Indigenizing Order and Agency: A Southeast Asian Perspective on the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' and the Rising China

M.L. Pinitbhand Paribatra, Thammasat University, Thailand

The Asian Conference on Asian Studies 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
The idea of the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) widely promoted by a number of major powers represents the evolving, yet competing, order of global politics. In light of these developments, this paper surveys the indigenous thinking of Southeast Asian International Relations (IR) in the context of the FOIP strategies. The main task is to make preliminary inquiries into three broad sets of the 'local' Southeast Asian scholarships undertaken by scholars academically domiciled within the region. First, what kinds of regional order have been conceivably established, replaced, or re-instituted amidst contesting power transformations shaped by major powers? Second, against this backdrop, how has the social identity of agency of ASEAN been formed, shared, and endured? Third, how has Southeast Asia actualized its agency to be able to cultivate their strategic positions, despite weaker/smaller actors, in this context? This paper argues that these broad understandings of Southeast Asian IR are enriching a 'Global IR' research program by incorporating the study of regions, regionalism, and agency into the pluralism of IR.

Keywords: Order, Agency, Indo-Pacific, Global IR

Introduction

Over the past decade, various external powers, namely the United States, the European Union, Australia and Japan, have coined their own strategies in association with the idea of the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP). It is to ensure that the vast maritime space, stretching from the northern Indian Ocean to the Malacca Strait to the South China Sea, are 'free' and 'open' for all stakeholders to have shared growth and prosperity. Having said that, anxious competitions and fragile hostilities have emerged, forming a central area of maritime geopolitics and geo-economics rivalries (Singh, 2020). While China continues to extend its militarization over the disputed areas of the South China Sea along with the immense projects of the region-wide Belt and Road initiative, Western allies have called for a new strategic alignment for maritime security to counter the rise of China.

From a geopolitical standpoint, Southeast Asia and ASEAN, located in the integral hotspot of the Indo-Pacific competitive architecture, shall need to embrace a strategic adaptation to ensure that the region remains inclusive to all major powers and that the region would enjoy the benefit of its geographical centrality. The idea of a 'Free' and 'Open' Indo Pacific' was then included in the regional joint statement in 2019. At the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, the regional grouping released its official ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), adding another definition of the term into the global discourse. While emphasizing its strategic roles, ASEAN maintains that the region of Indo-Pacific is a region of dialogue, cooperation, development and prosperity for all. AOIP was then to promote inclusiveness among 'galvanizing forces towards constructive cooperation with and through ASEAN based on the principles of mutual trust, mutual respect, mutual benefits' (Royal Thai Embassy at Washington D.C., 2020).

How can we make sense of these current strategic endeavors of ASEAN? On the one hand, AOIP was disappointing to many who argue that it could not offer anything beyond an irresponsive and ineffective ASEAN way (Boisseau du Rocher, 2019; J. I. Chong, 2019; Parameswaran, 2019). On the other, it is, in some ways, applauded by many who conceived it as an important institutional breakthrough after years of diplomatic maneuvering among ASEAN members (Anwar, 2020; Hussain, 2019; Pongsudhirak, 2019). The main purpose of this paper is to do a preliminary survey into the 'indigenous' Southeast Asian International Relations (IR), done by scholars academically domiciled within the region, in the context of the evolving FOIP strategies. The scope of the paper qualitatively focuses on a selected scholarship produced by a member of a network of strategic studies institutions of ASEAN-ISIS as well as those associated with research and academics institutions such as the Institution of Southeast Asian Studies, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, and the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies in Malaysia. While a transnational network of experts and academics can promote ideas and shape foreign policy and international relations, this paper is based on the notion that they are able to offer a set of knowledge, reflecting the way in which an indigenous scholarship is formed (Katsumata, 2003; Kraft, 2000; Simon, 2002).

Against the backdrop of the emerging trend of pluralism in IR (Acharya & Buzan, 2009; A. Chong, 2007; A. Chong & Hamilton-Hart, 2009; Compaoré, Martel, & Grant, 2021; Yong-Soo, 2019), this paper examines how the broad understandings of Southeast Asian IR enables 'Global IR' research program in three ways. First, what kinds of regional order and institution have been

conceivably established, replaced, or re-instituted amidst contesting power transformations shaped by major powers? Second, against this backdrop, how has the social identity of agency of ASEAN been formed, shared, and endured? Third, how has Southeast Asia actualized its agency to be able to cultivate their strategic positions, despite weaker/smaller actors, in this context? This allows us to comprehend how Southeast Asian contributions to Global IR unfolds.

On the Regional Order

Local contributions to the global order have been widely discussed (Acharya, 2007, 2014a, 2018a; Acharya & Buzan, 2009). When new great powers have risen, we commonly start to think about how international political order should look. What kinds of ordered institutions shall be established, replaced, and/or re-instituted amidst such transformations? What kinds of shared purposes and values have states sought to regulate their relations? These are among the questions that have dominated agendas and debates among scholars of international studies as well as Southeast Asian specialists based in the region. Seeing Southeast Asia as a source of knowledge production, scholars in some ways keep the tradition of having a realist perspective handy and more relevant to the analysis of how international orders look as well as how it shapes the region (A. Chong, 2007; A. Chong & Hamilton-Hart, 2009).

Over the recent Indo-Pacific discursive struggles, there is an agreement among recent Southeast Asian analysts that the region has undergone two intrinsic, yet challenging, structural transformations: how to retain, if not reconnect, the US strategic involvement; and how to incorporate China's expanding economic, military and political power more favorably to suit the region's needs. According to Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Survey in 2021, China and the US are still viewed as the most influential political and strategic powers in Southeast Asia (Seah, Ha, Martinus, & Thao, 2021). While 49.1 % of the respondents favor of China, the US shares 30.4% of the respondents as the runner-up global influencer. However, while Beijing has a regional trust deficit, most respondents (or 88.6%) see China as the most influential political and strategic power. Meanwhile, China's presence, despite the abundance of economic benefits it may bring, has oncerned locals. To illustrate the point, 46.35 % of the respondents perceive that "China is a revisionist power and intends to turn Southeast Asia into its sphere of influence." In a separate question, 31.5% think that "China is gradually taking over the US' role as a regional leader" (Seah et al., 2021, p. 35).

However, a clear and present anxiety in Southeast Asia is not all about China's rise, but locals are also anxious about the accumulating strategic rivalry between the US and China (Perlez, 2018; Pu & Wang, 2018). On the one hand, assertive Chinese militarization in the disputed South China Sea is about to challenge the rules-based multilateral order in the Indo-Pacific region (Seah et al., 2021, pp. 15-17). On the other, the Quad, which was recently revitalized in 2017, actualizes the sensitivity of the escalating geo-maritime competition in Southeast Asia, questioning the relevance of a regional institution like ASEAN as well as the regional inferiority due to power inequality (Beng, 2018; A. Chong & Hamilton-Hart, 2009).

The major power competition not only affects individual state autonomy but also holds the potential to polarize the sub-region (Anwar, 2020; Pongsudhirak, 2012, 2018, 2019 ; Singh, 2020; Sothirak, 2018, 2021; Tan & Korovin, 2015). For example, while it was agreed that ASEAN

should and could provide an institutional platform for handling territorial and diplomatic sensitivity in reference to the South China Sea, it was also evident that the challenges structurally lie in the division between the mainland and the maritime states of Southeast Asia. Four maritime states, including Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, are territorial claimants in the dispute. As a consequence, they perceive China as a growing threat to their sovereignty. In contrast, non-claimant states such as mainland Laos and Cambodia, currently under Chinese political and economic influence, are constrained from utilizing diplomatic tools such as hedging. For instance, these divisions between claimant and non-claimant states spilled over into an ASEAN ministerial meeting in July 2012, which prevented the grouping from issuing a joint communique for the first time since its establishment.

Nevertheless, against the backdrop of the 'Thucydides' Trap' (Allison, 2017), it is Southeast Asia that integrally becomes a part of the very nature of international order which, in tandem, is contingent upon the dynamics of the 'local' agency's trust toward major powers, the availability of the weak powers' profit-optimization agenda, and the particular arrangement of regional institutional mechanisms. These three phenomena offered by scholars in the region well navigate a 'reflexive' and 'fluid' order in Southeast Asia.

Despite Chinese President Xi's pledge to deepen relations with his ASEAN neighbors, China also has a 'trust deficit' with Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (Pitakdumrongkit, 2019, p. 55). The sheer number of infrastructure projects (i.e., hydropower dams and a highspeed railway) place Laos as a strategic neighbor that suits China's interests. However, their relationship seems contentious with a variety of issues. For example, Laos owes an estimated USD5.9 billion in debts, half of which is from China (Macan-Markar, 2021). In addition to a trade deficit, BRI projects in Myanmar are causing environmental deterioration and human rights violations. Amidst rising public awareness since 2011, Myanmar's Thein Sein government decided to suspend the Myitsone dam, a joint roject of China Power Investment and the Myanmar company Asia. At the same time, Nay Phy Daw took an opportunity to resume its decade-long non-alignment by improving its relationship with Washington. Chinese military provocation in the oil rig crisis in the South China Sea, or the East Sea for the Vietnamese, spurred a rising anti-China sentiment (Hiep, 2018). In January 2013, the Philippines decided to bring China before an arbitral tribunal under Article 287 and Annex VII of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The relationship between China and the Philippines deteriorated as Foreign Minister Wang Yi of China visited all ASEAN member states, except the Philippines, in 2013.

However, rising tensions between major powers have not only resulted in tensions and divisions among Southeast Asian states but have also paved the way for adaptive opportunism. For example, Indonesia has exemplified its ability to engage in 'dynamic equilibrium' diplomatic strategy through regional cooperation to cope with the rise of China and reduce American domination (Natalegawa, 2018; Sukma, 2012). As a decades-long ally, veteran journalist Kavi Chongkittavorn (2018) suggests that the American version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy coined by Donald Trump was an opportunity for smaller states in Southeast Asia, like Thailand, to resume their status as a leading regional player while preventing the hegemonic influence of China (Chheang, 2018; Pongsudhirak, 2018).

Divergence in how ASEAN members have responded to China's rise and the US's ambivalence, it is widely agreed that ASEAN member states are also determined to preserve their institutional centrality in the development of the 'Indo-Pacific' architectures and conceptualizes the resistant contour of smaller states against the 'balance of power' connotation of the Indo-Pacific strategy (Chongkittavorn, 2017). In practice, some positive outcomes between China and ASEAN with regard to the South China Sea conflict came about in response to the Philippines' legal challenges in 2013 as well as Thailand's effective coordination of the role (2012-2015) (Pitakdumrongkit, 2015). Meanwhile, China was implementing a "strategy of flexible assertiveness in Asia, South China Sea included. Beginning in mid-2017, China took a more forward-leaning approach toward the COC as the Duterte administration was to make light of the 2016 arbitration ruling (Boon, 2018, pp. 118-120). As a result, the Framework of the COC and the Single Draft Negotiating Text (SDNT) were adopted in August 2017 and June 2018, respectively. It can be argued that the regional hegemonic order enforced by China has been contemplated within a social contract that needs secondary states' consent for its existence (Noor & Rosli, 2018).

The regional order is not fixed but rather transitional and being contemplated by complex challenges (A. Chong, 2018). The contestation between or among major powers can be negotiated and remains open to possibly shared understanding. That would provide more space for local secondary power states, Southeast Asian and the regional institution included. Adding to the Indo-Pacific discourse, AOIP is firstly responsive to the multiplicity of the regional order where multiple states, large or small/powerful or weak, can influence the global outcome through shared diverse interests and concerns. As Indonesian expert Dewi Fortunam Anwar (2020, p. 112) suggests: "the growing interest in the Indo- Pacific region in recent years has been driven in part by the rise of India as an economic powerhouse with growing influence in regional affairs, which is seen to parallel the earlier and continuing rise of China and India's growing interest in engaging with countries to the east." From climate change to economic crisis to pandemics, it seems that the global availability of goods (e.g., peace, global financial and economic stability, spread of human security protection) could not only have been provided by great powers but the multiplicity of actors at the regional level. Alan Chong's (A. Chong, 2018) seminal research captures very well the recurring order of the so-called 'transitional polycentrism' in which Asian security has become perplexed and multidimensional, based on 'direct great power rivalries in the conflicting South China Sea island dispute and the emergence of non-traditional security threats challenging state-centric security order' (Caballero-Anthony, 2018; Singh, 2020).

On the Regional Agency

Pluralism in IR also urges the collective belief about how regional institutions are defined and negotiated in taming power disparity vis-à-vis rising competition of great powers. The analysis of ASEAN in the past decade generally points to the relevance of ASEAN in the post-Cold War global (dis)order. ASEAN took a series of innovative changes to foster regional architectures of institutions, along with the multiplex context of regional orders where ASEAN has played a central role in providing a forum for high-level discussions with major powers (Acharya, 2014b, 2018b).

Based on a social network theory, Mely Caballero-Anthony (Caballero-Anthony, 2014) conceptualizes the characters of ASEAN's centrality as bridging different networks in the East Asian region. It is then characterized by three networking elements: between-ness (how ASEAN lies between a cluster of networks); closeness (how ASEAN performs agenda-setting, information sharing, connecting intra/inter-regional resources); and degree (the frequency of ASEAN's meeting for multilateral dialogue). The centric position—located in the overlapping circles of regional groupings and extra-major powers—would allow ASEAN to be leading and influential in the ASEAN-led regional processes.

While the common conceptualization of ASEAN's centrality is associated with institutional practicality of convening and in terms of ASEAN as a regional leader (Sukma, 2009; Tan, 2016), the lengthy discussion on 'ASEAN's Centrality' very much provides a fundamental understanding of the regional 'self-construction,' especially in the time of evolving Indo-Pacific narratives. In line with the emergence of the 'ideation/critical' turn of IR, the conceptualization of 'Centrality" does not only stipulate a relevance of institutional processes and mechanisms made and facilitated by ASEAN amidst major powers' contestation but also the very nature of how ASEAN sees itself; and how it makes itself relevant to the world at large. A significant interest in the social and ideational components of regional grouping and politics features feature the fundamental knowledge of Southeast Asian IR.

As mentioned previously, ASEAN officially participated in the 'Indo-Pacific' conversation in 2019. The announcement, given as the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific, visualizes the way in which ASEAN should define and materialize its roles as well as get engaged with the ongoing debates of 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific.' AOIP gives specific attention to the value of cooperation and dialogue in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, experiencing 'geopolitical and geostrategic shifts' (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2019). It prioritizes maritime cooperation, connectivity and infrastructure with ASEAN playing a central and strategic role. That said, the document intends to actualize ASEAN as "an honest broker within the strategic environment of competing interests." It also intends to enhance "ASEAN's Community building process and to strengthen and give new momentum for existing ASEAN-led mechanisms" (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2019). ASEAN's centrality is therefore deemed essential, according to the long-standing norms of a process-driven approach to coordination and collaboration, in safeguarding an inclusive Indo-Pacific regional architecture for all (Pongsudhirak, 2018).

What motivates ASEAN to adhere to such norms? Why has it consistently endorsed its roles as central to such tectonic strategic shifts? Following norms may comprise elements founded upon both rationalist and constructivist insights (Abbott, Keohane, Moravcsik, Slaughter, & Snidal, 2000; Abbott & Snidal, 2000; Keohane, 1988). They enable a process of socialization and understanding that are more about how and why institutions work. That said, strategic calculation of states to participate in institutions as well as an institutional output to reduce transaction costs are intertwined with a sense of community and the logic of appropriateness. The 'contracts' and 'covenants' are then combined. Whether states are in pursuit of values or interests, they search for the law to achieve their ends. Hence, agencies utilize both normative and interest-based strategies to create a legal and institutional arrangement. Rules and institutions

then operate by changing material incentives and modifying understanding, behavior standards, and identity.

It is common among Southeast Asian pundits to take a constructivist exploration when it comes to understanding how ASEAN works. The issuance of AOIP manifests the normative purpose that a regional framework needs to be founded upon the ASEAN Way—inclusive and open regionalism. According to a constructivist perspective, an international agreement performs a covenant through which "persuasion, imitation and internationalization" (Abbott & Snidal, 2000, p. 425) will be continuously operated to alter the agency's intersubjective understanding, shared norms and interest. By no means is it intended to legitimize and revitalize the normative entity of its principles of non-interference and consensus-based decision-making (Natalegawa, 2017, 2018). As a result, AOIP has been the reemphasis of ASEAN as a norm-setting and confidence-building agency (Tan, 2016, 2020).

For a group of weaker states, AOIP could enhance external legitimacy while fortifying the endogenous construction of a regional identity. The norms set out in the AOIP are a way to promote 'regional resilience' (Anwar, 2001), where regional autonomy can be upheld and accepted. That said, the diplomatic communication done through the extensive ASEAN institutional mechanism provides a revitalized non-threatening poster to the rest of Asia-Pacific. As Tan (2018) pointed out, benign signaling of ASEAN has been taken by relinquishing "the use of force as the primary tool for resolving disputes among themselves, tolerate political pluralism in international relations as an article of good conduct, and maximize channels for dialogue between governments. It can also consider that it gains a high input legitimacy due to the adherence of consensus and consultation decision-making process" (Natalegawa, 2018).

For a strategic choice among weaker/smaller member states, AOIP does, in its original belief, aim to introduce new mechanisms to deal with the changing regional order while strengthening existing institutional functions to intertwine with diverse larger powers (Fitriani, 2018). This paper emphasizes ASEAN's rationale of power constraints. As smaller and weaker countries, deepening alignment with any single major power is not a good idea as they would eventually become drawn into becoming a pawn of the titan. The underpinning of AOIP was to avoid entanglement in the US-China strategic rivalry.

As a newly created ASEAN-centered institutional process, it can be said that AIOP strategically becomes another effort for weaker power states to "borrow strength from external players to augment their capacity to tackle their shared challenges, with using their collective identity as ASEAN members to ease intra-ASEAN problems" (Kuik, 2016, p. 504). Meanwhile, it is a strategic foresight to re-emphasize the engagement with other alternative powers in the region. As Hoang Thi Ha (2019, p. 4) claims, the idea of AOIP was partly founded upon the need for ASEAN economic leverage with an Asian potential, like India. In tandem, ASEAN neutral diplomatic discourse via AOIP provides such an opportunity for ASEAN member states to become potential trade and investment partners under the China's BRI schemes (Pitakdumrongkit, 2019, p. 54). More broadly, it also reflects ASEAN's persistent commitment to strategies, arguably such as limited alignment and non-alignment, to resist pressure on the regional members amidst the strategic rivalry between Beijing and Washington (Suryadinata, 2018; Tan, 2020).

It is autonomy that the region has cherished and would very much like to preserve. Dewi Fortuna Anwar (Anwar, 2020, p. 127) suggested: "the only way for Indonesia and ASEAN to achieve the desired regional order of strategic autonomy and ASEAN agency is to play an active role in shaping it." Stating it differently, AOIP is another sort of a regional collective rationale to preserve ASEAN's position while avoiding being marginalized in regional and global politics (Tan, 2016, p. 734). The avoidance of marginalization in regional and global affairs drives ASEAN to introduce and cherish its process-oriented approach of institutionalization to the wider global audience. That said, governments choose a different level of legalization because they aim to solve particular problems of commitment or collective action differently (Kahler, 2000). In terms of ASEAN, since the sovereignty cost of ASEAN member states is very high, they benefit the most from the establishment of the institutional solution while maintaining a state interest of sovereignty.

On the Agency of Weak States

Great power politics persists in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. However, it does not solely shape today's world affairs. As mentioned earlier, the very nature of global politics becomes multifaceted and fluid, actualizing diverse agency to be able to cultivate their positions and strategies. In line with the 'Global IR' trend, it seems predominant among the 'local' Southeast Asian scholarships that distinguish the potential ability of Southeast Asian states to enhance their agential role in the ramification of great powers' rivalries. That said, based on a realist perspective, the conventional belief is that the structural determinism under great powers provides only two strategic options for small and middle powers–balancing and band-wagoning. Juggling between the two, considered to be hedging, appears increasingly as witnessed in response to the economic and military power of rising China amidst the complex U.S.-led post-Cold War order (Acharya, 2007; Acharya & Tan, 2006). Two conceptualizations of hedging, understood by 'local' pundits, are worth discussing.

The first and most common understanding of hedging focuses on a mixed strategic choice of a secondary power state, laid by Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2016). Hedging is a strategic choice of a smaller power state that is 'contradictory and mutually counteracting.' It conveys an insurance-seeking behavior that concurrently combines both 'return-maximizing and risk-contingency options' (Kuik, 2016, p. 502). Kuik distinguishes six strategic choices along the continuum of conventional strategic options. With a specific focus on the rising China, ASEAN adopts the combination of economic pragmatism, binding engagement, and limited bandwagoning to maximize gains. Diversification of economic, political and military relations with other major powers was also adopted to offset the over-dependency on China. In this regard, despite its power limitations, ASEAN enables its inclusive regionalism through its extensive institutional processes designed to absorb uncertain power impulses. The tradition of not-taking sides while being equidistant vis-à-vis major powers is well noted among the local scholars (Chongkittavorn, 2018; Pongsudhirak, 2012; Saravanamuttu & Han, 2016; Sukma, 2012). Regardless, agential roles of weak states can be enhanced due to the availability and willingness of the different major powers that attempt to compensate for a lack of regional enforcement mechanism against the rising China with bilateral ties with individual ASEAN member states (Koga, 2016; Singh, 2020) or Mekong subregional cooperation, for example (T. M. Thu & Tinh, 2019).

Secondly, while the baseline of hedging denotes the concurrent mixed behaviors of economic, military, and diplomatic balancing and band-wagoning, ambiguity appears strategically selected and provides a rational option for a smaller power state to make a trade-off between the preservation of autonomy and alignment. Ambiguity can be strategically chosen and understood as hedging. Also, for strategic reasons, the issuance of AOIP would be timely and relevant as it might deal pretty much with existing complicated diversity across member states. The inherent strategic questions are: how the organization deals with a diverse presumption about China's rise; relevancy of the US historical legacy; possible benefits from alternative intra-regional powers like Japan, India and Australia, all of which lay down a diverse demand and expectation of both ideology and pragmatism to each individual state (Tan, 2016, p. 733). If the aim is to lessen the rigidity of the multi-faceted global and regional order, the systemic uncertainty can be manipulated by open-regionalism and fluidity of major power entanglements. AOIP and its persistent ambivalence among ASEAN member states might be the case (Ha, 2021; H. L. Thu, 2020).

The body of Southeast Asian literature also underlines multiple drives of agency's role conception under structural determinism (Acharya & Tan, 2006; Holsti, 1970). With a specific reference to Indonesia, the current global and regional critical environments do not de-actualize the role of the agency. As a middle-power, it becomes a sort of duty and special responsivity of Indonesia to take a leading role in shaping regional dialogue. The announcement of AOIP in 2019, therefore, reflected Indonesia's long-time omni-directional diplomatic practices that have been carried out in the pursuit of a middle-power status in the world at large (Anwar, 2020). The Indonesian brainchild of AOIP thus demonstrates its foreign policy restraints to actively engage with great powers both within and outside the region. While placing ASEAN Centrality as a cornerstone of regional affairs, the availability of inclusive Indo-Pacific discourses and practices provides a regional context that is autonomous from contentious behaviors of the US, China and other regional stakeholders. Meanwhile, to escape the gridlock among major powers for geo-strategic influences over the country, an agency may utilize its past distinguished diplomatic practices with ASEAN to offset power constraints and marginalization of small-size power countries. Kavi Chongkittavorn (2018) notes that the nature of Thailand's balanced foreign policy, together with the long-standing emphasis on the ASEAN Centrality, would be a credible asset to "confidently engage foreign powers in both geopolitical and geo-economic terms to make sure that they coexist with each other without conflicts" (p.110).

One of the key driving variables that actualize an agency of weak power states is when their foreign policy is associated with the elite's domestic political legitimacy projects. Recent scholarly attentions goes to 'indigenous' domestic responses of Southeast Asia against the rising China. Kuik (2020) maintains that variations in response to China's BRI projects in Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand have derived from the agency's elite legitimation to "justify and consolidate their authority before their targeted constituencies" (p. 6). A similar account also occurs in the case of China's involvement in Indonesia's infrastructure projects in which assertive public scrutiny has complicated the economic relations between Jakarta and Beijing (Anwar, 2019; Damuri, Atje, Alexandra, Soedjito, & Intan, 2014; Damuri, Perkasa, Atje, & Hirawan, 2019; Suryadinata, 2017). Despite weak states' agency, foreign policy can be autonomously taken through a variety of means, corresponding to contingent domestic conditions (Baviera & Arugay, 2021; Chheang, 2021; Sothirak, 2021).

Conclusion

Given the multiplicity of international order, emerging discussions about International Relations (IR) have been developed into more 'local' and 'regional' areas of focus. This paper suggests the evolution of IR theory with a specific reference to the relationship between Southeast Asia and the evolving international orders associated with the idea of 'Indo-Pacific' and the rise of China does not completely distinguish itself from a Western School of IR, including well-known research programs such as realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. The very nature of Southeast Asian IR scholarship has largely drawn insights from realism in various aspects. The western presupposition of anarchic international order and the structural nature of power disparity between great and weak states remain intact and are continuously reproduced. Meanwhile, the prospective Southeast Asian IR manifests pluralist discussions engaged with the importance of agency in world politics.

This paper concludes that Southeast Asia scholarship on order and agency has contributed to Global IR research programs in three main aspects, despite the absence of indigenous theorizing First, the 'local' IR scholarship views that Southeast Asia is situated within the fluid international order, allowing multiple forms of agency to autonomously evolve and become a part of the very nature of the international and regional order. The dynamics of the weak states' 'local' trust toward major powers, the structural availability of weak powers' profit-optimization, and the applicability of regional institutional mechanisms vis-à-vis great power rivalries, one way or another, are reconstituting the indigeneity of global and regional order. Second, with a specific reference to ASEAN, the importance of regions is well articulated and associated with the broad conception of the agency's self-construction that is founded upon an unseparated material and ideational motivation. ASEAN and its member states utilize both normative- and interest-based strategies to craft a regional institutional engagement with great powers. Distinct contributions of both rationalist and constructivist approaches in IR have much to say about Southeast Asian original creation of informal and non-legal binding institutional arrangements, as regional norm and identity, as seen from the announcement of ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in 2019. Third, the local Southeast Asian scholarship is keen to provide insights about variations on how to broaden the understanding of weak states' agency. A number of agency's sources streamline the accumulation of the 'local' knowledge where the structural determinism of great powers politics cannot be taken for granted.

References

Abbott, K. W., Keohane, R. O., Moravcsik, A., Slaughter, A.-M., & Snidal, D. (2000). The Concept of Legalization. *International Organization, 54*(3), 401-419. doi:10.1162/002081800551271

Abbott, K. W., & Snidal, D. (2000). Hard and Soft Law in International Governance. *International Organization, 54*(3), 421-456. doi:10.1162/002081800551280

Acharya, A. (2007). The Emerging Regional Architecture of World Politics. [Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security, Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver; A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium, Peter J. Katzenstein]. *World Politics, 59*(4), 629-652. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060175

Acharya, A. (2014a). Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies. *International Studies Quarterly, 58*, 647-659.

Acharya, A. (2014b). *Rethinking Power, Institutions and Ideas in World Politics*. London: Routoedge.

Acharya, A. (2018a). *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics*: Cambridge University Press.

Acharya, A. (2018b). *The End of American World Order, 2nd Edition* (2nd ed.): Wiley.

Acharya, A., & Buzan, B. (2009). *Non-Western international relations theory: perspectives from Asia*.

Acharya, A., & Tan, S. S. (2006). Betwixt balance and community: America, ASEAN, and the security of Southeast Asia. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, 6*(1), 37-59. doi:10.1093/irap/lci125

Allison, G. (2017). *Destined For War: Can Amierican and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* New York: HMS.

Anwar, D. F. (2001). National versus Regional Resilience? An Indonesian Perspective. In D. d. Cunha (Ed.), *Southeast Asian Perspectives on Security*. Singapore: ISEAS.

Anwar, D. F. (2019). Indonesia-China Relations. *Southeast Asian Affairs*(2019), 145-162.

Anwar, D. F. (2020). Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific. *International Affairs, 96*(1), 111-129.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations. (2019). ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Retrieved from https://asean2019.go.th/en/news/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/

Baviera, A. S. P., & Arugay, A. A. (2021). The Philippines' Shifting Engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative: The Politics of Duterte's Legitimation. *Asian Perspective, 45*(2), 277-300.

Beng, O. K. (2018). Southeast Asia: No Longer Peripheral to Global Events. In A. Chong (Ed.), *International Security in the Asia-Pacific: Transcending ASEAN towards Transitional Polycentrism* (pp. 43-60): Palgrave Macmillan.

Boisseau du Rocher, S. (2019, June 17). Great Expectations: ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific Concept. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/great-expectations-asean-and-the-indo-pacific-concept/

Boon, H. T. (2018). Flexing Muscles Flexibly: China and Asia's Transitional Polycentrism. In A. Chong (Ed.), *International Security in the Asia-Pacific: Transcending ASEAN towards Transitional Polycentrism* (pp. 101-128): Palgrave Macmillan.

Caballero-Anthony, M. (2014). Understanding ASEAN's centrality: bases and prospects in an evolving regional architecture. *The Pacific Review, 27*(4), 563-584. doi:10.1080/09512748.2014.924227

Caballero-Anthony, M. (2018). Transboundary Haze in Southeast Asia: Dealing with Elusive Regional Solutions and Implications on ASEAN Community. In E. Quah & T. S. Tan (Eds.), *Pollution across borders transboundary fire, smoke and haze in southeast Asia* (pp. 19-30). Singapore: World Scientific.

Chheang, V. (2018). *The Indo-Pacific Strategy and Small States' Diplomacy*. Paper presented at the Whither "The Indo-Pacific Strategy? Shifting Strategic Landscape in the Asia-Pacifc Region, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Chheang, V. (2021). Cambodia's Embrace of China's Belt and Road Initiative: Managing Asymmetries, Maximizing Authority. *Asian Perspective, 45*(2), 375-396.

Chong, A. (2007). Southeast Asia: Thoery Between Modernization and Tradition. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, 7*(2007), 391-425.

Chong, A. (Ed.) (2018). *International Security in the Asia-Pacific: Transcending ASEAN towards Transitional Polycentrism*: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chong, A., & Hamilton-Hart, N. (2009). Teaching international relations in Souhteast Asia: Historical memory, academic context, and politics-an introduction. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, 9*(1), 1-18.

Chong, J. I. (2019, September 3). ASEAN needs more than an 'outlook' on the Indo-Pacific. *East Asia Forum*. Retrieved from https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/09/03/asean-needs-more-than-an-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/

Chongkittavorn, K. (2017). ASEAN's Role in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. *Asia Pacific Bulletin*.

Chongkittavorn, K. (2018). *US FOIP and Regional Implications.* Paper presented at the The Whither "The Indo-Pacific Strategy? Shifting Strategic Landscape in the Asia-Pacifc Region, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Compaoré, W. R. N., Martel, S., & Grant, J. A. (2021). Reflexive Pluralism in IR: Canadian Contributions to Worlding the Global South. *International Studies Perspectives*. doi:10.1093/isp/ekab001

Damuri, Y. R., Atje, R., Alexandra, L. A., Soedjito, A., & Intan, R. (2014). *A Maritime Silk Road and Indonesia's Perspective of Maritime State*. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep14744

Damuri, Y. R., Perkasa, V., Atje, R., & Hirawan, F. (2019). *Perceptions and Readiness of Indonesia towards the Belt and Road Initiative Understanding Local Perspectives, Capacity, and Governance*. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25409

Fitriani. (2018). *ASEAN's Role: Perspective from Indonesia.* Paper presented at the Whither "The Indo-Pacific Strategy? Shifting Strategic Landscape in the Asia-Pacifc Region, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Ha, H. T. (2019). ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Old Wine in New Bottle? *ISEAS Perspective, 2019*(51).

Ha, H. T. (2021). ASEAN Navigates between Indo-Pacific Polemics and Potentials. *ISEAS Perspective, 2021*(49).

Hiep, L. H. (2018). The Belt and Road Initiative in Vietnam: challenges and prospects. *ISEAS Perspective, 2018*(18). Retrieved from https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective

Holsti, K. J. (1970). National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy. *International Studies Quarterly, 14*(3), 233-309. doi:10.2307/3013584

Hussain, N. (2019). ASEAN joins the Indo-Pacific conversation. *Commentary*. Retrieved from https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-idea-of-indo-pacific-asean-steps-in/#.YSunxy1h1-X

Kahler, M. (2000). Legalization as Strategy: The Asia-Pacific Case. *International Organization, 54*(3), 549-571. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/2601344

Katsumata, H. (2003). The role of ASEAN institutes of strategic and international studies in developing security cooperation in the Asia-pacific region. *Asian Journal of Political Science, 11*(1), 93-111. doi:10.1080/02185370308434220

Keohane, R. O. (1988). International Institutions: Two Approaches. *International Studies Quarterly, 32*(4), 379-396. doi:10.2307/2600589

Koga, K. (2016). Japan's "Strategic Coordination" in 2015: ASEAN, Southeast Asia, and Abe's Diplomatic Agenda. *Southeast Asian Affairs*(2016), 67-80.

Kraft, H. J. S. (2000). *UnofficialDiplomacy in Southeast Asia: the Role of ASEAN- ISIS*. Retrieved from Canadian Consortium on Asia Pacific Security.

Kuik, C.-C. (2016). How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN states' alignment behavior towards China. *Journal of Contemporary China, 25*(100), 500-514. doi:10.1080/10670564.2015.1132714

Kuik, C.-C. (2020). *Elite Legitimation and the Agency of the Host Country: Evidence from Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand's BRI Engagement*. IKMAS Working Paper, (2/2020). Malaysia.

Macan-Markar, M. (2021). Laos shifts to China equity from loans as party congress starts. *Nikkei Asia*. Retrieved from https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Laos-shifts-to-China-equity-from-loans-as-party-congress-starts

Natalegawa, M. (2017). The Expansion of ASEAN and the Changing Dynamics of Southeast Asia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia, 39*(2), 232-238.

Natalegawa, M. (2018). *Does ASEAN matter? A View from Within*. Singapore: ISEAS.

Noor, E., & Rosli, F. (2018). Making Cents Out of An Evolving Concept. *Focus(7)*.

Parameswaran, P. (2019, June 24). Assessing ASEAN's New Indo-Pacific Outlook. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/assessing-aseans-new-indo-pacific-outlook/

Perlez, J. (2018). Pence's China Speech Seen as Portent of 'New Cold War'. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/world/asia/pence-china-speech-cold-war.html

Pitakdumrongkit, K. (2015). Coordinating the South China Sea Issue: Thailand's roles in the code of conduct development. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, 15*(3), 403-431. doi:10.1093/irap/lcv006

Pitakdumrongkit, K. (2019). Economics and Trade Impact of the Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative. *Panorama, 1*, 47-58.

Pongsudhirak, T. (2012). Thailand. In N. Kitchen (Ed.), *The New Geopolitics of Southeast Asia* (pp. 74-80). London: LSE.

Pongsudhirak, T. (2018). Locating ASEAN in East Asia's Regional Order. *Asia Policy, 13*(2), 52-56. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/26497768

Pongsudhirak, T. (2019, August 2). Is the Indo-Pacific eclipsing Asia-Pacific? *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved from https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1722875/is-the-indo-pacific-eclipsing-asia-pacific-

Pongsudhirak, T. (2019 September 6). Asean militaries between US, China. *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved from https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1743684/asean-militaries-between-us-china

Pu, X., & Wang, C. (2018). Rethinking China's rise: Chinese scholars debate strategic overstretch. *International Affairs, 94*(5), 1019–1035.

Royal Thai Embassy at Washington D.C. (2020). Ambassador Thani highlighted ASEAN Centrality at Indo-Pacific Briefing [Press release]. Retrieved from https://thaiembdc.org/2020/03/02/ambassador-thani-highlighted-asean-centrality-at-indo-pacific-briefing/

Saravanamuttu, J., & Han, D. (2016). Malaysia-China Relations: A New Turn? *RSIS Commentary*.

Seah, S., Ha, H. T., Martinus, M., & Thao, P. T. P. (2021). *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021*. Singapore: ISEAS.

Simon, S. W. (2002). Evaluating Track II Approaches to Security Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific: The CSCAP Experience. *The Pacific Review, 15*(2).

Singh, D. (2020). The "Indo-Pacific" is Here to Stay. *ISEAS Commentary, 2020*.

Sothirak, P. (2018). *Welcome Remarks.* Paper presented at the Whither "The Indo-Pacific Strategy? Shifting Strategic Landscape in the Asia-Pacifc Region, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Sothirak, P. (2021). Geopolitics, Great Power Competition, and Cambodian Foreign Policy. In D. S. Udom, S. Suon, & S. Bulut (Eds.), *Cambodia's Foreign Relatins in Regional and Global Contexts* (pp. 41-48): Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Sukma, R. (2009). The Accidental Driver: ASEAN in the ASEAN Regional Forum. In J. Haacke & N. M. Morada (Eds.), *Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific: The ASEAN Regional Forum* (pp. 111–123): Routledge.

Sukma, R. (2012). Indonesia. In N. Kitchen (Ed.), *The New Geopolitics of Southeast Asia* (pp. 42-46). London: LSE.

Suryadinata, L. (2017). *The Growing 'Strategic Partnership' between Indonesia and China Faces Difficult Challenges*. Trends in Southeast Asia 2017, (15). Singapore.

Suryadinata, L. (2018). Indonesia and its Stance on the "Indo-Pacific". *ISEAS Perspective, 2018*(66).

Tan, S. S. (2016). Rethinking ASEAN Centrality" in the Regional Governance of East Asia. *The Singapore Economic Review, 62*(03), 721-740. doi:10.1142/S0217590818400076

Tan, S. S. (2018). Defence and Security Cooperation in East Asia: Whither ASEAN Centrality? In A. Chong (Ed.), *International Security in the Asia-Pacific: Transcending ASEAN towards Transitional Polycentrism* (pp. 61-84): Palgrave Macmillan.

Tan, S. S. (2020). Consigned to hedge: south-east Asia and America's 'free and open Indo-Pacific' strategy. *International Affairs, 96*(1), 131-148. doi:10.1093/ia/iiz227

Tan, S. S., & Korovin, O. (2015). Seeking Stability in Turbulent Times: Southeast Asia's New Normal? *Southeast Asian Affairs, 2015*(2015), 3-24.

Thu, H. L. (2020). Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific Concepts. *Security Challenges, 16*(3), 53-57.

Thu, T. M., & Tinh, L. D. (2019). Vietnam and Mekong Cooperative Mechanism. *Southeast Asian Affairs*(2019), 395-411.

Yong-Soo, E. (2019). Global IR through dialogue. *The Pacific Review, 32*(2), 131-149. doi:10.1080/09512748.2018.1461680

Contact email: ppinitbh@tu.ac.th