

BOOK REVIEW

Hans-Dieter Evers, Abdul Rahman Embong and Rashila Ramli (Eds.). *Connecting Oceans: Volume 1 – Malaysia as a Maritime Nation*. Bangi: UKM Press, 2019.

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In his keynote address to the Asia-Europe Conference 2019, organised by the Asia-Europe Institute of the University of Malaya, Malaysia's Deputy Minister of Defence, Liew Ching Tong said that "We are a maritime nation with continental roots linking Pacific Ocean and South China Sea on one side to Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean on the other side, while also connected to the Eurasian continent by land." By defining Malaysia as a "maritime nation with continental roots," Liew underscored the importance of the oceans to Malaysia, geographically, historically, economically and geopolitically. The maritime heritage of the country needs to be harnessed and embraced. In this sense, this book, *Connecting Oceans: Volume 1 – Malaysia as a Maritime Nation*, is a timely and important contribution from the academic point of view.

The nine chapters of this edited volume represent the outcome of a productive international research collaboration involving researchers from Germany and Malaysia, in particular those associated with the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (Institut Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa or IKMAS) of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. There are three major themes in this book. First is to re-examine the Nusantara heritage in Southeast Asia and how this heritage continues to be relevant to the conception of Malaysia as a maritime nation. Second is a scrutiny of the China factor, as China rises to become the most consequential power affecting the geopolitical and economic developments in this region. Third is policy-specific, namely what concrete maritime policies Malaysia and ASEAN countries should adopt and implement.

For the first theme, several authors (Hans-Dieter Evers, Abdul Rahman Embong and Rashila Ramli) have identified “Nusantara” as an immensely rich historical and civilisational resource that should be resurrected as a key conception in understanding, and improving, contemporary Southeast Asia. Simply put, Nusantara refers to the pre-colonial conception of the maritime world in Southeast Asia (roughly speaking that comprises Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines and southern Thailand of today), connected by peninsulas, islands and their surrounding seas, with strong networks of trade, and with Malay as the lingua franca. It sees this part of the world as Southeast Asian Mediterranean, with the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, the Java Sea, and the Sulu Sea forming the maritime horizons. This is a tradition that has strong emphasis on connectivity, way before “connectivity” itself became a fashionable modern concept. While the Nusantara world was not free from violent conflicts, by and large peace, trade and sharing were more prominent features. The geopolitics of Nusantara, as Hans-Dieter Evers indicates in Chapter 2, is very much about social and cultural connectivity, migration and diversity. There was no explicit set of law governing relations between different communities, but there were norms that were adhered to. This is in contrast to the modern day, Westphalian nation-state model, with clear territorial and maritime boundaries signifying exclusive ownership rather than the sharing of resources. In the South China Sea, different modern states have claimed sovereign, exclusive ownership of island features and/or maritime-based resources. Although modern international law such as the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) plays a role in governing the extent a state can claim these features and resources, there is an inherent limitation of how far it can really resolve the overlapping claims between sovereign states. Malaysia’s disputed maritime claims are discussed extensively in the chapter contributed by Faisal Hazis.

Malaysia’s role in Nusantara is especially interesting. Today, the maritime tradition of the country needs to be resurrected, as if the country has no memory of its maritime tradition. Abdul Rahman Embong presents a thesis here that European colonialism did not end the paradigm or worldview based on Nusantara; it effectively turned the sea-fearing communities into land-based peasants, disrupting and discontinuing this rich maritime culture. Of course, there is no point turning back to the pre-Colonial era, as today’s world is defined by a system consists of sovereign states, but the idea of Nusantara should be made more relevant and enriching in realising a coherent and mutually beneficial ASEAN community.

The second theme, the China factor, is touched upon by almost all chapter authors, but in a more focused way by the two chapters written by Abdul Muein Abadi and Muhamad Azwan Abd. Rahman. Historically China was a hegemonic power, sitting on top of the Sino-centric tributary order, but it was not a particularly violent power towards Southeast Asia (with the exception of Vietnam, perhaps). (There was often the mention of Kublai Khan's attempted invasion of Java as a proof of China's expansionism, but this can be easily refuted as China was actually conquered by Kublai Khan's Mongol Army). In modern world, China was once a security threat because of its support of the communist insurgencies, but today it presents a multiplex of challenges and opportunities. It is the largest claimant state in the South China Sea, with its ill-defined "nine-dashed line" claiming the whole of Paracel and Spratly Island groups. The line is not recognised by other claimant states in Southeast Asia and is generally seen as not only intrusive but also not in compliance with modern international law. On the other hand, China is a major economic partner (if not actually the most important economic partner) to most of the ASEAN countries. Its major foreign economic policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), originally coined as One Belt One Road in English, launched by its ambitious leader Xi Jinping, promises the much-needed infrastructure investment to many developing countries, but also carries financial risks to some of these countries. Incidentally, BRI, like Nusantara, is also a resurrection of an ancient concept (Silk Roads), but imbuing this ancient concept with modern policy designs. In a way, the BRI can actually be suggested as an example of how to concretise the traditional in the modern world.

How Malaysia reacted to these challenges and opportunities will have great implications for the future well-being of the country. Hans-Dieter Evers suggests different scenarios for the future of Malaysia-China relations as China pursues its BRI. A positive outcome will be a win-win situation between China and Malaysia. The opposite will be the gradual "sinicisation" of Malaysia and the erosion of Malaysian sovereignty. Abdul Muein Abadi, using a neoclassical realist theoretical framework, also attempts to forecast the future of Malaysia-China relations along similar projections. Much depends on how Malaysia adapted itself. Muhammad Azwan Abd. Rahman hence strongly suggests that Malaysia needs a proactive, focused and strong policy framework to respond to the BRI, lest that Malaysia will become more dependent on China and losing its foreign policy autonomy in the years to come.

The third theme is to devise a proper maritime policy framework, for Malaysia and for ASEAN. Hans-Dieter Evers and his colleagues have in an earlier work innovatively used several variables, including natural geodetic factors (such as length of coastline and average distance between coastline and any point inland) and the size of maritime economy to come up with a maritime potential index for ASEAN countries, and Malaysia does not perform particularly well. A maritime policy is much needed. The chapter by Rashila Ramli and Nik Adi Sukiman aims to outline a comprehensive ocean or maritime policy for Malaysia. Their chapter takes note of the past several Malaysian Plans where these plans touched upon the maritime sector, and also compares and reviews the maritime policies of several countries and organisations, including the European Union, China, the United States, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. This is a very useful exercise as it systematically reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the maritime policies of each of these countries and there are lessons for Malaysia to learn. However, in a short chapter of such it is also inherent that such comparison will not be in-depth enough to reveal more. Finally, Andrew Kam Jia Yi and Tham Siew Yean co-author a chapter addressing ASEAN single-shipping market. Both Kam and Tham are professional economists and their chapter is the only one chapter dealing with a concrete policy issue connecting ASEAN countries, which is the shipping sector. ASEAN, it is found, does have blueprints in enhancing the intra-ASEAN shipping sector, but the implementation of these blueprints is rather slow, and the primary challenges appear to be the uneven quality, performance and capacity of different ports. China's BRI, by connecting the ports in ASEAN with China, may have the unintended consequences of further weakening the connectivity of the ports within ASEAN. This is not to suggest that China's BRI is to be rejected, but it does point to the fact that in thinking of ASEAN-China relations, there is much to be done for ASEAN to strengthen its own connectivity first.

The book does have some weaknesses. Some chapters are not very cohesive with a clear structure but rather appear to be a collection of several ideas put into one. Some chapters are strong on argument but weak on the evidence supporting the argument. Nevertheless, overall this is a useful volume for academics, graduate students, policymakers, business professionals and interested general public.

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