Understanding Contemporary Asia Pacific

SECOND EDITION

Katherine Palmer Kaup

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY

ASIA PACIFIC
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edited by | **Katherine Palmer Kaup**

Contents

1

Introducing Asia Pacific

Katherine Palmer Kaup

Never has it been more important to understand Asia Pacific. The region—which includes China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, East Timor, and the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—is an economic trade hub, with China alone predicted to account for more than 28 percent of global economic growth in 2023 and currently accounting for more than 19 percent of world output (Huang 2019). With an ever-expanding network of free trade zones connecting the region, including the massive Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the region attracts huge foreign direct investment and is an integral hub for global supply chains. More than half of the world's maritime trade travels through the Indonesian Straits of Sunda, Lombak, and Malacca. A number of geopolitical "flash point" issues are in Asia Pacific, including tensions in the South China Seas, strained relations between China and Taiwan, nuclear tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and island disputes between China and Japan as well as between China and several of its Southeast Asian neighbors. As the spread of Covid-19 has so dramatically laid bare, global citizens' health, safety, and prosperity depend directly on the world working with Asian nations on issues of common concern, including combating global pandemics, slowing climate change, countering the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the flow of illicit drugs, implementing international maritime and trade regulatory regimes, and protecting human rights. Each of the regimes in the fifteen countries studied in this

volume approaches these issues with different histories, government institutions and priorities, economic concerns, and geopolitical interests. Without a clear multidisciplinary understanding of the regional actors and issues, international players cannot hope to engage with counterparts in Asia in what many analysts contend will be the "Asian Century" (Romei and Reed 2019).

The fifteen countries that stretch from the dry grasslands of northern China to the island tropics of southern Indonesia represent some of the most widely varied countries in the world: from one of the few remaining monarchies in tiny Brunei to the world's largest communist regime in the mammoth People's Republic of China (PRC). China's huge and rapidly expanding economy stands in stark contrast to the small and troubled system in neighboring Laos. Dozens upon dozens of ethnic groups live in the area, speaking hundreds of local languages and observing a wide variety of religious and other cultural practices. Why even discuss these countries together? Why write a book that focuses on the ten member states of ASEAN (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar,[1] the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) the People's Republic of China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and East Timor? Why not divide the region, as so many analysts do, into smaller regions like Northeast Asia (including the Koreas, Japan, and China) and Southeast Asia (including the ten ASEAN states), or focus separately on East Asia (China, Japan, and the Koreas), Central Asia (usually including the five "Stans" of the former Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), or South Asia (sometimes referring to the Indian subcontinent alone, but often including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and other states)? Why not focus on the Pacific Rim and include all countries that border both sides of the Pacific, including Russia and the United States, as well as several Latin American states?

Though the ASEAN states, China, Japan, the Koreas, and East Timor constitute one of the most diverse regions of the world, they also represent a group of countries that is increasingly interdependent and aware of common interests. Particularly since the devastating Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the global financial crisis in 2008, these countries have been strengthening their regional alliances and interactions (Oba 2019) and developing a host of "Asia-only" institutions such as ASEAN+3, designed to increase ties between ASEAN, China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. The United States and others outside of the region have had to reformulate plans to retain their presence in the

region in the face of this rising sense of Asia Pacific community (Revere 2005). Scholar Mie Oba notes that Asian regionalism has increased dramatically as United States–China tensions have risen and since the United States began abdicating its leadership role in the region, losing influence first gradually as the global financial crisis undermined confidence in the US-led neoliberal order and then more dramatically with President Donald Trump's "America First" policies and his withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Agreement and its accords on climate change.

Many analysts denounce Asia Pacific's economic and political rise as a threat to the global post–World War II neoliberal order. The international community, and perhaps the United States most of all, has been particularly anxious about the rapid rise of China, politically, economically, and increasingly militarily. The Trump administration has been vitriolic in its attacks on Chinese policies and intentions. The 2017 US National Security Strategy labeled China "an adversary," ranking it among three main challenges to US power along with the "rogue states of Iran and North Korea" and "jihadists and other terrorist organizations." The United States accused China of trying to "shape a world antithetical to US values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific Region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor" (White House 2017). Policymakers, scholars, and casual observers alike have clearly recognized the growing influence of Asia Pacific, and responded in vastly different ways, from seizing opportunities for greater interactions to the creation of think tanks, associations, and lobbying organizations to counter the region's economic, political, and social rise. The 1997 Asian financial crisis brought into clear relief just how interdependent the world's economies have become. Since China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, United States–China trade and investment linkages have become increasingly intertwined. The shocks to the global economy from both the global financial crisis in 2008 and the United States–China trade war launched in 2017 have further indicated how important it is to foster positive relations in Asia Pacific. The devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically highlights how developments in Asia can have impacts far outside its borders.

After accepting our regional focus, the next question the reader may ask is at what point in time should one begin to explain developments in "contemporary" Asia Pacific? How far back does one need to go to understand contemporary trends, particularly in a region of the world so proud of its thousands of years of history? Some background of cultural

and historical traditions is clearly essential, and Colin Mackerras provides in Chapter 3 an impressively clear overview of the key themes and patterns from the past that continue to influence events in Asia Pacific today. Placing our primary focus on events and trends since 1945 seems a clear choice, as new regimes emerged in almost all of the region's states from the rubble of World War II and the retreat of the colonial powers in the years that immediately followed. Asian regionalism and an awareness among the regional countries of their shared identity and common interests emerged largely after 1945.

The historical, political, economic, and cultural dynamics since the end of World War II within Asia Pacific have been so varied and complex that few analysts have dared to examine the region as a whole. Within academia, policymaking circles, and economic organizations, analysts have become increasingly specialized, often focusing their studies on a particular issue within a single country, rather than on broad trends occurring across the region. While it is possible to find experts on individual ethnic groups in China, for example, it is more difficult to find specialists on China's ethnic minorities generally, and extremely rare to find those with expertise on ethnic groups throughout the Asia Pacific region. The plethora of languages and diversity of experiences among those living in the region complicate cross-border and transnational studies.

Failure to "connect the dots" among the various disciplines and countries, however, will leave the student at best with a narrow understanding of the region, and at worst with a distorted view of what motivates and influences those living there. To date, very few attempts have been made to understand the diverse traditions and dynamic changes occurring in Asia Pacific through a multidisciplinary approach. Yet this is exactly what is needed in order to identify common patterns of interaction in the region. We need to understand how each of the topics covered in our volume intersect and inform action within Asia Pacific to assist us in navigating relations with regional players, and to learn from one another, explore areas of common interest, and avoid conflict bred from miscommunication. In bringing together leading scholars from a variety of disciplines, with decades of fieldwork experience throughout the region, it is our hope to provide a broad, interdisciplinary introduction to the trends occurring across one of the world's most vibrant regions. Though each of the chapters in this volume can be studied independently, read as a whole they provide uncommon insights on how geography, culture, economics, politics, and international relations intersect to shape dynamics in Asia Pacific. As the world charts a course

for responding to Asia's rise since World War II, familiarity with each of the issues collected here by leaders in the field is essential.

Asian political and cultural diversity are reflected in the varied geographical terrain that ranges from tropical forests to stark deserts, from imposing mountain ranges to deep gorges, and from vast expanses in the northern grasslands to thousands of islands scattered across the southeast. Historically, the mountains, deserts, and archipelagos have divided communities and left peoples speaking hundreds of local languages, practicing a wide array of religions, and professing loyalty to a variety of ethnic groupings or localities. The impact of Asia's geography can be seen in each of the topics addressed throughout our volume, from its affects on transnational migration patterns across time, to growing economic disparities across the region, to the rise and fall of security alliances. In Chapter 2, Stanley Toops provides a geographic preface for the chapters that follow.

Though the region exudes a sense of forward movement and drive to modernize, it remains heavily influenced by its past. Citizens in the region tend to have a much longer historical worldview than is commonly found in the West. Travelers in China regularly hear contemporary issues explained through reference to China's ancient past, for example. After first explaining that "China is a big country, with a long history, and a lot of people," many Chinese are as likely to blame current weaknesses in development of rule of law on the first emperor, Qin Shihuang, with his brutal use of legalism over two thousand years ago as they are to blame current party controls over the judicial system. In Chapter 3, Colin Mackerras's historical overview of migration patterns, agricultural development, traditional ethics, the rise of key states, and the expansion of Western colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sets the stage for understanding many facets of contemporary Asia Pacific.

After Toops and Mackerras sketch the geographical and historical setting, our chapters turn to developments since World War II. Asia Pacific lay in utter despair in 1945 after nearly a decade of regional warfare. An estimated 10 million people were killed in China alone during the war with Japan that raged from 1937 to 1945, and the war destroyed infrastructure and economies throughout the region. More than 6 million Japanese soldiers were demobilized after the war and returned to a shattered economy and a newly restructured political system that seemed incapable of supplying them with jobs. Hundreds of thousands of citizens had lost their homes and livelihoods throughout the region. Even after more than a decade of recovery efforts, Japan's per capita income was barely 10 percent that of the average American in the United States,

South Korea was no better off economically than many of the poorest countries in Africa, and widespread famine was feared across parts of the region. Few analysts predicted the rapid political and economic rise of Asia that would sweep the region beginning by 1960.

The regimes that came to power in the years after World War II, many of them governing newly independent states, confronted not only economic hardships but a host of problems resulting from the legacy of the Western powers' involvement in the region. As these new governments tried to build cohesive nations within the often arbitrarily drawn boundaries imposed by the colonial powers, and as they struggled to create effective state institutions to handle the pressing needs of development, they often resorted to coercion and concentrated state control over society. Though heavy state involvement in the economy and tight government control over society may have led to rapid national economic development in the first four decades after the war, it often came at a heavy cost to individuals' liberties. While state economies boomed in many countries across the region, individual living standards remained low. By the 1980s, governments across the region began to loosen their grip over society once their economies improved, state institutions became more efficient, and the countries became more involved in the global economy and world order. Regardless of whether the countries had chosen communism, military rule, or some form of electoral democracy in the first decades after World War II, governments across the region began liberalizing and easing state repression in the 1980s. When the first edition of this book was published in 2007, prospects for democratic consolidation looked strong. The fallout of the 1997 Asian financial crisis contributed to the fall of military strongman Suharto in Indonesia, and democratic consolidation continued apace in the Republic of Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines. But as I explain in Chapter 4, over the last decade democratic consolidation has stalled in many areas and reversed dramatically in others as Asia Pacific succumbed to the wave of populism and authoritarianism sweeping the globe in the mid-2010s.

Despite common patterns of liberalization beginning in the 1980s, followed by several authoritarian reversals, the Asia Pacific countries nonetheless manifest extremely diverse forms of government. Perhaps in no other region of the world are the differences in governance more pronounced. The tiny kingdom of Brunei is run by an absolute monarch who shows little inclination to reform, while the behemoth People's Republic of China remains ruled by a centralized communist party. South Korea, Indonesia, and Taiwan have free and flourishing democracies, while Thailand and Myanmar continue to struggle against military

rule. As they dealt with the common challenges of nation building, statebuilding, and economic development, each of the countries in Asia Pacific chose some form of either communist, military, or democratic rule. While all initially concentrated power in the center, each (with the exception of Myanmar and North Korea) then experimented with political liberalization and decentralization from the 1980s to mid-2010s before many reverted back toward authoritarianism. Though students may at times feel overwhelmed as they grapple to understand the radically different forms of governments in the region and the rapidly shifting policies of each, Chapter 4 provides a framework for recognizing general patterns of governance among seemingly disparate systems, and for tracing common trends over time in struggles for power between central governments and their citizens.

Given the challenges facing the new Asia Pacific governments after World War II, few analysts predicted the spectacular economic rise of the region. By 1993, however, the World Bank began referring to the phenomenal economic growth as the "East Asian miracle" (World Bank 1993). Between 1960 and 1985, Japan and the four "little dragons" (Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea) doubled their incomes every eight years. By 1990, more than 650 million people in East Asia had been lifted out of abject poverty, leaving less than 10 percent of the population in that category compared to 25 percent in Latin America, and more than 50 percent in sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent (Rohwer 1995). Whereas China's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was roughly equal to that in Africa in the mid-1990s, today it is more than five times as high as in Africa (Romei and Reed 2019). Asia Pacific and South Asia held only 19 percent of the global gross domestic product in 1950, but their economies in 2020 were larger than the rest of the world combined.

In Chapter 5, Kailash Khandke explains the factors contributing to the rapid development of the high-performing economies. He shows how state policies and unique historical circumstances combined with Asian cultural and political norms to allow these states unprecedented growth from the 1960s into the 1990s. Focusing on how these countries' economic choices in many ways paved the way for the Asian financial crisis of 1997, he also demonstrates how their institutional responses to the crash helped buffer the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis and may help the region recover from the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. Globalization since the late 1990s has increased the importance and prosperity of the region as a whole, though Khandke also notes how some countries, particularly Cambodia and Laos, were left behind.

The economic and political development choices made by each of the Asia Pacific states influenced their relations with one another as well as with countries outside of the region, as Derek McDougall describes in fascinating detail in Chapter 6. Perhaps the defining choice that most clearly determined patterns of international interaction in the first decades following World War II, particularly in Northeast Asia, was whether states would adopt communism or more market-driven economies. The ideological division between the communist states of China, North Korea, and Indochina and their noncommunist neighbors dramatically affected how the United States and Russia interacted with each state and thus altered their interstate dynamics. Although the Cold War division was important in both Northeast and in Southeast Asia, the more fragile and newer states in the Southeast were more heavily influenced by regional concerns than they were by the great powers. McDougall provides a historical overview of international relations during the Cold War period as context for understanding the current post–Cold War dynamics, and the newer forces of regionalism that have arisen since the Soviet Union's collapse.

In Chapter 7, Jongseok Woo explores how both domestic political concerns and international relations have impacted civil-military relations across the region. Noting how internal and external security threats often make democratization and the depoliticization of the military difficult, his chapter explores how different regime types interacted with their militaries in unique ways within their security environments. By providing paired case studies of differing patterns of civil-military relations, Woo provides a thorough analysis of when militaries intervene in politics and when they instead remove themselves to focus on military professionalization.

Economic and political choices have also given rise to a number of environmental challenges in the region, as Darrin Magee explains in Chapter 8. The communist development path imposed a heavy toll on the environment as the communist states raced to industrialize at whatever cost. The failure to tie use of natural resources to market prices has led to overutilization of resources and little care for sustainable development. Rapid urbanization throughout the region, discussed by both Magee as well as Dean Forbes in Chapter 9, has led to startling increases in air and water pollution as well as significant global warming. Conversion of land into agricultural farmland created massive deforestation, soil erosion, and water shortages throughout much of the region, particularly in the People's Republic of China. Despite Magee's grim outline of the current state of the Asia Pacific environment, he

leaves us with some hope that new awareness of and commitment to sustainable development, particularly by China, may be able to ease the region's environmental devastation.

Dean Forbes continues Magee's discussion of rapid urbanization throughout the region and examines new demographic challenges. The Asia Pacific population is aging as a result of government efforts to control population growth rates and from improvements in health and human services. While some countries, like the PRC, are banking on economic growth to answer future challenges of caring for the elderly, others like Japan, where over 40 percent of the population is predicted to be over age sixty by 2050, have begun to experiment with a number of new policies to meet the challenge before it turns to crisis levels. Combating poverty and managing migration into the already overburdened megacities will continue to challenge most of the Asia Pacific countries.

Another challenge governments face in managing their populations is how to handle the diverse ethnic communities living within their borders. As I detail in Chapter 10, Asia Pacific's ethnic mosaic is extraordinarily complex. Ethnic communities have emerged over time in response to intragroup elite efforts to build a sense of common destiny, and in response to changing environments and state policies. Governments have tried a host of approaches to managing ethnic competition, including exclusion of certain groups, assimilation, integration, preferential treatment for privileged ethnicities, regional autonomy schemes, and outright repression. As state policies shift over time and in response to new contingencies, they at times are able to control ethnic conflict while at other times only exacerbate them. Only through properly understanding how ethnic groups originate and assess their needs can governments hope to formulate proper policies. Though ethnic tensions have eased, at least on the surface, across much of the region, since 2017 the governments in Myanmar and China have launched campaigns so repressive that numerous international organizations have labeled them "ethnic genocide" in Myanmar's Rakhine state and "cultural genocide" in China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

Governments have also had to address another important segment of the population: women. While women have traditionally been treated as second-class citizens throughout much of Asia Pacific, improvements have been made, as shown by Yana Rodgers and Nafisa Tanjeem in Chapter 11. While gender inequalities continue and are particularly pronounced in the poorer countries of the region, women have made great strides in health, education, and labor market outcomes. Several legal reforms have been promoted that, while incomplete and not always well

enforced, have at least begun to lay the framework for women's rights. Once laws are recorded and a rights regime developed, women can begin to push for the rights promised them on paper.

Religious influences have affected the position of women throughout Asia Pacific and had a major impact on nearly every aspect of life in the region for all citizens. All of the major traditions play a role in the spiritual life of the region, as Sam Britt describes in Chapter 12, and they have blended with, shaped, and been shaped by one another in the interactions of local and foreign influences. While Buddhism has the largest numerical representation in the region, Islam is not far behind, and the number of Christians, though far below the numbers of Buddhists and Muslims, is on the rise. Hinduism is today found primarily only in Bali, where it has merged with the other traditions to create a unique blend of faiths in Southeast Asia. Britt paints a rich picture of the complexity of religious life in the region, reminding us that the examination of religious doctrines and teachings should never be isolated from cultural practices in all their variety and adaptability.

Each of the chapters in this volume explores important questions and issues facing the Asia Pacific. The final chapter reflects on the importance of combining core findings from each to better understand, and even predict, how Asia Pacific actors may respond to pressing issues, ranging from combating the coronavirus global pandemic and its fallouts, rising repression and struggle in Hong Kong, egregious human rights abuses of minorities, a resurgence of Islamic conservatism in Indonesia and Malaysia, an emergent new Cold War between China and the United States, and more. Even armed with the detailed background and analysis provided throughout the volume, students (and senior scholars and policymakers alike) may feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues facing regional actors. Chapter 13 shows how nearly all of the issues can, to some extent, be framed within three broad challenges that will largely influence social, political, economic, and strategic dynamics within the region over the next decade. Regional actors must (1) formulate a response to a rising China; (2) balance the influences of globalization, regionalism, and nationalism; and (3) assess and articulate their core values, particularly regarding individual liberties, ethnic pluralism, and religious tolerance. Each country must confront these three core challenges in the midst of huge transformations caused by globalization as well as from the tectonic-scale shift in geopolitical dynamics caused by China's challenge to US regional, and potentially even global, prominence.

While few predicted in 1945 that Asia Pacific might one day rival the power of Western Europe and the United States, today it is precisely this concern that keeps attention focused on this vibrant region. Casual observers and policymakers alike all seem to have strong opinions about the region, whether they see it as the next frontier for economic development and cooperation or as a dangerous military rival. Yet quite worryingly, few have the necessary tools for understanding the region. It is our hope that the pages that follow will provide students with a strong foundation for further study. As students explore the interactions among culture, economics, and politics found in this volume, we hope they will begin to appreciate developments in the region and discover common ground for engaging with those living within Asia Pacific. For it is only through increased understanding that we can move toward a future of global cooperation and mutual respect, rather than one of distrust and conflict.

Notes

1. Myanmar has gone through several name changes since gaining independence from the British in 1948 as the Union of Burma. In 1989, the then ruling military junta changed the country's name to Myanmar, though some governments, including in the United States, refuse to adopt the new name. Both names will be used throughout this volume.