

Southeast Asia and New Zealand
Reviewed by Christopher Butler.

Southeast Asia and New Zealand: a History of Regional and Bilateral Relations.
 Ed. Anthony L. Smith. Wellington: Victoria University Press and the New Zealand Institute for International Affairs, 2005.

Change in Southeast Asia and in New Zealand's relations with it has been so rapid that it has been compressed within the personal experience of many individuals on both sides of the equation. That reality emerges clearly from the collection of essays contained in this book. In one respect its publication is timely, given that New Zealand last year commemorated the 30th anniversary of its dialogue relationship with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In another respect the book is long overdue: as the chapter on Malaysia records, it was in 1972 that Norman Kirk noted: "For the first time, we are setting out to see things with our own eyes, to look at our relations with Asia from the point of view of a small and prosperous country which geography has placed in the Asia-Pacific region." How often have similar sentiments been expressed in the intervening years by political and business leaders?

But the use of the Kirk quotation from that year is apposite. Narratives in several chapters make clear how important 1972 proved to be as a "tipping point" towards the beginning of autonomous and multifold relationships between New Zealand and the countries of Southeast Asia. It was the year in which New Zealand ended its military involvement in Vietnam, and the year in which Britain signalled not only its intention to withdraw its military presence from the region but also finalised its entry into the EEC. The weight of both new security and economic realities were thus added to those of geography.

The book contains overview chapters on New Zealand's relationship with the region (Anthony Smith), as well as on defense dimensions (Ian McGibbon), issues of regional identity (Jim Rolfe), and the economic relationship (Gary Hawke). They are followed by individual chapters on relationships with Cambodia (Anthony Smith), East Timor (Stephen Hoadley), Indonesia (Michael Green), Malaysia (Mark Rolls), Myanmar (Guy Wilson-Roberts), the Philippines (Rhys Richards), Singapore (Gerald Hensley), Thailand (Anthony Smith) and Vietnam (Roberto Rabel).

The authors represent a distinguished line-up of academic ability and professional engagement, combining well particularly in the chapters by Gary Hawke, Michael Green and Gerald Hensley. Given that each chapter stands on its own, there is inevitably some overlap between them. But read as a whole, the book has cohesion and its occasional repetition of dates and events does little harm and at times is helpful in reinforcing the context. Anthony Smith has done well to discipline a potential morass of material.

The work is more about relations rather than relationships, and dates and structures tend naturally to dominate the narrative. Its emphasis is on the foundations and framing of the house, rather than its decoration and texture. There are hints at the latter in mentions of the personal associations formed through the Colombo Plan, the interaction of New Zealanders with regional counterparts in regional institutions and in aid and military contexts, and even the impact on New Zealand which Gerald Hensley notes of military families returning from Singapore.

That is not a criticism – engineering matters just as much as architecture. But it does perhaps point the way to another book which addresses in more depth the way in which personalities and relationships have profoundly influenced events. They have been a driver of the emergence of most Southeast Asian institutions (the influence of people connected with the ASEAN-ISIS network of think tanks is one example) and have been important too in New Zealand's own connections – and even I suspect in the publication of this book.

Given the accelerating speed of events, not least New Zealand's decision last year to accede to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and its presence at the first East Asian Summit, it will be important to ensure that another 30 years do not elapse before the production of a similar work. The next iteration could be an opportunity to include more interpretative and analytical comment, and an index would also be a welcome addition for anyone seeking to use it as a reference work.

All up, the book is definitely worth the time it takes to read (not a little at 391 richly factual and tightly laid-out pages), is usefully annotated, and is probably essential for anyone wanting a clear account of the development of New Zealand's formal links with a region which has been important to its history and is now central to its future interests.

It is interesting, albeit a sobering reminder of the passage of the years, to read a book which parallels the span of your own lifetime. In the 1950s, I shared school experiences in the UK with sons of South East Asia from Thailand, Singapore

and Malaysia. In the 1960s, I was befriended by Thai, Malaysian and Vietnamese Colombo Plan students at Victoria University, and teetered on the cusp of military service in Vietnam. In the 1970s, I started four years of regular transits through Singapore, seeing on every visit vast changes to roads, buildings, welfare and services.

For a time in the 1980s, my working life revolved around the trade and economic implications of East Asia's rising "Tigers" and the consolidating intricacies of ASEAN. In the 1990s, I saw at first hand the policy impacts of the "Asian Economic Crisis" from a vantage point within the APEC process. And after the turn of the millennium I became a regular visitor to the burgeoning and sophisticated cities of a region altered beyond recognition in the span of a single generation.

History, they say, is a great teacher and perhaps even the more so when an account of events enriches experience. This book does that.