

BOOK REVIEWS

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***Southeast Asia and China: A Contest in Mutual Socialization*, edited by Lowell Dittmer and Ngeow Chow Bing.** Singapore: World Scientific, 2017. Pp. 300.

A focus on the relationship between China and countries in the Southeast Asian region solely based on issues regarding the South China Sea (SCS) is incomplete. The relationship is much deeper and broader, and includes far-reaching economic linkages between these countries. To resolve the political-economic conundrum, the ten small Southeast Asian countries have adopted the “ASEAN way”, a normative mechanism to manage peace and stability in the region. While the SCS issue has the potential for conflict, economic integration is promoted as a constructive way to enhance growth and prosperity. *Southeast Asia and China: A Contest in Mutual Socialization* provides a detailed account of this well-encompassing, though at times conflicting, relationship between China and Southeast Asia, or ASEAN. It examines ASEAN’s norm of accommodation and differentiates it from the Western concept of sovereignty to explain how countries like Malaysia and China dilute the controversies around the territorial dispute and maintain cordial economic relationships with each other.

The edited volume is organized into three sections — Politics, Economics, and Norms — and twelve chapters (including the introduction), that are written by renowned Southeast Asian scholars.

The section on politics is the longest and discusses the issue bilaterally among the claimant states. Ngeow Chow Bing, as the author of the lead essay in the section, lays down the background with China’s new identity as a rising economic power and the implications for its relationship with Southeast Asia. Following that, five chapters are devoted to setting out the claimant countries’ perspectives on the SCS issue. You Ji, for example, provides the Chinese outlook and argues that recently China’s intentions seem to be less transparent than those of the Southeast Asian nations. To illustrate this, he discusses the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012 when Beijing displayed its “reactive assertiveness” to Manila, although it did not try to reclaim the Shoal the same way it did for the other islands — by building ports and airstrips. It seems that for Beijing, SCS is only a means to attain the bigger goal of expanding into the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Similarly, Reynaldo C. Ileto offers a historical account on the current Philippines–China relationship. He recounts that while the relationship with China during the 1970s was seen as a way of celebrating independence after decades of colonization, it turned sour after the Scarborough Shoal incident, as Manila dragged Beijing to the UN Convention on the Law of the SEA.

The section thereafter presents the case of: Vietnam, a front-line state that is often involved in skirmishes with China; and two relatively uninvolved states — Malaysia and Indonesia.

The second section on economics contains three chapters covering: the overall China–ASEAN economic relationship; the future of ASEAN–China trade relations; and the “One Belt, One Road” initiative in the context of China–Southeast Asia relations. Sarah Tong and Lim Wei Xin enumerate the long-term trade and investment trends between China and the Southeast Asian countries and provide an

account of how China became a leading economic partner of ASEAN. More recently, as the relationship between the two has become more asymmetric, with China growing much faster than the Southeast Asian nations, the ten small diverse economies feel that they are in a disadvantaged position to negotiate trade agreements, especially given their deteriorating trade balance with China. This, in turn, has had spillover effects on the negotiation regarding territorial dispute issues.

Kee-Cheok Cheong, Siew-Yong Yew and Chen-Chen Yong, in the following chapter, note that while not all ASEAN countries have a trade deficit with China, it does not imply that they have equally benefitted from a rising China. The CLM countries (Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar), for example, continue to have limited market access to China, and have yet to fully plug into the Chinese manufacturing value chain. Singapore, on the other hand, has gained from China's outward-bound foreign direct investment (FDI). Narrating China's ambition with its "One Belt, One Road" initiative, Zhao Hong mentions that the project is primarily aimed at promoting an export-oriented growth model. Likewise, the new funding mechanisms, such as the China Development Bank or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, are being advanced to build infrastructure capacity in less developed countries, which is not necessarily appreciated by all the receiving countries.

The final section deals with the normative approach followed by the Southeast Asian countries and China to come up with a win-win strategic partnership model. Anthony Milner presents the difference between the Western and Chinese (or ASEAN) concepts of sovereignty and argues that it is the accommodative approach in resolving differences that helps the ASEAN countries to maintain an easy relationship with China, irrespective of the dispute in the SCS. Similarly, China has its own understanding of sovereignty, i.e., *zhuquan*, which allows flexibility in interpretation and assigns greater importance to "giving face" rather than pursuing a full-blown conflict.

The book concludes with a chapter on connectivity, authored by Cheng-Chwee Kuik, Li Ran and Sien Ngan Ling, which highlights that China's ambitious infrastructure construction projects in the region are not charitable in nature. The actual intention is to link China's relatively underdeveloped areas, mainly the western and southwestern provinces, to the greater world. While the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement has enhanced the economic connectivity between the concerned parties to some extent, physical and policy connectivity need to be strengthened further.

Although the book covers three aspects of the China-Southeast Asia relations, it omits discussions on many other important areas, including: diplomacy; military defence; non-traditional security; finance; and cultural issues. Particularly for economics, the book could have added further value had it also elaborated on the bilateral relationships between individual ASEAN countries and China. While this would have highlighted the differences in interaction between claimant and non-claimant states in SCS with China, it would also have explained why it is becoming increasingly difficult for ASEAN to maintain consensus on several political and economic issues involving China. Also, the political economy of the China-Southeast Asia relations could have been better explained if the discussion on SCS was linked to economic relations, including Chinese initiatives to develop infrastructure in Southeast Asia.

Nonetheless, the book is useful for studying China-ASEAN relations and for understanding the underpinnings for a relatively stable and prosperous region, irrespective of uncertainties arising from the SCS issue. The volume is a definite reading reference for students and academics in international relations or international political economy.

SANCHITA BASU DAS
ASEAN Study Centre, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute,
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119614
email: sanchita@iseas.edu.sg