
The promotion of good governance and related issues, such as democracy (free and democratic elections) and the equality of men and women, has been part of Dutch foreign and development policy for many decades. In this study R. van der Veen challenges the rationale of this policy based upon statistics, documentary evidence, and sound argumentation. He shows how a number of authoritarian Asian states used a fundamentally different development model and managed to kick start their economies leading to higher income levels for their populations and—ultimately—a more even income distribution.

*Waarom Azië rijk en machtig wordt* (Why Asia is becoming rich and powerful) is an exceptional book for a number of reasons. It is a powerful exposé, conceptually rich, and full of facts, while based upon an impressive body of secondary sources. Van der Veen needs many pages for his arguments, but in the end disproves a long-time tradition of Dutch government policy. This is no small feat indeed, and all the more interesting because Van der Veen has been employed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for many years as an analyst and policy advisor. Since 2007 he is working as chief academic advisor to the ministry (*Wetenschappelijk Raadsadviseur*). He is also Professor by special appointment at the University of Amsterdam (History and Theory of International Relations) and the University of Groningen (Dutch Foreign Policy).

In 2002 Van der Veen published a provocative and well-received book on Sub-Saharan Africa (Van der Veen 2002) in which he related the disastrous state of affairs on this continent. In that volume he focused on the disintegration of the African state and the disappointing—sometimes even questionable—role of the international donor community that fails to contribute to sustainable economic development. His findings and conclusions were unflattering and did not spare anyone, including his own employer, the Foreign Affairs Office.

In his new book Van der Veen has set his eye on Asia. In his opinion there is more to learn from success than from failure. However, why Asian states did manage to develop their economies proved rather difficult to answer. The research of Asian development took him nearly twice as many years as his work on the African continent and almost 600 pages to present an answer.
Van der Veen underpins his arguments by referring to and skilfully using (parts of) the work of other authors (pp. 13-25), in particular William Bernstein’s identification of the necessary conditions for economic growth (Bernstein 2004). Van der Veen’s theoretical framework also owes much to his involvement in an international comparative research project funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs: ‘Tracking Development’ (2006-2011).1 (See note 358 on p. 566.) A good summary of Van der Veen’s views on Asian development can be found in his inaugural lecture as Professor in International Relations: De engel van de vooruitgang (‘The angel of progress) (Van der Veen 2010).2

In interviews Van der Veen has repeatedly stated his belief that Asian states have developed ‘out of fear’. Change followed from a wish for survival of those in power in reaction to external or internal threat or competition. In other words, Asian states have developed in response to local, regional, and global power dynamics. Japan’s successful response (commonly referred to as the Meiji Revolution, 1868-1912) to American power pressure in the late nineteenth century serves as his first example (pp. 89-99, 137-148). His point of departure in general is the primacy of state policy and the indispensability of strong leaders (such as president Deng Xiaoping in China or president Soeharto in Indonesia) associated with the introduction and/or implementation thereof.

Policy in this context does not imply industrialization on a large scale. Van der Veen emphasizes the agrarian roots of modern industrial growth in Asia and points out that poverty reduction took place through massive investment in the countryside. Most people lived in the countryside and concentrating policy efforts on agriculture, rural infrastructure, and the poor (farmers and farm labourers) was therefore most effective. Development

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1 More information on ‘Tracking Development’ can be found on www.trackingdevelopment.net. According to the website of the concluded project, ‘Tracking Development’ was a multilateral, international research project on the comparative development trajectories of Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa over the last 50 years. One of the objectives was to seek answers to the question of why Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have diverged so sharply in development performance during the last 50 years.

2 Equally informative is Henley 2011. Van der Veen and Henley participated both in the Tracking Development-project. Their close collaboration on development issues for many years has led Henley to comment that he is sometimes not sure who came up with a particular phrase or idea (Henley, 2011 on p. 9).
In this view is primarily a matter of numbers driven by a powerful sense of urgency.

In the Indonesian case, for instance, Soeharto first responded to an immediate internal communist threat by allowing, promoting and/or masterminding the organized killing of hundreds of thousands of (perceived) adversaries (1965-1966). By turning to the immense and pressing problem of endemic rural poverty—an ideal breeding ground for political radicalism—Soeharto successfully consolidated his political power towards the end of the 1960s. This rural policy focus probably owed much to his upbringing in the Indonesian countryside. As a result, the New Order regime of president Soeharto raised public spending on agriculture and allocated no less than 30% of Indonesia’s state budget to rural development (p. 288).

Soeharto’s focus on the rural economy led to rising production levels and improved efficiency. From being the largest rice importer in the world Indonesia soon became self-sufficient. The huge investment costs were paid for by foreign aid and oil revenues. Tens of millions of people in the countryside benefited immediately. At the end of the 1960s about 60% of the Indonesian population lived below the poverty line. In 1980 this percentage had dropped to 30% despite a growing population, and it continued to drop to 15% in 1990 and less than 10% at the beginning of the twenty first century (p. 289). Never before had so many people escaped poverty so fast. So far, only China under Deng Xiaoping has managed to do better. For this reason the authoritarian ex-general Soeharto, though responsible for the deaths of many thousands of people, came to be known as Bapak Pembangunan (Father of Development).

In Van der Veen’s change mechanism (veranderketen) (p. 492), the development of Asian countries started out as an effect of security problems or competitive strife. The resulting shift in mentality of powerful elite groups led to policy changes furthering economic development. Countless people profited from the rising production and income levels and managed to escape the extreme poverty they had always experienced. For the first time in their history common people had something to show for themselves and their children as a result of which their work mentality fundamentally changed. In Van der Veen’s view, this incentive explains why economic development became sustainable in the Asian context and has led to a more even income distribution. Ultimately, he reasons, this should lead to
democratization, since the growing number of people with something to fight for will demand a (political) say in their own future. Whether he will be proven right still remains in the future.

Van der Veen is convinced of the crucial influence of psychological and cultural factors on development issues (p. 24). Considerations of this kind are mentioned throughout the book and in his conclusions the author devotes a separate section on the theme of culture and mentality (pp. 487-92). It is admirable that he does not shrink back from this controversial issue. Cultural explanations of the difference in, for instance, economic development and business success tend to be considered racially motivated and discriminatory. For this reason they are often ignored even though their explanatory value cannot be denied. However, Van der Veen's description of the importance of the cultural-psychological layer stays at the surface. The concepts of culture, psychology and mentality are not clearly defined and used alternately. And he does not mention, for instance, the work of Hofstede or Geertz (except for note 146 on p. 563) from which his arguments might have benefited.

Van der Veen is obviously aware of the inevitable lack in detail in his research. He states beforehand that studying the continental wave of Asian modernization requires generalization (pp. 26-7). Naturally, experts on regions, countries and/or specific themes will find much to criticize or comment upon. But, this study is not about satisfying each and every one. Inviting critical response surely adds to its value.

Nevertheless, a few quibbles can be made. First of all, this book is not about Asia, but about a part of Asia. Central, Western and Russian Asia—highly important regions when it comes to economic resources and conflict potential—are intentionally left out. Second, Van der Veen devotes little attention to failed attempts at development since he is primarily interested in explanations for success (p. 29, 465-75). Arguably a rather imbalanced approach, because failed attempts at development could well have served to verify or falsify the theoretical approach adopted by Van der Veen. Third, (World Bank) statistics play an important part in this volume. For this reason more could have been said about their collection, interpretation, blind spots and possible flaws. Fourth, references that cannot be checked make little sense, such as mentioning unknown IMF numbers (note 513 on p. 569), or an interview on Dutch television (note 518 on p. 569), and referring to a dissertation on Thailand that has yet to appear (note 379 on p. 566).
This is all of little consequence, however, compared to the achievement of this volume. 'Why Asia is becoming rich and powerful' is an important book. The depth and breadth of the volume in both description and analysis makes it a valuable source on Asian development and poverty reduction. For this reason it should be translated into English, since the Dutch original will not reach the public it deserves.

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