



## LJMU Research Online

**White, NJ**

**Review of 'Ang Cheng Guan. Southeast Asia After the Cold War: A Contemporary History. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. ISBN: 9789813250789 (paper, \$30.00)'.**

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/14391/>

### Article

**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**White, NJ (2020) Review of 'Ang Cheng Guan. Southeast Asia After the Cold War: A Contemporary History. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. ISBN: 9789813250789 (paper, \$30.00)'. H-Diplo.**

LJMU has developed **LJMU Research Online** for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact [researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk)

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>

# H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 291

1 December 2020

Ang Cheng Guan. *Southeast Asia After the Cold War: A Contemporary History*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. ISBN: 9789813250789 (paper, \$30.00).

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E291>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Cindy Ewing | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY NICHOLAS J. WHITE, SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCE, LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

---

A sequel to the author's study of Southeast Asia's international relations during the Cold War,<sup>1</sup> this book is concerned with how the region's international relations have developed since 1990, focussing on "changes, continuities and likely trajectories" (1). Ang spotlights attempts by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to maintain its centrality and relevance against the backdrop of the relative decline of the U.S. and the rise of China. ASEAN continues to stress the advantages of its 'neutral' role between the great powers with initiatives like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which, from 1994, aimed at both constraining and maintaining the engagement of the US and China to avoid a "second Cold War" (39). Hence, the proposal by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd for an Asia-Pacific Community in June 2008 was slapped down by the Southeast Asians for fear of their marginalisation. Existing studies by political scientists and international relations specialists concentrate on current topicality or are theory-led and so in Ang's view overlook "complexities and interconnectedness" and inconsistent "inconvenient truths" (5). Instead, he takes an international history approach, giving precedence to "the analysis of situations in terms of everything happening at one time (within the chosen perspective)" (12).

Contemporary history, as Ang recognises, is a "controversial subfield" (2). He takes inspiration from E.H. Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis* as a revered example of contemporary international history.<sup>2</sup> As with the first edition of Carr's book being published just as the European phase of WWII began, Ang's is a *very* contemporary history, finishing in 2017 and arguing in the final chapter that 2016-2017 is a breakpoint in Southeast Asia's international history given three intersecting developments: the election of Washington-sceptic Rodrigo Duterte as Philippines president, the international tribunal ruling against China in the South China Sea Dispute, and the accession of the 'America-First' Trump administration. Ang also draws upon Ralph Smith's approach to writing the international history of the Vietnam War,<sup>3</sup> especially Smith's assertion that "the discipline of history need not in itself depend on the availability of archives" (3). There is a reliance on press reports and official publications as the primary-source base but Ang gets behind closed-doors through the interrogation of other material in the public domain—for example, email correspondence with Ong Keng Yong, ASEAN

---

<sup>1</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018). See the H-Diplo roundtable review at <http://www.tiny.cc/Roundtable-XX-39>.

<sup>2</sup> E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001 [1939]).

<sup>3</sup> Ralph B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, Vol. 1: *Revolution Versus Containment, 1955–61* (London: Macmillan, 1983); *An International History of the Vietnam War*, Vol. 2: *The Struggle for Southeast Asia, 1961–65* (London: Macmillan, 1985); *An International History of the Vietnam War*, Vol. 3: *The Making of a Limited War, 1965–66* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

Secretary-General from 2003-8, revealing a “long honeymoon period” (55) in Southeast Asia-China relations to 2009 after Beijing’s restraint and unwitting support during the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) of 1997-8. Important insights are also gleaned from careful analysis of public utterances, as in 2002 when Malaysia’s Chief of the Navy referred to the overlapping claims in the South China Sea as a principal threat to his country’s stability, and that Malaysia “should be prepared to defend” its sovereignty (151). The memoirs of Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr, meanwhile, give the basic content of Washington-Canberra cables in the summer of 2012 surrounding tensions in the South China Sea. The recollections of Philippines National Security Adviser Jose Almonte are also put to good use, such as on disagreements between Manila and Phnom Penh over the South China Sea dispute in 2012, while the memoirs of Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa reveal Jakarta’s thinking on an ‘Indo-Pacific wide’ treaty in the early-2010s. Journalists can sometimes get behind the wall of secrecy even in the most closed of ASEAN states; on Myanmar, for example, Ang draws upon a *Times of India* article from November 2012 which demonstrates that a secret study by the Yangon junta was questioning its close economic and diplomatic ties with China.

Ang also highlights the work of Nicholas Tarling as a major influence on his narrative style.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, as with Tarling’s tomes, this means that the mass of detail and the interconnections and cross references make a central argument sometimes difficult to decipher. It seems, nevertheless, that three main themes emerge. The first is competition between Southeast Asian states and the ongoing unilateralism of ASEAN members. By 1999, with Cambodia’s admission, ASEAN encompassed all of Southeast Asia. But, as Ang points out, ASEAN was “only the sum of its ten parts” (1), and, thus far, Timor-Leste (despite independence in 2002) is not part of the club. Individual actions have frequently often undermined ASEAN collectivism and therefore the organisation’s ability to maintain its position in the ‘driver’s seat’ of regional cooperation. ASEAN’s credibility and standing were “badly affected” by the AFC. In the words of Singapore premiere, Goh Chok Tong, the Asian Tigers became “Asian Kittens” (50). The organisation was galvanised into greater economic cooperation, as per ASEAN’s founding objective back in 1967, and especially in trying to re-attract foreign investment. At the time, however, the regional partners were unable to help each other out and Singapore was especially criticised for its self-interested attitude.

Calls for a Southeast Asian free trade area or economic community in the early-2000s were clearly much easier for Singapore to contemplate than the other ASEAN states with their ‘closed’ competing economies. In 2004, former ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino pointed out that the Southeast Asian economy remained “fragmented” and integration was still not underpinned by “binding, effective commitments” (100). Chinese claims in the South China Sea have led to some closing of ranks and joint negotiating, but Malaysia, for example, has proved itself unilateralist through courting China and erecting structures on territory that it covets. The “compromised formula” of the 2002 Declaration on the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea was likely symptomatic of divisions within ASEAN (153). For the first time in ASEAN’s history, no joint communiqué emerged from the July 2012 leaders’ summit in Phnom Penh because of a failure to find a common position on the territorial disputes and principally because of Cambodia’s burgeoning economic and defence relationship with China. Indeed, for Cambodia and Laos, China has come to serve as a “countervailing force” (175) to neighbouring past aggrandisers Thailand and Vietnam. In a further flare up between China and Vietnam over the Paracel Islands in May 2014, it was hardly surprising that Vietnam turned to Washington and New Delhi, and not ASEAN, for support. In 2016, the lack of consensus meant that ASEAN could not capitalise upon the “historic opportunity” provided by the international tribunal ruling (218).

On other security threats, Malaysia and Singapore were “tremendous[ly] frustrat[ed]” in the early-2000s by Indonesia’s lack of cooperation in the approach to the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network, underlining a major problem with ASEAN’s cardinal principal of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states (89). Yet, in 2003, an Indonesian-mooted ASEAN Security Community (ASC)—to prevent regional disputes leading to armed conflicts, as well as enhancing economic integration—was only reluctantly embraced for fear of Indonesian dominance. The first meeting of ASEAN defence ministers was held only in 2006, nearly three decades after the collective’s creation, and by 2009 Jakarta’s strategic

---

<sup>4</sup> See, For example, Nicholas Tarling, *Regionalism in Southeast Asia: To Foster the Political Will* (London: Routledge, 2006); *Southeast Asia and the Great Powers* (London: Routledge, 2010).

thinkers believed the archipelago was constrained on the world stage by ASEAN and Indonesia needed to forge a “post-ASEAN foreign policy” (131). Since joining in 1997, Myanmar’s human rights record, even before the Rohingya crisis, proved an embarrassing headache for ASEAN and strained the group’s credibility (with the U.S. and the European Union particularly). Despite open critiques and admonishing, ASEAN members exercised little leverage over the Yangon junta given (once again) the limitations of the non-intervention hallmark. Because of these divisions, after two decades the ARF was still at Phase 2 of its objectives—preventive diplomacy—and it had not moved to the conflict resolution stage.

Linked to the agency of individual states and the limits of regional institutions is the second major theme that emerges from Ang’s study: the influence of local regime change and political instability on Southeast Asia’s international relations. Political instability plagued Indonesia between 1997 and 2004, denting ASEAN’s effectiveness. Much to the chagrin of Singapore, for example, the replacement of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono by Joko Widodo in October 2014 led to a less-internationalist outlook in Jakarta, particularly with regard to a proposed ‘Indo-Pacific’ treaty. The 2008 summit in Thailand had to be postponed because of political violence, and the military coup in Bangkok in May 2014 led to strained relations with the U.S. as the junta turned towards China. Manila’s “radical shift towards Beijing” (220) in 2016 also underscores the importance of domestic political change within the ASEAN states. The lack of significant regime change in Singapore, on the other hand, explains a consistency of foreign policy approach—that is, a belief in a continuing U.S. presence as a countervailing power to China (and to a lesser extent India); whereas, since the early-1990s, the Philippines and Malaysia have proved less consistent in their attitudes towards the United States.

The third overarching theme is ASEAN’s continued dependence upon the “buy-in” of often unreliable and unpredictable “external powers” (239). This has been especially the case with the U.S. in recent years. China gave obvious economic benefits to the Southeast Asian nations especially after the 2008 financial crash in the West, but those attractions were tempered by fears of Chinese aggrandisement as the South China Sea dispute was sparked again in 2010. Surveys of Southeast Asian elite opinion in 2014 revealed that while China was regarded as the “top economic partner, the US was the preferred security partner” (200). Given that 90 per cent of the world’s commerce at the end of the twentieth-century was transported by sea, the U.S. did become increasingly alarmed by tensions in the South China Sea. The Obama administration signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN in July 2009 but U.S. priorities remained Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s Asia-Pacific ‘pivot’ from autumn 2011 suggested a new attitude in Washington. But Southeast Asian leaders remained sceptical of the U.S. bringing much real teeth to this rhetoric given budgetary restraints and political crisis in Washington. The first U.S.-ASEAN summit to take place in the U.S. in February 2016 was more “symbolism” than “substance” (212). China appeared to be doing far better in growing its influence in Southeast Asia through such initiatives as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and ‘One Belt, One Road.’ Potential overdependence upon China—with even Myanmar worried about threats to its independence—led ASEAN to try and improve relations with both Japan and India by 2013 as a balance to China.

The period after 1990 does appear distinct. Coalescing with U.S.-Soviet and Sino-Soviet rapprochements in the late-1980s, the official end of the Cambodia conflict in 1991 was the “first concrete indication” that Southeast Asia’s Cold War was “finally over” (20). The first ARF in Bangkok in 1994 took place after the U.S. and Japan overcame their previous aversion to security multilateralism: as Peter Ho of Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented, this would have been “unimaginable during the Cold War” (37). As Ang shows in Chapter Two on the AFC, trans-border economic cooperation became much more important and indeed possible in the post-Cold War situation, particularly regarding the Indochina states. There has also been a heightened concern with non-traditional security issues—such as drug trafficking and environmental degradation since the 1990s. The ASEAN-India relationship, as manifested in New Delhi’s inclusion as a dialogue partner of the ARF after 1995, overcame previous ASEAN-India tensions during the Cold War given India’s support for Vietnam and the USSR. Perhaps the most extraordinary discontinuity was the “common knowledge” by 2012 that Hanoi was “quietly encouraging the US to be a countervailing force against China” (177).

Ang, however, does recognise the continuities with the Cold War era in Washington’s re-engagement with “moderate” Malaysia and Indonesia in the ‘War on Terror’ (93) plus his reminder that as in the 2010s so in the late-1960s there was a concern by member states that the U.S. should not be “too close” to ASEAN (181). He also makes an important point in his conclusion that “ASEAN only reacts quickly and effectively when it is confronted with an existential threat” (239) as per

the 1975 fall of Saigon which led onto the first ASEAN head of state summit two years' later and the 1997 financial crisis which galvanised the Southeast Asians into increased integration. Nevertheless, other significant continuities could have been stressed. Singapore's different economic outlook, for example, has been reflective of its long-term divergence from its neighbours, which was most obviously exposed by the birth of the independent island Republic through its expulsion from Malaysia back in 1965.<sup>5</sup> Ong Keng Yong's lament in 2003 that the ASEAN states needed to combine rather than compete was reminiscent of the limits of economic integration before 1990 given that Southeast Asian countries have frequently been in competition with each other for markets and sources of investment, and import substitution industrialization programmes tended to be nationally focused. Intra-ASEAN concerns at the ASC proposal also reflected an underlying continuity given that containing Indonesia in the wake of the confrontation with Malaysia of 1963-1966 was a spur to ASEAN's formation.<sup>6</sup> Page | 4

Surely, then, it is too soon to say that Southeast Asia is currently at a watershed—this is the inherent problem of perspective in the writing of contemporary history, which Ang recognises in his introductory chapter. Indeed, the perils of contemporary history are underscored by Ang's point that neither the AFC nor the impact of cross-border terrorism in the wake of 9/11 were anticipated at the time. There are two further points of minor criticism. Firstly, the analysis could be said to be 'Singapore-centric' given the preponderance of references to the thoughts and utterances of three Singapore Prime Ministers and the veteran diplomat Tommy Koh, as well as frequent references to articles in *The Straits Times* and other Singaporean media outlets. Secondly, while there is ample discussion of economic and geo-strategic matters, it would have been helpful to know more about socio-cultural ties between ASEAN states and their influence on international relations. The ASEAN Social-Cultural Community was a third pillar of the 2003 Bali summit and, in the framing of the ASEAN Charter of 2007, there was a concern to maintain the institution's relevance and driver role through building a regional identity amongst "ordinary people" (121). But we are not told how successful that has been.

Nevertheless, Ang's book can be recommended as a crisply written, refreshingly bold and highly original contribution. It will be a vital point of reference for international historians of postcolonial Southeast Asia. Given the myriad of overlapping ASEAN "platforms" and "scaffoldings" with which "the region is still exploring and experimenting in the search for a new post-Cold War order" (239), the glossary at the back of the book is particularly helpful as are the footnotes at the bottom of the page for the copious primary- and secondary-source references. Above all, this book demonstrates that effective contemporary history can be written without access to government archives and for a region where public access to the official record is notoriously restricted.

**Nicholas J. White** is Professor of Imperial & Commonwealth History at Liverpool John Moores University where his research has focused on the decolonisation of Southeast Asia. His latest book, *In Trust: A History of PNB* (Petaling Jaya: MPH, 2018) is a study of Malaysia's National Investment Corporation from 1978 to 2018 and, with Prof. Shakila Yacob of Universiti Malaya, he is currently writing a monograph on Anglo-Malaysian economic relations during the 1970s and 1980s.

---

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas J. White, 'The Economics of Singapore's Exit from Malaysia' in Anthony Webster and Nicholas J. White, eds., *Singapore—Two Hundred Years of the Lion City* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Tarling, *Regionalism*.