Book Reviews

Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia After the Cold War: A Contemporary History*. 2019, vii + 282 pp. Singapore. NUS Press. ISBN: 9789813250789, price: 30.00 USD (paperback).

Ang Cheng Guan, a Singaporean scholar and Professor at the National University of Singapore, had a clear vision for *Southeast Asia after the Cold War*—a book he describes as the second ‘bookend’ of his study of the international history and politics of the region after the Second World War (p. vii). Ang’s goals were to explore the international politics of the region after the Cold War, the desires of the nation states, and the extent to which they have been realized. The book provides a compelling argument for the use of contemporary history, whilst introducing opposition to the methodology. The introductory chapter is a useful stand-alone piece in this regard. A contemporary historian’s research is not tainted by foresight, the themes and foci identified are not driven by knowledge of how the story ends—giving the contemporary historian an impartiality absent the ‘traditional’ historian.

Ang’s evident passion for his subject area makes for an energized work, which takes the reader on a whistle-stop, but highly informative, journey through the events of the thirty years preceding 2017. Whilst the first chapter does at times feel lacking in detailed exploration of the issues, that is largely due to its scene-setting nature, and the narrative flow and enjoyable prose of the Introduction soon recommences, sweeping the reader along. The vastness of the subject matter is assisted by a rigid structure, even if that does occasionally leave one wanting more detail on a topic and having to wait for a subsequent chapter to receive it.

Given Ang’s professional history, it is understandable that its references lean towards Singapore and particularly Lee Kuan Yew (who Ang recently wrote a book on), even if sometimes that leaves the book feeling a little Singapore-centric. However, the book is meticulously referenced, and extremely comprehensive.

In addition to its broad international relations and history audience, this book would be beneficial to students of ASEAN, South East Asian relations, US-geopolitics, and the rise of China. It provides an admirable overview of the South China Sea dispute, regional pressures, and the tensions between China and the USA. The exploration of the South China Sea, and China's approach to international relations with its neighbors is particularly interesting. The complex picture of competing territorial claims in the region is explored, and one is left with the distinct impression of a China that promises genuine dialogue and cooperation but does not deliver.

Although the key themes Ang identifies are order and regionalism, the flow of the tale is increasingly dominated by the action (and inaction) of the US and China. ASEAN is determined to stay in the driver's seat, but the balance between the two powers is increasingly hard to maintain, especially in the face of growing tensions surrounding the South China Sea, and US inattention (pp. 17, 128).

One of the most fascinating elements of the book is the Chinese and American jockeying for influence in the region. Where at times nervousness and distrust appears to weaken relations between individual Southeast Asian countries and the US or China, they are never prepared to go too far in the opposite direction, all existing on a continuum between the two powers, trying to maintain a balance. The situation is exemplified by the quotes: "Don't leave us, but don't make us choose"; "Washington should not 'bestow the kiss of death by too close an embrace'" (p. 181). This balancing act is a key feature of the book, and Ang aptly provides an overview of the historical events and interrelationships that have fostered (dis)trust. There are a great deal of historic tensions still influencing the region, such as Vietnamese and Lao distrust of the USA over the Vietnam War, and Cambodia and Laos viewing China as a protector against the regional dominance of Thailand and Vietnam.

Thus, the clearest unified goal of the region appears to be maintaining a neutral position between China and the United States so that they can benefit from the regional interest without losing power to either and the inevitable rise in tensions that would precipitate. We are repeatedly told of ASEAN's determination to stay "in the driver's seat". Whilst the SEA states have varying opinions on the US and China, they are willing to accept domestic assistance and use the powers to keep the other in check, so that neither has regional hegemony. Reading the book, one cannot help wondering how much longer this can continue, especially as China continues to rise. There are numerous competing territorial claims that threaten to derail progress and peace in the region. The table below provides an indicative overview of the island disputes, each of which could spark conflict if not resolved.

	Spratly islands	Paracel islands	Scarbo- rough Shoal	Senkaku / Diaoyu islands	Liancourt rocks	Pratas island	Maccles- field bank
Brunei	X						
China	X	X	X	X		X	X
Japan				X	X		
Korea					X		
Malaysia	X						
N. Korea					X		
Philippines	X		X				X
Taiwan	X	X	X	X		X	X
Vietnam	X	X					

The book concludes that ASEAN must be more proactive if it wishes to avoid being relegated from the driver's seat (p. 240). Maintaining its position between China and the USA is going to become increasingly challenging. The right choices must be made to prevent war, but as ever, the difficulty is knowing what those decisions are. This leads Ang to sum up with a quote reminiscent of the first Chapter's title. Southeast Asia is "standing uncertainly at the cross-roads scrutinizing signboards that point not in one but many directions ... But only one of them is pointing in the right direction and we shall never know which one until we get there—or what is more likely, we do not get there" (pp. 242–243). Thus, Ang concludes: "History is a guide to navigate in perilous times, and indeed, we live in perilous times" (p. 243).

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References

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