

***Restless Continent: Wealth, Rivalry and Asia's New Geopolitics.* By Michael Wesley. Collingwood, Victoria: Black Inc., 2015. Softcover: 210pp.**

Michael Wesley's *Restless Continent* is a great read. It is bold in its ambitions, analyzing the future of Asia's international relations and its assumed centrality for global peace and security. It is vast in its coverage, ranging from the founding myth of Melaka to a recent naval stand-off between China and Japan, from the location of a small Indian border town to the sociological impact of colonial European claims of civilizational superiority on current tensions among Asian neighbours. It addresses very large and pressing questions from the effects of the end of US strategic dominance in Asia to the uncertain relationship between growing Asian economic integration and interdependence centred on China, and deep and increasingly well-armed distrust between Asia's major powers and smaller states towards these major powers. It is elegant and insightful in its use of language and refreshingly easy to read and brief. All of this is covered in less than 180 pages and it is as suitable as a holiday read sitting on the beach as a reference book to be pored over in a library cubicle. It leaves the reader with many insights, new questions and quibbles with the author.

*Restless Continent* though is a daunting book to review, particularly for an academic journal of long standing. As with earlier works by the same author like *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Australia and the Rise of Asia* in 2011, *Restless Continent* is akin to a cross-over music hit or fusion cooking. Academic purists will find much to retort and reject. The book does not identify a gap in the literature to fill; does not have a central hypothesis (rather a number of connected ones); or a theoretical framework; is not backed by a character-building duration of ethnographic research; it is light on citations; in its breadth and ambition is often cavalier with details; is narrated more than lectured; and cuts across rather than being limited and defined by methodological or disciplinary delineations. If submitted as a thesis or dissertation, this manuscript could well fail or, at least, have major revisions demanded.

Yet, like good fusion cooking and cross-over hits, it is this very willingness to be informed but not imprisoned by the dictates of one's profession that opens this book up to a much larger and broader audience. While never acknowledged, *Restless Continent* is

held together and propelled by a set of classical Realist assumptions familiar to all students of International Relations. History is cyclical and driven by the changing distribution of power among major powers. Wesley posits that Asia is in a transition from a period of US strategic dominance, which itself had been preceded by one of European (and American) colonial dominance, to a nascent period analogous to the pre-colonial Asian order. In Wesley's words, "With Asia's growing wealth, the rivalries among Asian societies are increasingly reminiscent of genuine power competition. A 'normalisation' of Asian security is occurring" (p. 163). Given the book's classical Realist foundations, the overall tone is gloomy, as reflected in the title and those of its composite chapters. States and their interactions are personalized with pride, envy, fear, respect and resentment deemed to be defining motivations for state actions. As Wesley notes, "A distinctly Asian version of what security scholar John Herz dubbed the 'security dilemma' has developed: countries worried about encirclement or containment by their rivals seek alignments and build infrastructure to forestall such strategies, but in the process they aggravate others' fears of encirclement or containment" (p. 127).

The book is enriched by the author's deep and broad interest and knowledge of the history of Asia's major powers and of Southeast Asia. This allows the book to provide much more nuance, context and colour than a narrower work more beholden to the deductive, universalistic assumptions of Realism. More space and consideration is also given to the less powerful states and their security concerns and attempts to assuage them. The broad coverage of Asia that spans the whole continent and its eastern littoral also allows it to escape the limits of Asian Studies and this Western-originated discipline's division of Asia into separate, often mutually exclusive, subregions of focus. As noted by the author in a related context, "a subdivided Asia became globally integrated but continentally disintegrated" (p. 43). As a student of Asian Studies with Asia being limited to the eastern littoral, the space and consideration given to India and its view of Asia and India's central place in Asia is particularly refreshing.

The intellectual choices that define *Restless Continent* reflect the diverse but coherent professional background of the author, one that is centred on academia but radiates to intelligence analysis, a period as head of Australia's leading international affairs think-tank

and an enduring media profile. *Restless Continent* is a worthy addition to many a library. It will appeal to people with a general interest in the future of Asia and world politics and to those in government, the media and think-tanks with a professional mandate to try to analyze these same issues. For academics in International Relations, Security Studies, Asian Studies and Modern History, it will likely, appeal, challenge and repel.

---

MALCOLM COOK is a Senior Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. Postal address: 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119614; email: malcolm\_cook@iseas.edu.sg.