

Remapping East Asia: The Construction of a Region

T.J. Pempel (Editor)

Reviewed by Professor Robyn Lim

Timing is everything, as the actress said to the bishop. The theme of this book, written mostly by political economists, is that East Asia is 'ripe for co-operation'. That no doubt will encourage Australian advocates of the 'East Asia Community'. But the book came out not long before April-May 2005 saw greatly heightened tensions between Japan and China, as well as between Japan and South Korea.

It is depressing that Western liberals never seem to learn anything. Just before World War I, Norman Angell famously said that the European economies were so intertwined that great power war was now impossible.

There are some useful chapters. Notably one in which Andrew Macintyre of the ANU is co-author. That provides a valuable summary of how and why Japan, once the 'lead goose' of economic development in East Asia, became a dead duck. But as the title indicates, many of the chapters in the book are based on so-called 'constructivist' theories of international politics. Consider this contribution by the Canadian academic Paul Evans:

'More helpful, though less precise, is John Ruggie's idea of an episteme, adapted from Michel Foucault, which refers to a "dominant way of looking at social reality, a set of shared symbols and references, mutual expectations and a mutual predictability of intention." (Ruggie 1975, 569-70). If the episteme is treated as a process rather than a starting point, it accurately captures the evolutionary dialogue activities that are bringing together individuals from very different national settings who hold very different ideas and then move toward a kind of consensual knowledge that they hold in common'.

Of course, this kind of gobbledegook is deeply attractive to many academics, not least because it provides opportunities for travel, publications and so on. And the academics and bureaucrats feed off one another, at vast expense to taxpayers of course, and at considerable opportunity cost to students who would be much better off studying some decent history. When I used to sit on staff selection committees at ONA, and ask candidates what was Australia's national interest in issue X or Y, most would look at me in befuddlement.

Moreover, the theme that building institutions in East Asia will necessarily lead to stability is based on a false comparison with Europe. Without the overarching security provided by NATO, the EU would have got nowhere. And East Asia is a mostly maritime theatre, whereas during the Cold War strategic competition in Europe was mostly continental, although dependent on maritime reinforcement. You don't get far by comparing chalk with cheese. No wonder that APEC, ASEAN, ARF, etc, have proved useless in all the recent regional crises, including East Timor.

From an Australian perspective, the book provides embarrassing reminders of how the Hawke government

tried to create APEC without the United States. That provoked a stern, and soon public, letter to Gareth Evans from then US Secretary of State Jim Baker. Not that Evans was deterred of course. He saw the ARF, etc, as instruments to further his ambition to become United Nations Secretary General. DFAT, where strategic thinking can be as rare as snow in Singapore, was only too willing to oblige.

It is also curious that none of the contributors to this book seem to understand how ASEAN was created. Indeed, in the introduction Pempel says that 'Indonesia was subjected to a Cold War-inspired bloodbath in the mid 1960s that left it divided at home and at odds with many of its immediate neighbours'. It would be hard to find a better illustration of the mess that political economists get into when they dabble in strategy.

In reality of course, Australian and British intelligence helped bring matters to a boil in Indonesia in 1965 because we had reason to fear that the United States would not stay the course in Vietnam. The stakes were high indeed because China, at the height of its Cultural Revolution and using the Indonesian communist party as its instrument, sought to secure the succession to Sukarno — and thus a vital foothold on the straits that link the Indian and Pacific oceans. The advent of Suharto's New Order regime, which tilted Indonesia's nonalignment decidedly towards the West, made possible the creation of ASEAN. At long last, that brought Indonesia, by far the largest of the regional states, into civilised relations with its neighbours. And that was vital for Australian security.

As for the so-called East Asian Community, this idea is merely the latest reincarnation of the old Pan-Asia myth. Rich Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State in the 2000-2004 Bush administration, has recently dumped on it, and rightly so. ASEAN itself (despite the efforts of hardheads such as Singapore) has become mostly a vehicle for accommodating China. South Korea, like North Korea, has become a quasi-ally of China. Japan on its own cannot hope to balance China, not least because it keeps dropping rocks on its own feet. India may well be willing to balance Chinese power. But India has its own ambitions in the Indian Ocean, and is far too ambivalent a great power to be anyone's ally.

So why should Australia be pressing its nose against the window of an empty pie shop, especially when our security protector will be on the outside looking in? ♦

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