Southeast Asia: Towards the Zone of Benign Images[1]

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I. Introduction

This research paper discusses the persisting phenomenon of deeply entrenched mutual suspicion and threatening images among Southeast Asian elites in the context of the process of establishment of the ASEAN Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural Community. It argues that the ASEAN Community will become a long-term success only if it is underpinned by *benign images* among Southeast Asian states.

The initial discussion about the important role of ideas, identities and interests as mutable constructs created by human mind will set a background for further analysis. Here, we will also look at the way Southeast Asian nations have proceeded to regional cooperation and then highlight their attempt at reducing mutual distrust among regional countries as one of the ASEAN's main objectives.

In the second part of the paper, we will examine the present Indonesian foreign policy elite's threat perceptions held towards other regional states. As the author's recent field research in Indonesia revealed, the elite's images of other Southeast Asian states as posing a threat to Indonesia are quite widespread. Finally, we will examine Indonesia's policies aimed at building their country's benign character and, more broadly, creating benign images among Southeast Asian states.

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[1] This research paper draws on the data collected during the author's fieldwork in Indonesia in the period of October 2004 to March 2005 and at IDSS in Singapore in April 2005. For more on this topic and Indonesian foreign policy elite's threat perceptions in general, refer to Novotny, Daniel *Indonesian Foreign Policy: A Quest for the Balance of Threats*, PhD thesis, Sydney, UNSW, due to be completed and submitted in September 2006

II. From Threat Perceptions Towards Benign Images

Before we proceed to Southeast Asia, we will briefly first visit Europe. The Old Continent was for centuries a scene of frequent and bloody conflicts between its numerous kingdoms and states. The relations among the Europe's political entities were significantly shaped by lingering, deep-entrenched mutual distrust and animosity. Then, in the early 1950s, a number of European leaders set out to implement their vision of an Old Continent that would be a zone of lasting peace. Five decades later, in the early 21st century, most ordinary Germans and Frenchmen cannot understand why their ancestors fought only in the period of 1870 to 1945 three bloody wars that claimed millions of lives. At the same time, their respective leaders do no longer view the other country as an enemy that secretly plots to attack its neighbour's territory.

This systematic change from ‚war' through ‚cold peace' to ‚warm peace', which has gradually occurred in Europe during the 50 years after the end of the WWII, constitutes one of the most contested empirical and conceptual puzzles in the field of International Relations.[2] This is also illustrated by the growing literature that employs the constructivist analytical approach, in particular the one that focuses on the phenomena of threat perceptions and security communities.[3]

Traditionally, the adherents to realism have viewed the international relations as driven by basic laws of human nature and behaviour, for "there exists a fundamental identity between the human mind and the laws which govern the world."[4] Traditional realist approach rested on the assumption that human beings tend to be selfish, egocentric and act only from self-interests. Referring to the realist central theme of gaining and maintaining power, Machiavelli wrote: "…if you have to make a choice, to be feared is much safer than to be loved."[5]

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[2] George, Alexander 'From Conflict to Peace: Stages along the Road' in *United States Institute of Peace Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 6, December 1992

[3] Walt, Stephen *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1987; Adler, Emanuel and Barnett, Michael *Security Communities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998

[4] Morgenthau, Hans J. *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1967, p. 11

[5] Machiavelli, Niccolò *The Prince*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1992 in Microsoft Encarta Reference Library 2003, Microsoft Corporation, 1993-2002; Skinner, Quentin 'Machiavelli' in

In recent years, a number of studies within the constructivist school has essentially challenged the notion that the human nature constitutes an eternal and never changing constant in international relations. Illustrative of this is Holsti's provocative question: "If human nature explains war and conflict, what accounts for peace and cooperation?"[6]

Much like the European states before 1945, also the relations among Southeast Asian nations were shaped by mutual distrust and rivalry that resulted in several bloody wars in the 1950s-1960s. And, as the Europeans, also the Southeast Asians have managed to escape the 'anarchy' of the international system that has traditionally been underscored by omnipresent competition and conflict between different political entities. The process of economic, political and socio-cultural integration both in Europe and Southeast Asia has enabled to prevent conflict in the previously unstable regions. The examples of the European Union and ASEAN are illustrative of the fact that, under certain conditions, human nature can change from that of egocentric and cutthroat to peace-loving and cooperative.

How can we explain that the states that previously viewed the other's material power and intentions as threatening, now they consider one another as benign polities? As Walt's balance of threat suggests, states are not concerned about any excessive power but against threatening power.[7] In other words, it is the statesmen' subjective assumptions about the external environment, in particular their assessment about what state and non-state actors constitute a threat to their nation, what shapes their country's foreign policy. Here, Wendt supports Walt's argument and points out that „threats [are] socially constructed."[8]

At this point, it is important to highlight the main assumption of the constructivist approach, which is also employed in this research paper. The premise of constructivism

Skinner, Quentin, et. al., *Great Political Thinkers*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992;
Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Harmondsworth, England, Penguin Books, 1972;
[6] Holsti, Ole R. 'Theories of International Relations and Foreign Policy: Realism and Its Challengers' in Kegley, Charles W. Jr. (ed.) *Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1995, p.38
[7] Walt, Stephen M. Origins of Alliances, London, Cornell University Press, 1990
[8] Wendt, Alexander 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: the Social Construction of Power Politics' in *International Organization*, Cambridge, MIT Press, Vol.46, No.2, Spring 1992, p.396; Wendt, Alexander *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999

is that interests and identities are not static and a priori given, but are rather mutable constructs created by human mind. Although currently having a particular character, they could also have been or could be next created differently.[9] In other words, this world does not operate along some set of rules predetermined by non-human forces, but a world constructed in human minds.

Constructivist approach thus focuses on the conception of identities and interests and the creation of ideas and norms among individuals, notably on the elite level. For anthropologists and historians, social constructions of the past are of great importance because they "reflect the ways in which people are defined, apprehended and acted upon by others and, on the other, they define themselves."[10] Knowledge shared within a social structure is conveyed into the domain of political struggle, notably a state's foreign policy. The leaders' historical knowledge, images and perceptions „have the power to evoke the past, apprehending the present, and establishing the basis of 'imagined communities'."[11]

We have seen that the ideas, identities and interests are not static but rather mutable constructs created by human mind. Consequently, it can be argued that the leaders' perceptions of other states, and the outside world in general, could be reshaped under particular circumstances; under some conditions, elites of the erstwhile rival states can construct benign images of one another's character. In Kupchan's words, „it is the reciprocal construction of benign images that enables both parties to view the other's material power as non-threatening, if not indeed as a source of mutual security."[12]

Drawing on Walt's argument, the quantity of a state's power is less important than its quality. Thus, the question we have to ask here is how is a state's power perceived by another state actor, and namely its elite? The elite's perception of a particular power can

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[9] Smith, Steve 'Reflectivist and Constructivist Approaches to International Theory' in Baylis, John and Smith, Steve *The Globalization of World Politics: an Introduction to International Relations*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 2001

[10] Bond, George C. and Gilliam, Angela (eds.) *Social Construction of The Past: Representation as Power*, London, Routledge, 1994, p.5

[11] Ibid., Bond and Gilliam (eds.), 1994, p.16-17

[12] Kupchan, Charles A. 'Introduction: Explaining Peaceful Power Transition' in Kupchan, Charles A., Adler, Emanuel, Coicaud, Jean-Marc and Khong, Yuen Foong *Power in Transition: The Peaceful Change of International Order*, Tokyo, New York, The United Nations University, 2001, p. 8

range anything from benign to neutral to threatening. A country, whose policies are viewed by others as benign, is likely to be dealt with differently than a state, whose actions are seen as aggressive and threatening others' interests. It is not the power per se but the perceptions of a particular power, e.g. its nature, which generates a response in the form of changed dynamics of a state's foreign policy.[13]

III. Regional Cooperation in Southeast Asia

It could be argued that benign character is created by way of a state's benign, restrained and overall non-threatening behaviour. The validity of this principle has been relatively successfully tested in Southeast Asia. In the last four decades, Southeast Asia has gradually emerged as a place where the states have escaped the 'security dilemma', which is characterized by inherent competition among nations and suspicion of other states' intentions. The earlier mutual suspicion and animosity among the regional nations have been largely supplanted by their mutual attribution of benign character. We will now briefly focus on the crucial role of the ASEAN-driven process of regional integration as a means by which its members have been able to form benign images of each other.

It could be reasonably assumed that the political elite of every country seeks to diffuse what it perceives as a threat to its national security. The means to eliminate those threats are various. Some elites choose the 'security from' approach, which basically leads the country into an alliance to protect it from a menacing state or states. Some other elites prefer the 'security with' approach, whose rationale is "by cooperating together we hope we can diffuse the threats"[14]. Jakarta has from about the mid 1960 incorporated the 'security with' approach into its foreign policy calculations.

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[13] In the early 21st century, China and India, the two rising Asian giants, have both been widely identified as potential future superpowers. Both these billion-head states are economically fast-developing, militarily potent, regionally and increasingly internationally assertive and independently-minded powers. Yet, from Washington's perspective, while China is perceived as a threatening and menacing arch-rival, India's image is that of a benign rising power characterized by an unthreatening posture. The U.S. foreign policy has approached to these two 'future superpowers' accordingly. For more on this issue, see for instance: Giridharadas, Anand 'India Welcomed as New Sort of Superpower' in *International Herald Tribune*, July 21, 2005

[14] Interview with a prominent Indonesian leader, academic and International Relations expert affiliated with the CSIS, Jakarta, February 2, 2005.

In the first two decades after the WWII, the inter-state relations in Southeast Asia were substantially shaped by the leaders' personal idiosyncrasies, nationalism, decolonisation and Cold War bi-polar rivalry. All these factors contributed to a great level of mutual distrust among regional countries whose leading politicians were above all overwhelmed by domestic political considerations. These also included the question of the regime's legitimacy, which, as in the case of Indonesia, led President Sukarno to launch his *konfrontasi* with Malaysia. Consequently, it is not surprising that, given this tensed atmosphere, regional cooperation was not high on the agenda of Southeast Asian elites during those tumultuous years.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which was established in Bangkok on 8 August 1967, has over the years evolved as a 'security with' vehicle for multilateral security cooperation. By the mid-1970s, with only five countries as members of the ASEAN, Southeast Asian region was submerged in a number of inter-state bloody conflicts. Today, an open war between any of the now ten ASEAN members is virtually unthinkable. The almost four decades of collective experience in regional cooperation and the increasingly close ties among the ASEAN states have brought about substantial changes in the political culture and the social fabric of Southeast Asia.

What were the factors that have prompted this change in how elites in different regional countries perceive of one another? Here, we need to look at the so-called "ASEAN way", or, in other words, a set of principles agreed to by the members of the grouping that guide them in their behaviour and in how they conduct inter-state relations. In 1976, an ASEAN meeting in Bali produced the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) as a mechanism for dispute resolution. Moreover, this landmark meeting also introduced the ASEAN Concord that legally binds its signatories to "'mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty ... territorial integrity of all nations'; 'non-interference in the internal affairs of one another', 'settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means', and 'renunciation of the threat or use of force.'"[15]

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[15] Khong, Yuen Foong 'ASEAN and the Southeast Asian Security Complex' in Lake, David A. and Morgan, Patrick M., eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 333; ASEAN Secretariat official web-site at http://www.aseansec.org

This 'code of conduct', which obliged the ten member states to self-restrained behaviour, helped reduce 'anarchy' in the inter-state system of Southeast Asia and hence eliminate elite's threat perceptions within the region. The notion of self-restraint in ASEAN states' relations as a means to enhance its members' security was also a powerful reason for Brunei to join the grouping in 1984.[16] It was in the context of these collectively binding principles that the ASEAN countries have gradually developed a sense of 'community' or the notion of "we-ness".[17] To this end, "the four decades of collective experience in regional reconciliation"[18] has enhanced the sense of emotive affinity and shared identity, which has ultimately contributed to the creation of benign images around the region.

The ten states wedged in between India, China and Australia have done a substantial progress over the last 30 years toward creating a more peaceful and prosperous Southeast Asia. In October 2003, the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II put forward a plan to establish the so-called ASEAN Community which will comprise of three pillars: the Economic, Security and Socio-Cultural Communities. The ASEAN leaders proclaimed that the concept of ASEAN Community is designed to

> reaffirm ASEAN as a concert of Southeast Asian nations, bonded together in partnership, in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies. ...through this effort we would reach a closer and mutually beneficial integration among our member countries and among our peoples.[19]

The ASEAN leaders hope that the project of ASEAN Security Community will "bring ASEAN's political and security cooperation to a higher plane, and [will] assure that ASEAN members live in peace with one another..."[20] As we have suggested, how successful is the project of the ASEAN Community will largely depend on the level of trust among the ten nations. The following inquiry, which is essentially a case study of Indonesian elite's perceptions of other ASEAN states, is designed to examine the degree to which the process of creation of benign images among Southeast Asian states has been successful.

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[16] Leifer, Michael *ASEAN and the Security of Southeast Asia*, London, Routledge, 1989, p. 47
[17] Ibid, Khong, Yuen Foong, 1997
[18] Seng, Tan See and Emmers, Ralf 'Some Proposals for the East Asian Summit' in *The Strait Times*, Singapore, November 19, 2005
[19] Press statement by the Chairperson of the 9th ASEAN Summit, http://www.aseansec.org
[20] Ibid, http://www.aseansec.org

IV. Indonesian Elite's Threat Perceptions of ASEAN States

The preceding paragraphs have shown that ASEAN has enabled the projection and mutual attribution of benign images among its members. It needs to be acknowledged that the process of regional integration has been instrumental in the prevention of armed conflicts since ASEAN's founding in 1967. However, the author's recent fieldwork in Indonesia suggests that Southeast Asia might still have a long way to go before it becomes a 'zone of benign images' on a par with the contemporary European Union. The research project has revealed persisting negative attitudes held towards Indonesia's neighbours among the country's present leadership. This should be of a concern in the light of the widely accepted assumption that perceptions have a real effect on policymakers' decision-making. Not states make and implement foreign policies, but governments through their leaders and elites do – as the first Indonesian president Sukarno liked to point out, "international relations are human relations."[21]

The respondents who participated in the author's research project included two former Indonesian presidents, three cabinet ministers, senior diplomats, high-ranking military officers, prominent journalists, academics, businessmen and other members of the country's foreign policy elite. The mostly open-ended questions have been designed to find what is „on top" of the Indonesian leaders' mind. The structured questionnaires aimed to establish the Indonesian foreign policy elite's threat perceptions of other countries and outside world in general.

The series of interviews with 45 members of the Indonesian foreign policy elite has shown that a relatively large number of the country's prominent leaders view some of Indonesia's neighbours as posing a great danger to the island nation's security. It is perhaps not surprising that the United States, Australia and China are at present considered as the three greatest state-based external security threats to Indonesia. What might be of a concern for the architects of ASEAN integration process, however, is that Singapore and Malaysia rank no. 4 and 5 security threats in the Indonesian elite's threat assessment, well before other countries, such as Japan, India or the European powers.

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[21] FRUS 1961-63 XXIII: 149, Embtel 2426 (Jakarta), February 23, 1961; quoted in Aandstad, Stig Aga *United States Policy Towards Indonesia 1961-1965*, Doctoral Dissertation in History, University of Oslo, Spring 1999

We will now set out to examine the roots of the Indonesian elite's threat perceptions towards its neighbours. In terms of the factors that shape the leaders' images of other Southeast Asian states, we can identify four categories of attitudes:

- essentially conspiracy theories,
- sense of vulnerability to military invasion,
- religion-driven suspicions, and
- the „economic threat".

First, conspiracy theories seem to have traditionally played an important part in the formation of the Indonesian foreign policy. As a prominent Indonesian diplomat points out, "in some quarters, I have to say, is inherent xenophobia or sense of over-suspicion about intentions of others."[22] Another Indonesian leader agrees that "Indonesians are very good at conspiracy theories." In his view, the reason for the Indonesians' tendency to be easily influenced by conspiracy theories can be found in their historical knowledge: "We have a very strong tendency to apply our experience under the Dutch. … So we always suspect foreign governments because of that experience. That has become an [eternal] element in our mentality."[23]

As has been pointed out, the main concern among Indonesian leaders seems to be directed at Malaysia and Singapore. Several Indonesian leaders have suggested that Singapore and Malaysia are two foreign powers seeking to exploit Indonesia's internal problems. These two Indonesian neighbours do not want Indonesia to be a strong country. One leader alleged that Singapore and Malaysia seek to weaken the archipelagic nation, especially by plotting to divide the Riau Province so that they can have an advantage of it. According to him, threat No. 1 to Indonesia is Singapore and No. 2 is Malaysia.[24]

This case clearly illustrates the pervasive sense of Indonesia's weakness among the nation's elite. As we will see, the leaders are generally convinced that Indonesia is in the weaker position vis-à-vis other regional states. This is why, as a young Indonesian

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[22] Interview with a prominent Indonesian diplomat and ASEAN expert, DEPLU, Jakarta, January 25, 2005

[23] Interview with a prominent Indonesian academic and economist, previously affiliated with the CSIS think tank, Jakarta, February 3, 2005

[24] Interview with a senior Indonesian diplomat and former Ambassador, Hotel Hilton, Jakarta, February 8, 2005

diplomat argues, because of Indonesia's weakness, "Singapore can exploit Indonesia".[25] Another young diplomat suggests that the concept of the Singapore's government is to subdue Indonesia and thus make Indonesia its backyard or hinterland. But "it can not be spoken openly".[26]

It could be argued that while the belief in a conspiracy theory among sections of the population is unlikely to significantly affect the government policy, on the elite level, it is bound to influence and potentially inflict serious damage to the state's foreign relations. Consequently, it might be of a concern when a university educated senior official of the PDI-P party and close aide to the former Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri asserts that Malaysia and Singapore have their missiles directed at Jakarta, Medan and other cities in Indonesia and, as such, they pose a dire threat to the archipelagic nation's sovereignty.[27]

As to the other countries' attempt to break Indonesia's territorial integrity, one leader argued that Malaysia exploits Indonesia's internal problems, such as corruption and illegal logging in Kalimantan. To this end, he explains:

> So, I think this is very dangerous. And you know exactly that the boarder line between Indonesia and Malaysia almost every year they move it to the south. … According a Japanese expert who has been undertaking a research on the relationship between Dayaks in Kalimantan and Sarawak, they see that since 20 years ago the borderland is going to the south. The military people, because they have illegal business related to the timber, they move the borderland from the Malaysian side to the Indonesian side.[28]

Secondly, we have already highlighted the pervasive sense of weakness and vulnerability among the Indonesian leaders. Under the Sukarno and Suharto's leadership, Indonesia was the strongest military power in Southeast Asia and, as some leaders argue, now even Singapore and the Philippines are stronger.[29] This perception has generated anxiety coupled with frustration among many in the Indonesian elite, in particular, about Singapore's "capacity to intervene in the Indonesian territory." Referring to the suspicion of Singapore's long-term intentions, one leader explains that

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[25] Interview with a young career diplomat, DEPLU, Jakarta, February 2, 2005
[26] Interview with a young career diplomat, DEPLU, Jakarta, February 25, 2005
[27] Interview with a senior official of PDI-P, Jakarta, February, 22 2005
[28] Interview with an Indonesian scholar and IR expert affiliated with LIPI, Jakarta, February 24, 2005
[29] Interview with a senior official of PDI-P, Jakarta, February 22, 2005

the Indonesian elite see to some extent Singapore as a problem. Because we still have a problem with the air space where all of the Indonesian aircraft flying to the northern part of Indonesia we have to pay to Singapore because the air is basically controlled by the Changi Airport. So there is a perception that Indonesia is really very easy to be intervened by foreign powers. …because of the inability of Indonesia to control the airspace. … Once you enter the Indonesian territory north of the Equator line, then it is controlled by Singapore. So there is a perception about Singapore.[30]

The sense of insecurity and uncertainty about Singapore's real intentions is further reinforced by the island nation's close ties with Australia, Japan and, in particular, the United States. Indonesia is seen by some as encircled by these four countries – described as "four points" or "four anchors". The Indonesian policymakers and diplomats' suspicion towards Singapore and the other three states stems from the fact that they do not know how to interpret the close cooperation between these "four anchors". Whenever there is an initiative by Washington, they argue, Singapore, Canberra and Tokyo always support it.[31]

Thirdly, a thorough evaluation of the data collected in Indonesia has demonstrated that the respondents' religious background substantially determines their perceptions of other countries. This is nowhere more obvious than in the case of the predominantly Muslim Malaysia, which has been earmarked as a security threat to Indonesia solely by the leaders who come from non-Muslim background. On the contrary, a number of Muslim leaders have named Singapore as a threat to Indonesia. A case in point is the expressed deep suspicion of Singapore by a senior leader of *Muhammadiah*, Indonesia's second largest Muslim organization, because of Singapore close military ties with Israel. There is especially a sense of irritation due to the fact that Singapore trains its soldiers in Israel. Moreover, the Muslim leader also expressed his negative attitude to Thailand and the Philippines because they are "close friends" with the United States."[32]

This case suggests that, in the future, the religion as a crucial variable might act as a 'double-edge weapon' in creating benign images among Southeast Asian states.

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[30] Interview with a prominent Indonesian academic and IR expert affiliated with the CSIS, February 21, 2005
[31] Interview with a senior Indonesian diplomat and scholar affiliated with The Habibie Centre, Jakarta, January 12, 2005
[32] Interview with a leader of the Muhammadiah, the second largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, February 23, 2005

Common culture, based on language, ethnicity and, particularly, religion, arguably facilitates the creation of the 'we-ness' feeling, which in turn enhances an emotive affinity, shared identity and thus benign images. Consequently, we can assume that while in some cases religion will enhance mutual trust, in other cases, it is likely to maintain or even strengthen the mutual distrust among elites in different countries.

Finally, the most prominent source of threatening images that the Indonesia's leaders attribute to its neighbours is what they call an "economic threat". We can thus see that there has been a shift in the nature of the threat from a more conventional[33] to non-conventional threat. Again, it is mainly Singapore and Malaysia, which are seen as jeopardizing Indonesia's economic interests. To this end, several leaders have suggested that Singapore already is and might well in the future become economically an even greater threat to Indonesia.[34]

Some are worried, for example, that following the implementation of the U.S.-Singapore FTA (Free Trade Agreement), Indonesian products going through Singapore to the U.S. market will require special anti-terrorism certificate. Indonesia's economic position vis-à-vis Singapore's will be further weakened, as Indonesian products will be disadvantaged vis-à-vis Singaporean products.[35] There is also a growing concern that, as regional investors from Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand increasingly acquire strategic Indonesian assets, notably banks, the country will become more vulnerable and subject to pressures from its neighbours.[36]

The awareness of Indonesia's myriad domestic problems reinforces the elite's sense of insecurity and their view that its neighbours seek to exploit Indonesia. This is clearly illustrated in one leader's claim that "in my opinion, Singapore is still a threat to Indonesian economy. Because Singapore right now is still keeping the money stolen

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[33] There have been tense periods in the Indonesia-Singaporean relations. In 1968, for example, following an execution of two Indonesian marines-turned-saboteurs in Singapore, there was an intense sense of urgency in Indonesia to punish Singapore for this act that was perceived as a serious insult to Indonesia's pride.
[34] Interview with an Indonesian leader and academic affiliated with The Indonesian Institute, Jakarta, January 17, 2005
[35] Interview with a senior official, a FTA negotiator, from the Department of Trade, Jakarta, January 27, 2005
[36] Interview with a prominent Indonesian banker, Vice-President of a major international banking institution, Jakarta, February 2, 2005

from our country by the Chinese *konglomerat hitam*."[37] Hence, there appears to be a clear correlation between Indonesia's economic, political and social difficulties on the one hand, and the tendency to view the outside world with suspicion and distrust. To this end, one leader explains that,

> of course, there is a perception, it is about political interaction, economic sensitivities, of Singapore, Australia but the main security concern is still very much internal problems. … Now we are facing economic and social crisis in Indonesia. But the main point is [that] the social capital within the Indonesian society and the economic crisis is very easy to exploit to become social unrest or political instability. That's the main problem. And I think it's very reasonable.[38]

Although the Indonesia's official policy, namely its last Defence White Paper, refrains from mentioning any country as a source of threat, it is obvious that, unofficially, Indonesian leaders' decisions are shaped by their perceptions of other regional states. And, as we have seen, the Indonesian leaders' perceptions of some of the other regional states are rather inauspicious and far from what we can characterize as benign images. More optimistically, the author's research project in Indonesia found that many Indonesian leaders are conscious of the crucial importance to eliminate these suspicions and distrust and persistently build trust and benign images among Southeast Asian nations.

V. Indonesian Elite: Building Benignity in Southeast Asia

After the fall of Sukarno, the new Suharto's regime was „conscious of a regional mistrust" of Indonesia, which was a regional predominant power."[39] The Indonesian leadership was well aware that, for any regional cooperation to become a long-term success, Indonesia would have to implement a foreign policy of strategic self-restraint. In line with this realization, one of the first steps taken by the new Suharto's government was, for example, to end the President Sukarno's policy of *konfrontasi* with Malaysia.

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[37] 'Konglomerat hitam' is an Indonesian term for companies that practice illegal business activities. Interview with an Indonesian academic and IR expert associated with LIPI, Jakarta, February 24, 2005

[38] Interview with an Indonesian academic and IR expert affiliated with the CSIS, Jakarta, February 21, 2005

[39] Ibid., Leifer, Michael, 1989, p. 20

The 2005 research project in Indonesia has shown that the country's contemporary foreign policy is still substantially influenced by the perceived necessity for elimination of others' anxiety about Indonesia's sheer size, population and power. A number of present Indonesian leaders consider it vital that a conscious and persistent effort be made to create benign character for Indonesia and foster benign images among the ten Southeast Asian nations. In this section, we will examine the main means and strategies that the Indonesian elite employs to achieve these above outlined objectives.

Initially, the author found it vital to establish what are, from the Indonesian elite's perspective, the most effective approaches to peace and security in Southeast Asia. Each of the 45 respondents was asked to select three most effective strategies to achieve and maintain peace and security in the region. The results of this research are presented in the table below. As we can see, the Indonesian leaders have displayed an overwhelming preference for liberal approaches in foreign relations, notably the one that builds on increasing mutual trust on people-to-people level. Moreover, the stated preference for the increasing economic interdependence and the narrowing of the gap between rich and poor nations in Southeast Asia signifies the elite's understanding that "increasing economic interdependence between Indonesia and other countries decreases [mutual] threat perceptions."[40]

THE MOST EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO PEACE AND SECURITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA		
	Approaches	%
Liberal	Better communication and understanding among policymakers and ordinary people from different nations	91.1
	Increasing economic interdependence	91.1
	Narrowing the gap between rich and poor nations	75.6

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[40] Among other members of the Indonesian foreign policy elite, this issue was discussed in an interview with an Indonesian leader and respected scholar affiliated with the LIPI, Jakarta, December 10, 2004, and with a former Indonesian president, Jakarta, January 10, 2005

Realist	Constant political effort to maintain a balance of power within Southeast Asia and between the world's biggest powers involved in the region	37.8
	Closer military cooperation of ASEAN states	31.1
	Military superiority of the United States in the region	31.1
	Collective security through alliances	8.9

In line with these foreign policy preferences, we can identify four main strategies aimed at building benign character for Indonesia and benign images among the regional states:

- elite-to-elite personal contacts,

- strategic self-restraint,

- economic interdependence, and

- security interdependence.

As to the elite-to-elite personal contacts, a number of Indonesian leaders have expressed their firm conviction that, as the number of meetings among officials from the ten ASEAN member countries increased in the last few years, this has actually enhanced their feeling of cultural affinity with the other Southeast Asian nations. Referring to the ASEAN meetings as the means of "trust building", a senior Indonesian diplomat and one of those frequently participating in various ASEAN sessions points out that "I know [now] everybody at the Foreign Ministry of Cambodia."[41]

Apart from the fact that "communication will always be effective if you have personal contacts,"[42] the regular meetings among officials from the ten member countries have helped instil in the leaders' minds the "we feeling notion."[43] Some Indonesian leaders say that through the ASEAN structures they have been able to establish very informal and personal ties with officials in other member states, with whom they now exchange regular emails and phone calls.[44] These personal contacts can be considered as one means to build benign images among Southeast Asian nations.

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[41] Interview with a senior Indonesian diplomat, DEPLU, Jakarta, January 12, 2005
[42] Interview with an Indonesian scholar and IR expert affiliated with the CSIS, Jakarta, February 21, 2005
[43] Interview with a senior Indonesian diplomat who is intimately involved in the ASEAN process of integration, DEPLU, Jakarta, February 28, 2005
[44] Interview with a senior official from the Department of Trade, Jakarta, January 27, 2005

Secondly, the present Indonesian elite is well conscious of the fact that their country's sheer size constitutes both an asset and a liability. Moreover, as one leader argues, "because of its location, Indonesia has to be friend with everybody."[45] Especially the senior Indonesian diplomats have emphasized that Indonesia has to be very sensitive when dealing with its smaller neighbours; Indonesia has to exercise self-restraint. The leaders believe that the other regional states are looking to Indonesia with suspicion. Therefore, Indonesia, as the Southeast Asia's biggest country, has to strive to create a level-playing field for all regional states and create image that, despite its great power, it is equal with other smaller states and it is not threatening their interests. As one leader put it, Indonesia cannot impose its will on others but rather has to "earn its leadership." Indonesia's foreign policy has to be mindful of the regional environment, including others' sensitivities.[46] Hence, there is awareness in Jakarta that only such as a circumspect approach can facilitate the creation of benign character for Indonesia.

Finally, increasing economic and security interdependence is considered as another very efficient tool to build benign images among the regional states and, ultimately, to achieve and maintain peace and security in Southeast Asia. The idea here is that joint management of common security challenges that affect simultaneously several regional countries will function as a strong 'Confidence Building Measure' (CBM). Common management of problems is not a goal, but rather a vehicle that will provide an opportunity for ASEAN states to cooperate and make them realize that it is more efficient if they deal with various non-traditional security challenges together. Moreover, as one Indonesian diplomat put it, "the feeling that we need each other will make us feel more secure and endorse peace and stability."[47]

Underlining this kind of CBM is the rationale that non-traditional security threats can be used as a vehicle to dissipate conventional state-based security concerns. The prominence of various non-traditional threats has increased in recent years. While the Cold War years were marked by the nuclear arms race between two rivals, the United States and the Soviet Union, in the period of the War on Terrorism, state leaders are increasingly concerned about threats of non-conventional, trans-boarder nature, such as

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[45] Interview with a prominent Indonesian academic, economist and former ambassador, Jakarta, February 23, 2005
[46] Interview with a senior Indonesian diplomat, DEPLU, Jakarta, February 28, 2005
[47] Interview with an Indonesian diplomat, DEPLU, Jakarta, February 2, 2005

money laundering, people smuggling, environmental problems, and most notably, terrorism. This leads an Indonesian senior diplomat who is closely involved in ASEAN negotiations to argue that

> … now more than ever before the Indonesian foreign policy establishment would view that you cannot define threat perception or a source of threat in a neat manner pointing to a country A as the threat or a country B as the threat … it is a messy picture, it is that the threat can come within the country itself.[48]

In the context of these multi-natured and non-conventional threat perceptions, ASEAN plays an indispensable role as a means to bring Southeast Asian states together and jointly manage common security challenges plaguing the region. And this is where the idea of ASEAN Security Community comes in with its agenda that includes, in particular, conflict resolution, conflict prevention and post-conflict peace building.[49] Indonesian leaders believe in the necessity to cultivate understanding among Southeast Asian states that any measure or policy implemented by one regional state will have implications for all its neighbours. This notion that "you are our concern and we are your concern" essentially constitutes a distinct kind of interdependence that in turn helps build benign images among the ten regional states.[50]

Several Indonesian leaders, in particular those with an expertise in ASEAN integration processes, argue that the non-traditional security issues are very important because they facilitate cooperation and thus enhance mutual trust among Southeast Asian states. It is easier for states to cooperate in dealing with terrorism or drug trafficking rather than to try to resolve an issue of arms race or a territorial dispute. As one of the architects of the idea of ASEAN Security Community explains, "that's why we prefer to talk about illegal fishing, piracy, because it's easy to bring everyone on board. And we believe that through this habit of cooperation, then the degree of confidence will emerge among [Southeast Asian] countries."[51]

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[48] Interview with a senior Indonesian diplomat, DEPLU, Jakarta, January 25,2005
[49] Interview with a senior Indonesian diplomat, DEPLU, Jakarta, January 25 and February 28, 2005
[50] Interview with a prominent Indonesian academic and IR expert affiliated with the CSIS, Jakarta, February 21, 2005
[51] Interview with an Indonesian leader and prominent academic affiliated with the CSIS, Jakarta, February 8, 2005

A common theme during the series of interviews with Indonesian leaders was the idea that "we need to prevent suspicions."[52] The efficient way to achieve this objective is to develop security cooperation that would push through the notion that there is no security issue that one state can handle by itself. And it is exactly this security interdependence that helps build benign images. A good example is the late-2004 tsunami and earthquake in Aceh. Several leaders believe that this tragic natural disaster has had a positive effect on the region because it has "changed the matrix of relationships."[53] Moreover, the aftermath of the Aceh disaster has also, it is argued, changed Indonesians in the sense that it make them view the outside world as a compassionate place. Aceh certainly offered an opportunity for other regional states to enhance their benign characters. To this end, an prominent Indonesian journalist and a chief editor recollected that, in the wake of the Aceh disaster, he called his friend, a high-ranking official in the Singaporean government, and suggested to him that "Singapore, with the highest income per capita, the most modern country, ... is in the position to share that with their neighbours. And that's your best defence!"[54]

VI. Conclusion

This research paper has sought to illustrate that elite's interests and identities are not static, but are rather mutable constructs created in the leaders' minds. This means that, under certain conditions, a policymakers' image of another state can change from an enemy and threat to that of a friend and a partner. The process of economic, political and socio-cultural integration in Southeast Asia has facilitated this process of change in perceptions and hence enabled to prevent conflict in the previously unstable region. It is thus apparent that benign character is created by way of a state's benign, restrained and overall non-threatening behaviour.

Despite the fact that the ASEAN states have successfully prevented mutual disputes from escalating into an armed conflict, the author's research project has showed that the

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[52] Interview with an Indonesian academic and IR expert affiliated with the CSIS, Jakarta, February 21, 2005

[53] Interview with an Indonesian leader, diplomat and a prominent journalist, Jakarta, February 4, 2005

[54] Interview with an Indonesian leader, diplomat and a prominent journalist, Jakarta, February 4, 2005

Indonesian leadership's views of the Indonesia's neighbours are marked by a relatively high level of threat assessment of other regional countries, particularly Singapore and Malaysia. At the same time, however, there is awareness on the elite level of the necessity to eliminate mutual suspicion and distrust among regional states. Indonesian foreign policy is thus substantially shaped, first, by the perceived need to dilute other's anxiety about Indonesia's power given its sheer size and population, and, second, by the conscious effort to promote benign images by means of the security interdependence among the ten ASEAN states.

The nascent ASEAN Community can become a long-term success only if Southeast Asian elites make a conscious effort to build benign character for their respective countries, based on self-restrained, consensual and overall non-threatening foreign policies, underpinned by a sense of "you are our concern and we are your concern" security interdependence.