

L'Asie du Sud-Est 2022: bilan, enjeux et perspectives *[Southeast Asia 2022: assessment, challenges and perspectives].*

Edited by Christine Cabasset and Jérôme Samuel. Bangkok: Institut de recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine, 2022.

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BOOK REVIEW

L'Asie du Sud-Est 2022: bilan, enjeux et perspectives [Southeast Asia 2022: assessment, challenges and perspectives]. Edited by Christine Cabasset and Jérôme Samuel. Bangkok: Institut de recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine, 2022.

While not widely understood in a Europe focused on itself, North America, and the Middle East, Southeast Asia is an important and complex region of more than 650 million inhabitants and with important global stakes, for example, in terms of energy security, global production networks, international security and great power competition, and a focus on international tourism. In terms of international politics, the centrality of this region is demonstrated by the fact that summits of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) attract the leaders of states that are not part of this geographic region, such as the USA, China, Japan, Australia, and South Korea.

To advance our understanding of the region, the Bangkok-based Institut de recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine (Institute for Contemporary Southeast Asian Research or IRASEC) has published this collection as an annual assessment of the region. This year's edition appears "at a time when tensions between China and the United States increases Southeast Asian 'centrality'" (20). These annual publications, free to download and produced since 2007, produce a French-language compendium that makes it possible "to follow over the years the evolution of its major contemporary issues and to understand the dynamics of regional integration and connectivity with the rest of the world" (3).

L'Asie du Sud-Est 2022 offers an overview of this region, by providing a detailed analysis of the political, economic, social, environmental, and diplomatic events that occurred in 2021 in the region and also in each of its 11 countries, which, except for Timor-Leste, are ASEAN members. The book begins with a chapter on the region, "Southeast Asia in the Great Game amid the Burmese Crisis and Health Crisis," then presents five thematic "dossiers" which address important topics for the region and the world: the Chinese influence; tourism in the pandemic; land and real estate ownership by foreigners; and the internationalisation of higher education. There then follows a discussion of escalating tensions in the South China Sea and the possibility of a European "Third Way" – involving the collaboration of the European Union and ASEAN – in the conditions of tensions between the USA and China. The situation in this sea has been further complicated due to China's clear priorities in the area, the ties between the ASEAN countries and China and the USA and the developing ties of ASEAN with AUKUS, the military alliance formed in September 2021 between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the USA.

These chapters are followed by country studies, the main part of the book. With each country having a dedicated chapter, coherence across the chapters is maintained through using the same structure: a deep analysis of its current international and national context, followed by a useful monthly chronology listing some important events in 2021 in each country, then by two "Portraits" of significant personalities – and not just political leaders – making the news in the year, and ends with a

representative image. For example, in the chapter on Myanmar, the 2021 coup d'état is discussed – its context, evolution, international and national implications, and perspectives on the future – followed by the presentation of some important events in 2021, generally related to the political and socio-economic crisis. The Portrait section presents civil society figures, ethnic entrepreneur Win Win Tint and medical activist Salai Maung Taing San. Finally, the image chosen is one that was widely circulated on social networks: a comparison of the fuel prices under the previous civilian government compared with the military regime when the prices tripled.

For all of this book's wide coverage of the region and its countries, there are some important issues for the region and with global implications that are not covered in any detail: piracy and drug trafficking. There are two somewhat tangential references to piracy when discussing the South China Sea and navigation in the region and when discussing vulnerability for Singapore: said to be “fueled by the socio-economic disarray of the populations on the opposite shores: 35 attacks in total, including 33 effective and two attempted, in the Singapore Strait in 2021” (353). But the issue seems in need of broader study for, in 2021, 57 of the 132 pirate attacks reported globally were in Southeast Asia (ICC 2021, 6).


The other major issue in this region is drug production/trafficking. Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand are usually considered to constitute the “Golden Triangle,” the second largest opium production region in the world (UNODC-GMCP, 2021). The most detailed analysis of drug issues in this region is found in the Philippines country chapter, where President Duterte's war on drugs has led to human rights violations. But, like piracy, most references to drugs are brief observations, often in Chronology sections: the seizure made by the Laotian police in October 2021 of the largest drug haul ever recorded in Asia (283); border instability and tensions between Thailand and Myanmar following the Myanmar coup which has involved all kinds of trafficking, and especially of illicit drugs (394); and the torture and death of an alleged drug dealer during a police interrogation in Thailand (400). But, as a major drug production region, with drug use problems in several countries, and with official statements regarding commitments to a drug-free region (ASEAN 2022, 10), more discussion of the issue would have further enriched this collection.

Despite these shortcomings, explainable in a context of significant events such as the positioning of ASEAN in global politics and the pandemic, this edited book is a useful compendium of information for both specialist and general readers. The specialist will find a rigorous analysis and ideas for new scientific explorations while the book's accessible language permits a wider readership. Assisting in making the book accessible is the fact that the publishing research institute makes it free to download.

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