

BOOK REVIEWS

***Regional Security Structures in Asia.* By Ashok Kapur.** London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. 198pp.

This book makes an important contribution to the literature on the study of Asian international relations. Ashok Kapur adopts a different position on the study of this vast subject by claiming that too much attention has been given in the literature to the Cold War and bipolarity while insufficient emphasis has been put on the notions of regional power formation as well as conflict formation and resolution. The author argues that these and other concepts discussed in the book are essential for studying international relations in Asia. The other concepts include multipolarity as well as global and regional hegemonies.

Kapur is interested in understanding the shift from conflict formation to conflict resolution in the context of North Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, particularly with regards to “the major geopolitical pivots which dominate the Asian strategic landscape” (p. 3). These pivots in the post-Cold War era are the Korean peninsula, Taiwan and the South China Sea, the Northwest part of the Indian subcontinent, the Eastern zone of the Indian subcontinent, and the ASEAN region. Rather than adopting a traditional “top-down approach” to the study of Asian international relations, Kapur judiciously uses a “bottom-up” approach that concentrates on regional dynamics and their interactions with international affairs. The author relies on and modifies the works of Barry Buzan on “regional security complexes” and R. Vayrynen on “regional conflict formation” and “regional power and structures”.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 provide the historical and political context of the book. The second chapter offers an interesting discussion on the growing importance of Asia over the last 500 years, although it is not always clear how it contributes to the claims mentioned above. Chapter 3 is, in contrast, much more relevant to the themes of the book. It examines the evolving international structures in Asia, discussing the declining influence of the great powers and the rising power of regional actors as well as how these changes in the distribution of power may lead towards new bargaining relations. Chapter 4 is a fascinating discussion on the movements of great powers in Asia during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Kapur covers a broad geographical area and historical period and makes a series of arguments on the security structures in Asia. Due to space constraints, I will focus on three central ideas and concepts developed in the following chapters, namely, the decline of the great powers in Asia and the rising power of regional actors, the notion of multipolarity, and the ongoing importance of geo-politics.

Kapur considers the great powers, Russia and the United States, to be in decline in the Asia-Pacific. Though this is stating the obvious in the case of the former, to make a similar claim with reference to the United States is much more debatable. Kapur develops this argument in Chapter 5 when stating that the United States “cannot alone keep the peace in troublesome regions, it cannot prevent the rise of regional hegemons, it cannot alone manage the ethnic and Islamic battlefields, and it cannot prevent the growth of new international battlefields” (p. 100). The United States needs therefore to cooperate with other actors to pursue its interests, which Kapur regards as an indication of its declining power in the region. Simultaneously, regional powers benefit from “enhanced freedom of action and bargaining opportunities” (p. 41).

The argument on the decline of the United States is debatable due to several reasons. First and foremost, U.S. reliance on allies and regional partners to promote its interests should not automatically be viewed as a sign of weakness but simply as a dimension of power politics. In fact, this is how the United States has exercised power successfully in most parts of the world since the end of the Second World War, particularly in Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Moreover, the decline of the United States is an old debate that brings us back to the early 1990s and the consequences of the end of the Cold War. It was feared at the time that the United States might disengage from the region. Instead, it rapidly indicated its intention to remain a regional power and demonstrated its unchallenged military capability in

operation Desert Storm in 1991. Finally, most regional policy-makers and experts are now concerned not with a declining U.S. power but with its enormous preponderance in military power and the resurgence of a U.S. unilateralist foreign policy under the Bush administration.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 focus on the concept of multipolarity as the central character of the Asian security structure. Kapur argues that regional multipolarity is based on the United States and China but also Russia, Japan, India and other players and that it is expressed in the five geo-political pivots mentioned above. The attention is thus given to multipolarity in contrast to unipolarity, bipolarity or multilateralism. Discussing the absence of the latter in Asia, Kapur argues that “unlike Europe there is no security architecture or a tradition of multilateral discourse and conflict resolution among competing nations” (p. 121). In contrast, Asia is said to be “a geo-political jungle” (p. 121).

China, and to a lesser extent India, certainly support this multipolar perspective defined with reference to countering America’s unipolar status in the post-Cold War era. It is striking, however, that Kapur does not pay any attention to formal multilateral institutions in Asia as possible promoters of peace and stability nor does he include them as actors of the regional security structure. ASEAN, the ARF or SAARC, to mention only these three, are not mentioned as multilateral arrangements that can influence security relations by changing the behaviour of states. Rather than a weakness of the book, this constitutes a challenge to those who claim the relevance of these institutions in Asian international relations. Yet, Kapur also sometimes confuses multipolarity for multilateralism, which can be defined as principled interaction among regional states with the goal of managing conflict and building political and economic cooperation. He fails to acknowledge that some regional relationships are ordered and organized on the basis of principles and therefore represent examples of multilateralism. This is true in the case of the ASEAN region but also to some extent with reference to current multilateral efforts involving six different parties to find a solution to the North Korean nuclear weapons programme.

Chapter 9 examines the future of geo-politics in Asian international relations in a post-September 11 security architecture. Rather than referring to a new era in international politics, the author demonstrates the continuing importance of geo-politics in Asia. To argue for the ongoing centrality of geo-politics offers a refreshing change from the current literature on Asian security that focuses more on the threat of terrorism and non-state actors, the role of formal institutions and other matters. Despite September 11, the Asian strategic environment has not gone through a radical transformation, as the principal security structures

have essentially remained unchanged. Kapur argues that September 11 “did not alter the constant elements in Asian international relations but it defined clearly the nature of the problem and the nature of the policies of the main powers” (p. 169). The central contention is said to be between the doctrines of “just war” and “holy war” — the former located within the nation-state system while the latter occurs between believers and non-believers.

The very ambitious nature of the book and the broad geographical area it covers mean that some claims tend to be too diffused and not sufficiently applied to the different sub-regions. South Asia is very well covered while much less attention is given to the international relations of Southeast Asia. Kapur refers for instance to Vietnam and Indonesia as sub-regional hegemony without telling us more about why they hold these positions and how they exercise power. It also begs the question whether the three sub-regions might be too distinct as regional security complexes to make general arguments on Asian security.

Nonetheless, the book makes an important contribution to the scholarship on Asian international relations by challenging standard beliefs on the explanatory factors of the Cold War and bipolarity and focusing instead on several other useful concepts. Its discussions on multipolarity as well as regional hegemonies are particularly relevant to understanding the security structures and geo-politics of the region both during and since the end of the Cold War. They are also a clear demonstration of the realist arguments developed in the book.

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***The Political Economy of Cambodia's Transition, 1991–2001.* By Caroline Hughes, London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. 260pp.**

For a small country, Cambodia has attracted considerable scholarly and political attention internationally. Hughes' book is another addition to the growing literature on post-Cold War Cambodia on a theme that has drawn little attention prior to the 1990s: democratization and civil society. The book focuses on the political and economic transformations in Cambodia from 1991–2001 and how they impact upon the emergence and development of substantive democracy in the country. Specifically,