Chapter I

ASEAN, Community Building and Southeast Asia: A Theoretical Overview

The role of ASEAN in maintaining regional security and the process of community building under its auspices in the Southeast Asian region has been analyzed by different scholars from diverse theoretical perspectives. Within the traditional or conventional International Relations theories, the two most important theoretical perspectives, which have been used by different scholars to analyze ASEAN’s role in managing regional security are realism and neoliberal institutionalism. In fact, the dominance of realism has come under sharp attack from neoliberal institutionalism within the literature on conventional international relations theories. Although both realism and neoliberal institutionalism differ on how anarchy in the international system is to be managed, these two theoretical perspectives share several commonalities including rationalism as an approach to the understanding of international politics. Further, both these theoretical perspectives have emphasized the role of material factors in explaining the concept of security and behaviour of states in the international system. The realist literature on ASEAN has cast doubts on the ability of the regional grouping to shape the regional order in the Southeast Asian region. On the other hand, the liberal institutionalist and the neoliberal institutionalist perspectives have taken a more optimistic view of ASEAN’s ability to manage intramural conflicts and create the foundations of a more stable regional order. Unlike classical realists and neorealists, neoliberal institutionalists accept that change can take place peacefully through the workings of international institutions. Realists remain sceptical about the prospects for peaceful change and maintain that institutions are basically a reflection of the distribution of power in the world. International institutions are based on the calculated interests of great powers and they have no independent impact on the behaviour of states.

However, both realism and neoliberal institutionalism have come under serious attack from the post-positivist International Relations theories, the most notable of which is constructivism. Constructivist scholars have rejected those international relations theories that are based on the rationalist approach, which includes both realism and neoliberal institutionalism. For these conventional theories that are based on the rationalist approach, cooperation depends on calculation of gain or loss by states whose interests are deemed to be exogenous to the process of interaction. Constructivists argue that through incremental interaction and socialization, states
redefine their interests and develop a collective identity that may enable them to overcome power politics and security dilemma. According to constructivism, international relations are not only shaped by material factors like power and wealth, but by non-material or inter-subjective factors like ideas, norms, identity and culture. Constructivists are of the opinion that conditions such as anarchy, security dilemma and power politics are not immutable or organic features of international relations, but are socially constructed. Based on this constructivist theoretical perspective, it will be argued in this chapter that regions like Southeast Asia are also socially constructed rather than geographically or ethno-socially preordained. The process of community building undertaken by ASEAN through the norms of the ‘ASEAN Way’ represents a quest for regional identity. The primary point of debate between the realist and constructivist theoretical perspectives 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.

Realism and ASEAN

Realism was developed systematically in international relations by twentieth century scholars like E.H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, Kenneth N. Waltz and others, although it is often associated with a great tradition of political thinkers that includes Thucydides, Hobbes and Machiavelli. Realism in all its different varieties, seeks to describe and explain the world as it is, rather than how one might like it to be. Realism emphasizes the unending competition for power and security in the world of states and for a long time, it remained as the dominant theoretical perspective in international relations. Moral principles and social progress are seen by realists as relevant to domestic politics where trust prevails since security is provided by the state, whereas cosmopolitan projects are considered by realists to have little importance for international relations where states must provide for their own security and trust very few other states. The existence of a more or less unbridgeable gulf between domestic and international politics is a central theme in realism in general and neo-realism in particular (Linklater 2001: 103). In the realist account of the conflictual nature of international relations, realists give high priority to the centrality of the nation-state in their considerations, acknowledging it as the supreme political authority in the world. According to both classical realism and neorealism, states are the most important, dominant and rational actors in international relations. Realists argue that states are
the primary actors in international relations because they retain the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. The international system was considered to be anarchical, that is without an overarching authority to regulate the behaviour of states. Realists are of the view that the international political realm is characterized by conflict, suspicion and competition between nation-states, a logic which prevents the realization of alternative world orders. Therefore, realism can be regarded as a pessimistic theoretical tradition and accordingly, international politics constitutes an arena of repetition and recurrence and not reform or radical change (Burchill 2001a: 70). From this standpoint, realism tends to view ASEAN’s origin as a reflection of security commitment to a balance of power within the framework of a distinctively Eurocentric concert of powers. Realists believe in great power primacy and dependence of smaller or weaker states of the region on great power security guarantees (Leifer 1989; Leifer 1999: 25-38; Huxley 1987: 194-207; Huxley 1996: 199-228; Jones and Smith 2002: 109-126; Zakaria 1994: 109-126). The management of regional order is largely an exclusive preserve of the great powers. Smaller and weaker states, whether acting individually or through multilateral institutions, lack the capacity to play a managerial role during international crises and must therefore depend on the resources and leadership of great powers. Realism has focused on the impact of material factors like balance of power in explaining the limitations of ASEAN’s role in shaping the regional order in Southeast Asia.

A central concept in nearly all realist approaches is that of the ‘security dilemma’. The concept of ‘security dilemma’, which was originally developed by John Herz, refers to the attempt by states to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of power of others with the intention of safeguarding their own security (Herz 1950: 157-180). It is important to note that realist scholars have analyzed ASEAN’s role in the Southeast Asian region from this standpoint. The five founding members of ASEAN (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand) shared a common vulnerability to internal threats aggravated by external powers taking advantage of a conflict ridden regional environment. During the initial years, the member states shared the belief that the greatest security threat confronting the Southeast Asian states was foreign-backed communist insurgency. ASEAN was meant to promote regional peace and stability, primarily through pursuing socio-economic goals. However, in reality, the ASEAN member states since the inception of the organization were very much concerned about security issues. The existence of a common external threat played a key role in the creation of ASEAN in
In fact, from the realist standpoint, ASEAN’s evolution in response to diverse external threats has remained a consistent motivating force behind ASEAN’s development over the last forty-six years. Regional partnership through the establishment of ASEAN was intended to control conflict, facilitate the management of fragile post-colonial political systems and ameliorate the sense of vulnerability (Leifer 1989: 1).

Realism has emphasized that self-help and concerns about balance of power are important principles behind the behaviour of states in the Southeast Asian region. Many realist scholars have argued that a stable distribution of power is a desideratum for the successful functioning of ASEAN (Huxley 1996: 199-228; Simon 1993: 11-27). 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. This is in line with the neorealist perspective that international institutions are basically a reflection of the distribution of power in the international system and therefore have no independent effect on the behaviour of states (Mearsheimer 1994-95: 7). Both classical realists and neorealist scholars have offered two arguments to buttress their claims as to how ASEAN member states have tried to overcome their ‘security dilemma’. First realist scholars have pointed out that defence expenditure of most Southeast Asian states are rising steeply as they apprehend that the various intramural disputes (including territorial disputes) in the region might result in violent armed conflict in the future (SIPRI 1998: 224; Boyd 2002). Realist scholars are of the opinion that this increase in defence expenditure of most of the ASEAN member states is to a large extent motivated by the declining presence of the United States in the region since the culmination of the Cold War (Simon 1993: 20-21). Second, according to realism, Southeast Asian states are seen as behaving in accordance with the principle of balance of power considerations by way of forging bilateral defence arrangements with major powers against potential external threats or as a means of assurance during times of strategic uncertainty. The defence ties between ASEAN member states and other major powers include the Five-Power Defence Agreement (FPDA), the bilateral security alliance between Thailand and the United States, the defence pact between the United States and the Philippines and the bilateral security agreement between Indonesia and Australia. Realists have seen these defence agreements as attempts by the Southeast Asian states to increase their military power in order to preserve their national security from external threats. Realism has explained these defence agreements as attempts by ASEAN member states to exercise self-help by arming
them or creating alliances in order to maintain a stable balance of power, or more specifically, a balance of threat in the Southeast Asian region (Waltz 1979; Waltz 2000: 5-41; Walt 1985: 3-43; Walt 1987).

Realist scholars have also highlighted considerable differences among the ASEAN member states on matters concerning regional security to underrate the role of ASEAN as a vehicle for managing regional security. Although ASEAN had displayed a high degree of cohesiveness and solidarity in the aftermath of Vietnam’s military intervention in Cambodia in December 1978 by invoking the various ASEAN norms in order to manage the regional security dilemma, there were considerable differences among some of the ASEAN member states on the issue of threat perception to their respective national security (Anwar 1994: 186-189; Sebastian 2000: 165-166). This was particularly evident in the position undertaken at that point of time by Indonesia and Malaysia on one hand and Thailand and Singapore on the other. Within ASEAN, Thailand and Singapore considered Vietnam as the most immediate threat to their security and were prepared to form a temporary alliance with China to oppose Vietnam. Indonesia and to a considerable extent Malaysia regarded China as the greatest long-term threat, notwithstanding Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia. As a result, Indonesia even opposed a proposal put forward by Singapore in December 1981 for ASEAN to supply arms to the Khmer Rouge rebels. Ultimately, the proposal had to be withdrawn from ASEAN’s agenda, although the association stated that it would not have any objections if individual members decide to do so (Anwar 1994: 187). In line with this thinking, former Indonesian President Suharto and former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Hussein Onn announced the ‘Kuantan Principle’ on March 27, 1980. The ‘Kuantan Principle’ in a nutshell called upon both former Soviet Union and China to stay out of the conflict in Indo-China and thereby accommodated Vietnam’s withdrawal from Cambodia contingent upon China’s non-interference in the region (Nischalke 2000: 93). The significance of the ‘Kuantan Principle’ was that two ASEAN members had launched a bilateral initiative that ran counter to the previous ASEAN position on the Cambodian crisis. Even though it never became official policy, the initiative gave an impression of disunity prevailing within ASEAN and thereby affected the image of the organization to a certain extent.

Moreover, in spite of ASEAN displaying a high degree of cohesiveness on the Cambodian issue by invoking the various norms of the ASEAN Way, the regional organization did not act
alone during the entire period of the crisis as it was part of an international effort that included China and the United States, which exercised complimentary military, diplomatic and economic instruments of coercion. ASEAN’s involvement as a diplomatic community during the crisis was buttressed by a distinctive pattern of international alignments. In line with realist thinking, ASEAN’s participation in a tacit alliance was in contradiction to the goal of regional order being managed autonomously as was evident from the founding Bangkok Declaration of 1967 and the ASEAN declaration of Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971 (ASEAN Bangkok Declaration 1967; ASEAN ZOPFAN 1971; Leifer 1999: 33). It is also important to note that the Cambodian conflict was finally resolved as a consequence of the end of Cold War whereby the former Soviet Union withdrew material and diplomatic support from Vietnam, which forced the latter to come to terms with China, its prime regional adversary. Therefore, although ASEAN had displayed a common diplomatic front in challenging Vietnam’s military intervention and occupation of Cambodia, its effort to resolve the crisis were rather poor. The five permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council took greater interest in monitoring the regional peace making process culminating in the Paris Peace Conference of 1991, while ASEAN remained more or less on the sidelines during these diplomatic initiatives. ASEAN’s objective of unilateral withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia got fulfilled as its interests coincided with those of the United States and China (Narine 1998: 201). Realists have argued that without the support of the major powers, ASEAN’s diplomacy would not have been effective.

Realism tends to consider ASEAN as incapable of shaping the regional order in Southeast Asia and has termed it as a classic ‘imitation community’ in the region (Jones and Smith 2002: 108). The term ‘imitation community’ was first coined by Michael Oakeshott to describe the incomplete process of nation-building in the newly decolonized states. Marked by ethnic, social and economic cleavages, these post-colonial states struggled to establish themselves in the decolonized world. The leaders of these ‘imitation’ states have a high degree of insecurity, which was largely a result of lack of legitimacy with respect to their control over the state apparatus (Kedourie 1975: 351). Similarly, by advancing this argument, it can be argued that this same insecurity can also inspire the establishment of regional institutions like ASEAN, which are essentially rhetorical shells that give form but no substance to domestic and international arrangements. Realists argue that prior to the East Asian Economic crisis of 1997-98, ASEAN’s
supposedly regional security architecture masks a series of structural faults that rendered it almost irrelevant to the real foundations of regional security. Neorealists in particular have regarded ASEAN as largely irrelevant. In line with the logic of balance of power, ASEAN constitutes a mechanism to consolidate the imitation states of Southeast Asia (Jones and Smith 2002: 99). The kind of insecurity that prevails in the region has led to the creation of regional institutions like ASEAN, which are in actual practice rhetorical shells that provide form but no substance to domestic or international arrangements.

**Liberal and Neoliberal Institutionalism and ASEAN**

The ‘institutionalist’ literature on ASEAN and regional community building 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). Both liberal institutionalist and neoliberal institutionalist perspectives are part of this type of scholarship. Before evaluating the liberal and neoliberal institutionalist perspectives’ analysis of ASEAN’s role in the process of community building and managing regional security, it is important to distinguish between liberal institutionalism and neoliberal institutionalism. Liberal institutionalism, which emerged in the early 1970’s focuses on the contribution of international organizations in managing conflict and promoting cooperation between states. A subsequent and relatively modern variant of liberal institutionalism is neoliberal institutionalism. Unlike classical liberalism, which took a rather benign view of human nature, neoliberal institutionalism accepts the basic realist premise that the international system is anarchic and the states are the primary if not the only actors in international relations. But the disagreement between realism and neoliberal institutionalism rests on the fact that neoliberal institutionalism advocates that international institutions, which include international regimes and formal international organizations, can mitigate the effects of anarchy and constrain state behaviour by promoting norms of conduct, facilitate information sharing and reduce transaction costs. The main thrust of the neoliberal institutionalist perspective has been that through membership of international institutions, states can significantly broaden their conceptions of self-interest in order to widen the scope for cooperation (Keohane and Nye 1977; Nye 1988: 235-251; Powell 1994: 313-344). As argued by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, compliance with the rules of these international institutions not only discourages the narrow pursuit of national interests, it also debilitates the meaning and appeal of state
sovereignty. The emergence of regional economic integration in Europe was to a large extent inspired by the belief that the likelihood of conflict between states would be reduced by establishing a common interest in trade and economic collaboration among the members of the same geographical region. The process of European integration leading to the emergence of the EU is the best example of economic integration engendering closer economic and political cooperation in a region historically bedeviled by national conflicts. Liberal institutionalists share with neorealism an acceptance of the importance of the state and the anarchical condition of the international system. Likewise, liberal institutionalists believe that since the institutions are the creation of self-interested states, they do not transform state identities and behaviour. Accepting the broad structures of neorealism, but employing rational choice and game theory to anticipate the behaviour of states, liberal institutionalists seek to demonstrate that cooperation between states can be enhanced even without the presence of a hegemonic player, which can enforce compliance with agreements. Liberal institutionalists are of the view that the consequences of anarchy can be mitigated by regimes and institutional cooperation that brings higher levels of regularity and predictability to international relations (Burchill 2001b: 40). Therefore, in line with this argument, it can be said that through membership of ASEAN, the states in the Southeast Asian region would be able to achieve mutual benefit and promote greater levels cooperation among them.

Both neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists disagree on how states conceive of their self-interests. While neorealists have opined that states are concerned with relative gains, neoliberal institutionalists claim that states are concerned with maximizing absolute gains, which focus more on assessing their own welfare than that of their rivals (Burchill 2001b: 40). Realists in general and neorealists in particular are of the view that states are not willing to cooperate with others if they expect to gain less than that of their rivals. Neoliberal institutionalists, on the contrary do not view international relations as a zero-sum game, as several states feel secure enough to maximize their own gain regardless of what accrues to other states. According to neoliberal institutionalism, mutual benefits arising out of cooperation are possible because states are not always concerned with relative gains. Further, the growth of economic interdependency has been matched by a corresponding decline in the value and importance of territorial conquest for states. This has become apparent in recent times where the ‘trading state’ rather than the ‘military state’ is becoming more dominant (Rosecrance 1986).
Neoliberal institutionalism gained considerable momentum in the Southeast Asian region during the first half of the 1990’s, when ASEAN took a more direct managerial role in regional security while the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was being established in 1994 to manage the strategic uncertainties that emerged in the region in the aftermath of the Cold War. The neoliberal institutionalists primarily focus upon the pacific effects of multilateralism in the region. It is important to note in this connection that Asian liberal and neoliberal institutionalist scholars unlike their counterparts in the Western World tend to view institutionalism less in formal legalistic structures of cooperation than as a long term process of socialization and consensus-building. But neoliberal institutionalists in Asia, like their counterparts in the Western World also based their hopes about a regional order on the assumption that institutionalism will facilitate information sharing, building trust, and provide avenues for avoidance of conflict and dispute settlement in the region (Acharya 1999: 5). Therefore, according to neoliberal institutionalists, the process of community building in the Southeast Asian region under the initiative of ASEAN and its model of security cooperation provides a useful tool for institution building in the Southeast Asian and the Asia-Pacific region. Neoliberal institutionalists generally take an optimistic view of security in the Southeast Asian region with the hope that the habits of cooperation forged through dialogue and interactions within ASEAN would decrease the appeal for balance of power politics.

**Limitations of Conventional International Relations**

*Theories in explaining ASEAN Regionalism*

It can be argued from the above discussion that one of the limitations of the more conventional or traditional theoretical perspectives in explaining ASEAN’s role in managing regional security in Southeast Asia is that cooperation is understood primarily in terms of discrete collective action problems involving the provision and division of direct gains. Likewise, the idea of order and the contribution of ASEAN towards maintaining regional order are also understood mostly in material and mechanical terms like balance of power, hegemonic leadership, forms of hierarchy, the structure of economic and security incentives. Both realism and neoliberal institutionalism emphasize the role of material factors while explaining the behaviour of states and the concept of
security in the international system. The conventional international relations theories tend to measure cooperation in utilitarian terms, which includes direct material gains and outcomes. As a result, realists, for whom military power and balance of power are key determinants of security, are mostly dubious about ASEAN’s strategic value. While the ASEAN member states may view regionalism as a way to safeguard their interests against those states which are more powerful, member states have also historically avoided any collective pooling of military capabilities that are central to realist definitions of balancing behaviour and world order. Political-security initiatives undertaken by ASEAN like ZOPFAN are seen by realists as more or less useless as they offer regional states very little in the way of military or material deterrent against probable territorial encroachments (Ba 2009: 18). It is primarily because of this that the conventional International Relations theories like realism have viewed ASEAN’s cooperation as weak, inconsequential and even unworthy of theoretical reflection. However, the real dilemma before the conventional or traditional theories is not why ASEAN cooperation has not been more materially fruitful but rather why the member states have pursued ASEAN regionalism for such a long time if it is meaningless and there is nothing substantive in it. Realists in particular have so far failed to offer any explanation as to why ASEAN’s members dedicate so much time and resources on something, which is considered meaningless (Narine 2008: 412).

It is also significant to outline here that neorealism totally neglects the domestic dimension of state-building and their interaction with the dynamics of regional balances as well as with global power rivalries and international norms as explanations for the occurrence of conflicts in the international system. Since a large number of conflicts in the international system today have their origins in the state-making process and also in its obverse phenomenon, state-breaking and state failures, neorealism’s inability to explain and predict these conflicts, particularly in the developing world and to prescribe strategies for their management is not at all surprising. In contrast to traditional interpretations of international security, it is important to emphasize that the insecurity of most of the states in the Southeast Asian region results from conflicts that are internal to the states. 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 are 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). Therefore, neorealism is unable to provide meaningful explanation to these types of insecurities, which confronts the
states in the region. In this respect, neoliberal institutionalism is even less concerned with the dynamics of these conflicts than is neorealism. Its narrow ethnocentric focus on the changing nature of interstate interaction in the interdependent world of developed industrialized liberal democratic states renders it incapable of even conceptualizing the problem of disorder and conflict in most parts of the developing world (Ayoob 1998: 43).

But even theoretical perspectives like neoliberal institutionalism, which are more optimistic about cooperation and the resilience of institutions, have found it difficult to see any value in ASEAN. Neoliberal institutionalists find it difficult to see why states would try to cooperate at all because of the existence of competing economic and security interests among ASEAN states, which would encourage states to move away from regional cooperation. In fact, the absence of formal cooperative mechanisms within ASEAN is particularly problematic. While neoliberal institutionalism tends to view information and transparency as important products and facilitators of institutional cooperation, cooperation is nevertheless viewed primarily in terms of formal constraints and binding obligations that ASEAN lacks (Ba 2009: 18-19).

Therefore, analyzing ASEAN’s role in managing regional security from the liberal and neoliberal institutionalist theoretical perspectives have certain limitations. Neoliberal institutionalism would not provide the appropriate theoretical framework for explaining ASEAN’s role as ASEAN has not developed any sanctioning mechanism to prevent any kind of non-cooperative behaviour of its member states. ASEAN’s approach towards regionalism has been based on generating cooperation among its members through socialization rather than by constraining non-cooperative behaviour through the use of sanctions. Also, the ASEAN member states have not yet developed a shared liberal-democratic domestic environment and relatively a high degree of mutual economic interdependence, which are considered as primary basis for the success of regionalism by the neoliberal institutionalist perspective (Acharya 2001: 7-8). Moreover, neoliberal institutionalism faced a serious credibility problem regarding explaining ASEAN’s role in maintaining the regional order in the wake of the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. This stems from the conflict-causing consequences of the economic downturn during and after the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and the weak response of regional institutions like ASEAN in dealing with them (Acharya 1999a: 14).
There is no gainsaying the fact that ASEAN has been labeled as weak and even inconsequential by the conventional International Relations theories because institutional strength has been calculated by these theories in terms of legalization and militarization, neither of which describes ASEAN well. From this standpoint, ASEAN’s minimalist economic and security initiatives have been looked upon as a rather empty or weak form of cooperation. But it is significant to note that while ASEAN like any other regional organization has its own share of problems, the stabilization of regional relations and growth in cooperation over time counters such extreme and pessimistic conclusions about ASEAN. Unlike the situation that used to prevail in the region in the mid 1960’s when conflict and intervention were the norm in intra-Southeast Asian relations, at present exchanges, dialogue and collaboration does take place regularly at multiple levels and in a variety of areas. While utilitarian explanations put forward by the conventional theories provide plausible explanations for the limitations of ASEAN cooperation and why ASEAN has not done more in terms of cooperative endeavours, they have difficulty in explaining the reasons as to why ASEAN has not done less in terms of regional cooperation. Although it is true that divergent interests among member states often make cooperation difficult and less binding, yet both realism and neoliberal institutionalism fails to offer meaningful explanations regarding what justifies or sustains ASEAN for over more than four decades and how ASEAN has been able to expand the scope and depth of regional cooperation since its establishment in 1967 in such a manner that its model of regional cooperation has been extended in parts even beyond Southeast Asia into the wider Asia-Pacific region (Ba 2009: 19-20).

Constructivism and Community

Building in Southeast Asia

The emergence of constructivism in the literature of International Relations theory since the 1980’s has been marked by an emphasis on not only the material factors, but also on the importance of non-material dimensions like the role of norms, culture, ideas and identity in shaping political action and also on the mutually constitutive relationship between agents and structures. Both the conventional theoretical perspectives, realism and neoliberal institutionalism, based on rationalist approaches, have come under serious criticism from the post-positivist perspectives, most notably constructivism. This research work will emphasize that in comparison to the conventional International Relations theories, constructivism offers a more meaningful
analyses of the process of community building in the Southeast Asian region by highlighting the need to move beyond the material conceptions of the region and taking into account non-material dimensions like ideas and culture that are involved in the social construction of regions. Constructivists advocate that the states develop collective identities through a process of socialization in order to ameliorate the security dilemma (Wendt 1994: 384). It will be argued later on in this chapter that collective identities are imagined during, and as a result of an actor’s or a group of actors’ interaction within an institutional context. The constructivist perspective has provided important insights into Southeast Asia’s international relations by focusing on the way in which the elite elements within the Southeast Asian states by engaging themselves through a process of socialization within the institutional context of ASEAN have imagined themselves to be a part of a distinct region named Southeast Asia. This imagining of Southeast Asia as a shared political and cultural space by the regional elites was a pertinent factor behind the emergence of ASEAN regionalism and to the crystallization of Southeast Asia as a distinct region (Acharya 2012:37). Therefore, it can be argued from this standpoint that the process of community building under the auspices of ASEAN is primarily elitist in nature and is a product of imagination of the ruling elites of the member states of ASEAN.

Some scholars are of the view that constructivism needs to be seen as an outgrowth of other post-positivist International Relations theories including critical theory based on the ideas of the Frankfurt School, as constructivist scholars have sought to use the insights of those post-positivist theories to illuminate on the diverse aspects of world politics. Constructivism, although, differs from the first wave of post-positivist theories in its emphasis on empirical analysis. While the first wave of post-positivist theories had rejected the rationalist depiction of humans as atomistic egoists and society as a strategic domain resulting in an alternative image of humans as socially embedded, communicatively constituted and culturally embedded, constructivists have employed this alternative ontology to explain and interpret aspects of world politics that were anomalous to conventional theories like neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Also, where earlier post-positivist theories had condemned the neo-positivist methodology of conventional International Relations theories like neorealism and neoliberalism and calling for a more interpretative, discursive and historical modes of analysis, constructivism has employed these very techniques to further their empirical explorations (Reus-Smit 2001:215-216).
The demise of the Cold War undermined the explanatory pretensions of neorealism and neoliberal International Relations theories, neither of which had predicted or could adequately comprehend the systematic transformations that were reshaping the global order during that time. The end of the Cold War therefore, opened a space for alternative explanatory perspectives like constructivism and prompted critically-inclined scholars to move away from narrowly defined meta-theoretical critique (Reus-Smit 2001: 216). At the beginning of the decade of 1990’s, a new generation of scholars had emerged who embraced several of the propositions of the critical International Relations theory, but who also saw the potential for further innovation in conceptual elaboration and empirically inclined theoretical development. Not only did the end of the Cold War gave rise to new and interesting questions about world politics (for example, dynamics of international change, the nature of basic institutional practices, the role of non-state agencies, the issue of human rights), the failure of conventional theories based on rationalist approaches to meaningfully explain these recent systemic changes encouraged this new generation of scholars to revisit old questions and issues that have been viewed so long through realist or neoliberal theoretical perspectives.

The emergence of constructivism has resulted in a more sociological, historical and practice oriented form of scholarship in the discipline of International Relations. In many respects, constructivism embodies characteristics normally associated with the ‘English School’ theory or the ‘International Society Approach’. Constructivists have taken up the idea that states form more than a system that leads to the formation of a society, and they have pushed this idea to new levels of theoretical and conceptual sophistication. The interest of the constructivist perspective in international history also represents an important point of convergence with the ‘English School’ theory, as does their emphasis on the cultural distinctiveness of different societies of states. Further, constructivism’s interpretative methods of analysis also find resonance with Hedley Bull’s call for a classical approach to theorizing in International Relations rather than the neo-positivist standards of verification and proof. By reimagining the social as a constitutive realm of values and practices, and by situating individual identities and interests within such a field, constructivists have placed social inquiry back at the centre of the discipline of International Relations. Constructivists have brought a new level of conceptual clarity and theoretical sophistication to the analysis of both international society and world society, thereby complementing and augmenting the work of the ‘English School’ (Reus-Smit 2001: 226).
It is also important to note that constructivist scholars are also divided between modernist are postmodern constructivists. However, all constructivist scholars seem to articulate and explore three main ontological propositions about social life, propositions which they claim illuminate more about global politics than the assumptions of their rival conventional International Relations theories. First, to the extent that structures can be considered to shape the behaviour of social and political actors, be they individual or states, constructivism states that normative or ideational structures are as important as material structures. As neorealists focus on the material structure of the balance of military power, and Marxists stress the material structure of the global capitalist economy, constructivist scholars argue that systems of shared ideas, beliefs and values also have structural characteristics, and that they exert a powerful influence on social and political action. Constructivists accord importance to non-material factors like norms, identity, culture and ideas because they are of the view that material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded (Wendt 1995: 73). Moreover, normative and ideational structures also are thought to shape the social identity of political actors.

Second, constructivist scholars are of the view that understanding of how non-material structures condition actors’ identities is important because identities inform interests and, in turn, actions. As it has already been outlined, conventional International Relations theories like realism and neoliberal institutionalism argue that interests of actors are exogenously determined, whereby actors, whether individual or states, encounter one another with pre-existing set of preferences. Realists and neoliberal institutionalists are disinterested from where such preferences came from, only if actors pursue them strategically. On the contrary, constructivism advocates that understanding how actors develop or construct their interests is important in order to explain a wide range of phenomenon in international politics that conventional International Relations theories tend to ignore or misunderstand. Focusing on social identities of individuals or states, constructivists have argued that identities are the bases of interests. And identities of actors are socially constructed and it informs the interests of actors and in turn their actions. Constructivists like Alexander Wendt have argued that in international relations, ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ (Wendt 1992: 398). Third, constructivists also contend that agents and structures interact with each other and are mutually constituted (Checkel 1998: 328). Normative and ideational structures may well condition the identities and interests of actors, but those
structures would not exist if it were not for the knowledgeable practices of those actors. Institutionalized norms and ideas define the meaning and identity of the individual actor and the patterns of appropriate economic, political, and cultural activity engaged in by those individuals, and it is through reciprocal interaction that we create and instantiate the relatively enduring social structures in terms of which identities and interests of actors are defined.

According to constructivism, normative and ideational structures are seen as shaping the identities and interests of actors through imagination, communication and constraint. With regard to imagination, constructivists argue that non-material structures influence what actors view as realm of possibility, which includes how they think they should act, what are the perceived limitation of their actions and what strategies they can imagine and entertain to achieve their objectives. Institutionalized ideas and norms thus condition what actors’ consider necessary and possible, both in practical and ethical terms. Normative and ideational structures also work their influence through communication. When individuals or states seek to justify their behaviour, they will usually do so through established norms of legitimate conduct. According to constructivism, normative and ideational structures also can place significant constraints on the conduct of an actor. Constructivists have outlined that institutionalized norms and ideas only work as rationalizations because they already have moral force in a given social context (Reus-Smit 2001: 218-219). The very language of justification thus provides constraints on action, though the effectiveness of such action will vary with the actor and the context.

The social constructivist perspective has offered significant insights into the study of regions by moving beyond the material dimensions and taking into account the ideational forces that play an important part in the social construction of regions. In this connection, it is important to consider Benedict Anderson’s seminal work on nations and nationalism as there are many parallels between imagining a nation and imagining a region. Benedict Anderson has stated that by definition, a nation is an imagined political community and it is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign (Anderson 1983: 5-6). It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. In fact, all communities, larger than primordial villages of face to face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which those
communities are imagined. In earlier times, Javanese villagers used to know that they are connected to people they have never seen, but these ties were imagined in a particularistic way as indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship and clientship. The nation is also imagined as limited because even the largest of them has finite and possibly elastic boundaries, beyond which exist other nations. There is no nation that imagines itself coterminous with mankind (Anderson 1983: 7). The nation is also imagined as sovereign as the concept emerged during the period of ‘European Enlightenment’ and revolutions were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, dynastic realm.

Based on Benedict Anderson’s work on nation and nationalism, it can be argued that regions like nation states are also imagined communities and are socially constructed. In fact, there exist many parallels between imagining a nation and imagining a region. International Relations scholars working within the constructivist theoretical framework have used this framework to analyze the emergence of the regional concept of Southeast Asia. One of the basic assumptions of the constructivist perspective is that regions can be created through the decision to imagine them into existence. Although often described in geographical terms, regions are political creations not fixed by geography. Even regions that appear to be most natural and unalterable are products of political construction and subject to reconstruction attempts (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002: 575). Regions are social entities, emerging out of imagination, discourse and socialization (Acharya 2012: 24). A region is conceived both as an ideational as well as a material construct, existing and acting as a social entity, having its own rules of inclusion and exclusion, with its identity defined in relation to the perceived characteristics of other regions. This view challenges the purely materialist conception of regions based on geography, geopolitics and market forces. Regions need not be treated as mere abstractions or as prior spatial givens, but can be viewed as emerging out of social processes that reflect and shape particular ideas about the manner in which the world is or should be organized. Among the ideational forces shaping regions are the regionalist ideas held particularly by the regional elites about how a region originated, what kind of distinctive values and characteristics it represents and what its future evolution ought to be. In this context, it is important to focus on both the constructive as well as the constitutive relationship between the idea of Southeast Asia as a region and its institutional manifestations and strengths overtime. Therefore, viewing the region as an imagined community while understanding the international relations of Southeast Asia helps us to
critically look into the process of community building undertaken by ASEAN and also the alternative imaginations of communities that exist in the region among the various civil society based organizations, which will be discussed in the latter chapters.

However, while arguing that regions as imagined communities, it is important to note that there are significant differences between regions and nations or nation-states. While there may be some parallels, the process of imagining a region is not the same as the process of imagining the nation. The nation is imagined as a sovereign political entity. On the other hand, the region is imagined in most cases if not all, as a community of sovereign states. Regions are imagined in the sense that territorial proximity and functional interaction are by themselves inadequate to constitute a region in the absence of an idea of the region, whether conceived from inside the region or outside. And regions are socially constructed in the sense that regional coherence and identity are not givens, but result primarily from self-conscious socialization from the political leaders and people of a region (Acharya 2012: 23). In other words, it can also be said that regions are what its politicians and people want it to be. It will be argued in this dissertation that the process of social construction of the Southeast Asian region is a product of imagination by the regional ruling elites as a result of which the voices or interests of the people who inhabit the states of the region have not been given their due importance.

Further, it will be difficult to accept the view that regions like Southeast Asia are ‘nations writ large’ because it does not necessarily clarify the relationship between regional identity and national identities. Some scholars are of the opinion that a clash between national identities and regional identity is not always inevitable and it is seen that on all occasions, regional identities complement, rather than replace, evolving state and national identities. It has been argued in this dissertation that there has been a constant interaction between the evolving sense of a regional identity and the persistence of national identities in the Southeast Asian region and in most cases, the two seem to contradict each other.

The constructivist perspective emphasizes on not just what is common between and among the constituent units in the region, but at how the countries of the region, especially its elite elements engaged in a process of socialization within the institutional context of ASEAN have imagined themselves to be part of a distinct region (Acharya 2012: 27). Ideas as imagined by the ruling elites are critical to explaining ASEAN regionalism. Ideas define the social contexts that lead
actors to perceive threats in one situation but not another. Ideas also define the realm of possibility and appropriateness. In the absence of clear material incentives, ideas are especially useful in explaining the reasons behind pursuing regionalism as a response to the problems experienced by the diverse and divergent member states of ASEAN. ASEAN begins with the normative idea that there is a certain defined space called Southeast Asia marked by diversity and history of division and foreign intervention as well as ideas about national and regional self-determination vis-à-vis the external powers. Taken together, these ideas have found expression particularly in ideas of regional resilience and ‘One Southeast Asia’ as both a regional ideal and a plan of action. The effect and significance of these ideas derive from the shared meanings that the actors attach to them, which in other words, reflect their inter-subjective content. That inter-subjective content is what provides ideas their causal power and is thus critical to explaining the effectiveness of certain ideas as a coordinating principle or the persuasiveness of one regional idea over another.

Besides emphasizing on the importance of ideational factors, the constructivist perspective in International Relations rests on the concept of identity and norms (Katzenstein 1996: 1-32; Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996: 33-75). The constructivist scholars have argued that ASEAN member states possess a shared collective identity that exerts significant influence upon state behaviour (Acharya 1999b: 59-84, Busse 1999: 39-60). While realism has underlined the necessity of self-help and maintenance of a stable balance of power as the prerequisites for managing the security dilemma, constructivism has emphasized upon the need for building a security community through a process of interaction and socialization for achieving the same objective. The constructivist scholars have resuscitated the idea of security community as outlined by Karl W. Deutsch in order to explain ASEAN’s role in maintaining the regional order in Southeast Asia. According to Karl W. Deutsch,

A security community is considered to be a group which has become integrated where integration is defined as the attainment of a sense of community accompanied by formal and informal institutions and practices, sufficiently strong and widespread to assure peaceful change among members of a group with reasonable certainty over a long period of time (Deutsch 1961: 98-99).

A very 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. It
is therefore important to evaluate whether the ASEAN norms have resulted in the emergence of a security community based on a sense of collective identity in the Southeast Asian region.

A security community is marked by the absence of war and also non-existence of organized preparations for war among its members. A security community is also characterized by the same or equivalent patterns of living, thinking and we-feeling among its members. In a sense, a security community is guided by the sense of “we-feeling” among its members (Deutsch 1961: 100). One of the unique features of a security community is that although there might exist rivalry and serious differences among the states within the security community, some special nature of the relationship will prevent the quarrelling governments from adopting forms of behaviour typical in a conflict situation involving threat or actual use of force (Adler and Barnett 1998: 31-32). Thus it is the ability to manage conflicts within the group peacefully, rather than the absence of conflicts per se, which distinguishes a security community from other types of security relationships. The use of force has no place in the management of relations between the member states within a security community (Acharya 2001: 16, 20).

Security communities can be classified into amalgamated and pluralistic security communities (Deutsch 1961: 100). An amalgamated security community is one where formal political merger of the participating units have taken place. On the other hand, in a pluralistic security community, the members retain their independence and sovereign status. A pluralistic security community can be defined as a transnational region consisting of sovereign states whose people maintain depending expectations of peaceful change. The primary point of debate between the constructivist and the realist theoretical perspective centers around whether the ASEAN norms have resulted in a collective ASEAN identity through which the regional grouping can be considered as a pluralistic security community.

The construction of identity is central to the kind of ‘we-feeling’ that Karl W. Deutsch identified as a key feature of security communities. The notion of identity is one of the central elements of the constructivist perspective because of its primary claim that the development of collective identities can ameliorate the ‘security dilemma’ among states. Like norms, collective identities can make and redefine state interests and move them beyond the logic of power politics. Just as norms are contested and are made and remade through politics, collective identities are made and remade through interactions and socialization, rather than being
exogenous to those processes. For example, till recently, there was a general tendency among scholars to understand a region in terms of immutable and pre-ordained features such as geographic proximity, a given physical location, cultural and linguistic similarities among the people, and a common historical experience. However, as it has already been highlighted, regions like nation-states can be viewed as imagined communities, created through processes of interaction and socialization, which may result in a different conception of what constitutes a given region at different points of time. Benedict Anderson’s study of nation and nationalism provides an important conceptual basis for a constructivist understanding of the emergence of security communities. Benedict Anderson has seen the construction of nationalism as one huge exercise in learning, adaptation and collective self imagination. This process overcomes significant cultural, linguistic, political and other differences and conflicts of material interests between social groups inhabiting different geographical spaces and lays the basis of the formation of the nation-state. In a similar way, like the nation-states and regions, security communities can also be conceptualized as imagined communities (Adler 1997: 249-277 cited in Acharya 2001: 28). Imagined security communities involve a social construction of generative and self-reinforcing attitudes and behaviours that may gradually lead to the definition and realization of common identity.

Viewed in this light, ASEAN regionalism, in general, and the expression ASEAN Way in particular may be viewed as a continuing process of identity building, which relies upon conventional modern principles of inter-state relations as well as traditional and culture-specific modes of socialization and decision-making prevalent in the region. It can be argued that the founders of ASEAN had very little idea of regional identity during the initial period. However, they clearly hoped to develop one through regional cooperation. ASEAN came to play a critical role not only in developing a sense of regional identity, but also laying down the boundaries of Southeast Asia as a region as it has been discussed earlier in this chapter. It drew from indigenous social, cultural and political traditions of its members and borrowed, adapted and redefined the principles and practices of cooperation from the outside world. In this connection, it is significant to note that sometimes, supposedly foreign principles and ideas have been subsequently incorporated into the ASEAN framework after being redefined and adjusted so as to conform to the needs and aspirations of the ASEAN member states. But whether ASEAN has been able to develop a sense of collective identity after more than forty seven years of interaction
remains extremely debatable and will be discussed in details in the second chapter of this dissertation.

The constructivist scholars have also focused on the ASEAN norms as the edifice through which it has been able to maintain the regional order in the Southeast Asian region. The term ASEAN Way refers to claims about a distinct approach to settlement of regional disputes and regional cooperation developed by the ASEAN members with the aim of ensuring peace and stability in the region. The norms of the ASEAN Way include a code of conduct for inter-state behaviour as well as a decision-making process based on consultation and consensus (Acharya 1997: 328). The code of conduct constitutes the behavioural norms of the ASEAN, which includes certain well known principles like non-interference in domestic affairs of other states, non-use of force, pacific settlement of disputes and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of the member states. These behavioural norms have also been termed as legal-rational norms by some scholars. These principles have been eloquently expressed in various ASEAN documents, most notably in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia signed at Bali on February 24 1976 (ASEAN TAC 1976). The behavioural norms of ASEAN are characterized by a strong commitment to the idea of state sovereignty.

In this context, it is important to note that these behavioural norms of the ASEAN may be viewed as platitudinous as they are found to be part of the UN Charter, as well as other regional political and security organizations elsewhere in the world. However, the uniqueness of these norms lies in the manner in which they have been operationalized into a framework of regional interaction. This refers to a set of socio-cultural norms or procedural norms, which ASEAN has developed over the years and they constitute important elements of the ASEAN Way (Busse 1999: 47). These procedural or socio-cultural norms of ASEAN refer to prescriptions on how conflicts in the Southeast Asian region are to be managed. The term ASEAN Way is a loosely used concept whose meanings remain vague and contested. The origin of the term is obscure and its early usages implied the close inter-personal ties among the ASEAN leaders (Acharya 2001: 63). Some former officials connected to ASEAN described the ASEAN Way as something marked by the fact that most of the leaders representing the ASEAN member states initially were mostly old friends who knew each other very well. In fact, this excessively personal approach of the ASEAN leaders towards forging regional cooperation during a considerable length of time
has been criticized. But, this approach has also been recognized as one of the inherent strengths of ASEAN regionalism. The ASEAN Way is usually described as a decision-making process that features a high degree of consultation and consensus among the ASEAN member states. Many elements of the ASEAN Way have been enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, signed in 1976. Article 2 of the Treaty stipulates the provisions of non-interference, non-use of force in settling regional disputes and some other norms (ASEAN TAC 1976). As part of the ASEAN Way, informality, quiet diplomacy, discreteness, consensus-building and non-confrontational bargaining styles characterize the process of regional interaction and cooperation. These are often in sharp contrast with the adversarial posturing, majority vote and other legalistic decision-making procedures in Western multilateral institutions (Acharya 1999b: 56-69; Acharya 2001: 64). Estrella Solidium, a Filipino scholar, who was perhaps the first one to seriously analyze the ASEAN Way, asserted that it consists of cultural beliefs, practices and values that have resulted in an ASEAN culture, which is found to be congruent with some values of each of the member states (Solidum 2003: 93).

It is important to discuss in detail some of the important norms of the ASEAN Way. In this respect, the principle of non-interference in the inter-affairs of other member states is one of the most important elements. The ASEAN states avoid interference in any issue, which can be regarded as the domestic affair of other members. Yet, it can be argued that this principle is not necessarily peculiar to Southeast Asia. In Europe, the same principle has been respected within the Conference/Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE/OSCE). However, what is unique in the Southeast Asian region is the fact that this principle is coupled with another element of the ASEAN Way, which is quiet diplomacy. This principle of quiet diplomacy as part of the ASEAN Way, allows member states to subdue any bilateral tensions. Each member refrains from criticizing the policies of other members publicly (Katsumata 2003: 106-107). With regard to the principles of quiet diplomacy, the importance of the comfort level, as an important precondition for the success of ASEAN’s regional diplomacy needs to be taken note off. This raising of the comfort level of the members involves lengthy, often ritualistic dialogues, without public criticism by any one member of another.

Also, the principle of non-use of force or peaceful settlement of disputes, which is another important ASEAN norm, is equally important. This very principle also needs to be understood in
In the Western context, the principle of non-use of force and peaceful settlement of disputes imply settlement of disputes through legal means. In contrast, the ASEAN members prefer a more informal approach to conflicts (Katsumata 2003: 107). The ASEAN norms encourage the members to seek improvement of the situation in the long term by gradually promoting a sense of mutual trust. The ASEAN Way does not guide the members to resolve conflicts in the short term by defining territorial boundaries in a disputed area through legal means. The primary objective of ASEAN’s approach is the prevention of escalation of conflicts through promotion of mutual trust.

The preference for informality and a related aversion to institutionalization of cooperation constitutes an important norm of the ASEAN Way. In this connection, it is important to note that the first summit of the ASEAN leaders only took place after eight years of ASEAN’s establishment and there were only four such summits in the first twenty-five years of ASEAN’s existence. From 1992 onwards, ASEAN started to hold formal summits every three years and from 1996, informal summits were held in between official summits. As ASEAN evolved, the value of close interpersonal ties among senior government officials of the member states increasingly came to be recognized. This preference for informality can be very well understood from the comment of former Foreign Secretary of the Philippines, Carlos Romulo. He opined that within ASEAN, it has often been found out that private talks over breakfast have proven to be more important than what transpired in formal meetings (Hoang 1996: 67; Acharya 2001: 65). Malaysia’s former Prime Minister Hussein Onn, while explaining the rationale behind this informal setting of ASEAN observed during the Bali summit of 1976 that ASEAN has been able to absorb national differences because it is a relatively informal organization without rigid rules of procedure and without elaborate structural machinery. It has also been stated that the founding Bangkok Declaration, which was termed as a declaration and not a treaty, was noteworthy as treaty presupposes a lack of trust. Further, the word association was used in order to differentiate ASEAN from an organization and thereby conveying a sense of looseness and informality.

However, it is also important to note in this connection that the level of looseness and informality that marked ASEAN’s initial years became less apparent in the 1980’s and particularly since the 1990’s. A proliferation of ministerial and bureaucratic consultations has covered an expanding range of issue areas. There are now numerous ASEAN related meetings
involving ministers, senior officials and parliamentarians coordinating policies in areas ranging from environment, shipping traffic, tourism etc. In fact, every year, ASEAN organizes around two-hundred official meetings under its auspices. The ASEAN summit meetings have become much more regular since 1992. At the Singapore ASEAN summit of 1992, it was also decided to expand the secretariat and upgrade the status of the secretary-general to cabinet rank, with the official redesignation of Secretary-General of ASEAN instead of the earlier designation of Secretary-General of the ASEAN secretariat. Nonetheless, it can be said that ASEAN has not developed an EU style bureaucracy with supranational decision-making authority. The ASEAN secretariat remains subordinate to the national secretariats and its work continues to be limited to economic and technical issues (Acharya 2001: 65-66). Moreover, ASEAN’s preference for informality and its tendency to limit institutionalization has been specifically evident in the area of dispute settlement. The very fact that as part of the provisions incorporated in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the High Council framework has never been invoked by the member states of ASEAN till date to settle intra-mural disputes has been justified by some scholars as an important indication of the capability of the ASEAN members to avoid serious confrontations without resorting to formal measures of dispute settlement (Leifer 1992a: 169).

The ASEAN Way characterized by the principle of decision making through consensus is also significant. Although consensus building is considered to be a common feature of decision-making in several societies in Asia, in the context of ASEAN, the origin of the term is usually traced to a particular style of decision making within Javanese village society. In the traditional Javanese conception, the strong guiding hand of a village elder is required for building a consensus on any matter within the village community (Pye 1985: 364-365). The ASEAN Way of consensus building is based on the Javanese tradition whereby the leader of a village takes important decisions affecting social life in the village through a process of consultation (Feith 1962: 40). In this process, it is important to note that the leader of a village according to Javanese tradition must not act arbitrarily or impose his will over others, but instead make gentle suggestions based on consultations with all other members of the village regarding the path the village community needs to follow. This process has two related components, which are ‘musyawarah’ (consultations) and ‘mufakat’ (consensus). ‘Musyawarah’ or consultation may be viewed as a pre-negotiating stage of intensive informal and discreet discussions that in the end bring out the general consensus of the community. During the stage of consultations, differences
can be aired and the possibility of reaching a common ground can be achieved before the issues are submitted to the formal official meetings. This process of consultation takes place on the basis of equality, tolerance and understanding with overtones of kinship and common interests. Therefore, ‘musyawarah’ constitutes a form of soft diplomacy in contrast to sabre-rattling, gun-boat diplomacy of the former colonial and the big power type. The ASEAN process does not impose a decision on its members by a majority vote. Common understanding on an issue is arrived at through lengthy dialogue and consultation. The idea of ‘mufakat’ or consensus is not an abstract notion, but was conceived as a pragmatic way of advancing regional economic and political cooperation in the Southeast Asian region (Acharya 2001: 68-69). This concept was initially applied in order to overcome the hesitancy and indifference among the ASEAN members towards intra-ASEAN economic cooperation, including ASEAN industrial joint ventures and tariff reductions. Consensus as understood within the ASEAN context is not to be confused with unanimity. Instead, consensus represents a commitment on part of the members of finding ways to move forward by establishing what seems to have broad support. In a consensus situation, not everyone would always be comfortable, but they tend to go along so long as their basic interests were not compromised. This was quite eloquently advocated by former Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at a time when ASEAN comprised of only five founding members. For example, when four member states agreed to a particular decision and one did not, it still was considered to be a consensus by the ASEAN’s elites as the five minus one scheme was viewed as beneficial to the four member states which were agreeable to the decision without damaging the interest of the remaining one member which had disagreed to it (Acharya 2001: 69). Through this process, consensus building was perceived as a way of advancing regional cooperation schemes despite the reluctance of some of the member states to participate in it. Although the very notion that consensus need not involve unanimity imparts a great deal of flexibility to decision-making within ASEAN, it is also clear that the ASEAN style consensus may be of limited effectiveness in dealing with issues, which concerns principal national interests, including issues relating to sovereignty and territorial integrity. Therefore, forging consensus through the ASEAN Way may be viewed as a pragmatic and deliberate way of glossing over national differences that could not be reconciled within the institutional framework of ASEAN.
It is primarily through these procedural or socio-cultural norms that the ASEAN states have incrementally reconstituted and reconstructed the behavioural or the legal-rational norms of ASEAN in the Asian context, thereby developing the ASEAN Way through the process of interaction over decades since 1967. In other words, the Southeast Asian states have incrementally reconstituted certain global norms including important ideational elements in the regional context (Katsumata 2003: 105). The ASEAN consultative process, including frequent meetings and other forms of multilateral interaction has gradually led to the development of an institutional culture that helps ASEAN to prevent conflicts (Leifer 1992b).

However, it can be seen from the above discussion that the process of interaction and decision-making within ASEAN based on the norms of the ASEAN Way constitutes a primarily elite process (Ba 2009: 36). The elite nature of the process has been reflected essentially through the elite decision making process within ASEAN in Southeast Asia. ASEAN itself has been to a large extent a project of foreign ministries of the ASEAN member states, although that process has now expanded to include greater regional participation by ASEAN heads of governments and other ministries. Very recently, a small effort has been made to include sections of the civil society in the region, which has begun to challenge the elite nature of the ASEAN process and the discourse of ASEAN regionalism. Despite this fact, it can be very well argued as illustrated by certain recent developments including the signing of the ASEAN Charter in 2007 that ASEAN till date remains a predominantly elite-driven and controlled process.

In this respect, the framework of constitutive localization based on the constructivist perspective assumes critical importance. The process of constitutive localization may commence with the reinterpretation and re-representation of the external norm, but may also extend into more complex processes of reconstitution to make an external norm congruent with an existing local normative order. Localization involves active construction of foreign ideas through discourse, framing, grafting and cultural selection by local actors, which results in the foreign ideas developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices. In this respect, role of local actors becomes more crucial than the external actors in producing norm diffusion (Acharya 2009: 14-15). This framework of constitutive localization helps in understanding the role of local actors or local agents as actively adapting and localizing certain external ideas and norms with the characteristics of a particular region. Norm diffusion strategies that tend to accommodate
local sensitivities and contexts are more likely to succeed than those seeking to dismiss or supplant the latter (Acharya 2009: 15). Norm-takers want to localize international norms in order to justify their actions and call into question the legitimacy of others. This framework of constitutive localization helps in explaining the reasons behind ASEAN’s preference for the norms of the ASEAN Way that involves both the behavioural as well as the procedural norms. This process has been affected by particular factors in the Southeast Asian region, which include the ASEAN countries’ specific concerns regarding state sovereignty and their policy priorities of safeguarding domestic stability. For example, it is because of their concern over state sovereignty that the ASEAN member states have placed so much emphasis on the norm of non-interference. The principle stipulated in the UN Charter got consolidated in the Southeast Asian region because of the ASEAN states apprehensions over state sovereignty as most of the regional states were plagued by domestic insurgencies after achieving independence from colonial rule.

The norm of non-intervention or non-interference was an instrument to safeguard the sovereignty and regime security in the ASEAN member states from threats, which are mostly internal to those states. If one carefully analyzes most of the 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 are 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). This concern with domestic political legitimacy underpins the ASEAN member states determination to defend and safeguard the conventional Westphalian principles of state sovereignty (Narine 2004: 424). It is because of this concern that the ASEAN states have shown severe reluctance to dilute in any form the norm of non-interference, which comprises an important part of the norms of the ASEAN Way. ASEAN states, almost uniformly, reject the idea that regional institutions require a ‘pooling’ of state sovereignty. 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.

The process of localization does not erase the cognitive prior or identity of the norm takers but results in its mutual inflection with external norm. In constructivist perspectives on socialization, norm diffusion is the result of adaptive behaviour in which local practices are made consistent with external ideas. Localization, on the contrary, describes a process through 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 latter, although it can only be fully understood in terms of both. Norms exert autonomous influence by influencing the regulatory behaviour of actors and they also determine actors’ identities and interests. It is important to note that this very aspect of localization makes it a constitutive process. In a truly constitutive situation, agents and structure mutually constitute each other (Checkel 1998: 325, 328; Wendt 1999: 72). This means that the original identity of the agent or belief system would not be totally displaced, but would play a role in modifying the structure. Moreover, localization is seldom a final act or terminal condition, but a dynamic and uninterrupted process. The occurrence and outcome of localization is subject to shifting conditions at different points of time. Conditions absent at a given time may present themselves at a future juncture, thereby reversing an earlier resistance to external norms and facilitating their localization. After local agents have developed greater familiarity and experience with the new ideas, functions and instruments, previous resistance to new norms may considerably weaken, opening the door towards fundamental change, including an incremental shift leading to norm displacement (Acharya 2009: 21). Localization provides an initial response to new norms pending norm displacement, which may or may not occur. Localization is also progressive in nature and it reshapes existing beliefs and practices as well as foreign ideas in their local context.

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. The source of ‘cognitive priors’ may be culture, cultural norms, the shared, sanctioned and integrated system of beliefs and practices that characterize a cultural group. Such norms may reflect ethnicity, social belief system of groups, historical memory and domestic political rhythms and peculiarities of societies. The ‘cognitive priors’ of nations and regions in the realm of international relations could be built around traditional culture, historical practices of statecraft and patterns of diplomatic interactions. Another significant source of ‘cognitive priors’ is ideas, including the world views and the principled and causal beliefs of leaders and elites of a social group, state, or states within a given region. In fact, ideas have their widest impact on human action when they take the shape of world views (Goldstein and Keohane 1993: 8-11). Thus, the ideas and beliefs of the nationalist elites were especially important components of the ‘cognitive prior’ of the
foreign policy of many post-colonial states, forming the edifice of their international conduct (Acharya 2009:22-23). ‘Cognitive priors’ also include norms that are accepted and borrowed from outside because of prior choices, including acts of borrowing and localization. This process was particularly significant for the post-colonial states including those in the Southeast Asian region, which sought to translate their sovereign status into new found foreign policy behaviour. Hence, these post-colonial states had to borrow, adapt and localize Westphalian principles to develop their foreign relations, including non-intervention, sovereign equality of states and diplomatic recognition (Acharya 2009: 23). It can also be seen that institution building in Asia including the process of regional cooperation and community building embarked upon by ASEAN have provided for the diffusion of norms of international relations. They have functioned as site of normative contestation and localization involving global and regional norms.

Therefore, the constitutive localization framework stresses a dynamic process of congruence building through which local actors accept foreign ideas in accordance with their ‘cognitive priors’ or existing beliefs and conducts. In norm diffusion, local ideas and agents matter, and do so in a central way. Once in place, these cognitive priors shape future norm borrowing. The principle of non-intervention or non-interference found progressive elaboration and extension in Asian regionalist ideas and approaches. But the construction of non-intervention in Asia in general and in the Southeast Asian region in particular was not simply a restatement of the original European or the subsequent Latin American concept. In Asia, the norm of non-intervention took additional meanings, including the creation of an injunction against participation in collective defence alliances organized under the umbrella of great power orbit, which had been evolving since the end of the Cold War. This Asian construction of the non-intervention norm crystallized in the aftermath of the Bandung Conference of 1955 and its diffusion beyond Asia occurred through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which includes an injunction against participation in superpower led collective defence that was nonexistent in the original European and Latin American formulation of the norm (Acharya 2009: 69). Although no standing regional institution was established in Asia immediately after the Bandung Conference of 1955, 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.

Both in the Southeast Asian region as well as in the rest of Asia, in the immediate post-independence period, the nationalist elites viewed regional defence pacts with considerable amount of suspicion and perceived it as a threat to their national sovereignty and regional autonomy. The development of a ‘cognitive prior’ in the Southeast Asian region featuring the enhancement of non-intervention in the regional and global context, the emergence of certain elements of process diplomacy or soft institutionalism, the long term avoidance of multilateral collective defence organizations, whether with external powers or within the region and a multilateralism developed around ASEAN, which, while remaining open to limited political and economic engagements with outside powers, rejected EU style economic integration as well as the idea of a pacific community dominated by Western nations and Japan. These constituted a regional cognitive prior, a distinctive Asian construction of sovereignty that has shaped the future trajectory and design of regional institutions like ASEAN in which the norm of non-intervention has assumed critical importance. It also illustrates why ASEAN, since its inception in 1967, has given so much importance to certain key norms like the norm of non-interference as part of its efforts to maintain the region order in the Southeast Asian region. Consensual decision-making within ASEAN based on the principles of ‘musyawarah’ (consultation) and ‘mufakat’ (consensus) was guided by the objective of protecting national prerogatives of the member states by avoiding international pressures to force a government to adopt policies that has been decided externally.

In this chapter, it has been analyzed that constructivism, by emphasizing the interplay of ideational factors like norms, culture and identity, has tried to offer an alternative way of explaining ASEAN’s role in managing the regional order in the Southeast Asian region in contrast to realism’s overwhelming reliance on material factors like balance of power and self-help as the sole explanatory variables. Neoliberal Institutionalism has difficulty in explaining what exactly ASEAN’s functions are. On the other hand, constructivist scholars have argued that the behavioural and procedural norms of ASEAN have given rise to a sense of collective identity and a shared vision that has generated the process of evolution of ASEAN as a nascent security community in the region. In this regard, the constructivist perspective by going beyond the
material dimensions of power has highlighted the significance of the norms of the ASEAN Way as the main factor that has allowed ASEAN to settle most of the intra-mural disputes among its members. It is through a process of socialization that states in the Southeast Asian region have tried to develop collective identities in order to mitigate the ‘security dilemma’. And collective identities according to social constructivist perspective are imagined during and as a result of an actor’s or a group of actors’ interaction within an institutional context. Constructivist scholars have argued that regions like nation-states and nationalism are also imagined communities as there are many similarities between imagining a nation and imagining a region. Therefore, it has been emphasized in this chapter based on the arguments of the constructivist perspective that international relations in Southeast Asia can be analyzed by not just focusing on what is common between and among the states in the region, but at how the ruling elites in those states at different points of time by engaging themselves through a process of socialization within the institutional context of ASEAN, have imagined themselves to be part of a separate region. In line with this argument, it can be stated that the process of community building in the region that includes an ASEAN Political and Security Community, an ASEAN Economic Community and an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, which ASEAN is trying to achieve by 2015 is product of imagination by the ruling elites of the ASEAN member states with very little involvement of the people of the region and is primarily elitist in nature. Thus, it can be argued that the constructivist perspective, in contrast to the conventional international relations theories like realism and neoliberal institutionalism, offers a more meaningful analysis of the process of community building in the Southeast Asian region within and beyond the institutional structure of ASEAN.

As it has been argued in this chapter, the process of forging regional cooperation and community building under the auspices of ASEAN, including mutual responsiveness and socialization, has remained narrowly confined to the intergovernmental level within ASEAN (Acharya 2001: 207). As a result, the process of community building that ASEAN has embarked upon based upon the norms of the ASEAN Way is essentially a product of elite imagination within ASEAN. The evolution and application of the norms of the ASEAN Way in the regional setting clearly reflect this elitist character of these norms. This form of regionalism that ASEAN has promoted does not necessarily translate into cooperation or development of ‘we-feeling' at the societal level in the region that Karl Deutsch had talked about. In this connection, it is
significant to note that in recent years, a network of civil society organizations have been trying to promote different ideas concerning alternative community building in the region and different forms of alternative visions of regionalism in Southeast Asia aimed at opposing and reframing the policies pursued by ASEAN so far. This network comprising of various civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region has been somewhat strengthened by the economic downturn in the wake of the East Asian Financial Crisis leading to the collapse of the former President Suharto’s ‘New Order’ regime in Indonesia, growing challenges to authoritarianism in different parts of the region, such as Malaysia, as well as the advent of proposals such as flexible engagement that encouraged trans-boundary criticism of domestic repression. The various civil society organizations in the imagined region of Southeast Asia have advocated the need for building a people-centred non-elitist regional community unlike ASEAN, which would give primacy to the interests and aspirations of the people of the region. It is from this standpoint of building a people-centred regional community that the civil society organizations in the region, particularly those which function at the Track III level, have questioned the very nature of the ASEAN Charter of 2007 and have put forward their idea of an alternative ASEAN People’s Charter, which has been analyzed in details in the third chapter of this dissertation. The emergence of various civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region opposing the official ASEAN regionalism and community building reflect at the very least a substantial amount of dissatisfaction with and the incompleteness of the community building enterprise led by the ASEAN elites. It is still a matter of great debate as to whether the norms of the ASEAN Way have facilitated the development of a collective regional identity in the Southeast Asian region. Some scholars have opined that while the social and cultural diversity between the member states of ASEAN made it difficult to speak of a common cultural identity, the process of socialization developed on the basis of the ASEAN Way did contribute to the development of what Karl Deutsch would have referred to as a sense ‘we feeling’ within ASEAN. It has also been said that a fairly consistent pattern of adherence to and practice of norms of the ASEAN Way in spite of occasional exceptions itself has become part of an ASEAN identity. From this standpoint, some scholars have labeled ASEAN as a nascent security community (Acharya 2001: 208). Others have termed ASEAN as a ‘thin’ and pluralistic security community (Emmerson 2005: 165-185).
Despite these observations, some scholars have also argued that ASEAN does not yet constitute a security community although it is moving in that direction. The simple reason is that when Karl Deutsch had identified the prerequisites of a security community, the absence of inter-state threat perceptions was one of the most important criteria. The absence of conflict is meant to derive from such fundamental condition and ASEAN is considered to be far from meeting this important prerequisite (Ganesan 2004: 129, 131). Bilateral tensions between ASEAN member states on a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional sources of threat preclude ASEAN from obtaining this fundamental condition. The most recent example of this kind of intramural threat perception among ASEAN member states is between Thailand and Cambodia over the exercise of control over a disputed temple along their border that has resulted in intermittent armed clashes between the two sides in the last few years.

However, it will be argued that the sense of regional identity that ASEAN has tried to develop since its inception is rather very weak. This point will be argued in further details in the second chapter of this dissertation. There have been numerous occasions when the ASEAN member states have failed to take a united collective position on various international issues. Therefore, it can be said that while the regional elites within ASEAN may enjoy a sense of belonging to a larger community, the people residing in the different ASEAN member states do not seem to exhibit much of the ‘we-feeling’ that is part of security communities as outlined by Karl Deutsch. Instead, it can be said that ASEAN is a community based around the mutual benefits of shared rules, not on a strong sense of collective identity among its members (Collins 2007: 203-225). Therefore, scholars like Alan Collins have described ASEAN not as a security community but as a security regime, which facilitates cooperation around recognized rules to reduce uncertainty and advance long term interests of its members. Based on the constructivist theoretical perspective, it can be stated that since regions like nation-states are imagined communities, the kind of regional community that ASEAN is trying to promote is a product of imaginations of the ruling elites of the Southeast Asian states. Similarly, there are also multiple alternative imaginations of regional communities that can be found within the various civil society organizations that operate in the region, which in many ways contradict the kind of community that ASEAN is trying to promote. These civil society organizations, based on their own 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 build in the region.
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