



Andrew Yeo. *Asia's Regional Architecture: Alliances and Institutions in the Pacific Century.* Studies in Asian Security Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 264 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5036-0844-3.

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Despite his open dislike of foreign travel and abandonment of Barack Obama's "pivot" rhetoric, Donald J. Trump has found himself in the Asia-Pacific region several times. The forty-fifth US president has visited China, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and South Korea while even becoming the first American head of state to enter North Korea during a cinematic photo-op with its supreme leader, Kim Jong-un, at the demilitarized zone. Conducting bilateral diplomacy with long-standing US allies, nascent partners, and rivals has not been the only task. Trump also participated in the multilateral Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits. Meanwhile, administration officials have been involved in track-I diplomacy like the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) and track-1.5 initiatives like the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC).

For all but the most dedicated policy practitioners and observers, keeping tabs on the dizzying array of overlapping institutions in Asia presents a formidable challenge. Fortunately, Andrew Yeo has published a thorough and comprehensible compendium that explains the evolution of this web of multilateral—and sometimes trilateral—institutions. How is it, Yeo asks, that these institutions have emerged irrespective of remark-

able continuity in the "hub and spokes" system of US bilateral security alliances in Asia? Readers of such works as Victor Cha's *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (2016) and Thomas Christensen's *Worse Than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (2011) will undoubtedly be interested in this book.

One could be forgiven for being skeptical that a book discussing understudied forums, such as the East Asian Economic Group (EAEG) and the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), fits well with scholarship on "hard security" and military alliances. Yet Yeo's use of the historical institutionalism framework—more prominent in comparative politics than international relations—helps him make the case. His argument is one of path dependence premised on the notion that past efforts at interstate cooperation inevitably condition future ones. That is, no institutional choice should be seen as an independent event in isolation from its predecessors. Yeo does not deny that exogenous shocks like the 1997-99 Asian financial crisis led to the creation of new institutions. Rather, he maintains that "endogenous processes of institutional change suggest that macroinstitutional systems such as the regional architecture will evolve gradually, even if actors face periodic exogenous

shocks” (p. 154). To Yeo, security threats during the Cold War motivated the creation of the “hub and spokes” system, which then gave rise to both material and ideational interests.

The argument follows that bilateralism birthed shared values and an elite consensus in favor of maintaining alliances. Multilateral cooperation in Asia has naturally developed over time in areas like trade and disaster preparedness, but such initiatives involve a process of institutional layering that preserves extant alliances. Objectives and membership of new institutions may vary, but the number of institutions continues to increase instead of contract. The result is, in the phrasing of Cha, a “complex patchwork” of regional bodies that often lack formal decision-making authority and involve little delegation of sovereignty. And within this architecture, the ASEAN Way and principles of noninterference and consensus also play a significant role in conditioning each successive attempt at institution building.

Yeo’s approach is clever, but it may vex strong proponents of various grand theories of international relations. For example, Yeo states, “In addition to threat perceptions, the arguments here take into account the role of ideas, institutions, and domestic politics in the formation of an elite consensus” on bilateral alliances (p. 25). Throughout the book, Yeo advances positions to explain the emergence of multilateral institutions and temporal persistence of bilateral alliances that have striking similarities with points made by realists, liberals, neoliberal institutionalists, and constructivists alike. Yeo appears to favor an approach that recognizes multicausal explanations for events and sequences thereof. His attempt to avoid, so to say, forcing square pegs into round holes is admirable and will likely be appreciated by historians and policymakers.

To construct his narrative of a path-dependent regional architecture, Yeo uses a multitude of short case studies covering different periods—

mainly in the post-Cold War era. Examples include the US bilateral alliances with Japan and the Philippines in the 1990s, the ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, and South Korea) in 1997-98 during the Asian financial crisis, and the Six-Party Talks over the North Korean nuclear weapons program from 2003 to 2009. Yeo covers an impressive breadth of cases for such a concise book, many of which conform to a similar logic. They take note of declining external threat levels and tensions in US bilateral alliances. These events often create the necessary space for inter-Asian cooperation along multilateral lines and new policy thinking to address regional challenges. Regardless, Yeo maintains that the “hub and spokes” system survives because of its long-standing material and ideational benefits. Some scholars may, however, find these brief cases to be slightly formulaic and lacking detailed illumination of causal mechanisms. In just a few pages per vignette, it is difficult to provide compelling process tracing with smoking gun or doubly decisive evidence ruling out alternative explanations.

The book also would have benefited from establishing a bright line regarding what constitutes an “institution.” Drawing on a definition from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), an endnote reads, “Institutions are rules, arrangements, and organizations ‘ranging from ad hoc and informal forums that lack an organizational core to formal standing bodies that serve a particular purpose’” (p. 192n32). This is an expansive definition that would have been useful in the main text, for the sake of clarity, given the book’s subject matter. The institutions discussed by Yeo also vary across numerous dimensions. Consider, for instance, a comparison of the Six-Party Talks and ASEAN. The Six-Party Talks were a series of fairly informal meetings intended to resolve a specific problem and had strategically restricted participation. None of ASEAN’s ten member states were among the six parties in the Six-Party Talks, and ASEAN has an—although admittedly weak—Inter-Parlia-

mentary Assembly and a secretariat that deal with a range of policy issues.

These small critiques aside, Yeo makes a compelling case for historical institutional layering in Asia as a product of both slow endogenous change and exogenous shocks. He justifies this approach by arguing that political scientists should study continuity mechanisms in international relations “because they affect the pace and parameters of change” (p. 177). Readers might thus interpret, as Yeo hints, that bilateral US alliances will likely have an extended shelf life—even if in different forms—and multilateral institutions could provide mechanisms for China to have a stake in Asia-Pacific regional governance and stability.

However, another possible way to interpret the evidence is that the geopolitical backdrop in Asia over the past few decades has simply lacked game-changing variation. While reading, I was struck by the parallels between present-day Asia and Europe during the interwar years. Europe in the 1920s and early 1930s was characterized by relatively weak, overlapping institutions like the League of Nations, World Court, Kellogg-Briand Pact, and Geneva Protocol. States maintained strong bilateral security alliances, but there was no singular formal and effective multilateral institution. But the onset of the Cold War and the rise of an existential Soviet threat was sufficiently motivating to spur the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which included enduring rivals like France and Germany among its members.

In the Asia of today, perhaps bilateral alliances with the United States and weak multilateral institutions make sense for countries like Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam. If in the coming years China becomes a threat of similar magnitude to the Soviet specter in Europe, it is unclear if the patterns observed by Yeo will hold. Perhaps China will be content to counterbalance the United States by enlarging its presence in current institutions and forming new ones—like

the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—where Washington is notably absent. But could Beijing become intimidating enough to encourage legitimate Japan-South Korea rapprochement, or even a multilateral balancing coalition in Asia? Of course, Yeo’s analysis does not preclude these possibilities, but one wonders if future Chinese military activities might tip the scales and trigger regional security paradigm shifts. Some caution might still be advised in using the path-dependent trends noted by Yeo as the basis for longer-term predictions and strategic planning.

Overall, there is much to praise about *Asia’s Regional Architecture*. Yeo has written a book with indisputable value for understanding international cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. Its “big tent” approach to theoretically analyzing historical events also should appeal to a range of scholars and policymakers. With Asia’s centrality to many events in global politics, Yeo’s research should find its way onto the bookshelves of regional specialists, scholars of both alliance politics and international institutions, and students with an interest in learning about the complexities of Asian diplomacy.

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