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**The Southeast Asian Games**

Simon Creak

**Abstract**

In purely sporting terms, the biennial Southeast Asian (SEA) Games is a third tier megaevent, positioned beneath both the Olympics and the Asian Games. Yet this formal status has done nothing to limit the growth and consolidation of the event on the regional sporting calendar over the past sixty years. Nor has it diminished the seriousness and enthusiasm with which the eleven Southeast Asian nations approach the event. This chapter examines how the SEA Games, all but ignored outside the region itself, came to dominate regional sporting culture in Southeast Asia through distinctive norms of regional cooperation in sports, In doing so, it argues the event should not be considered a sub-regional derivative of larger regional and global events, but as a highly adapted regional cultural form embedded in regional history and international relations.

**Introduction**

In purely sporting terms, the biennial Southeast Asian or 'SEA Games'—as the event is universally known—is a third tier megaevent, positioned beneath both the Olympics and the Asian Games. This formal status has done nothing, however, to limit the growth and consolidation of the event on the regional sporting calendar over the past sixty years. Nor has it diminished the seriousness and enthusiasm with which the eleven Southeast Asian nations approach the event. The most recent edition, the 30th SEA Games in the Philippines in 2019, broke all records with more than 8500 athletes competing in 56 sports, far more sports and almost as many athletes as the more prestigious Asian and Olympic Games. All but ignored

outside the region itself, the SEA Games came to dominate regional sporting culture in Southeast Asia through distinctive norms of regional cooperation in sports, embedded in regional history and international relations.

**Historical foundations**

The forerunner of today's SEA Games, the South East Asia Peninsular (SEAP) Games, were established in 1959 by Thailand and several of its neighbours: Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya, and the Republic of (South) Vietnam. Singapore was added before the first games in Bangkok. The impetus for the games came from the vice president of the Olympic Council of Thailand, Luang Sukhum Naiyapradith, who proposed a 'little Asian Games' during meetings with his counterparts at the third Asian Games in Tokyo in 1958. Having agreed with the idea in principle, the men convened again in Bangkok the following June and formed the SEAP Games Federation (SEAPGF). With the OCT president Lieutenant-General Praphat Charusatien also being deputy prime minister of the Thai junta, the Thai government readily agreed to host and fund the first SEAP Games in Bangkok.

According to Sukhum, the SEAP Games formally had two objectives: to promote friendship among Thailand and its newly independent neighbours; and to improve sporting standards among competing nations in the Olympics and the recently formed Asian Games. Both stemmed from the context of decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia. Although Thailand had not been colonized, its neighbours had recently gained independence or, in Singapore's case, internal self-government from colonial rulers. In this context, national leaders embraced international sport to promote nation building and foster relations in the postcolonial region of nascent nation-states. But sports officials found their standards lagged far behind regional competitors. Regular competition against opponents of similar sporting standards and physicality, argued Luang Sukhum, would improve performances at the larger events. Meanwhile, Thailand's status as a bastion of anti-communism determined that the

games' vision of regional friendship would be anti-communist, as evidenced by the absence of the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam and a number of disputes between the Thai founders and neutralist Cambodia.[1] The SEAP and later the SEA Games remained limited to non-communist nations until the 1980s.

The SEAPGF meetings in 1959 adopted a number of distinctive rules. First, the founders decided to conduct the games biennially between each Olympic and Asian Games, twice as frequently as the larger events, so the SEAP Games could be used to prepare for these. Second, the SEAPGF determined that after the first games in Bangkok, hosting of future editions should rotate according to alphabetical order of participating countries. According to this principle, the games would pass automatically to Burma (1961), Cambodia (1963), Laos (1965), and so on. Finally, the rules gave the host country the power to select the sports program. Besides the inclusion of aquatics and athletics, both of which were compulsory, hosts initially stuck with familiar Olympic sports, in keeping with the objective of training for larger meets.[2] Over time, these distinctive characteristics would profoundly shape the evolution of the SEA Games.

In the short term, however, the SEAP Games were plagued by the confluence of postcolonial nationalism, the Cold War, and military conflict in Indochina. For a range of political reasons, Cambodia withdrew from the inaugural games in 1959, cancelled its own games in 1963, and again declined its turn to host and even to attend Thailand's second games in 1967. With Laos also declining to host due to conflict in the country, the 1965 games passed to Malaysia (as Malaya had been renamed). As it transpired, none of the three Indochinese countries were able to host the SEAP Games between 1959 and 1973, leaving the other four countries to do so. Malaysia and Singapore urged the SEAPGF to admit new member countries, but Thailand resisted these efforts. With the communist revolutions of 1975, the three Indochinese countries withdrew completely, leaving the event to an uncertain future.[3]

The SEAP Games became the SEA Games (with no 'Peninsular') in 1977 when the remaining four members finally agreed to admit Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines—all located in archipelagic Southeast Asia. Despite the changed name and expanded membership, the numbering of the games was retained so that the 1977 event was called the ninth SEA Games. As sporting powerhouses in Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines would host as soon as 1979 and 1981, respectively, and Indonesia took over from Thailand as the dominant country. Cambodia returned to the SEA Games under Pol Pot's Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea in 1983-87 but Laos and Vietnam agreed to re-join only after the CGDK withdrew in 1989—an important early indication of the wider regional détente that would follow in the early 1990s. All ten countries of Southeast Asia competed for the first time in 1995 when the newly reconstituted Kingdom of Cambodia again re-joined the games. Timor Leste became the most recent member of the SEA Games Federation (SEAGF) in 2003 after gaining independence from Indonesia.

**Core principles**

Like other sport megaevents, the SEA Games is a large, expensive, and complex event, and could be studied from many perspectives.[4] One of the most important is its role and interaction with the emergence of regionalism in Southeast Asia. Although the original SEAP Games were envisaged as a 'little Asian Games' and today's SEA Games look similar in many ways to that event and the Olympics, the SEA Games developed a distinct culture of its own, especially after its expansion in the late 1970s. This was due largely to the distinctive rules adopted by the founders and the institutional norms that developed around them. Shaping the SEA Games in unexpected ways, these norms fostered the emergence of a distinctive regional sporting community. For this reason, it would be mistaken to consider the SEA Games merely as an imitative or localized derivative of the larger megaevents on which it was originally based. Embedded in regional cultures of sport and regional cooperation, the

SEA Games came to represent a unique mode of cooperation in sport as well as in Southeast Asian regional affairs.

To an unfamiliar eye, one of the most distinctive features of the SEA Games is the inclusion of many 'local' or 'traditional' sports, defined as non-Asian Games or Olympic sports. This trend began in 1965 with the inclusion of *sepak takraw*, a spectacular game resembling volleyball played with the feet and a rattan ball. Standardized from indigenous games played throughout the region—and named by combining Malay and Thai words for the game—*sepak takraw* had a genuine regional heritage and was thus a quintessential regional sport. From the 1980s, however, host countries took turns strategically choosing not just local but national and 'new' sports to derive advantage. While the number of sports climbed gradually from 12 in 1959 to 18 in 1985, it leapt to 29 in Indonesia's second SEA Games as host in 1987. Since then, the number reached 43 in 2007 (Thailand) and an astonishing 56 in 2019 (Philippines). Although SEAGF rules were modified to cap the number of non-Asian Games/Olympic sports, this was ineffective in reorienting the focus towards Asian Games and Olympic events.

Since this practice emerged in the 1980s, officials and media have ritually condemned the steady increase in local and new sports. Some go as far as calling it corruption, but most question the practice for undermining the goal of building performance in Asian Games and Olympic disciplines. Nevertheless, this novel feature of the games has stuck for two main reasons. First, national and regional sports federations in Southeast Asia see the SEA Games as a means of promoting their sport, first in Southeast Asian countries and ultimately beyond. Many national sports, including *pencak silat* (Indonesia), *muay thai* (Thailand), *arnis* (Philipines), and *vovinam* (Vietnam) have been included in the SEA Games for this reason.

Second, and most substantively, the inclusion of local and new sports served as a key factor in emergence of distinctive norms of reciprocity and exchange. In essence, the practice

allows host countries to dominate the medal tally (in the case of larger nations), or to dramatically increase the number of medals won (for smaller nations). In recent editions, for example, strategic sports selection helped Indonesia (2013) and the Philippines (2019) top the medal tally with 180 and 149 gold medals, respectively, the only times they had done so since previously they hosted (in 1997 and 2005). Though much smaller, Laos won a remarkable 33 gold when it hosted for the first time in 2009, more than six times more than its next best performance two years earlier.

Sports selection is not the only factor that contributes to inflated medal tallies, but SEAGF officials agree it is the most consequential factor in boosting host country performances.[5] While this may seem contrary to the spirit of sport, officials accept the practice to ensure the host governments that fund the SEA Games can gain a patriotic dividend on their investment—thus ensuring governments remain willing to host the SEA Games. Most crucially, with biennial frequency and under the rotational hosting system, all countries are ensured the opportunity to host and benefit from these norms. With Brunei (1999), Vietnam (2003), and Laos (2009) having hosted for the first time in the past two decades, and Myanmar having done so in 2013 for the first time in 44 years, only Cambodia (hosting in 2023) and tiny Timor Leste (which only joined 2003) await their turn for national glory.[6]

Despite being contrary to fundamental sporting principles (notably, the equality of opportunity to compete and win), this system of reciprocity and exchange underpins the regional sporting community of the SEA Games.[7] Perhaps because they recognise this, athletes and officials often stress that the SEA Games are 'the friendly games.' In part, this common belief reflects the pervasive rhetoric of 'friendship' in the SEA Games, stretching back to the original SEAP Games' objectives.[8] As in other sport mega-events, regional ideas are reinforced by symbolic and semiotic devices, and by rhetoric of 'friendship' and 'family' that slips unconsciously between individual and national registers.[9] In the case of the SEA

Games, it is further underpinned by popular understandings of geographical proximity, comparable physicality, and putative cultural similarities among participants, even if such ideas are questionable given the region's great cultural diversity. In addition, the notion of the SEA Games as the 'friendly games' appears also to stand as tacit recognition that the SEA Games are not governed solely or even primarily by the pursuit of sporting excellence.

On the flipside of friendship rhetoric, the SEA Games provide pervasive opportunities for overt performances of nationalism. Of course, this also is a feature of all international sports events, with the pride of representing ones nation, the raising and waving of flags, singing of chants and anthems, cheering of athletes and teams, and reading about national accomplishments (largely to the exclusion those of others) in the national press and online. The popular pride that typically comes with hosting the SEA Games is another case in point, notwithstanding the controversies that occur in host nations over the cost and desirability of hosting.[10] Yet, beyond these common features of nationalism in sport, the nationalism of the SEA Games is inflamed by intense rivalries among neighbouring traditional rivals. Although the proximity of these nations promotes familiarity, desire, and emulation, sporting passions combine with historical acrimony to breed intense rivalries, including racism and violence among fans.[11]

While such incidents contradict discourses of friendship, they build the region in another more subtle way. The combination of familiarity and contempt breeds a love-hate paradox, in which the SEA Games provide a potent means of constructing national selves in contradistinction to ones nearest neighbours—the same countries that figure as friends and villains in national historiography and myth.[12] Most importantly, these rivalries exist within a sealed system of regional competition based on the imagined reality of 'Southeast Asia' as a historical and geographical construct—a construct that emerged from the post-war period parallel and dialogically related to the SEA/SEAP Games.[13] In this way, proximity and

rivalry combines to reinforce a collective sense of mutual national construction and interdependence.[14]

**Conclusion**

The SEAP Games were originally established as a means of promoting friendship among the young nations of the region and preparing teams for competition in larger international events. As a result of changes in the sports program and the rotation of hosting rights, they have come to focus more on the first of these two objectives than the second. Although the SEAP/SEA Games still resemble the Olympic model on which they were originally based, they have thus moved away from their original conception as a 'little Asian Games,' developing according to a distinct system of reciprocity and exchange and in the process becoming deeply embedded in regional history and international relations. The regional philosophy is most evident in the system of rotating hosts and is enhanced by the biennial frequency of the games, host selection of sports, the relatively small size of the region (11 countries), its geographically stable nature, and the proximity and shared histories of participating nations.

The idea of 'Southeast Asia' constructed and celebrated in the SEA Games appears stronger than the equivalent idea of 'Asia' in the Asian Games. Not only is Southeast Asia far less vast and diverse than Asia; the remit of the Southeast Asian Games has tended to move away from that of the Olympic Games, allowing greater adaptation to local cultural peculiarities. The regional idea of Southeast Asia has not emerged solely from the sporting community of the SEA Games; but sport and the SEA Games has been an important factor in creating it. Above all, the SEA Games defy the notion that a single Olympic 'template' is simply reproduced and adapted at different scale throughout the region and the world.

[1] Simon Creak, 'New Regional Order: Sport, Cold War Culture and the Making of Southeast Asia,' in *Spanning and Spinning the Globe: History of Sport in the Cold War*, ed. Robert Edelman and Christopher Young (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020). The Asian Games were also limited to non-communist countries around this time. See Stefan Huebner, *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913-1974* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).

[2] Simon Creak, 'Eternal Friends and Erstwhile Enemies: The Sporting Community of the Southeast Asian Games, 1959-present,' *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 5 (1): 147-172.

[3] Simon Creak, 'Friendship and Mutual Understanding: Sport and Regional Relations in Southeast Asia,' in *The Ideals of Global Sport: From Peace to Human Rights*, ed. Barbara Keys, 21-46 (Pennsylvania, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

[4] Though I do not consider it here, one of the most important aspects of the games are the political-economic dimensions of organizing such vast events in countries as poor as Laos and Myanmar.

[5] Besides sports selection, countries invest more in coaching and preparation when hosting, home crowds inspire local athletes, and rumours abound of biased judging in subjective sports (especially combat sports) favouring the home athletes.

[6] Creak, 'Eternal Friends and Erstwhile Enemies.'

[7] For the structural characteristics of modern sport, see Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, updated edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[8] Creak, 'Friendship and Mutual Understanding.'

[9] Creak, Friendship and Mutual Understanding.'

[10] Simon Creak, 'Sport as Politics and History: The 25th SEA Games in Laos,' *Anthropology Today* 27, no. 1 (2011): 14-19; *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), chapter 8; Simon Creak, 'National Restoration, Regional Prestige: Myanmar's Southeast Asian Games of 2013,' *Journal of Asian Studies* 73 (4): 1-21.

[11] For examples from the 29th SEA Games in Malaysia, see AFP, 'Malaysia fined $30,000 over "dog" chants during SEA Games,' *Jakarta Post*, 31 October 2017. https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/10/31/malaysia-fined-30000-over-dog-chants-during-sea-games.html (accessed 10 Dec. 2019); AFP, 'SEA Games: Myanmar fans beaten up at football stadium,' 22 August 2017. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/sport/sea-games-myanmar-fans-beaten-up-at-football-stadium-9147524 (accessed 10 Dec. 2019).

[12] As Frederick Barthes wrote, identity is strongest near the boundary. Fredrik Barth, 'Introduction,' *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Bergen-Oslo and London: Universitets Forlaget and George Allen and Unwin, 1969). For elaboration with respect to the SEA Games, see Simon Creak 'Sport as Politics and History: The 25th SEA Games in Laos,' *Anthropology Today* 27 (1): 14-19.

[13] Creak, 'National Restoration'; For the emergence of 'Southeast Asia', see Donald Emmerson, "'Southeast Asia': What's in a Name?,' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (1984): 10.

[14] Cf. Huebner, *Pan Asian Sports*, who suggests state nationalism and nation branding took precedence over Pan-Asian sentiments in the early Asian Games.