Contemporary Southeast Asia Vol. 36, No. 3 (2014), pp. 483–85 DOI: 10.1355/cs36-3k

ISSN 0129-797X print / ISSN 1793-284X electronic

***Comparing Institution-Building in East Asia: Power Politics, Governance and Critical Junctures.* By Hidetaka Yoshimatsu. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. Hardcover: 231pp.**

Comparing Institution-Building in East Asia makes a solid, empirically-based contribution to the field of East Asian regionalism, and is suitable for academics, researchers and postgraduate students. However, the author's four-factor historical institutionalist model and its relation to International Relations theory, together with the meticulous nature of its process-tracing (a social science method of identifying causal relations and mechanisms through the detailed analysis of an empirical case-study over time) of each case study, make it less accessible to non-academic and undergraduate readers.

The books' two major strengths are founded on this inductive, empirically sensitive model and the choice of case studies. First, the five cases of East Asian institution-building, i.e. trade, exchange rate management, rice reserves, oil reserves' coordination and acid rain monitoring are highly comparable: all started in the last fifteen years or so, include and exclude the same states (with a few exceptions), have undergone a similar two-stage development of original soft institutionalism, followed by attempts at institutional strengthening and are in the realm of "low politics" in interstate relations. This admirable consistency across the five case studies enhances the analytical value of the commonalities and variances across them. Yoshimatsu provides a compelling argument for how the commonality of early Japanese leadership interacts with Southeast Asian states' commitment to ASEAN "centrality" and Chinese and South Korean competition with Japan to determine the outcome of the second stage of institutionalization in all five cases. One related commonality that is not fully developed in this succinct book is the benefits of East Asia-wide regionalism and ASEAN centrality in moderating the negative effects of Northeast Asian power politics on interstate cooperation.

Second, as is true with many Japanese social science scholars, the author's attention to empirical detail and conscientious process-tracing clarifies well the sectoral specificities of interstate interaction between China, Japan and South Korea, and Southeast Asian states' interests in wider East Asian cooperation. On trade, through participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Japan is less

committed to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). South Korea prefers its own existing regional scheme to the Japanese-led one for acid rain monitoring. China has shown little interest in efforts by ASEAN Plus Three to enhance energy security. Yoshimatsu's commitment to careful process-tracing enlivens the first of four factors in his model and the efforts to provide a more nuanced explanation than the parsimonious power politics model of Realism:

> the configuration of policymakers' preferences for political legitimacy is different between Japan and China: Japanese government officials seek to pursue political legitimacy of their own ministries through regional commitments, while the ruling party's aspiration for maintaining its political legitimacy has strong influences on Chinese behaviour and policies towards East Asian cooperation (p. 6).

By delving into bureaucratic details, the author provides useful insights into the nature of Japanese and Chinese bureaucratic politics, how these have changed in China in particular over the last decade, and how these forces direct and limit Japanese and Chinese leadership of East Asian cooperation.

The ambition of the book — five cases and a theoretical discussion — and its brevity — less than 200 pages — are admirable but also pose shortcomings. First, all five cases are in the International Relations realm of low politics. This dulls the book's attack on the monocausal limits of Realism and its focus on power politics. Both classical and structural Realism concentrate on the high politics of interstate interaction and competition in traditional security. Whether or not strategic rivals such as Japan and China cooperate on issues such as regional rice reserves or the monitoring of acid rain is of little concern to Realists. The inclusion of cases such as the formation of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) process even at the cost of one of the five chosen cases would have expanded and deepened the book's contribution. As with the five case studies, Japan took an early leadership role in regional security cooperation that has led to the establishment of the ADMM-Plus process in 2010 and ADMM-Plus has followed a similar two-stage trajectory of institutionalization. The fact that it has included the United States and is hence broader than East Asia reduces its comparability. Yet, the very fact that the United States is included in the ADMM-Plus and excluded from the five case studies highlights the

power political differences between the realms of high and low politics in East Asia.

Second, there is one significant variance among the five cases that the author does develop enough and that an alternate approach to case-study selection could have moderated. Among the five cases, only the second, exchange rate cooperation through the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM), has shown any real progress in the second stage of institution-building. As the author correctly notes, the East Asia Emergency Rice Reserve, the Acid Deposition Monitoring Network in East Asia (EANET), and the ASEAN Plus Three process on energy security are still lightly institutionalized, poorly funded cooperation efforts of limited import. It is too early to tell whether the RCEP negotiations will lead to any greater market access or institution-building gains than the five ASEAN+1 free trade agreements that are at its core and are the outcome of the first stage of East Asian regional trade cooperation.

Including the Japanese-led, Singapore-based Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) would have strengthened the book's analytical contribution. This would have precluded the chance that CMIM will prove to be a methodology challenging outlier of institution-building success among the five chosen cases. ReCAAP is a recent institutional development, Japan is its protagonist, it has followed the same two-stage process of institution-building and, like CMIM, it has delivered on this second stage.

Overall, however, the strengths of *Comparing Institution-Building in East Asia* outweigh its shortcomings. It makes a worthy contribution to the study of East Asian cooperation and is a good example of the benefits of historical institutionalism and careful process tracing.

Malcolm Cook is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119614; email: malcolm_cook@iseas.edu.sg.