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## **Book Review: ASEAN: Conflict and Development, by Otto F. Von Feigenblatt**

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**Reviewed by Daniel Clausen, PhD Candidate, Florida International University**

**Abstract:** *Through a structural dynamics approach, Otto F. von Feigenblatt's new book sets out to demonstrate a "new ASEAN way." At the core of the book is the belief that conflict resolution mechanisms matter and that "tensions" in their many forms can be a productive force for change if channeled properly. The book draws on a rich collection of scholarly sources while maintaining its structuralist perspective. The book's rich case study approach has something to offer both practitioners and scholars.*

### **Full Review**

In the wake of the Obama administration's "pivot" toward the Asia Pacific and in the backdrop of China's conspicuous rise as a power in the region, the hot topic of the day has been the ebbs and flows of competitive regional architecture-building. Amongst competing and overlapping frameworks like Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), the nascent Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Six Party talks with North Korea, as well a host of bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTA) and bilateral security agreements is one of the region's oldest organizations: the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). This organization often plays a pivotal role in regional forums, hosting a number of summits such as the ASEAN plus 3, ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asian Summit. Separately, the countries that make up ASEAN would have little influence in the regional order-building process; however, collectively, the ASEAN organization has served as an important counterweight to competition between China and Japan, and now between the US and China. Given the diversity of the countries involved, it is seen as a more neutral partner in efforts at building regional architecture. For this reason, the study of ASEAN will be important not just for experts of Southeast Asia, but

*Daniel Clausen, Florida International University*

those scholars who want to understand larger economic and security dynamics in the Asia Pacific region.

If ASEAN has been successful as a regional organization set on finding peaceful ways to resolve disputes, its future progress as an organization is still much in question. In particular, the great diversity in cultural, economic development, and political organization that cuts across these countries makes progress along its three pillars—political, economic, and social—difficult. Otto Von Feigenblatt's new book—*ASEAN: Conflict and Development*—sets about tackling the question of ASEAN's future as a regional organization. The book is unique in that it uses a structural dynamics approach steeped in the conflict resolution literature to reassess conflict resolution mechanisms and suggest different approaches to managing disputes that nevertheless remain faithful to the "ASEAN way."

This is no easy task. The breadth of the book is quite extraordinary. The book covers the various issues of ASEAN comprehensively by drawing on a wealth of scholarly insights and articles. This enhanced case study approach seeks to understand the organization's many parts by creating a structural big picture view of the organization. The book first aims for accurate descriptive scholarship in locating "tensions" that prevent ASEAN from developing as an organization. The theoretical perspective of structural dynamics is then applied in ways that seek alternative methods for redirecting these tensions productively into positive transformations.

The book brings together a diverse range of sources from scholarship in the peace science literature, to the conflict management literature, to human security writing, and postcolonial studies. If these diverse literatures provide the book with rich perspectives and information, the tensions between these diverse literatures sometimes feel unexplored. To be sure, analytical eclecticism can be a powerful tool for coming to pragmatic conclusions with important hedges on best estimates. In the concluding chapters, von Feigenblatt provides a thorough accounting of the limitations of his own

study, the limitations on current predictions for ASEAN region building, and areas for future research. Academic honesty of this sort should be applauded, even if it makes readers more cautious about embracing the book's solutions.

However, if the use of various intellectual tools can be pragmatic, at a certain level it can also be somewhat intellectually unsatisfying. How does one, for example, reconcile structural approaches to conflict management with the concerns of postcolonial studies and critical human security writings for human emancipation that often trickle in the book's margins? In a sense, these tensions need to remain unexplored for the book to fulfill its main functions of description and providing policy recommendations. For this reason, the book walks a difficult tight rope between a practitioner audience and an audience of critical scholars and activists.

While academic audiences in critical areas studies and postcolonial studies will appreciate the author's diverse collection methods, reflexivity, and exploratory digressions, they will probably wonder why issues of social justice and human emancipation do not play a more significant role in the book. Academic audiences may also want a fuller engagement with the different world-views that underpin these literatures. On the other hand, practitioners training to be the future leaders in ASEAN negotiations might wonder what purpose reflexivity, hedging, and the diverse selection of scholarship serves if the main function of the book is to provide technical solutions to working-level problems.

In a sense, the tension between the structural and critical-scholastic literatures is a productive one. The book offers an ambitious challenge to books and articles that approach their study through a single lens or perspective. If analytical eclecticism is troublesome and at times unsatisfying, it is also true that it is here to stay. In the case of Mr. von Feigenblatt's book, there is a clear goal for bringing these literatures together: to create an enhanced case study that serves his structural dynamics model. If his book can indeed lead the way to a more peaceful model of channeling

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tensions in ASEAN region building, then his efforts will have been well worth it.

As the author himself points out, future scholars will need to examine how local activists can productively intervene in the regional order-building. Future scholarship in this area might draw productively from structural dynamics approach, but these studies might also employ different literatures in ways that are disruptive and de-constructive (de-structuring). It's clear that the seeds of this future scholarship are already planted in this rich overview of ASEAN.