

***Asia's New Regionalism*. By Ellen L. Frost. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2008. Softcover: 293pp.**

Ellen Frost's book is an original and important contribution to the growing literature on Asian regionalization and regionalism. What sets it apart from most of this literature is its interdisciplinary approach — specifically, its willingness to draw on the insights of historians and geographers to illuminate a field that is largely the domain of economists and political scientists. Frost's book is, for example, one of the few that takes into account *The Myth of Continents*, the ground-breaking 1997 study by geographers Martin Lewis and Karen Wiggen of the evolution of regions as social and political constructs. Their analysis of how Asia was imagined in the past offers a natural starting point for examining how it is redefining itself today. By looking back, in other words, one can sometimes see the present and future more clearly. Frost has done this and come up with an interesting and provocative thesis that the integration of South, Northeast and Southeast Asia is being driven chiefly by the “resurgence of Maritime Asia” (p. 63) — i.e., the revival of the seaborne flow of goods, ideas, and people that united southern India, Southeast Asia and coastal China from the early centuries of the Common Era until its disruption by the nineteenth century advance of the West.

In Frost's view, Maritime Asia is — and was — the unplanned creation of private traders, investors, missionaries, travellers and other “spontaneous integrators” (p. 79). It acquires its dynamism from the initiative of such groups, particularly commercial capitalists. She contrasts this dynamism with the more hesitant efforts of Asian governments to forge agreements and institutions to address common economic and security concerns. As she sees it, Asia's government-led integration is failing to keep pace with its spontaneous commercial, social and cultural integration. She concludes that governments need to do more to establish an environment conducive to the continued development of Maritime Asia which she regards as a major driver of the economic growth and prosperity of South, Northeast and Southeast Asia.

In this reviewer's opinion, Frost is to be commended for introducing an historical dimension into the study of contemporary Asian regionalism, which is usually ignored in treatments of this subject. As Mark Twain once remarked, history may not repeat itself but it sometimes rhymes. Put differently, past patterns have a way of springing back to life, albeit in different form. The Indian Ocean and

the East and South China seas have always connected the littoral lands of South, Southeast and Northeast Asia, pulling together culturally, politically and even racially distinct societies. Early European observers were well aware of this and saw India, China and Southeast Asia as forming parts of an interconnected whole which they eurocentrically dubbed “the Far East”. It is only natural that the sea should once again serve as an integrator of these areas in the altered circumstances of post-colonial and post-Cold War Asia. As Frost points out, this is true even in today’s globalizing world where satellite communications, jet transport and the Internet have greatly reduced the tyranny of distance.

While Frost’s historical take on Asia’s integration is persuasive, it by no means excludes other perspectives. A good case can be made that the main story is not the resurgence of Maritime Asia but rather the revival of the trade and tributary networks that linked Inner, Southeast and Northeast Asia to Imperial China until the mid-nineteenth century. This argument is, for example, developed by Giovanni Arrighi et al. in *The Resurgence of East Asia* (2003), a book not mentioned by Frost nor even included in her bibliography. Another perspective given short shrift by Frost is the Asia-Pacific one — i.e., that the coming together of South, Northeast and Southeast Asia is likely to be less important than the deepening of its ties with the United States. There are, in short, different ways of thinking about Asia’s new regionalism. Ellen Frost offers one of the most interesting and innovative.

JOHN MILLER is a retired U.S. State Department official and author of *Modern East Asia: An Introductory History* (M.E. Sharpe 2007).