

Peace and Security in the Asia-Pacific: Theory and Practice.
By Sorpong Peou. Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2010. Hardcover:
351pp.

This book is an ambitious project which seeks to critically review major theoretical perspectives relevant to the study of peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region so as to stimulate further debate among academics and policy-makers. In the Introduction, the author, Sorpong Peou, raises a provocative question: there are a plethora of views and theoretical perspectives on peace and security in this region, but which is the surest guide to understanding it?

Divided into six parts, the book examines each of the main schools of thought in the field of security studies, namely, realist security, liberal and socialist security, peace and human security, constructivist security, feminist security and non-traditional security. Sorpong argues at the outset that while each theoretical perspective on security can explain something important in a specific context, and while some are more persuasive than others in light of practice and evidence, none has emerged as the dominant school of thought. The author moves on to argue that eclecticism offers the most promising approach for the emerging policy agenda of building a regional security community in the twenty-first century. Based on numerous theoretical insights and evidence, Sorpong contends that regional pluralistic security communities can be built to enhance regional and human security without sacrificing national security.

To support his main argument, in the chapters that follow Sorpong focuses less on the strengths but more on the weaknesses of each theoretical perspective. To do so, Sorpong first defines the essence of security studies; for him, the starting point is insecurity. From the perspective of a realist, states constantly live in insecurity and therefore concentrate primarily on military alliances. However, in the Asia Pacific, there have been attempts at the state level to build more regional institutions and encourage more activities through international trade, in order to foster an atmosphere of peace. To the author, the realist security school has failed to recognize that states do work together for the promotion of national, regime, societal and human security.

Sorpong then turns to diagnose the flaws of the liberal and socialist security paradigm, which tends to paint a brighter picture of regional security than the realists. For the liberals, regional cooperation is imperative as the basis of peace building. For the socialists, interdependence is crucial as a way to avoid dependency.

Nonetheless, while states continue to promote regional institutions, they also keep them weak and even subservient to their own national interests. He elucidates why the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has been unable to implement confidence-building measures and mitigate the violence-prone behaviour of members like Myanmar and North Korea.

The author also makes clear that peace and human security studies in the Asia Pacific have their limits. The search for peace and security without capable armed forces, for most states, is still elusive. As for constructivist security paradigm, its imperfection derives from its own overly optimistic view about the positive impact of globalization and the upbeat prospects for peace and security through regional community building. Such a utopian perspective could mislead states to believe that anarchy is a thing of the past. They could not possibly believe that a new world order is a world of peace. The feminist perspective is equally troublesome. Sorpong states succinctly that although this paradigm provides a useful link between gender and security, the search for a link between masculinity and insecurity remains unproven: the growth of American feminist movements has not made the United States less militaristic while in Japan feminist movements are weak, but anti-militarism is strong.

Finally, Sorpong discusses non-traditional security studies in the Asia Pacific, emphasising the emergence of non-military threats, ranging from transnational crime to economic and environmental security challenges. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and the recent earthquakes in China and Indonesia remind states of the real and present danger of such non-traditional threats. The author argues that, unfortunately, perspectives on non-traditional security issues tend to be descriptive, speculative and strong on advocacy. In reality, levels of effective cooperation among states remain low and some do not possess the institutional capacity to deal with crises.

The review of the existing security studies paradigms seems to confirm that the best way to understand peace and security in the Asia Pacific is through eclecticism, by drawing upon multiple theories to gain complementary insights into the subject. The most crucial finding of this book is that theorists may compete fiercely to monopolize their view of peace and security, but they agree on one element: democratization is the key to safeguarding peace and maintaining security. Democracy is responsible for implanting a certain cultural norm that to a large extent underpins political stability. Generally, democratic states look at security far beyond the

usually selfish perception of state survival to cover human security, thus democratizing the discourse of peace and security.

But how to build a sustained democracy? It does not matter much whether China might one day “take over” the United States’ hegemonic position in the Asia Pacific. What matters more is whether China will eventually become a democratic state. The Asia Pacific security community, according to the author, will never succeed as long as China remains an authoritarian state.

Peace and Security in the Asia-Pacific: Theory and Practice delves into the issue of the survival of state and non-state actors against traditional and non-traditional threats through the successful investigation of various theories, some of which are highly practical while others are mere fantasy. It is an important contribution to the literature.