

***Southeast Asia after the Cold War: A Contemporary History.* By Ang Cheng Guan. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. Softcover: 282pp.**

Ang Cheng Guan's latest book traces the history of the international relations of Southeast Asia in the three decades following the end of the Cold War—up to 2018, the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As the author correctly notes in the opening chapter, this is already a relatively crowded field, with excellent contributions from such luminaries as Amitav Acharya (*The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region*, 2012), Evelyn Goh (*The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia*, 2014) and Marty Natalegawa (*Does ASEAN Matter? A View from Within*, 2018). However, *Southeast Asia after the Cold War* seeks to differentiate itself from these stellar contributions by adopting a “contemporary history” approach. The author draws inspiration from E.H. Carr's classic 1939 text *The Twenty Years' Crisis*.

Contemporary history is often denigrated by historians who maintain that respectable scholarship is impossible in the absence of access to archival materials, and by International Relations scholars who regard it as non-theoretical. The author is clearly attuned to these critiques and heads them off effectively, not least by adopting a meticulous scholarly approach throughout the book.

Interestingly, the book highlights many of the continuities in Southeast Asia's international relations across the period under examination. The South China Sea dispute, for instance, provides one of the book's primary focal points, with two of its eight chapters dedicated to this subject. Ang reminds us that serious tensions between China and Vietnam on the one hand, and China and the Philippines on the other, are not a recent phenomenon, but that these have ebbed and flowed over the course of the post-Cold War period. The book also highlights just how long the (ongoing) efforts to develop a Code of Conduct to govern behaviours in this contested body of water have dragged on.

One of the main criticisms of Southeast Asia's institutional expression, ASEAN, is its inability to cope with crises both in its immediate subregion and beyond. This criticism remains valid given ASEAN's absence from most of the major potential flashpoints that have afflicted Asia since the end of the Cold War, including the Korean Peninsula, Kashmir and the Taiwan Strait. However, what the author also highlights is the organization's often under-acknowledged

resilience in the face of seemingly existential challenges to its own survival. For instance, Ang shows how ASEAN defied expectations and not only bounced back after the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis but played a central role in generating a stronger East Asian Community sentiment. It was also able to ride out and respond effectively to its potential marginalization from Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's ill-fated Asia-Pacific Community proposal in 2008.

One of Ang's earlier books addressed the strategic thought of Lee Kuan Yew (*Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought*, 2013). His expertise in this area is evident in the references to this subject that are also smattered throughout the current book. I particularly enjoyed reading these and they whetted my appetite for delving into that earlier work.

There is ultimately little to fault with this latest book, which represents a solid, timely and very accessible contemporary history of Southeast Asia's international relations. That said, I would still like to have seen the author chance his arm, at least a bit. In this respect, one of the book's key strengths is also, arguably, a weakness. While the book is very well researched, readers would have benefited more if the author had shared his own views on the subject, rather than his very fair and balanced summation of the opinions of others. The author is certainly well placed to advance those views, having "follow[ed] assiduously developments in the region every day for almost 30 years" (p. 11). He has also, throughout his scholarly career, worked closely with some of the intellectual giants of his field, including the late Michael Leifer, Nicholas Tarling and S.R. Nathan (p. vii). By seemingly shying away from so doing, however, the author arguably falls somewhat short of meeting his admirable ambition of producing a work in the mould of *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. Put another way, while the book does a good job of identifying the raft of contemporary challenges facing Southeast Asia (and ASEAN), it would have been illuminating if the author had proposed some solutions to these challenges. That is almost certainly the approach that E.H. Carr would have taken. The author's rationale for refraining from doing so is that, unlike Carr, he is "neither a political scientist nor a public intellectual advocate" (p. 2). While that is certainly his scholarly prerogative, I for one wish that he had decided otherwise. The Southeast Asian subregion, and ASEAN in particular, would benefit from his evident experience and insight.

Notwithstanding this critique, this is still a very worthy contribution to a relatively voluminous body of work. Scholars of

Asian security will no doubt find it a useful reference text. Because of its clarity of purpose and prose, coupled with its coherent narrative approach, this book will undoubtedly find its way on to plenty of graduate and undergraduate reading lists, including as a core text for courses on the international relations of Southeast Asia.

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