

***Overcoming Isolation: Japan's Leadership in East Asian Security Multilateralism.* By Paul Midford. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020. Hardcover: 272pp.**

Paul Midford's *Overcoming Isolation: Japan's Leadership in East Asian Security Multilateralism* makes important contributions to the historical understanding of Japan's role in regional multilateralism in general and the establishment and development of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in particular. The book primarily focuses on the policy objectives, processes and decisions that allowed Japan to support the establishment of the ARF—East Asia's first region-wide multilateral forum—and serve as a regional leader during its inception as well as its subsequent development. Midford's thorough analysis yields valuable insights into Japan's relationships with its Southeast Asian partners and the evolution of ASEAN-centric regionalism.

Japan's engagement with Southeast Asia has grown incrementally since the end of World War II. As its economy rapidly expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, Japan used its economic power to rebuild relationships with regional countries and make investments in the region through commercial transactions and official development assistance (ODA) for infrastructure and development projects. In 1977, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda announced that Japan would strengthen political engagements with Southeast Asia while maintaining a distance from the region's security affairs. This announcement came to be known as the Fukuda Doctrine. Over time, however, Japan became increasingly involved in regional security issues. In the early 1990s, Japan became a member of the ARF and participated in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Cambodia. From there, Japan's involvement in regional security slowly but steadily expanded. Today, Japanese ODA directly supports security-related capacity-building projects, the Japan Coast Guard actively partners with maritime law enforcement agencies throughout the region, while the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force regularly operates in the South China Sea. Japan is also among the largest force providers for regional military exercises hosted by groups such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, and during natural disasters Southeast Asians look to Japan as a first responder. However, the existing literature has done a relatively poor job of identifying the most important transition points and is unsatisfying in its explanations of exactly when, why and how the Fukuda Doctrine was displaced by this new reality.

*Overcoming Isolation* does an excellent job in laying out how the often-overlooked 1991 Nakayama proposal served as the specific inflection point that moved Japan's relationship with Southeast Asian states beyond the parameters established by Fukuda. The Nakayama proposal—a multilateral security dialogue initiative submitted by Foreign Minister Tar Nakayama to ASEAN—is widely understood by Japanese foreign policy elites as Japan's inaugural post-Cold War security initiative and the foundation for successive prime minister-level policies, including Japan's support for the development of regional institutions. Midford astutely observes that the English-language literature either de-emphasizes or completely omits this milestone event. Drawing on a trove of primary research, including interviews with Prime Ministers Nakayama and Miyazawa, this book corrects the imbalance by explaining when, why and how Japan abandoned its Cold War policy of regional security isolation and embraced multilateral security engagement with its East and Southeast Asian partners. It also ably demonstrates how Japan's "multilateralism-first approach" was designed to simultaneously reaffirm its commitment to refrain from becoming a military power, build confidence among the nations that previously suffered under Japanese militarism, hedge against over-reliance on the United States, and establish the preconditions for enlarging bilateral security engagements with its East Asian partners.

The book firmly situates these Japanese decisions in the context of regional post-Cold War dynamics and as important first steps towards the multiplication of East Asia's regional institutions. It traces Japanese contributions to the development of several regional multilateral mechanisms, with a particular emphasis on the ARF, ASEAN Plus Three, Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum and the East Asia Summit. It debunks the conventional misunderstanding that Japanese actions were primarily at the behest of America and shows that the Japanese initiatives were often out in front of, and sometimes at odds with, American priorities. The book sheds light on how Japan has handled its historical baggage in Southeast Asia while emerging as one of the region's most trusted extra-regional partners. This narrative reveals the important roles Japan played in establishing ASEAN Centrality as an essential feature of East Asian political and security multilateralism.

Midford is well-suited to develop this sort of analysis. His language proficiency and deep professional networks enabled the rich engagement with Japanese elites and the primary-source documents

necessary to support the scholarship introduced in the book. He invested nearly a decade—including two year-long sabbaticals in Japan—to conduct the interviews and review thousands of pages of declassified documents. This work is built on a solid research background, which includes his important 2011 volume on the interplay between the evolution in Japanese public opinion and Japan's changing national security policies.

The importance of Japan's quiet leadership in Southeast Asia's multilateral environment is commonly understood and frequently referenced by political leaders, scholars and pundits. However, there are few works—and very few of them in English—which provide the sort of detailed, empirically driven study that is offered by *Overcoming Isolation*. The book's detailed accounts make it an essential read for those seeking to understand Japan-Southeast Asia relations or the interplay between extra-regional powers and ASEAN-centric bodies.

However, *Overcoming Isolation* may leave some readers who specialize in Southeast Asia disappointed by its rather one-sided nature. Although the positions and reactions of Japan's Southeast Asian partners are discussed in chapters six, seven and eight, the book focuses more on the Japanese side of the story, and appears to downplay questions of Southeast Asian receptivity or regional countries' agency over their own institutions. This shortfall in no way diminishes the value of the book, but it does suggest a need for further research. An equally detailed study of Southeast Asian attitudes towards Japan's leadership in regional institutions and the extent of their embrace of Japan's growing role as a security partner would be a welcome companion to this excellent new book.

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