



# FRIAS RESEARCH FOCUS OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2014/2015

## DYNAMIC ALIGNMENTS AND DEALIGNMENTS IN GLOBAL SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## Description of the research subject

The FRIAS Research Focus seeks to examine dynamic alignments and dealignments of collective entities related to global interaction in Southeast Asia. By alignments we mean forms of cooperation, alliances, coalition-building and caucuses, by dealignments fragmentation and disintegration as responses to intensifying global challenges. At the same time, dealignment entails options for reorientation and realignment. Collective entities denote social and functional groups at different levels of formation – regional, national and local. How alignments and dealignments of such groups play out in a strategically vital, economically vibrant and highly diverse world region like Southeast Asia and which cultural processes are involved is an issue of great significance. It provides answers on how globalization is managed in arrangements of cooperation and correspondence as well as dissociation and identity politics both within the region and in global entanglements.

Southeast Asia is particularly apt to study such processes, because the region has always been at the crossroads of strong external cultural, religious and political influences. Over the centuries, the region has sequentially been exposed in different ways and varying intensities to Hindu-Brahmanic, Buddhist, Islamic, Chinese and European/Western ideas. These globalized encounters strongly shape Southeast Asians' identities. They transform their senses of collective belonging to certain (ethnic, national, regional, religious, transnational, professional etc.) communities and thus contribute to continuous reconfigurations and reorganizations of cultures of cooperation. Identification and inclusion, on the one hand, and conflict, contention, rupture, exclusion, defection and dissociation, on the other, shape political, economic and cultural processes and social group formations at all levels of organization.

Internationally, as a region largely consisting of small and medium-sized powers, Southeast Asia struggles with an asymmetrical power distribution in global forums. With the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), formed in 1967 and often celebrated as a model of South-South cooperation, the region seeks to develop bargaining power and cohesiveness in order to safeguard common interests in the global arena. Security, economic prosperity and environmental sustainability are issue areas where this is most evident. However, the changing global power distribution, embodied in the rise of China, India and other newly emerging powers, and increasing rivalries between China and the U.S. in Asia, have subjected regional cooperation to severe tests. Defection of individual mem-



ber countries from regional unity is thus a recurrent phenomenon. This gives rise to the question when, under what circumstances and related to which issues ASEAN members prefer bowling alone, forming coalitions or defecting from collective action.

Also at the national level positioning towards externally driven issues such as how open an economy, how democratic a polity, how religious a society, how sustainable the environment and how local or global knowledge production should be, shapes alignments of societal forces. These issues generate, but also break up coalitions of political forces, including parties, interest organizations, social movements, professional associations, factions and dynasties. They may create or rescind social and ethnic contracts. Mobility and global flows of ideas and imaginations also interact with a society's system of knowledge production including the pertinent academic cultures, validating or devaluing skills and expertise (thereby empowering or marginalizing social groups) and shaping transnational forms of academic cooperation.

Locally, globalization configures central-local relations and tangibly affects local traditions of cooperation. A case in point is labor migration. The transnational political and social spaces and the redistributive effects migratory movements entail have far-reaching repercussions on group alignments in the sending communities as well as the place of destination. Land grabbing by TNCs or their local subsidiaries may be another obvious case spurring new alignments or causing dealignments at the local level, empowering some and dispossessing others, with potentially wide-ranging consequences for social group configuration.

These are only a few examples highlighting how global influences interact with cultures of cooperation and social group alignments in SEA. Yet, the region is also a significant case because Southeast Asians often pride themselves of having developed alternative forms of cooperation. They claim to have nurtured a culture of cooperation devoid of the legalistic baggage known from the West: an informal, non-binding, personalistic, flexible and pragmatic way of interaction which allows for instant responses to the region's challenges. Yet, it is also a mode of cooperation facilitating defection, non-compliance, patronage and corruption. This concept of cooperation has come under siege since the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997/1998. It raises the question whether Southeast Asian countries are – internationally and domestically – en route towards a new, more legalized, contractual way of cooperation.

The FRIAS Research Focus will thus examine the actors, patterns and processes which drive social and institutional alignments and dealignments in Southeast Asi-

a, how cultures of cooperation are negotiated and through which encounters and narratives changing alignments between nations as well as diverse ethnic, economic, religious, political and professional groups are framed. These inter- and transcultural processes are relational as they do not only capture encounters within Southeast Asia but also beyond its regional boundaries and with the global world.

The objective of the FRIAS Research Focus is to strengthen international and interdisciplinary cooperation on the basis of theoretical and methodological pluralism by bringing together scholars whose work tallies well with the umbrella theme of the FRIAS Research Focus. Proposals related to the research foci of the conveners summarized below are welcome but not conditional.

### **1) Democratizing Regional Cooperation in Southeast Asia (J. Rüländ, Pol Sc.)**

With the "ASEAN Way," SEA countries have cultivated an exclusivist, state-centered and elitist cooperation culture. The underlying repository of cooperation norms became contested with the devastating effects of the Asian Financial Crisis. The objective of this study is threefold: It seeks (a) to trace the ideational origins of the currently discussed concepts of a "people-oriented ASEAN," (b) explore how they localize the European "gold standard" of regional integration as well as competing concepts of an "alternative regionalism" emanating from Latin America and Africa and (c) assess as to what extent processes of localization affect regional cohesion. At the center of interest will be large Indonesian NGOs and their conceptualization of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia.

### **2) Negotiating Academic Cultures: International Cooperation in the Social Sciences (J. Schlehe, Anthropology)**

Exploring academic cultures and investigating international academic collaboration in the Social Sciences will enhance the reflection of how our activities as scholars working in SEA are being enabled or constrained by the broader context of the mutual cultures of cooperation, imaginations of the Other, flows of ideas and ideologies as well as structural inequalities. Epistemological and methodological questions will be related to dialogical practices and juxtaposed with approaches to self-determination. Based on anthropological field research and previous studies, the main focus will be on how returnees, after having studied abroad ("academic migrants" to the West, the Arab world or foreign Asian countries), reintegrate in their home universities and collaborate internationally.

### 3) Cooperation and Conflict at the Subnational level (G. Schulze, Economy)

Many SEA countries have undergone fundamental institutional change in the last decades. While some have democratized and decentralized or have become more populist, others have reversed democratization. At the same time practices of non-transparent and undemocratic coalition-building have persisted such as corruption, preferential treatment of politically connected firms, and political favoritism. These developments have not only altered the set of relevant players at the national and subnational level, but also brought about new forms of cooperation and conflict. We seek to analyze the effect of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin's seizure of power on the value of political connections in Thailand and the failure of cooperation in Thai flood management in 2011. Another issue of interest is the role of political favoritism in the distribution of earmarked funds from the center to the regions in Indonesia after decentralization in 2001.

### 4) Environmental Cooperation between Singapore and China (S. Dabringhaus, Asian History)

The city state of Singapore and the global power of China represent two very disparate partners. Nevertheless, Singapore assists China to construct its first eco-city. Singapore's extensive knowledge and experience in integrated urban planning and water resource management is certainly one reason for this cooperation, which started in 2007. This raises the following questions: What are the difficulties in such an unequal partnership? How important is cultural proximity between the two countries? How does the transregional cooperation influence the regional cohesion within Southeast Asia? Has their model of an eco-city any global links and affiliations?