

BOOK REVIEWS

***The New ASEAN in Asia Pacific & Beyond.* By Shaun Narine. Boulder and London: Lynne Reiner, 2018. Hardcover: 308pp.**

Shaun Narine's excellent new book interrogates the role the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is likely to play in the Asia Pacific over the next decade or so. The book's major strength is its insistence on viewing ASEAN's development in the broader regional context.

After a brief introduction, the first three substantive chapters cover ASEAN's history as far as the multiple crises of the late 1990s; its quest for internal reform through the creation of a three-pillared ASEAN Community; and its attempt to position itself at the centre of a web of intersecting regional organizations. The next three chapters profile the giants — China, the United States, Japan, India and Russia — that ASEAN seeks to engage and enmesh.

The concluding chapter argues that ASEAN's most critical role in the Asia Pacific is to function as a three-level facilitator of regional interaction: among its members, between those members and the Great Powers, and among the Great Powers themselves. Amid the uncertainties of a shift to a multi-polar environment, this is a niche that ASEAN could further exploit to its advantage (pp. 251–52). But it is also a role that is subject to notable constraints. ASEAN can influence the behaviour and interests of the Asia Pacific's Great Powers, but only marginally. It can create structures that nudge them towards certain rules and norms of conduct, but its influence reaches only as far as their willingness (p. 257). ASEAN does indeed occupy the "driver's seat" of the region's web of organizations, but the vehicle is more akin to a taxi than a private car. The driver can exercise creativity, but only limited autonomy (p. 259).

In his review of ASEAN's internal development and larger regional role, Narine's perspective is sober but sympathetic. Simplistic policy prescriptions are refreshingly absent, and the analysis demonstrates considerable nuance.

Given Southeast Asia's history, diversity and economic position, it is far from surprising that ASEAN's *raison d'être* was — and still is — state-building (pp. 43, 257), and it was designed not to challenge sovereignty but to augment national and regional independence (p. 7). The ASEAN Community is therefore a long way from becoming “a meaningful reality” (p. 114). Nevertheless, it is not a vain enterprise. Efforts towards community-building seek to future-proof ASEAN by staking out desired normative parameters and a vision for regional unity — even if neither of those goals is achievable yet (pp. 81–82).

The regional structures that ASEAN “drives” similarly show gaps between capabilities and stated goals (p. 110). Yet, if regional organizations are understood “as a set of overlapping symbols and commitments that form a network of communication and interaction”, then we need to assess not only their practical outcomes but also “the linkages they create and the problems they avert” (p. 112).

The chapters on China and the United States demonstrate very forcefully the challenges ASEAN faces in dealing with powers that Hedley Bull might well have characterized as the “great irresponsibles” of their day. China is a “contradiction”, powerful on many fronts but “also hobbled by formidable limitations” (p. 160). It appears willing to exploit divisions within ASEAN, but unwilling and/or unable to compromise on an elastic range of key interests, most prominently, of course, the South China Sea, to which Narine devotes a section (pp. 118, 134–50).

The United States, on the other hand, has seen its soft power seriously undermined by “domestic political dysfunction, instability, and ideological rigidity” (p. 182), and the difficulties it is experiencing in adjusting to a changing role in the world mean that ASEAN must prepare for a “multipolar regional order wherein the United States is a much more unreliable actor and, perhaps, a dangerously destabilizing force” (p. 204).

The remaining Asia-Pacific powers are not necessarily easy interlocutors either, although the uncertainties of their positions at least offer ASEAN more scope to set the terms of engagement (p. 248). Japan is still working out what kind of power it wants to be (pp. 208–28); India is still grappling to reconcile its ambitions

and its limitations (pp. 228–46); and Russia’s regional potential has not yet been realized (pp. 246–47).

One unresolved tension stands out in what is otherwise a very pragmatic book. That is Narine’s repeated insistence that ASEAN should aspire to “present a unified face to the world” (see, for example, pp. 3, 79, 159, 252, 270). Yet he is very clear about the downsides of this proposal. A more united front might not only be impracticable, because of diverging interests (pp. 159, 257), but also undesirable, because it would undermine the very vulnerability that has allowed ASEAN to occupy a central position in the regionalism endeavours so far (pp. 261, 272), and/or might potentially create “more competitive and antagonistic relationships between ASEAN and some of the great powers” (p. 261).

The book’s final paragraph (p. 275), somewhat enigmatically, returns to this theme by invoking three possibilities. First, ASEAN states might develop a consensus in support of one of the Great Powers, with the result that they “can have a profound effect on regional relations”. Second, ASEAN states might individually ally with different powers, thereby exacerbating ASEAN’s divisions. Third, and “most unlikely, but most advantageous”, ASEAN states might agree “on a common strategy to manage all of the great powers”. In the current circumstances in the Asia Pacific, the first possibility seems quite alarming, and it could be counter-argued that the ASEAN states’ current practice of constantly recalibrated ambivalence is more useful than risking the unreliable favours of the courted power in exchange for the almost certain wrath of the spurned other.

This quibble aside, Narine’s comprehensive study is a highly welcome addition to the literature, recommendable both as a stimulating discussion-starter for interested general readers, and as a textbook for undergraduate or postgraduate students.

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