

Does the Study of Asian International Relations Require International Relations Theory?

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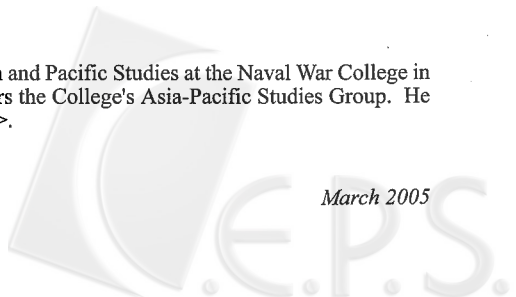


Muthiah Alagappa's newest collaborative volume, *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features*, is a work of impressive sweep and substance. Alagappa is among the foremost proponents seeking to apply international relations theory to the Asia-Pacific region. Drawing on the contributions of authors from Asia and the Pacific, North America, and Europe, he conclusively puts to rest any lingering claims that "mere regionalists" are incapable of undertaking rigorous, empirically-grounded generalizations relevant to the study of international relations. There is a richness, diversity, and depth to this volume that warrants the careful attention of all students of regional politics, and of international relations as a whole.

Alagappa first presents some "big picture" questions in his introductory chapters and then distills the insights of individual contributors in a concluding chapter. At the outset, he directly challenges numerous Western assessments of Asian international relations published during the past decade. As he observes:

More than a decade has passed since the end of the Cold War, but the dire prognostications of certain Western analysts [about the management of Asian security affairs] have not materialized ... although Asia still faces serious security challenges, it has enjoyed relative peace, security, and prosperity. Despite periodic crises, there has not been a major war since 1979. With very few exceptions, Asian states do not fear for their survival. ... In comparison with the first

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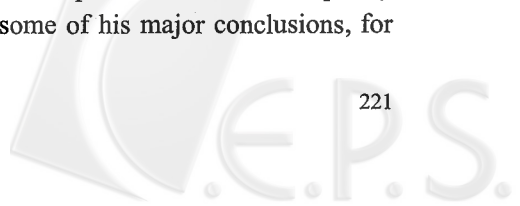


thirty years of the postindependence period, greater stability and predictability have characterized Asia's international relations in the last two decades (p. x).

Alagappa and his collaborators devote much of the volume to this one central question: why has the Asia-Pacific region failed to substantiate the expectations and predictions contained in realist international relations theory? (Indeed, numerous contributors are card-carrying members of the realist camp.) Is it because scholars have incorrectly characterized regional international relations, or that a decade is too short a period to enable definitive generalization? Are there specific dimensions to international behavior different from the history of the European state system or from the history of the Cold War? Are the animating impulses and expectations of Asian states somehow divergent from those evident in the West? In a word, why is Asia different?

Alagappa posits the existence of an indigenously-derived concept of security order that differs in significant ways from the Western state system. He contends that a "widely shared normative framework" has emerged within the region, enabling states to manage security rivalries, achieve political normalcy with most members of the regional system, and enable states to realize national-level goals through collaboration and co-existence, including the avoidance of interstate war (p. xi). He also asserts that the lesser degree of regional institutionalization is not evidence of insecurity or of weakness: "Over the years, Asian states have reached certain understandings and developed formal and informal forums and rules to manage their differences" (p. 7). He envisions neither a hegemonic Asia dominated by the United States or by a single regional power, nor "a genuinely bipolar or multipolar Asia," although he concedes the possibility of spheres of influence (p. xii). In essence, he believes that the development of a hybrid system has enabled increased levels of regional stability and well-being.

This seemingly benign forecast does not make Asian international relations boring. Alagappa and other contributors highlight the daunting challenges that stand in the way of a fully-realized regional order, which are explored in great detail in individual chapters. A conditional quality still pervades his overall assessment: some of his major conclusions, for



example, contain the caveat "except in a few cases" (p. 596). Since the "few cases" encompass the three primary regional domains where major power war still seems imaginable in Asia (i.e., in the Taiwan Strait, on the Korean peninsula, and between India and Pakistan), these hardly seem trivial examples. Considered as a whole, however, the volume is characterized by optimism rather than pessimism. Most of the authors assert that regional states have proven adept at managing interstate rivalries, avoiding acute crises, and achieving increased interdependence, all while simultaneously maintaining a commitment to the inviolability of state sovereignty. As Alagappa concludes, "The consolidation of Asian countries as modern nation-states is a crucial part of the explanation for Asia's transformation ... the rise of an international normative structure ... has naturalized the notions of sovereignty, noninterference in domestic affairs, private economic activity, and restraint in the use of force" (p. 596).

The Asia-Pacific region therefore combines significant elements of two alternative security approaches—that is, an accelerated commitment to military-technological advancement by states still preparing for interstate conflict comparable to U.S. national security strategy, and increased regional interdependence and cooperative security that resonate with much of contemporary Europe. Though such parallels do not imply emulation, they suggest ways in which Asian regionalism has drawn on and adapted to the predominant patterns in contemporary international politics.

The ambitions of the contributors, however, go well beyond explaining how and why the Asia-Pacific region constitutes a distinctive international species that is neither European nor American. Numerous chapters in *Asian Security Order* are informed by an ample grasp of international relations theory. This is hardly surprising. Most of the authors serve as faculty members in departments of political science or international relations, in which mastery of theory is a guild card. Alagappa endeavors to demonstrate that he and others are fully at home in the realm of theory. However, how essential is this theoretical underpinning to the insights contained in various chapters? No doubt, individual contributors need to conceptualize how they believe the world works in their designated empirical domains. Indeed, Alagappa argues for an eclectic definition of security

order, since "no single grand theory ... can fully explain the security concerns and behavior of Asian (and other states)" (p. xiii). His argument seems unobjectionable, but an "all of the above" approach necessarily dilutes the singularity attached to any given particular theory. So construed, theory becomes a useful ordering device for individual chapters, but not the source of the volume's originality.

Deeper explanations of security order in Asia seem rooted in three primary factors: (1) the historical and cultural forces shaping the formation of nation-states across the region (including the internal structure of states); (2) the development, maturation, adaptation, and socialization under way within and between various Asian states over the past two decades; and (3) the extent of major power involvement in state-building and security arrangements. None of these factors constitutes a grand theory, but they explain a great deal about the region's increasing normalcy and distinctiveness, uncluttered by theoretical conceptualizations or international relations jargon. The interaction of the latter two factors warrants particular attention. As the capacity of regional states to determine their security futures has increased, the ability of external actors to oversee these patterns has diminished accordingly. The first three decades of regional development following the end of the Pacific War were characterized by intense American involvement, including major wars in Korea and Indochina. In the intervening years, the singularity of the U.S. presence has diminished, requiring regional actors to pursue (often in somewhat halting fashion) their own approaches to security and stability.

The challenges posed by the need to develop regional security approaches apart from dominant Western patterns are highlighted in several of the volume's most distinctive chapters. Rosemary Foot superbly captures the subordinate role of the United Nations in addressing interstate and communal violence in Asia, aptly characterizing the UN System as "a buttress, not a pillar" (p. 311). Responsibilities have therefore frequently devolved to regional states. Unlike Alagappa, Foot seems far more uneasy about the absence of regional institutions able to fulfill responsibilities for conflict resolution (p. 328). She also notes how the "essentialist quality" of disputes over sovereignty and national identity between China and

Taiwan, in Kashmir, and on the Korean peninsula work against meaningful compromise (p. 331). Jianwei Wang's comprehensive assessment of the variability in territorial disputes across the region (including the multiple historical legacies of these disputes) is equally worthy of note, though he recognizes the increased capacity of states in the post-Cold War era to resolve or at least diminish many of these disputes. Jean-Marc Blanchard's assessment of maritime disputes and rivalries is especially insightful, drawing connections between "adolescent statehood" and consequent uncertainties about political and security identities as a primary source of conflict (pp. 425-26). The intersection of resource control, national identity, and sovereignty constitutes an especially volatile mix (p. 435). Blanchard, however, identifies various "pathways to order" that (depending on the rates of regional maturation) could ameliorate various potential conflicts (p. 443); yet his account is sobering and unsettled about potential regional futures.

Though all three of these authors are comfortable with and cognizant of relevant theoretical domains, the value of their respective analyses derives from an ability to connect disparate phenomena, to explain the sources of conflict and prospective security approaches to conflict resolution or management, and to link both to the highly uneven capacities of states to address their security alternatives. Theory may serve as a useful stage setter for many of their individual judgments, but it is only work grounded in larger realities that tells a larger story and informs understanding of the region's extraordinary evolution.

