

# The ASEAN-ISIS Network: Interpretive Communities, Informal Diplomacy and Discourses of Region

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**Abstract** A network of think tanks—the ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies and their researchers—have played a proactive and sometimes influential role in regional debates on Asian economic integration and security cooperation through informal diplomacy. This paper contributes to the literature on knowledge utilisation, specifically debates on the role of policy research institutes in policy-making. Paying attention to the debates and research on economic and security cooperation which preceded attempts at institutionalisation drives analytical attention to scholars, think tanks and others in the ‘interpretive community’ who were engaged in a long term learning activity to shape domestic and regional agendas and institutionalise discourses of regional cooperation.

**Keywords** Think tank · Networks · Diplomacy · ASEAN · Interpretive community

## Introduction

The ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) have played a proactive and sometimes influential role in regional debates on Asian economic integration and security cooperation. These think tanks and their directors sought to promote social learning and help create a sense of regional identity at an elite level amongst nascent regional policy communities. This contribution to regional cooperation was through a ‘repeated cycle of interaction, interpretation and

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internalization' (Johnstone 2005, p. 189) conducted via intensive networking and informal diplomacy. Think tanks have often provided the 'neutral territory' outside the architecture of the state for the conduct of informal diplomacy. Such networking entails unofficial activities involving academics and intellectuals, journalists, business elites and others as well as government officials and political leaders 'acting in their private capacity' (Jones 2008, p. 2).

For several decades a number of Asian think tanks have had research programmes concerning economic affairs of the Asia-Pacific and later, security cooperation. Their role has been at the earlier stages of regional cooperative efforts; that is, agenda setting. Rather than focusing on political and economic interests involved in the tangible features of building institutions of regional cooperation the focus of this paper is on prior efforts of agenda setting undertaken through research, advocacy and networking of think tank staff with political elites. Through longstanding interaction at conferences or workshops, shared experiences have forged strong links between institutes. The body of policy related research conducted by think tanks from the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) states, combined with their policy entrepreneurship, contributed to political understanding about the possible benefits of cooperation. In short, an 'interpretive community' was built (Johnstone 2005). Examination of the debates on ideas of economic and security cooperation which preceded attempts at institutionalisation, drives analytical attention to scholars, think tanks and other opinion leaders.

Accordingly, this paper contributes to the literature on knowledge utilisation, specifically debates on the role of ideas in policy. This literature has been criticised for assumptions that paradigmatic shifts or policy learning occurs as ideas are 'diffused' into the policy atmosphere without sufficient explanation of the *mechanisms and agents* through which diffusion occurs (Campbell 2008). Regarding the knowledge-policy nexus, this paper does three things: First, it pays attention to the organizational and individual actors who generated and advocated ideas on regional economic and security cooperation. Second, the paper draws attention to the mechanisms by which they informed policy—the dialogues sustained over the long term through a regional network of Institutes (ISIS). Third, through the policy process of 'informal diplomacy' that became institutionalised, ideational policy entrepreneurs had access to government, business and other political elites and their decision making forums (Rouhana 1995). In sum, the paper outlines how an interpretive community emerged and operated. Some claims are made about the influence of ASEAN-ISIS albeit with the caveat that impact is variable, quite often intangible and is time and context contingent. Nevertheless, ASEAN-ISIS was an innovation spurring new institutions of regional governance via informal diplomacy.

To be sure, there has been recognition of the role of ASEAN-ISIS in the evolution of Asian regionalism. However, this literature is firmly based within the discipline of International Relations and International Political Economy. The epistemological precepts of both Realism and Liberalism put the 'state' as prime unit of analysis. Realists would dismiss think tanks as irrelevant 'bit players' in regional power plays or, at best, analytic support service to formal decision makers.

Liberals are more likely to regard think tanks as tools for intergovernmental cooperation but likewise see them as secondary actors subject to the diktats and preferences of the state. Sovereignty and national organization is the structuring principle of societal and political action. Both theoretical traditions suffer from ‘methodological nationalism’ and ‘state-centrism’: non-state actors such as think tanks tend to be lost from analytical sight, and transnational processes disregarded.

Instead, it is the Constructivists and neo-Gramscians (Parmar 2002) that have highlighted the power of ideas and the role of research communities in developing normative understandings of regional identity. Even so, the object of analysis of constructivists has not been university research institutes, think tanks or their networks (exceptions being Capie & Taylor 2010; Job 2003). Instead, such studies tend to explain patterns of inter-state cooperation and the genesis of regional institutions. An ontological separation between the scholar and the policy practitioner, between knowledge and power is often maintained. The research and intellectual interpretation that underpins conceptualisation of ‘regional cooperation’ is treated as an expert input from an ‘epistemic community’ (Rüland 2002), or a one-way transmission of ideas into policy debate.

This paper puts think tanks, intellectuals and the interpretive community – hence knowledge in the form of research, conferences and learned debate – at the centre of analysis as both agents and structures in the construction of region. Collectively, the Southeast Asian think tanks created a transnational network to sustain a governance space for regional cooperation. Thus, the network and its component organizations create, synthesize, legitimate, and disseminate useful knowledge played a significant role in the emerging regional governance system. In doing so, this paper is informed partially by constructivist thought but also draws upon ‘discourse institutionalism’ (Schmidt 2008) and post-structuralist ‘interpretive policy studies’ (Fischer 2003).

Doing so complicates the picture of ASEAN-ISIS as a non-state actor and exposes the status of the network and of informal diplomacy as resting on uneasy distinctions between ‘public’ and ‘private’ (Nesadurai and Stone 2000; Evans 2006) as well as a false division between knowledge and power. The research and analysis of the interpretive community is not ‘independent’ or created in a domain separate from policy and politics that is only utilized when contracted or called upon by government actors, but deeply imbricated in policy-making as a part of the mode of governance. Rather than a mere resource for other interests, knowledge actors and knowledge discourses are a form of power essential to the construction of region.

### **Informal Diplomacy**

Informal diplomacy is not state-centric and incorporates a more diverse range of actors than bureaucrats and politicians in international negotiations. Track One (T1) diplomacy are diplomatic efforts of bureaucrats to resolve conflicts through official channels of government (Kaye 2007, p. 5). However, official diplomats in Track One increasingly share the world stage with and make use of the growing cast of non-state actors. What has become known as Track Two (T2) is an arena for

non-governmental public action. T2 is symptomatic of the breakdown of traditional distinctions between foreign policy-making and domestic policies that are mirrored in the academic fields of international relations and public policy respectively. Track Three (T3) diplomacy occurs among civil society groups.

To complicate matters, the notion of Track One-and-a-Half (T1½) is also used to refer to describe something between an autonomous T2 and official diplomacy (see Nan, Druckman and El Hor 2009). The ideas of T1, T1½, T2 and T3 may be thought of as points on spectrum from state exclusive and often secret processes at one end to non-state public processes at the other. Hence the preference in this paper for the term ‘informal diplomacy’ given that T2 can morph into T1½ over time (Capie and Taylor 2010, pp. 365–67) and terminological nuances in different political cultures (Job 2003, p. 250; Rouhana 1995).

T2 diplomacy entails “unofficial dialogues often facilitated by an impartial Third Party and involving individuals with some connections to their respective official communities, focused on co-operative efforts to explore new ways to resolve differences over, or discuss new approaches to, policy-relevant issues” (Jones 2008, p. 4). It is conducted through closed dialogues “either because of government uncertainty on how to proceed with sensitive discussions, or because of a lack of professional expertise” (Kim 2001, p. 1). It can include academics and intellectuals, journalists, business elites and others as well as officials ‘acting in their private capacity’ (Ball, Milner and Taylor 2006, p. 175). This diplomacy usually takes place in an ‘off-the-record’ setting. That bureaucrats and politicians are acting in their private capacity is to be treated as a ‘polite fiction’. Official and non-governmental participation in seminars, conferences and organizations is ‘mixed’ or ‘blended’ suggesting that the demarcation between official and unofficial involvement is unclear (Kraft 2002). Some processes can be secretive such as the Oslo Process in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Chataway 1998; Fisher 2006). In the ASEAN-ISIS case discussed here, T2 was a more public albeit quite exclusive process.

T2 is also different from ‘cultural diplomacy’ with which intellectuals are often associated (Guilhot 2006). Cultural diplomacy usually originates from within civil society; that is, inspired by philanthropists, artists, sports enthusiasts or academics and has recently morphed into the ‘celebrity diplomacy’ associated with aging rock stars (Cooper 2007). Whilst T2 incorporates figures from civil society, it is distinct given the direct ties to, and sometimes long-term involvement of government officials and politicians in network building and patronage of university institutes and think tanks. T2 diplomacy is semi-official, a hybrid form of diplomacy that uses interlocutors between state actors. This occurs in situations where governments wish to express intentions or to suggest methods of resolving a diplomatic situation, but do not wish to express a formal position. In reverse, informal diplomacy also provides windows of opportunity for non-state actors or policy entrepreneurs from the interpretive community to independently influence government by providing analysis or evaluations (Chataway 1998, p. 275; Lee 2009).

Often regarded as independent organizations, think tanks can create neutral territory in the form of private dialogues where all parties to a concern can meet to discuss possibilities for policy. Think tanks play a facilitating role. To an extent, they act as the ‘honest broker’ inviting all interested parties to sit down behind

closed doors to address a particular problem or proposal. They provide ‘a middle ground’ where new forms of cooperation or controversial approaches to regional conflicts can be explored without fear of public exposure. Such an activity is useful to governments if the think tank is a prominent organization of which foreigners have heard, and more importantly, if it can draw upon a network of distinguished states-people, business leaders, diplomats, military officers, experts and scholars (Parmar 2002).

Informal dialogues are also valuable at times when, for whatever reason, official dialogues are stalled or official relations strained (Chataway 1998, p. 273). On the negative side, governments can use the Track Two process and think tanks for the purposes of public symbolism. Non-officials are given the impression that their advice and analysis is useful although this could be illusory. In mainstream international relations, sceptical assessments prevail among policy practitioners who see few if any concrete results from such unofficial endeavours (Jones 2008, p. 2; Kaye 2007, p. 3). Some realists have a tendency to see dialogues and multilateral discussions as little more than ‘talking shops’. That is, the various policy dialogues may offer little more than an amenable social and intellectual exercise for participants. However, other realists would argue that their key concerns about ‘balance of power’ continue to permeate T2 dialogues (Rüland 2002, p. 93; Lee 2009).

The “realist” school tends to favour explanations of international affairs which stress interest based bargaining, the competition for power between states and zero-sum games. Social-psychological and constructivist theories tend to stress interpersonal relations, community building and the development of norms. While neither realism nor constructivism is so definitive as presented here, most Track Two is more comfortable in the latter tradition (Jones 2008, p. 11).

The interpretive community framework adopted here goes one step further than constructivism to argue that policy is dependent on, and framed by, knowledge and ideational forces. In this perspective “...it is a mistake to believe that T2 diplomacy is merely dialogue for dialogue’s sake... (for) it creates a positive atmosphere that is conducive to the formation of regional identity” (Kim 2001, p. 4). With the emphasis on consensus building, the filtering and re-assembly of ideas and the socialization of elites, the focus is more on discourse and interpretation by the Institutes of norms of regional cooperation. That is, the routes and processes through which vague and general concepts are transformed into policy practices and political objectives (Schmidt 2008).

A focus on discourses of informal diplomacy is to focus on the processes by which new ideas are created, moulded, elaborated, disseminated, expounded and adjusted to practical realities. A dilemma in the literature on the role of ideas in policy is the paucity of explanations about how, where, when and why new ideas emerge and why they are picked up. That is, there is insufficient analytical attention directed to the *mechanisms* of ideational impact and the agency of actors in spreading ideas (Campbell 2008). The interpretive community of ASEAN-ISIS think tanks is one such mechanism.

Outlined below, Asian think tanks and the ASEAN-ISIS network they built is the mechanism through which they became involved in informal diplomacy and built trust and understanding among Southeast Asia's policy communities. The network was a vehicle for policy learning. It was not sufficient for 'vague' ideas or policy research on security cooperation to be 'diffused' through traditional processes of academic publication or public speaking for such ideas to find their way into policy discussion by serendipity. There is no automatic process that new policy ideas will seep into the consciousness of political and policy elites. Instead, it is necessary to focus on the discursive constructions and agency of policy entrepreneurs, their research institutes and their networks.

By no means is ASEAN-ISIS the first experiment in international networking among intellectuals to influence policy thinking. In the Cold War context, the cultural diplomacy of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Fondation pour une Entraide Intellectuelle Européenne aided "the intellectual network building that contributed to the emergence of new political and cultural elites in Eastern Europe, providing them with political legitimacy and international contacts to move swiftly and powerfully into the post-Communist era" (Guilhot 2006, p. 408). Similarly, there are many studies of the historical and contemporary role of think tanks in the policy process. Yet, such studies remain focused on OECD contexts and 'expert internationalist organizations' like the Council on Foreign Relations ... (which) has been at the heart of the American foreign policy establishment" (Parmar 2002, p. 241). What is remarkable about the Southeast Asian institutes is their sustained long-term cross-national collective action. And notwithstanding theoretical debates about their impact (or not) and the influence of ideas, the pace of informal dialogues accelerated, diversified and continues to attract governmental sponsorship.

### **Southeast Asian Policy Institutes**

This paper cannot enter into the inconclusive definitional debates concerning 'think tank'. Nevertheless, it is important to note that most of the Southeast Asian think tanks discussed here are different to their Western counterparts. Anglo-American think tanks are usually 'non-governmental' bodies assumed to be intellectually autonomous and growing out of civil society. By contrast, the institutes discussed here have both formal and informal ties to national political elites and the state apparatus (Nesadurai 2011). "State and non-state actors in ASEAN have proceeded in a very complex environment that displays authoritarian and democratic features simultaneously, a high degree of power monopoly on the part of a small circle of elites consolidated by the infrastructure of an interventionist state" (Manea 2009, p. 37). In some instances, the ASEAN institutes may be better described as GONGOs – governmentally organized NGOs, or MANGOs – manipulated NGOs. It is the case that many Western think tanks (like the US Institute of Peace) are largely funded by government, as is also the case of SIPRI in Sweden, and on this basis might be categorised as MANGOs. However, what is important is both the liberal political culture and open societies in which they operate, as well as close adherence to international best practice in social science research. Needless to say, long-term

dynamics towards democratisation in Southeast Asia alongside ‘knowledge for development’ capacity building can alter over time whether or not institutes are classed as MANGOs.

In most Southeast Asian countries, the first generation think tanks were elite, establishment bodies like the Singaporean Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) (Sandhu 1991, p. 3). The regionally oriented Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta were created with government funding and patronage. Sometimes, they were set up directly within government or as a non-departmental public body – a quango. For instance, the Philippine Institute of Development Studies is an economic think tank established by government decree in 1977. In other words, their primary purpose was to provide information and act as a sounding board for government.

When ASEAN-ISIS was rising to prominence in the 1990s, Asian think tanks were considered by many Western observers to have an unhealthy close relationship with government. Some critics claimed that these bodies were ‘state-directed’ (Jayasuriya 1994). Their importance to the state was in their capacity to amplify messages that come from the top down to the rest of society. Consequently, Asian think tanks tended to be “regime enhancing” rather than “regime critical” (Yamamoto and Hubbard 1995, p. 45). This also applied to regional institutional initiatives as think tanks began to engage in policy dialogues across borders. Thus, while depicting their dialogues as T2, in reality the close political connections of think tank directors of that time suggested their activities were rather more T1½.

The launch of ASEAN in 1967 and its slow consolidation over the 1970s and 1980s gradually generated a regional source of demand for policy analysis. The ASEAN secretariat has lacked sufficient strength and staff to conduct policy research and advisory functions. There has been a policy analysis vacuum in the formal structures of regional governance. This lacunae provided a window of opportunity for think tanks in Southeast Asia (as well as researchers in universities and elsewhere) to provide research and analysis on security and economic cooperation via ASEAN-ISIS. This does not mean that T2 displaces T1. However, ASEAN was reliant on the Institutes (and other actors) to provide the convening, the conference organization, the dialogue vehicles and other activities that allowed the ‘habit of dialogue’ to become a reality and on-going practice.

The ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies was launched as a formal association in 1988 (although there were informal meetings in years earlier). It was founded by think tanks in four of the core ASEAN countries:

- Centre for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS Indonesia
- Institute for Strategic and International Studies – ISIS Malaysia
- Singapore Institute for International Affairs – SIIA
- Institute for Security and International Studies – ISIS Thailand
- Plus an individual, Professor Carolina Hernandez, subsequently Institute for Strategic and Development Studies – ISDS in the Philippines from 1991.

The ASEAN-ISIS network is legally designated as an NGO. At the domestic level, however, most institutes are linked to the state via funding relationships or

legal location within the bureaucratic apparatus. For instance, ISIS Malaysia directors often acted as speech writers for their Prime Minister. Such formal and informal links have made informal diplomacy a very effective mode of policy influence. Nevertheless, these institutes are both policy institutes and scholarly bodies, although the balance differs from one nation to the next. ISIS-Thailand was originally founded in 1981 at Chulalongkorn University before acquiring independent status. Likewise, ISDS was founded by scholars from the University of the Philippines. University or NGO status also bestows some legitimacy via the presumed independence and autonomy of these institutes.

The objectives of ASEAN-ISIS are to: (i) strengthen and increase regional cooperation in the development of research; (ii) increase the effectiveness and efficiency of research by intensified communication and coordination; and (iii) contribute to ASEAN cooperation by promoting public knowledge and understanding of problems and issues faced by the ASEAN communities. ASEAN-ISIS has three flagship activities:

1. Asia Pacific Roundtable (APR) for Confidence Building and Conflict Resolution from 1987
2. ASEAN-ISIS Colloquium on Human Rights since 1994
3. ASEAN People's Assembly in 2000

The Asia Pacific Roundtable is its oldest activity and most closely associated with T2 diplomacy (Soesastro, Joewono and Hernandez 2006, p. 2). Indeed, it has been described as the 'grand-daddy' of all T2 in the region (Butcher 2009). Hosted by ISIS Malaysia, APR has "the consistent and unwavering patronage of successive Prime Ministers, Deputy Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers of Malaysia ... (who) have delivered the bulk of the keynote addresses at the APR since its inception".<sup>1</sup> The other two activities emerged much later and these activities engage with civil society to a greater degree. Unlike APR, the People's Assembly as a T3 venture did not gain traction with official ASEAN.

With the widening of ASEAN to the new member countries of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Brunei, new institutes were brought into the fold:

- Institute for International Relations in Hanoi
- Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace
- Brunei Darussalam Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies
- Institute of Foreign Affairs, Laos

The development of the regional network over a decade and growing recognition of it as a space and place for policy dialogue had the effect of prompting institutional development at the national level in those countries where think tank development was not known. There was a 'boomerang effect' of regional dialogue and networking spurring national-level institutional development in order that the new national institution could participate in the regional debates on economic

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.isis.org.my/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=263&Itemid=186](http://www.isis.org.my/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=263&Itemid=186). Accessed 4 February 2011.



integration and security cooperation. That is, a replication process to consolidate the network structure paralleling the formal intergovernmental ASEAN organization.

### **A “Relentless Conversation”: Regional Identity and Community Construction**

Think tank manipulation of political and cultural symbols contributes to the formation of collective identities at the regional level. This idea draws on Wendt’s (1994) constructivist hypothesis that state identity can be endogenous to the process of structured interaction between states. That is, states often share similar interpretations of their environment. States also depend on each other, in part, for the creation of these interpretations; and furthermore, the strategic interaction of states further contributes to shared understandings.

A shared idea of regional identity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the states of the region to establish a framework for political and economic cooperation or harmonisation of policies. Political leaders of Asian countries have often talked of “Asian values” in their regional security community or economic dialogues. That is, “states are engaging in discursive practices designed to express and/or to change ideas about who ‘the self’ of self-interested collective action is” (Wendt 1994, p. 391).

Engaging in cooperative acts can become a self-reinforcing dynamic that allows actors to reassess core beliefs and come to new understandings. By teaching themselves and others to cooperate, they effectively create new identities. Part of the learning and interactive process occurs through the strategic narrative practices designed to persuade others to change conceptions of their interests. The greater the degree of conflict in the international system, the more likely states will fear each other and defend their “egoistic identities” (Wendt 1994). By contrast, where there are positive shared understandings and mutual recognition of sovereignty among states, there is potential for collective identity formation. States are also more likely to identify their interests with others, when they share a common fate and cannot act unilaterally to undo that fate. Aspects of egoistic identities increasingly become redundant provided states do not respond defensively to their vulnerability. The discourses of cooperation can aid collective action by helping create a sense of solidarity. The discourse of ASEAN-ISIS became an elite system of meaning for the policy community that ordered the production of interpretations of the social world in the context of the post Cold War security vacuum in the region. A major concern “was the need to prepare ASEAN to anticipate impending changes in the regional and global order” (Sukma 2006, p. 91).

One area where NGOs, think tanks and experts can be found is in regional ‘interpretive communities’. However, these communities are not neatly defined. Instead, there are overlapping communities; those involved in the economic cooperation movement in East Asia (Nesadurai 2011) also sometimes feature in ASEAN-ISIS debates on security or human rights. In the words of one Japanese think tank director, these communities develop regional networks “thus providing encouraging opportunities of establishing regional institutional linkages and

facilitating individual networks and collaborative relationships, a prerequisite ... of community building in Asia Pacific” (Yamamoto 1995, p. 3). At issue is whether the actors within the ASEAN-ISIS network were acting solely in the interests of their states with their research and advocacy of Asian cooperation, or whether the ASEAN-ISIS affiliates developed their own *raison d’être* as an interpretive community.

An interpretive community rests upon ‘professional interpreters’. In the case here, think tank directors, research fellows, university scholars and others operating in ASEAN-ISIS.

All professional interpreters ...are situated within an institutional context, and interpretative activity makes sense only in terms of the purposes of the enterprise in which the interpreter is participating. Furthermore, a given text is always encountered in a situation or field of practice, and therefore can only be understood in light of the position it occupies in that enterprise. ...Thus, interpretation is constrained... by the “cultural assumptions within which both texts and contexts take shape for situated agents”. Meaning is produced neither by the text nor by the reader but by the interpretative community in which both are situated (Johnstone 2005, p. 189 quoting Stanley Fish).

The texts of ASEAN-ISIS are the web-sites, meetings, publications and policy commentary (briefs, speech writing, etc) produced by the interpreters. The situations and ‘field of practice’ are constituted through T1, T1½ and T2 networks where think tanks articulated new meanings of region.

Asian think tanks in general (not only ASEAN-ISIS) played a catalytic role in region building because they represented an intersection for the movement of opinion formers and decision makers. That is, a cross-road for policy entrepreneurs or what has elsewhere been called ‘norm entrepreneurs’ (Job 2003) or sometimes ‘epistemic communities’ (Acharya 2004; Kim 2001; Rüland 2002)). ASEAN-ISIS ideas and interests transcended the nation-state. This network and others provided forums where new social realities were constructed, debated and interpreted as individuals came into contact and interacted.

The ‘interpretive communities’ analytical frame emerges from a post-structuralist sensibility. That is, ideas have independent influence. Meaning-making has structural consequences in shaping or limiting the frame of reference for policy-making or what is considered politically viable. Power and capacity for change comes from the idea itself, irrespective of who or what articulates that discourse. This sets it in distinction from both the norm entrepreneur concept and epistemic community framework which portray ideas, norms or expert knowledge as a resource *utilised* by an agent. Power or change capabilities are seen to reside in the individual or institutional agent that advocates on behalf of state, communal or corporate interests. Both approaches presuppose an agent who socially constructs identities and interests through instrumental actions. This is not to negate the role of those actors or institutions that articulate the ideas, and the concern of the paper is to address ASEAN-ISIS as one important *mechanism* articulating concepts of region. By doing so, over time and through multiple discourses and venues, the idea becomes an organizing logic or co-ordinative paradigm. Expert discourses, such as the ‘ASEAN Way’, become a structuring force.

Rather than seeking legalistic and formal institutions (such as characterised in the development of European Union), Asian economic and security cooperation is of a more informal, unstructured and consensual character. It “has been called the ‘ASEAN Way’ (and) was presented by some Asian leaders as a culturally-rooted notion, focusing on organizational minimalism, avoidance of legalism, and an emphasis on consultations and consensus decision-making” (Acharya & Johnstone, 2007, p. 34). The non-governmental T2 dialogue activities of think tanks are not simply a manifestation of the style of Asian cooperation. From a discourse institutionalism perspective they are constitutive of regional cooperation. That is, “a *relentless conversation* of ASEAN that may have been the essential ingredient in creating ... meaningful entities...” (Milner 2007, p. 579 my italics).

By no means is this a smooth linear process. Official reception of new ideas is not automatic and “government officials are often skeptical or even disdainful of Track 2, which they often see as full of ‘wannabes’ or ‘hasbeens’ seeking to play intergovernmental roles themselves and dispensing unsolicited advice” (Morrison 2004, p. 550). The identity building dialogues, Roundtables and regional workshops are indeterminate and easily unsettled. The 1997–98 Asian financial crisis saw funds dry up for regional activities when states reverted to their focus on national interests of economic recovery (Ball, Milner and Taylor 2006, p. 176). Egoistic identities re-asserted. Weathering the current global financial crisis better, and propelled over the past decade by non-traditional security threats ASEAN-ISIS adopted new research agendas for regional cooperation and coordination in areas such as piracy and the maritime commons, disease (especially in the context of SARS and Avian flu) and environmental crime.

ASEAN-ISIS influence is at the earlier stages of regional cooperative efforts, in agenda setting. The institutes perform three important tasks. Firstly, think tanks act as *innovators* by providing new policy ideas about economic or security cooperation at the regional level. Secondly, think tanks *broadcast* these ideas and their policy recommendations. They start the ball rolling for a ‘habit of dialogue’ (Sukma 2006, p. 89). Thirdly, through their *networking*, joint research and other collaborative ventures intra-regionally, and for some through their involvement in the political processes of their home states, think tanks can help shape the political choices made by state elites.

To-date, most analysis has concentrated on the more tangible institution building exercises and disputes of business and government actors concerning APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) with the research community tending to be portrayed as playing a subsidiary analytical service role. This is not unusual. As think tanks are considered to be NGOs operating at the margins of politics with only the powers of persuasion at their disposal they have not been accorded significant influence in policy-making (but see Acharya 2004; Nesadurai 2011). Another reason why non-state action is lost from sight is that it operates primarily at a discursive level. This is labelled in the region as the ‘habit of dialogue’. The phrase pertains to the meetings and dialogues, the workshop reports and conference proceedings as well as the countless informal discussions and web-site postings that are all part of the ‘relentless conversation’. This long term ‘conversation’ is process related activity. As such, it is relatively ephemeral and less concrete than

tangible new institutions created by governments such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Generally, multilateral security institutions have been slow to emerge in the Asia-Pacific. The Cold War in Asia was conducted through a set of bilateral relationships with a resulting absence of European style alliances. The end of the Cold War and the rapid decay of the former communist regimes provided a window of opportunity for new thinking in security cooperation. The formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF),<sup>2</sup> the Asia-Pacific region's first attempt at multilateral security cooperation, illustrates this clearly, with scholars explaining its formation as the outcome of both strategic power shifts and leadership provided by middle powers, in this case by ASEAN (Acharya 2004).

The ARF operates on the basis of cooperative security rather than common security (Dewitt 1994). Unlike common security approaches, cooperative security is less fixated on the rapid development of formal multilateral institutions, preferring the establishment of habits of dialogue. The ARF replaced the Cold War security structure (which was based primarily on bipolar power balancing and bilateral alliances) with a multilateral diplomatic approach that emphasizes consultation, inclusiveness and engaging "adversaries". The latter has been termed "soft regionalism" or 'soft dialogue' as opposed to the 'hard dialogue' associated with formal institutions (Acharya 2004).

While these dialogues have been strongly influenced by European ideas, the evolving discourse necessarily has a distinctly Asian flavour and regionally specific institutional 'field of practice'. For instance, the main elements of a cooperative security discourse include emphasizing political dialogue at both the governmental and non-governmental levels, a non-confrontational approach to dispute settlement, establishing comfort levels, frequent consultations and consensual decision-making. In short, ideas about common and cooperative security have been translated or interpreted and then adjusted, modified and adapted in unique ways (Kjaer & Pedersen 2001, p. 221) to the particular regional and historical context of East Asia. That is, 'the ASEAN Way' and a home grown Asian strategic culture.

T2 processes, especially through ASEAN-ISIS, have been crucial to the leadership role played by ASEAN in establishing the ARF. This was significant as ASEAN had generally been averse to multilateral security cooperation in the past. As Schmidt (2008) argues, discursive institutionalism offers insights into *why* political institutions change by zooming in not only on sentient agents' cognitive and normative ideas about what they were doing and why at different levels of generality—policy (in this case, security cooperation), program (the ARF), and philosophy (ASEAN Way)—but also on their discursive interactions regarding who spoke to whom, where, when, and why in the process of generating those ideas in a 'coordinative discourse' of policy construction. ASEAN-ISIS generated a venue for 'communicative' discourse of public deliberation and their conferences, analysis and publications provided one source of legitimization for subsequent policy positions.

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<sup>2</sup> The ARF includes the ASEAN states, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, DPRK, European Union, India, Laos, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, ROK, Russia, Sri Lanka, Timor Leste and the USA.

By taking discourse as the object of analysis, and interpretation and persuasion as the source of policy change, the role of regional experts and think tanks comes into analytical sight. Discourse is a system that, through language or text, or a set of statements or social interactions, structures the way we perceive reality. Discourse constrains perceptions. It shapes how groups respond to particular situations and how some things come to be regarded as normal or legitimate – the ‘taken-for-granted’ features of a social order. Discourse institutionalism (Pedersen & Kjaer 2001) and the interpretive turn in policy studies (Fischer 2003) regard processes of meaning-making – deliberation and argumentation – as prior to, and informing, interest formation and institutionalisation.

This process of opinion formation and consensus building over decades is another reason why the impact of unofficial actors can be under-estimated. Many of the initiatives and policy proposals of the ASEAN-ISIS for security cooperation have touched on areas where ASEAN governments were known to have serious reservations; for example, ideas to convene a multilateral security dialogue go to the core of sovereign insecurities. As one Singaporean insider to ASEAN-ISIS argues: “It is an on-going process... rather than episodic undertaking ... a process that shadows the official inter-governmental, state processes” (Tay 2006, p. 129).

This ‘shadow’ process is aside from public scrutiny where its relevance and influence is caught in the multiplicity of conversations, briefings and professional relationships built through successive meetings. Indeed, T1 to T2 dialogues and research activities throughout Asia have proliferated so extensively that the Japan Centre for International Exchange (another government supported think tank) maintained the *Dialogue and Research Monitor* to map the web of meetings and dialogues. The web-site provided an inventory of trends in research dialogues concerning East Asia and it lists major multilateral governmental and non-governmental meetings and significant studies. In 2007, marking the 40th anniversary of ASEAN, the adoption of the ASEAN Charter, and the 10th anniversary of the Asian financial crisis, there were 278 Track 1 and 284 Track 2 dialogues, as well as 132 related publications.<sup>3</sup>

The interpretive community has many institutional bases, and it evolves over time. Yet in terms of setting the agenda towards economic and security cooperation in the 1990s this community consolidated in regional non-governmental organizations. This is not to suggest an uncontested or consensual pattern of research or debate within interpretive communities. Significant divisions among scholars, institutions and nations exist. Even so, the close personal ties and friendships between the directors and senior fellows of the ASEAN-ISIS institutes, particularly in its earlier days, is notable. The social capital that they built has been recounted by a number of ‘insiders’ in a book on *Twenty Two Years of ASEAN ISIS* (Soesastro, Joewono, and Hernandez 2006) with retrospectives from self-dubbed ‘ASEAN thinkers’ and ‘true believers in ASEAN’. They saw each other regularly at the annual Asia Pacific Roundtable and in between at issue specific meetings and workshops. It was a tight community. Today, they are concerned about generational

<sup>3</sup> DRM: <http://www.jcie.or.jp/drm/>. Accessed 26 February 2010.

renewal to bring younger scholars into ASEAN-ISIS leadership positions (Butcher 2009; Sukma 2006, p. 95).

Notwithstanding on-going scholarly debates and intellectual divisions, the body of policy related research conducted by think tanks from the ASEAN states, combined with their policy entrepreneurship, contributed to wider political understanding about the possible benefits of regional cooperation. The main protagonists – think tanks – organized their policy advocacy through ASEAN-ISIS. Their discursive practices have helped create new regional modes of governance via informal diplomacy as well as opening transnational spaces for policy-making by making discursive and social sense of that space.

As noted above, state centric accounts of Liberals and Realists are likely to see non-state research actors playing a marginal role in the creation of multilateral institutions. For instance, questions that dispute the relevance of ASEAN-ISIS would ask – in a positivist vein – what is the evidence of causal impact of ideas in creating or reforming institutions or policy? This often entails mapping and measuring in a quantitative quest of proof of ideational impact. Such methodologies are lacking (Job 2003, p. 243); “only indirect inferences can be made” (Lee 2009, p. 207). Measurement of impact of regional discourse is likely to remain elusive. This is due to numerous other intervening variables that muddy the causal path between ideas and policy (Rouhana 1995, pp. 264–65).

Even so, the state-centric approach does provide an antidote to over-determining the role of ideas. Both the Australian and Canadian governments were also early advocates of ARF. Other scholars have argued that the ARF was established for real politik concerns of ASEAN to balance the power of China and the US in a multilateral framework. Interpretive accounts do not deny the salience of power-plays and material interests but posit that ideational power cannot be forgotten in shaping interests.

### **The ‘ASEAN Way’ of the Intellectuals**

ASEAN-ISIS is registered with the ASEAN Secretariat as an ASEAN NGO. Its Charter mandates that only research institutes based in ASEAN member countries may join ASEAN-ISIS. However, ASEAN-ISIS also maintains extensive regional and international networks of institutional linkages with leading think tanks outside ASEAN. ASEAN-ISIS is non-governmental but, as noted above, its non-governmental status is questionable. But is it a MANGO? As this quote from Paul Evans, a long standing Canadian participant-observer in ASEAN-ISIS events and expert on Asian security indicates, the distinctions between official and unofficial are very cloudy:

In structural terms, while it has been an avowed leader of non-governmental or unofficial initiatives, the dividing line between non-governmental and governmental is thin to non-existent in several of the participating institutes. Some institutes are based within governmental ministries and led by government officials. For example, the Institute of International Relations in

Hanoi is part of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The same is the case in Laos. The management and staff at ISIS Malaysia are government employees and the government provides the lion's share of the Institute's funding. At the other end of the spectrum, ISDS in the Philippines has a loose connection to the University of the Philippines but is independent from government and the university in funding, personnel and operations. The Singapore Institute of International Affairs is a self-standing and self-financing organization, though does receive government funding. CSIS in Jakarta has evolved from having a close relationship to government to being an autonomous institution in the past decade (Evans 2006, pp. 99–100).

The demarcating line between unofficial T2 and official T1 diplomacy is blurred to become indistinguishable (Ball, Milner and Taylor, 2006: 184). The grey areas in the status of ASEAN-ISIS as part public, part private is very convenient for all parties to informal diplomacy. The distinctions between T1, T2 and increasingly T3 are more than symbolic and have functional value. "This 'disclaimer' erects a mythical separation of private and public diplomacy and allows sensitive issues to be discussed without the burden of official accountability" (Kim 2001, p. 2).

Within the tense security environs of the early 1990s, ASEAN-ISIS was able to emphasize its non-governmental status – neutral territory at the regional level – in promoting sensitive ideas and policy recommendations on security cooperation. At the same time, the (semi-)official status of key members attending T2 activities and dialogues meant that state interests were protected and pursued in a 'safe' setting. In reality, the public and the private were very blurred, deliberately so. Through the symbolic distinctions of T1 and T2, the 'mythical separation' of official and informal diplomacy has practical advantages in creating forums for discussion of threat perceptions and other delicate issues in low risk settings.

Influence has been a gradual process. And it has not been a constant one. The first steps towards substantive engagement with ASEAN came in 1991. The ASEAN-Institutes meeting of that year in Jakarta produced a memorandum – *A Time for Initiative* – that was not only timely in its recommendations but captured the imagination of not only ASEAN Governments but also ASEAN Dialogue partners like Japan, Australia and Canada in establishing an arrangement for the Asia Pacific like the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Inspiration was, however, a CSCE-like "tool kit minus the normative substance" concerning democracy and human rights as it would have directly confronted the ASEAN principle of non-interference in domestic affairs (Rüland 2002, p. 89; Manea 2009).

ASEAN-ISIS ideas were submitted to the Fourth ASEAN Summit in Singapore in 1992 as well as in a series of constructive proposals to ASEAN governments to initiate an official dialogue process at the end of each ASEAN-PMC (Post Ministerial Conference). The official ASEAN response was cautious but not dismissive since ASEAN Foreign Ministers agreed to study the idea further. ASEAN-ISIS was attempting to establish a new regional agenda and "was somewhat ahead of the official position" (Kerr 1994, p. 403). It was not until two years later, after the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, that the ASEAN Regional Forum was formally established.



The ARF's creation in September 1993 was greatly influenced by a climate of opinion generated through T2 activities. Indeed, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers acknowledged the role played by non-governmental bodies in the genesis of ARF and, in particular, commended ASEAN-ISIS for exploring and promoting the ideas that enhanced security cooperation (Kerr 1994, p. 397). The ASEAN Secretariat states on its web-site: "Efforts of the Governments to foster an enduring regional order, stability and prosperity are supplemented by various non governmental institutions on the non-official track. .... ASEAN has found useful several studies and proposals put forward by the various institutions represented in the ASEAN-ISIS".<sup>4</sup>

ASEAN-ISIS built a set of multilateral processes through which new thinking in security cooperation could be informally and openly discussed before these ideas were taken up at the official level. While these new ideas have been strongly influenced by European ideas of 'common security', 'cooperative' and 'comprehensive security', 'confidence building measures' and 'transparency' (Dewitt 1994), the evolving discourse has a distinct regional or Asian character. This enabled these new ideas to be accepted at the official level by ASEAN states.

As ASEAN political leaders usually only meet where there is an official summit, such informal dialogues are all the more important. The ASEAN Regional Forum meets only once every summer for a day. National leaders do not have time to become acquainted with the intricacies of issues, or have the luxury to appreciate the reasons for different perceptions. Consequently, the T2 community becomes an important vehicle for building constructive relationships at a lower bureaucratic level. As ASEAN-ISIS evolved, it also moved in different directions. T2 widened beyond the Southeast Asian nations to embrace a broader concept of region than that composed of the ASEAN states.

### *A Wider T2 Process*

The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) is another T2 initiative. Established 1993, it also complements the governmental (T1) mechanisms for developing security cooperation. It is a more diverse grouping than ASEAN-ISIS on two fronts: first, it is of wider national reach and, second, CSCAP convenors are university, think tank and governmental<sup>5</sup> (and other relevant individuals such as consultants, senior journalists or leading corporate executives) whereas ASEAN-ISIS is constituted by think tanks.

CSCAP was established with the purpose of serving as the ARFs Track Two mechanism. This has involved delivering "the necessary support activities for the ARF agenda, and make recommendations which are relevant for policy implementation" (Kerr 1994, p. 404), improved communication among like-minded states as well as more ambitious objectives of instituting "cooperative security approaches" that transcend ideological divisions and existing alliance structures. It provides a

<sup>4</sup> ASEAN Secretariat: <http://www.aseansec.org/9545.htm>. Accessed 3rd February 2011.

<sup>5</sup> CSCAP Member Committees: <http://www.cscap.org/index.php?page=member-committees-page>. Accessed 1 February 2011.



more structured process for regional confidence building. CSCAP does not aspire to become the region's sole Track Two channel but to help coordinate efforts and avoid redundancy.

The idea for CSCAP was first aired in 1992 at a conference on "Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific" in Seoul. This meeting was jointly arranged by Pacific Forum, the Japan Institute of International Affairs, the Seoul Forum for International Affairs and ASEAN-ISIS. Thus, ASEAN-ISIS played a key role in creating CSCAP. However, participation in CSCAP was extended to all countries and territories of the Asia-Pacific. The establishment of CSCAP has not been without difficulty or some skepticism. There were the usual teething problems as it sought funding and members and as founding partners tinkered with structures and administration. Concerns that CSCAP represented an overly optimistic attempt to promote cooperation that does not sufficiently appreciate the tensions and hostilities that continue to abound in the region have been borne out. These include unresolved sovereignty and territorial conflicts, uncertainty about the extent of US commitment to the region, anxiety over the arms build-up in China and arms proliferation in general. Furthermore, whilst there is an apparent 'habit of dialogue' in Southeast Asia, such a habit is weak in Northeast Asia. More fundamental collective action difficulties arise from the differing perceptions of the enterprise held by a larger number of participants (that also includes Russia, the US and India) than is the case in ASEAN-ISIS.

ASEAN-ISIS also broadened but in terms of its research agenda to include a wider array of human security and development issues. This has included partnering with parallel T2 processes like the ASEAN Economic Forum. ASEAN-ISIS also engaged with civil society bodies through APA to promote 'regionalism from below'. However, the T2 to T3 process has had a short and chequered history leading "some CSOs to accuse ASEAN-ISIS of restricting rather than opening channels for dialogue with ASEAN" (Collins 2008). Participatory regionalism also requires ASEAN governments and officials to create space for these groups in ASEAN deliberations. In reality, "ASEAN has not always been supportive of APA". Moreover, when ASEAN officials attended APA Annual Forums "in their private capacity" to allow for a frank exchange of views this happened rarely "because many officials could not step out of their official roles" (Nesadurai 2011).

The establishment of a 'habit of dialogue' is an important but intangible outcome of the ASEAN-ISIS. It has built a history among participants encouraging loyalty and learning. In other words, the Association has helped build an *esprit de corps* and a sense of ASEAN solidarity among members. Information is shared and views on sensitive matters are aired helping to clear doubts and uncertainties if not to resolve tensions. Its activities promote information exchange and transparency in the region. Admittedly, this sense of identity is a fragile one that has encountered many more set-backs and challenges than can be conveyed in this paper. Yet, there is enough going on for a former Singaporean parliamentarian to speak of ASEAN identity construction:

ASEAN ISIS and the individuals involved in their work have in some ways been fore runners in creating a sense of the region. ... Moreover, they are often

less closely wedded to a national interest perspective, and can try to see the common interest of the region as a whole. Through the media, and in their various conferences and symposia, the ASEAN ISIS think tanks promote the understanding of ASEAN (Tay 2006, p. 126).

The notion of ASEAN identity and community raises the question of the identity of whom? From its inception, the ASEAN project has been very much an elite affair or an 'exclusive club'. Not until after the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s did civil society engagements become recognized and routinized. Indeed, it was not until the Bali Concord in 2003 – some 30+ years after ASEAN's establishment – that an ASEAN Community was proclaimed and recognized that ASEAN was founded on three pillars: the ASEAN Economic Community; the ASEAN Security Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. This third pillar is testimony to a perceived political need to engage the wider ASEAN community beyond its business and political elites (Caballero-Anthony 2006, p. 55). Through its flagship ASEAN People's Assembly, ASEAN-ISIS wanted to help build the third pillar but APA was one contested by alternative regional gatherings of civil society associations (Collins 2008, p. 322). ASEAN-ISIS suspended APA in 2009. Moreover, the idea of an ASEAN Community remains an elite civil society project which is very weakly embedded and barely recognized in national societies of the region.

The success of ASEAN-ISIS in the 1990s prompted imitation as well as replication (such as CSCAP or the Asia-Pacific Water Forum Regional Consultation Meetings). Other venues of T2 have become equally important in regional debates on community building if the DRM inventory is taken as a guide to the multiple institutional bases of the interpretive community. The innovative agenda-setting influence of ASEAN-ISIS region construction may also be time contingent. Today it operates in a different environment from the early 1990s: At a domestic level, national bureaucracies have matured, professionalised and increasingly function with in-house research and analytic capacity. At the regional levels of ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific, ASEAN-ISIS is now only one venue for T2 activity. New T2 dialogues have entered the field of which NEAT – the Network of East Asian Think Tanks – is but one example and the Sentosa Round Table another. Additionally, the Shangri-La dialogue convened by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies touts itself as “the most important regular gathering of defence professionals in the region and has become a vital annual fixture in the diaries of Asia-Pacific defence ministers and their civilian and military chiefs of staff”<sup>6</sup> and is seen by some as having over-taken ASEAN-ISIS (Butcher 2009; Capie and Taylor 2010). Finally, regional institution building is subject not only to the persuasiveness of interpretive communities, but also to the dynamics of material interests and power plays of political and economic interests. As noted by one observer of CSCAP, “official responses to T2 suggestions are usually influenced by the neo-realist mentality of state governments” (Lee 2009 p. 209).

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<sup>6</sup> Shangri La Dialogue: <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/about/>. Accessed 3 February 2010.

## Conclusion

Analysis of the regional think tank networking of ASEAN-ISIS informs our conceptual understanding on the knowledge-policy nexus on three fronts: First, analysis of bodies like the ASEAN-ISIS directs attention to the agency of researchers and research institutes. That is, what they said and wrote, the web-sites established, the workshops and meetings organized, as well as the personal relationships and professional ties built. Second, their analytical work was not allowed to simply diffuse into the public realm, but was actively propelled into policy circles through a very entrepreneurial regional network. Third, and subsequently, the non-governmental networking was institutionalised as a (semi-) private policy process that ‘shadowed’ official deliberations via T2 diplomacy.

The achievements of ASEAN-ISIS were to create and help sustain a regional interpretive community. Indicators of ASEAN-ISIS impact are numerous: (1) it was an early entrant to, and initiated new T2 processes; (2) it built a regional network that continues to prosper; (3) it prompted the launch of new think tanks in Laos and Cambodia in order for those countries to have representation in the network; (4) it attracted official patronage from national governments; (5) it has institutionalised meetings with the ASEAN Senior Official Meeting (SOM), has acknowledgement of the role of ASEAN-ISIS in the Joint Communiqués of the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings, and the solicitation by ASEAN SOM of ASEAN-ISIS views on issues that ASEAN senior officials would like to have studied; and (6) developed collaborative research and dialogues that have attracted scholarly interest. Had it failed, the ASEAN-ISIS would have slowly retreated into the academic domain or disintegrated. Instead, it expanded with new activities that attract funding and patronage. Others with certainty in the power of ideas have copied ASEAN-ISIS via additional T2 networks. All this suggests that ideational work is essential to institutional innovation.

As a consequence, the ontological separation between the scholar-researcher and the policy practitioner – exemplified by the very terms T1 and T2 – is de-stabilised and undermined. Instead, knowledge and power are seen as intertwined and inseparable. ‘Region’ and institutions of regional cooperation first needed to be ‘thought’ – researched, critiqued, debated – before they could be created. In this framework, the research/interpretive community that is drawn from universities and think tanks becomes a central component to governance. This is in contradiction to the Realist and Liberal perspectives that would regard the think tanks and T2 networks as ‘interlocutors’ or ‘ideas brokers’ between the research world and the state; that is, “reinforcement for T1 processes” (Morrison 2004, p. 551).

The research/interpretive community is not based in a separate or independent domain distinct from policy and politics feeding ideas in a one way transmission process to decision makers. Nor are think tanks and networks merely hinged or fused onto political processes to legitimate inter-governmental cooperation. Instead, they are inextricably bound with such processes. This is not just blurred lines between public-private. Rather, knowledge is mutually constituted with governance. Nevertheless, the ‘mythical separation’ of official state directed T1 vis-à-vis private NGO-led T2 is maintained because it is useful for ASEAN governments to sponsor

so-called independent ‘thinking outfits’ to act as non-state interlocutors. It is a source of legitimation in the sense of consulting independent expertise outside the state, and a means to manage either sensitive or highly technical policy concerns between states.

Over a period of two decades, a field of practice was created, and continues to be sustained, by the ASEAN-ISIS and many other T2 initiatives in the interpretive community. This is not to say that regional identity acquisition is learned automatically through processes of T2 communication and social engagement. Identity creation is a much more variable process. It is fragile, prone to set-backs, and at this point in time, is mostly limited to regional policy elites in the business and political worlds rather than wider society. These regional spaces are weakly institutionalised and ‘soft’ in the sense that they are based often on dialogues and informal processes of diplomacy rather than formal multilateral organization. Yet, these informal processes remain a necessary if not a sufficient condition for the development of formal inter-governmental structures such as the ARF. Where institutions are weak or under-developed, discourse is strong. This is reflected in continuing proliferation of T2 and T3 activity witnessed in the region and which is bank-rolled by governments, business and philanthropy alike. While ASEAN-ISIS may now be of less policy significance in the more crowded and competitive realm of informal diplomacy, its experience shows how ‘interpretive communities’ composed of like-minded think tanks, independent experts and university scholars can be central to the articulation, formation and legitimation of new regional governance arrangements.

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