

BOOK REVIEWS

***The ASEAN Regional Security Partnership: Strengths and Limits of a Cooperative System.* By Angela Pennisi di Floristella. Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Hardcover: 212pp.**

In *The ASEAN Regional Security Partnership: Strengths and Limits of a Cooperative System*, Angela Pennisi di Floristella contributes to the theoretical discussion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by introducing and developing the concept of ASEAN as a “regional security partnership” (RSP). Floristella contrasts the RSP approach to the conventional theoretical approaches most often used to analyse ASEAN: realism (and varieties thereof) and constructivism. Realism, especially its neorealist variant, dismisses ASEAN as largely irrelevant, while constructivism focuses on ASEAN as the focal point of a regional effort to build a Southeast Asian identity that is in the process of altering how regional states interact.

RSP theory is a kind of institutionalism, derived from neoliberal institutionalism. RSPs are a form of cooperative security building, but they do not rise to the level of security communities. RSP theory acknowledges the importance of interests and power in shaping state action but rejects the idea of conflict as a permanent condition of the system. It asserts that multilateral cooperation is possible; indeed, states tend towards cooperation. States have an interest in developing regional cooperative institutions through which to regulate crises and manage common problems. They develop a sense of their interdependence and understand the advantages of a common response to transnational problems. Over time, states can develop a “flexible understanding of security” (p. 7). Floristella notes the similarities between the RSP approach and constructivism,

but there are significant differences. RSP emphasizes norms as regulators of state action, whereas constructivism — at least as usually applied to Southeast Asia — focuses on norms as instruments of identity-building. The RSP does not require a strong sense of collective identity to explain state action, which fits well with the reality of Southeast Asia.

Floristella tests the theory by evaluating ASEAN's incremental approach to building cooperative security. She examines how well the organization performs the tasks of prevention (Chapter 3), protection (Chapter 4) and assurance (Chapter 5). She provides an excellent and detailed overview of ASEAN's various efforts in these areas, including (among others) examinations of its role in managing the South China Sea dispute with China, the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear Temple, ASEAN's efforts to coordinate counterterrorism and disaster response, and its various confidence-building measures.

Floristella initially seems fairly optimistic about ASEAN's ability to effectively address at least some of these issues. Along the way, she sometimes seems to overlook some significant evidence to the contrary. For example, her brief discussion of ASEAN's human rights initiatives does not mention the failure of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) to address Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya people. Her account of ASEAN's handling of Preah Vihear is too willing to overlook the many ways in which that incident demonstrated serious weaknesses in the commitment of some ASEAN states to the organization's integrity. She discusses China's role in the region in mostly positive, liberal terms, noting that the extensive economic interaction between China and ASEAN can be expected to alleviate regional tensions, though she later does note the capacity for China and the United States to pull ASEAN apart. She does not address the obvious failure of ASEAN's efforts to deal with the "regional haze" that chokes Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore on a regular basis.

In the end, however, Floristella's analysis ends up in the same spot as numerous other analyses of ASEAN: the organization remains handicapped in its development by the continuing commitment of most of its members to Westphalian state sovereignty and the norm of non-intervention. Most of the ASEAN initiatives the book examines suffer from the same limitation: while they may look good on paper and they may even indicate ASEAN's aspiration

to effectively address shared regional and transnational problems, Floristella's analysis indicates that they have mostly been untried or proven less than adequate when called upon to perform their functions. This does not mean that these measures will not, eventually, be useful and effective. For now, however, they remain first steps down a much longer road.

Floristella's analysis of ASEAN is interesting and useful. Her use of RSP theory adds an intuitively appealing approach to understanding the institution that successfully threads the line between the obvious problems of a realist interpretation of ASEAN versus an unsustainable devotion to a shift in identity that characterizes most constructivist examinations of ASEAN (though we should note that constructivism is far broader than the book's discussion of it tends to allow). The RSP approach fits very well with what empirical observation of ASEAN seems to support. ASEAN does not constitute a strong regional identity, but it does not have to do so; states are inclined towards cooperation for mutual gain and are usually not overly paranoid regarding their security. However, the weaknesses of Floristella's approach are common to that of any analysis that concentrates on ASEAN, the organization, as a self-contained structure. As Floristella explains: "significantly, the concept of RSPs assumes that the organization of security is no longer the exclusive prerogative of states; rather, it implies that institutions created by governments emerge as the principal agents for the construction of common security practices" (p. 39).

The inclination of ASEAN specialists to focus on ASEAN, the institution, is understandable and even unavoidable. Nonetheless, to understand ASEAN, one must start at the level of the domestic politics of its member states. ASEAN is stuck in the Westphalian state paradigm because its members, collectively, cannot afford to let the institution grow into something they cannot control. The ASEAN states are relatively fragile states that, despite their recognition of common transnational problems, insist on maintaining the protection of state sovereignty. The energy and effort that the ASEAN states put into the institution demonstrates that it matters to them. Floristella's work ably captures the aspirations that ASEAN has for the region and the sense that its members understand that the world is shifting beneath them and that ASEAN is the best instrument through which they can assert some level of influence in the region. In this sense, ASEAN's purposes have not changed

since the organization was created in 1967. But what has also not changed is the willingness and ability of the ASEAN states to make the critical steps needed to allow ASEAN to rise as a competing centre of influence in Southeast Asia. Appearances aside, the ASEAN states have proven time and again that they are not prepared for this level of intrusion in their domestic affairs.

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