

***The Courteous Power: Japan and Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific.* Edited by John D. Giorciari and Kiyoteru Tsutsui. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2021. Softcover: 321pp.**

The editors of *The Courteous Power* have assembled a superb cast of experts to provide a comprehensive analysis of Japan’s deep and multifaceted relations with Southeast Asia. While recognizing the importance of the past, this volume contextualizes Japan-Southeast Asia relations in the new “Indo-Pacific era”, following Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s introduction of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision in 2016. The contributors examine how the FOIP concept has affected the basic principles of the Fukuda Doctrine (which has shaped Japan-Southeast Asia relations since 1977), how Southeast Asia has responded to Japan’s FOIP vision, and how non-state actors have contributed to or helped shape Japan-Southeast Asian relations.

*The Courteous Power* is timely for two reasons. First, it shifts attention away from US-China competition and instead foregrounds Japan’s role as an autonomous actor. Second, it does an excellent job of demonstrating, in vivid empirical and conceptual terms, Japan’s critical but “underappreciated” (p. 1) role and influence in Southeast Asia, and the region’s prominence in Tokyo’s foreign policy strategy. In addition to the Introduction and Conclusion, the volume contains ten chapters which are divided into two sections. The first section, “Relations in the International Political Plane”, includes chapters on Japan’s role in the Southeast Asian regional order, Japan’s evolving security posture and its efforts to shape ASEAN-led institutions and initiatives, and Southeast Asian perceptions of Japan. The second section, “Development, Culture, and Role of Non-State Actors”, discusses how Japanese commerce, civil society and culture (including manga and anime) have contributed to Tokyo’s growing ties with the region in the postwar period. These chapters track how Japan-Southeast Asia relations have evolved positively despite multiple challenges (including the unresolved legacies of wartime Japan, the rise of China and doubts about the staying power of the United States), while also demonstrating how regional responses to US-China competition can best be understood by unpacking the complexity in Japan-Southeast Asia relations. The positive evolution of Japan-Southeast Asian relations in multiple domains provides confidence

to all states that stability could be achieved despite the uncertainty caused by US-China competition.

Ultimately, the volume suggests that Japan's role in Southeast Asia displays both continuity and change. While Tokyo continues to pursue a low-key foreign policy approach that entails strong support for ASEAN centrality and normative structures, it has also been proactive in trying to shape the regional order and enhance its engagement in regional security affairs. Even though the FOIP may suggest a departure from Tokyo's limited approach towards Southeast Asia due to the strategic motivations, namely to deter China's rise, the volume argues against it.

The volume attributes Japan's success in Southeast Asia to its non-assertive and non-confrontational posture, as befitting a "courteous power". Instead of adopting a transactional approach, Japan advances its interests by respecting the norms, sovereignty and preferences of Southeast Asian states, providing diplomatic and political support to the region, and focusing on ensuring the long-term stability of its relations with ASEAN and its member states (p. 280). In comparison to other extra-regional powers such as the United States and China, Japan "wears its formidable capabilities lightly, listening respectfully to Southeast Asian partners to identify convergent interests rather than seeking to exercise its influence assertively" (p. 3). The authors describe how Japan relies on "a guiding hand rather than a threatening fist" to "nudge" Southeast Asian countries (p. 3). Tokyo also did not abuse "its economic might in the 1980s and 90s", preferring instead to pursue a path of "continued engagement and partnerships" (p. 3). According to the editors, such a consistent "courteous" approach has enabled Japan to achieve its foreign policy goals in the region.

Though I agree with the conclusions, I have three queries regarding the use of the "courteous power" label. The first is whether it is congruent with the dominant International Relations understanding that the international structure is anarchical. In this environment, all states are understood to be in a condition of constant competition to enhance their self-interests and ensure their survival. If this is the case, one could argue that no state is courteous, since their actions are motivated by self-interests as a result of the anarchic nature of the international system. Second, the volume argues that Japan's outreach to Southeast Asia is multi-dimensional and best understood in terms of "diversification". However, the volume underplays Japan's growing tendency to try to balance China's growing engagement with the region. This is

manifested in a variety of areas, such as maritime security capacity-building, institutional building, and the provision of infrastructure and aid. If balancing is part of Japan's strategy towards Southeast Asia, it is unclear how this threat-based strategy correlates to the assumptions of being "courteous". My third comment relates to whether Japan's courteous approach is unique to Southeast Asia, or whether it could be extended to describe Tokyo's relations with other regions, such as Northeast Asia, South Asia, Africa or Europe. If it is indeed unique to Southeast Asia, it would be interesting to investigate why.

Nevertheless, *The Courteous Power* is a very important contribution to the literature on contemporary Japan-Southeast Asia relations and Japan's role in the Indo-Pacific. The volume is a must-read for experts in the academic and policy-making communities, as well as students, who would like to understand how Japan and Southeast Asia have always been, and will continue to be, consequential actors in regional affairs.

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