

***Empire and Neoliberalism in Asia*. Edited by Vedi R. Hadiz. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. Softcover: 301pp.**

Empire and Neoliberalism is the product of a conference held at the National University of Singapore in July 2004. The major focus of the book is on Southeast Asia, the conference re-uniting a number of specialists on the region who have been associated at some point in their careers with the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University in Australia. In addition, the volume has contributions from specialists on globalization, on China, and on India.

I will begin with a familiar lament from reviewers of edited books: the volume is very uneven in the quality of its contributions, and the extent to which they directly address any of the themes identified by the editor. As is often the case in these situations, it seems that the editor might usefully have intervened with a heavier hand — both to insist that some authors link their papers to a set of common themes, and, indeed, to take the hard decision of cutting some papers altogether.

The first part of the book examines “theoretical issues and the international context”, focusing primarily on the current sources of U.S. foreign policy, how the U.S. international role might best be conceptualized, and on where Asia, primarily Southeast Asia, fits within U.S. strategy. Because these are the chapters that are most likely to interest a wider audience, I will discuss these in some detail below.

The second part of the collection looks at how the changes in U.S. strategy post-9/11 have affected domestic politics and social relations in states from around the region. The Southeast Asian chapters are generally the strongest, and the ones most closely related to the volume’s central themes. Garry Rodan and Kevin Hewison provide an insightful chapter on how the post-9/11 change in emphasis in U.S. policies has affected Washington’s relations with Singapore and Thailand, and domestic politics in these two countries. Vedi Hadiz’s chapter on the American “Empire” and authoritarianism in Indonesia is undermined by the delay that has occurred in bringing the conference papers into print: it contains no reference to the administration of S.B. Yudhyono, elected only a few months after the conference took place. Khoo Boo Teik’s chapter on Malaysia focuses on the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the “meanings of Islamic governance”, topics that seem at best peripherally related to the volume’s overall themes. Patricio N. Abinales’ study of the Southern Philippines does have an explicitly American dimension: it reviews

the history of the triangular relationship between U.S. administrations, Philippine national governments and Muslim politicians and rebels. Chaiwat Satha-Anand poses the question of what violence does to democracy through examining the impact of the violence used by the Thai state against Southern rebels, concluding that Thailand is best characterized as an “authoritarian democracy”.

The remainder of the country studies is a very mixed bag. Zhiyuan Cui examines China’s response to U.S. neo-conservatism, particularly how Beijing is attempting to move beyond the “Washington Consensus” to promote a “Beijing Consensus”. Sonn Hochul asserts that “neoliberal and armed globalization constitute nothing less than ‘a planetary war’ against humanity”, and argues that the policies of the Bush administration have not only intensified anti-Americanism in Korea but also internal disputes on key issues such as policy towards North Korea and Iraq. Lee Wen-Chih and Yang Der-Ruey’s brief chapter reviews how the changing international politics of the Cold War and post-Cold War era, in particular as they have affected U.S.-China relations, have fed ethnic-based conflict on Taiwan. Finally, in the two chapters on South Asia, Habibul Haque Khondker looks at how relations between Bangladesh and the United States have recently improved “under conditions of military-dominated authoritarianism”, despite Bangladesh moving towards a more Islamic path; and Anand Teltumbde examines the relationship between Hindu fundamentalism in India and U.S. support for the neo-liberal economic policies of the BJP.

On a contentious topic such as that covered by this volume, a risk always exists that papers will be little more than a ritual denunciation of policies to which the author objects. The better chapters in the first half of the volume avoid this temptation, and identify anomalies in the policies of the Bush administration. Unfortunately, this cannot be said of Goran Therborn’s disjointed chapter on “Occidental Despotism”. Most of the rest of Part One of the book is much better.

Kanishka Jayasuriya grapples with how best to conceptualize the impact of globalization on forms of governance, arguing that one needs to employ an “inside-out” perspective to understand how globalization is being internalized within the state, in particular, how it leads to an interlocking web of governance within advanced capitalist countries — a new form of “ultra-imperialism”. The relevance to Asia, he argues, comes through the role that “globalizing bureaucrats” are playing in the management of new systems of transnational regulatory governance, and through regulatory regionalism such as the new regional surveillance process adopted by ASEAN finance

ministers. As Jayasuriya acknowledges, the chapter is only a first cut at applying the argument to East Asia, and might usefully be elaborated in the future.

Richard Robison examines tensions between the market-opening agenda of neo-liberalism and the preoccupation of neo-conservatives with not “rocking the boat” as far as loyal allies are concerned. In Southeast Asia, he argues, neo-conservative interests are in the ascendancy with priority being given to cementing alliances with governments that “can deliver order, loyalty and security” (p. 66).

Mark Beeson examines the rise of the “neocons” and their influence on U.S. foreign policy. The chapter puts a great deal of emphasis on the importance of ideas, something missing from some of the less subtle discussions of U.S. “empire”. Beeson points to the paradox that the “neocons” were acutely aware of the importance of winning policy debates but have ignored the implications of this since achieving office. The consequence, Beeson argues, is that they are undermining U.S. “soft power”: “the legitimacy of US ideas and policies is being systematically eroded by a highly doctrinaire, ideologically driven and nationalistic administration” (p. 81).

Elmar Altvater begins a chapter on energy, international conflicts and Asia with the question of how important it is for the geo-political stance of the United States that leading figures in the administration including Bush himself have strong ties to the California-Texas industry. In his words, “Is the Bush administration driven by a Wall Street–military–CalTex complex?” (p. 83). Unfortunately, Altvater fails to address the question systematically in his chapter. Neither does it contain much material focused on Asia. It ends with a lame plea that the “energy apartheid” system be overcome with a switch from fossil fuel to solar energy, a switch he notes that will require a “transformation of the social system” (p. 100). But he provides no guidance as to how such a transformation will be brought about.

Some chapters in the volume are very worth reading: its unevenness, however, makes it impossible to recommend except as a library purchase.

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