

***China, the United States and the Future of Southeast Asia.* Edited by David B.H. Denoon. New York: New York University Press, 2017. Softcover: 464pp.**

David B.H. Denoon's latest edited book brings together a collection of notable experts on Southeast Asian security and international relations. What ties this book together is its thorough coverage on an overarching theme: as Southeast Asia turns into a focal point where tensions between the United States and China are increasing, what kind of influence do Southeast Asian countries wield in the rapidly-changing regional power dynamics?

The different levels of political and economic development, as well as foreign policy priorities, across the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) make it difficult to generalize on a preferred mode of engagement the region pursues in dealing with China and the United States. In the introduction, Denoon acknowledges the "patterns of behavior within ASEAN are quite diverse" (p. 6). Still, one can identify a few emerging trends. For one, geographic proximity makes it a strategic imperative for the region to engage in close business, trade and economic ties with China. Thailand, for instance, is increasingly leaning towards China, in part because of its large ethnic Chinese business elite community that sees the economic benefits of close ties to China. In Chapter Eight, Catharin Dalpino's chapter finds that Laos and Cambodia have also benefited from Chinese largesse in recent years, as seen with the increasing amount of development assistance, preferential loans and investments in large-scale infrastructure projects that range from dams to highways and railroads. Dalpino concludes in her chapter that the military's continuing influence in Myanmar's domestic politics means Sino–Myanmar economic relations remains a key pillar in bilateral ties. Likewise, maritime Southeast Asian states have similar economic prerogatives to engage with China more closely. Vikram Nehru's comprehensive overview captures this narrative in the opening chapter. The higher levels of economic development in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia continue to thrive and rely on China as an attractive export market.

At the same time, the authors note that while cooperation is deepening on the economic front, confrontation and hedging are more prevalent in China–Southeast Asia security relations. Vietnam,

for example, has a complicated security view of China. As Tran Truong Thuy points out in Chapter Six, in spite of its ideological ties to China, Vietnam is wary of Beijing's excessive influence, particularly since the 2014 oil rig incident in the South China Sea. Factional splits within the Vietnamese leadership reveals the delicate balance Hanoi maintains between its Beijing-wary nationalists and pro-Beijing accommodationists. Likewise, the Philippines has also seen its security ties complicated in recent years by China's activities in the South China Sea, most notably with the tussle over Scarborough Shoal in 2012. Officials and politicians keen to increase diplomatic and security ties with China were forced to re-evaluate their stance with increasing Chinese presence and encroachment in the maritime dispute. The Arbitral Tribunal's July 2016 ruling in Manila's favour galvanized widespread China-weary sentiments in Philippine public opinion. However, equally pressing domestic security and economic priorities quickly trumped foreign policy concerns and ushered in a new, more pro-Beijing leadership in the Philippines in 2016 that has since been keen on mending ties with China. Skepticism about China's material capabilities continue to dominate the security landscape in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Evan Laksmana, Heng Yee-Kuang and Zakaria Ahmad's balanced analyses in Chapters Four, Five and Seven respectively point to an important commonality across these three Southeast Asian countries: they see China's assertiveness as an ominous and looming security challenge to regional stability.

This is where the United States enters the regional calculus. The new and emerging security partnerships between the United States and Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar are most illuminating, as reflected in Marvin Ott and Michael McDevitt's contributions to this volume. Each of these three Southeast Asian countries has had complex relations with the United States, but a conscious decision to overcome the historical baggage and to work with Washington is borne out of sheer pragmatism: the deepening and broadening of security ties with another external major power can help ensure one's survival and relevance in the region. This is reflective of the longstanding strategies practised by small states like Singapore and Brunei. In a region where several external powers are vying for influence, Southeast Asia is in a unique position to engage in a plethora of new security partnerships. Rather than confronting China's rising influence and potential security threat head on, nearly

all Southeast Asian countries are diversifying their security ties. Put crudely, they are outsourcing the role of balancing against China to the United States, Japan, India and even Russia.

The analyses presented in this volume confirm the significance of “omni-enmeshment” as a regional preference in engaging with external powers. It reaffirms the notion that the more things change, the more they stay the same. As Chu Shulong’s chapter observes, China’s rise has been gradual, drawn out over decades rather than occurring overnight or as a sudden shock. It has allowed Southeast Asian leaders to prepare for and address this inevitable shift in power dynamics in more subtle but sophisticated ways than pundits external to this region might appreciate, a point underscored throughout this excellent volume’s rich empirical evidence and in-depth country studies.

What contribution towards theory building lies behind this intellectual exercise of opening up the foreign policy black box? Public opinion, historical context, economic development, party factions, leadership transitions and the nature of political regimes are some of the key domestic determinants of Southeast Asian countries’ foreign policy. We may not be able to identify the causal weight of each of these factors from the analyses provided, making it a challenge to hypothesize more broadly about which of these domestic influences matters at what time. But, the historically and culturally contingent argument provided in this volume makes a remarkable and understudied contribution: it accounts for variation as well as the twists and turns in foreign policy choices that Southeast Asian leaders consider when dealing with external powers. There is no one-size-fits-all policy; neither is it a straightforward balancing or bandwagoning approach for the region. This alone is an important advancement and contribution to the field and for those seeking to truly understand Southeast Asian politics, preferences and priorities.

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