Introduction

This doctoral thesis analyzes the multiple meanings about communities and the process of community building in the Southeast Asian region by focusing on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) norms through which it plays its role in managing regional security and the activities of various civil society organizations in the region. It has evaluated the alternative imaginations regarding regional communities that exist in Southeast Asia beyond the institutional structure of ASEAN by focusing on the activities of various civil society based actors that operate within the various states in the region. While using the term region, it is important to take note of the fact that by definitions, regions on most occasions would defy logic and geographical contours. Very often the states and people who belong to a region did not have a say in categorizing the area of their own nativity. As far as the concept of region is concerned, it will be argued by using Benedict Anderson’s theoretical framework on the study of nationalism and nation-states that regions like nation-states are imagined communities (Anderson 1983: 5-6). Likewise, regions are socially constructed and can be created through the decision to imagine them into existence (Acharya 2012: 12). Therefore, on many occasions, it has been observed that regions are artificial constructs of geopolitical convenience of major powers. It is worth noting in this context that identifying a region as ‘Middle East’ or ‘South Asia’ or ‘Southeast Asia’ or ‘Far East’ are all colonial or imperial constructs which grouped the former colonial territories and peoples into imagined geographical divisions of metropolitan strategic convenience.

The older Chinese concept of ‘Nan-Yang’ referred amorphously to a so called southern region to be reached by sea, which corresponds to what later emerged as Southeast Asia. Its later Japanese derivation named ‘Nampo’, stretched out broadly and elastically into what the Americans used to call ‘Southwest Pacific’. It is not surprising that the use of the term Southeast Asia as a separate or distinct region with a significant political meaning gained currency and popular usage during the summer of 1943 at the time of the Second World War when the Southeast Asia Command was established under Lord Louis Mountbatten for the interests of the allied powers led by the United States of America (US) and Great Britain. As a result, the very name Southeast Asia came from outside, and even today, not many people who reside within this imaginary construct ever think of themselves as ‘Southeast Asians’ (Anderson 1998: 3). Imperial interests, power play and strategic calculations of great powers have often been the
parameters employed in describing and delimiting an ‘international region’. From this standpoint, Southeast Asia of contemporary currency is primarily a Second World War and later on Cold War regional construct popularized by the United States.

It is also important to remember that a host of academicians, particularly those from the Anglo-Saxon maritime imperial states, began to use the term Southeast Asia seriously from the time of the Second World War. This new wave can be seen to have commenced in 1941 when John Furnivall published his book entitled *Progress and Welfare in Southeast Asia* (Furnivall 1941). In 1942, American political scientist Rupert Emmerson along with Lennox Mills and Virginia Thompson published a book titled *Government and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (Emmerson, Mills and Thompson 1942). Two other significant works with the title Southeast Asia emerged during this era that includes Victor Purcell’s *The Chinese in Southeast Asia* and D.G.E. Hall’s *A History of Southeast Asia* published in 1951 and 1955 respectively (Purcell 1951; Hall 1955). Although not part of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, a book published by well known Indian diplomat and strategic thinker K.M. Panikkar in 1943 entitled *The Future of Southeast Asia: An Indian View* did play its part in establishing Southeast Asia conceptually as a region (Panikkar 1943; Crozier 2006: 13). Till the outbreak of the Second World War, there was the absence of a historic hegemonic power in Southeast Asia like the Ottomans for the ‘Near or Middle East’, the Hapsburg and the Bourbons for ‘Latin America’ and the successive dynasts of Peking who made ‘China’ a plausible bounded mirage. Being heterogeneous along ethnic lines and segmented among various imperial states, it is not surprising that the region got its unitary name only during the time of the Second World War.

The Second World War promoted idea of Southeast Asia in three different ways. First, and not the least because of Great Britain’s greatest military debacle occurred in the area during the initial phase of the Second World War that the region became visible to the outside world. Second, the term was legitimated in the creation of the Southeast Asia Command, which was placed under the authority of Lord Louis Mountbatten after the Anglo-American Quebec Conference of 1943. Finally, war also conferred upon Southeast Asia a political connotation as a region. In fact, the Second World War in the Pacific catalyzed the definition of Southeast Asia as a distinct region (Crozier 2006: 13; Weatherbee 2009: 7). Also, the culmination of the Second World War in the Pacific, the rapid pace of post-war decolonization and the emergence of the
Cold War was accompanied by the sustained attempt of the United States to replace Japan as the single regional hegemon. In fact, the emergence of the Cold War in Asia led to the process of making Southeast Asia the kind of imagined reality it is today (Anderson 1998: 6-7).

In this context, it is significant to note that when ASEAN was established in August 1967, invitations to join the organization were extended to all the then existing states (including Brunei, which became independent from Britain much later in 1984) within the imagined reality of Southeast Asia and none from outside. It is in this connection that Ceylon’s (later Sri Lanka) objective of obtaining membership was not viewed favourably by the then ASEAN member states in 1967. Ceylon has cultural, mercantile and even political association with Southeast Asia going back to a millennium and it shares Theravada Buddhism with Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Ceylon’s agriculture, food, culture and even climate have strong resemblances to those in large parts of Southeast Asia. However, Ceylon ended up, perhaps uncomfortably, in the so-called South Asian region (Anderson 1998: 6).

Since its establishment on August 08, 1967, ASEAN as a regional organization in Southeast Asia has experienced considerable fluctuations in its fortunes during the last forty-seven years of its existence. The Bangkok Declaration establishing ASEAN in 1967 stated that ASEAN was created to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours and also to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in maintaining relations among countries in the region (ASEAN Bangkok Declaration 1967). In spite of ASEAN’s survival for over four decades, there is no gainsaying the fact that the most fundamental questions about ASEAN remain extremely debatable. On one hand, the ASEAN member states are often divided among themselves as their economic interests are more competitive than complimentary in nature and unilateralism on many occasions seems to have trumped over multilateralism on matters relating to dealing with regional and international affairs. In fact, the open-endedness of past initiatives and often the frustratingly slow pace of cooperation have resulted in a common characterization of ASEAN as a ‘talking shop’ involving all talk with little or no action. The vulnerabilities and institutional weakness of ASEAN as a regional organization in Southeast Asia became visible in the wake of the East Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 when it proved ineffective in responding to the crisis to protect the interests of its member states from the deleterious effects of the crisis. In the last few
years, lack of consensus between some of the member states on the issue of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, on the difficulties experienced in approving a new ASEAN Charter, the issue of democratization in Burma and the sporadic border clashes between the armed forces of Cambodia and Thailand, have undoubtedly posed new challenges before the ASEAN.

In this context, it is also important to note that there has been a debate within the theoretical literature on regional institutions over the nature of regional institutionalism in the entire Southeast Asian and the wider Asia-Pacific region, which includes the ASEAN. Some analysts argue that the focus of the Asian states on consensus-building, non-confrontational interaction and non-binding institutional structures reflect a distinctly Asian cultural approach to regional institutions. The central obstacle to strong regional institutions in the Southeast Asian region and in other parts of Asia is the quest for political legitimacy or the right to rule (Alagappa 1995: 2-3). Constituting the core of political organization, it affects all political activities. Political legitimacy comprises of four key elements, namely, shared norms and values, conformity with established rules for acquiring power, proper and effective use of power and consent of the governed (Alagappa 1995: 15). In fact, legitimacy is a complex, dynamic, variegated feature and a matter of degree instead of a simple dichotomy between legitimacy and illegitimacy. Uncertainty about domestic political legitimacy in most of the Southeast Asian as well as other Asian states is the most important variable that explains their reluctance to create strong regional institutions. The processes that regional institutions in Asia follow are indicative of the different perspectives of the Asian states as well as their inability to agree on common, overriding interests. Therefore, Asian regional institutions like ASEAN need to be evaluated differently from their counterparts like the European Union (EU) in the Western world (Acharya 1997: 319-346; Acharya 2003: 201-240). The problem of regime legitimacy prevalent in most of the Southeast Asian states can be traced to the newness of these states as modern states and the lack of shared values for political organization (Alagappa 1995: 57). In different degrees, every Southeast Asian state is still in the process of establishing its political legitimacy. This concern with domestic political legitimacy underpins the determination of the regional elites to defend the traditional Westphalian principles of state sovereignty and their unwillingness to establish strong regional institutions like the European Union. According to this line of argument, regional institutions like ASEAN are inherently weak and are of limited efficacy. The member states of regional institutions like ASEAN have insisted that these institutions must not infringe upon their
sovereign rights. ASEAN members intend to maintain and promote Westphalian notions of sovereignty. The basic norms, rules, structures and practices of ASEAN have to varying degrees reflected this concern (Narine 2004: 423-450).

On the other hand, ASEAN has been associated with the transformation of the once volatile, conflict-ridden and fragmented Southeast Asian region. With the emergence of ASEAN in 1967, an era characterized by highly confrontational politics gave way to a new one marked by relatively more stable relations and growing cooperation among the ASEAN member states. Since its inception, ASEAN gained prominence during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s when it was at the forefront of organizing the international campaign against Vietnam’s military intervention in Cambodia in December 1978. The military intervention and subsequent occupation of Cambodia by Vietnam from December 1978 for a period of ten years was catalytic in transforming ASEAN (Leifer, 1989). Overall, the achievements of ASEAN since August 1967 have been impressive in comparison to other Third World regional organizations. It is worth noting that in a region historically engulfed by conflict and confrontation, no serious large-scale armed conflict has taken place between the ASEAN member states from 1967 onwards although bilateral tensions have resurfaced on many occasions including sporadic border clashes.

After its formation in 1967, the founding members of the ASEAN established a formula for governing relations between them as well as their relations with states outside the Southeast Asian region, which is commonly referred to as the norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’. Elaborated in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) signed in 1976, and reiterated in the ASEAN Concord I signed at Bali in 1976, these norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’ based on certain cultural and ideational factors governing inter-state relations or ground rules of conduct have become an essential part of ASEAN regionalism (ASEAN TAC 1976; ASEAN Concord I 1976). But since the East Asian Financial crisis of 1997 and the subsequent internal political changes that brought about a democratic transformation in Indonesia, there has been pressure to modify some of the prevailing norms of the ASEAN Way and the distinctive non-binding process of decision making within the ASEAN. While analyzing the process of community building in Southeast Asia, it is also important to evaluate whether the norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’ have resulted in a sense of collective identity within ASEAN on the basis of which the regional organization can be called a security community in the Southeast Asian region.
ASEAN has expanded impressively the scope and depth of regional cooperation in the last four and half decades and its model of cooperation has in parts been extended to the wider Asia-Pacific region with the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, the ASEAN +3 Summit Process in 1997, the ASEAN-India (ASEAN+1) Summit Process in 2002, the East Asian Summit (EAS) Process in 2005 and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 2006. At its Ninth Summit held at Bali in October 2003, the ASEAN announced its intention to create by 2020 an ASEAN Community based upon three pillars: ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN Security Community (ASC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). This announcement was made in the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II, which is also known as ‘Bali Concord II’ (ASEAN Concord II 2003). A year later at ASEAN's Tenth Summit held at Vientiane in November 2004, ASEAN established the Vientiane Action Programme (VAP) to achieve this goal (ASEAN Vientiane Action Programme 2004). However, during the Twelfth ASEAN Summit held at Cebu in January 2007, the leaders of the ASEAN member states decided to accelerate the regional integration process by bringing forward the date of commencement of the ASEAN Community from 2020 to 2015 (ASEAN Declaration 2007). One of the primary reasons behind this decision to fast-track regional integration and community building process to 2015 was to reinforce ASEAN centrality and ensure that ASEAN remains the driving force in regulating the continuously evolving regional political and security architecture. Further, on November 20, 2007, the heads of ASEAN member states signed the ASEAN Charter at Singapore, which became operational after all the ten ASEAN member states ratified it (ASEAN Charter 2007). The ASEAN Charter restates the principles, goals and ideals already contained in the previous ASEAN agreements, including the foundational Bangkok Declaration of ASEAN of 1967, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia of 1976 and revalidate these and all of ASEAN’s other prior commitments. Further, on November 17, 2011, at the nineteenth ASEAN Summit, the heads of government of the ASEAN member states signed the Bali Declaration on ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations or Bali Concord III, which focuses on all the three aspects of the idea of the ASEAN Community, namely, politics and security, economy and socio-cultural dimensions (ASEAN Concord III 2011).
This thesis analyzes two fundamental research questions that are at the heart of the process of community building in Southeast Asia and on which no significant research work has been done previously. First, if regions like nationalism and nation-states are imagined communities, then the crucial question that needs to be analyzed in this context is the extent to which this community building process in Southeast Asia based on the strict adherence to the norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’ has resulted in a sense of collective regional identity and whether this form of collective regional identity has been able to supersede other more important national and sub-national identities that persists in the region. This study seeks to analyze whether community building in Southeast Asia requires a strict adherence to the norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’ or it can proceed by transcending some of the existing norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’.

Second, this research work also critically looks into the meaning of community and community building in the Southeast Asian region. In this context, it is important to note that although ASEAN at present consists of ten member states, it would be amazing to conceive that all those people who inhabit the ten Southeast Asian states share a common sense of collective identity and community or even are aware of what ASEAN actually is. This research work will also evaluate whether the meaning of community extends only to the elite club known as ASEAN or does the meaning of community embrace the whole region of Southeast Asia by going beyond the official institutional structure of ASEAN. It will be argued that if ASEAN constitutes an imagined community, then there also exist multiple alternative imaginations about communities in the minds of those who inhabit the various states in the Southeast Asian region, which in many ways contradict and can even undermine the kind of regional community that the ASEAN elites are trying to create.

This research work is based on the case study method of conducting research. It provides a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data, analyzing information and reporting the results. Multiple case studies in this research will help in both generating and testing hypotheses. This research work analyzes not only the available official ASEAN documents but also the documents about the activities and functioning of various civil society based groups in the Southeast Asian region. Regarding ASEAN, the primary data have been collected from the available official ASEAN documents and statements by ASEAN officials as also from
newspaper reports. Regarding the informal forums or civil society based groups in the region, primary data have been collected from the available official documents about the activities and programmes of these non-state actors. Secondary sources of data used in this research work include information from various books and reputed journals related to ASEAN and community building in the Southeast Asian region.

While analyzing the process of community building in Southeast Asia, it is important to understand the meaning of region and the processes that are involved in its evolution. As far as the concept of regionalism in Southeast Asia is concerned, it will be argued that regions like nation states are socially constructed rather than geographically or ethno-socially preordained. Using the theoretical framework of Benedict Anderson’s study of nationalism and the nation-state, it can be seen that there exists many parallels between imagining a nation and imagining a region (Anderson 1983: 6; Acharya 2012: 12). And regions like nation-states can be imagined, constructed, designed and defended. Therefore, regions, like nation-states are imagined communities and can be created through the decision to imagine them into existence. While there may be some parallels, the process of imagining a nation is not identical with the process of imagining a region, which has been dealt with in the first chapter of this research work. But in spite of its limitations in certain cases, there exists a parallelism in many respects between imagining a nation and imagining a region. It is important to note in this connection that Southeast Asia’s evolution as a region can never be established by simply looking at its geographical proximity or shared cultural attributes. Southeast Asia’s international relations represent a quest for regional identity and the success or failure in developing this regional identity explains to a large extent the patterns of conflict and cooperation among the states that strives to be a part of the region.

While focusing on ASEAN’s role in managing regional security, it has been analyzed whether ASEAN’s behaviour during the last forty-seven years of its existence was in strict conformity with the norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’ or whether there was any kind of deviation from those ASEAN norms in certain instances. It is important to note in this connection that the ASEAN member states still remain committed to the Westphalian concept of domestic sovereignty and are extremely reluctant to dilute or modify some of the existing norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’ in
general and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN member states in particular in spite of certain recent developments in the imagined region of Southeast Asia. These developments include the signing of the ASEAN Charter at Singapore in November 2007, the process of democratic transformation in Indonesia and the prospect for similar changes in Burma (now known as Myanmar)\(^1\), the extent to which the concepts of ‘Flexible Engagement’ and ‘Enhanced Interaction’ put forward by Thailand within ASEAN in 1998 have moulded ASEAN’s response on the question of political repression and human rights violations in Burma, East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98, ASEAN’s response towards combating terrorism and threats to ‘Human Security’ (particularly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome and the environmental concern resulting from the ‘Haze’ problem) in the region. This concern with domestic political legitimacy underpins the ASEAN member states determination to defend the traditional Westphalian principles of state sovereignty and it has the potential to undermine the process of community building in Southeast Asia that ASEAN has been trying to promote. The latter chapters will analyze in detail several factors that explain the reluctance of the ASEAN member states to transform ASEAN into an effective multilateral institution.

It would be more comprehensive in its scope than many of the previous researches on ASEAN and community building in Southeast Asia as it will not be confined to the analyses of official ASEAN documents alone to reach its conclusion but will also undertake a critical look at the role of informal or non-official regional forums like the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA), ASEAN Civil Society Conference, Solidarity for Asian Peoples’ Advocacy (SAPA), Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN) and other such forums. The agency for change emanating from these informal civil society groups that operate outside the institutional structure of ASEAN, which is still very much under-theorized in the existing literature on community building in the

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\(^1\) The ruling military junta changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989, one year after thousands of people were killed in the suppression of pro-democracy uprising. The name of the city of Rangoon was also changed to Yangon from that time onwards. The change of name from Burma to Myanmar was recognized by the UN and some other states like France and Japan, but not by the US and the UK. It is believed by the local people that the word ‘Bamar’ (which is Burma in English language) represents only one ethnic group out of eight major ethnic groups in the country, while Myanmar represents a combination of all ethnic groups. Burmese pro-democracy groups like the National league for Democracy do not accept the legitimacy of the unelected military regime to change the official name of the country. Internationally, both the names are recognized. In this dissertation, the original name of the country, which is Burma, has been used as the present official name Myanmar has been a contentious one and has raised debates, both within and outside the country.
region, will become critical and is likely to have far reaching consequences on the present set of ASEAN norms and the future of community building process in Southeast Asia.

This research work therefore focuses on the activities of informal civil society organizations in Southeast Asia like the ASEAN People’s Assembly, ASEAN Peoples’ Forum (APF), Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, Solidarity for Asian Peoples Advocacy and similar other such organizations in the region in order to ascertain among which sections of the population are knowledge of and support for ASEAN most and least present. Therefore, outside the official institutional sphere of ASEAN, the activities and programmes of civil society based groups or non-institutional forums in Southeast Asia like the ASEAN People’s Assembly, Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy, ASEAN Civil Society Conference and Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma have the potential to lead to a process of dilution or modification of some of the core norms of the ASEAN, particularly the norm of non-interference, which can have a significant bearing on the community building process in the region. It is significant to point out in this connection that the ASEAN Charter of 2007 has not been well received by the various civil society organizations in the region and they are aiming to adopt an alternative ASEAN People’s Charter (Collins 2008: 326-327). This research work has evaluated in details whether these civil society based organizations like the APF, SAPA and the ALTSEAN will turn out to be a co-opted body of ASEAN in disguise, or will they become a new platform for criticizing the ASEAN along with the norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’ by providing an alternative vision of community in the Southeast Asian region.

While reviewing the existing theoretical literature on ASEAN, it becomes clear that different scholars have analyzed ASEAN’s role in managing regional security from diverse theoretical perspectives. A careful scrutiny of these different theoretical perspectives makes it clear that realism (both classical realism and neorealism), which once dominated the discourse on Southeast Asian security is no longer the sole theoretical perspective (Peou 2002-03: 575-584). Within mainstream international relations theory, the predominance of realism has come under sharp attack from neoliberal institutionalism. Although realism and neoliberal institutionalism differ on how anarchy in the international system is to be managed, these two perspectives also share many similarities, which includes rationalism as an approach to the understanding of
international relations and emphasis on the role of material factors in explaining the notion of security and the behaviour of states in the international system. More importantly, realism has come under serious challenge from the post-positivist perspectives, most notably constructivism. Constructivism’s strength lies primarily in its challenge to realism’s epistemological foundations. The constructivist approach to international relations rests on the concept of identity and norms. One of its central claims is that development of collective identity can ameliorate security dilemma among states.

Realist literature on ASEAN has cast doubt on the ability of the organization to shape the regional order in Southeast Asia. Most realists tend to trace their intellectual ancestry to thinkers like Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes and Nicolo Machiavelli. Classical realists like E.H. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau argued about the primacy of national interests of states and emphasized that the morality of politics would always be tied to specific political interests (Carr 1946; Morgenthau 1948). Realism has emphasized that self-help and concerns about balance of power are important principles behind the behavior of states in the Southeast Asian region. Realists and particularly the neorealists have argued that the role and survival of ASEAN is dependent on, and shaped by, a wider regional balance of power system underpinned by U.S. military presence (Leifer 1989; Leifer 1999: 25-38, Huxley 1996: 199-228, Jones and Smith 2002: 109-126). This realist assertion is marked by the assumption that the smaller and weaker states in the international system, whether acting alone or through multilateral institutions, lack the capability to play a managerial role in ensuring regional order and must therefore bank on the resources and the leadership of great powers. Neorealist scholars have argued that a stable distribution of power is necessary for the successful functioning of ASEAN. This is in line with the neorealist argument that international institutions are basically a reflection of the distribution of power in the international system and therefore, have no independent effect on the behavior of states (Mearsheimer 1994-95: 7).

There also exists another body of literature on ASEAN, which can be termed as ‘institutionalist’ in the sense that it takes a more optimistic view of the ability of ASEAN to manage intra-mural conflicts and create the foundations for a stable regional order (Alagappa 1991: 269-305). This type of scholarship embraces both liberal institutionalist and neoliberal
institutionalist perspectives. Unlike the classical realists and neorealists, neoliberal institutionalists accept that change can occur peacefully through the functioning of international institutions (Keohane and Nye 1977; Nye 1988: 235-251; Powell 1994: 313-344). Both classical and neorealists remain skeptical about the prospects for peaceful change and maintain that international institutions are basically a reflection of the distribution power in the world and are based on calculated interests of great powers (Mearsheimer 1994-95: 7; Mearsheimer 2001: 363-366; Grieco 1988: 485-507). However, analyzing ASEAN’s role in managing regional security from the liberal institutional or neoliberal institutionalist theoretical perspectives have certain limitations. Neoliberal institutionalists share the basic realist assumptions that institutions reflect and are conditioned by the distribution of power in the international system. Likewise, since institutions are the creation of self-interested states, they do not transform state interests and identities. Neoliberal institutionalism does not provide an appropriate theoretical framework for explaining the role of ASEAN in the Southeast Asian region as ASEAN has not developed any sanctioning mechanism to prevent uncooperative behavior of states (Acharya 2001: 8). Moreover, the ASEAN member states have not developed a shared liberal-democratic domestic political environment and a relatively high degree of mutual economic interdependence unlike their counterparts within the European Union, which are regarded as the primary determinants for the success of regionalism by the neoliberal institutionalist perspective.

More importantly, realism and other conventional international relations theories like neoliberal institutionalism have come under serious challenge from the post-positivist theoretical perspectives like social constructivism. One of the significant claims of the constructivist theoretical perspective is that development of collective identity can ameliorate security dilemma among states (Wendt 1994: 384). Constructivism has emphasized upon non-material dimensions like cultural and ideational factors such as norms and identities as the fundamental determinants of security and politics of Southeast Asia. While realism has underlined the need for self-help and maintenance of a stable balance of power as the precondition for managing the security dilemma, constructivism has emphasized the necessity for building a security community through a process of interaction and socialization for achieving the same objective. The constructivist scholars have resuscitated the Karl W. Deutsch’s framework of security community in order to explain ASEAN’s role in maintaining regional order in Southeast Asia. A
security community is marked by the absence of war and also the non-existence of organized preparations for war among its members. In other words, security communities are guided by a sense of ‘we feeling’ among its members and use of force has no place in the management of relations among the members of a security community (Deutsch 1961: 100). Security communities can be of two types, amalgamated security communities and pluralistic security communities. An amalgamated security community is one whose constituent states have been formally merged into one single super-state. On the contrary, a pluralistic security community is one in which the member states retain their respective sovereignties intact. A pluralistic security community constitutes a transnational region comprising of sovereign states where there exist dependable expectations about peaceful change.

This research work further emphasizes that in comparison to realism and neoliberal institutionalism, the constructivist theoretical perspective offers more meaningful analysis of the process of community building in the Southeast Asian region, both within and outside the institutional structure of ASEAN. Constructivism has undoubtedly provided a powerful critique of both the realist and neoliberal institutionalist understanding of ASEAN and its role in managing regional order in Southeast Asia. The constructivist theoretical perspective has highlighted the need to move beyond the material conceptions of the region and to take into account the non-material dimensions like ideas and culture that make regions. Unlike traditional theoretical perspectives like neorealism and neoliberalism, constructivism treats identities as being in a constant state of process. It is through socialization that states develop collective identities that ameliorate the security dilemma. And collective identities are imagined during, and as a result of, an actor’s or a group of actors’ interaction within an institutional context (Acharya 2012: 27). Therefore, social constructivism has provided an illuminating insight for analyzing Southeast Asia’s international relations by looking not just what is common between and among the constituent units, but at how the states in the region, particularly the elite elements in those states engaged in a process of socialization within the institutional context of ASEAN, have imagined themselves to be a part of a distinct region. It can be argued from this standpoint that the process of community building that ASEAN has embarked upon is a product of imagination by the elites of the member states of ASEAN and it is primarily elitist in nature.
An important contribution of constructivism is that it provides insights into the interplay of institutions, norms and identities that goes into the social construction of security communities. ASEAN embodies and promotes certain key norms and practices in the Southeast Asian region. ASEAN’s power lies mostly in getting other Southeast Asian states to adopt its rules of acceptable regional behavior. Constructivism has explained the success of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia by particularly emphasizing upon the significance of the norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’, which comprises a set of behavioural norms encapsulated in a code of conduct and a set of procedural norms (Acharya 1997: 328). Constructivist scholars like Amitav Acharya have highlighted the norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’ as a distinct approach to dispute settlement and regional cooperation developed by ASEAN members with the aim of ensuring regional peace and stability. The ‘ASEAN Way’ consists of a set of well formulated norms like informality and consensus building in decision-making, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, non-confrontationist attitude and pacific settlement of disputes through dialogue and consultation. The ASEAN states cooperate because any shared antipathy is outweighed by the advantages of working together. In fact, although the sense of Southeast Asian regional identity remains relatively weak, this reality does not preclude cooperation among the ASEAN member states (Acharya 2001, Busse 1999:39-60). The primary point of debate between the realist and constructivist scholars centers on whether the norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’ have resulted in a collective ASEAN identity through which the regional grouping can be called a pluralistic security community.

It is also important to critically look into the reasons responsible for the relatively weak sense of regional identity for which the ASEAN elites has given more preference to certain types of norms like the norms of the ASEAN Way and not to any other set of norms in its attempt towards the process of community building in Southeast Asia. In order to understand the reasons behind ASEAN’s adherence and preference for the norms of the ASEAN Way, it is important to focus on the idea of Southeast Asian region’s division and diversity. Southeast Asia’s diversity can be seen in its people, culture, colonial experiences, national perspectives and even geographic orientations. Given the extensive nature of ethnic complexity in the region, it is rather difficult if not impossible to classify Southeast Asia as one coherent place. Ideas about diversity and divergence associated with the imagined region of Southeast Asia are important factors that
contribute to the understanding and explanations about Southeast Asia’s domestic and international politics. It appears that even with ASEAN’s expansion of membership and the changes that have taken place in the Southeast Asian region, the very idea of ‘One Southeast Asia’ as enunciated in various ASEAN documents remains a radical concept. It can be argued that Southeast Asia’s diversity, resulting in both division and disunity, is both ideological as well as empirical. While there can be no skepticism about Southeast Asia being an extremely diverse place in terms of ethnic composition, colonial experience and national perspectives, the political significance of that diversity is also the product of social interpretations reinforced by social practice. While some societies perceive diversity as a source of strength, others see it as a problem. In the case of ASEAN, historical experiences and particularly patterned interactions with major powers have contributed mostly to a view of diversity as a source of vulnerability for the regional states. And this particular perception of diversity affects how the ASEAN elites conceive, approach and practice regional cooperation (Ba 2009: 6).

The problems associated with diversity and division within the region provided an important starting point for the intra-ASEAN dialogue on regionalism. The experiences of the Southeast Asian states during the colonial era and the Cold War provide critical points of reference in this case. In the perception of the regional political elites, intra-state divisions and inter-state conflict encouraged various forms of external interventions, which in turn facilitated further additional divisions in the region. In particular, the colonial powers drew borders irrespective of geography and ethnic factors, which resulted in important internal diversity. Further, colonial policies also often exploited and fomented intergroup competition and prevented interaction among the Southeast Asian units. From these past historical experiences, there emerged a commonly held belief and interpretation about the dangers of division and a correlating conclusion about the necessity for greater regional unity. Therefore, if the problem of diversity within ASEAN is perceived as weak national integration and regional division, then the solution lies in national integration and regional unity. It is important to understand in this connection that alongside beliefs about the dangers of Southeast Asia’s diversity and fragility, ASEAN politics is also guided by an important concern for regional unity. Therefore, regionalism under the auspices of ASEAN in Southeast Asia is the pursuit of regional unity as a response to the underlying problems associated with diversity. At the same time, precisely because regionalism begins with the premise of Southeast Asia’s diversity, fragility and predilection towards division, a concern
for unity has contrary effects on ASEAN regionalism. Specifically, it appears that the understood importance of regional unity combined with shared understandings about the tenuousness of regional relations means that even while states are compelled to look to regional unity as an answer to important security challenges, they are also bound by the perception of not pushing regionalism too hard or too far, lest the whole project unravels prematurely. As a result, concern for regional unity becomes both a driver and constraint on ASEAN regionalism and different ASEAN initiatives (Ba 2009: 7). It is also because of this that some ASEAN initiatives have been decade long projects and the pace of regional cooperation pursued so far has been slow.

Moreover, if one carefully analyzes most of conflicts in the Southeast Asian region that ostensibly appear to be interstate in nature, one would find that the origin or source of such conflicts is on most occasions deeply rooted within the domestic polities of at least one of the participants (Alagappa 1995: 11-30; Ayoob 1995; Ayoob 1998: 31-54). As it has already been outlined, scholars like Muthiah Alagappa have emphasized that uncertainty about domestic political legitimacy in most of the Southeast Asian states is the key variable that explains their reluctance to create strong regional institutions. This concern with ensuring domestic political legitimacy and regime survival underpins the ASEAN member states determination to safeguard the traditional Westphalian principles of state sovereignty (Narine 2004: 424). As a result, the external or inter-state dimension is usually secondary in character and comes into play largely because of the existence of sources of disorder that are present within the boundaries of these states and it sometimes draws unwilling external actors into these conflicts or provides opportunities for external actors to get involved in such domestic conflicts in the developing world including those in the Southeast Asian region and thereby turning them into inter-state ones. So long as these states remain engaged in this process of state-building, they will be unwilling and perhaps unable to create strong regional institutional structures. It is also because of this concern that the ASEAN states have shown severe reluctance to dilute in any form the norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, which comprises an important part of the norms of the ASEAN Way. The ruling elites of the Southeast Asian states are of the view that regional institutions like ASEAN should enhance and not challenge the sovereignty of their respective states. It is also significant that there exists a constant interaction and contestation between ASEAN’s attempt to forge a collective regional identity and various
national and sub-national identities that are present within the various states in the Southeast Asian region, which has been highlighted in the second chapter of this research work. It outlines the reasons behind the rather weak sense of regional collective identity that has been imagined by the regional elites within the institutional structure of ASEAN.

In this context, it is important to note that the process of constitutive localization provides an important conceptual framework while analyzing the reasons behind the acceptance of certain ideas and norms in a particular local or regional context. Based on the constructivist theoretical perspective, the process of constitutive localization helps in understanding the complex processes involving reinterpretation, re-representation and reconstitution of an external norm in order to make it congruent with an existing local normative order. In this case, the role of local actors becomes crucial than that of the external actors in producing norm diffusion (Acharya 2009: 14-15). Based on the historiography of Southeast Asia, it appears that the Southeast Asian societies on most occasions were not only passive recipients of foreign cultural and political ideas, but were also active borrowers and localizers. It is important to note in this context that to localize something means to invest it with the characteristics of a particular place. Localization constitutes active construction (through discourse, framing, grafting and cultural selection) of foreign ideas by local actors, which results in the latter developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices.

A key aspect of localization is the role of local actors. Norm diffusion strategies that accommodate local sensitivities and contexts are more likely to succeed than those seeking to dismiss or supplant the later. Localization does not extinguish the cognitive prior or identity of the norm takers but leads to its mutual inflection with external norms. In constructivist perspective on socialization, norm diffusion is the result of adaptive behaviour in which local practices are made consistent with an external idea. Localization, by contrast, describes a process in which external ideas are adapted to meet local practices. The resulting behaviour of the recipient can be understood more in terms of the former than the later, although it can only be fully understood in terms of both. This aspect of localization makes it constitutive. According to constructivists, the constitutive impact of norms implies that the impact of those norms reaches deeper and they constitute actors’ identities and interests and not simply regulate the behaviour
of those actors (Checkel 1998: 325, 328). In fact, agents and structures both influence each others’ attributes. Agents and structures mutually constitute each other and are codetermined entities in a truly constitutive situation (Wendt 1987: 350; Wendt 1999: 72). It means that the agents’ original identity or belief systems would not be totally displaced, but would play a role in modifying the structure.

Constitutive localization assumes an existing normative framework, or a ‘cognitive prior’. A cognitive prior may be defined as an existing set of ideas, belief systems, and norms, which determine and condition an individual or social group’s receptivity to new norms (Acharya 2009: 21-22). The sources of cognitive priors could be culture or cultural norms, the shared, sanctioned and integrated systems of beliefs and practices that characterize a cultural group. The cognitive priors of nations or regions in the realm of international relations could be built around traditional culture or historical practices of statecraft and diplomatic interaction patterns. Another important source of cognitive priors is ideas, which comprises of world views, principled beliefs and causal beliefs of leaders and elites of social groups or states in a given region. There are differences between world views, causal and principled beliefs, which needs to be mentioned in this context (Goldstein and Keohane 1993: 8-11). World views can be defined as the universe of possibilities for action. Ideas have the broadest impact on human action when they take the form of world views. A crucial example of this is the concept of sovereignty. Principled beliefs constitute normative ideas, which specify criteria for distinguishing the right from the wrong, the just from the unjust. An important example of this type of principled beliefs is the anti-landmines movement in the last few decades. Causal beliefs are beliefs concerning cause-effect relationships that derive authority from the shared consensus of recognized elites, whether they are village elders or elite institutions or even scientists. Such causal beliefs provide guide to individuals on how to achieve their objectives. An important example of causal belief can be the link between shared beliefs and revolutionary political change. Thus the ideas and beliefs of the nationalist elites were critical elements constituting the cognitive prior of the foreign policy of the postcolonial states.

Other significant source of cognitive priors includes norms that are accepted and institutionalized from outside because of prior choices, including acts of borrowing and
localization (Acharya 2009: 23). This process was particularly important in the context of the Third World, where the post-colonial states would seek to translate their newfound sovereign status into foreign policy behaviour. In so doing, these post-colonial states could not just rely on traditional cultural norms or historical notions of statecraft. Although these did matter, the newly independent states had to cope with an international political environment dominated by essentially European norms of sovereignty, which had no prior equivalent in their traditional indigenous setting. Hence, these newly independent states had to borrow, adapt and localize Westphalian principles to develop their foreign relations, including nonintervention, sovereign equality of states and diplomatic recognition.

The framework of constitutive localization indicates that the outcome of localizing an external norm could lead to its enhancement at the local level and the amplification of local beliefs and practices at the international level. These outcomes of localization are expressed by the creation of new institutions or modification of existing ones. This is exactly what happened to the norm of nonintervention following the Bandung Conference of 1955. The principle of nonintervention found progressive elaboration and extension in Asian regionalist ideas and approaches. It is important to note in this connection that the Asian construction of the nonintervention norm was not simply a restatement of the original European and subsequent Latin American concept. The nonintervention norm in the Asian context would take additional meanings, including the creation of an injunction against participation in collective defence pacts organized under great power orbit, an idea that started to evolve after the culmination of the World War II. This Asian construction of the nonintervention norm in the aftermath of the Bandung Conference of 1955 and its diffusion beyond Asia through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which includes an injunction against participation in superpower led collective defence was absent in the original European and Latin American formulation of the norm (Acharya 2009: 38-40).

Such consolidation of nonintervention norm at the regional level also served to strengthen the global sovereignty regime. Although no standing regional institution was created immediately after Bandung Conference, the localization of nonintervention was evident in many characteristics of subsequent regional institutions in Asia, most notably the ASEAN. These characteristics as reflected within the ASEAN include consensus-based decision making, an
aversion to legalization and avoidance of any form of supra-national bureaucratic structure. The institutional characteristics of ASEAN was also marked by its rejection of great power led regionalism and collective defence functions (with or without participation of Western powers), because of the concern that any form of collective defence might be associated with the then discredited Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Instead, defence cooperation was undertaken by the ASEAN member states on a bilateral basis. ASEAN would develop a framework of regional conflict reduction and extra-regional political and security dialogues as part of the strategy of building security interdependence. Similarly, ASEAN also rejected European style regional economic integration and pursue a developmental regionalism that would limit the scope for more ambitious ideas regarding Pacific economic community.

It is through dialogue that ASEAN’s diverse and divergent states have identified, maintained and pursued points of consensus and agreement on relations and various issues of common concern. It is through talking that the ASEAN member states have developed new thinking about relations and practices based on a culture of restraint, respect and responsibility that is dramatically different from conflict-torn Southeast Asia of the 1960’s. As a dialogue-driven, consensus seeking process, ASEAN regionalism involves a lot about talking. However, it is not talking without substantive, material effects. Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN as a dialogue-driven process has produced new social norms, a new culture of regional dialogue, as well as new social and institutional practices that emphasizes on consensus-based regionalism and non-confrontational engagement (Ba 2009: 5). The practical impact of such changes is a regional system based on the nonviolent resolution of problems and the normative belief that states should work towards regional solutions.

The constructivist theoretical perspective allows us to look at regionalism as a cumulative social process by focusing on ASEAN states’ small power identity, extra-regional uncertainties, regional ideas consisting of a nationalist bounded regional unity norm and regionalism as a dialogue driven, consensus seeking process of social change that aims to build upon areas of agreement among the regional states. In fact, social constructivism’s emphasis on ideas, norms, identities and social processes helps to highlight and analyze the dynamics of ASEAN regionalism in ways that the dominant theories of international relations like realism and
neoliberalism with their focus on material gains could not. Social constructivist perspective can provide important insights into the kind of changes and exchanges taking place in ASEAN and the ways that ASEAN facilitates them.

Moving beyond the institutional framework of ASEAN, it is important to note that there are various civil society based organizations present within the different Southeast Asian states, which have their own imaginations of multiple alternative visions of communities in the region and are trying to influence and significantly mould the kind of regional community that ASEAN is trying to establish. The notion that ASEAN must be oriented towards the people of the member states could mark a dramatic reorientation of its raison d’être. The very notion that ASEAN was established in 1967 to secure peace and freedom of the citizens of its member states will no doubt appear to be quite a surprise for those who have endured long periods of authoritarian rule in the past and for some who still continue to endure oppressive rule in its various forms in some of the Southeast Asian states. The core principle of non-interference was designed to facilitate the member states in the often brutal policy of state building through authoritarian rule with the assurance that other members would refrain from interfering (Collins 2008: 314). The idea of greater participation of the people and the people taking ownership of realizing ASEAN Vision 2020 implied that rather than the top-down process described above, a bottom up process was envisaged, which emphasized that building a caring society was the prerogative of not only the state elites but of non-state actors as well (ASEAN Vision 2020 1997). The ASEAN Vision 2020 document among other things specifically mentioned about need for empowering the civil society in the region to give special attention to the disadvantaged, disabled and marginalized sections in order to ensure for them social justice and the rule of law. The Vientiane Action Programme (VAP) of 2004 was adopted by the ASEAN to initiate this community building process that involves the creation of ASEAN Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASEAN VAP 2004). Of these three pillars of ASEAN Community, it was the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Plan of Action that the civil society organizations are explicitly invited to act as agents for implementing the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.
Although efforts by various civil society groups to engage with the ASEAN began much earlier than the time of the making of the ASEAN Charter in 2007, it was during this time frame that the government-civil society engagement intensified and became more organized. The formal acceptance of a people oriented ASEAN Community in various ASEAN documents was viewed as a huge window of opportunity by the civil society groups to engage with ASEAN. Civil society organizations in this research work refers to non-state groups, operating in urban and rural areas and at times in foreign countries, functioning autonomously or in small networks to advance specific causes and interests that may diverge and conflict with one another. The civil society also constitutes an arena of power, inequality, struggle, and cooperation that is populated by a wide variety of non-state groups whose political orientations, interests, resources, capacities and methods span a wide spectrum. Civil society can be defined as a distinct public sphere of organization, communication and reflective discourse and governance among individuals and groups that take collective action deploying civil means to influence the state and its policies but not capture state power, and whose activities are not motivated by profit. There exist four important aspects of the space that constitutes the civil society. These aspects of civil society are a distinct place for organization by non-state, non market groups, a site for communication and discourse, a site of governance and an instrument to influence the structure and rules of the political game (Alagappa 2004: 9). These four aspects of civil society are also interrelated with each other. In the first aspect, civil society comprises of the voluntary and non-voluntary organizations that populate the realm located in the interstices among the state, political society, the market and the wider society at large and take collective action in the pursuit of public interests. The second aspect refers to civil society as a distinct sphere of rights, political discourse, critical discourse and reflection as well as construction of normative ideals through a process of interaction on the basis of ideas and arguments. The third aspect identifies civil society as an important site of self-governance that is largely independent of the state. The fourth characteristic of civil society point towards its role in taking collective actions for constructing, protecting and expanding the public sphere, limiting state power, making demands on the state, affecting the political system and restructuring the relations among the actors in the different arenas. It is significant to note that civil society is not a monolithic force but a diverse and disparate group of non state actors and the interests of these actors span across a wide spectrum. Also, civil society organizations in Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular are viewed
primarily in instrumental terms, as bringing about or preventing political change in the state and its institutions and it is less commonly seen as autonomous sphere of self-governance (Alagappa 2004: 5, 10).

However, while analyzing the role of civil society organizations, with each having their own imagination of an alternative regional community, it is pertinent to remember that there is a tendency in many Asian countries as also elsewhere to perceive and idealize civil society as the moral conscience of society and project its development as critical for democratic transition and consolidation. Although the role of civil society as a moral force is important, only occasionally and for brief moments does civil society assume the image of a moral force in the public eye. Even during the period of maximum mobilization, when its component units endeavour to project themselves as united, civil society is often divided, with struggle and competition among groups remaining latent. Civil societies in the Southeast Asian region are highly diverse in composition, resource endowment, and objectives. In fact, civil society constitutes an arena of power, struggle and cooperation among competing interests. Moreover, depending on the structure and composition of civil society, the autonomy and inclination of non-state organizations, and the prevailing political and economic circumstances, civil society organizations have tended to exhibit both democratic and anti-democratic tendencies in the region.

During the celebration of the forty-first anniversary of ASEAN in August 2008, civil society groups and networks in the Southeast Asian region organized a public debate with officials from the various ASEAN organs on the issue of challenges and opportunities in the implementation of the ASEAN Charter and the steps that are required towards the creation of an ASEAN Community. The debate also involved the issue of making ASEAN a ‘people-centred’ organization in the Southeast Asian region. It is worth noting that high-level ASEAN officials criticized civil society’s use of the term ‘people-centred’ ASEAN at this meeting and instead proposed the use of the more preferred nomenclature by ASEAN and its member governments, which is ‘people-oriented’ ASEAN. Although these two terms might appear to be similar on paper, they both have different meanings and can be interpreted in diverse ways. The ‘people oriented’ ASEAN essentially means that the policies pursued by ASEAN policy makers shall be
oriented towards the interests and concerns of the people of the region. However, under this principle, the final decision-making authority still rests with the political elites of the ASEAN member states. In contrast, ASEAN as a ‘people-centred’ organization refers to a principle under which the people will be placed at the heart of or at the centre of the decision making process in the regional grouping (Chandra 2009: 9-10). Core policies that affect the livelihood or well-being of the people across the region need to be determined by and for the people through democratic means. As ASEAN remained a relatively closed, non-transparent and non-accountable organization to the people of the region for more than four decades, ASEAN officials were and still are reluctant to endorse the concept of ‘people centred’ ASEAN. Although the governments of the member states of ASEAN have committed themselves towards the realization of peace, freedom and prosperity of their people, an evaluation of ASEAN history reveals that in actual practice, the core purpose of ASEAN has been the centrality of state security and safeguarding the interests of the ruling state elites. As a result, while promoting their own multiple alternative visions of regional communities in Southeast Asia, it has been a challenging task before the various civil society groups in the region to pursue the objective of making ASEAN ‘people-centered’ instead of confining it to ‘people oriented’ regional organization.

In this research work, Track I will refer to the official ASEAN. Track II will refer to academic think tanks and epistemic communities seeking to influence official ASEAN policy through open, inclusive and informal dialogue process. It is important to note that epistemic communities comprises of a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge within that particular domain or issue area. An important example of the ASEAN Track II processes is the ASEAN-ISIS (ASEAN Institute for Strategic and International Studies). These Track II processes also include the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA) created in 2000, which was an initiative of the ASEAN-ISIS designed to bridge the official Track I with the Track III processes. Track III processes refer to broader civil society and grass-root level non-state actors present within the Southeast Asian states. This research work has analyzed the activities of these civil society organizations like the ‘ALTSEAN’ (Alternative ASEAN, a pro-Burma democracy regional group), ASEAN Civil Society Conference, ‘Forum Asia’ (an Asia wide group that champions pro-people advocacy on many issues), Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy (SAPA) and
‘Focus on the Global South’, which is a pro-people group focusing on the issues relating to alternative regional community building.

It has been emphasized in this research work that the activities of the various civil society based groups in the Southeast Asian region indicate a willingness on their part to be stakeholders in the community building process, with each group having their own imagination of community for the region. These civil society organizations, based on their multiple ideas of imagined regional communities, are also involved in the effort to initiate modifications in the kind of regional community that ASEAN is trying to promote. The attempt of various civil society based organizations to promote the idea of a ‘people-centered’ instead of a ‘people-oriented’ ASEAN community assumes importance in this respect and has been analyzed in detail in the fifth chapter of this research work. Moreover, it is also important to note in this connection that the ASEAN People’s Assembly or the APA process has caused some amount of disquiet among the civil society based groups in the region. A perception has been created among some of the civil society organizations that rather than acting as a bridge between official ASEAN or Track I and the various civil society organizations at the Track III level, the ASEAN-ISIS acts as a gate-keeper restricting the access of these civil society groups (Collins 2008: 321-322). Further, while raising awareness about ASEAN is a function, which the various civil society based groups can perform, it is still a long way from their desire to be active agents from making ASEAN more responsive to the threats that bedevil the people of the imagined region of Southeast Asia. The very notion of the civil society organizations acting as agents to raise the profile of ASEAN among the people of Southeast Asia seems more in tune with the top-down process, with very little input in the decision making from the various non-state actors. The various civil society organizations have clearly presented this in the fifth ASEAN People’s Assembly Report and in the statement at the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC), held in December 2006. The ACSC Conference in December 2006 unequivocally stated that in order to truly reflect the aspirations of the people residing in the Southeast Asian region, ASEAN should be more than just being a forum for government and states and needs to involve the people in the issues they are most concerned with like human rights, democracy, livelihood and work, health and well being, environment and biodiversity, participation and inclusion, cultural expression, self-determination and economic justice. It called for an alternative regionalism that is rooted in
people’s participation at all times that truly represents a community of people of diverse faiths, cultures and bound by an undivided commitment to universal principles of human rights, justice, peace, democracy, tolerance and solidarity (ACSC II 2006: 8).

The first chapter will provide a theoretical overview of the process of community building in Southeast Asia with particular emphasis on ASEAN and its role in managing regional security. It will discuss various conventional or mainstream International Relations theories, which have been used by scholars to explain ASEAN’s role in managing regional security. While reviewing the existing theoretical literature on ASEAN and the process of community building in Southeast Asia, it will be argued in the first chapter that a careful scrutiny of these diverse theoretical perspectives makes it clear that realism (both classical realism and neo-realism) and neoliberal institutionalism, which once dominated the discourse on Southeast Asian security are no longer the two dominant theoretical perspectives. The first chapter of this research work will emphasize that in comparison to realism and neoliberal institutionalism, the social constructivist perspective by focusing on the interplay of institutions, ideas, norms and identities can offer more meaningful analysis of the process of community building in the Southeast Asian region under the auspices of ASEAN and also the multiple alternative imaginations of regional communities that exist among the various civil society groups beyond the institutional structure of ASEAN. Using Benedict Anderson’s theoretical framework on the study of nation and nationalism, it will be argued that regions like nation states can also be viewed as imagined communities.

The second chapter will focus on the constant interaction and contestations between ASEAN’s attempt to produce a collective regional identity and the various national and sub-national identities that exist within the states in the Southeast Asian region. The chapter outlines the reasons behind the rather weak sense of regional collective identity that has been imagined by the regional elites within the institutional structure of ASEAN. The third chapter will analyze the ASEAN Charter of 2007 and its vision of a people oriented ASEAN Community. It will also critically discuss the origins of the process of engagement that has been taking place between ASEAN and the various civil society based actors in the Southeast Asian region. The reactions of the various civil society organizations in the region towards the ASEAN Charter of 2007 have also been analyzed in this chapter.
The fourth and fifth chapters of this research work will evaluate respectively the activities of Track II and Track III processes and their multiple alternative visions of regional communities for the imagined region of Southeast Asia. The fourth chapter will evaluate the activities under the Track II processes, which includes the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA) created in 2000, with the objective of bridging the official Track I (ASEAN) with the Track III processes. The fifth chapter will evaluate the activities of Track III processes that include broader civil society based and grass roots level non-state actors, which operate in the Southeast Asian region. These civil society based organizations include ALTSEAN, Forum Asia, ASEAN Civil Society Conference, Solidarity for Asian Peoples Advocacy, Focus on the Global South and several other such organizations. Among these various civil society groups, the activities of ASEAN Civil Society Conference, ALTSEAN and Solidarity for Asian Peoples’ Advocacy will be analyzed in detail.

In the concluding section, it will be argued that if ASEAN continues to view these various civil society based organizations as conduits through which it can make itself better known among the people of the region, then the process of building regional community in Southeast Asia will remain top-down instead of bottom up and ASEAN will also continue to be elite driven without any real empowerment of the people. It is also pertinent to point out in this respect that there exists a process of constant interaction and contestation between the imaginations about several alternative visions of regional communities in Southeast Asia among the various civil society based non-state actors and the official or elite imagination of a regional community that the ASEAN is trying to establish for the Southeast Asian region.

References


