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Sport, diplomacy, and regionalism in Southeast Asia: the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games and ASEAN

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ABSTRACT

The biennial Southeast Asian or SEA Games, a regional sport mega-event modeled on the Olympic and Asian Games, were established by Thailand in 1959, and since then have been conducted 32 times across 10 of the region's 11 countries. This article examines how this understudied event has operated as a forum for diplomatic representation, negotiation and communication in Southeast Asia. We make three key arguments: (1) the SEA Games have provided member countries with a means to signal national progress and membership of the regional community, as well as to define and delineate this region; (2) the SEA Games have evolved parallel to the region's political grouping, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), but with important differences as well as similarities; and (3) the regional perspective of the SEA Games offers insights that blur the distinction in recent scholarship between traditional 'sports diplomacy' (foregrounding the state) and 'international-sport-as-diplomacy' (foregrounding non-state actors).

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Introduction

The relationship between sport, international relations, and diplomacy is long, complex, and fascinating. Major sports events or sport mega-events (SMEs), in particular, serve as platforms for countries and leaders to display national identities and attractiveness to a large audience, and to become a relevant actor in international affairs. These events offer multiple opportunities for public diplomacy through demonstrating sporting prowess, organizational capacity, cultural uniqueness, and good international citizenship (Murray 2016). Nevertheless, there is a risk of conceptual simplification in this field. Until recently, scholarship on sports diplomacy in Asia has largely been limited to state-to-state diplomacy and the geopolitics of SMEs. This includes the exemplary case of ping-pong diplomacy, as well as studies of Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups in Asia. This article, in contrast, contributes to the discussion on sport and diplomacy from a regional perspective, specifically that of Southeast Asia. Sports diplomacy within a region is potentially more complex than bilateral, state-to-state diplomacy, given the vaster number of relationships within a

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multilateral region, while also providing a more specific site than global events and geopolitics. Most importantly, a regional scope illuminates the long history and distinctive dynamics of sports diplomacy at a scale that is highly salient, both diplomatically and sportively, for participating countries yet is overlooked in studies of more prominent global SMEs in Asia.

Southeast Asia offers an especially valuable if largely overlooked case study of sport and diplomacy. First, the region boasts both a long-running biennial regional multi-sport event, the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games, held 32 times since 1959, and an established political organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which was founded almost a decade later in 1967. Scrutinizing the diplomatic role of the SEA Games in a context where most participating countries are also (but have not always been) members of ASEAN promises new insights into the relationship between sport, politics, diplomacy, and regionalism. Second, both the SEA Games and ASEAN can look back on relatively long histories spanning key periods in regional history, both during and since the Cold War. These parallel histories provide the opportunity to investigate the relationship between sports diplomacy and traditional diplomacy in a particular region. Third, our discussion on diplomacy and the SEA Games promises to contribute not only to debates on sports diplomacy but also to the understanding of Southeast Asian regionalism and ASEAN, scholars of which have largely neglected the role of the SEA Games (cf. Creak 2017).

The article develops three key arguments. First, the SEA Games have functioned as an important space for regional public diplomacy. Not only have the SEA Games provided an attractive means for countries to signal membership of the regional community by participating in and particularly hosting the games; they have also provided a means for members to delineate and define the region, geographically and politically, in a popular and high-profile format. The second key argument concerns the relationship between the SEA Games and ASEAN. Although the SEA Games Federation (SEAGF) and ASEAN are organizationally distinct, they emerged parallel to one another with similar institutional norms and aims of forging a common purpose and identity in postcolonial Southeast Asia. This parallelism, we argue, provided regional sporting connections with a proximate political analogue. We also show how the SEA Games differed from ASEAN, particularly in terms of chronology—developments in regional sporting ties often preceded those in politics—and their mode of diplomatic communication.

Third, on a theoretical note, we propose that the SEA Games blur the distinction between 'sports diplomacy' (with governments as actors) and 'international-sport-as diplomacy' (foregrounding 'non-state sporting actors', or NSSAs) (cf. Murray 2018; Murray and Pigman 2014; Rofe 2016; Dichter 2021). This is due to the prominent role of the state in the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) of Southeast Asia and, thus, the SEAGF, a federation of the region's NOCs. As a result, we define the SEAGF as a 'regional semi-governmental organization' rather than an NSSA. This characteristic of the SEA Games' ruling body blurs the boundaries of governmental and non-governmental diplomatic action, offering new conceptual perspectives in the 'new sports diplomacy' (cf. Murray 2018).

This article proceeds in three main sections. First, we consider the SEA Games in relation to key scholarly interventions in the young but growing field of sport and diplomacy. Next, we examine the parallel histories of the SEA Games and ASEAN according to three fundamental functions of diplomacy—representation, negotiation, and communication—highlighting several similarities and some important differences. Finally, we focus on the experience of three

countries hosting their first SEA Games—Indonesia in 1979, Vietnam in 2003, and Laos in 2009—to illustrate the diplomatic issues at stake, especially in terms of asserting full membership of the regional 'family' and thus delineating the region that is celebrated in the SEA Games.

Sport and diplomacy in Asia

The analysis of sport and diplomacy builds on the certainty that international engagement through sport is inherently connected to politics and international diplomacy (Murray and Pigman 2014). Politics, however, should not be considered coterminous with diplomacy; whereas politics concerns the message, diplomacy is related to the mode of the message (Rofe 2016, 215). The key functions of diplomacy—communication, representation, and negotiation—thus demand specific analysis when scrutinizing the relationship between sport and diplomacy.

Until recently, the relationship between sport, politics, and diplomacy remained underexplored and undertheorized. Inspired by growing interest in sport as a soft power tool in the first decade of the 2000s, Murray and Pigman (2014, 1098) aimed to remedy this by distinguishing between (1) international sport employed consciously by governments as an instrument of diplomacy; and (2) international-sport-as-diplomacy, which involves non-state actors and occurs through regular international competitions (see also Murray 2018). The first category focuses on sport as a tool that governments use to achieve foreign policy goals (Murray 2016). In a bilateral context, this can entail the testing of possible policy shifts. As an avenue for increased dialogue, sport can help to mediate estrangement between people, nations and governments and bring leaders together (Murray and Pigman 2014, 1100). However, sport can only be used effectively as a diplomatic tool when it can build on momentum, and thus function as a facilitating condition and symbolic step towards a common goal (Cha 2009). Criticism of traditional sports diplomacy often points at its inconsistent, sporadic, and elitist nature, and its limit as a mere means to foreign policy ends (Murray 2016, 620).

The second category of international-sport-as-diplomacy—or the 'new' sports diplomacy (Murray 2018)—widens the scope of analysis to non-state actors, including civil society organizations (CSOs), multinational corporations (MNCs), international governmental organizations (IGOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and even celebrities, and is concerned with the way in which international sports federations 'interact with the state, business, and industry through international sports contacts and competitions' (Dichter 2021, 3, citing Beck 2020). Adapting Bull and Watson's notion of an 'international society of states'—reflecting the state of order that diplomacy seeks to foster amongst otherwise anarchic states—Murray (2018, 142) calls this ecosystem of state and non-state sporting actors an 'international society of sport'. These aspects of sport and diplomacy are seen as proactive, regular, and inclusive compared to traditional, government-led diplomacy (Murray 2016). Rofe (2016) similarly encourages scholars to look beyond the state and even beyond international sport when conceptualizing 'sport and diplomacy'—a term he prefers over 'sports diplomacy' because of the equality it implies between the two nouns.

These discussions have been important for clarifying the conceptual bases of sport and diplomacy. Nevertheless, they have been developed primarily with reference to major and emerging powers, global sports events (particularly the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup), and globally prominent sports teams. In this article, we consider how a distinctive

regional sports event, such as the overlooked SEA Games, might be understood in the conceptual terms developed by these scholars, and how this case study might advance the conceptualization of sports diplomacy.

Most fundamentally, the SEA Games Federation (SEAGF)—the key actor involved in organizing the SEA Games—appears to blur the distinction between sports diplomacy and international sport-as-diplomacy that underpins much thinking in the new sports diplomacy. Unlike the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which can be categorized as a non-state actor (NSA), NSSA, INGO, and MNC (Rofe 2016; Postlethwaite and Grix 2016; Murray 2018)—the SEAGF retains close links with the states of member countries through the NOCs that comprise it. Furthermore, it boasts no significant commercial interests. For example, television rights continue to be awarded on a piecemeal basis, and the small amounts paid accrue not to the SEAGF but to the host country.

To put this in conceptual terms, whereas the IOC officially regards NOCs as 'embassies' for promoting and upholding the Olympic Charter (Postlethwaite and Grix 2016, 303), including autonomy from politics, the reality is different in Southeast Asia, as indeed is the case across much of Asia. Although some of the region's NOCs are formally independent of the government, the Olympic Council of Asia has a far greater proportion of NOCs headed by current or former government officials than any other regional Olympic confederation. Moreover, many of the clearest cases of non-independence are located in Southeast Asia (Wickstrøm and Alvad 2017, 12). Most notably, the majority of NOC presidents in the region typically retain close connections to the state. In addition, the SEAGF's relative lack of commercial sponsorship means the games depend almost entirely on host government funding (and sometimes foreign assistance). As such, all Southeast Asia's NOCs, including the more institutionally independent ones, rely heavily on government relations when hosting the SEA Games. Thus, while classifying the SEAGF is not straightforward, it would certainly be misleading to assume it was, like the IOC, an NSSA (or NSA), INGO or MNC. Instead, we suggest it is a *regional semi-governmental organization*, lying somewhat closer on a spectrum to an IGO than an INGO.

Another key concept for understanding the diplomatic function of hosting SMEs is soft power. Sports mega-events play a role in all five of the 'resources' that are crucial to a soft-power strategy: culture, tourism, branding, diplomacy, and trade (Grix et al. 2019, 30–31). In recent years, emerging economies such as the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and Qatar have embraced SMEs to enhance their agency in global affairs and increase their international prestige (Grix and Lee 2013; Grix et al. 2019). In Southeast Asia, the desire to host the SEA Games has long stemmed from a similar appeal, despite the smaller scale of the event. Host governments seek to display attractive cultures, values, and policies (cf. Nye 2008, 95), while (re)gaining regional acceptance and—in some cases—overcoming a negative image (Creak 2011, 2014; cf. Lee 2017, 480). The imperative of investing in long-term relationships to establish trust and credibility (Grix et al. 2019, 29) is also prominent in the SEA Games, as it is in ASEAN.

According to Cha, sport has been 'unusually central' to government policy and diplomacy in Asia, 'where tactfulness, symbolism and subtlety are highly valued' (2013, 1592). This impression is reinforced by the widespread scholarly attention paid to a few especially high-profile events: ping-pong diplomacy, landmark Olympic Games in East Asia (1964, 1988, 2008), the East Asian Era of the Olympic Games (2018–2022), the controversial 1962 Asian Games in Indonesia, and the short-lived but politically significant Games of the New

Emerging Forces (GANEFO, 1963 and 1966)—both editions of which were staged in Southeast Asia. However, the Asian continent also has a deeper history of regular but less studied regional sports events, notably the Far Eastern Championship Games (1913–1934) and its successor, the Asian Games (since 1951)—the latter being the largest regional sports mega-event in the world. Although geopolitics and international relations have featured prominently in scholarship on the Asian Games (Huebner 2016; Hong 2007), studies focusing specifically on regional diplomacy are less common (but see Cha 2013). Nor do existing studies engage with the emerging scholarship on sport and diplomacy.

In addition to the Asian Games, several smaller regional events take (or have taken) place under the umbrella of the Olympic Council of Asia. Besides the SEA Games, which were established soon after the Asia Games in the late 1950s, these include the more recently founded South Asian Games (conducted since 1984), East Asian Games (1993–2013), Central Asian Games (1995–2003) and West Asian Games (1997–2005). While diplomacy related to these events has gained little scholarly attention compared even to the Asian Games, international relations and regional politics have provided a focus for the analysis of regional sports in the Arab world (Al Zandani and Bouandel 2021) and the Middle East (Stanton 2021). Stanton's (2021) findings on the Middle East correspond with our analysis of the SEA Games, namely how member countries embrace the opportunity to participate to display equality with other nations and thus membership of a region. Although the present study builds on valuable earlier work on the politics of the SEA Games (Creak 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015), which highlights diplomatic issues including regional Cold War relations (Creak 2020), norms of cooperation (Creak 2017), discourses of friendship (Creak 2019), and representations of regional leadership (Trotier 2021a), the present study represents the first to develop a comprehensive model of how diplomacy functions in the SEA Games.

Parallel histories: the SEA Games and ASEAN

Spanning the continental and archipelagic zone south of China and east of the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia today comprises eleven countries: Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia on the mainland; Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, and Timor Leste in maritime Southeast Asia; and Malaysia, which spans the peninsula and archipelago but is usually grouped with the latter due to ethnolinguistic and religious similarities. With the exception of Timor Leste (which is currently pursuing membership), the same countries are today members of ASEAN.

Southeast Asia's recognition as a geographical region emerged only recently, during the Second World War and particularly the Cold War (Emmerson 1984). Paradoxically, the chief characteristic of the region is often purported to be its diversity—geographic, demographic, ethnolinguistic, religious, cultural, political, and economic. Nevertheless, the region also shares deep cultural and historical similarities, including traditional modes of political organization, the fluid and shifting nature of boundaries (prior to colonialism), common agricultural practices, the relative autonomy of women, ancient links with India and China, and similar experiences of European imperialism, Japanese occupation, and postcolonial nationalism (Acharya 2012). As products of the postwar, postcolonial period, both the SEA Games and ASEAN represented parallel efforts to forge a cooperative purpose and collective identity out of these strands of proximity, diversity and common experience.

In order to understand how these diplomatic histories emerged alongside and shaped one another, this section examines the emergence and evolution of SEA Games diplomacy—and, where relevant, parallel developments in ASEAN—according to three key functions of diplomacy: representation, negotiation, and communication. Representation covers the fundamental aspect of participation and membership, which is linked to a specific identity and positioning within the region. As Rofe (2016, 221) emphasizes, 'shared experience' plays a significant role in identity formation and consequently for the representation of these identities. Importantly, notions of representation in Southeast Asia are also strongly linked to processes of nation-building, particularly as they relate to decolonization and the Cold War. The aspect of negotiation draws attention to the operations of sporting organizations and federations—here the SEAGF—and their interactions with states and other entities (Rofe 2016, 222). This includes strategies of problem solving and decision-making among members. Communication, as a critical component of diplomatic practice, is highly present in sporting competitions in the form of messages to the audience (Rofe 2016, 219), which can include other member states, the public, or specific persons or groups.

Representation

Representation in regional sport or politics takes place on multiple scales. Just as athletes and officials represent their nations, both on the field and within regional sports institutions, the region itself is represented through the participation of some countries and non-participation of others. This latter aspect of regional representation is critical since it determines the very makeup of the region invoked in the names of regional sports events or political institutions. The membership of these events and institutions does not necessarily reflect the common geographical understanding of these names. Indeed, although the SEA Games and ASEAN were established in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively, representation in the two aligned only in the 1990s.

The biennial South East Asia Peninsular (SEAP) Games, as the SEA Games were originally known, were established in 1959, eight years before ASEAN. As the name of the SEAP Games reflected, participation was originally limited to the countries of mainland Southeast Asia: the founder Thailand, Burma (later Myanmar), Malaya (later Malaysia), Laos, Cambodia, and the Republic of (South) Vietnam. Although the island-state of Singapore was added prior to the first games on a technicality—that it could be considered part of the peninsula since it was joined to Malaya by a causeway—insular Indonesia's efforts to join were denied. This mainland basis for participation in the games echoed the Thai notion of the 'Golden Peninsula' (*laemthong*)—a term used in the Thai name for the SEAP Games—though it also served to keep large and powerful sporting countries like Indonesia and the Philippines out of the event (Creak 2020, 196). The games' founder, Luang Sukhum Naipradith, vice president of the Olympic Council of Thailand (OCT), invoked this restriction in explaining the two-fold aims of the SEAP Games: to 'strengthen the friendly relations that happily already exist among the countries that lie in the peninsula'; and to improve the performance of peninsular athletes at the Asian and Olympic Games (Organizing Committee of the First South East Asia Peninsular Games 1961, 5).

A second, unspoken criterion for membership was anticommunism; indeed, the communist Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam was not even mentioned by planners and

organizers, despite also being located on the Southeast Asian peninsula. With Thailand's anticommunist and American-backed junta serving as the United States' anticommunist bulwark in the region (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005, 148), Thai diplomatic aspirations for the SEAP Games built upon its efforts to promote friendly relations with its noncommunist neighbors to counter the appeal of domestic, Chinese and Vietnamese communism. Sport and culture were ideal for anticommunist public diplomacy since, unlike the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), also based in Bangkok, neutralist as well as 'Free World' countries could take part. The junta exercised direct influence over Thai sport and the SEAP Games. The president of the OCT, Lieutenant-General Praphat Charusatian, was also the deputy prime minister and interior minister, meaning he encountered little difficulty obtaining cabinet approval for the sports event. These connections also helped the OCT obtain support for the games from the US Embassy (Creak, 2020). On the other hand, Thailand's politics also contributed to Cambodia's withdrawal from the SEAP Games in 1959, 1967, and 1969—and cancellation of the 1963 event scheduled for Phnom Penh—due in large part to Cold War political tensions with its neighbor and personality clashes between the two countries' leaders (Creak, 2019).

ASEAN was formed in 1967, almost a decade after the SEAP Games, by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore (all in insular Southeast Asia), and Thailand. Although its membership and geographical makeup was different to the SEAPGF, it was underpinned by a similar anticommunist perspective. ASEAN was not the first effort to create a regional political grouping, but recent developments had increased the urgency and prospects of security cooperation among the five anticommunist countries. These included escalation of the war in Indochina, US talk of withdrawing from the region, the imminent departure of British forces from Singapore, and Indonesia's violent lurch to the right in 1965–1967, when the pro-Western General Suharto sidelined and replaced President Sukarno and eviscerated the Indonesian Communist Party (Davies 2018, 21). ASEAN's aims were initially vague—to promote regional peace and security along with economic, social, and cultural development—and bilateral issues divided some countries (Weatherbee 2019, 59). Its five member states were nevertheless united in their pro-Western outlook and in their fierce opposition to communism.

Representation in the SEAP Games and ASEAN gradually aligned as the regional Cold War intensified in the mid-1970s and then faded in the 1990s. In 1969 and 1971, soon after helping to form ASEAN, Singapore and Malaysia suggested expanding the SEAP Games to Indonesia and the Philippines (Creak 2019; Trotier 2021a). Although Thailand resisted for several years, it relented in 1975 when South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos withdrew due to the communist revolutions there, leaving the games on the brink of collapse. Indonesia, the Philippines, and the tiny British protectorate of Brunei were thus invited to join the renamed 9th Southeast Asian or SEA Games (without the 'P' for 'Peninsular') in 1977 in Malaysia. Significantly, the federation insisted on continuing the numbering of the SEAP Games and thus retaining the heritage of the event's first eight editions. The seven active countries now comprised the five ASEAN members as well as Burma and Brunei. When Brunei joined ASEAN upon gaining independence in 1984, de facto membership of the two bodies aligned even further, with only Burma among the active SEA Games participants not being in ASEAN. Although reunified Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia remained members of the SEAGF and continued to receive invitations to the games, the three countries did not participate for several years.

As upheaval in the region continued into the 1980s, further changes in representation emerged from the complex regional politics relating to Cambodia. Less than four years after the 1975 revolutions, the reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam occupied Democratic Kampuchea (DK), dislodged the Pol Pot regime, and established the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Despite its infamy, DK retained Cambodia's seat at the UN and ASEAN—led by Thailand and Singapore—condemned Vietnam's 'invasion' as a breach of sovereignty. With ASEAN, China, and the US backing DK and the Soviet Union backing Vietnam and the PRK, '"the situation in Kampuchea" dominated ASEAN's calendar and Southeast Asian regional relations for the next decade' (Weatherbee 2019, 64). The SEA Games were no exception. In 1983, the year after ASEAN's intervention helped to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), DK resumed Cambodia's place at the 12th SEA Games in Singapore. DK participation was controversial—its small contingent in Singapore was flanked by an armed guard when it marched at the opening ceremony—but also short-lived. After the 1987 SEA Games in Indonesia, the SEAGF barred the CGDK on IOC advice that it did not recognize its NOC as the PRK also claimed to represent the country (Samaranch 1988).

The CGDK's eviction cleared the way for the return of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and Lao People's Democratic Republic to the SEA Games in 1989—14 years after their withdrawal following the 1975 revolutions and six and eight years, respectively, before they joined ASEAN. This occurred in a wider context of regional rapprochement. With Vietnam and Laos having formally adopted market-based reforms at their ruling party congresses of 1986, Thailand announced its intention to turn regional 'battlefields into marketplaces' in 1988, and the following year—when Vietnam and Laos returned to the SEA Games—Vietnam announced plans to withdraw its forces from Cambodia (Weatherbee 2019; Acharya 2012). In 1995, the same year Vietnam joined ASEAN, the reconstituted Kingdom of Cambodia also returned to the SEA Games. That event in Thailand was the first in which all 10 countries in the region took part. Two years later, Laos and Myanmar (Burma) joined ASEAN and, in 1999, when Cambodia did the same, membership of the regional sporting and political communities had finally aligned. With the exception of Timor Leste, which gained independence from Indonesia in 2002 and joined the SEA Games in 2003, representation in the two entities has now been aligned for more than two decades.

Two decades later, the SEAP/SEA Games have now been held 32 times in 64 years. Over this period, the SEA Games and ASEAN developed on different trajectories but were subject to similar regional dynamics. On some occasions, changing representation in the SEA Games took place in parallel to developments in ASEAN; more often, however, changes in representation in the SEA Games predated those in ASEAN. On these occasions, the SEAP/SEA Games provided a testing ground for building trust and literally assembling the region on one field. On other occasions, the event served as a metaphorical battleground, where the region of Southeast Asia could be split and circumscribed on geographical (mainland/insular) or political (communist/anticommunist) grounds, though sport typically provided for greater ideological diversity than did ASEAN. Across this period the SEA Games also functioned as a legitimate stage on which the region's countries could fight it out among one another, on and off the field, both within the rules and while stretching them—as the next section will elaborate. Despite the ups and downs that inevitably resulted from such battles, representation in the sports event played a key role in defining the region over this period, particularly through the key question of who was in and who was out.

Negotiation

Although the key actors in regional sports and politics, the SEAGF and ASEAN, are not connected organizationally, they have developed similar norms of negotiation based on principles of foregrounding national sovereignty, informality, consensus-based decision making, and an emphasis on interpersonal relations. Created in Bangkok in June 1959, the SEAPGF (renamed the SEAGF in 1977) comprised the NOCs or national sports organizations (NSOs) of its six original members, with Singapore and subsequent members being added to the federation as they joined the event. The SEAPGF Council, responsible for overseeing the games, comprised three representatives of each NOC/NSO, with a president, vice president, and honorary secretary nominated for two years by the host of the next games. In addition, an executive committee was appointed for each two-year term, comprising the three office bearers and one representative from each member country (Organizing Committee of the First South East Asia Peninsular Games 1961, 15).

Chaired by Praphat and games founder Sukhum, the first SEAPGF meetings in Bangkok adopted rules for the event. While most regulations resembled those of the Asian Games, the most direct model for the SEAP Games, two key differences laid foundations for the SEAP/SEA Games' distinctive mode of cooperation. First, the SEAP Games would be conducted biennially, between each Olympic and Asian Games, meaning they would be held twice as frequently as those events. Second, after the first SEAP Games in Bangkok in 1959, the right to host subsequent games would be rotated according to alphabetical order (Creak 2017). Although the three Indochinese countries failed to host due to war, lack of funds, and (in Cambodia's case) tensions with Thailand and the International Amateur Athletic Association (related to GANEFO), subsequent SEAP Games were duly held in Burma (1961, 1969), Malaysia (1965, 1971), Singapore (1973), and Thailand (1967 and 1975) (Creak 2019).[1] Third, and finally, the host country was given the effective right to select the sports program, the significance of which would only reveal itself later.

ASEAN, meanwhile, was similarly governed by just a few formal rules in its first decades of existence. The brief Bangkok Declaration of 1967 established rotating annual meetings of foreign ministers and a standing committee. The more detailed Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), signed in 1976, stated key principles of ASEAN cooperation, including peaceful resolution of disputes, respect for national sovereignty, and non-interference in internal matters. Together with informality, decision-making by consensus, and reliance on interpersonal relations rather than rules and institutions, these norms (as opposed to rules) became the basis of the so-called 'ASEAN Way' of regional diplomacy. Although this approach limited ASEAN's ability to resolve complex regional problems, it provided a basis for regional dialogue and trust (Davies 2018, 6–8). After the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s, ASEAN pursued deeper institutionalism, culminating in the ASEAN Charter (2007) and ASEAN Community (2015), but its preference for talk, ritual, and performance—along with the key principles of the ASEAN Way—remained a key feature of the body (Davies 2018).

Over time, the SEAGF's culture of negotiation developed parallel to ASEAN's. While the official rules provided for decision-making through majority vote, the federation governed according to principles of informality, reliance on personal relations, and consensus-based decision making, with decisions reached behind the scenes and announced at SEAGF Council meetings. As in ASEAN, this has not prevented division, but has generally kept

disagreements in-house. Second, national primacy has remained fundamental to the functioning of the SEAGF. While this is partly due to the centrality of the nation in international sport, it is also owing to the system of rotating hosting rights and permitting host nations to select its sports program. Although the SEAGF Council must sign off on the final list of sports, hosts are effectively permitted to tailor their sports program, which they have come to design to their own advantage, particularly through the inclusion of local sports and other sports that are not included in the Asian or Olympic Games (Creak 2017).

Although the sports roster expanded gradually, including the addition of the regional sport of *sepak takraw*[2] from the 3rd SEAP Games in 1965, the more cynical exploitation of this rule effectively commenced at the 1987 SEA Games in Indonesia. That year, the host country expanded the program from 18 to 32 sports, including ten first-time sports, and won an astonishing 185 gold medals, double the previous highest of 93 (won by both Indonesia in 1979 and Thailand in 1985). Subsequently, the system of host selection of sports was regulated by distinguishing between three categories. In addition to the two compulsory sports of athletics and aquatics (Category 1), hosts must today include a minimum of 14 Olympic and Asian Games sports (Category 2) and a maximum of eight non-Olympic/Asian Games sports (Category 3). However, the effect of efforts to reduce the number of such sports has been limited, and the event has continued to grow. In 2019 the Philippines included a new record of 56 sports (Creak 2021).

This system is criticized by many journalists and other observers, including some SEAGF officials, who argue the goal of boosting performance in the Asian Games and Olympics should take precedence (e.g. Peh Shing 2003). For such critics, the inclusion of category 3 sports—local and other obscure disciplines—is problematic since these are not part of any higher-level events. While these sports have given the SEA Games a distinctive feel and appearance, they argue, they are typically included not just to promote local sports and heritage, but to boost the medal tallies of the host countries that draw up the program. Nevertheless, the SEAGF continues to permit the practice since on-field success by the host country guarantees it a surge in national pride and thus ensures governmental financial support. This support is essential for the SEAGF since, in the absence of major commercial deals that might give the federation more autonomy, it secures the games' future. Most critically, the rotation of hosting rights means that every host country—eventually all SEAGF members—get their turn to benefit. The underpinning logic is thus reciprocity and exchange among sovereign equals (Creak 2017).

At the heart of this system are core members of the Executive Committee and Sport and Rules Committee, who schedule future SEA Games, negotiate the sports program, and discuss changes to the SEAGF Charter and Rules. These people—mostly but not exclusively men—have typically worked together for many years and enjoy close personal relations. Sharing similar backgrounds as athletes and sports administrators, these officials possess an abiding belief in the power of sports—and the SEA Games in particular—to bring people together and to nurture friendship and cooperation, despite the rules and norms of the SEA Games differing in such fundamental ways from those of the Olympics and other multi-sport events (Creak 2019). Many of these officials enjoy direct or indirect links with their respective governments. NOC presidents (an honorary role) often hold senior positions in government or military or have held such positions in the recent past. While NOC secretaries-general (the more hands-on role) are usually more removed from day-to-day politics, they benefit from the access provided by NOC presidents and other official connections. Some of the

most active SEAGF figures possess life or honorary membership of the SEAGF Council, thus retaining a role even after they relinquish their NOC position. Despite many internal disagreements, particularly over the selection of sports, this inner circle provides the diplomatic relations and glue that keeps the SEAGF functioning as one of the region's longest-running regional institutional bodies (Creak 2017). Members refer affectionately to the SEAGF and its constituent NOCs as the 'SEA Games Family'—a term reminiscent of both the 'ASEAN Family' and 'Olympic Family', which reflect similar ideologies of intimacy in those large, cognate institutions.

Communication

At first glance, communication in ASEAN and the SEA Games would appear to have little in common. Whereas the former consists of rolling meetings involving leaders and officials at many levels, the latter brings together thousands of athletes to compete in sports events which demand physical and technical excellence. Nevertheless, communication in the SEA Games and ASEAN is more comparable than these initial impressions might suggest. Here we can distinguish between three different modes of communication: interpersonal, symbolic, and sportive.

As discussed earlier, both the SEA Games and ASEAN highlight the importance of informality and interpersonal relations, even at the ceremonial level of ASEAN summits and SEAGF Council meetings. If informality invites criticism on the grounds of elitism, lack of transparency, and unaccountability, both the SEAGF and ASEAN celebrate this mode of communication as allowing groups of like-minded men—and occasionally women—to bridge differences that might otherwise impede diplomacy. Thus, one of the key themes in both the SEA Games and ASEAN is the informal and intimate style of communication that is fostered through interpersonal bonds and relationships among officials (on ASEAN, cf. Nair 2019).

The SEA Games and ASEAN also share an emphasis on rituals, symbols, and performance. Just as scholars have recognized the importance of rituals and symbols in communicating identities and ideologies in the Olympic Games and other sports mega-events (e.g. MacAloon 1984; Besnier et al. 2018), Southeast Asia has provided a rewarding site for the study of traditional theatrics of power and their reinvention by leaders of modern nation-states (Geertz 1980; Jackson 2004). Combining these two traditions, several of Southeast Asia's postwar leaders patronized national and regional multi-sport events, embracing the political prestige offered by Olympic-inspired spectacle (Creak 2013, 2014, 2015; Trotier, 2021a, 2021b, Huebner 2016).

The SEAP/SEA Games have been paradigmatic in this regard. Sukhum, the SEAP Games founder, borrowed or adapted many traditions from the Olympics and invented new ones of his own in the rituals and ceremonies of the first SEAP Games in Bangkok. Interwoven with displays of Thailand's national culture and development and the national symbols of competing countries, the key diplomatic theme communicated in these performances was regional unity. This took place 'under the gaze and presidency of the games' patron, King Bhumibol' (Creak 2020, 202). Key SEAP Games symbols adapted from the Asian Games and Olympic Games, such as the official emblem, flag, and oath, communicated a similar message of unity (Creak 2020, 201). Over half a century later, performance technologies have changed profoundly, with the incorporation of highly choreographed

and technologically sophisticated cultural performances, in another borrowing from larger sport mega-events. But host countries and officials continue to boost their standing by reigning over the symbols, rituals, and performances of the SEA Games, just as King Bhumibol did at the first games in 1959 (Creak 2011, 2014).

Less obviously, ASEAN has developed a similar culture of ritual and symbolic diplomacy to that which is deployed in the SEA Games. Seeking to move beyond the debate between realist 'sceptics' and constructivist 'boosters' of ASEAN', Matthew Davies (2018, 8) argues that rituals and symbols—including meetings, summits, iconic images, and 'sacred texts'—'have become the way that ASEAN creates the impression of unity in the absence of other unifiers' (3). These actions and images, argues Davies, project unity despite the disagreements that characterize closed-door discussions. This analysis contains clear parallels with symbolic and performative modes of communication in the SEA Games, which relay an inspirational image of unity despite the more complex reality. Likewise, the ceremonial and symbolic features of both the SEA Games and ASEAN build on, revitalize, and modernize the tradition of the 'theater state' in postcolonial Southeast Asia (cf. Creak 2015; Geertz 1980).

Besides embodied rituals and aesthetic symbols, it helps also to think of official pronouncements of unity, friendship, and cooperation—ubiquitous in both the SEA Games and ASEAN—in terms of ritual and symbolism. There is clearly a rhetorical dimension to much of this language, whether in the form of official speeches, mottos, promotional materials, or media coverage. To be sure, journalists and other critics often question the importance and sincerity of such pronouncements, and many dismiss them as empty rhetoric. But the constant repetition of such ideas—even when people question their reality—has the effect of reinforcing the discursive association of both the SEA Games and ASEAN with unity and friendship (Creak 2019).

Finally, the sporting competitions of the SEA Games—the fundamental reason for their existence—can also be interpreted as a mode of diplomatic communication. At first glance, this may seem questionable. As opposed to the 'ideal' of sport, actual competitions create winners and losers, as well as arguments, cheating, controversies, and even violence—hardly the stuff of diplomacy (Murray 2012). Nevertheless, it is precisely sport's unscripted nature that makes the SEA Games a believable and authentic mode of multilateral engagement. In this view, competition and cooperation remain in tension, producing a 'love-hate' or 'friend-enemy' paradox that can bind a collection of national identities into a coexisting regional (supra)identity (Creak 2021). While sporting passions can indeed appear demonstrably *un*diplomatic, the passions of sporting competitions are meaningful for SEA Games diplomacy precisely because rivalries among neighboring countries are genuinely meaningful. This authenticity transforms sport-as-diplomacy into a popular and persuasive—if messy, uncontrollable, and sometimes unedifying—form of mass communication between sovereign entities, which involves not elite diplomats but multitudes of athletes and ordinary people. This authenticity and popularity represent the greatest difference in the communicative characteristics of the SEA Games and ASEAN.

First-time hosts: country cases

The facets of representation, negotiation, and communication come together in the actual conduct of the SEA Games. This is particularly true when a country hosts for the first time. While participating permits members to signal membership of the region and an equal

footing with counterpart countries, first-time hosts seek to demonstrate their capacity to prepare and stage a brilliant event, and to confirm their ability and willingness to share the burden of hosting with other SEAGF members—thus signaling full and equal membership of the community. Since 1977, when the SEAP Games became the SEA Games, six countries have hosted for the first time: Indonesia (1979), the Philippines (1981), Brunei (1999), Vietnam (2003), Laos (2009), and most recently Cambodia (2023), meaning that only Timor Leste remains to do so. In this final section, we sketch the first-time hosting of the SEA Games by Indonesia, Vietnam, and Laos to illustrate common diplomatic ambitions and strategies during different epochs in regional history.

Indonesia, 1979

As touched on above, Indonesia joined the renamed SEAGF in 1977, a decade after helping to found ASEAN. It took part in its first SEA Games later that year in Malaysia, a country it had been at (undeclared) war with the previous decade—officially known as the policy of *konfrontasi* (confrontation). Also in 1977, the SEAGF enthusiastically accepted Indonesia's offer to host the next SEA Games in Jakarta (Tjondronegoro 1979, 48). In diplomatic terms, the 1979 SEA Games in Jakarta relieved the burden on the four existing hosts of the SEAP/SEA Games, and underscored Indonesia's keen interest in being a member of the SEA Games as a sportive analogue to ASEAN. The Suharto government saw hosting the event as a new platform to confirm its common interests with neighboring countries, such as regional solidarity, an anti-communist worldview, and advocacy for economic development. Indonesia's first SEA Games as host also underlined the increasing convergence of common interest between the SEA Games and ASEAN.

The sports diplomacy of the 1979 SEA Games represented a notable shift from the diplomatic objectives of Indonesia's earlier forays into international sport in the 1962 Asian Games and 1963 GANEFO. Indonesia's foreign policy strategy at these two sports events had focused on Asia and Africa and, in the case of GANEFO, also on nations and other entities which identified as 'New Emerging Forces' (Trotier 2021a, 41). Whereas GANEFO in particular had manifested Indonesia's strengthening relationship with the People's Republic of China (Trotier 2021b, 511), this ended abruptly with Suharto's seizure of power and Indonesia's turn to its anti-communist neighbors.

Hosting the 1979 SEA Games gave Indonesia the opportunity to showcase itself as a valuable member of the SEA Games Federation, which reflected the country's pronounced emphasis on regional politics and its commitment to the Southeast Asian region. The organizers of the event aimed to 'cultivate and develop the holding of this South East Asian Games as a means in realizing utmost cooperation and solidarity of the South East Asian nations, through the venue of sports' (Tjondronegoro 1979, 49). The overt and repetitive declaration of friendship to the Southeast Asian neighbors can be traced in part to the new political orientation of Suharto's New Order and the radical departure from Sukarno's foreign policy. Whilst Sukarno had aimed for Indonesian leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement building on the 1955 Bandung Conference as milestone event of Asian-African solidarity, Suharto's foreign policy in the 1970s mainly served the economic development of the country and the stability of the Southeast Asian region. Consequently, Indonesia's self-portrayal at the 1979 SEA Games was in line with the overarching goal of strengthening ties with the non-communist members of the SEA Games and ASEAN.

In a prominent example of this about-face, the Indonesian organizers strongly emphasized diplomatic rapprochement with Malaysia after Sukarno's divisive policy of *konfrontasi* (Djiwandono 1996), which had been prominent during the 1963 GANEFO under the slogan 'crush Malaysia' (Trotier 2021a, 52). Stressing unity, mutual understanding, and brotherly ties with Malaysia, official communication during the 1979 SEA Games took the same line as the diplomatic relationship between the two countries as founding members of ASEAN and during the 1970s (Acharya 2012, 157; Liow 2004). The vice-chairman of the Indonesian Olympic Committee, for instance, expressed his gratitude to Malaysia for assisting and supporting his delegation during the 1977 event in Kuala Lumpur (Tjondronegoro 1979, 49).

In another notable shift from the Sukarno period, Indonesia did not attempt to make a grand entrance as a first-time host at the 1979 SEA Games but, rather, sought to portray itself as humble and cooperative. An example of this was the way the host used the concept of *gotong royong* (mutual and reciprocal assistance), a cultural operator and practice that is based on Javanese community life (Rahmi et al. 2001, 130), to represent cooperation and mutual understanding. In the context of the SEA Games, *gotong royong* was translated as 'the spirit of national cooperation' (Tjondronegoro 1979, 52), representing a link between Indonesian culture and the international event. Through the use of this concept, organizers projected an image of Indonesia as a good village neighbor—a neighbor who was eager to play a more active role in the community than before. This image had also been evident in Indonesia's salient role, a decade earlier, in co-founding ASEAN.

Also of relevance for Southeast Asian diplomacy was the emphasis on all ten member countries of the SEAGF in the context of the 10th SEA Games, despite the absence of the three Indochinese countries in Jakarta. Organizers attached specific importance to including all Southeast Asian nations in their communications, thus keeping the doors of the event open. Although Indonesia officially wished to remain humble, it comfortably topped the medals table again, just as it had done in Malaysia in 1977, dislodging Thailand from its domination of the SEAP Games and ensuring widespread popular support among the population, as well as recognition from its neighbors.

Vietnam, 2003

A decade after Indonesia's first games as host, Vietnam's regional rapprochement began on the sports field with its return—along with Laos—to the 1989 SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur. Given the depth of the still-unresolved Cambodia dispute, Vietnam and Laos's return to the SEA Games represented a striking use of sport to symbolize—and foreshadow—wider diplomatic rapprochement. An even more powerful symbolic statement would come with hosting the games. Vietnam declined a 1991 offer to host the SEA Games in 1993, due to its lack of suitable facilities (Khoo 1991; *Straits Times* 1993). But four years later in 1995—just after becoming a full member of ASEAN—Vietnam declared its readiness to host the 2003 SEA Games (*Straits Times* 1995). The SEAGF formalized this decision in 2000 when it awarded Vietnam its first SEA Games as host (Organizing Committee of the 22nd SEA Games 2002, 6).

Vietnam's SEA Games represented a milestone both for the host country and ASEAN's vision of One Southeast Asia. In hosting the games, the Vietnamese Communist Party and government sought to display the country's achievements under its Doi Moi (Renovation) policy, which since 1986 had opened the country to regional trade, investment, and tourism. More specifically, it sought to demonstrate its capacity to organize a large and complex

event, and its ambition to develop into a regional sporting power. Minister Nguyen Danh Thai, who was head of both the games organizing committee and Vietnam's Sports and Physical Culture Committee, stated: 'First, we want people to see that Vietnam … has adopted comprehensive reforms in line with its own identity … Second, we want people to see that Vietnam has a long sporting tradition' (Low 2003). At the opening ceremony, Nguyen added that the state and people of Vietnam had strived to organize the games 'justly and thoughtfully, thus leaving a fine impression in the heart of foreign guests as a civilized and hospitable Vietnam inherited with martial spirit' (Organizing Committee of the 22nd SEA Games 2003a, 5). Intentionally or otherwise, Nguyen's short speech referred to the SEA Games as the 'ASEAN Games' (ibid), thus referencing the wider context of regional rapprochement after the ascension of Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia to ASEAN during the period 1995–1999.

Vietnam's efforts to re-engage as a full and equal member of the region constituted the other fundamental theme of the games. To this end, the organizing committee chose as its motto 'Solidarity, Cooperation, for Peace and Development'. This motto had particular salience for Vietnam. 'Peace' referenced ending the Indochina Wars, including the recent conflict that had divided Vietnam and ASEAN; 'solidarity' and 'cooperation' evoked regional integration as the pathway out of this history of division; and 'development', a common goal throughout the region, referred to the anticipated gains of both the Doi Moi policy and regional engagement. The official SEA Games website brought these themes together, directly linking sport with wider diplomatic goals:

> With a desire for peace and development, Vietnam has in recent years actively got itself integrated into multilateral co-operation and taking part in international cultural and sport event[s] … Vietnam still seeks to get more integrated, as we do understand that while guns tear the world apart, arts, cultures and sports draw people closer. (Organizing Committee of the 22nd SEA Games 2003b)

In turn, the Vietnamese government provided substantial funding for the games. In addition to a reported games budget of US$85 million, it spent hundreds of millions of dollars on building and renovating venues (Low 2003; *Straits Times* 1995). By investing heavily in on-field preparations and including strategic local sports in the program, Vietnam topped the medal table with 156 gold medals, ensuring widespread public support. As intended, the games left both foreign visitors and local fans thoroughly impressed (Low 2003). Emphatically, Vietnam had arrived—or returned—to the region.

Laos, 2009

Just six years later, the Lao People's Democratic Republic or Laos—Vietnam's neighbor and the region's only other Marxist-Leninist state—took its turn to host its first SEA Games. Like Vietnam, its closest ally, Laos had returned to the SEA Games in 1989 after a 14-year absence, though its ASEAN membership was delayed until 1997. In 2001, the Lao National Sports Committee set the ambitious target of hosting the 2009 SEA Games, and in 2003 the SEAGF granted Laos its wish during the SEA Games in Vietnam (Creak 2015, 232–235). A year later, in 2004, Laos took its first turn as rotating chair of ASEAN and hosted its first ASEAN Summit, showing how its engagement with the region through both sport and politics took place in lockstep with one another.

Like Indonesia and Vietnam before it, Laos's first SEA Games dramatically marked the country's arrival on the regional stage. Nevertheless, the dynamics of hosting a large regional event were different given the country's small size (population 6.1 million in 2009). Despite economic reforms since the 1980s, decades of war and revolution had left Laos poor, lacking in state and human capacity, and highly dependent on foreign aid. Although Laos was by 2009 sustaining high levels of economic growth, per capita income remained among the lowest in the region. With this status mirrored on the sports field, Laos was hardly shooting to win the medal count or to put on the biggest and grandest SEA Games in history—its key objective was more modest: simply to host the games successfully and to leave a positive impression in the country and the region.

Accomplishing these tasks demanded creative diplomacy. Lacking funds to build the necessary sporting facilities, the Lao government combined methods it used to drive its rapid economic growth: land concessions, foreign investment, and foreign aid. Most controversially, Chinese developers built a US$100 million National Sports Complex on the outskirts of Vientiane in exchange for a centrally located land concession, sparking uncharacteristically vocal opposition. Though the deal was modified, China thus exerted an ambivalent phantom presence in the games. Less prominently, a Vietnamese company built the athlete's village in exchange for a large rubber and timber concession in southern Laos. Smaller facilities were granted by Japan, Thailand, the OCA, and a private Korean company (Creak 2011, 2015). In addition, stalwart SEAGF Council members provided technical assistance, uncompensated, as they had done previously for Vietnam (2003) and Brunei (1999) (Sieh Kok Chi, personal communication, 24 March 2014; Chris Chan, personal communication, 16 July 2014). Not all regional counterparts were so supportive, however. Even with its new facilities, Laos was forced to reduce the size of the games to just 25 sports—a dramatic reduction from 43 at the previous games in Thailand. With the customary inclusion of local sports but no room for basketball, gymnastics, and other established disciplines, organizers earned the ire of regional journalists and even some officials (Creak 2011, 2015).

Despite low expectations, Laos' SEA Games were experienced as a jubilant success not just for the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party and Lao population, but in terms of strengthening the country's image and integration in Southeast Asia. Domestically, the success was driven by the visceral and boisterous outpouring of national pride, both in hosting the games and in its on-field successes in netting an unexpected 33 gold medals. The audience was also regional. As politburo member, deputy prime minister, and chairman of the organizing committee Somsavat Lengsavad declared: 'the SEA Games [are] an important way of showcasing the development of Laos over the last 34 years [since 1975]. Friendly countries have praised our political stability while national socioeconomic development has continued to grow' (Creak 2015, 227). In addition to familiar rhetoric and symbols of regional unity and friendship, the Lao prime minister invited his Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, and Myanmar counterparts as well as the ASEAN general secretary to the opening ceremony, resulting in more traditional images of regional diplomacy (25th SEA Games Organizing Committee 2010). Ultimately, the regional press feted Laos as an impressive host, boosting the country's image and confirming its status as an equal member in the region (Creak 2015, 231).

Conclusion

Analysis of the Southeast Asian Games in relation to ASEAN provides a regional perspective on sports and diplomacy with new insights that help to bridge the dichotomy of traditional

sports diplomacy and international-sport-as-diplomacy. Just as the SEAGF can be understood as a regional semi-governmental organization, the evolution of the SEA Games has been closely related to political conditions and shifting relations within the region. Despite the prominent role of the state in the SEAGF, however, the sports event has always remained organizationally autonomous from ASEAN, allowing it to provide a separate testing ground for changes in regional dynamics. Throughout this history, the SEA Games have functioned as an effective diplomatic tool toward the common goal of building a Southeast Asian 'regional sporting community' or 'friendship circle', which is closely related to but ultimately distinct from ASEAN regionalism (Creak 2017, 2019). Though the geographic shape and political character of this sports region has changed over time, the attractiveness of membership has built on the possibility of establishing trust and credibility and gaining recognition in the form of public diplomacy.

Our exploration of the parallel histories of the SEA Games and ASEAN has specifically considered the three core functions of diplomacy—representation, negotiation, and communication. Among these, representation provided the starting point for our analysis of the formation and development of the two bodies, since it relates to the fundamental qualities of membership, participation, and the delineation of the region. As we have shown, representation in ASEAN and the SEA Games came into alignment only at the very end of the 1990s, after a period of evolution in which both bodies emerged from competing political and geographic ideas of the region against the background of the Cold War. Like the expansion of the SEAP Games into maritime Southeast Asia in 1977, the return of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to the SEA Games and their subsequent joining of ASEAN in the 1980s and 1990s marked critical moments in the emergence of Southeast Asia as we know it today.

Besides representation, ASEAN and the SEAGF have developed similar norms of negotiation based on what the former calls the 'ASEAN way' of regional diplomacy, with an emphasis on national sovereignty, informality, interpersonal relations, and consensus-based decision making. In the sporting arena, the unique rotation of hosting rights and opportunities for on-field success through the host country's selection of sports is central to the SEAGF's principles of reciprocity and exchange, notwithstanding dissatisfaction with this system among many observers. The close interpersonal relations of SEAGF delegates play a similar central role. Likewise, in spite of different modes of communication in the political and sporting realms, there exists a substantial similarity between ASEAN and the SEA Games as they share the importance of embodied rituals and symbolism. The greatest difference in the communicative characteristics, on the other hand, lies in the genuine popular appeal of sports competitions, which—in spite of the nationalism and manifold controversies that accompany the SEA Games—speak to the event's capacity as a platform for diplomacy and for assembling, if not always uniting, athletes and ordinary people from across the region.

These convergences and divergences between sports diplomacy and political diplomacy were made especially apparent at the three SEA Games hosted for the first time by Indonesia (1979), Vietnam (2003), and Laos (2009). To be sure, these landmark events were different in important ways. Whereas Indonesia's joining of the SEA Games in 1977 and first hosting of the event in 1979 marked the increasing alignment of the SEA Games with the anti-communist vision of ASEAN, the return of communist Vietnam and Laos to the SEA Games in 1989 heralded the post-Cold War vision of what ASEAN would later call One Southeast Asia—several years before ASEAN itself welcomed these countries as members. Yet in other ways, these events also demonstrated diplomatic commonalities of hosting the SEA Games for the first time: the public embrace of discourses of regional

solidarity, cooperation and integration; demonstrating full and equal membership of the region; enhancing national reputation and prestige through the display of high levels of organizational capacity and competence; and demonstrating national worth through outsized performance on the field. These case studies exemplify the diplomatic significance of the SEA Games as a sports event that has developed in parallel with but also distinctively from ASEAN and make a case for further studies aiming to understand the regional aspects of sports diplomacy in Asia and elsewhere.

Notes

1. The 1963 games scheduled for Cambodia were cancelled due to the dispute in regional sport sparked by the 1962 Asian Games and 1963 GANEFO while Singapore did not host until 1973 due to lacking a suitable stadium.
2. *Sepak takraw* is a game resembling foot volleyball and is also played at the Asian Games (since 1990).

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