Beyond securitization: explaining the scope of security policy in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Since the late 1980s, the scope of security policy has widened dramatically to encompass a wide range of 'non-traditional' threats. Southeast Asian states have superficially appeared to embrace this trend, broadening their security discourse considerably. However, they are also often criticized for failing to translate this discursive shift into concrete regional cooperation to tackle these new threats. This article critiques the dominant theoretical framework used to explore the widening of states' security agendas – the Copenhagen School's 'securitization' approach – as unable to account for this gap due to its fixation on security discourse rather than practice. Drawing on state theory and insights from critical political economy, the article argues that the

scope of regional security policy is better accounted for by the distinctive nature of state–society relations within Southeast Asia. The argument is advanced using case studies of Southeast Asian states' policies toward Burma, environmental degradation, and border conflicts.

1 Introduction

It is now commonplace to note that the scope of 'security' has broadened and deepened considerably since the Cold War. The range of phenomena considered by states as security issues has expanded from military and strategic matters to include a host of new problems, including transnational diseases, crime, piracy, environmental degradation, and flows of illegal migrants and narcotics, to name but a few. These issues are often described as qualitatively or quantitatively 'new' and linked to 'globalization', which has supposedly made states more susceptible to such challenges and less capable of tackling them in isolation. Correspondingly, in some parts of the world, this discourse has been accompanied by a significant expansion in international cooperation designed to govern these new issues at the regional or even global level. The academic subfield of security studies has grown commensurately to analyze this expansion of discourse and practice. The Copenhagen School's (CS) 'securitization' approach, which explores how issues become discursively identified as new security 'threats', has become particularly influential (Buzan *et al.*, 1998).

  Southeast Asia is often said to be host to a forbidding array of new security challenges. In particular, the region is said to be 'imperiled' by 'transnational' threats such as natural disasters, migration, climate change, environmental degradation, epidemic diseases, terrorism, transnational crime, and drug trafficking (Dupont, 2001; Caballero-Anthony *et al.*, 2006). However, while regional states' official discourse appears to follow the global trend of recognizing and securitizing these challenges, analysts often observe that the practical action required to tackle them – whether regionally, bilaterally, or unilaterally – is rarely forthcoming. The main regional body, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has certainly issued declarations identifying problems like transnational crime and diseases as serious threats to security. However, securitization theorists report that this discourse has only created the

'illusion of progress', arguing that there is little evidence that states are 'going beyond the rhetoric of securitisation to deeper institutionalisation' (Emmers, 2003, p. 430; Caballero-Anthony, 2008a). The ASEAN Regional Forum, which is specifically devoted to enhancing security at the pan-regional level, is also widely seen as ineffective, having failed to progress beyond banal 'confidence-building measures'.

Securitization theorists struggle to explain this significant gap between security discourse and practice. From their theoretical perspective, political leaders deploy discourses of existential 'threat' in order to broaden the scope of 'security', to legitimize raising issues above the usual level of political contestation and enable the use of extraordinary resources and measures to deal with them (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, ch. 2). This perspective makes it difficult to explain instances where issues are discursively identified as a threat, yet little or no resources or measures are deployed against them. CS scholars working on Southeast Asia therefore tend to refer to ASEAN's principle of non-interference in member states' internal affairs to explain the lack of substantive regional cooperation. This norm, supposedly 'the single most important principle underpinning ASEAN regionalism' (Acharya, 2001, p. 57), is said to block meaningful action being taken on all manner of domestic and transnational problems, such as the consequences of military misrule in Burma, humanitarian crises, piracy, transnational crime, infectious diseases, and so on (McDougall, 2001, p. 168; Emmers, 2003, p. 433; Caballero-Anthony, 2008a, p. 522; Rahim, 2008, p. 70). This implies that states do see these issues as threats but cannot act against them due to the increasingly anachronistic norm of state sovereignty.

This argument is not, however, particularly persuasive. 'Non-interference' has been violated on countless occasions to further powerful interests in Southeast Asian societies. Violations include the cross-border sponsorship of guerrilla movements, the invasion of East Timor in 1975 and humanitarian intervention there in 1999, membership conditionality for Cambodia, and attempts to promote political liberalization in Burma (Jones, 2010). ASEAN states have also engaged in very concrete multi- and bilateral cooperation against transnational security threats, including military and diplomatic assistance against cross-border insurgent movements and separatist struggles such as the one in Mindanao in the southern Philippines (Antolik, 1990, pp. 22, 53–60, 77–81). Southeast Asian governments have also weakened their

sovereignty to pursue economic growth, empowering multinational corporations to effectively govern parts of their territories, and establishing regional mechanisms to monitor and regulate national monetary policies (Ong, 2000; Nesadurai, 2009). Southeast Asian states' adherence to sovereignty and non-interference is thus selective, rather than uniform. It demands an explanation in its own right, rather than providing a catch-all explanation for state inaction.

Rather than blaming international norms, this paper advances a deeper explanation of the scope of regional security policy, suggesting that which phenomena count as security issues and how they are governed are strongly influenced by social conflict. Rather than seeing states as unitary actors responding to or securitizing threats, I argue that we should analyze the way in which potential security issues are viewed by different societal forces operating upon and within the state and understand security policy as the outcome of power struggles between these forces. Different societal groups always evaluate potential security issues in relation to their own interests, ideologies, and strategies. Because these vary, there is unlikely to ever be unanimous agreement on the content of security policy. One social group may perceive and discursively identify something as 'threatening', while others may be indifferent or even view the issue positively. Particularly since the content of security policy has profound consequences for the way that state power is exercised, socio-political groups will push for policies that further their own agendas, potentially clashing against one another. This social conflict powerfully shapes both the official policies states adopt and actual state practice – which may diverge considerably, as social groups opposed to official policies may thwart or pervert their implementation. Some state officials may discursively securitize an issue, yet be powerless to take decisive action due to resistance by more powerful forces within or outside the state apparatus. From this perspective, the scope of security policy is best explained by assessing the relationship between specific issues and the power, resources, and strategies of socio-political forces, the conflicts and compromises between them, and the opportunities afforded to them by state forms.

This paper proceeds in three sections. Section 2 develops an analytical framework for understanding security policy. It argues that the distinctive nature of state power in Southeast Asia, whereby states are often captured or dominated by dominant social forces, particularly illiberal

capitalist elites and their allies, profoundly shapes how governments identify and respond to security threats. Section 3 illustrates this argument with an extended case study of regional policies toward Burma (Myanmar). This shows that while some social groups identify the externalities of military rule there as 'threats', more powerful elements see them as lucrative opportunities and resist securitizing them. The actual policy that has emerged is the result of conflicts and compromises between these forces, which play out at both the domestic and transnational levels. Section 4 briefly shows how the framework can be applied to other security issues, touching on the environment and border conflicts.

2 Security policy and social conflict

This section provides a framework to analyze security policy via a critique of the influential CS approach. For many years, security studies was dominated by realist approaches, which remain highly influential today. Realists typically depict security threats and resultant insecurity as material, objective phenomena arising from the unequal power capabilities of states under conditions of international anarchy (Waltz, 1979). However, since the late 1980s, a range of new critical and constructivist approaches have emerged to challenge realism, which can be loosely grouped into the Aberystwyth, Copenhagen, and Paris Schools (Waever, 2004). These new approaches have made a major contribution to security studies by debunking the objective qualities of 'security', underlining its 'essentially contested' nature, and enhancing our understanding of the concept and its political uses (Smith, 1999). Below, I outline their distinctive contributions. I focus, in particular, on the CS's 'securitization' approach, which has arguably become the most widely applied theoretical framework, particularly in Southeast Asia and with respect to 'non-traditional' security issues. I argue that while it opens the way to grasping the way in which security policies are politically produced, it does not go far enough in rejecting realism's state centrism and statism. Statist theory is unable to account for why some issues are securitized over others because it neglects political contestation and the social and economic contexts of policy formation. An alternative approach is advanced, building on a particular branch of state theory, and fleshed out with examples drawn from Southeast Asia.

Broadly speaking, there are two contrasting strands in contemporary security studies that seek to transcend the previously dominant realist approach. The first strand, represented by the Aberystwyth School (also known as critical security studies), critiques realism by decentering the state from our analysis of security and insecurity, insisting that we should be concerned more with the insecurity of people than that of states. The Aberystwyth School maintains realism's belief that there are real, objective threats 'out there', but emphasizes threats to 'human security' that are overlooked or even exacerbated by a narrow focus on 'national security' (Booth, 1991; Wyn Jones, 1999). At the heart of this approach is a normative agenda that advocates changes in policy to make 'security' work for the weak and oppressed.

By contrast, the second strand in contemporary security studies, represented by the Copenhagen and Paris Schools, uses a constructivist, anti-foundationalist methodology. From a constructivist perspective, security threats are not objectively given but are constructed through the production of intersubjective understandings of an issue as 'threatening' to some referent object. The CS has elaborated a detailed account of how this occurs, arguing that securitizing actors – typically understood as state elites – strategically identify issues as 'threats' through discursive 'speech acts' in order to persuade political audiences to legitimize the suspension of normal politics and mobilize extraordinary measures and resources to deal with the issue (Waever, 1995; Buzan *et al.*, 1998). The Paris School's related but distinct, Foucauldian approach focuses on how professional networks of security agencies and experts work to define threats and risks through the nexus of power and knowledge (CASE Collective, 2006; Huysmans, 2006; Bigo, 2008).

Arguably, by far the most influential of the three new 'schools' is the CS's 'securitization' approach. This is certainly true in scholarship on Southeast Asia. While the other schools have made few inroads (cf. Tan, 2007), the concept of 'securitization' is regularly deployed by analysts of 'non-traditional' security issues, even by scholars situated in the realist tradition (e.g. Collins, 2003; Emmers, 2003; Caballero-Anthony *et al.*, 2006; Caballero-Anthony, 2008a). However, deploying securitization theory to this region reveals a number of significant shortcomings in the CS approach. First, as noted above, there is a stark gap between security discourse and practice *vis-à-vis* many non-traditional 'threats'. This is highly problematic for a theory that assumes that security discourse is

crafted precisely in order to mobilize resources for radical emergency actions. A second, related weakness is that securitization theorists do not and cannot explain why some issues are discursively securitized while others are not. The primary value of the CS approach is its emphasis on how securitization advances particular agendas by suspending the normal rules of politics. However, rather than proceeding to investigate the wider power struggles in which securitization is therefore logically implicated, CS theorists focus almost exclusively on the discursive 'speech act' of securitization itself – an approach favored even by their post-structuralist critics (McDonald, 2008). CS theorists have analyzed policymakers' 'securitizing moves' and elaborated some of the 'facilitating conditions' that enable them to persuade their 'audience' (Buzan *et al.*, 1998; Buzan and Waever, 2003). However, this achieves little more than to *describe* the process by which an issue becomes securitized; it does not *explain* why one issue is selected over another or why it is governed (or not) in a particular way. To do so would require connecting security policies to specific domestic interests and considering how social, economic, and political forces constrain or enable particular security policies. However, securitization theorists have so failed to genuinely open up the 'black box' of the state, depriving themselves of vital explanatory resources.[1]

Consider an example provided by Mely Caballero-Anthony, the leading scholar of non-traditional security in Southeast Asia and secretary-general of the Consortium on Non-Traditional Security Studies in Asia. Analyzing the securitization of the issue of poverty in the region, Caballero-Anthony notes that, rather than enhancing 'human security', this has been accomplished in a way that has instead enhanced regime security and solidified the developmental state. Although she notes that this approach was contested by pro-poor groups, she merely observes that 'opposition was not tolerated' and 'government critics were often branded as subversive elements' and suppressed (2008b, p. 195). How states were able to do this, why they did so, and on whose behalf

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1 Some CS scholars have rightly pointed out some shortcomings with the securitization approach (such as its Eurocentric origins and focus), and in their analyses refer to factors other than discourse in shaping state practice (e.g. Caballero-Anthony *et al.*, 2006). However, these factors are introduced in an *ad hoc* fashion rather than as part of a sustained critique or systematic development of the theoretical framework, which continues to be used regularly by these same authors.

they were acting are left unexplored. There is no systematic attempt to open up the state to understand how one conception of security managed to prevail over another. Instead, the state centrism of the CS approach is simply reinforced, since it is implicitly assumed that 'states' are somehow able to uniformly override the wishes of their own populations, such that 'the state remains the critical actor' and 'securitisation has largely been a state-centric project' (Emmers and Caballero-Anthony, 2006, p. 32; Caballero-Anthony, 2008b, p. 195). The wider societal interests that benefit from authoritarian-developmentalist state structures are thus simply ignored.

To transcend the limitations of 'securitization' theory requires us to reject state centrism and investigate the socio-political conflicts that define the scope of security policy. The need to look beyond the state at societal interests is, in fact, already gestured toward in the references CS theorists like Cabellero-Anthony make to 'regime security' (i.e. to the stability of a particular set of forces whose interests dominate the state) and 'government critics'. As the CS itself implies, the meaning of 'security' is intensely contested among societal groups precisely because of its implications for the distribution of power and resources among particular political agendas. Different social groups naturally evaluate issues in relation to, and push for policies that advance, their own interests, ideologies, and strategies. What emerges in practice is the outcome of conflicts between these opposed forces. Consequently, security policies can only be understood as 'the products of historical structures and processes, of struggles for power within states, of conflicts between the societal groupings that inhabit states and the interests that besiege them' (Lipschutz, 1995, p. 8). To explain what is and what is not securitized thus requires that we study domestic social conflicts and power relations. This should involve both an analysis of the balance of power between different social groups, conceived of as classes, class fractions, ethno-religious groups, and so on, and the opportunities afforded to them by state forms.

A useful starting point for the first task is to consider patterns of ownership and control over resources in a society. These patterns imply vast disparities in wealth, status, skills, access to political leaders, and so on, which 'generate significant inequalities among citizens in their capacities and opportunities for participating as political equals in governing the state' (Dahl, 1985, p. 55). The distribution of wealth and power in Southeast Asian societies has been profoundly shaped by colonial

legacies, Cold War strategies, and especially state-led economic development. Persistent state patronage has produced dominant capitalist classes that have never needed to develop liberal ideology or alliances with the lower orders to secure their interests, and are thus statist, illiberal, and often predatory in nature (Bellin, 2000; Rodan, 2006b). Conversely, authoritarian measures have been used to suppress and disorganize workers and peasants, the effect of which has been compounded by globalization's negative impact on the bargaining position of labor (Hadiz, 2004; Deyo, 2006). Economic development has generated professional middle classes in many regional countries, but their dependence on the state for generating employment and providing security from the lower orders means that only a small, radical fraction of this class has been prepared to challenge the status quo (Robison and Goodman, 1996; Rodan, 1996; Jones, 1998). This fraction has tended to exercise influence only during crises when the oligarchic elite fragments (Loh, 2008). The balance of power between social forces thus favors the interests of illiberal, developmentalist elites. This helps explain, for instance, Caballero-Anthony's findings about the securitization of poverty.

Socio-political groups vary not only in their interests, ideology, and socio-economic power, but also in terms of their access to state power. As Jessop (2008) argues, following Poulantzas (1976), states are never neutral apparatuses offering identical opportunities for control to all social groups; rather, they exhibit an inherent 'strategic selectivity', marginalizing some interests while advancing others. Over time, states are organized so as to systematically favor dominant forces' interests, through the interpenetration of state apparatuses with powerful social groups, such that state power 'reflects and essentially underpins the prevailing hierarchies of power embodied in the social order' (Hewison *et al.*, 1993, p. 6). Given the nature of region's social orders sketched above, this means that 'one of the defining features of the political economy of Southeast Asia is the highly instrumental nature of capitalist control of state power' (Rodan *et al.*, 2006a, p. 25). However, Jessop also emphasizes that different parts of state apparatuses may be captured by or interpenetrated with rival social groups, such that social conflict also plays out within states themselves. States and their policies thus have no necessary coherence. This helps to explain the disjuncture between ASEAN states' rhetorical commitments and actual practice. Some state officials – notably those in the technocracies of foreign ministries who

are embedded within global communities of foreign policy *apparatchiks* and perhaps interface with scholars favoring broader security agendas in various 'Track Two' institutions – may genuinely wish to securitize particular issues and produce commensurate discourse. However, they might have little leverage over those parts of the state apparatus tasked with devising or implementing solutions, which may be linked to social forces with little interest in tackling the problem. Even when commitments are made to address an issue, they may consequently involve little more than international posturing, being made in full knowledge that implementation is impossible.

We can concretize this understanding of state power in Southeast Asia and its implications for security policy using a few examples. In most regional states, the balance of social and economic power allows cartels of politico-business elites to capture state power, using a combination of coercion, patronage, and bribery. Offices and ministries are apportioned as the spoils of power and milked to provide pecuniary benefits for their incumbents and their allies. This state capture has both indirect and direct consequences for security policy. Indirectly, it means that the basic scope of security policy is set by the interests of oligarchic elites. This explains why, as one analyst wryly remarks, 'nothing drives government policy in Southeast Asia like the smell of money' (Ott, 1998, p. 73). More directly, it can involve state power being used instrumentally by specific business interests. An obvious example is tycoon-turned politician Thaksin Shinawatra, who was Thailand's foreign minister in the mid-1990s and prime minister from 2001 to 2006. Thaksin's firm, ShinCorp, was directly implicated, alongside officers of Thailand's National Security Council, in a bungled attempt to overthrow the Cambodian government in 1994, designed to advance the business interests of Thaksin and his allies (Jones, 2010, p. 490). Thaksin also used his ministerial positions to acquire lucrative contracts for ShinCorp's subsidiary, Sattel, in Burma, and thus pursued a very friendly foreign policy toward that country, legitimized with reference to 'non-interference' (Pasuk and Baker, 2004, p. 213; McCargo and Ukrist, 2005, pp. 54–55).

Constellations of social and economic power also operate as practical constraints on security policy even when oligarchs do not control governments directly. There are, as mentioned above, various forces contesting corruption, illiberalism, and oligarchic rule in many Southeast Asian

societies. One of these forces – Thailand's Democrat Party, which is largely based in Bangkok's middle classes – came to power after the 1997 Asian financial crisis to replace the discredited incumbent government and embarked on an ambitious program of neoliberal reforms. However, they recognized that 'establishment interests' would continue to exercise powerful constraints on Thailand's foreign and security policies. As the new foreign minister explained, while Democrat supporters wanted

> Thailand to move more quickly and aggressively in pressing for greater democracy and human rights in the region...there are also others, including border business interests and some in the bureaucracy, who stand to lose out from such a course of action. The task of balancing the interests between the more progressive and entrenched establishment interests is a delicate one. Foreign policy cannot get ahead of social factors. Foreign policy...must reflect the existing social structure altogether. If foreign policy is internally contradictory, the benefits gained would fall short of their potential. For example, if our policy of promoting human rights and democracy hurts the interests of our traders along the border, the policy will encounter domestic political resistance and be ultimately unsustainable. (Surin, 1998)

'Social structure' operates as a constraint on official policy because groups within and beyond the state may have the capacity to resist or overturn the implementation of official government policy in defense of their own interests. In the early 1990s, the United Nations (UN) was trying to settle the long-running Cambodian civil war, which Thailand had long been fueling. However, the Khmer Rouge were refusing to disarm, undermining the peace process. The UN thus embargoed trade with Cambodia in petroleum, timber, and gems in order to cut off the Khmer Rouge's supplies of fuel and funds. Thailand's Democrat-led coalition government pledged to cooperate fully with the embargo. However, this policy was resisted by political, military, and business leaders who profited from the international black market trade in arms, gems, and timber mediated through the Khmer Rouge. They continued these activities, with police and military units being regularly observed helping to transport goods to the Khmer Rouge. Naturally, this severely undermined Bangkok's official policy (Rungswasdisab, 2006, pp. 103–111).

The social constitution of state power is thus vital to our understanding of security policy. It helps set limits to what will be defined as a 'threat' and how states will actually respond in practice. The 'social conflict' analysis described above goes beyond securitization theory by unpacking the state and specifying the forces whose struggles actually determine the content and practice of security policy. This approach also goes further than the ubiquitous yet vague references made to 'regime security' in literature on Southeast Asia. Security policy is not simply driven by the desire of small numbers of state elites to remain in power, but by the broader constellation of interests that these elites serve and whose agency, in fact, constitutes particular forms of state and regime, and by struggles both within such coalitions and between these coalitions and their opponents. Although this argument has been advanced in relation to the specific nature of state power in Southeast Asia, the theoretical and analytical approach is universally applicable. For example, it is arguably impossible to comprehend US policy toward Latin America during much of the Cold War without taking into account the interests and influence of corporations like the United Fruit Company. The next section illustrates the argument further through an extended case study of regional policies toward Burma that traces these policies to the constellations of power and interests underpinning ASEAN states.

3 Regional policies on Burma

Burma's military regime, which stands accused of repeated human rights abuses and of generating serious transnational security threats, has become a major international political issue over the last two decades. Liberal critics in the West and Southeast Asia often criticize ASEAN for tolerating rather than dealing forcefully with the threats the Burmese regime creates to regional security. The Association's non-interference principle is often cited to explain this reaction. In reality, ASEAN states have frequently violated non-interference when dealing with Burma. They have, for example, increasingly criticized the repression of opposition forces and have repeatedly sought a role to play in Burma's process of 'national reconciliation' (Jones, 2008). 'Non-interference' is thus a weak explanation for their failure to respond to Burma as a security threat. Analyzing how policy is embedded in broader processes and

power relations at the national level provides a better guide to state behavior. First, it shows that oligarchic business interests, in particular, shape the basic contours of Southeast Asian states' policies toward Burma. Some things that appear as 'transnational security threats' to the region's liberal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties are actually seen as lucrative opportunities by more powerful oligarchic forces. Parts of state apparatuses are even directly involved in exploiting these opportunities. Second, we can examine how social conflict transforms security policy and the state. When liberalizing forces took control of the Thai government in 1997, they adopted a much more hostile policy toward Burma, identifying transnational flows as security threats, and began reconfiguring the state to act against them. However, this was reversed when oligarchic forces recaptured the state. Third, we can explore how regional states deal with the dilemmas created when gaps emerge between the policies generated by oligarchic domination and the demands of important foreign states. Several regional states have created more space for liberal critics to attack Burma, yet the risk of this being used for domestic purposes means that the space is tightly policed.

3.1 'Threats' as oligarchic opportunities

Dominant oligarchic interests have been very influential in setting the basic contours of regional policies on Burma. While liberal political parties and civil society groups see transnational flows from Burma, such as refugees, as a challenge to regional security, the region's business oligarchs see them as a commodity to be exploited and thus refuse to 'securitize' them.

Liberal critics in the West and in Southeast Asia have identified various transnational flows produced by military rule in Burma as threats to international security, including high incidences of communicable diseases like HIV/AIDS, forced and illegal migration, and exports of illegal narcotics. An estimated 700,000 Burmese refugees reside in neighboring countries, as many as 2 million illegal Burmese migrants live in Thailand, and up to 500,000 are in Malaysia (DLA Piper, 2005, p. 56; IOM, 2008). Burma exported an estimated $123 million worth of opium in 2008, and around 700 million methamphetamine tablets as recently as 2004 (Devaney et al., 2005, p. 48; UNODC, 2008, p. 43). Drug addiction and closely correlated HIV-infection rates in neighboring

countries have steadily grown. ASEAN itself has discursively 'securitized' a number of related issues, declaring in 2000 the goal of a 'drug-free ASEAN' by 2015, issuing a declaration on the protection of migrants in 2005, and expanding regional cooperation to include the combating of HIV/AIDS and transnational crime. However, some Southeast Asian NGOs and liberal politicians argue that this response is merely rhetorical and ineffective. For them, these problems constitute security threats requiring robust, interventionist measures by the UN, ASEAN, and/or other powers like China and India (see, e.g., www.altsean.org; www.aseanmp.org).

The disjuncture between critical interpretations of these threats, ASEAN's official security discourse, and what regional states actually do in practice can be explained via the nature of state power in Southeast Asia. Rather than dealing with Burma forcefully as a security threat, ASEAN governments have instead pursued a policy of 'constructive engagement'. Launched in the early 1990s, this policy aimed to transcend the frosty relations of the Cold War era to facilitate trade and investment, encourage pro-market reforms, and minimize China's influence in Burma. Although the policy was initially devised by Thai foreign ministry officials with the explicit goal of promoting reforms in Burma, in practice the contours of constructive engagement were principally set by the requirements of ASEAN's businesses classes. The Burmese and Indochinese markets were seen as lucrative destinations for accumulated investment capital and a crucial source of raw materials to replace supplies exhausted by ASEAN's long economic boom. The displacement of Thailand's military regime in 1988 by an elected government comprising leading business oligarchs paved the way for these interests to be prioritized in foreign and security policy and for Bangkok to try to turn neighboring 'battlefields into marketplaces' (Jones, 2008, pp. 273–275).

Rapprochement with Burma was pioneered by well-connected senior military officers and state-linked business elites looking to expand their corporate interests into Burma. Many of them were or became involved in politics, like General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who became Thailand's prime minister in 1996. Thai politico-business elites were followed by Malaysian investors, including the state oil company, Petronas, which sank $587 million into 25 projects in Burma by 2001, and many Suharto cronies, who invested similar sums. These intimate connections between state and business elites ensured a cautious, non-confrontational

approach toward the military regime. The political and economic reforms promoted by neighboring states as part of 'constructive engagement' were limited to those compatible with this agenda and were commensurate with regional elites' own illiberal styles of domestic governance (Jones, 2008, pp. 273–274, 278).

Recognizing the social basis of constructive engagement enables us to understand why the negative externalities of military rule in Burma are apparently accepted with such equanimity by neighboring states. The vast numbers of Burmese refugees and migrants in Malaysia and Thailand, for example, are widely seen by business leaders not as a security risk but as a source of cheap, exploitable labor. Malaysia's economy depends heavily on foreign labor, with over 2 million legal and up to 1 million illegal workers (perhaps half of them Burmese) supplementing the 11.3-million-strong domestic workforce. NGO leaders allege that Burmese migrant workers were used to construct the federal capital at Putrajaya, and a recent investigation even alleged the direct involvement of senior state officials in the trafficking of Burmese migrants across the Thai border (Jones, 2008, p. 285; US Congress, 2009).

Thai manufacturing, agriculture, and fishing are also dependent on the exploitation of predominantly Burmese migrants. The International Labour Organization estimates that migrant labor produces up to 6.2% of Thailand's GDP, or $11 billion per year (Martin, 2007). As in Malaysia, elements of the Thai state, whatever official government policy may be, are interpenetrated or identical with the forces enriching themselves through such exploitation. Parts of the central security apparatus may harbor genuine 'security' concerns about Burmese migrants, but are able to impose their will only sporadically through periodic clampdowns and expulsions. According to Kraisak Choonhavan (2008), the Democrat party's deputy leader, the National Security Council believes that up to 5 million Burmese migrants live in Thailand and worries they may soon 'explode with discontentment and anger'. Yet, northern businessmen are currently able to quash strikes by 'hir[ing] policemen to do the job of suppression'. The non-governmental Labour Rights Protection Network also alleges the involvement of Thai soldiers in people-trafficking (Ellgee, 2009). Senior military officers and their allies on both sides of the border have long been accused of involvement in the black-market trade in drugs, arms, and other goods, and Thai army units have even reportedly been bribed by both the Burmese government and rebel

groups to intervene in battles across the border (Lintner, 1999; Maung, 2001, pp. 50–52, 58).

The social, economic, and political dominance of illiberal business interests, and their interpenetration with state apparatuses, thus produces an approach toward Burma that tolerates, exploits, or even welcomes, rather than securitizing, the transnational flows produced by military rule.

3.2 Social conflict reshapes security policy and states

Illiberal business interests have not always been able to simply impose their interests upon the state. Occasionally, especially in moments of crisis, liberalizing, middle-class forces may impose their preferences as government policy. However, due to the interpenetration of state apparatuses with powerful interests opposed to their agenda, liberalizers often face significant resistance both inside and outside the state. Consequently, they are often compelled to reorganize state apparatuses to pursue their goals. However, the political economy of the region is so weighted against liberalizing political parties that they are often unable to hold power for long, except in alliance with oligarchic groups.

The opponents of constructive engagement tend to be drawn from the liberal section of the middle class, which derives little benefit from the policy and has long been hostile to the Burmese regime. However, because of their subordinate position, liberals have struggled to impose their reading of the situation onto their respective states. The most forceful attempt to do so occurred under the Democrat government from 1997 to 2001. Following repeated seizures of Thai personnel and installations by Burmese dissidents in late 1999 and early 2000, the government sealed the border and cracked down on Burmese migrant workers, severely damaging northern business interests (Haacke, 2006, p. 8). The government also reorganized the state apparatus, promoting anti-Burmese reformers to key positions in the army. Its new chief, General Surayud, identified Burmese drugs as the principal threat to Thailand's security in January 2000, and by May, the deputy foreign minister had reportedly backed military raids on drugs factories inside Burma, blasting the regime for sheltering narco-traffickers. Surayud endorsed the idea the following month, and armed clashes between the two countries' armies began along the border (Tasker and Crispin, 2000;

Kavi, 2001, p. 125). The Democrats also tried to dilute ASEAN's non-interference principle, pressing for ASEAN to send a troika of foreign ministers to berate Burma. Outraged oligarchs condemned this ruinous deterioration in bilateral relations, trying to topple Chuan's administration in a parliamentary no-confidence motion (Associated Press, 1999).

Despite Surin's warning about the necessity of government policy reflecting the 'social structure' (Surin, 1998), the Democrats over-reached the government's wider social limitations. They were soundly defeated by Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party at the 2001 elections, which restored both the oligarchic domination of Thai politics and business as usual with Burma. Thaksin promoted leading Thai oligarchs to cabinet positions, following the Thai Chamber of Commerce's advice to make General Chavalit defense minister and use him to improve bilateral relations (Snitwongse, 2001, p. 201). Thaksin cracked down on Burmese dissidents inside Thailand, renounced Thailand's policy of sponsoring Burmese rebel groups to create a 'buffer zone' along the border, and drastically reorganized the state apparatus, sidelining anti-Burmese reformers in the army and installing his own cronies (Pasuk and Baker, 2004, pp. 184–187; McCargo and Ukrist, 2005, pp. 131–151). Burma reopened the border to trade and reactivated fishing concessions, while Thai government funds were used to facilitate new investments in Burma, with Chavalit's allies and Thaksin himself rushing to exploit fresh opportunities (Moncrief and Khiel, 2002; McCargo and Ukrist, 2005, pp. 54–55). The Thaksin government also ended the Democrats' attack on Burma's sovereignty, emphasizing 'non-interference' to justify their new policy. Meanwhile, Thaksin harnessed public concern about narcotics not to attack Burma, but to wage a domestic 'war on drugs' in which over 2,700 people were extra-judicially killed, many of them allegedly local 'godfathers' who had resisted incorporation into TRT networks (McCargo and Ukrist, 2005, p. 227). Thaksin only took a critical line toward Burma when a lucrative free trade deal with the United States was threatened in the wake of an anti-opposition crackdown by the junta in 2003 (Jones, 2008, p. 279).

These dramatic reversals in policy, and the reconfigurations of the state that accompanied them, clearly cannot be explained without reference to Thailand's domestic social conflict. Moreover, it is this conflict

that determines the state's relationship to ASEAN's non-interference principle, rather than the norm that determines state behavior.

3.3 The dilemmas of strategic liberalization

Challenges to business-friendly policies toward Burma do not merely emanate from the domestic field, however. Particularly since a resurgence of hard-liners in the Burmese regime since 2003, Western states have also applied a great deal of pressure on ASEAN. This has imperiled the external economic and political relationships from which dominant forces benefit. Several Southeast Asian states have therefore allowed more space for domestic critics of Burma, in order to enhance their standing in Western capitals. However, the risk of this space being exploited to demand *domestic* reforms means that it is often tightly policed. This illustrates that the degree of liberalization in foreign and security policies remains subject to broader structural constraints.

The widening of domestic space is clearest in the Philippines and Indonesia. Since the demise of the Suharto regime and its significant business interests in Burma, dominant groups in these two states have had little interest in defending the Burmese regime. Indeed, Indonesian elites have found, playing up their liberal-democratic image, a useful way of regaining Western aid in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, and of restating Jakarta's supposed right to lead ASEAN (Emmerson, 2006; Rüland, 2009). Indonesian legislators are thus happy to criticize military rule in Burma, and have been at the forefront of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC), which campaigns for intervention in Burma. However, because many legislators are drawn from the old elite and benefit from widespread corruption, they have refused to support a similar caucus on 'good governance'. This shows that liberalizing forces are not automatically unleashed by democratization, but remain subject to broader structural constraints on state power (Jones, 2009, pp. 398–400).

More authoritarian regimes like those in Cambodia, Singapore, and Malaysia have also granted space to critics of Burma from within their own parliaments to help burnish their 'democratic' credentials and distance themselves from the junta. However, the risk that liberalizing opposition parties might use this space to pursue a domestic agenda means that this space remains constrained and policed. Singapore, for

instance, has strongly encouraged the AIPMC, but arrested opposition politicians and protest groups for staging their own independent demonstrations against Burma. Similarly, the Malaysian government has ensured that AIPMC legislators' attacks on Burma do not go so far as to damage state-linked economic interests. They were allowed, for example, to criticize the regime in parliament, but not to pass a resolution calling for sanctions. As an opposition parliamentarian explains, since 'some of the MPs, or the government-linked corporations, like Petronas' retain investments in Burma, 'we can't call for sanctions because this will hurt the investors from Malaysia' (Kok, 2008). Consequently, even when political space is strategically relaxed, dominant forces can take steps to constrain its use, and entrenched political economy relationships still operate as a background constraint.

The 'social conflict' approach to analyzing regional security policies has revealed why Southeast Asian states seem surprisingly indulgent toward Burma. What appears as a 'threat' to some social groups may be a lucrative opportunity for others. What matters is less the nature and magnitude of the material flows across borders, but rather their relationship to the interests, ideologies, and strategies of key social forces, and the power relations between these forces.

4 Implications for other issues: across and upon borders

The approach developed above can potentially help us understand a wide range of 'security' issues. Indeed, it can help shed light on why a region with many so-called non-traditional security threats elicits so little practical cooperation to tackle these threats: the social forces that benefit from or even produce these threats may be too deeply entrenched, or the conflicts among them too severe, to permit such cooperation. This section indicates how the framework could be applied to analyze environmental governance and border conflicts.

Environmental degradation is widespread in Southeast Asia, and occasionally it is securitized. In particular, the annual 'haze' (smog) arising from Indonesian forest fires has become a major political issue. In the worst year, 1997, the haze had a greater impact than the Exxon Valdez disaster, affecting the health of 70 million people and costing an estimated $4.5 billion (Glover and Jessup, 1999). Just as some forces seek

to securitize the externalities of military rule in Burma, so the haze is depicted by many critical analysts, political leaders, and particularly environmentalist NGOs as an objective 'threat' requiring decisive action. However, this agreement remains unratified by the Indonesian parliament, and therefore offers no basis for Malaysia and Singapore, the worst-affected countries, to take action. The 2006 haze was almost as severe as that in 1997, suggesting that this problem is far from resolved.

The barrier to effective cooperation against this 'threat' is not, as IR scholars would again have it, ASEAN's non-interference principle. Rather, as Tay (2009, p. 233) explains, it is 'certain agro-industrial firms, ambitious politicians, and venal officials who mutually benefit from cheaply burning off land to plant cash crops' in Indonesia, and the 'corruption and collusion between some of the large plantation firms that use fire and the officials who are supposed to control and suppress such illegal acts' (see also Dauvergne, 1998; Ross, 2001; Smith *et al.*, 2003). The Indonesian military – and perhaps the police – relies on illegal activities, including logging, to raise at least half of its operational costs, and powerful agri-business magnates are able to dominate state institutions and corrupt judicial outcomes at the local and even national levels (International Crisis Group, 2001; Matthew and Van Gelder, 2002). It is thus unsurprising that the ASEAN haze agreement remains unratified and little decisive action has been taken by the Indonesian national government against polluters.

Why are the Singaporean and Malaysian governments reluctant to take unilateral action against haze producers inside Indonesia? Partly, they are doubtless afraid of evoking a predictably hostile response from the Indonesian state. However, they may also wish to avoid other repercussions that are not so clearly apparent. Indonesian ministers have often called for Malaysia and Singapore, as the main export destinations for illegal timber, to help stem unlawful logging in Indonesia. Tay dismisses this as merely diversionary. However, this overlooks the fact that key agri-businesses involved in slash-and-burn operations, like Asia-Pacific Resources International Holdings Ltd (APRIL), are actually headquartered in Singapore and operate processing facilities in Malaysian Borneo (Matthew and Van Gelder, 2002, pp. 14–15). Illegally imported Indonesian logs reportedly constitute the vast majority of timber processed in Malaysian factories (Asia Times Online, 2003), and the Malaysian forestry industry is notoriously entangled with local political

elites who dispense concessions in exchange for campaign finance contributions (Leigh, 1998). APRIL is just one of the many Indonesian businesses, led by one of the ethnic Chinese magnates who dominate the regional economy, that benefited hugely from state patronage under Suharto before relocating to Singapore to escape financial reckoning during the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Studwell, 2007, esp. pp. 163–167). It reminds us that a full explanation of transboundary 'security' issues is rarely complete without taking into account the complex and evolving transnational organization of economic, social, and political power.

The 'social conflict' approach may also help in analyzing more 'traditional' security issues, such as border disputes. Take, for example, the Thai–Cambodian border conflict, which has been raging since July 2008 and has involved vitriolic diplomatic exchanges, repeated incursions of Thai forces into Cambodia, and even armed clashes, killing nine soldiers. Ostensibly, the dispute concerns a few square miles of scrubland adjacent to the Preah Vihear temple, which was granted to Cambodia by an International Court of Justice ruling in 1962. In fact, the conflict has virtually nothing to do with territory or border 'security' at all; its roots lie firmly in Thailand's domestic social conflicts.

The dispute emerged as part of an effort to topple the Thai government in 2008. The government was led by the People's Power Party (PPP), which won a plurality of votes in the first democratic elections following the military coup that overthrew the Thaksin government in 2006. The TRT had been forcibly disbanded but had simply reconstituted itself as the PPP and quickly seized power thanks to continued support from the rural poor. Consequently, the same forces that had opposed Thaksin in 2006 now lined up against the PPP. This alliance spanned the middle classes, big businessmen disgruntled at Thaksin's monopolization of lucrative opportunities, and the palace network, including politico-business and military and bureaucratic elites who resented Thaksin's growing encroachment on their turf (Connors and Hewison, 2008).

These forces, led in parliament by the Democrats, began agitating against the government in a way that directly precipitated conflict with Cambodia. Using courts stuffed with anti-Thaksin judges during the military interregnum, they launched a series of highly politicized lawsuits against the PPP. In a so-called judicial coup, the courts first ruled that the PPP must disband due to electoral irregularities. The PPP simply

reconstituted itself as Puea Thai and carried on. The courts then targeted individual ministers for prosecution, forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Samak Sundraravej over the hosting of a television cookery show. The border dispute began when Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama supported Cambodia's bid for UNESCO recognition for Preah Vihear as a world heritage site. Democrat legislators (falsely) claimed that the government had thereby unconstitutionally alienated Thai territory, initiating another lawsuit. The constitutional court ruled in favor of the Democrat suit. Noppadon was forced to resign, and the government had to send politically unreliable troops to the border. Clashes were then inevitable.

The border conflict was thus triggered by the entirely opportunistic use of a long-dormant interstate dispute for purely domestic purposes. It has persisted because despite the Democrats having lured away a Puea Thai faction in December 2008, enabling them to finally dislodge their enemies and form a coalition government, the social conflict underpinning the country's political upheaval is far from resolved. The farmers, workers, and oligarchs loyal to Thaksin are refusing to simply submit to the middle classes and elites clustered around the palace. On the contrary, this intense social struggle has produced open violence on the streets on several occasions, notably the massacre of 90 red-shirted protestors in April 2010. In opposition, Puea Thai has mimicked the Democrats' opportunistic use of Preah Vihear to advance their position in this conflict, attacking the Democrats in March 2009 for 'losing' 250 m of territory by ignoring the construction of a new Cambodian road to the temple. Thus, troops remain stationed along the border, producing continued tensions and territorial violations. Reflecting what is really at stake at Preah Vihear, Cambodia's prime minister retaliated by appointing Thaksin as his economic adviser in November 2009. The border dispute is thus unlikely to end any sooner than the profound social conflicts in which it is firmly rooted in Thailand.

5 Conclusions

This paper has argued that the securitization approach, despite its ubiquitous application, struggles to explain some key issues in security studies, notably why gaps exist between supposedly all-important security discourse and the actual practice of security policy, and why some

security issues get securitized and governed in particular ways while others do not. To answer these questions requires us to go beyond securitization and to go further in disaggregating the state than CS theorists have hitherto ventured. I have argued that understanding the way in which states deal with international security issues is impossible without exploring their relationship to the strategies and interests of important societal groups. Different social forces' interests, ideologies, and strategies lead them to relate differently to potential security issues, and thus potentially to push for divergent responses. In addition, powerful forces are often able to either directly capture or indirectly impose their wishes on the state, or organize themselves in ways that frustrate policy implementation or bend it to their interests. Thus, what emerges in practice is a function of struggle between socio-political coalitions, both outside and within states. It may very often depart from the official security discourse that CS theorists privilege so heavily. While the CS approach may remain partially useful in describing the way in which political actors rhetorically frame issues as matters of security, to assess why they do so and what real effect this will have on policy requires going well beyond securitization, to disaggregate the state and identify the social conflict and political economy relationships affecting the exercise of state power.

This 'social conflict' perspective helps us to understand why many security issues appear so intractable and why states seem so reluctant to take action or incapable of doing so. Many security problems are intractable precisely because they are rooted in obdurate social conflicts, or because they relate to particularly entrenched interests. To ignore such relationships inevitably produces naïve, technocratic policy prescriptions that have no realistic chance of being adopted, in the short term at least, given the social constraints faced by governments. Governments and officials often appear reluctant to tackle issues identified as security problems precisely because they are either fearful of exacerbating domestic conflicts, incapable of successfully taking on entrenched interests, or are directly or indirectly implicated in these problems themselves.

This in turn helps to explain why it is often so difficult to get states to sign up to instruments of global governance or to meet their obligations under such instruments. Take, for example, environmental governance, which is an increasingly important issue on the global security agenda and the focus of growing numbers of multilateral treaties and

institutions. Issues like climate change, air pollution, forest depletion, and species extinction are increasingly acknowledged in Southeast Asia's regional security discourse. However, the actual formulation and implementation of policies is filtered through dominant domestic interests. Regional states have long been in league with rapacious corporate interests, embracing porous borders and pursuing deregulation in neighboring territories to help shift environmental exploitation into spaces where political mobilization around green issues is less effective (Pangsapa and Smith, 2008). States are also reluctant to join and implement global accords around these issues because natural resources are often exploited by networks directly connected to politico-security elites who benefit from off-budget revenues and other collusive relationships (Talbott and Brown, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 2003). To the extent that environmental governance does occur, it is likely to take an 'authoritarian' form that will reinforce dominant interests (Beeson, 2010).

However, this is not simply a counsel of despair, because security policy is not simply an unfettered expression of the interests of dominant forces. Rather, states and their policies are contingent outcomes of struggles for power and control. As Thailand's relations with Burma and Cambodia show, social conflict can generate dramatic shifts in policy as competing groups reorganize the state to promote their ideologies and interests. The future of security policy in Southeast Asia will thus depend on the ongoing social, economic, and political transformation of the region. Liberalizing middle-class opposition movements are increasingly influential in states like Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia, making it difficult for dominant groups to simply impose their whims upon the state. They are also beginning to organize themselves regionally through bodies like the AIPMC and the ASEAN People's Forum. New institutions and regional commitments to democracy and 'good governance' partly testify to their influence.

However, as we have seen, discursive commitments and new institutions by no means guarantee progressive outcomes. The anti-majoritarian attitudes of many reformist groups severely limit their popular appeal and thus the social force they can mobilize. The region's middle classes have often displayed contempt for the 'backwards', corruptible masses and favored anti-democratic insurrectionist strategies to achieve their goals (Thomson, 2007). Combined with a relative lack of resources, this has often led them into deeply compromising alliances

with oligarchic forces (Reid, 2006; Kitirianglarp and Hewison, 2009). Beyond these strategic weaknesses, there remain deep barriers to building mass support for progressive change that emanate from 'political economy relationships that undermine cohesive, independent, collective political action'. Real political transformation thus arguably 'requires a transformation in the political economy' (Rodan and Jayasuriya, 2009, p. 43). For all these reasons, reformers – including those seeking to change regional security policy and practices – are necessarily playing a long game.

Acknowledgements

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