

***ASEAN's Half Century: A Political History of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.* By Donald E. Weatherbee. Lanhan, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019. Softcover: 273pp.**

*ASEAN's Half Century*, by Donald Weatherbee, is an excellent and amazingly detailed historical account of ASEAN's first fifty years. The book benefits enormously from Weatherbee's long personal history as a scholar of ASEAN and an unusually well-connected academic who can draw on his experiences working in Southeast Asia to provide personal connections and insights to many of the events he describes. As noted, the book is packed with details about virtually all of the events that have shaped ASEAN during its long history. While the book is primarily descriptive, it does provide some useful analysis of these events. The book stands as a relatively brief yet surprisingly comprehensive overview. For this reviewer, this book will from now on serve as the first reference point for sourcing information about the organization's history.

The book's analysis creates a picture of ASEAN as a highly reactive but relatively fragile institution whose accomplishments, over the decades, are worthy of considerable critical scrutiny. In one of the book's more telling chapters (pp. 199–226), Weatherbee reviews numerous examples of territorial conflicts between the member states, many of which remain unresolved or have the potential to flare up again. He notes the ways in which these disputes often came close to or even resulted in violence—in the case of the Preah Vihear temple on the Thai-Cambodia border, considerable violence—in defiance of ASEAN's professed norms. In these cases, outside actors, notably the International Court of Justice, were far more instrumental in facilitating resolutions than ASEAN. These observations are particularly relevant given ASEAN's repeated claims of having prevented violent conflict between its members. This is, at best, an overstatement. In some cases, the existence of ASEAN has facilitated relationships that proved valuable in resolving the situation, such as Indonesia's decision to inject itself into the Preah Vihear temple dispute or in helping to mitigate intra-ASEAN divisions after the 2012 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting which failed to produce a consensus over the South China Sea. However, the organization itself was usually a bystander. Of course, to advocates of ASEAN, it is precisely the creation of a general environment that is conducive to such political interactions that makes ASEAN valuable. The possibility that ASEAN embodies a kind of multilateralism

not readily captured by Western International Relations theories or legalistic outlooks is a perspective that Weatherbee does not appear to share.

In the final chapters of the book, Weatherbee's criticism of ASEAN sharpens considerably. He presents ASEAN's inability to deal effectively with China in the South China Sea as the organization's "existential crisis" (pp. 227–56). He also points out the considerable gap between ASEAN's professed norms and aspirations as expressed in the three "pillars" that make up the ASEAN Community against the reality of the situation on the ground. Most of the ASEAN states are guilty of major human rights abuses and very few are genuine democracies. Moreover, the instruments created by ASEAN to ostensibly promote and protect these professed values (such as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Committee on Human Rights) lack teeth. These are legitimate and necessary criticisms of the organization. On the other hand, they may underplay the kind of difficulties faced by developing states dealing with the problems of economic and political uncertainty in a rapidly changing world. Modern Southeast Asia has always been a region of considerable upheaval and volatility. At the end of the twentieth century, Thailand was a vibrant democracy leading the vanguard for change in ASEAN; today, it is a quasi-military dictatorship that is struggling to manage the reality of democracy. Indonesia is currently the region's most democratic state but who can tell in twenty years' time? This suggests that ASEAN's durability lies in its flexibility. Whether or not this renders the organization irrelevant depends, again, on what "multilateralism" means in a Southeast Asian context.

Weatherbee's depiction of ASEAN's helplessness in the face of Chinese machinations is understandable, but not entirely fair. How does ASEAN survive in an era of shifting regional configurations of power? What compromises must it make? China's expansive claims in the South China Sea are preposterous but its behaviour is no different from other Great Powers seeking to protect their security and access to resources. In many ways, China is behaving far better than the norm if we were to compare it to the United States' dismal history in the Middle East as it sought control of the region's oil supplies. This does not excuse Chinese behaviour, but it does raise questions about how ASEAN should best manage the inexorable rise of a regional superpower. ASEAN is designed so that its member states can always put their national interests ahead of organizational solidarity. Its failure to unite against China may thus be in keeping with its established practice.

Finally, Weatherbee is less critical of the role of the United States in the region than he could be. The failure of America to help the region during the 1997 financial crisis gets no mention and he is not critical of the International Monetary Fund's gross mismanagement of the crisis (p. 152). These developments were the impetus for many of ASEAN's later reforms and would colour the region's relationship with the United States. Probably because the book covers ASEAN's fifty year history (1967–2017), it says little about the effect of the Trump administration on America's role in the Asia Pacific. Even so, the very fact that Trump was elected president is a factor that has affected how regional states calculate their relationships with America. Weatherbee mentions Trump's decision to cancel US participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership but does not reflect on what this means for America's regional position (p. 154).

Overall, this book is an excellent reference for any scholar of ASEAN who wants all of the major historical developments of the organization documented in one book. Not only is it timely, the book also offers a strong perspective that allows for considerable debate and engagement.

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