

## WHAT MAKES SOUTHEAST ASIA ? IN SEARCH OF CONVERGENCE

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As a qualifier for a region, "Southeast Asia" sounds unlikely. Beyond sheer geography, its incidental emergence and development, its very identity are questioned. Still, it does exist.

Beyond the usual emphasis on the region's diversity and presumed lack of coherence, this paper means to stress structural elements that give a necessary substance to its existence, beyond its fortuitous situation.

The impact of external factors upon Southeast Asia may not be overlooked: globalization, which generates world regions, is fairly accommodated by Southeast Asia; colonization, which resulted in nation-states, independent but sharing the same inherited western model; the historical hegemony of India and China over the region; the influence of eastern and western religions that commonly formatted locality in Southeast Asia.

However, the outside view of Southeast Asia is also a reflection of things observed. Beyond the plain juxtaposition of varied cultures, one comes across local and autonomous dynamics shaped by convergences, communalities, strange parallels and outright encounters. Beyond simple geographical proximity, intense vicinity translates into imitation and dialectics, partnerships and competition. Resulting from independence struggles, small and large nation-states are all involved in the same geopolitics and synchronous developments where they interact together in an emerging regional fabric.

These structuring patterns evolve into determinants that bolster local will. While no one declares him or herself to be Southeast Asian, elites work on building a shared meta-national construct, namely ASEAN, meant to face the outside world.

An imagined identity is being derived from presumed, common cultural features: rurality, centralizing authoritarianism, familyhood. Another binding ideology is modernity, which is both endorsed and promoted by new middle class groups enthused by democratic ideals.

Language diversity itself is outdone by the general use of English as a *lingua franca*, which blends with local vernaculars, while working as a social marker.

Last but not least, an old but continuing linkage is given a new relevance: the *maritime world* as a source of identity, an economic resource and a thalassocratic model: what about the renewed significance of the "maritimization" concept?