

***Central Asia and Southeast Asia: Exploring the Dynamics of Greater Engagement.* By Paradorn Rangsimaporn. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. E-book: 174 pp.**

At first glance, Central and Southeast Asia appear to have little in common. One is landlocked, the other mostly maritime. One is a region of countries that only achieved independence from Moscow 30 years ago, is dependent on natural resources for economic growth and ruled by a mix of post-Soviet leaders. The other is a region with a varied post-colonial history, mixed democratic heritage and a series of economies that are among the most, and also least, developed in Asia. A closer look, however, reveals a shared set of geopolitical tensions and cultural similarities. This dynamic is explored in detail by Paradorn Rangsimaporn in his compact book *Central Asia and Southeast Asia: Exploring the Dynamics of Greater Engagement*, which examines the potential for cooperation between these regions.

According to Rangsimaporn, cooperation between the two regions will be challenging. Despite broad, logical reasons for partnership, numerous practical and abstract obstacles exist. Geography alone creates significant separation; China lies between them, making direct physical connections feasible but subject to Beijing's influence. Direct flights between the two regions are still scarce and reduced further during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, both regions have relatively poor populations and economies that primarily trade with other parts of the world. Central Asian states, in particular, have incentives to explore opportunities in Southeast Asia's growth markets, but most of their companies lack the maturity to make the leap. Southeast Asian companies are equally interested, but also lack the scale and products to really enable the push. And even if they could, they would face substantial competition from more formidable competitors, primarily China. Some Chinese companies, such as tech giant Alibaba, have envisioned uniting the two regions into a massive Eurasia-plus market, but the practical challenges are significant. And in both regions, other players are also significant; Russia remains a strong force in Central Asia, while Southeast Asia has become a theatre for major power competition. But the challenges of navigating between large powers as developing economies is a shared concern that drives both regions to look at each other for lessons.

In some ways, the idea of bridging Central and Southeast Asia is more compelling at a theoretical level—a theme Rangsimaporn explores thoroughly. Potential organizational structures linking the two regions internally, and lessons each can learn from the other about local governance and managing powerful, overbearing neighbours, are ideas that are discussed in detail. ASEAN was in part born to help Southeast Asia countries manage their internal conflicts, as well as the major powers they sit in-between. Central Asia is a region that still has tense regional relations, and where trade within the region is still held up by awkward border relations. A web of overlapping Russian or Chinese connectivity visions tie them north and south, but do little to help internal coherence. Recently the region has started to have more considered talk about how to improve regional connectivity and cooperation, and often they look to the ASEAN experience to learn lessons.

Central Asians believe they can learn much from Southeast Asia, an observation that recurs throughout the book. They particularly look to Singapore and, to a lesser extent, Malaysia. Central Asian leaders have observed with envy the development of these two Southeast Asian states, considering how they might similarly transform their own countries to create stable and largely accountable bureaucracies that deliver high growth and prosperity. Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad, the pivotal former prime ministers of Singapore and Malaysia respectively, are frequently mentioned as admired figures in Central Asia for their transformative tenures.

Regarding how small countries in complex neighbourhoods can collaborate to manage their external environment, Central Asia again looks southeast, with ASEAN offering a model for association. Rangsimaporn provides an insightful analysis of how Central Asia could emulate the Southeast Asian experiment. ASEAN presents a more credible template for a regional bloc than the European Union (the two models that are most frequently invoked), as the latter involves substantial power relinquishment to a distant capital—a federation model unlikely to succeed in Central Asia, a region with memories of distant decision-making in Moscow.

Despite these intriguing theoretical connections, the reality is that cooperation will take some time to mature. The world may be globalized, but Central Asia's landlocked geography constrains its options. This geographical challenge is why China's Belt and Road Initiative was so well received in the region; the construction

of new railways and roads offered hope for overcoming geographic limitations and trading with distant countries (and has always been a core self-identifying vision within a region which prides itself as being the heart of the ancient Silk Roads). By contrast, Southeast Asia's position on some of the world's busiest sea lanes has made it much easier to integrate into the global marketplace.

Compounding the difficulty, Central Asia is surrounded by countries facing some form of sanctions from the United States and its Western allies. As Rangsimaporn concludes, the current geopolitical environment further complicates efforts to build connections between the two regions.

RAFFAELLO PANTUCCI is Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore. Postal address: Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 50 Nanyang Ave, Block S4, Level B3, Singapore 639798; email: rpantucci@gmail.com.