Introduction: the age of delusion in the Asia–Pacific

The dominant international relations paradigm of the late 1980s and early 1990s assumed that regions represented the necessary structures that underpinned an emerging post-Cold War global order. This regional re-ordering, it was asserted in works like Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson’s *Globalization in Question* (1996) and Susan Strange’s *The Retreat of the State* (1997), would occur at the expense of the nation-state. These authors, and many others like them, believed that a complex web of transnational processes that spanned the activities of non-governmental organizations, corporate and media conglomerates on the one hand, and international institutions on the other, would continue to erode state sovereignty from above and below. In scholarly and media commentary the perception and description of this apparent shift towards regionalization was often accompanied by the overt promotion of multilateral arrangements as the necessary corollary to the new post-Cold War order.

Nowhere was the enthusiasm for building multinational institutions that reflected the seemingly inexorable transition of the international system from a state-centric into a regionally based order more noticeable than in the Asia–Pacific. In particular, scholarly zeal focused on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the exemplar of this evolving regional emphasis. ASEAN, and its expansionist offshoots, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), together with the Australian initiative of Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and later the ASEAN Plus Three framework embracing China, Japan and South Korea, represented the building blocks of a distinctive Asian trading region and security community. Prior to the financial crisis of 1997 many of these arrangements, it was also maintained, intimated a shift in the global order towards a new Pacific Century premised on multilateral practices of cooperation and dialogue that reflected a regional diplomatic culture of consensus and non-interference. Indeed, multilateralism based upon what Ken Booth and Russell Trood in *Strategic Cultures in the Asia–Pacific* (1999) deemed a sensitivity to the strategic cultural preoccupations of this evolving region would facilitate a burgeoning and largely benign interdependence. Even relatively recent works like Mark Beeson’s edited volume, *Reconfiguring East Asia* (2002), continue
to maintain that an East Asian region, as opposed to individual states, is ‘increasingly consequential in political practice [and] economic decision making’ (Beeson 2002, pp. 2–3).

The regional economic crisis of 1997–98, followed by political breakdown in Southeast Asia, regime change in Indonesia, the recrudescence of suppressed ethno-religious tensions and the emergence of a regional terror network with links to al-Qaeda, along with the region’s conspicuous inability to coordinate a coherent response to transnational threats in the form of diseases like SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) or natural disasters like the 2004 tsunami, challenged many of these regionalist and multilateral assumptions, exposing them as fallacies. The multilateral orthodoxy which sustains these fallacies has strongly resisted reasoned counter-argument (see Öjendal 2004, pp. 519–33). Instead, it maintains faith in the regional verity, despite evidence to the contrary, which regional commentators repeatedly played down, overlooked, misunderstood or just ignored. Analytical weakness, combined with ideological faith, we shall show, sustained a delusion that became entrenched in the field of Asian international relations.

How this delusion came to dominate the study of the Southeast Asian, and the wider East Asian, region forms the central theme of this book. It will assess how it achieved the status of an intellectual orthodoxy and explain its persistence, which continues to impede an accurate understanding of regional affairs. Furthermore, this study suggests that the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, along with the new agenda posed by the forces of economic globalization and the low intensity conflicts that bedevil Southeast Asia and the wider Pacific region more generally, require us to re-evaluate radically both the political economy and the security arrangements in Pacific Asia that are essentially the product of the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War era. This work, therefore, specifically examines the failure of ASEAN to address the political and economic problems that became increasingly evident after 1990. In order to scrutinize these failings, ASEAN’s weakness is set in the context of the broader economic and political incoherence that afflicts the Asia–Pacific region more generally and which, according to Gilbert Rozman, always rendered the promotion of regional interdependence flawed (Rozman 1998). In other words, we shall analyse the economic, political and ethno-religious tensions that beset the wider region through the distorting prism that is ASEAN.

This study begins with an examination of the manner in which an ASEAN scholar-bureaucracy and its western fellow travellers promoted flawed regionalism in the course of the 1990s. Having revealed the limitations of a variety of liberal, idealist and post-modern theorizing and their distorting consequences for understanding the historically contingent factors that shaped threat perception in the Asia–Pacific, we shall proceed to examine the post-1945...
evolution of international relations in Southeast Asia, and their implications, if any, for the wider Pacific Rim. Subsequent chapters thus examine the curious dispensation through which ASEAN rose to international prominence. In particular, we shall assess how ASEAN erroneously came to be seen in the 1990s as a new form of security cooperation that could, in its extended version of the ARF, apparently effortlessly embrace Northeast Asia. We shall then analyse how rising levels of low-intensity conflict generated by the forces of globalization threaten to undermine irrevocably Southeast Asia’s economic and political integrity.

As an imitation community rather than an imagined one, we shall further show that the competing forces of economic integration and identity politics have exposed ASEAN’s constituting ambivalences that leave it ill-equipped to serve as the template for a post-Cold War regional order. Furthermore, the seemingly insoluble Cold War flashpoints in Northeast Asia, coupled with Chinese irredentism and American ambiguity towards both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Japan, render a balance of power in Northeast Asia both complex and uncertain. It will be the further contention of this work that as the processes of globalizing trade and internmenting markets continues this will have a centrifugal rather than a centripetal impact on the region. These processes will be further exacerbated by the impact of the ‘war on terror’ and its spillover into Islamic radicalism in both Southeast and South Asia.

Globalization premised on state security will afford opportunities for stronger states to quell internal dissent while exploiting comparative advantage. As a result, the United States, China, Japan and Australia will exercise increasing soft power in the Southeast Asian region. The downside to this process will see the less adaptable Asian developmental states eroded both at the global level by difficulty in adapting to post-meltdown market requirements and at the sub-state level by a global black market in guns, drugs and people smuggling that facilitate the activity of sub-state actors working through diaspora communities to sustain long-standing separatist movements. Thus the region’s weaker states, like Indonesia, Burma, Malaysia and the Philippines, will either federalize or fragment. China, meanwhile, will constitute an evolving problem: on the one hand, seeking to re-establish a tributary relationship with its pre-eighteenth century area of regional influence in the Nanyang, on the other, guarding internally against separatist Islamic forces and pressures to democratize both from within and without which impels it towards new authoritarian and anti-Islamic groupings like the Shanghai Five.

Finally, it will be argued that the notion of Asian values, manifested organizationally in shared ASEAN values during the 1990s, constituted an illusion that both masked emerging tensions between Asian states and actively obscured political and economic weaknesses, with ultimately disastrous
consequences. Ironically, the extent to which Southeast Asia and the broader Asia–Pacific more generally can sustain the status quo and avoid a possible Middle Eastern fate will reflect the balancing role played by the west, in the shape of the US across the Pacific region and Australia in Southeast Asia.

DEALING WITH DELUSION

The main argument put forward in this work is that many of the acknowledged experts on Southeast Asian and Pacific affairs have consistently misread regional prospects, their assessments and prognostications consistently undermined by the subsequent turn of events. The contention, though, is not that these analytical errors were, despite the best of intentions, the product of the simple inability to predict the future. The point this study seeks to make is that many of the key assumptions that underpinned the study of Asia–Pacific relations were themselves delusions: seriously flawed understandings of regional developments that produced a systematic misreading of the character of international relations that inevitably disfigured any attempt to discern the trends and patterns in regional affairs.

The notion of delusion, then, forms the principal motif running through this work. Delusions are defined here as ‘mistaken beliefs that are maintained in spite of strong evidence to the contrary’ (Huffman, Venoy, Williams 1987, p. 552). What gives rise to a delusion is a question that is a good deal more complicated than this straightforward definition might imply. The term itself derives from psychoanalysis and denotes various dichotomous conditions where internal beliefs fail to conform with any wider, more objective or intersubjectively understood ideas of reality. Hence, the term is associated with psychiatric disorder: delusions of grandeur, delusions of persecution or delusions of reference. In these respects, the idea of delusion is often located within states of extreme narcissism (see Jung 1983, pp. 14–41). In psychiatric practice, for instance, a chart of questions is used to locate personality types and, if an individual forms a cluster around a certain spread of responses, they are more than likely to be delusional.

One of the interesting aspects of the delusive personality as a psychiatric phenomenon is that, while it may cover neuroses that encompass modes of aberrant behaviour, it does not of itself necessarily delineate mental illness. The condition can be observed in, say, the business or academic type who, despite corruption, mismanagement and incompetence, demands that his board or faculty feed his or her delusion. This is called monosymptomatic delusion and manifests itself in ego-driven behaviour and a tendency to intellectual hubris, and can be found in some degrees in many walks of life and most modern universities (Beary and Cobb 1981, pp. 64–6; Walter 1991, pp.
283–4: see also Kagan and Segal 1992, pp. 502–4). In the monosymptomatic understanding, the world must fit my view of it. The delusive personality, therefore, cannot face the reality principle without the ego feeling threatened. A consensual group maintains and reinforces belief systems, no matter how misguided they may be. Such a mentality is unable to withstand contradiction without descending into fragmentation, which also explains the tendency in narcissistic personalities towards paranoia.

Interesting and potentially fruitful though a psychoanalytical approach may be, we somewhat reluctantly reject it as an explanatory tool in this analysis. As authors we do not possess any formal psychiatric training. Further, while we can note the valuable attempts to scientifize understandings of aberrant behaviour, it is recognized that psychoanalytical approaches are themselves open to question. Psychoanalysis rarely yields itself to decisive external verification. This has led political philosophers, and sociologists like Ernest Gellner and Karl Popper, to argue that it is inherently speculative and its conclusions ultimately unfalsifiable (Gellner 1985; Popper 1985, pp. 127–8, 363–5). Such accusations inevitably intimate a degree of controversy in any field of study that seeks to define and ascribe mental disorder and social deviance. Specialists in psychiatry and psychology do, needless to say, acknowledge the severe difficulties in discerning what constitutes abnormal behaviour (Kagan and Segal 1992, pp. 482–3). What the problematic and contested nature of such debates clearly suggests, however, is the inapplicability of psychoanalysis as a viable investigatory method in the social sciences. This is reinforced by the obvious abuse of psychoanalytical terms that have made their way into political and sociological discourse that claim the right to detect ‘phobic’ or ‘philiac’ tendencies in ideological and intellectual positions. The imputation of mental illness or disorder to others is itself a form of intolerance that is the enemy of scholarly inquiry. Such imputations should have no place in any wider discussion of the humanities and social sciences, a theme to which this introduction will return later.

Despite the difficulties associated with psychoanalysis, there are nevertheless strands of thought evolving from group psychology that legitimately intersect with themes in the realm of political science and which possess analytic utility. These notions arise out of concepts like ‘groupthink’ and concentrate on the empirically observable (see Janis 1982; ’t Hart 1990; ’t Hart, Stern and Sundelius 1997). Thus it is possible to discern evidence of systemic predictive and analytical error and seek explanations in ideas that relate to the formation of orthodoxies and the attraction of individuals to consensus-seeking activities. It is the establishment of orthodox modes of understanding that can result in a collective tendency to screen out discrepant information that might diverge from it. This, in turn, inhibits alternative appreciations of developments that might more thoroughly accord with the available evidence. In this
way shortcomings of certain forms of intellectual activity can be properly tested without ascribing psychiatric dysfunction.

Therefore this study sets out to examine the evident empirical failure of Southeast Asian regionalism, despite the confident claims of regional experts concerning its emergence. Consequently, we are dealing with a body of analytic opinion, framed in terms of a specialist knowledge of the politics of the region and as such invested with an authority disported in academic and journalistic forums. This authoritative voice seeks to describe and explain the emerging patterns in regional affairs, but, more often than not, has failed to do so with either accuracy or coherence. None of this implies that there exists a single truth about regional developments and that it is only the blinkered nature of academic consensus that blinds people to it. Such a view would itself be a sign of delusion. Debates in the social sciences should properly exist as a contest of perceptions based on considered assessments of the evidence. However, the spirit of open-minded inquiry so necessary for understanding has been notably lacking in the realm of Southeast Asian studies. Indeed, the very idea of ‘debate’ in regional academe has become problematic. The free exchange of contending views concerning regional developments became in the course of the 1990s characterized by a refusal to consider more plausible alternative explanations because they clashed with the prevailing orthodoxy.

FASHIONABLE DELUSION

The focus of this study, then, is the observable and potentially explicable, not what is wished or willed. There are, though, two further related questions that need to be raised at this point. The first is: what is the nature of the intellectual orthodoxy on regional affairs that has distorted understandings of Southeast Asian international relations? The second is: what is the principal delusion that may be said to underpin this orthodoxy?

The premise which informs this book is that a contradictory understanding grew up around the various security dilemmas that ASEAN was originally designed to address. Over time, ASEAN’s approach came to exercise an attraction to an eclectic assortment of scholarly opinion both within Southeast Asia and beyond, ranging from soft-realists and liberal-institutionalists on the one hand to post-Marxists, constructivists and post-colonialists on the other. This broad and inclusive church gained particular currency in the immediate post-Cold War era, developing into an orthodox understanding of regional relations where ASEAN’s unique style of multilateral diplomacy became seductively modish. This consensus, we argue, was based on a delusion.

An investigation of the recent history of Southeast Asian international relations, in this respect, reveals an interesting case study in teleology. This
teleology held that the post-Cold War world would witness increasing global interdependence based on multilateral cooperation in which the consensual practices of consultation and dialogue would forge shared regional values and identities that would render established patterns of inter-state relations redundant. Most notably, during the 1990s, a time in which theories of multilateralism, constructivism and strategic culture proliferated in the previously theoretically bereft study of international relations, ASEAN’s international profile grew on the back of its appeal as the prototype of such forms of regional, economic and security cooperation. This fashionable delusion, however, obscured major fault lines in ASEAN’s theory and practice that misread its past, overestimated its capacity to manage the region’s affairs and ignored or underestimated new threats and challenges to the regional order.

ASEAN came into being in 1967, after a series of faltering attempts at regional security cooperation among the non-communist states of Southeast Asia. Few hopes were invested in ASEAN’s formation. Its agenda was vague and its direction uncertain. As Singapore foreign minister S. Rajaratnam observed after an ASEAN ministerial meeting in 1974: ‘You may recall at the first meeting in 1967, when we had to draft our communiqué, it was a very difficult problem of trying to say nothing in about ten pages . . . we ourselves, having launched ASEAN were not quite sure where it was going, or whether it was going anywhere at all’ (quoted in Business Times 1992, 15 January). The Association was rescued from this road to oblivion by a series of fortuitous international events that would change the security dispensation in Southeast Asia and boost ASEAN’s profile.

The first major turning point was the enunciation of the so-called ‘Nixon doctrine’ in 1969 (Kissinger 1995, pp. 707–9). Looking towards the day on which the United States extricated itself from its Indochinese quagmire, President Richard Nixon sought to clarify the outlines of future American foreign policy in the post-Vietnam era. Recognizing that it could no longer expect to impose its will on the character of emerging states (like Vietnam) Nixon, nevertheless, reiterated that the US retained global interests and would be prepared to back those states prepared to defend themselves against the threat of Communism, not through direct intervention, but through less direct forms of military, economic and diplomatic support. It was this doctrine that provided for the continuing, but less intrusive, commitment to maintaining its interests in Asia that afforded ASEAN the space to define the rudiments of a regional consensus after 1969 defined primarily as a shared resistance to Communism, which, at this time, was diagnosed as the common root of internal instability.

The Nixon doctrine proved to be a more viable basis for the US to build stability in Asia. The semi-detached US security presence enabled the still fledgling ASEAN states to pursue domestic consolidation and regional cooperation.
largely free from the direct interference of the major powers outside Southeast Asia. Thus, from 1971 onwards, ASEAN’s diplomatic profile as a cohesive regional security organization began to take root. Yet it was the reformulated nature of the American security commitment to Southeast Asia that formed the vital backdrop to nearly two decades of unparalleled political stability and economic growth in the region which permitted ASEAN the illusion of international significance: an illusion, as this study will seek to demonstrate, that it was not necessarily in the interests of the benign American hegemon to dispel.

The second pivotal event from which ASEAN benefited was the ending of the Cold War. At the dawn of the 1990s, having outlasted the Soviet Union and experiencing rising levels of prosperity that appeared to challenge conventional, and – given the then downturn in the US and European economies – apparently moribund western models of growth, the collapse of the bipolar world enabled ASEAN politicians and scholars to promulgate what they argued was a distinctively Asian approach to economic and political development. The years of the so-called ‘economic miracle’ in the Asia–Pacific between 1985 and 1995 had, in the minds of some observers, propelled Asian states into the ‘first rank’ and engendered ‘greater cultural self-confidence’ (Kausikan 1993, p. 32). According to one ASEAN scholar–bureaucrat, ‘East and Southeast Asian countries are increasingly conscious of their own civilizations and tend to locate the sources of their economic success in their own distinctive traditions and institutions’ (ibid., p. 34).

Growing regional self-confidence consequently displaced the long-term impact of the Nixon doctrine as the chief explanation for the region’s success. A uniquely Asian cultural disposition perfected by ASEAN’s regional diplomacy over the previous 25 years, it was now maintained, rather than economic growth and political stability engendered by a benign American hegemony, foreign direct investment and access to global markets, had established regional stability and order. Those who extolled the supposedly harmonious and consensual practices of the Asian way believed that the character of Pacific Asia’s political culture would provide the basis for a regional dynamic that would solidify East Asian cohesiveness. ASEAN, it was asserted, would evolve into a ‘security community’ in which conflict amongst its membership would be banished through the creation of a diplomatic milieu of multilateral arrangements in which regional problems ‘either do not arise or can be readily managed’ (Leifer 1995, p. 34).

Furthermore, the success of ASEAN’s diplomacy would be the cornerstone of a new Pacific order in the twenty-first century (see Naisbett 1995). Pundits predicted that a confident and prosperous East Asian region would occupy an increasingly dominant place in the global trading and political order (see Chia 1994; Bell, R. 1996). The forces of regionalization would be extended through pan-Asian forums like the ARF and AFTA, which would consolidate regional
confidence as former or market-oriented communist regimes in China, Pacific Russia, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia experienced the beneficial consequences of foreign direct investment and export-driven growth. Through such means regional trade and cooperation would be further facilitated. The utopian vision mapped out for the region emphasized Pacific Asia’s seemingly effortless capacity to sustain economic growth founded on its distinctively shared regional values.

It is here that we see the seeds of delusion being sown. For the curious Asian hiatus, extending from the end of the Cold War to the financial crisis of 1997 and beyond, provided an attractive, but ultimately deceptive, locale upon which an eclectic mix of analytical perspectives – ranging from pan-Asianists, post-modernists, cultural conservatives, constructivists, multilateralists and strategic culturalists – alighted. Liberated from the constricting straitjacket of Cold War power politics, many analysts saw in the ASEAN region both the practical validation of their methodological preferences and the harbinger of the future regionalization of the global order. The ‘ASEAN way’, therefore, united various shades of opinion into a fashionable orthodoxy. But it was an orthodoxy built on contradiction.

Officially endorsed opinion emerging from Southeast Asia during the ‘miracle’ decade often explicitly sought to contrast the distinctively consensual and managerial approach to problem solving of ASEAN to what was deemed the rigid, legalistic, treaty-oriented, confrontational power political norms of western diplomacy (Mahbubani 1995a, pp. 105–20; Sopiee 1992, p. 131). This thesis found willing adherents beyond Asia, most notably in western academia itself, which conceived the attractively diverse multilateralism of ‘Asian way’ regional cooperation within the broader context of the rejection of realist, Eurocentric, inter-state and balance of power ideas that were held to characterize the western strategic–diplomatic process. Thus a curious intellectual concurrence evolved during the 1990s that brought together western liberals and post-modernists on the one hand, with an assortment of autocratic Asian governments on the other, that came to exert a powerful hold on analytic opinion about regional developments.

Yet, in practice, the hopes invested in the ASEAN way (both by Southeast Asian governments in the post-Cold War and by their western academic followers) as the forerunner of a new and excitingly different form of international diplomacy suffered from a gap between rhetorical aspiration and the underlying realities of Southeast Asian diplomacy. ASEAN’s origins did not, in fact, spring from any deep commitment to the principles of inclusive multilateral cooperation, but from very traditional security concerns to stabilize inter-state relations in Southeast Asia and the pursuit of internal consolidation (Leifer 1989, p. 4). In particular, the formation of ASEAN was premised on two overriding security issues: (1) to present a unified anti-communist front...
towards the spread of Communism across Indochina, and (2) to lock
Indonesia, the biggest and most powerful state in Southeast Asia, into a di-
plomatic system that had at its core the recognition of accepted sovereign borders,
thereby curbing its destabilizing ambitions which sought territorial expansion
through a policy of ‘confrontation’ with its neighbours (Leifer 1996, p. 13).
These concerns represented a thoroughly ‘realist’ understanding of interna-
tional relations with its emphasis on Cold War imperatives and a security
commitment to maintaining a regional balance of power that reflected
distinctly Eurocentric understandings of a ‘concert’ of powers. The fashion-
able orthodoxy that arose in the post-Cold War years obscured or ignored the
fact that ASEAN was essentially a supranational arrangement that functioned
as a mechanism to strengthen the new states of Southeast Asia. Over time, this
realist commitment to the state as the major actor in a local concert of powers
was conflated with an anti-realist framework that extolled multilateral inter-
dependence, shared norms and the cooperative management of a ‘security
community’ (Acharya 1991, p. 176). The post-modernism of the early 1990s
that embraced somewhat incoherently both ethical relativism and western self-
loathing further enhanced the capacity of Southeast Asian scholars and diplo-
mats to disregard the underlying realist logic of ASEAN. This approach
rejected the ethnocentric and patronizingly Orientalist assumptions assumed to
be embedded in western political discourse while elevating the distinctive
diplomatic and strategic norms of non-western cultures (Booth and Trood

However, as the rhetoric of regionalization reached its zenith both in offi-
cial discourse and in the groves of academe, the onset of the Asian financial
危机 rendered these same ‘norms’ redundant. The ASEAN norms of consen-
sus, harmony, multilateralism and regional managerialism now stood
condemned for promoting corruption, cronyism and opaque government–
business dealings that had engendered regional meltdown. Why had
ASEAN’s allegedly ‘unique from of multilateralism’ whose ‘remarkable
economic dynamism’ constituted the basis for a progressive ‘culture of coop-
eration’ (Leifer 1996, pp. 53–7) suddenly mutated into a feeble concert of
imitation states incapable of addressing the effects of the regional economic
crisis and its devastating political consequences? At the turn of the new
century ASEAN was revealed as an organization of political, economic and
security contradictions. The Association’s purpose, it seemed, had been to
shield fundamental differences amongst its membership from public scrutiny
under the guise of consensus. It succeeded in this somewhat limited objective
for most of the Cold War. However, the post-meltdown era, where defensive
ethnic and religious fundamentalism represented a growing response at the
sub-state level to the uncertainties generated by the processes of globalization
at the supra-state level, exposed the unsustainable nature of the Asian Cold
War model of building national and regional resilience. And what sustained this delusion was fashionable orthodoxy.

THE DELUSION OF DETACHMENT

The possible reasons why certain explanations of political development in Asia meshed into an ‘accepted’ orthodoxy are likely to be many and varied. But the question remains, what was delusive about this orthodoxy? To address this area of debate will help provide some understanding about whether there exists a fundamental delusion that accounts for the formation of this orthodoxy. While the prevailing orthodoxy was a composite of diffuse influences, nevertheless this study evinces that it had one overriding characteristic, namely, that its adherents believed it represented a neutral and objective understanding of Asia. It was a delusion of detachment.

Effort in most scholarly disciplines is devoted to the attempt to establish rigorously formulated intellectual positions based on investigation across the range of available source material and the development of analytical frameworks in order to generate theories and arguments that appear to accord with a comprehensive reading of the evidence. This is, of course, exactly how academic inquiry should proceed. To achieve knowledge, however, a theory can only provide a testable hypothesis. All explanations can be improved upon or overturned by new and maybe better data and/or the development of new interpretations. For any mode of explanation to have meaning it must be refutable, or, to use Karl Popper’s formulation, it must be ‘falsifiable’ (Popper 2002, pp. 120–32). A vibrant field of inquiry is, therefore, characterized by a continuously evolving debate between different, contending arguments.

Nevertheless, the danger is that, in attempting to work out dispassionate positions through the weighing up of facts and figures, this fixes the limits of ‘acceptable’ knowledge about any given subject. The nature of inquiry renders the analyst prone to the conviction that they see things ‘as they really are’ and come to believe that they purvey the only accurate, balanced and neutral assessment of events. Once a broad network of opinion accepts a particular interpretation as the most balanced and accurate, it can promote concurrence and this can result in the ‘hardening of the categories’ where all attempts to challenge a settled paradigm are consciously ignored or dismissed as unreasonable or partisan (see Makinda 2001, p. 319). The orthodoxy becomes the only valid explanation and the single truth (Jones and Smith, 2003, pp. 131–41).

A variety of factors facilitate the delusion of detachment. The condition might arise from a bland empiricism that holds that ‘facts speak for themselves’ and require no further embellishment. Or it might derive from the cynical view
that a balanced assessment results from taking a middle point between two contending arguments. Alternatively, it may stem from the attempt to apply the principles of rational scientific method to the landscape of the social, an approach particularly attractive to American political science, which classically presumes that, once the ‘dependent’ and ‘independent’ variables are settled, situations will yield objective results (Walt 1999, p. 12). Additionally, there may be notions that appeal to a more post-modern mentality. For example, ambivalently drawing from the writings of the conservative political philosopher, Carl Schmitt, who argued that the concept of the political required the friend/enemy dyad, which demands an adversarial ‘other’, many post-modern thinkers and critical theorists convince themselves that they can unmask the ‘othering’ process and are thereby endowed with a unique sense of impartiality and independence (Schmitt 1996, pp. 19–79).

In all these instances, commentators of whatever methodological provenance persuade themselves that they see events independently and without prejudice. Collectively, this adds up to the conviction that they can stand outside ‘the political’. Consequently, analysts conclude that they are merely neutral observers who exist above the fray of conceptual conflict between contested viewpoints. Having transcended all the difficult epistemological questions, they see little need to justify their own ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ positions, and in this state of grace feel able to pronounce with Olympian detachment on those who challenge their objectivity. The effect of this delusion of detachment, evident in the theory and practice of scholarship in the Asia–Pacific, has been to close down avenues for debate while denouncing counter-arguments that disturb settled opinion as polemical.6

But as writers and philosophers from Orwell to Schmitt have noted, no-one can stand outside the political (Orwell 1948, pp. 1261–8). To argue that the contestability of viewpoints in the academic realm is somehow uncouth and that politics should be exiled from the humanities and social sciences is itself a political statement. To assert that there is a neutral understanding of events is inherently subjective. To maintain that only you can unmask the ‘othering’ process is merely to ‘other’ those you deem to be guilty of ‘othering’ themselves. To accuse someone of being polemical is itself an act of polemicism. In Schmitt’s words:

Above all the polemical character determines the use of the word political regardless of whether the adversary is designated as nonpolitical (in the sense of harmless), or vice versa if one wants to disqualify or denounce him as political in order to portray oneself as nonpolitical (in the sense of purely scientific, purely moral, purely juristic, purely aesthetic, purely economic, on the basis of similar purities) and thereby superior. (Schmitt 1996, pp. 31–2)

One aspect of this delusion that came to predominate in Asian political affairs was that it united an amalgam of scholar-bureaucrats operating on
behalf of a variety of authoritarian governments, whose job it was to propagate the virtues of the ASEAN way, and western scholars who functioned in ostensibly liberal environments. How these two seemingly very different bedfellows came to share a common agenda is one of the more peculiar aspects of the regional delusion. The dilemma for those scholars working in the authoritarian political arrangements of Southeast Asia in the 1990s is one readily familiar to anyone who possesses any experience of living and working in an illiberal polity. It is the dilemma articulated by writers like Czesław Milosz, who, in *The Captive Mind*, described how intellectuals in newly Stalinized Eastern Europe after World War II were systematically worn down by authoritarian duress and who, despite their independence of mind and spirit, were eventually subordinated to serve the formal goals of the state (Milosz 1990, pp. 191–222). Ultimately, the intellectual predicament in Eastern Europe or Southeast Asia was the same – conform or be crushed.

Less easy to appreciate, and far more curious, was the mentality of the western scholar of Asian politics who faced no such dilemma. Their path to delusion, unlike those who existed in the ‘guided democracies’ of the Asia–Pacific, was self-chosen. Comprehending western intellectualism’s encounter with Asian authoritarianism is less to do with Milosz’s captive mind, and more to do with Mark Lilla’s identification of *The Reckless Mind* (2001). Western academics enjoy the luxury of being able to take extreme or outlandish intellectual positions without having to accept responsibility for them, and certainly not incurring any of their consequences. In this context, the reckless mind is attracted to the ‘Lure of Syracuse’ – the yearning of the intellectual to be taken seriously, to have influence, to be relevant, to make a difference. In other words, to have power (Lilla 2001, pp. 193–216).

The attraction of some western thinkers, who benefit and flourish under a liberal dispensation, to illiberal solutions is not peculiar to thinking about Asia. However, the concept of ‘Asia’ has traditionally presented particular problems for western social and political thought, the Asian ‘other’ often seducing a variety of European commentators into sympathizing with forms of Oriental despotism (Jones 2001a, pp. 1–13, 143–203). The concurrence of thinking that emerged between western analysts and ASEAN scholar-bureaucrats offers an interesting continuation of this phenomenon. Those that embraced the ASEAN way could expect to be lured to Syracuse, enabling themselves to feel empowered within an officially endorsed consensus that embraced scholars in sub-ministerial meetings and conferences and a patronage network that could dispense jobs, grants and other forms of preferment.

The consequence of this contract with Syracuse, however, was a severe form of groupthink. It reduced academic debate on Asian developments to a self-perpetuating consensus that disallowed dissenting viewpoints, and at best...
permitted only the cautious nuancing of received wisdom. Closed scholarship occasions sclerosis and the inability to think or move outside self-censoring boundaries. It is a regressive construct that loses the ability to test its ruling assumptions through sceptical inquiry. Indeed, ‘scepticism’ is the enemy of the paradigm. The result is an orthodoxy that ceases to be a theory with explanatory value. Rather it is a self-reinforcing ideological preference that mistakes its own belief in balance and neutrality for a valid methodology.

The irony is that when any mode of thought, be it Asia–Pacific studies or the wider study of international relations theory, becomes closed in this manner it becomes irrelevant to practice. When a discipline suffers from a misguided belief in its own neutrality it becomes delusional, mistaking its own relevance and importance. Eventually, it stands revealed as the prove-nance of a sect that talks only to itself, yet hovers on the edges of the classa politica acting as pliable supporting counsellors to political agendas, usually in the service of authoritarian regimes, but losing all pretence to rigorous inquiry.

NOTES

1. A Chinese word meaning ‘southern ocean’. The term commonly refers to the areas in Southeast Asia that contain significant numbers of ethnic Chinese, most of whom, in countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, are descendants of migrants from the southern provinces of China, and sometimes also known as the ‘overseas Chinese’.

2. According to the current compendium, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (latest edition DSM-IV) published by the American Psychiatric Association, the formal definition of delusion is ‘false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary’.

3. Delusions of grandeur are ‘mistaken beliefs of being important persons’; delusions of persecution are ‘mistaken beliefs that others are plotting to harm or destroy you’; delusions of reference are ‘mistaken beliefs that give special significance to unrelated events’ (see Huffman, Venoy, Williams 1987, p. 552). These are only a few of the diagnosed conditions of delusion, amongst many others such as delusional parasitosis, an erroneous belief of infestation by parasites or bacterial infections (see Freinhar 1984, pp. 47–53).

4. The concept of groupthink is a useful tool to aid understanding of concurrence-seeking activity. Groupthink was initially developed by Irving Janis to provide a social psychological explanation for serious failures in foreign policy. Other analysts have critiqued the concept (see t’Hardt et al. 1997), suggesting that it does not sufficiently take account of the politico-bureaucratic conditions that confront decision makers faced with stressful decision-making tasks ‘that have serious consequences, are unusually complex, and divisive or controversial’ (Neves 2005, p. 30). Felipe Ortiagão Neves argues that the key idea behind groupthink is ‘collective, stress relieving uncritical concurrence seeking’ or ‘stressed groupthink’ for short (ibid., p. 33). As a criticism of the explanatory power of groupthink to fully explicate failures in political decision making these arguments have some force. Accounting for ‘intellectual’ failures is, however, likely to conform far more to the original conception of groupthink as envisaged by Janis. Scholars are rarely challenged by collective stressful decision making. The stresses, such as they are, in the academic realm that lead to concurrence seeking are more likely to be self-induced through an addiction to peer approval resulting...
in a generalized timidity in questioning fashionable orthodoxy. Concurrence seeking in acad-
emia may in these respects be reinforced by deference to dominant figures in a particular
discipline or the methodological preferences of leading journals, along with a predisposition
to be bureaucratically guided towards officially endorsed goals and agendas through the
grant-giving machinery. All these factors can provide powerful incentives towards concur-
rence, rewarding with financial and professional preferment those who conform to the ortho-
dox, while punishing, by exclusion, those who dissent. For a profession that supposedly is
governed by the ethos of scrutinizing given assumptions, this is deeply paradoxical. It is, in
part, aspects of this paradox that this book is intended to address.

5. AFTA envisaged the creation of a common effective preferential tariff scheme of between 0
per cent and 5 per cent across the region. In order to facilitate a regional free trade area,
ASEAN Economic Ministers in Phuket, Thailand in 1994 agreed to implement the scheme by
2003. As yet this has not happened.

6. The marginalization, exclusion or denunciation of arguments because they are allegedly
‘polemical’ (i.e. challenge the orthodoxy) is something that it is possible to encounter on a
regular basis in the field of Southeast Asian studies, notably in the journal review process. For
example, one commentator asserts that criticism of ASEAN may be credible so long as it does
not degenerate ‘into polemics’, though what is meant by polemics is, as is often the case in
the rhetoric of Southeast Asian international relations, rarely spelt out (see Acharya 2003, p.
336).