

Reviews

Diminishing Conflicts in Asia and the Pacific: Why Some Subside and Others Don't. Edited by Edward Aspinall, Robin Jeffrey, and Anthony J. Regan. London and New York: Routledge, 2013, 298 pp., ISBN: 978-0-67031-9.

DESPITE ITS MODEST LENGTH, *Diminishing Conflicts in Asia and the Pacific* is an interesting contribution to the study of international relations and security in South and Southeast Asia and in the small, Pacific Island states. The book succeeds as a collection of case studies intended to both summarize and update extant information in the region. The handbook-type presentation of information from the historic and recent past is likely to be regarded favorably by analysts who are looking for recommendations that are immediately useful for the improvement of policies relevant to the de-escalation or demilitarization of armed conflicts. Each chapter concludes with a “Lessons” section that identifies principles of engagement that are likely to be applicable in other geographic areas or conflict conditions.

The chapters on Timor-Leste, Maluku, Aceh, Solomon Islands, Punjab, and Sri Lanka under Part I (Conflicts diminished) reflect the progress in these conflict areas because of policy-responses and international interventions that involved brokered peace negotiations, political and military reform, and interactions with leaders of armed groups. Meanwhile, the chapters on Bougainville, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Eastern Burma and Fiji under Part II (Conflicts deferred) document how the success has been limited in some peace programs because of key intervening factors. These include: viable but limited indigenous conflict management systems, the large societies displaced by the conflicts, the profitability of a “war economy” for some combatants, and an overly-politicized system of

governance. Chapters under Part III (Conflicts undiminished) describe how generations-old conflicts in Southern Thailand, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, Southern Philippines, Kashmir, and the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea remain largely unresolved and could possibly escalate. Key factors include the poor control of state systems over abusive military units, the continued operation of powerful alternatives to the national system of governance, the inability of resistance fighters to commit to the peace process, the persistence of a latent jingoism amongst the parties involved, and an apathy of the national government towards poor governance and policing in violence-prone areas. The presence of active peace initiatives, even those that are flawed or operate under difficult conditions, as well as of detailed documentation programs in these conflict areas, is taken by the authors as an indication that ethnonationalist conflicts in Asia and the Pacific currently have the best prospects of de-escalation and even resolution.

The contributors appear to have intended the credibility of their work to rest on both a technique of authorship that emphasizes the primacy of the issues and perspectives that motivate the combatants, as well as a format that emphasizes chronological clarity. This combined approach does, to some extent, satisfy the theme “intentional ambiguity” of the project because it allows the authors, the combatants, and the international influences on these conflicts to be portrayed as committed to the resolution of these conflicts without an obvious designation of culpability if the conflicts persist or worsen. This ambiguity, however, also poses the most significant challenge to the readership, which likely expects more from a work on intersocietal conflict than a conclusion that conflicts in the Asia and the Pacific are diminishable but not, as yet, resolvable. *Diminishing Conflicts in the Asia and the Pacific: Why Some Subside and Others Don't* portrays international interventions as either neutral contributions to a foreign but, overall, beneficial de-escalation mechanism or well-intentioned programs that nonetheless vilify the assertive local actors, including those combatants motivated by a strong desire for justice.¹

The implication of this is an indirect laying of the blame upon the combatants themselves for not fully appreciating either the benevolence

of the intervention or banality of conflict motivated by ideas that are not shared by the interveners. All of the conflicts examined in the book have persisted for decades, some for centuries, and have thereby become constitutive influences upon the societies that wage these conflicts. Moreover, the conflicts in South and Southeast Asia are interaffective in terms of material effects and ideational influences, and are not discrete acts of communal violence that the handbook format seems to imply. The presentation of these conflicts as locally worsened and therefore internationally resolvable may help the politically influential justify intervention as the moral prerogative of powerful or aspirational states. However, it does not plainly address the fundamental issue that these conflicts are indicative of a tendency of collectives, regardless of size, influence, or geographic location, to identify the commission of violence, including armed intervention, as an adequate basis for social organization.

Readers would gain a more balanced view of the conflicts in the Asia-Pacific by reading *Diminishing Conflicts in the Asia and the Pacific: Why Some Subside and Others Don't* in conjunction with other materials on the growth of various imbalances in the region to which violent conflict is associated. Key themes to consider in conjunction with conflict diminution would be the regional market in small arms, narcotics and other contraband, the persistence of organised crime, the trade-vs.-aid debate, and the persistence of 'neocolonialism' and other power asymmetries as the conceptual bases for Asian and Pacific international relations.

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Note

¹ The authors of the chapters, however, appear uniform in their belief that the all intervention is matched by a benevolent concern by the 'international community' even if the local fighters seem determined to continue. See pp. 11–12, 30–31, 44, 57–58, 61, 70, 77–79, 95–96, 126–28, 145–46, 160, 180, 213–14, and 228–29. The cases of Southern Thailand, Kashmir and the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, as presented in the book, are notable for (1) the absence of international intervention and (2) the persistence of the conflicts.