

***Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific Construct*. Edited by Indu Saxena and Stephen Nagy. New York City, New York: Nova Publishers, 2024. Hardcover: 194pp.**

The term “Indo-Pacific” was first introduced into political discourse by Japan’s former prime minister, the late Shinzo Abe, in 2007. However, the administration of US President Donald Trump popularized the concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), emphasizing its relations to a rules-based order. Over the past decade, numerous Asian and Western governments have developed their own Indo-Pacific strategies, although the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), aware of China’s opposition to the concept, waited until 2021 to publish its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Given the ongoing Sino-US rivalry in the region, a book that explores Southeast Asian perceptions of the Indo-Pacific concept is timely. Edited by Indu Saxena and Stephen Nagy, *Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific Construct* comprises nine chapters and a brief introduction and conclusion. As with many anthologies, the quality of the individual contributions varies, yet it is noteworthy that most contributors are from the region itself. Moreover, all highlight the perception of China’s increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, notably in the South China Sea and towards Taiwan. Consequently, they advocate for a robust US diplomatic and military presence alongside deeper Southeast Asian partnerships with Washington.

The *leitmotif* of this collection is that hedging—avoiding taking sides and deliberately cooperating with both superpowers—is the most appropriate strategy for small and middle powers in the region. Nagy explores this in more depth in the first chapter, in which he argues that Southeast Asian governments are leveraging both Washington’s FOIP strategy and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, this approach has its own strategic and economic challenges, which governments must navigate carefully.

While Nagy’s assessment of the distinct hedging approaches of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam is somewhat cursory, the subsequent chapters delve into these approaches in greater detail. In particular, Renato Cruz De Castro provides a succinct and persuasive analysis of the Philippines’ hedging behaviour, tracking the shift from former President Rodrigo Duterte’s appeasement of China to the hard balancing employed by the current president, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. However, he emphasizes that even Duterte

adopted a tougher stance on China during the final years of his presidency due to Beijing's unyielding position in the South China Sea and its unfulfilled infrastructure investment promises.

Tharishini Krishnan uses Malaysia as an example of a country that harbours concerns about Washington's FOIP. She argues that while US economic and infrastructure initiatives benefit Malaysia, security cooperation with Washington is more complicated. For instance, a stronger US naval presence in the South China Sea could "unnecessarily" irritate China (p. 61). M. Waffaa Kharisma evaluates Indonesia's pragmatic but "ambiguous, ambivalent, anomalous, and irresolute" foreign policy (p. 76). In his interesting contribution, he argues that "Indonesia's threat perception is framed in such a way that it recognizes strictly the *issues* it has concern about—rather than through determining certain actors as its potential enemies or allies" (p. 74; italics in original). This approach, Kharisma contends, has led to the absence of a clear foreign policy direction amid the US-China competition. However, Indonesia's *bebas dan aktif* (independent and active) policy emphasizes neutrality and engagement through ASEAN and other multilateral forums.

Mark S. Cogan's analysis of Thailand's foreign policy highlights the significant impact of domestic instability. The deterioration of US-Thai relations following Washington's criticism of the 2014 military coup allowed China to strengthen its ties with the military junta. However, Thailand has not aligned entirely with Beijing, maintaining its "bending with the wind" strategy. This balancing act is evident in its growing cooperation with other middle powers, such as Japan, India and Australia, over non-traditional security issues and trade. Yet, Bangkok's lack of a clear Indo-Pacific strategy limits its broader international cooperation.

According to Satoru Nagao, Japan traditionally focused on security in East Asia, rather than Southeast Asia or the Indo-Pacific more broadly. This changed under the Abe premiership and, in particular, since the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) was formed. Nagao's chapter primarily assesses how the Quad works and recommends how the minilateral format should be developed further. For instance, he suggests deepening military-technological cooperation, akin to the AUKUS partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. However, he neither addresses whether China has legitimate security concerns about the Quad and AUKUS nor considers how his recommendations might affect China's behaviour.

The final three chapters, particularly the contributions by Leo S.F. Lin and Indu Saxena, focus on the role of the United States as a security provider in Southeast Asia. Their chapters stand out for their emphasis on the importance of domestic US politics in shaping Washington's Indo-Pacific security strategy, alongside Washington's geopolitical considerations.

Overall, this anthology offers a useful overview of the current strategic and security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and how Southeast Asian states are responding to the opportunities and challenges posed by these developments. Unfortunately, it is marred by easily avoidable errors, including a surprising number of typos, particularly in the preface and introduction, and grammatical and stylistic errors. On occasions, China's BRI is called the "Border Road Initiative", New Zealand is branded a Southeast Asian country and Philippine President Marcos Jr. is misnamed "Marco Jr.". Inconsistent formatting, particularly with footnotes, further detracts from the overall quality. More diligent copy-editing would have greatly improved the readability of the text.