

***Rivalry and Response: Assessing Great Power Dynamics in Southeast Asia.* Edited by Jonathan R. Stromseth. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021. Softcover: 202pp.**

Building on a trilateral initiative by the Brookings Institution, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and Lowy Institute, Jonathan Stromseth has put together a volume of well-written and stimulating essays by renowned authors on the relationship between Australia, the United States and ASEAN. This important publication comes at a time when Southeast Asia is set to become a “hotbed of strategic rivalry between China and the United States” (p. 1).

The collection starts with an overview chapter by Jonathan Stromseth which sets the scene for the subsequent analyses by outlining the current strategic landscape of Southeast Asia and providing a summary of the book’s policy recommendations. The eight subsequent chapters can be grouped under two themes: one dealing with specific actors and the other with substantive issues. While Lindsey Ford examines the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy, Richard Heydarian discusses ASEAN centrality vis-à-vis Sino-US rivalry and Hervé Lemahieu analyses Australia’s engagement with Southeast Asia. Under the second theme, David Dollar looks into major power competition over regional infrastructure, which is supplemented by a sharp juxtaposition by Roland Rajah on the Indo-Pacific Infrastructure and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the next two chapters, Khuong Vu offers a forward-looking piece on the economic challenges facing ASEAN, while Ben Bland provides a convincing account of historical and contemporary governance in the region, using Indonesia as a case study. The volume concludes with a vigorous analysis by Thomas Pepinsky on development and democracy in Southeast Asia.

The authors’ treatment of Southeast Asia’s challenges posed by its complex strategic environment and the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the fact that there is no linear way of understanding the region’s dynamics. One has to acknowledge the diversity of the region’s history as well as the heterogeneity in the strategic planning process of each Southeast Asian country. For instance, Bland argues that “it is more instructive to see the problems faced by these countries in their own unique historical context” (p. 135). Also, as stated by Heydarian, “ASEAN constantly emphasizes its unwillingness to choose between competing sides” (p. 56), not just

because they do not want to be entangled in power politics but also because they are already consumed by domestic agendas.

Another critical takeaway is the sense of optimism about the roles that ASEAN can play in promoting public goods and facilitating member countries' attainment of their individual goals. Stromseth acknowledges that Southeast Asian countries have endeavoured to "develop a more ASEAN-centric approach to regional issues" (p. 4). He goes further by asking whether "this is also a 'middle-power moment' in geopolitical terms" for ASEAN, "as great power rivalry heats up in the region" (p. 26). Lemahieu seems to agree with Stromseth by observing that "ASEAN-centered multilateral architecture also continues to provide the only viable, broad-based, and suitably nonaligned alternative to a Sino-centric order in the Indo-Pacific" (p. 80). Certainly, as pointed out by Heydarian, for the sake of effectiveness, ASEAN has to overcome the "middle institutionalization trap" (p. 58) by applying the consensus principle more creatively, including the "ASEAN Minus X" formula or majority-based voting, which proved successful in trade negotiations. Furthermore, Vu suggests that ASEAN's role, from the economic standpoint, is not limited to growth and size. It can provide an alternative to the Washington Consensus (WAC) and Beijing Consensus (BEC) models with the "ASEAN Consensus" model that "emphasizes ecosystem-building as the primary mechanism for creating value, while the WAC relies on the market and the BEC on government interventions" (p. 131).

In analysing strategic, economic and democratic engagement, several authors point out that the partnership between Australia, the United States and ASEAN is not without problems. Those problems are twofold. On the one hand, Australia and the United States (under President Donald Trump) are constrained politically, institutionally and financially from extending more vibrant support to ASEAN. For instance, Australia does not have a development assistance agency with enough strength to make the country more visible in the region (pp. 112–13), while the United States falls short of being a considerable investor in regional infrastructure (p. 88). On the other hand, as pointed out by Dollar, China is "learning from its experience and improving its practices" with regard to its ambitious BRI (p. 96). The case of infrastructure investment also reveals "the heterogeneity of experiences" in policy responses by ASEAN member states (p. 95). These issues further complicate America and its allies' efforts to engage Southeast Asian countries

in meaningful ways in order to counter China's expanding influence in the region.

The recommendations for promoting the partnership between Australia, the United States and ASEAN vary in content but generally converge on three key points: support for ASEAN centrality should be stepped up and not be undermined by new initiatives such as the Quad and Quad Plus; policy towards Southeast Asia should be Southeast Asia-focused instead of China-focused; and to promote the partnership, America and its allies need to look at both the system level, where ASEAN is considered a middle-power entity, and the unit or state level, where ASEAN faces various internal issues. As suggested by Pepinsky, the guiding principle should be thinking big, acting small—for instance, political reforms are more feasible at the substate, local level (p. 157).

Taken together, this volume provides a set of persuasive arguments backed up by sound empirical evidence. Relations between regional middle powers, including Australia and ASEAN, have generally been under-researched as much of the work in the field tends to focus on the major powers. This body of scholarship is therefore a welcome addition to the literature. That said, the volume would have been more convincing had it given local researchers further room to contribute their voices, given that the common thread running through the book is a celebratory recognition of the significance of local knowledge and inside-out approaches to strategic, economic and democratic questions facing the region.

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