are faced with countering forces. Third, the region evolves incrementally. These three bring a crucial methodological consequence for research on Southeast Asian peace: there is no sufficient or deterministic independent variable that can attributably explain Southeast Asian peace. The diagram below illustrates the impacts of the four root causes and how they lead to such challenge.

The author believes that this is the cause of divergent and contradicting views on the source of peace in Southeast Asia. Realism, liberalism, and constructivism all offer some explanation, but individually none of them is able to offer comprehensive and accurate picture. This means that researchers relying on any of the grand theories are likely to come up with incomplete or misleading findings.

Epistemologically, this problem is known as equifinality – sometimes referred to as plurality of causes or multiple causation – where an outcome is caused by combinations of different independent variables (King et al., 1994, p. 87). As Robert Jervis points out, this often brings a real problem for political scientists because it constitutes a menace to their prime methodologies (Jervis, 2001). This problem frequently occurs when doing research on international politics and regional integration but it

seems more prevalent in the case of Southeast Asia due to the specific characteristics of the region as explained above.



Peace transformation in Southeast Asia
Source: Author

CONCLUSION

What then makes Southeast Asia peaceful? This paper does not claim to have the answer. However, this paper has put some evidence to show that it is difficult to point out the causes. Thanks to the diversity of the region, its colonial experience, culture of indeterminacy, and level of development, various factors are at play and collectively drive the region gradually to where it is now and will be tomorrow. It is important to note that the actual dynamic of the transformation is even more complex than described above since there are external factors such as constellation at the global level that shape the regional transformation. Given this challenge, future research on Southeast Asian transformation could consider the following strategies.

First, researchers can utilise the strategies offered by experts in research methodology in overcoming the problem of equifinality. There is extensive literature on this issue that researchers can consult. For example, for King, Keohane and Verba, studies that entail equifinality can still generate valid findings as long as the researcher 1) can collect comprehensive data that cover all categories of the causal variables, and 2) is objective in making claims on the correlations among the variables e.g. that the causes are probabilistic instead of deterministic (King et al., 1994, pp. 87–89).

For George and Bennett, equifinality can be overcome through a strategy that they call “typological theory”. Here, scholar needs to specify independent variables, delineates them into the categories for which the researcher will measure the cases and their outcomes, and provides not only hypotheses on how these variables operate individually, but also contingent generalizations on how and under what conditions they behave in specified conjunctions or configurations to produce effects on specified dependent variables (George & Bennett, 2005). This way, the researcher will be able to specify the pathways through which particular conjunctions or configurations of the variables relate to specified outcomes.

Indeed, John Stuart Mill’s *A System of Logic* has been influential when it comes to the issue of multiple causation where he discusses “method of agreement” – identifying a similarity in the independent variable

associated with a common outcome in two or more cases – and “method of difference” – identifying independent variables associated with different outcomes (Mill, 2008). Likewise, Charles Ragin’s *Fuzzy-set Social Science* offers models to overcome causation in research with complex explanatory variables (Ragin, 2000). Although these tools might be difficult to apply in the complex case of Southeast Asia, researchers might benefit from the essence of their logic.

Second, instead of taking peace as a dependent variable, researchers can examine certain dimension of Southeast Asian peace and factors as well as conditions that generate it. With this, the researcher can produce more accurate and useful theories, as long as the claims are objectively presented in the context of the dimension being examined. In this regard, researchers may benefit from the Conjunctions Analytical Framework proposed by Foot and Goh especially in examining *content* (key social referents of the region’s international relations), *boundaries* that appear to govern the region’s international relations, and *change* that can be observed at regional-global and unit-systemic conjunctions (Foot & Goh, 2019).

Lastly, if an author still wants to approach the region with grand theories, she/he shall combine wisdoms from different traditional theories which can be done using what is called eclectic or hybrid approach. Here, the researcher shall not focus only on certain drivers of peace such as economic interdependence, institutions, or democracy but takes into account the factors under different theories. Among others, Sil and Katzenstein have elaborated how this can be done (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010). Moreover, Paul has tried to apply this approach in the context of Southeast Asia, nevertheless his analysis is limited to realism and liberalism and future research can offer a more comprehensive picture (Paul, 2022).

Whichever the strategy is, of importance for researchers is to be aware of the nature of transformation in Southeast Asia: there are diverse factors that shape its peace processes, there is no dominant driver, and the region evolves incrementally. Without putting the study in this context, the research is unlikely to resolve the puzzle and instead may obscure our understanding.

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