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New Security Challenges in Asia

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New Security Challenges in Asia (eds. Michael Wills and Robert M. Hathaway) is a collection of scholarly essays arguing that Asian security issues are determined by “transnational elements” that are shaped as much by external sources as the “preferred responses” of the actors involved. For this reason, the contributing writers focus on four core aspects of Asian security dilemma: water and food security, responses to pandemics, and transnational crimes, including cyberwarfare and terrorism. But as Wills and Hathaway concede in the introductory essay, such challenges are hardly “new.” Indeed, the book shows how complex foreign policy threats manifest themselves as an amalgamation of old and new challenges.

The book is divided into ten chapter-length essays. In each chapter, authors examine case studies and follow them with policy recommendations for American and Asian policymakers. The editors set the tone for the discussion by laying out factors hampering effective responses to transnational threats to Asian security which may ultimately undermine the legitimacy of the state actors involved. Hathaway and Wills argue that what makes it difficult to manage these challenges may be the complexity and the rapid pace with which they threaten the security of the region and the attendant problems associated with integrating the “new frameworks of cooperation” due to the lack of consistent policy approaches and capabilities.

Although none of the essays in this volume explores the military dimensions of security challenges, defense policy mavens and military officers may derive great insights from chapters on water security, cyber-crimes, and conflict and transnational terrorism. For instance, in Chapter 2, Kenneth Pomeranz examines how limited access to water can lead to potential conflicts in the Himalayan-Tibet region due to domestic unrest over food and water security concerns.

Eric A. Strahorn delves into the historical roots behind conflicts over the Indus River Basin in Chapter 4. Strahorn argues that while the Indus Waters Treaty has been a political success, it ultimately “lacks flexibility” because it does not adequately address ecological dimensions of water usage by China, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Strahorn further argues that competition for the control of water flow may ultimately lead to interstate conflicts and potentially derail America’s security interests in the region.

In Chapter 9, Justin V. Hastings examines how post-colonial legacies in Southeast Asia have combined traditional instability with modernity to give rise to terrorism that continues to bedevil Southeast Asian states. To illustrate how Southeast Asia’s porous “political and economic networks” can complicate both economic policies and counterterrorism efforts, Hastings examines two case studies. Each case illustrates how imperfect border control can foster what Hastings calls “illicit political

and economic networks.” Since terrorism in the aforementioned regions can undermine American interests, Hastings argues that the United States should “reshape” the security environment in Southeast Asia by aiding its allies at all governmental levels.

Adam Segal’s essay in Chapter 10 examines how cybersecurity threats may undermine the underpinnings of global networks due to the rapid pace with which the Internet has spread and the difficulties of identifying perpetrators of cybercrimes. For these reasons, Segal argues that the militarization of cyberspace perpetuates traditional interstate rivalries. To prevent cyber threats from spiraling out of control, Segal suggests establishing the definition for what may constitute cyberattacks. Further, he argues the United States should combat cyber threats by fostering a “regional approach” to addressing cyberwarfare.

For diplomats and international relations scholars, this book may be impactful as it forces them to look beyond the confines of the existing international relations theoretical frameworks. As if to bear this out, case studies cited by the contributors demonstrate that no traditional international relations theories can easily explain the underlying causes of the challenges and threats posed by the plethora of elements involved nor can diplomats and scholars readily derive solutions from them.

The book, however, is not without its flaws. For one, military planners may find it difficult to apply lessons from the essays in the book. My chief complaint is the authors do not address the military dimensions of the transnational elements threatening Asian security. For instance, the authors dealing with water security, transnational crime, and cyber threats could have included policy recommendations for how the US armed forces can successfully deal with the new security challenges.

Furthermore, the contributors’ American-centric policy recommendations fail to address solutions from the viewpoints of allies who supposedly need our guidance. To give a few examples, Robert Pomeroy’s recommendations for resolving the fishery crisis in Southeast Asia in Chapter 5 entail top-down approaches directed by Washington, whereby the writer believes the United States must play a vital role in fostering sustainable growth and governance. Also, Segal’s solutions for dealing with cyber threats are flawed in that they fail to account for the recent diplomatic embarrassments wrought by the revelation that the National Security Agency has been eavesdropping on America’s chief allies.

The aforementioned shortcomings notwithstanding, *New Security Challenges in Asia* may serve as an informative guide for how the United States can successfully rebalance to Asia. As the writers of this volume show, where little or no military solutions exist to deal with new challenges, the United States can lead from behind by relying upon its soft power.