



Regional Identity and Belonging: Timor-Leste and ASEAN



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[*Abstract*]

Emerging from Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation to become one of the newest states, Timor-Leste is an interesting example of modern nation-building. Geographically, Timor-Leste is located in the area covered by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In such context, Timor-Leste has a strong claim to belonging to Southeast Asia. Timor-Leste nevertheless has not yet been admitted formally as a member despite its application for membership in March 2011. This paper locates Timor-Leste in a broader context of their construction of regional identity and as part of Southeast Asia. Drawing upon the constructivist approach, this paper suggests that the complexity of Timor-Leste's regional affiliation with ASEAN is made more challenging with its quest to assert itself as a nation-in-the-making.

Keywords: regional identity, national identity, ASEAN, Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste

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I . Introduction

Following a bloody independence struggle from the Portuguese until 1975, Timor-Leste, a small state with close to 1.3 million population restored its independence in 2002 after 24 years of Indonesian occupation with the United Nations-assisted referendum in 1999. Emerging from Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation to become one of the newest states in this era of globalization, Timor-Leste provides a particularly interesting example of modern nation-building. With the multiple belongings of Timor-Leste between Southeast Asia, the Pacific and the Lusophone connexion, this paper focuses on the construction of Timor-Leste's regional identity in relation to Southeast Asia, and tries to understand the interactions between the local population and the influence from Southeast Asia based on the identity, interests, culture and relationship that the member states may have with one another. In this framework of work drawing upon the constructivist approach, this paper locates Timor-Leste in a broader context of their construction of a regional identity within Southeast Asia and its application for membership of ASEAN.

As a former province of Indonesia, Timor-Leste is geographically located within ASEAN. In such a context, Timor-Leste has a strong legitimate claim to belonging to the Southeast Asia region. Timor-Leste has not been admitted as a member despite its formal application for membership in 2011. Prior to the ASEAN Charter that was adopted at the 13th ASEAN Summit in November 2007, there is no specific requirement to become a member in ASEAN. In the ASEAN Charter, it stipulates that ASEAN membership is conditional, based on four factors. They are geographical location, recognition by other states, agreement to be bound by the ASEAN Charter, and ability and willingness to carry out the obligations of membership.

Based on two views, namely spatial and temporal, Sahin (2014: 4-5) argues that Timor-Leste's insecure national identity is a factor that determines the political leadership's foreign policy moves in the post-independence period. The construction of spatial boundaries refers to Timor-Leste's political and cultural distinction from its

neighbors, while the temporal dynamic is linked to a broader lens where it encompasses its transition from a colony to an independent state as well as its transformation from a “fragile” state to a more stable one. This paper draws upon the constructivist approach of Wendt (1992) and the conceptualization of the actors’ construction of identities as an outcome that is constituted by particular interactive processes rather than it being a one-way relationship. It looks into the state action preferences in the broader context of the quest of decision-makers to position their small state in the emerging global order (Weldes 1996) in order to secure national identity.

For constructivists, states can have multiple identities that are socially constructed through interaction with other actors. Identities are an indication of an actor’s understanding of who they are, which in turn signals their interests. Interests and actions are important in indicating which identity a state chooses. The constructivist approach attempts to set the backstage for the development of the consciousness of a state through mutual interactions with the emphasis on the significance of different actors, and on the creation of mutual concepts and interests for understanding the identities, interests, institutions, and perceptions of a state.

In the context of Timor-Leste, its identity as a small state implies a set of interests that are different from a large state. It is arguably more focused on its survival, whereas the large state is usually more concerned with gaining political and economic influence. This paper is based on the author’s interactions with the East Timorese from different backgrounds ranging from government, academics to civil society, as well as drawing on secondary sources. It is divided into three main sections: The first examines Timor-Leste’s politics and its national identity; the second addresses Timor-Leste’s relationship with ASEAN; the third section explores the regional identity of Timor-Leste.

II . Politics and national identity in Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste is the newest state in the Southeast Asian region as it

only achieved its restoration of independence in 2002. It was first colonized by the Portuguese in 1701. Timor-Leste began to develop its political parties to call for independence following the “Carnation Revolution” in Portugal in 1974 that finally brought an end to the regime. Later, it was caught in a short yet bloody war between the two largest parties, the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT). Political crisis then took place and in December 1975, just nine days after Timor-Leste declared independence from the Portuguese, Indonesia launched an invasion and the forced integration of the province into Indonesia in 1976.

Resistance to Indonesia’s invasion lasted for 24 years and it led to the deaths of a total of 180,000 of the East Timorese population (Leach and Kingsbury 2012). This means, approximately a third of the population died from various forms of abuse such as execution, starvation, or disease. More than three-quarters of the population of Timor-Leste were displaced and more than 70 per cent of its buildings and infrastructure destroyed. Later, in January 1999, in a referendum conducted by the UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), the East Timorese had the opportunity to decide their own fate whether to remain within Indonesia or to become autonomous and achieve full independence. The East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence on 30 August 1999 as the result revealed that 78.9% opted to be separated from Indonesia. Violence and destruction however accompanied the lead up to the referendum, and continued after the ballot result. The process of rebuilding Timor-Leste as an independent state then was put under the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET).

Its Constitution is based on the Portuguese model, with a directly elected president as the head of state, a parliament with legislative authority, and a prime minister as head of the executive government and a cabinet. The parliamentary representatives are elected under a party-list proportional representation system to serve for the duration of five-years (Leach and Kingsbury 2012). As the youngest country in Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste is also one of the poorest in the region. Emerging from the decades of conflict, food security was low with poverty continuing to be widespread. All

these pose challenges in Timor-Leste's institutional frameworks. However, it has managed to live up its democratic ideals despite the political challenges since its restoration of independence. For instance, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) ranks Timor-Leste at the top of the most democratic countries in the Southeast Asia region in the latest Democracy Index 2018. The oil and gas sector continues to be the main resource, yet the challenge is to find ways to manage political disagreement and to address it in the most effective way to support sustainable development (World Bank March 2018).

Despite being in the highest rank in the EIU's Democracy Index 2018, Timor-Leste has been facing some political challenges in recent years. The March 20 presidential election and the July 22 parliamentary election in 2017 were the first elections successfully held without assistance from the international community since the UN mission departed in 2012. The 2017 elections were considered as significant milestones as they were held in a peaceful manner with no major incidents reported (Khoo 2018). Difficulties kicked in after the elections when the political parties could not achieve consensus in forming the government. The VII constitutional government composed of two political parties, the FRETILIN and the *Partido Democratico* (PD) with a total of 30-seats out of the 65-seat house was formed. The earlier agreement between FRETILIN, PD and *Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nasional Timor Oan* (KHUNTO) fell apart when the youth party withdrew from the coalition at the last minute. This then strengthened the opposition parties; the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) led by former revolutionary leader Xanana Gusmao, and the People's Liberation Party (PLP), led by former president Taur Matan Ruak. With the addition of KHUNTO, they formed the opposition coalition, "parliamentary majority alliance" or AMP.

While this minority government hoped to maintain stability and ensure peace with political inclusion, the FRETILIN-led minority government could not sustain itself as it was having difficulty in passing policy programs or budget bills. For months since the 2017 elections, political uncertainty marked disturbances

at the expense of the interests of the people. Finally, in January 2018, President Francisco Guterres, famously known as Lú-Olo, from the FRETILIN dissolved the parliament and announced the early election on 12 May 2018. The coalition of opposition parties with Xanana Gusmao at its head emerged with a majority of seats in the parliament and the two parties of the outgoing minority government; FRETILIN and PD accepted the outcome and pledged to serve as a strong parliamentary opposition. Such a situation highlights the fragility and insecurity facing the government, as argued by the constructivists on the importance of state survival for a small state like Timor-Leste.

Over time with the bloody independence struggle as its background, East Timorese national identity has evolved since Portuguese colonialism from a conventional anti-colonialist narrative, to one contesting Indonesia's forced invasion with the elements of local differences (Tønnesson and Antlöv 1996: 30). The resistance as portrayed by the East Timorese is described by Chatterjee (1993) as a form of an inner 'spiritual domain' of identity that was 'always sovereign' despite the political dominance of the colonial power. Although Timor-Leste shares much in common with other post-colonial narratives that aim to unite its populations under a similar colonial history and territory, it is important to note that there are several distinct features of East Timorese nationalism. This is mainly due to the experience of the subsequent invasion by Indonesia that is distinctive compared to other post-colonial states.

This provides Timor-Leste with a more complex and distinct narrative of the differential impacts of "colonialism" from the Portuguese period and then Indonesia's forced occupation. It is particularly significant when it has also led to a distinctive feature of East Timorese national identity with two generations of nationalists with different linguistic and cultural characteristics in that the people have been exposed to different forms of government. Two generations witnessed the country's long struggle for independence. The first is the "Generation of '99", also known as the *Geracão Foun*, who were born during the period of the Indonesian occupation, some of whom emerged as national leaders in the 1980s and 1990s. They are distinct from the "Generation of

‘75’ who are Portuguese-speaking older leaders and mostly dominate the government. The two generations find themselves in disagreement over certain matters including national identity. But the reconciliation of both generations’ nationalist experience is crucial for the transmission of cultural values and for the country’s social cohesion as a whole (Khoo 2017b) as different visions of national identity are brought to a compromise (Shamsul 1996: 346). This remains a central part of the story of East Timorese nationalism (Leach 2019: 295).

Among the common problems facing post-colonial states is the challenge to establish a durable balance between the national government and the various forces that might threaten state sovereignty, especially in ethnically diverse societies (Leach 2019: 297). This is a distinctive feature of East Timorese nationalism in which ritual leadership continues to be a sustaining force in East Timorese identity. This has also been raised by Hicks (2012: 26) who argues that for rural Timorese communities, they are more inclined to identify themselves as residents of those local communities than as citizens of the state. The challenge then lies in finding ways to integrate the existence of these two political cultures that draws on the strengths of both sources of political identity. Hicks (2012: 34) quoted a Timorese who reminds us that “the process of nation-state formation led by a few elites from the East Timorese diaspora and the UN relied heavily on elements of foreign cultures and values and undermined the cultural identity of the East Timorese”.

The 2015 celebration of the “500-year” arrival of Catholicism in the attempt as the “affirmation of Timorese identity” (RDTL 2015) suggested dimensions of the same narrative in contemporary East Timorese nationalism. For instance, Catholicism, the role of the church, and Portugal, is depicted as outsiders whose arrival marks the beginning of a new political society that played a role in shaping national identity. But this has been met with some domestic critics as a contradictory, or inadequately “post-colonial” discourse (Leach 2019: 296). At the beginning of the rise of the PLP, led by Taur Matan Ruak in late 2015, the PLP provided strong criticisms against the government’s development policy, the rampant clientelism and corruption, and also its efforts in building a national consensus.

They argued that there is a need for a renewed emphasis on teaching Indonesian and English in schools alongside Tetun and Portuguese (Cleary 2016), which are the two official languages of Timor-Leste. This brings into more discourse as the contestation of Timor-Leste's national identity continued. More recently, the government has also attempted to shift the focus of the nationalist narrative from the national identity of resistance to one, which emphasizes the concern for national development, but it has thus far not been successful (Leach 2019: 283).

Examining this from a constructivist perspective, states are considered as active stakeholders in the construction of their own national interests through processes of interpretation and representation as they do not simply act on the basis of a predetermined environment (Weldes 1996). The distribution of power as Wendt (1992) argues has considerable influence in the states' calculation of its future direction, but the way it does so depends on "intersubjective understandings" that shape their conceptions of the state and other actors (Wendt 1992: 398). Having said that, it is rather the interactive processes among states that create meaning or define situations that eventually determine their interests (Wendt 1992). As such, foreign policy choices that a state decides to make on certain issues can be best understood as "interpretive processes" that are shaped by interests, which in turn "depend on a particular construction of self-identity in relation to the conceived identity of others" (Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996: 60).

III. Timor-Leste and its relationship with ASEAN

ASEAN is considered the premier regional association in the region (Frost, 2008). ASEAN's founding declaration in Bangkok in 1967 called upon its member states to "... ensure their stability and security from external interference in any form or manifestation in order to preserve their national identities in accordance with the ideals and aspirations of their peoples". It is regarded as an important factor for stability in Southeast Asia through various

reasons; among them are its cooperative activities, its policies of constant active dialogues with not only the Asia Pacific countries but also other major key players in the world. Moreover, ASEAN's promotion of wider cooperation forums in East Asia and the Asia Pacific is also a significant role. Significantly, ASEAN is often regarded as constituting a diplomatic, security, and economic and cultural community (Ganesan 1994).

Geographically, Southeast Asia consists of eleven countries that reach from the south of China and to the east and southeast of India. It has basically two main regions. First is considered as the continental Southeast Asia, which includes Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore and peninsular Malaysia. Second is the archipelagic Southeast Asia, which includes East Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste. This region has long been influenced by external sources because of its rich natural resources and strategic location. ASEAN that was formed in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand brought a new level of regional cooperation to the extent of protecting the region so as not to be controlled by external global forces. Brunei Darussalam joined the regional body later in 1984. Traditionally, ASEAN's cooperation approach emphasized mutual respect for national sovereignty, avoiding direct confrontation, agreement through consensus and most importantly, all decisions are made at a pace with which all the member states feel comfortable.

Since the late 1990s, ASEAN has made substantial efforts to maintain its profile and prominence. After the end of the Cambodian conflict and the end of the Cold War, ASEAN's membership was expanded to also include Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. With that, ASEAN in the late 1990s was able to represent Southeast Asia in a more holistic way. But on the other side of the coin, the membership expansion poses some challenges. ASEAN's diversity is now becoming wider and therefore poses further challenges in terms of economic integration. While most new members are agreeable to ASEAN's principles and norms, some member states, for instance Myanmar's autocratic regime has tainted the image of

ASEAN's cohesion and its international image overall.

ASEAN has pursued cooperation in three ways. First, in 2003, it committed its members to develop an ASEAN Community. The ASEAN Community involves three key pillars. They are the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Second, as to what was stipulated since its establishment, ASEAN continues to actively engage the major powers in political and economic dialogue to enhance the overall security and prosperity in the region. With that, ASEAN member states agreed to place special emphasis on the "big three" Asia Pacific powers, namely the United States, China and Japan. Third, ASEAN is sponsoring wider regional cooperation by playing a leading role in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to build confidence and enhance dialogue on security issues, the ASEAN Plus Three grouping with China, Japan and South Korea and the East Asian Summit (Frost 2008).

In comparison to the 1967 Declaration of Bangkok, the ASEAN Charter is a rule-based document that specifically provides provisions in matters that were not found in the Declaration. One of which is the matter of membership admission. It is stated in Article 6(2) of the ASEAN Charter that admission shall be based on the following criteria: location in the recognized geographical region of Southeast Asia; recognition by all ASEAN member states; agreement to be bound and to abide by the Charter; and ability and willingness to carry out the obligations of membership. The puzzle that needs to be solved is when will Timor-Leste be formally accepted as the regional bloc's 11th member. As the newest country in Southeast Asia, its place in the region is often overlooked. Timor-Leste is vulnerable not only as a small and relatively young state but also the fact that it suffered an Indonesian occupation that destroyed its economy and infrastructure prior to the restoration of independence in May 2002. It therefore faces various post-conflict challenges, including having its voice heard in regional and international forums.

Timor-Leste expressed its desire to be part of ASEAN immediately

after the restoration of independence in 2002. In July 2005, it became a member of the ARF and it signed the ASEAN Treaty on Amity and Cooperation in 2007. As outlined in its Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030, Timor-Leste's aspiration to join ASEAN is based on geographical location, the wishes of the country's leaders and people, and its cultural affinity with its neighbors. Timor-Leste officially applied for ASEAN membership in March 2011 during Indonesia's chairmanship after a number of years with ASEAN observer status. An ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group (ACCWG) was then set up and tasked to assess Timor-Leste's readiness to be part of the regional grouping, and the implications for ASEAN if it did join.

The exclusion of Timor-Leste is in stark contrast to the time-consuming admission of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam in the late 1990s (Astria, Arif and Fadhillah 2016). This is because in the past, prior to the introduction of the ASEAN Charter, there were no specific requirements for admission. With its domestic challenges, some questioned Timor-Leste's aspiration for ASEAN membership, as well as the benefits and costs of joining. For Timor-Leste, ASEAN membership is hoped to provide access to an established forum where important issues such as security, economic development and integration, and socio-cultural matters can be pursued.

In 2018, Timor Leste's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (MFAC), through the Directorate-General for ASEAN Affairs and with support from the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) technical assistance team, held consultation meetings with various government institutions to discuss a technical work plan for ASEAN accession. The meetings gave rise to the Timor-Leste ASEAN Mobilization Program (TLAMP) document that set forth Timor-Leste's commitment and timeline for policy, economic and legal reforms in order to become a full member in the broad range of ASEAN cooperation. Around the same time, a technical working group composed of representatives from key government agencies was also established to address a number of Critical Elements for Accession (CEA), with a structured work plan to achieve these within a short time-frame. The CEA process has identified a key number of ASEAN

agreements in economic, political-security and socio-cultural matters that can be implemented swiftly to demonstrate Timor-Leste's capacity and commitment to join ASEAN.

In a more recent development, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Dionisio Babo Soares launched the TLAMP on 4 March 2019, to mark the 8th anniversary of Timor-Leste formally expressing its interest in becoming a member of ASEAN. Held in Dili, the launching ceremony brought together various Timorese government officials, eminent persons, technical directors, representatives of academia, civil society, and the private sector and ambassadors and representatives from countries and international agencies, including some of the ASEAN ambassadors. The launch of TLAMP, which came after the Council of Minister's approval of a Government Resolution on Timor-Leste's Accession to ASEAN, reiterated Timor-Leste's commitment to join the regional organization.

As emphasized in the speech delivered by the Foreign Affairs Minister, "ASEAN membership is our national interest, foreign policy priority and strategic decision to take part in regional economic integration, to diversify our economy and contribute to the stability in this region". Some of the preparatory steps have included nation-wide programs for ASEAN awareness, the establishment of the ASEAN National Secretariat and focal points, capacity-building through training and dialogue to ensure the readiness of institutions, the establishment and strengthening of Timor-Leste's embassies in all ASEAN countries, and participation in regional meetings, which include co-chairing and hosting the ARF.

IV. Complexity in constructing regional identity

In an attempt to explore Timor-Leste in a broader context of their search for regional identity and belonging in Southeast Asia by using the constructivist approach, I argue that the complexity of Timor-Leste's regional affiliation with ASEAN is made more challenging with its quest to assert itself as a nation in the making. This section is written mainly based on interactions that I had with local respondents from various backgrounds ranging from the

government to civil society groups including academics.

Regional identity refers either to the supposed distinctive natural and cultural qualities of a region, and the identification of people with such a region or both aspects at the same time (Paasi 2012). From the constructivist approach, regions can be understood as “social constructs” and a form of expression that showcases the power relations but it is not often clear what such arguments mean in practice (Paasi 2010). In such contexts, regions are considered as results and expressions of social relations that may have their origin in complex institutional interactions located both within the region itself and outside (Paasi 2011: 10).

The definition of regional identity is used in diverging ways in different social and geographical contexts. The basic division is between approaches that regard regional identities as “really existing” and stable, and those that understand them as social constructs or narratives and expressions of societal power that are developed for specific purposes. From the latter viewpoint, the key question is not whether regional identities exist but what it means to talk about such identities (Paasi 2012). Both the rise of regional identities and their current power are related to the globalization of culture, economics and consciousness. It has been suggested that people’s awareness of the processes of globalization and their insecurity in the face of them generate a search for new points of social orientation in a world that is increasingly mobile (Paasi 2012).

Until today since the restoration of independence in 2002, Timor-Leste continues to face difficult issues of post-conflict justice and reconciliation. Internationally, as a small state, the relationship between Timor-Leste and China has also been the focus of discussion as China’s “soft power” and global resource diplomacy grows. Issues also arise on how Timor-Leste balances its two major neighbors, Australia and Indonesia, as well as its involvement with the global Lusophone community. Timor-Leste is especially prominently known as an active player in the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) and G7Plus. These are some of the critical issues that continue to inform and inflame the politics of Timor-Leste (Leach and Kingsbury 2012).

Having endured internal strife that has scarred the nation-building process in 2006 and 2008, the political uncertainty since the 2017 elections signifies that several unresolved issues are still looming. Despite the political uncertainty, Timor-Leste continues to be assertive on a range of topics with potential implications for the country's foreign policy agenda. Nevertheless, the internal situation poses questions and doubts in regards to the direction this small state seeks to pursue (Seabra 2012: 145). As one of the newest players in the international arena and a small state, Timor-Leste had to formulate a foreign policy that not only guarantees its worldwide recognition but also to establish the country as a credible actor in the regional setting by not neglecting its nearest neighbors. As an oil-rich country, it provides Timor-Leste not only with opportunities but also challenges, especially given the various choices that the small state has to make concerning where to allocate them.

By opting to balance key international donors which mostly are either historically and culturally related or politically engaged, and at the same time, investing in a secure and stable regional scenario, a careful diversification of the country's foreign policy goals was required, despite the various constraints that could impede those goals. Despite the establishment of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR) with the aim of investigating human rights violations during the Indonesian occupation, the human rights violations perpetrated by the Indonesian military remain a thorny issue between Indonesia and Timor-Leste until today. However, Timor-Leste recognizes that it remains necessary to establish a working bilateral relationship with Indonesia not only as former ruler but also its neighbor. This is done based on the reason that it is essential to recognize the importance of state survival, therefore, normalizing ties with Indonesia is unavoidable (Seabra 2012: 146).

For all intents and purposes, the Timor-Leste government acknowledges that it is crucial to forge close relations with Southeast Asia in order to better secure its longer-term diplomatic relations and realizing the potential for opening new relations with vibrant economies, as well as for contributing to a regional stability.

Nonetheless, this particular goal has so far been much delay, as Timor-Leste has been limited to observer status in ASEAN. Among the reasons for this are structural constraints in the accession process and to some member states' doubts about Timor-Leste's ability to meet the organization's requirements.

On the other hand, given Australia's contribution to the later stages of the independence process through both its leadership of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) and its bilateral aid program, Australia has come to regard Timor-Leste as a country situated within its sphere of influence. Bilateral relationships between the two countries, however, have occasionally caused some tensions, one particularly difficult issue concerns the exploration of the vast natural resource reserves lying beneath the Timor Sea (Seabra 2012: 147-148). As for its status as a former colony of Portugal, the former colonial power retains a historical and continuing bond with Timor-Leste. Since the Indonesian invasion in 1975, and especially leading towards the 1990s, Portugal has been supportive towards the independence of Timor-Leste and it played an active role in securing the referendum leading to independence (Seabra 2012: 149).

Section 8 of the Constitution sets out the principles for Timor-Leste's foreign policy. It states the importance of the right of the people to self-determination and independence, the protection of human rights and the mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality among states as guiding principles. The aims of Timor-Leste's external policies are to establish relations of friendship and cooperation with all other peoples, aiming at settling conflicts peacefully, general disarmament, establishing a system of collective security and creating a new international economic order to ensure international peace and justice. The same section of the Constitution also mentions the importance of maintaining privileged relations with Portuguese-speaking countries and of special ties of friendship and cooperation with neighboring countries of the region.

Timor-Leste's Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030 in the section on Foreign Affairs stipulates that "As a small nation in a highly strategic geographic location, Timor-Leste's security will

depend upon forging strong relationships with our neighbours and friends, making a positive contribution to a stable and peaceful region, and participating in global peacekeeping missions and cooperative international forums and initiatives". Having an outward-looking policy, it believes that a collaborative approach to foreign policy will encourage people to take pride in the development of Timor-Leste, attract international investors and generate greater opportunities for economic advancement. In the plan, it has highlighted that apart from the CPLP in which Timor-Leste is active, another key regional organization is ASEAN. It states, "Timor-Leste's aspiration to join ASEAN is based on our geographical location, the wishes of our leaders and people, and our cultural affinity with our Asian neighbours. The plan has set the target to be a key member in ASEAN by 2020". As mentioned in the earlier section, the MFAC, through the Directorate-General for ASEAN Affairs and with support from the ADB technical assistance team kicked off the TLAMP document that set forth Timor-Leste's commitment and timeline for policy, economic and legal reforms to become a full member in the broad range of ASEAN cooperation.

From the interaction that I have had with various respondents, it reveals that there are some agreement in which Timor-Leste is connected to Southeast Asia, and that it plays an important role in defining its regional identity despite its difficult journey to independence. In the meantime, the foreign policy approach of the Timor-Leste government is also a distinctive feature in defining its regional identity especially its active role in the CPLP and the G7Plus. For many respondents, it is logical that Timor-Leste be considered as part of ASEAN. Nevertheless, Timor-Leste is considered as Asian but also Pacific because of its ethno-linguistic and oral history connections. As elaborated by one respondent, it has always claimed itself to be geographically part of Southeast Asia; indeed, it shares the same island with West Timor, which is part of Indonesia. In this regard, one can assume that Timor-Leste has a closer proximity to the Southeast Asia region than to other regions.

Moreover, the annexation and occupation of Timor-Leste by Indonesia for 24 years has tied Timor-Leste historically with the Southeast Asia region, although in an undesired way. It resulted in

an expanded cultural interaction between the people of Timor-Leste and the Malay-Indonesian world. Great numbers of Timorese are able to communicate in the Indonesian language, which enables them to communicate with people from other Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. Timor-Leste is seen as part the ASEAN community as there are commonalties and cultural ties with other ASEAN members, especially with Indonesia as its closest neighbor and also as a former Indonesian-occupied country. Nevertheless, many respondents do not dismiss the close connection between Timor-Leste and Portugal.

During the years of the liberation struggle, Timor-Leste was more Pacific than Southeast Asian. However, since the restoration of independence in 2002, Timor-Leste's identity is seen to be part of Southeast Asia. However, to some extent, Timor-Leste's foreign policy tends to be more inclined to the European region in some instances such as its active role in CPLP. The question of regional identity is complicated in than it is "socially constructed" as argued in the constructivist framework. A respondent as I quote said "Timor never see itself [as] part of any regional identity except for the CPL P... ASEAN countries were not really supportive of our struggle, only Vanuatu in the Pacific who was very close to us. Perhaps the closest we can get is that we do have families living in West Timor, since before the formal separation by the Dutch and the Portuguese and recently in 1999".

There exist generationally different views in term of Timor-Leste's regional identity. As informed by a respondent, on the one hand, the East Timorese have fought so hard to be different from Indonesia, on the other hand, they have come to embrace being closer to the Portuguese. Having said this, the Timorese are still defining themselves in term of regional identity. As part of the constant struggle to be free and independent, the Timorese had to reject much of what Indonesia was trying to inculcate in them. Yet, there are thousands of young Timorese voluntarily taking Portuguese citizenship to go to the United Kingdom for economic opportunity. Nevertheless, the respondent believes that from the perspective of religions, values and norms, particularly the historical past, these will keep many Timorese from truly embracing being Asian. As

regional identity formulation also links closely with how a country shapes its foreign policy, the same respondent also added that Timor-Leste's foreign policy is driven by the concern about being stuck between two giants: Indonesia and Australia. Nevertheless, the strength of Timor-Leste lies in its ability to straddle continents and alliances.

The respondents are however divided in their views when it comes to the question about admission of Timor-Leste to ASEAN. Some have stated that Timor-Leste might not be ready for the time being due to the internal political and economic challenges, although in general, there are more supportive voices for Timor-Leste to be admitted to ASEAN at some time in the future. Timor-Leste is undoubtedly unique when it comes to its regional identity. Therefore, in determining the direction of its foreign policy, it is trying to diversify its neighborly reach while awaiting the consecration of its primary regional objective. While the association of regional identity with Southeast Asia is relatively strong as shown through the history and socio-cultural norms and values that they share, this is also not to dismiss the close links between Timor-Leste and other regional organizations such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and Pacific Island Forum apart from the CPLP. The significance of Timor-Leste's ASEAN bid goes beyond economic benefits to the realm of security-building and identity formation. Functioning as a boundary-setting practice, it not only signifies the country's position in the regional and global order but also helps secure the young state's identity by distinguishing its political and cultural difference from its two powerful neighbors as an independent, Portuguese-speaking Southeast Asian nation.

V. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate the connections between Timor-Leste's search for identity and its leaders' foreign policy preferences in the post-independence period. Using a constructivist theoretical framework and relevant empirical material derived from the interactions with local respondents, I sought to

clarify what is on their “slate” during their external interactions in the context of the development of regional identity in Southeast Asia. After all, the specific foreign policy decisions that the state leaders take as part of their efforts to shape and consolidate the political and cultural character of their state and its place in the emerging global order do not occur in an ideational vacuum, nor are they simply shaped by a set of supposedly objective rules and behaviours conditioned by the strategic environment in which they are operating. Understood as such, it becomes clear that the choices made by Timorese policy-makers in relation to membership of the Southeast Asian region as the strategic orientation of the fledgling state was neither the “only choice” available nor merely a matter of material considerations. Instead, they view ASEAN membership as providing an important opportunity to establish and secure the boundaries of state identity, which is essential not only for their state survival but also as an opportunity for common benefits in areas such as politics, economy, security and socio-cultural cooperation.

This discourse is closely related to the country’s transitional experience from a former colony and then internationally supervised by the UN to a more stable country. All these experiences have been embedded in a process of identity construction that is underpinned by the understandings and meanings that Timorese officials have attributed to the emerging global order (Sahin 2014). The challenge is how Timor-Leste can balance its foreign policy direction to garner more regional attention to its own interests in the long run in asserting itself as a truly independent country. Ultimately, the relatively complicated relationships between Timor-Leste and some of its major foreign partners are common problems for every small state, this is especially so when it is still struggling to advance its development. The need for greater freedom to establish an independent policy is inherent in any state’s growth, and, since Timor-Leste is a young nation, it is only natural that some hard choices and decisions have to be taken in the name of state survival and development.

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