

Understanding Contemporary Asia Pacific

Edited by Katherine Palmer Kaup, (Publishers: Lynne Rienner, USA, 2021, 521 pages)

Reviewed by Dr. Muhammadi¹

“Understanding contemporary Asia Pacific,” edited by Katherine Palmer Kaup, is inclusive and includes vital information about the Asia Pacific region. It is a significant overview of a vibrant and increasingly important region. The multi-authored book discusses all aspects, including geography, history, politics, economy, security, environment, and socio-economic and cultural issues. Furthermore, the book draws attention to Asia Pacific’s significance with respect to the wider geopolitical and global landscape. In the introductory Chapter, Katherine Palmer examined the ‘degree of interdependence of the states in the region, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states, China, Japan, the South, North Korea, and East Timor. These states discovered interdependence based on mutual interest, making their bonds strong, and also strengthening regional alliances. Their close cooperation continued even during the financial crisis in 1997. The regional countries also established ASEAN Plus to further strengthen multilateral relations in the region further. The author underscores economic and political development in the region while discussing rapid economic development. The author specifically discusses the rise of China, which she considers a threat to the international community, especially to the US. However, these claims are not supported by credible evidence. China has demonstrated that it believes in win-win cooperation with other countries. It strictly adheres to the policy of non-interference, especially its mission of a “Shared future for mankind”

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Regarding the region's geography, Ron D. Hill argues that the region has a vast variety of land from deserts to forests, rivers, valleys, and high mountains. As geography is an essential factor in shaping the states' defense and foreign policy as well as the socio-economic development of any nation. Therefore, the author has included an overview of the major geographical features of the region which helps the readers to understand the policy orientation of these countries in the Asia Pacific region. The Asia Pacific region faces some emerging issues such as climate change, deforestation, and shortage and water in the region. China and Japan, two major countries in the region, play an influential role in environmental protection. For instance, China has completed more than ten forest ecological projects on 120 million hectares since 1978. Japan is also playing its part in global environmental protection, such as the US-Japan agreement on environmental protection in the 1975 Hatoyama Initiative for reducing greenhouse gases in Japan.

Collin Mackerras examined the historical context of the Asia Pacific the periods of imperialism and colonization, and the rise of nationalism in the region. As "nationalism demands the supreme loyalty of the people with the state. The nationalism factor is prominent throughout history in different movements, such as the anti-colonial movements of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century in the region. The other examples of nationalism are Korea's uprisings of 1919 against Japan for independence, Sun Yet Sen's revolution of 1911 against the Manchu dynasty, Chairman Mao's revolution, and the establishment of PR China in 1949, etc. Commerce and exploration are also an important topic of the discourse of chapter as the author especially focused on the significance of the "Silk Route." The Silk Route under the Han Dynasty linked China to the Roman Empire through Central Asia and was the main route through which the Silk trade was carried out. In contemporary times China's Belt and Road

(BRI) is a revival of the old Silk Route, which will connect China to the rest of the world through land and sea.

Katherine Palmer assessed the political systems of countries of Asia Pacific in the post-WW-II era, mainly focusing on the communists' regimes, state-building, nation-building, economic development, and the democratic and military regimes in the region. The author presented data from the 1980s showing that China's 650 million citizens lived below the poverty line. However, since 1979 the economic reforms in PR China and various policies for poverty alleviation have raised their standards of living. In this regard president, Xi Jinping in this country adopted the policy of eliminating this massive poverty that had been eradicated in China. In 2021 President Xi announced that extreme poverty and that 98.99 million rural residents had been taken out of poverty in the last eight years. The liberalization and decentralization of economy, politics, and societies were also observed in most of the region's countries since the 1980s.

Khandke highlighted the role of different regional organizations in the region's economy, i.e., ASEAN, Asia-Pacific Cooperation (APEC). He argued that ASEAN had played its part in filling the gap between domestic and foreign savings. Due to the regions' rapid economic development, World Bank also granted the status of High Performing Asian Economies (HPAEs) to Japan, South Korea, China, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. However, the author neglected to mention China's economic opening up and modernization and its membership of international organizations, including the World Bank and IMF, which played a crucial role in China's rapid economic development and its output for the global economy in trade liberalization policies.

On international relations of the Asia Pacific region, McDougall analyzed the ASEAN's role in regional identity. He argued that ASEAN

somehow failed to maintain this. It illustrates this assertion by giving examples of, the financial crisis of 1997 and the East Timor Issue. The author also assessed the evolving nature of international relations in the region, mainly focusing on the cold war era and post-cold war era. During the Cold War era, the significant events included the global role of China, Japan, and the US, the decolonization of Southeast Asia, and China-US rapprochement in the 1970s. Pakistan played a vital role by arranging the secret visit of Henry Kissinger to China, which paved the way for the establishment of China-US relations. Jongseok Woo examines the domestic relations of the region especially focusing on civil-military relations in the Asia-Pacific region. The author then explored the impacts of international relations on civil-military relations throughout the region. Civil-military relations in the region have been a contested issue for many years. However, most countries have adopted a democratic form of government, and the position of the military in politics remains vague. For instance, during a military coup in Myanmar in 2021, the Aung San Suu Kyi government was toppled on several law breach charges by the military.

The Asia Pacific faces some significant issues such as global warming, industry technology, and the environment. However, the author has neglected the problems associated with climate change and governance. The evolving environmental situation in the Asia Pacific has attracted increasing attention since the 1980s when rapid industrial development began in the region. Other issues which affect climate change include deforestation and desertification. The chapter missed some significant initiatives taken by different stakeholders in the region, such as the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, China's efforts to reduce desertification and ecological forestation, etc. As Asia Pacific is one of the most populous regions of the world. Policymakers and regional and international organizations need to take concrete steps for improving the quality and sustainability of the environment.

Dean Forbes discussed the issues related to the population, such as fertility and family planning, population morbidity and mortality, aging and population, poverty, migration, etc. The Asia Pacific is the most populous region in the world. The author also discusses rapid urbanization in the region as many people migrate from rural to urban areas. Fundamental economic structures also come under stress. Population aging issues concern the region, especially in China and Japan. For example, China adopted the 'one-child policy' to control population growth. However, due to the increasing population of older people, it had to ban the one-child policy. The repercussions of the pandemic, such as those produced by AIDS, SARS, and the COVID-19, etc. will make the policymakers a high priority in the countries of the Asia Pacific region. Especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, all the countries took strict measures to overcome the issue, which had badly affected the economy, trade, and health, in these countries like in the rest of the world.

On ethnicity in the Asia Pacific, Katherine Palmer argued that after the Cold War, an ideological conflict between the US and the USSR hopes had risen that the peace and stability in the post-1991 era would prevail but inter-state tensions somehow ethnic conflicts emerged. Ethnic conflict, the Asian financial crisis, and the post-9/11 era are quoted as examples of this phenomenon. In combating global terrorism, China effectively played its role in diminishing the three evils, namely extremism, terrorism, and separatism in its Western regions. According to the Chinese authorities, the anti-terrorism operations in the Western part of China were not against any specific ethnic community but against terrorist groups and to eradicate terrorism from within the region. The ethnic repression of Muslims has also been highlighted in this chapter. Millions of Rohingya Muslims had to flee from Myanmar to neighboring countries due to extrajudicial killings, gang rape, and arson, especially during Aung San Suu Kyi's

tenure. The author identified some primary ethnic groups within the region, including the Han, Japanese, Koreans, Malay, Kenh, and Tai. Han is the dominant ethnic group in PR China among the various ethnicities. The other groups are located in other countries such as Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, etc. The ethnic montage in the Asia Pacific portrays a multifaceted network of groups and individuals meeting one another in diverse settings.

Rodgers and Tanjeem added a very important chapter on the role of women in the Asia Pacific region. The author brought the readers the fact that women in the Asia Pacific made immense strides in filling the gender gap in health, education, labor market, political and social sectors, etc. Globalization has impacted the Asia Pacific economies since the 1960s and brought significant transformations in the economic milieu that women face in routine life. With rapid economic development and enhancing integration, women in the Asia Pacific have also achieved better social status, gender equality through legal reforms, and political representation. According to a World Bank report, in 2001, 20 percent of parliamentary seats were held by women in the Asia Pacific from 1985 to 1995. Sam Britt examined various religions in the region, mainly focusing on Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam. Islam is also a prominent religion in the region, such as in Indonesia and Malaysia. Muslims are in the minority in China, Thailand, and the Philippines. Similar to Buddhism and Christianity, Islam was also spread to the region's countries through missionaries/preachers, mainly by the Middle Eastern Merchants through the Silk Route in the seventh century. In this context, Silk Route played a significant role in the spread of Islam in the Asia Pacific region.

In the concluding chapter Katherine Palmer presented a futuristic study of the region. Since 1945 Asia Pacific region has experienced a remarkable transformation. The trends and prospects which impact the

region include varying conditions of interactions due to its geography, global warming, increase in the utilization of alternative energy sources, increasing population, and rapid economic development, especially China's rise, balancing and globalization, etc. The other trends and prospects of the 21st Century in the Asia Pacific are the COVID-19 Pandemic and measures taken by the regional countries to control the pandemic. For instance, China's vaccination preparation and provision to many countries worldwide. Belt and Road (BRI) is another trend and has prospects for economic development in the region. BRI is China's mega-project aiming to connect China to the rest of the world via land and sea aiming to have 'win-win cooperation' and 'a shared future for humankind.' China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is also an integral part of the BRI.