

Opinion – Southeast Asia: Global Rock Star in Waiting

Written by Peter A. Coclanis

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PETER A. COCLANIS, MAR 18 2021

In the early 1990s I was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to spend a research year in Singapore. When I told one of my colleagues that I would soon be off to Singapore, she wished me well and, just to be certain, asked me where in China Singapore was located. On one level her question could be read as ironic, maybe even sardonic – yet it also indicates a general lack of awareness of the area across American society and academia. Only 1.4 percent of the 10,980 members of the American Historical Association—the largest and most prestigious general historical organization in the US—list Southeast Asia as a primary interest, and data provided by the multi-disciplinary Association for Asian Studies tell us that only about 15 percent of the group's 6000 plus members are Southeast Asianists. Thankfully, things are changing. Whether because of American Michael Fay's 1994 caning, the island-nation's often lampooned policy regarding the sale of chewing gum or, most likely, John Chu's 2018 film "Crazy Rich Asians," more people in the US have heard of Singapore and know more or less where it is. Hipper elements of the population may even have read (or at least heard of) cyberpunk author William Gibson's snappy 1993 article on Singapore, entitled "Disneyland with the Death Penalty" that appeared in *Wired*.

Despite the modest rise in recent decades of Americans' awareness of Singapore, it remains fair to say that both the island-nation and Southeast Asia, the broader region of which it is part, are, with one notable exception, still obscure, even uncharted areas in our geographic imaginations. That exception, Vietnam, because of the American phase of the protracted "Thirty Years' War" there. The foreignness of Southeast Asia to most Americans can be seen in other ways as well. According to a 2018 piece in the *New York Times*, only one of the top twenty-five international travel destinations for Americans is located in Southeast Asia—the Philippines (#14) –and its rank is largely due to visits "home" by Filipino Americans. To be sure, Asia is far away, but seven other Asian countries/destinations made the *Times*' top twenty-five: Australia, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, India, and China. Even Thailand's famous allures couldn't push the country any higher than #26 on the list.

The above observations are intended to demonstrate that Southeast Asia, for whatever reason, still flies under the radar for many Americans, or, to employ another image, represents a lumpy zone in our ostensibly ever-flattening world. This situation, I believe, is unfortunate for many reasons, a few of which I shall lay out below. As people familiar with Southeast Asia well know, the population of the region is smitten with acronyms, abbreviations, and mnemonics, perhaps reflecting Southeast Asia's amazing diversity of languages and cultures, and remaining educational challenges. Playing off of the title of this piece, I shall introduce a new mnemonic below to organize my comments: GEODE. A geode, of course, is a rock, often volcanic, with a cavity or cavities inside filled with crystals or other minerals. Geodes are commonly associated most closely with dry, desert-like areas (which Southeast Asia certainly is not), but occur frequently in Southeast Asia as well, particularly in volcanic parts of the region included in the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire—Indonesia and the Philippines, most notably. So geode it is, which letters can help us to keep in mind some of the reasons for the region's salience today:

- (G) Geopolitics
- (E) Economic importance
- (O) Openness
- (D) Diversity
- (E) Equipoise

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Like the value of real estate, the prominence of Southeast Asia in geopolitical terms is related closely to three concerns: location, location, location. The region's name, Southeast Asia, arose during World War II to denote the theater south of China and east of India. The fact that these two countries are central to the emerging narrative of the twenty-first century only hints at the locational importance of Southeast Asia. Stretching from the Bay of Bengal on the west to the Pacific on the east, from the Himalayas on the north almost to Australia on the south, the 11 countries comprising Southeast Asia—Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam—are positioned in the midst of the most economically dynamic part of the world, an area, moreover, that is increasingly the site of Great Power rivalry between China and the United States, not to mention intra-Asian competition between China and India. The many development projects in Southeast Asia growing out of the China-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) should be viewed and interpreted at least in part in this light.

Geopolitical significance is often, though not always, related closely to economic importance. In the case of Southeast Asia, the two work hand in glove. The region is home, for example, to one of the world's busiest and, arguably, most important shipping lanes—the Straits of Malacca—as well as to two of the busiest ports in the world (Singapore and Port Klang in Malaysia), two of the top twenty busiest airports in the world (Changi in Singapore and Suvarnabhumi in Bangkok, Thailand), and numerous other regional hubs. The countries of Southeast Asia have a total population of over 660 million (youthful except for Thailand and Singapore) and a combined GDP in 2020 of well over \$3.1 trillion. To put these figures in relative terms, if the Southeast Asian nation-states were grouped into one entity, that entity, comprising about 8.4 percent of the Earth's population, would have the world's fifth highest GDP. Put another way, Southeast Asia, with less than half the population of India, has a GDP that is almost 17 percent greater. And, remember, India is a BRICS member.

Speaking of BRICS, Jim O'Neill the British economist/investment banker who famously coined that term (originally as BRIC before South Africa was later added) in 2001 while working at Goldman Sachs, came out in 2011 with an updated list of emerging economies to watch called the “next eleven.” The list included three very different countries from Southeast Asia: Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. And, as we'll see shortly, part of the region's economic importance grows out of its openness and diversity.

Indeed, when it comes to openness, few areas in the world can match Southeast Asia, which has been “global” for millennia, and whose character has been formed in large part via engagement with the outside world, and its selective incorporation of elements of “foreign” influences into its own cultural blends. It is in fact fair to say that it is impossible even to approach the study of Southeast Asia without considering the effects over time of outside influences from India, China, Islam, and the West, which effects, however mediated, were frequently profound. In terms of trade, Southeast Asia has been a major global crossroad for a long, long time. Tomé Pires, a Portuguese merchant who in the early sixteenth century wrote a detailed, two-volume account of trade in Asia, famously described the port of Malacca in what is now peninsular Malaysia in a way that makes it sound a lot like the nearby island-nation of Singapore today. According to Pires, 84 languages were spoken in polyglot Malacca at the time, and the European merchant wrote admiringly (and at length) about Malacca's wealth, its low taxes, the dazzling array of currencies being exchanged there, and the sophisticated commercial practices on display. And, by and large, he was correct: Malacca's prime location on the straits that bear its name – like that of Singapore today – placed it in a prominent position along the shortest sea lane between China and India, making it a trade emporium analogous to contemporary Singapore.

The region's economic openness comes through loud and clear in its statistics on trade. The value of trade (exports plus imports) exceeds GDP in six of the eleven countries in the region, making Southeast Asia one of the most open parts of the world. The trade-to-GDP ratio in tiny Singapore in 2019 was 319, third highest in the world (behind Luxembourg and Hong Kong), and, even in a large country like Vietnam with almost 100 million people, the ratio is 210, seventh highest in the world. Moreover, in a time when economic globalization is increasingly being challenged, it is instructive that ten of the fifteen signatories to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreed to in November 2020 – the most important globalizing trade agreement in recent decades – were located in Southeast Asia (every nation-state in the region was included except Timor-Leste).

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Given the openness of the region—Southeast Asia’s preferential option to embrace the outside world, as it were—it is not surprising that the region is marked by incredible diversity, diversity apparent anywhere one looks. That is to say, Southeast Asia is characterized—and I would contend blessed—by an amazing variety of peoples, languages, religions, and cultures, as well as geographical and economic diversity. How else can one describe a region where the world’s great religions all have long histories, whose geographic features include a mountain—Hkakabo Razi in northern Myanmar—which soars to 5881 meters (over 19,000 feet), a tropical rainforest (Taman Negara in Malaysia) that is around 130 million years old, several of the few remaining hunter-gatherer societies left on Earth, as well as a place like Singapore, arguably the most futuristic place on the planet.

The region’s economic diversity is as striking as it is advantageous in competitive terms, providing, as it does, opportunities for economic activities of all kinds, no matter how low-value-added or how high. The region comprises four very poor countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Timor-Leste), three middle-income countries (Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines), two upper-middle-income countries (Thailand, Malaysia), and two of the wealthiest countries in the world (Singapore and Brunei). Some of these countries are very, very rural (Cambodia and Laos), while one is almost entirely urban (Singapore), the others somewhere in between. Virtually any type or level of economic activity can be pursued in the region, from unskilled work offering very low wages/remuneration to activities demanding the most sophisticated skill sets. Regarding the latter: It should be noted that one Southeast Asian country, Singapore, ranks at or near the top of global league tables regarding not only per capita income, but also educational attainment and in the quality of its leading universities.

Last, but not least, the region’s equipoise—a word suggesting balance whether used as noun or verb. Simply put, the region by and large is keen on positioning itself as an area friendly or at least open to, but not in the pocket of either the U.S. or China, the great powers currently competing for hegemony in Asia. I say “by and large” because some influential commentators—ex-Singapore diplomat Bilahari Kausikan, for example—have recently suggested that two weak Southeast Asian nation-states (Cambodia and Laos) have been reduced to near-puppet status by China because of their economic dependence on the PRC. The other countries in the region, even Myanmar of late, have worked to assert or maintain more independent positions even as Chinese trade and investment in the region accelerates. Their leaders realize that their economic gains over the past seventy-five years have been underwritten in large part by the US-dominated international economic order and the U.S.-security umbrella, considerations they don’t take lightly, however many BRI infrastructure projects come their way.

In their 2017 study, *The ASEAN Miracle*, Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng made the provocative case that in the first half century of its existence the regional grouping, for all its imperfections, has made numerous important contributions both to the region and the world. In their view, ASEAN has not only facilitated the region’s economic growth and development, but also helped to keep cross-border military clashes to a minimum, and helped build a sense of community among the diverse nation-states in the organization. They also argue that the qualities that some see as weaknesses – the lack of strong leadership, weak compliance/enforcement mechanisms, etc. – can at times become strengths, especially when outside parties are looking for non-threatening third-party brokers, avenues for engagement, etc. Although the authors never mention him or his work, the scholarship of the distinguished sociologist Mark Granovetter is relevant in this regard as well, particularly his path-breaking 1973 paper “The Strength of Weak Ties,” wherein Granovetter argued that in a variety of domains weak ties, ironically, enable parties to reach and influence audiences, markets, etc., unattainable in cases of strong ties.

In light of the above considerations, it seems unlikely that ASEAN will, as some hope, be joining the so-called Quad anytime soon. This non-formal “security dialogue” comprised of the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India has been meeting off and on since 2007 to discuss ways and devise strategies to respond to Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. The fact that ASEAN won’t be transforming the Quad into the Quintet shouldn’t concern Western observers unduly as it likely won’t be signing on to a defense pact with the PRC either.

The acronym GEODE captures much about contemporary Southeast Asia, a rock star in waiting. To be sure, the region, not unlike ASEAN, still has weaknesses aplenty: poverty, cavernous zones of underdevelopment, egregious inequality, the threat of terrorism, political corruption, a democracy deficit (to which the recent coup in Myanmar attests), etc. But the facets touched upon in the economic, social, and political crystallography above suggest that

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this rising region—a region brimming with hope and optimism—merits a greater place both in global political economy and in our geographical imaginations, especially in these parlous times.

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