

***Managing Great Power Politics: ASEAN, Institutional Strategy, and the South China Sea.* By Kei Koga. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Hardcover: 284pp.**

Drawing on the South China Sea dispute as an illustrative case, *Managing Great Power Politics* examines ASEAN's role in managing great power politics in East Asia. It argues that ASEAN and ASEAN-led institutions have developed their own "institutional strategies" with regard to the dispute since the 1990s, through which the organization has been able to manage the tensions in the region and to prevent great powers from dominating the South China Sea. By examining different individual ASEAN institutions such as the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM), ASEAN Summit, ASEAN-China dialogues, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), the book casts light on how these ASEAN-led institutions have devised and adjusted their strategies over what the author identifies as four defining periods: 1990–2002, 2003–12, 2013–16 and 2017–20. The book thus provides an alternative understanding of the strategic value of regional security institutions in the context of rising great power rivalries.

According to Kei Koga, ASEAN's approach to the South China Sea dispute is not to resolve it multilaterally but to maintain stability in the region (p. 248). To understand this approach, it is necessary to understand the complex web of ASEAN institutions, which Koga calls a "strategic institutional web" (p. 252). This web has become increasingly intricate over the decades, due to the proliferation of ASEAN-led institutions and the increased involvement of major international actors. For instance, the AMM was the only institution to discuss political and security issues, including the South China Sea dispute, in the early 1990s, but now many ASEAN-led institutions are involved.

By drawing all regional great powers into its institutional framework, ASEAN has created a system that connects different institutions with the issues or crises that they are best suited to address. Different institutions also engage with outside powers with different objectives. The AMM, ASEAN Summit and ADMM prioritize maintaining intra-bloc unity and autonomy, as well as setting ASEAN's rules and norms, while the ARF and EAS, as well

as the ASEAN-China dialogue institutions, are used for “institutional hedging” or “institutional co-option”, allowing ASEAN to employ cooperative norms to try to influence other states’ preferences, such as China’s aggression in the South China Sea.

In Koga’s view, there is ever more reason to understand ASEAN’s institutional structures, as they are facing serious threats from both China and the United States. China is creating its own regional institutional frameworks, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and is disrupting ASEAN unity as member states are increasingly dependent on the Chinese economy. Meanwhile, the United States has long considered ASEAN institutions “supplementary” (p. 2) to its interests in the region and is creating its own minilateral frameworks, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS, which some view as jeopardizing ASEAN’s central role in the region’s security architecture (p. 2).

It is clear to the reader that despite its willingness to create new institutions, ASEAN has struggled to address its own divisions concerning the South China Sea. This difficulty is due in part to the bloc’s inability to form a unified position on the issue. Here, however, flexibility proves to be one of ASEAN’s strengths, which the author makes clear by tracing ASEAN’s ability to improvise to adjust its strategies. The author also makes it clear that a permanent resolution to the dispute is unlikely to come to fruition so long as Beijing is intent on driving wedges between the bloc’s members and resisting calls to work within United Nations mechanisms or via other multilateral negotiations to resolve the dispute. Beijing has further capitalized on this by using incentives and punishments to steer the dispute resolution process onto a bilateral pathway, thereby diminishing the collective bargaining power of Southeast Asian nations and weakening ASEAN’s voice in the region.

In an argument potentially useful to American policymakers, Koga also examines how Washington turned to Southeast Asia’s multilateral fora only when the South China Sea dispute presented an opportunity to gain leverage in its geopolitical rivalry with Beijing. Koga suggests that this can paint US interventions in the dispute in a negative light. In contrast to Washington’s perception of these interventions as reinforcing regional freedoms, Koga emphasizes that some ASEAN states view them as “another point of concern in terms of regional stability” (p. 118) and as a problem to manage rather than meaningful assistance. It is, however, illustrative of ASEAN’s flexible approach to dialogue that despite those concerns,

it decided to draw the United States into the EAS in 2011 to counter Beijing's increasingly assertive behaviour.

Overall, this is a well-written and accessible book that will be useful to researchers and practitioners alike. Koga's forward-looking conclusion is perhaps not best served by being afforded just 11 abbreviated pages, but the predictive analysis offers a measure of optimism that the current trajectory, despite a significant disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, may remain stable. Developments surrounding negotiations on the South China Sea Code of Conduct (CoC) in 2023 appear to support his optimism. Although a realistic path to the conclusion of the CoC remains elusive, ASEAN's commitment to the negotiations once again highlights its time-tested institutional strategies to engage with the great powers and manage disputes for the benefit of regional peace, stability and development.

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