

## 5. A delusion transformed: ASEAN and East Asian regionalism

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In the late 1980s, Barry Buzan maintained that Southeast Asia constituted a 'security complex'. By this he understood that the region appeared both divided and balanced between the communist states of Indochina and the non-communist states represented by ASEAN. According to Buzan this bipolar structure looked 'stable' and was 'likely to define the internal dynamics of the Southeast Asian security complex for the foreseeable future' (Buzan 1988, pp. 1–16). Writing in 1997, Khong Yuen Foong somewhat captiously observed that the 'shelf life' of Buzan's theory 'was approximately a year' (Khong 1997, p. 318). Buzan's 'affection for realism', Khong contended, had led him to privilege 'enmity over amity'. Buzan's penchant for realism, it seemed, had caused him to misapprehend the 'process that turned out to be more enduring and relevant for the 1990s and beyond', namely, the 'transformation of intra-ASEAN security relations from enmity, fear, and rivalry to amity, trust, and cooperation' (*ibid.*).

Unfortunately for Khong the shelf life of his own fashionably multilateralist view of the ASEAN way was even shorter than Buzan's. For 1997, the year when Khong's observations appeared, also witnessed an unprecedented Asian financial crisis that devastated the tiger economies of Southeast Asia. In the process, ASEAN leaders engaged in unseemly public displays of mutual suspicion, rivalry and denunciations of their putative partners. The Association itself, meanwhile, stood impotent in the face of both financial meltdown and the growing internal discord that accompanied it.

Khong, of course, was no more guilty of misreading Southeast Asia's prospects than any number of scholars who had, since 1990, commended ASEAN as a 'weighty and influential player in the international system' (Dorsch and Mols 1998, p. 168). More intriguingly, however, Khong's uncritical endorsement of the ASEAN way in international relations led him to speculate further whether ASEAN's seemingly consensus-driven approach 'might have relevance for other non-ASEAN states in Southeast Asia' (Khong 1997, p. 320). Other commentators equally impressed with ASEAN's unique diplomatic style and convinced that the 'economic rise of Southeast Asia' along with the rest of the Pacific littoral had 'proven itself a sound developmental model' (Nesadurai 1996, p. 51) had already begun to consider that ASEAN

might fashion a wider East Asian order. Thus, for Bobrow, Chan and Reich, the 'activism of the ASEAN members' had already been 'amply demonstrated in their domestic, regional, and international initiatives'; this entailed a growing, 'unwillingness to leave it to others to construct the Asian or international order for them' (Bobrow, Chan and Reich, 1996, p. 27). Even more outspokenly, Helen Nesadurai declared that the years of spectacular economic growth had 'given the East Asian states a degree of confidence' that had 'led a number of their leaders to question the validity and suitability of US norms in the economic as well as the social and political spheres' (Nesadurai 1996, p. 51).

Certainly, the official articulation of claims for the broader relevance of the ASEAN way began almost as soon as the Cold War ended. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), for example, sought explicitly to export the virtues of ASEAN's non-confrontational diplomacy into the general Pacific arena, in particular by providing a cooperative link between Northeast and Southeast Asia (Simon 1998, pp. 204–9). The prevailing scholar–bureaucratic assumption was that ASEAN itself would be comfortably nested at the centre of a web of transnational institutions like APEC and AFTA, benignly spreading its harmonious, inclusive and economically effective practices across the region. ASEAN, it was held, would be the cornerstone of a new Asia–Pacific-wide regional management process in which the Association would function as the core of a network of multilateral institutions that would facilitate the regional cooperation and help build a new global community and sense of regional identity (see Almonte 1997, p. 80, 90; Abdullah 1992; Acharya 1993; Pupphavesa and Crewe 1994; Parreñas 1998; Kahler 1990; Harris 1994; Garnaut 1994; Thambipillai 1998).

However, ASEAN's institutional ineffectiveness in the face of the 1997 economic crisis seemed to destroy the argument for its wider East Asian application, based as it was on the alleged success of the Association's distinctive practices. Yet this was not the case. For, strangely, in the post-crisis era, the evidence of political and economic failure that ostensibly negated assertions of both ASEAN's regional and wider Asian relevance was now either overlooked or used to sustain (rather than critique) the notion that ASEAN remained a force for fashioning an integrated East Asian region. Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong intimated as much in 1998, when he stated that the 'regional crisis does not spell the end of Asia's progress . . . the reforms now being adopted in most countries will lay the foundations for a stronger and leaner Asia' (Goh 1998).

Predictably, this perspective was quickly adopted by academic commentators. It became the new orthodoxy amongst Aseanologists to assert that 'the dynamics of the crisis . . . rather than debilitating ASEAN and APEC, may well remake them as effective regional organisations' (Ferguson 1999, pp.

4–5). How, we might wonder, was it possible to proceed from the claim that ASEAN before 1997 represented a successful model of economic and political development that would inexorably expand its institutional framework into the broader East Asian region, to the view that ASEAN's economic and political failure after 1997 equally validated the projection of its managerial way into the wider region? It is to inquire into the sources of this incoherence that is the principal aim of this chapter. The purpose is not only to demonstrate that positions advanced between pre- and post-crisis eras were inconsistent but also to show how and why it is that Aseanology's latest methodological fashion enables its analysts to move from proposition to contradiction without reflection. The lack of critical introspection and academic scepticism in this field, we shall show, indicates that regional delusion does not die easily, even in the face of empirical refutation.

## EXPORTING RESPONSIBILITY: EXPLAINING THE CAUSES OF THE 1997 ECONOMIC CRISIS

In tracing the origins of the incoherence in regionalist thinking the natural place to begin is with an assessment of the political and scholarly reaction to the 1997 economic crisis. Evidently, for ASEAN enthusiasts, this unforeseen event represented the crucial discontinuity in recent Asia–Pacific international relations. Moving from the boundless optimism of the Pacific Century to fiscal basket case over the space of a few months obviously provided a great shock both to the system and to regional pride. The crisis undermined previous certainties, and left both regional politicians and academics desperately searching for explanations.

Moreover, the fact that the economic crisis had spread from Southeast Asia to ravage parts of Northeast Asia, most notably South Korea, induced feelings of collective humiliation across the Asia–Pacific. It was not simply that the once high-performing Asian economies like Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea required the assistance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and surrendered to externally imposed fiscal constraints in return for a financial rescue package. It was further compounded by the fact that western countries on the Asian periphery like Australia and New Zealand, along with the United States, escaped the effects of the financial contagion altogether. It was from the perception that East Asia had lost face by submitting the region to the tender mercies of essentially 'western' institutions like the IMF and World Bank that occasioned the felt need for a revived sense of regional solidarity. An evident willingness of some East Asian leaders and regional commentators to export responsibility for the crisis first announced this disposition (Lewis 1999, para. 1).

In particular, the IMF was accused of aggravating the crisis through its 'too sudden and too harsh' demands for economic re-structuring and financial reform (ibid.). It stood accused of lacking sensitivity to local feelings. In Indonesia, the Southeast Asian basket case par excellence, 'western financial institutions' were guilty of ethnocentrically misunderstanding Indonesian culture. Apparently, it was culturally insensitive to expect Indonesian leaders to acknowledge their economic mistakes and to be seen to be subject to pressure from foreign institutions (Katzenstein 1999, p. 19). In Peter Katzenstein's view: 'The IMF's approach helped push General Suharto to tap into a deep strain of Javanese nationalism. The result were [*sic*] deadly anti-Chinese pogroms and the downfall of the regime' (ibid.).

While academic and media critics in both western and East Asian universities, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) and think tanks blamed the IMF for its insensitivity toward ASEAN styles of governance, the origin of the crisis itself was more generally ascribed to US-dominated global financial institutions that recklessly shifted hot money in and out of Asian growth funds (Harding 1998). Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, a politician not averse to conspiracy theory, considered it expedient to find one at work in the crisis. He soon discovered that a cabal of primarily Jewish hedge fund managers and shady futures traders in New York, Chicago and London had manipulated Asian currency markets in order to profit from their wild fluctuations (Mohamad 1999, p. 7).

A bowdlerized version of this thesis found its way into the commentary of some regional academics who also deduced the hidden hand of the United States manipulating the crisis. Thus R. James Ferguson contended that the US had first facilitated 'an unregulated release of financial capitalism', subsequently followed by a cynical manipulation of the IMF that sought 'both . . . to limit the scale of the bailing out and demanding a strongly interventionist role in return for aid' and ultimately compounded the disaster by its unwillingness 'to provide a strong leadership role for Asia-Pacific recovery' (Ferguson 1999, p. 19).

The attempt to blame the crisis on actors outside the region (see Gilpin 2003) inevitably perceived a western/Jewish conspiracy overtly or covertly corroding Asian economic growth and reputation. To sustain this assumption, both regional politicians and analysts alike veiled their accusations in vague and unverifiable terms. A *pot pourri* of unsubstantiated allegations about insouciant western institutions, coupled with a general angst about the pace and shape of global capitalism, adumbrated by the apparent insensitivity of both the IMF and the US government to Asian sensibilities, served the interests of regional governments. Shifting responsibility westward thus enabled the largely unaccountable East Asian political class to evade blame for their own culpability in causing the meltdown.

Likewise, western scholars and Asian scholar–bureaucrats also had a vested interest in reinforcing this developing climate of blame in order to conceal their own analytic failure to foresee the crisis. Nor was all this intellectual effort to export the burden of responsibility for the meltdown entirely free of hypocrisy. After all, the governments of Southeast Asia were hardly in a position to complain about the financial medicine prescribed by the global market that they were required to swallow after 1997. Before the crisis, ASEAN politicians and scholar–bureaucrats from Lee Kuan Yew to Kishore Mahbubani and Noordin Sopiee had triumphantly announced and enthusiastically promoted the virtue of a non-liberal Asian way of managing political and economic development.

Ironically, it was this widely advertised and atypically Asian synergy between government and business that facilitated the very cronyism and lack of accountability that initially precipitated regional financial crisis. At the same time, the ASEAN states had actively utilized the open and increasingly globalized, financial and trading arrangements that emerged at the end of the Cold War to attract the foreign direct investment that drove double-digit economic growth in the miracle years prior to 1997. Only a delusional complex built on a mixture of hubris and narcissism could assume that international financial institutions and mutual funds would agree that the remedy to the region's ills lay in the re-application of tried, and failed, Asian economic values.

The growing belief that the outside world had neglected Asia in its hour of need fed a burgeoning sense of resentment (see Higgott 1998). The image of a monolithic 'west' gloating over the plight of the once formidable but now ailing Asian tiger economies was never an accurate picture, but it provided a suitable balm for the hurt pride of politicians and regional commentators. It was this mood of damaged *amour propre* that spurred support for the idea of East Asian regionalism. Regionalism offered the seductive prospect of Asian solutions for Asian problems that would engender a sense of growing independence and inure regional economies against further externally induced shocks. The project further assumed the rejection of any further reliance on an unfeeling west and its equally insensitive institutions. As deputy Prime Minister of Thailand, Supachai Panitchpakdi explained in 2000: 'We cannot rely on the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, or International Monetary Fund . . . we must rely [instead] on regional cooperation' (quoted in *Nation*, Bangkok, 10 June 2000).

The years following the crisis therefore witnessed an upsurge in the rhetoric of pan-Asian renewal. Jusuf Wanandi, therefore, declared that ASEAN lacked 'the critical mass and influence needed to face the new and formidable challenges of globalization'. There was instead a 'need to revitalize multilateral institutions in the region' because only by 'the strengthening

of this cooperation can the East Asian region have some influence globally' (Wanandi 1999a). In a similar vein, Singapore Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh argued that the economic crisis had 'stimulated a new sense of East Asian regionalism and brought the countries closer together' (quoted in *Financial Times*, 13 May 2001). It was the felt need to stimulate belief in a shared destiny and thereby engender greater East Asian resilience that spurred ASEAN to action. At the 6th ASEAN summit in Hanoi, in December 1998, its members announced:

We shall move ASEAN onto a higher plane of regional cooperation in order to strengthen ASEAN's effectiveness in dealing with the challenges of growing interdependence within ASEAN and of its integration into the global economy. In doing so, we commit ourselves to intensifying our dialogue on current and emerging issues, further consolidating our unity in diversity, our cohesiveness and harmony. (Hanoi Declaration 1998, point 5)

In the months following the outbreak of the economic crisis ASEAN promoted a dialogue partnership with Northeast Asia through the new mechanism of an East Asian Summit (EAS). The first summit was held in December 1997 in Kuala Lumpur, where the leaders of ASEAN participated in discussions with their peers from China, Japan and South Korea. Subsequently, at ASEAN's Hanoi Summit, it was agreed to formalize these meetings into the arrangement now known as 'ASEAN Plus Three'.

This push for East Asian consolidation reinforced the perceived need for closer economic cooperation, which took the form of suggestions for trade liberalization, tariff reductions and the strengthening of AFTA (see Soesastro 2001, pp. 6–11). Perhaps the most novel idea was the Japanese proposal for an Asian Monetary Fund tailored to regional needs and more sensitive to regional vanity than the IMF (Johnstone 1999, p. 125). Carried away with this latest exercise in Asia bonding, some members even envisaged an Asian free trade area and monetary union (Soesastro 2001, pp. 7–9), while Jusuf Wanandi, impressed with the regional integration achieved by the European Union, raised the prospect that one day East Asia might also develop into 'a community' on similar lines (Wanandi 1999b).

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi gave official credence to this sentiment in a lecture in Singapore in January 2002. He maintained that East Asia should evolve into a 'community' that 'acts together and advances together'. Such an integrated East Asian 'whole [could] be greater than the sum of its parts', and he added that, while 'our pasts may be varied and divergent . . . our futures can be united and supportive of each other' (quoted in Low 2002). Significantly, Koizumi's speech seemed to accept and welcome the idea that Southeast Asia's political destiny was intimately linked with that of Northeast Asia, and the Japanese Prime Minister further suggested that

ASEAN Plus Three should provide the institutional framework for forging a common East Asian destiny (*ibid.*).

South Korean President Kim Dae-jung kept up the post-crisis momentum for East Asian integration. At the Hanoi summit, he proposed the establishment of an 'East Asia Vision Group' that would report on ideas to deepen long-term cooperation among members of the ASEAN Plus Three grouping (East Asia Vision Group 2001). The promotion of East Asian cooperation thus became the principal justification for subsequent ASEAN Plus Three summits (Soesastro 2001, pp. 1–2).

Clearly, ASEAN Plus Three constitutes the most significant regional political reaction to have emerged from the aftermath of the crisis years. As Soesastro noted, ASEAN Plus Three had become the 'embryo of an East Asian regional organization' (*ibid.*, p. 1), a view Japan's Koizumi subsequently reinforced. As its name intimated, moreover, the new arrangement represented the most promising mechanism to regenerate a moribund ASEAN. Moves towards a more developed sense of East Asian regionalism held out the prospect of a new, but nevertheless still seminal, role for the Association. As one of its enthusiasts, former Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas averred, ASEAN Plus Three, like the original rationale envisioned for the ARF, 'should, at least during the initial phase, continue to be ASEAN driven' (Alatas 2001, p. 4).

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of ASEAN Plus Three, however, was that it reflected an exclusive understanding of regionalism. Unlike inclusive trans-Pacific groupings like APEC or AFTA, ASEAN Plus Three was notably 'Asian' in composition, effectively drawing the boundaries of 'East Asia' in a way that ruled out those countries on the periphery. These countries were, implicitly, deemed 'external' to the region. Those most obviously ascribed outsider status were 'caucasian' states: the United States, Australia and New Zealand. In this respect, the arrangement bore more than a passing resemblance to the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC),<sup>1</sup> a grouping comprising the ASEAN states along with a number of Northeast Asian states such as Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong, originally promulgated by Prime Minister Mahathir in the early 1990s to act as a counter-weight to US influence in APEC. EAEC never got off the ground, but it nevertheless expressed a widespread regional sentiment that wished to reject US hegemony in the Pacific together with the wider civilizational value-system it seemed to uphold and promote.

Later proponents of ASEAN Plus Three, of course, denied that the framework had any correspondence with Mahathir's earlier exclusionist regional vision (Wanandi 2000). Even so, in the sense that ASEAN Plus Three was born out of resentment arising from the perceived mistreatment of Asian sensibilities at the hands of western countries and their financial institutions, there is an obvious genealogy from EAEC to ASEAN Plus Three. In fact, Ali Alatas

early acknowledged the lineage claiming that ‘there has always been a strong political will to enhance mutually beneficial cooperation in East Asia. On the ASEAN side, a significant manifestation of this political will has been the early advocacy of Malaysia’s Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir, for the establishment of an East Asian Economic Caucus’ (Alatas 2001, p. 2). EAEC constituted the stillborn precursor for East Asian collaboration. Its subsequent mutation into ASEAN Plus Three represented for both regional officials and analysts alike the primary framework for both reinvigorating and, indeed, constructing the East Asian region. For Alatas, the ‘ASEAN + 3 forum is an idea whose time has come’ (ibid., p. 1).

## CONSTRUCTING EAST ASIA

East Asia’s entrenched scholar–bureaucracy welcomed the expanded regionalist thinking that came to dominate the diplomatic conversation among East Asia’s capitals. They were, moreover, fortuitously supported by an apparently new and exciting methodology that both explained and endorsed the new momentum in East Asian affairs. Social constructivism, the current vogue in international relations methodology, maintains that discursive activity constructs our understanding of reality. In its application to international relations, constructivism emphasizes the centrality of ideational factors in the formation of state interests. Such an ontological premise was not in itself particularly original. In fact, philosophy post-Bishop Berkeley and the later Wittgenstein, psychoanalysis after Freud, and sociological inquiry since Herbert Mead, had all attempted, at various times, to analyse or deconstruct the factors that compose identities and create the context for languages of self-understanding and self-disclosure. Even within the somewhat theoretically light domain of international relations what amounted to a constructivist approach *avant la lettre* had been evident in the writings of Raymond Aron (Aron 1966, pp. 177–366) and in certain works by strategic theorists from the 1960s if not some years before (see Liddell Hart 1935; Mead 1951; Bauer 1952, 1954; Haimson 1953; Tomasic 1953; Weigley 1973; Fairbank 1974; Snyder 1977; Gray 1981).<sup>2</sup> In a late developing and nescient international relations theory, however, it arrived on the scholarly scene via the influential studies published by Alexander Wendt in the early 1990s (Wendt 1992a, pp. 391–425, 1992b, pp. 384–6, and 1999).<sup>3</sup>

According to Wendt, constructivism investigated ‘how knowledgeable practices constitute subjects’ (Wendt 1992a, p. 394). It sought to demonstrate, further, that it was the process of inter-activity with other agents in a social system that determined the understanding of the structure of that system. In his densely argued *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999), Wendt evinced

that anarchy in the international system was a consequence of social processes and, therefore, not given by fixed, material conditions. From this premise, it necessarily follows that the place of norms in international relations – how they help construct the social identities of agents in the international system, and how this subsequently defines perceptions of the state and its interests – preoccupies constructivism's research programme.

The appeal of constructivism for many contemporary social scientists whether of a liberal–institutionalist or post-Marxist provenance, resides in its implicit transformative possibilities because the central tenet of constructivism holds that the continuing process of socialization can re-make identities and interests (see Legro 2000, p. 419–32). As Wendt explains, in his own inimitable way: 'the process by which egoists learn to cooperate is at the same time a process of reconstructing their interests in terms of shared commitments to social norms. Over time, this will tend to transform a positive interdependence of *outcomes* into a positive interdependence of *utilities* or collective interest organized around the norms question'. Thus the 'process of cooperating' will assist in 'reconstituting identities and interests in terms of new intersubjective understandings and commitments' (Wendt 1992a, p. 417).

What Wendt means is that, through the process of interactive communication and exchange, actors in the international system can free themselves from the debilitating effects of self-interested, competitive state relations. A felt need for interdependence and a common destiny (or fate) can over time transcend egotistical state identities and forge a group identity that will, in turn, fashion new norms that establish an alternative pattern of interests that has the potential to displace older, more restrictive identities. Central to the constructivist project, therefore, is the understanding that, once formed, norms assume their own dynamic, even if the actors that first gave them voice intended otherwise. Ultimately, norms re-define interests in a way that may eventually subsume individual state identities within wider collectives. Unsurprisingly, the geo-political discourse of medium powers and NGOs that seek to mould and shape distinctive regions from nations and states yields easily to the blandishments of constructivism.

All the above notwithstanding, a major criticism of Wendt's thesis focused upon the lack of hard data to support his theory (Copeland 2000, p. 209). For that reason it was both fortuitous and timely that the evolving debate over East Asian regionalism occurred at a time when constructivism's converts in Ivy League schools and regional institutes, armed with large grants and postgraduate scholarships, sought empirical validation for their treasured hypothesis. The later 1990s onward saw a proliferation of constructivist studies that examined the developmental norms shaping the Asia–Pacific region (see Acharya 2000, 2001; Busse 1999, pp. 39–60; Haacke 2003, pp. 57–87; Nabers 2003, pp. 113–36; Peou 2002, pp. 119–38). Examining the 'speech acts' of Asian

leaders and picking over the ‘interpretive schemes’ that emerged from regional colloquies, analysts sought to validate methodologically that ‘East Asia and Southeast Asia are beginning to emerge, through debates and controversies’ (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002, p. 610). ASEAN, naturally, played a crucial role in the process of ‘region-wide community building and the formation of a collective identity’ (Nabers 2003, p. 130). According to commentators, the process of pan-Asian socialization was such that ‘the East Asian region is so closely connected in political, economic, social and ecological terms that it is impossible to consider one state’s fate independently from another’ (ibid., p. 132). For Katzenstein, *pace* Ali Alatas, ‘Asian regionalism is an idea whose time has come’ (Katzenstein 1999, p. 16).

### *DÉJÀ VU* IN THE ASIA–PACIFIC

Despite the confidence with which regional analysts have endorsed constructivist developments in the Asia–Pacific, a number of theoretical and practical problems arise that might cause those not wedded to constructivism to ponder sceptically the evolving shape of East Asian international relations. Certainly, both Wendt’s hypothesis and constructivist approaches in general have not been without their detractors. Critics have noted, for example, that constructivism ultimately entails a logical absurdity. If constitutive processes are all, then all phenomena collapse back into language. This robs constructivism itself of any meaning. As Copeland observes, if human agents were merely ‘puppets of the ideational environment in which they find themselves’ then ‘each would exist simply as a socially conditioned “Me,” without the free-willed “I” capable of resisting the socialization process’ (Copeland 2000, p. 197). Such overdetermining conditioning would undermine any prospect of transforming the structure of the international system through human interaction – the very thing that most constructivists want to show is possible.

Somewhat differently, constructivism in international relations often demonstrates a limited understanding of its philosophical underpinnings whilst its attempts at theory testing are invariably superficial (Palen 2000, pp. 575–98; Sidel 2001, p. 162). Indeed, they often bear an uncomfortable resemblance to Jorge Luis Borges’s fiction, *Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius*. For Borges, significantly a keen student of Berkeleyan idealism, the people of Tlön have constructed a world that is not a concurrence of objects in space, but a heterogeneous series of independent acts. Interestingly, the metaphysicians of Tlön, endlessly fascinated by system building, do not pursue truth or even an approximation of it. They are in pursuit of a ‘kind of amazement’ (Borges 1962, p. 25).<sup>4</sup>

Rather than the fantastic systems of Tlön, constructivist authors are instead

in pursuit of positive norms – nice norms – assuming that the transformation of identities always promotes cooperation and is thus an innately benevolent process (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001, pp. 403–4). Hence, Muthiah Alagappa informs us that ‘The ASEAN approach emphasizes principles, norms and rules as the key to regulate international interaction’, privileging multilateral institutions designed ‘to reduce the role of power’ (Alagappa 2003, p. 77). This preferencing clearly discounts negative norms that may equally well explain international behaviour (see Jervis 1998, p. 974). Yet, as Jonathan Mercer has shown in an application of situational identity theory to international relations, cooperative behaviour among certain actors inevitably generates competitive behaviour against others (Mercer 1995, p. 251). Such an uncomfortable outcome of normative processes (clearly apparent in the ASEAN Plus Three approach to non-Asian states) tends to be overlooked by those who apply a constructivist ontology to international relations.

Such incoherence notwithstanding, let us accept the central constructivist premise that identities are capable of changing over time for the purposes of understanding developments in Asia–Pacific relations. Most social scientists would acknowledge that ideational factors condition social actors and that these factors are capable of change over time. This, after all, is how perceptions alter and progress occurs. What we can dispute in the context of East Asian regionalism, however, is whether, below the discursive level of speech acts and rhetorical exhortation to regional unity, constructivism explains the practice of Asia–Pacific international relations and whether, as it further contends, any genuine transformation is taking place in that practice. Do discursive practices in international relations, we might wonder, accurately forecast political change, or do they instead create the politically useful illusion of transformation?

It is a question that has obvious resonance in the Asia–Pacific because Southeast Asian regionalism in the post-Cold War period manifestly failed to fulfil its rhetorical promise. This earlier failure provides both an empirical and a rhetorical framework in which to assess current claims about the direction and intensity of East Asian regionalization. For it is evident that, in the period from 1990 to 1997, ASEAN’s constant proclamation of regional harmony and stability and the machinery of regional consultation merely obscured the reality of a loose collection of competing states, briefly united (for a few decades) by their self-denying ordinance of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states and a shared opposition to Communism. During the 1980s, rapid economic growth spurred on by foreign direct investment had dampened the multifarious claims, rivalries and suspicions that perennially agitated its membership.

While ASEAN expanded its membership and attempted to export its managerial style to wider regional problems it achieved minimal institutional

deepening before the 1997 economic crisis. Yet the consequences of the economic crisis revealed how little of substance there was to the rhetorical claims of harmony and cooperation as each of the major states in ASEAN looked abroad or to its own resources to survive the meltdown.

A properly value-neutral political scientist committed to empirically testing hypotheses would find in the Southeast Asian case between 1990 and 1998 the conspicuous failure of a regional project. Aware of the causes of that failure our putative scientist might be inclined to exercise a degree of scepticism towards new claims from the proponents of the previous failure to have engineered an even bolder scheme conceived on an East Asian scale. Instead, the current literature on East Asian regionalism endorses and repeats on a broader Asian canvas claims made by Southeast Asian autocrats and their scholar-bureaucracies in the 1990s, manifesting an uncritical propensity to conceive events in East Asia as essentially transformative in nature. Amitav Acharya, an eager proponent of both constructivism and an evolving ASEAN security community, exemplifies this approach, asserting that 'Asia is moving in the same trajectory of greater interdependence, institutionalization and political transformation as Europe did in the past centuries, and there can be reasonable hope that their pathways will converge more fully in the long-term future' (quoted in Lim 2003).

However, events from 1994 to 2004 indicate – from the Spratly Islands dispute between China and almost all the ASEAN states, which remains unresolved, to the very different post-meltdown political and economic experiences of North and Southeast states – that the current 'trajectory', far from propelling Asia towards European-style integration assumes a rather different 'pathway'. In fact, the appropriate comparative region is not the European Union, or even looser structures like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, but Africa and the Organization of African Unity (OAU). While Asian leaders, like their African counterparts, evince their 'unity' through repeated declarations of regional solidarity, ASEAN is in fact a fading institution. Like the OAU, only relative geographical propinquity and a sense of shared grievance that belies an underlying divergence of interest hold East Asian regionalism together. As we know, moreover, in the case of the OAU, this stretches the meaning of both 'Organization' and 'Unity' in highly tenuous ways.

If we probe further into the international relations of the Asia-Pacific we can discern a number of issues that challenge the constructivist representation of an East Asia transforming itself into a coherent region. Peter Katzenstein, one of constructivism's *illuminati*, maintains that regionalization charts a course towards more satisfactory forms of international cooperation, transcending inadequate national approaches while avoiding the pitfalls of more 'unworkable universal schemes' (Katzenstein 1995). The process of divining

the agreed form and extent of international cooperation among disparate states sufficient to define a region is, of course, complex, and subject to continual negotiation and re-negotiation. This notwithstanding, the premise assumes that regions will eventually cohere into an accepted and acceptable form.

The notion of an 'East Asia', however, presents especially acute problems for this approach to overcome. If regions are essentially discursive creations formed by the interplay of language and politics, which in due course become acculturated within the thinking of governing elites and a wider public over time, then what constitutes East Asia is still inchoate. Consequently, while the idea of a 'Southeast Asia' emerged from the formation of a British theatre of operations in World War II – South East Asia Command – and is currently framed by membership of ASEAN, no such simple delineation frames East Asia (see Huxley 1996).

Indeed, 'Asia' has always been something of a movable feast. The term, together with sub-variant forms like East Asia, Southeast Asia, Farther India, Indochina and Northeast Asia, arose not from amongst those states integral to that 'region' but from political actors external to it, most notably during the period of European colonial expansion from the seventeenth century onwards (see Segal 1992, pp. 414–17; Osborne 1995, pp. 4–5). The term 'Asia', then, was an essentially European coinage that gave rise to misleadingly monolithic images of the Orient that still persist today (Jones 2001b). For, paradoxically, Asia as a distinct region is constituted, if at all, only through its geographic, ethnic and religious diversity.

Because of Asia's historically nebulous character, it is necessary to be cautious in interpreting the signs of its emergence into a coherent East Asian regional form. As John Ravenhill observes: 'Statements by East Asian political leaders at regional forums affirming such an identity and a new commonality of interests have to be read in the particular context in which they were made and not be assumed to translate automatically into new collaborative outcomes' (Ravenhill 2002, p. 175). Furthermore, not only are declarations of regional solidarity frequently made for demonstrative effect, they also conceal very different understandings of this putative region. Thus Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's call for an East Asian community envisaged the ASEAN Plus Three framework broadening to embrace countries like Australia and New Zealand and a wider free trade area (Low 2002). This vividly contrasts with Malaysia's push, supported by the People's Republic of China, for a more segregated and racially determined understanding of the region. In the latter view, as Rafidah Aziz, the Malaysian trade minister explained, non-Asiatic countries like Australia and New Zealand 'are [not part] of the region' (Asia Times Online, 8 March 2001, cited in Nabers 2003, p. 121).

Uncertainty over who or what constitutes the East Asian entity raises a further problem: can any arrangement so broadly and ambivalently conceived

address the diverse economic and security problems confronting the Asia–Pacific? As we have seen, the main impetus for regional expansion sprang from the 1997 financial crisis, which inspired visions of pan-Asian cooperation strengthening regional economic resilience, and prompted ideas for an Asian Monetary Fund, the reduction of tariff barriers and free-trade agreements. Scrutiny of trans-Pacific economic and trade cooperation reveals, as the previous chapter indicates, that progress in this area has been negligible.

In sum, there are continuing differences over what form regional economic cooperation should take. Political entities like Hong Kong and the city state of Singapore favour trade liberalization, while others such as Malaysia prefer mutual technical and economic assistance aimed more at developing an economically defensible ‘fortress Asia’ (Ravenhill 2002, p. 178). Efforts within the ASEAN and APEC frameworks to reduce tariff barriers remain a commitment only in theory, the intention being to reduce tariffs to zero by 2015, while in practice numerous commodities are subject to a Temporary Exclusion List, a General Exception List and a Sensitive List (excluded permanently from any liberalization) (Soesastro 2001, pp. 3–6). Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand continuously re-negotiate trade ‘sensitive’ items and extend their protection well beyond the next decade (‘Par for the course’, 1995).

Interestingly, the most recent exercise in ASEAN bonding, the ‘Bali Concord 11’, declared at the ninth ASEAN summit in October 2003, envisaged an ASEAN community built on the three pillars of political and security, economic and sociocultural cooperation. Significantly, the Concord merely reinforced and updated the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation of 1976 that had failed to integrate the region in the past. Clearly, the putative political community is founded on a principle of non-interference. Its economic integration, despite the introduction of ‘new mechanisms’, remains consensus-driven rather than rule-driven. What is more, the Concord does not foresee an integrated economic community emerging any time before 2020 (ASEAN Secretariat 2004). Even for slow-moving ASEAN, a decade and a half is a long time in international politics.

Ultimately, attempts to extend consensus-based community ideas for an Asia free trade area and an Asian Monetary Fund have fallen by the wayside for a similar lack of will. As Ravenhill again notes, the inconsistent character of the rhetorical attachment to inter-Asian trade deepening was exposed in 2001, when arch pan-Asianist, Prime Minister Mahathir, warned of the danger to Southeast Asian investment and economic growth posed by the increasing flow of imported goods from, and foreign direct investment into, China (Ravenhill 2002, p. 182). ASEAN’s poor record of trade integration has, Ravenhill continued, ‘been punctuated by some member states flouting even

its modest demands' and provides 'little reason for confidence that rapid progress will be made' across the broader Asia-Pacific (ibid.).

In fact, economic integration, to the extent that it is taking place at all, occurs through the mechanism of bilateral free trade agreements between states both within and outside the 'community/region'. The US, Australia, China, Japan, Singapore and Thailand are all actively pursuing or signing bilateral trade agreements. Singapore early on signalled its frustration with the pace of trade liberalization in the ASEAN economic community by concluding a bilateral free trade agreement with New Zealand in January 2001, and Australia in 2003, which contradicted any ostensible commitment to regional solidarity (ibid., p. 181). China is examining closely free trade agreements with both the ASEAN grouping and Australia. As Greg Sheridan observed, with evident perplexity, none of 'the formal multilateral architecture of East Asia ... has had much effect on these matters' (Sheridan 2003).

If the attempt to deepen and extend inter-Asian trade possesses only rhetorical rather than real collective economic integration, how will a wider regional bloc cope with the even more difficult problems that afflict the security order in the Asia-Pacific? ASEAN has been unable to resolve underlying grievances and intramural tensions amongst its own membership, yet the presumption persists that the organization's machinery, inculcation of norms of good regional behaviour and diplomatic style can deal with the protracted security issues that trouble Northeast Asia. Yet the regional security architecture evinces little evidence of even addressing, let alone managing, complex and entrenched issues that, *inter alia*, include historically deep-seated Sino-Japanese cultural, economic and territorial rivalry, China's hegemonic claims over Taiwan and the South China Seas, North Korea and its dangerously unstable nuclear programme, as well as sensitive 'internal' matters concerning human rights, good governance, environmental degradation and transnational crime and terror organizations (for a survey of these problems see Friedberg 1993, pp. 261–85; Yahuda 1996, pp. 216–85; Roy 1994, pp. 149–68).

ASEAN's attempt to demonstrate its wider regional utility through the ARF was built on the illusion that the supposed success of the organization's conflict avoidance mechanisms could be applied across the Pacific. In practice, the ARF simply reflected ASEAN's preferred strategy of consensus diplomacy, which manages problems rather than solves them. Consequently, a variety of ARF-inspired workshops and ministerial dialogue sessions have made no impact on any security issue they have addressed (see Jones 1998, pp. 185–6). This has been evident since its earliest efforts to manage the evolving dispute over oil and gas reserves beneath the Spratly islands in the South China seas. Given that, Singapore, Laos and Cambodia apart, all the ASEAN

states claimed some part of the seas, and China claimed the whole lot, it would appear to be both a conflict amenable to ASEAN-style management and at the same time an opportunity to induct China into the regional norms of responsible behaviour that the ARF sought to extend northwards.

The result was something of a disappointment. China ignored any attempt to establish an ASEAN-designed multilateral approach to the crisis. Indeed, China considered any attempt to address its claim multilaterally with suspicion. Instead, to the extent it negotiated at all, it was on a bilateral basis and at no time relinquishing its historic claim to treat the South China Sea as a greater Chinese lake. Some form of bilateral approach to the still unresolved dispute is, moreover, inevitable. Even when China's occupation of the aptly named Mischief Reef in March 1995 agitated regional sensibilities in general and Philippine ones in particular, the ASEAN members could not even formulate a consensus amongst themselves as a basis for any agreed multilateral approach to the disputed islands (see 'China's creeping assertiveness', 1995).

The poor performance of the ARF, like the failure of ASEAN regionalism in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis, should have been sufficient to confound future expectations that a broader multilateral arrangement would have any capacity to address the region's security dilemmas. Yet the illusion persists that the involvement of a triumvirate of regional powers, China, Japan and South Korea, guided, of course, by ASEAN diplomatic processes, will constitute a concert of Asia capable of regulating the region's affairs. Inherent in ASEAN initiatives dating from the 1971 ZOPFAN plan has been the aspiration to enhance regional integration free from great power interference. This aspiration, however, ignores the further and crucial strategic question of how this prospective concert can operate without the active participation of the United States. Given that the US is the major power in the Pacific any long-term effort to reduce the influence of 'outside' powers must mean excluding the US (Khoo and Smith 2002, pp. 77–8). Even here another incoherence appears, for a majority of the ASEAN states welcome, to various extents, the presence of a benign US hegemony across the Asia–Pacific both to mitigate the numerous inter-Asian security dilemmas and specifically to balance the potentially destabilizing rivalries of the region's major powers, namely Japan and an irredentist China. As one Southeast Asian diplomat observed in 2001: 'Basically our choice is between a hegemony in Washington or a hegemony in Beijing. We are still choosing the United States' (quoted in Pomfret 2001).

ASEAN's practical reliance on the US security umbrella, while rhetorically committing itself to schemes for enhanced regional resilience that ultimately imply a diminution in US regional power in Asia, is clearly contradictory. Yet at no time since its formation as a US proxy in the wake of the Guam doctrine have ASEAN politicians or scholars sought to address this contradiction adequately. More disturbingly, extending this incoherence to ASEAN Plus

Three by excluding the US from the broader Asian security arrangement risks disrupting the delicately calibrated understanding of balance in the Asia–Pacific. In the past, only Mahathir Mohamad, in conjunction with the odd Japanese ultra-nationalist like Shintaro Ishihara, was associated (outside the People’s Republic of China) with promoting anti-Americanism as a basis for a pan-Asian identity (Mohamad and Ishihara 1995). Post-meltdown and post-September 11, however, this viewpoint has received growing scholarly endorsement, particularly from a Singapore school of constructivist security analysis. Promiscuously coupling Wendt’s concern with multilateral norms and Mahathir’s *ressentiment*, this emerging school has engendered the thesis that it is the United States that threatens the construction of a new and purposeful East Asian regional identity. Thus, Kwa and Tan somewhat solipsistically claiming to speak on behalf of ‘we, the countries of Southeast Asia’, represent the ‘mood in East Asia’ as one which increasingly resents American ‘arrogance’ and the ‘evangelistic zeal of U.S. foreign policy makers to remake East Asia into an annex of Americana, or, failing that an authoritarian Other’ (Kwa and Tan 2001, pp. 95–6). Likewise, Goh’s constructivist analysis of the impact of American foreign policy upon Asia implies that the US is responsible for causing the war on terrorism that now confronts it (Goh 2003, pp. 77–97). Elsewhere, Acharya, rails against the evils of the US’s post-September 11 doctrine of pre-emption (Acharya 2002a) and further contends that one of the major ‘challenges’ ASEAN faces is that of ‘American unilateralism’, which he believes ‘demand [*sic*] a response from the Association’, although we are not told quite what this response might entail (quoted in ‘Challenges and prospects in the current international situation’, 2003).

Intellectual consistency has rarely been a hallmark of the Singaporean scholar–bureaucracy and in a constructivism married to a fashionable academic anti-Americanism it has evidently found a useful ideological weapon to mask its failings. Precisely why ‘American unilateralism’ poses a ‘challenge’ to ASEAN and East Asia is, for example, never explained. Such inconsistency aside, they nonetheless imply that ASEAN in conjunction with a wider East Asian caucus should work to diminish a potential US hegemony in the Pacific, the logical implication of which is that ASEAN should actively collaborate with the emerging regional hegemon, China, to undermine US power.

Such a radical reversal of ASEAN’s traditional perception of China seems immediately feasible only in the concrete encrusted towers of Southeast Asian academe. Nevertheless, such officially endorsed scholasticism only adds the Pelion of constructivist discourse to the Ossa of regional incoherence. For, in the end, the only properly constructive role ASEAN Plus Three can play in the increasingly complex security dilemma that faces the Asia–Pacific region is not to coopt China into an anti-US crusade, but to constrain its irredentist proclivities through diplomatic engagement (see Leifer 1995, p. 34). At most

ASEAN Plus Three can extend the ASEAN way, involving ‘a commitment to carry on with consultations without any specific formula or modality for achieving a desired outcome’ (Acharya 1997a, p. 329), to the wider Asia–Pacific. Yet the fulfilment of even this modest enterprise seems unlikely given the ARF’s conduct towards the Spratly dispute and China’s inflexible approach to the rebellious province of Taiwan and continuing claim to the Japanese-occupied Senkaku islands.

These cases should again induce a degree of scepticism amongst scholars when any loose collocation of states riven by ethnic differences, historic jealousies, territorial disputes and a litany of mutual antipathies claims, but fails to manifest, a capacity to manage regional problems. Instead, we find a pattern of failed scholarship reinforcing failed multilateral initiatives repeating itself. Central to this pattern is the seemingly intractable habit of mistaking process for progress. Analysts eagerly see in yet another ASEAN-inspired ministerial meeting, declaration of concord or adoption of unenforceable commitments to realize forms of low-level cooperation, irrefutable evidence of the transformative socialization processes that ‘identify a compelling imperative for further institutionalization’ (Nabers 2003, pp. 124–5). In other words, an interesting convergence of a questionable but scholarly appealing ideology combines with the felt need of regional elites to sustain the delusion of regional integration.

Ultimately, the process is self-fulfilling, but it raises a further question: if, as we have demonstrated, the construction of wider East Asian arrangements is rhetorical rather than real, what, we may ask, sustains the apparent desire amongst the ASEAN Plus Three states to indulge in illusory declarations of regional unity? From an academic perspective, as we have shown elsewhere, it is relatively easy to demonstrate how methodological fashion aided by major grant-giving institutions in hock to the latest orthodoxy sustains a pseudo-scholarship devoted to regionalization. This is an unstoppable bureaucratic process that continues despite events that ought to induce a reality check. But what do the states of the Asia–Pacific actually gain by inflating the rhetorical balloon of East Asian regionalism? It is to the resolution of this perplexity that we shall now proceed.

## REVERSING THE DIALECTIC: THREE PLUS ASEAN

At face value, it seems strange that realist state actors in Northeast Asia consider it useful or desirable to support an institution like ASEAN Plus Three. Why should three major Asian powers wish to associate themselves with a grouping of weak states like ASEAN whose collective sum is much less than its constitutive parts? If there was any prospect that China, Japan

and South Korea could form a concert of powers to manage economic and security relations in Northeast Asia, why would these countries require ASEAN?

Let us momentarily and constructively engage in a short international relations thought experiment. Imagine, for example, that a group of weak states in the Mediterranean – Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece – had during the Cold War constituted an Associated Region of Southern Europe for economic and security purposes. Then consider Germany, France and the United Kingdom desperately trying to join such a union in the post-Cold War era. It sounds unlikely, yet this is exactly how the Northeast Asian states are acting in relation to ASEAN. As Amitav Acharya observed, ASEAN has recently witnessed ‘so many suitors knocking on its door’. China, Japan and India are all queuing up to sign free-trade agreements with the Association. ‘Why’ is there ‘so much wooing of an allegedly sunset organisation?’ Acharya asks rhetorically (Acharya 2002b).

Two answers may be given. The first is that East Asian diplomatic solidarity comes at a discount. The price of commitment to regional cohesion is negligible. Forging trade agreements, or even signing up to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, is a cost-free exercise. The governing principle of non-interference embodied in the TAC is particularly appealing to Asia’s Heinz 57 variety of authoritarian governments and semi-demi-semi democracies and thus has little difficulty attracting adherents who resent any external scrutiny of their internal affairs. Adhering to the precepts of the TAC, therefore, incurs no obligation other than to mind one’s own business, something which a number of the states in the Asia–Pacific, from China to Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, are only too happy to respect.

A second, and more interesting, answer that helps unravel the dynamic of state self-interest in the evolving East Asian enterprise appears if we reverse the dialectic. Aseanologists are by habit and training ASEANcentric. They assume that much East Asian diplomacy occurs through ASEAN’s institutional machinery. Hence the presumption that, because ASEAN appears to have ‘so many suitors’, this indicates its continuing importance to the affairs of the Asia–Pacific. In fact, the very opposite is true. ASEAN Plus Three should really be viewed as ‘Three Plus ASEAN’. By itself ASEAN has, since its meltdown in 1997, little relevance for Northeast Asia. But, in contrast, the economic development and international relations of Northeast Asia possess mounting significance for Southeast Asia.

For the states of Southeast Asia, the putative utility of exporting ASEAN way diplomatic initiatives through the ARF or ASEAN Plus Three resides in restricting the growing power differential between them and the states of Northeast Asia. In practice, however, the reverse is the case. Far from preventing Chinese and Japanese expansionism, ASEAN Plus Three provides an

attractive vehicle for Northeast Asians to explore their regional ambitions and vie for influence in Southeast Asia. ASEAN itself is an empty vessel. It can be easily manoeuvred by external powers who, like Japan and China, use the rhetoric of regional solidarity to pursue their self-interested competition for regional hegemony.

Such an understanding, moreover, fits with the Cold War history of ASEAN. As the late Michael Leifer endeavoured to show in a number of books and articles, ASEAN functioned in the Cold War as a proxy for US and Chinese interests (see Leifer 1989, 1996). This was most evident in the resolution of the Cambodian crisis in the early 1990s. In addition, since the late 1970s, Japanese foreign policy thinking has consciously sought to increase its influence in Southeast Asia via ASEAN. In 1977, the then Japanese Prime Minister's eponymous 'Fukuda doctrine' declared Japan's commitment to 'cooperate in the development of Southeast Asia, under the ideal of equal partnership' (*East Asian Strategic Review*, 2003, p. 211). In practice, of course, the relationship was far from equal, as Japanese foreign direct investment poured into the fledgling economies of ASEAN. Furthermore, as trade friction developed between Japan and the US during the 1980s, the Japanese Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Defense steadily expanded the Fukuda doctrine (see Jones 1998, p. 190; Johnson 1996, pp. 23–9), seeking to diversify its foreign policy by increasing multilateral cooperation with the states of Southeast Asia, especially through trade and investment links, and subsequently, after 1992, extending collaboration in the broader diplomatic and security fields through the ARF (see Hughes 1996, pp. 229–50).

Commentators continue to debate the intent of Japanese foreign policy (see Inoguchi 1993). On the one hand, the emphasis on dialogue diplomacy with ASEAN could be interpreted as Japan attempting to position itself in the post-Cold War order as a potential counter-weight to American influence in the Pacific (Bobrow, Chan and Reich 1996, p. 5). On the other, it is equally plausible to contend that Japan's willingness to engage in ASEAN-sponsored multilateral forums was undertaken with the aim to improve its image in Asia by diluting the impression that it was the US lackey in the Pacific (Hara 1999, p. 529). Whatever tensions have emerged between the US and Japan since the end of the Cold War, it is clear that the alliance with the US remains the cornerstone of Japan's security (Segal 1989; Levin 1991, p. 237). Consequently, it can be argued that involvement in Southeast Asian multilateralism served primarily to assuage growing Japanese nationalism at home while advancing its internationalist credentials abroad, yet without ever seriously imperilling its crucial bilateral relationship with the US. So whether Japanese diplomacy after 1990 sought *de facto* leadership in the Asia-Pacific or reflected a more subtle repositioning, the power-political outcome was the same: Japanese diplomacy has not elevated ASEAN to a position of equality

with the aim of building a broader East Asian identity, rather ASEAN serves and is subordinated to the ends of Japanese foreign policy.

At the same time that Japan was re-defining its role with regard to ASEAN, so too was the People's Republic of China. In other words, after 1990, Southeast Asia became the playing field for Northeast Asian power politics. Chinese foreign policy initially perceived ASEAN and its expansionary multi-lateral ventures like the ARF suspiciously, seeing behind them the hidden hand of the US attempting to contain China in its own hemisphere (Wang 1997, pp. 10–11). Such suspicions, moreover, were by no means groundless, given that the formation of the ARF reflected ASEAN's growing concern over China's post-1990 assertiveness. In particular, ASEAN worried about China's claim over the South China Sea and its attempts to enhance its naval power projection capabilities (see Valencia 1995) which, as Michael Yahuda stated, threatened to 'reach right into the heart of Southeast Asia' (Yahuda 1996, p. 271).

It was the post-economic crisis period after 1997, however, that sharpened Sino-Japanese rivalry over Southeast Asia. The economic crisis damaged Japan's economic credibility in Southeast Asia. Japanese financial institutions were quick to withdraw from the region after the currency turmoil struck, and slow to return. These circumstances offered China an opportunity to 'strengthen its influence over ASEAN members in order to challenge Japan's leadership in the region' (*East Asian Strategic Review*, 2003, p. 209). China's refusal to devalue its currency, the *renminbi*, which might have further exacerbated the Asian financial meltdown, gave it regional credibility. The refusal to devalue indicated China's responsible 'regional' economic leadership. The perception in Japan that China had increased its leverage in Southeast Asia through its response to the crisis, in turn, elicited a further response. This took the form of the New Miyazawa Initiative in 1998 that subsequently broadened into the Obuchi–ASEAN plan to provide large-scale financial assistance to facilitate economic recovery (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1998, 1999).

It is, therefore, in the context of this evolving Sino-Japanese competition for Southeast Asian influence that the ASEAN Plus Three project must be understood. It is essentially a forum where the major powers of Northeast Asia contest the economic (and, ergo, political) leadership of Southeast Asia. Indeed, Japanese policy makers have few illusions about this. They maintain that, without the participation of the United States and Australia, ASEAN Plus Three presents China with 'an ideal framework within which it can exercise its influence, making it easier for China to play a leading role in forming a free-trade area in East Asia' (*East Asian Strategic Review*, 2003, p. 210). Japan, in other words, does not consider China's participation in ASEAN Plus Three, and its negotiation of a regional free trade agreement with ASEAN, as cementing an East Asian identity, but rather as a mechanism to diminish Japanese influence in Southeast Asia. This, in turn, compels Japan to 'cooperate with ASEAN

members' on investment, technology, human resources and security strategies because 'through such measures, Japan can match the growing influence of China in that region' (ibid., p. 213).

It is in this evolving competition between East Asia's historic great powers that statements like the Koizumi doctrine must be read. Prime Minister Koizumi envisages 'an expanded East Asian community' not as some idealistic attempt to forge an East Asian community but in order to balance China's bid for regional ascendancy. Official Japanese publications like the *East Asian Strategic Review* confirm the accuracy of this, observing: 'Using ASEAN as their stage, it appears that Japan and China are jockeying for a leadership role in East Asia' (*East Asian Strategic Review*, 2003, p. 213).

Of course, the theatre of ASEAN Plus Three is not open only to Chinese and Japanese actors. ASEAN connoisseurs can appreciate elsewhere dramatic posturing by minor characters in inter-ASEAN rivalry. This may be illustrated, for example, by Malaysia's proposal in mid-2002 to fund the establishment of an ASEAN Plus Three secretariat in Kuala Lumpur, much to the chagrin of other member states who tried to 'neutralize' the idea (Saiful and Mahavera 2002). However, it is in the machinations of Asia's two most significant powers that we see the operation of foreign policy imperatives coming to the fore. Accordingly, reversing the understanding of ASEAN Plus Three exposes the emptiness of constructivist assumptions of multilateral norm construction along with the fatuous notion of an emerging regional identity. It reveals, in its place, the naked pursuit of traditional, realist, state interests.

## CONSTRUCTIVIST UTOPIANISM AND THE POLITICS OF FAITH

If ASEAN Plus Three is thus exposed as a front concealing very conventional forms of inter-state diplomacy then we can move closer to resolving the final question: why have many analysts abandoned an empirical assessment of regional reality in favour of upholding the notion of East Asian transformation into an attractive multilateral norm-enhancing enterprise?

On reflection, there may be an uncomplicated answer. As we have noted, the recent study of East Asia reflects an enthusiasm for a constructivist explanation of regional relations. This is because, despite its failure to say anything insightful or interesting about the region, it places the official view of Southeast Asian political elites in a satisfyingly self-fulfilling methodological framework. For the notion that ideational factors modify perceptions of material self-interest and sustain an open-ended transformative process is inherently unfalsifiable (see Copeland 2000, p. 208). Wendt, somewhat predictably, maintains that the 'transformation of identity and interest' is 'incremental and

slow' (Wendt 1992a, p. 418). Consequently, all speech acts and any other foreign policy initiative can be treated as evidence of remorseless transition. Constructivist commentators on Asian regionalism, like Acharya, *pace* Wendt, also perceive the process of international change in terms of 'incremental interactions and socialization' (Acharya 1999b, p. 5). By a selective use of data, he identifies a global 'trend towards intrusive regionalism' resulting in the 'development and mutual observance' (Acharya 1999c, p. 23) of universalized norms that in East Asia's case is leading to 'greater interdependence, institutionalism and political transformation' (quoted in Lim 2003). Similarly, Stuart Harris finds that the 'contribution of multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific has been to alter the environment within which interactions take place and, in encouraging cognitive learning about the way the world works to change or reinforce how Asian states want to pursue their interest and reshape their national objectives' (Harris 1999, p. 7).

Hence impediments like terrorism, war or economic crisis that occasion purely self-interested national responses and repudiate the constructivist case are airily dismissed as minor details delaying but by no means stopping the inexorable process of transformation. Constructivists appear to treat evidence of the continued pursuit of state interest as a temporary phase soon to be overcome. Eventually, inter-state rivalries will mutate into an appreciation of interdependent regional interests. Given these historicist assumptions, constructivism considers itself released from the need for scepticism (see Popper 1959, pp. 64–71). We can see this by the way in which the constructivist idiom replaces the requirement to question ruling assumptions with the accumulation of data on policy and procedures that demonstrate the 'institutionalisation of the ASEAN + 3 process' (see 'Regions in transition', 2000, p. 2). Interestingly, the thickly descriptive, and often meaningless, discussion of technical and bureaucratic processes that characterized the scholarship of ASEAN before 1997 has, post-1997, been transferred to the wider Pacific arena to sustain the delusion of an emerging East Asian region (see Ferguson 1999, pp. 4–19; Harris 1999 pp. 2–18; Haacke 2003, pp. 57–87; Katzenstein 1999, pp. 2–24; Nabers 2003, pp. 113–36).

Analysts of the Asia-Pacific are evidently reluctant to abandon a predestined understanding of international affairs to which they have formed, implicitly or explicitly, an ideological and emotional attachment. Observers have noted that attempts to account scientifically for the modernization process often carry a value-laden, or what Yahuda has termed a 'redemptionist' (Yahuda 1996, p. 282), baggage that sees history as an inexorable movement towards a capitalist, democratic and thymotically self-regarding End of History (see Jones 1998, p. 164). In international relations this baggage further entails a liberal/internationalist predilection towards both the desirability and the inevitability of transcending the state as the primary unit in the international

system. Regionalization, from this perspective, appears to be the first stage in the process towards a properly interdependent international system. Accordingly, foreign policy should facilitate the transformation<sup>5</sup> because regionalism, as Acharya explains, is ‘an important tool for promoting a range of positive values’ throughout the international system (Acharya 1999c, p. 24).

Ultimately, this orthodoxy is, itself, a deeply normative construct and an example of what Michael Oakeshott would have recognized as ‘the politics of faith’ (Oakeshott 1996, pp. 45–67). In Oakeshott’s conception, the politics of faith sustains an intellectual scheme utterly resistant to scepticism. The problem for the politics of faith, however, is that a belief in infallibility invariably, as Jonathan Clark notes, ‘fails to yield predictability’ (Clark 2003, p. 54). So, when regionalization falters in Southeast Asia as a result of ASEAN failing to live up to its promise, the object of affection is not subject to critical scrutiny, but instead broadened to an East Asian canvas in order to maintain the faith. Consequently, much of what passes for scholarly analysis of contemporary East Asian affairs is not value-neutral but accumulates information to affirm the faith. Hence commentators passionately declare that regional interdependency in the Asia–Pacific represents a ‘basic truth’, asserting that it ‘is not in doubt that the process will foster the identity of an East Asian community’ (Nabers 2003, p. 133). Statements of future resolve support this belief structure. They are acts of faith, not scholarly scepticism. Thus, in order to consolidate Asia–Pacific regionalism, we are told that ‘new visions of regional governance will need to be developed to bypass blockages in solving trans-boundary problems, in moving towards effective preventive diplomacy, and in moderating triangular patterns of “great power” competition’ (Ferguson 1999, p. 19). For proof that this worldly regional utopia is about to be realized, we need look no further than ‘regional multilateral dialogues’ which have ‘probably led to learning’ in the economic and security fields, and give ‘grounds for believing it has made important contributions in both directions’ (Harris 1999, p. 8).

By piling assertion upon incoherence, regional commentary avoids confronting internal dissonance, never pausing to question whether ASEAN’s flawed Southeast Asian project renders its wider applicability to East Asia suspect. Faith coupled with discourse enables commentators to overlook the manner in which the 1997 economic crisis undermined ASEAN’s regionalist pretensions and instead maintain, very oddly, that ‘ASEAN is not as weak as it may seem’ because, despite the consequences of economic crisis, it ‘demonstrated a high degree of commitment to its institutional principles’ (Ferguson 1999, p. 15), thereby making ‘an important contribution to the normative environment of the region by reinforcing the fundamental principles of international society’ (Narine 1998, pp. 33–47, quoted in Ferguson 1999, p. 15). The problem is that the only ‘institutional principle’ to which ASEAN adheres is

that of non-interference. For this reason, the only ‘fundamental principle of international society’ it has reinforced is a realist commitment, not to the region, but to the sovereign inviolability of the nation-state.

There may be a final level of understanding that reconciles the idealistic, faith-based character of much scholarship on Pacific affairs with the essentially realist practice of inter-state diplomacy that actually regulates regional relations. This further understanding brings us as close to explaining the delusional basis of East Asian academic discourse as it may be possible to achieve.

If we examine the history of the Asia–Pacific over the *longue durée* of the twentieth century, it becomes evident that the rhetoric of East Asian regionalism has presented itself in many guises, waxing and waning over the decades. Arguably, imperial Japan’s attempt to impose its notion of an East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere in the 1930s and 1940s constituted the first coherent regionalist enterprise. Later regionalist schemes revealed themselves in the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and then in ASEAN’s attempts to establish regional neutrality through ZOPFAN in the 1970s. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, economic cooperation was regarded as the principal agent of a regionalist dynamic, with APEC depicted as the harbinger of an East Asian community (see Bhagwati 1996; Wanandi 1996). As Asia entered the post-Cold War era, bilateral and trilateral growth areas in Northeast and Southeast Asia proliferated, together with the assertion of shared ‘Asian values’ constituting a cultural commonality across the Pacific. Indeed, the formation of the ARF intimated the culmination of the vaunted ‘ASEAN way’. Now, in the post-economic crisis environment, we have ASEAN Plus Three and visionary promises of future East Asian integration.

However, all these initiatives have consistently foundered on the rocks of global power politics and national interest. The Japanese imperium turned out to be the East Asian Co-Poverty Sphere, and other powers in the international system (as well as most Asians themselves) rejected it. ASEAN’s various schemes to promote regional resilience, consensus and harmony have, likewise, failed to resolve intense bilateral antipathies, often of an ethno-religious nature. The absence of any deepening of inter-Asian trade relations and, after 1997, evidence of economic mismanagement, rendered the ASEAN way illusory (Harland 1993, pp. 8–16). Similarly, as Gilbert Rozman has shown in Northeast Asia, the attempt to sustain regional growth in the early 1990s through practical economic and developmental initiatives between China, Japan, South Korea and Russia were ‘flawed’ by ‘narrow local or national self-interest’. Rozman concluded: ‘Impulsive regionalism flailed against entrenched nationalism, distorted reform programs, unbalanced decentralization, conflicting ideals for the future division of labor, and untrusting personal relations’ (Rozman 1998, p. 3).

What we have, then, is the continual re-imagining of the regionalist project

in ever more fanciful forms, but – Japan’s failed attempt to forcibly incorporate an East Asian sphere during World War II notwithstanding – nothing concrete ever appears (Ravenhill 2002, p. 193). Yet, rather than examine why this is the case, regional commentary instead seems transfixed by the latest incarnation into which a discursive Asian vision has metamorphosed. In this regard, the regionalist rhetoric emanating from the Asian scholar–bureaucracy and their adherents in European, American and Australasian universities reflects an anxious need to sustain the regional fiction that guarantees official patronage as Asian governments and grant-disbursing agencies remain wedded to the vision (see Copeland 2000, p. 212). Consequently, predictive success is not the criterion by which the regionalist scholocracy necessarily judges itself. Whether East Asia ever attains the status of a fully integrated ‘community’ is almost beside the point. In the transformative discourse of constructivism one has a methodology designed to evade empirically evaluating assumptions. The conclusion we come to is that what has changed in the East Asian firmament is not the underlying dynamics of regional relations, but merely the discourse by which regional analysts have sought to maintain the faith in the transformation of the Asia–Pacific into a fashionably seductive, but ultimately delusional, East Asian community.

## NOTES

1. EAEC was originally rendered by the Malaysians as the East Asian Economic Grouping (EACG).
2. Constructivist forms of approach were prominent in studies of what has become known as strategic culture that emerged in the late 1970s with works like Jack Snyder (1977), *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Options*, Santa Monica: RAND; and Colin Gray (1981), ‘National style in strategy’, *International Security*, 6 (2). This literature could itself trace its origins back to the early 1950s in works that tried to use ‘culture’ to dissect Soviet understandings of the world (see for example Mead, 1951; Bauer 1952, 1954; Haimson 1953, Tomasic 1953). In addition, such approaches can also be seen in the ‘way of warfare’ school of military history and strategy that have an even older lineage in the works of Liddell Hart (1935), Weigley (1973) and Fairbank (1974).
3. Even Wendt, it should be noted, is pre-dated in contemporary international relations by Nicholas G. Onuf (1989), *A World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
4. Ultimately, pervading constructivism is the subjective idealism of Bishop Berkeley’s *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710). The idea that *esse est percipi* and that the world we perceive is a world of ideas has inspired writers from Dean Swift to Flann O’Brien and Borges. Only recently has it unconsciously appealed to political theorists of an activist hue (see John Gray, 1995, ‘Notes toward a definition of the political thought of Tlon’, in *Enlightenment’s Wake*, London: Routledge) and now, limping along in political theory’s wake, to those who purport to practise international relations theory.
5. One of the exemplars of this line of thought was the French political theorist and civil servant, Alexandre Kojève (see Lilla 2001, pp. 113–16).