
REVIEWS

Regional Security

*Alan Dupont, **East Asia Imperilled: Transnational Challenges to Security**
Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2001.*

*Reviewed by **Ron Duncan***

From an international relations perspective, this book attempts to make the case that the 'realism' paradigm which has been dominant in thinking about international security is no longer appropriate, particularly in the East Asian region. Dupont argues that transnational issues such as environmental degradation, unregulated population movements, and organised crime are not adequately captured by the realism paradigm that focuses on the balance of power between states. It is argued that these transnational issues are particularly important in East Asia and the realism paradigm needs to be at least broadened to take them into account.

In the realism paradigm of an unending struggle between states over the protection or acquisition of territory, military threats are paramount and factors affecting military strength are important only to the extent that they affect the military power of the state. For example, there may be concern with competition for resources such as minerals or oil, as these may affect the economic and military power of the state and thereby give rise to conflict. Resource scarcity in an East Asian context is seen by Dupont as having three characteristics that sets it apart from traditional thinking about resource competition: first, it involves resources such as water and air that are fundamental to survival and were once considered to be inexhaustible; second, resource vulnerabilities are being made more acute by the degradation of the natural environment; and third, while the growing scarcity of renewable resources is aggravating tensions between states, for the most part it is the internal cohesion of the region's states that is most threatened by the prospect of food, water and energy shortfalls, organised crime, unregulated people movement, and AIDS.

Following an introduction which argues the case for the inappropriateness of the 'balance of power' paradigm for analysis of security in the East Asian region, Chapter 1 makes the broad case for the importance of the transnational issues to considerations of international security generally and in East Asia in particular. The remainder of the book divides into three parts. Part I examines the importance of rapid population growth, deforestation, pollution, climate change, and reduced access to food, energy and water as drivers of intra-country and regional conflict. Part II looks at recent trends in the unregulated movement of people across borders, including the increasing role of people smugglers, and their likely implications for intra-state and inter-state conflict. The final Part III documents the growth of organised crime and its transnational activities

particularly drug-trafficking. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is seen as being promoted by the illegal trade in drugs and sex.

Dupont is obviously sympathetic to the 'deep green' arguments. He sees the projected global population growth on the one hand and the slowing rate of increase in agricultural (mainly grains) productivity on the other hand as pointing to growing food shortages. This widely accepted conclusion, which has been derived from analysis that focuses on the supply side and ignores factors affecting demand, is wrong. It ignores the fact that population growth is slowing rapidly and a large proportion of the world's population has experienced increased incomes, and has therefore been through the most rapid growth phase in their food consumption. Therefore, agricultural productivity does not need to increase as fast as it did previously to match effective food demand.¹

Dupont claims that agricultural productivity has slowed because of environmental degradation, particularly the erosion of soil and soil fertility (p. 91). Moreover, it is claimed that soil erosion is three to eight times higher in East Asia than the world average (p. 58). Such claims are highly suspect. Crosson and Anderson (1992) who have carefully reviewed claims about the extent of soil loss and Lindert (2001) would suggest that there is no empirical basis on which to make such a claim.

Similarly, it is incorrect to argue that 'High levels of population growth can erode the benefits of economic development and worsen income differentials' (p. 42). Such a statement shows a lack of understanding of the causal relationship between population growth and income growth. Causality runs from income growth to population growth, not in the other direction. If incomes are increasing, the fertility rate and population growth rate decline. Dupont also misunderstands the dynamics of the global demographic transition. The world did not experience the unique event of the rapid population growth of the second half of the 20th century because of a 'dramatic increase in human fertility rates' (p. 36), but because infant mortality and adult death rates declined while fertility rates also fell, but with a lag.

Dupont's lack of understanding of the global food system leads to claims that 'current world grain production averages around 200 million tonnes' (p. 96) and that 'by 2025, China may have to import as much grain as the world produced in 1998' (p. 83). Dupont is confusing world grain trade, which is about 200 million tonnes, with world grain production. China already produces around 500 million tonnes of grain.

Dupont's tendency is to argue that the long-term declines in the real prices of food and energy commodities do not give a good indication of real price movements in the future. If he has any confidence in his predictions about demand and productivity increases, he should be investing in these commodities in the expectation of price increases. For example, he is concerned that the rate of crude oil discoveries is continuing to fall when global primary energy use is 'conservatively expected' to double or triple by 2050. Clearly, those investing in

¹ See Duncan (1998).

oil exploration and development do not believe such demand forecasts and are expecting energy prices to continue trending downwards in real terms.

In contrast, the author is happy enough to view an increase in fish prices as a 'sure sign of scarcity' (p. 102). The increase in international disputes over fishing is also taken as a sign of increased scarcity. There is no thought given to the fact that the Law of the Sea, which gave property rights to countries over the seas within 200 miles of their coastlines, was only ratified in 1994. This allocation of property rights over what were previously 'open seas' obviously upset many historical fishing patterns. It will take some time for countries to devise ways to take control over the allocation of these fishing rights and to monitor and enforce them effectively. There also remain disputes over the boundaries of these so-called exclusive economic zones. Fishing grounds can clearly not be treated on an 'open access' basis. Hence, the disputes over fishing rights can be seen in a more positive light as the working out of effective controls over what were previously 'global commons'.

Indeed, many of the transboundary issues that Dupont is concerned about should be seen in the light of cooperative international efforts to solve these problems. Rather than being a growing threat to international security, their identification may be promoting international cooperation to solve them. As well as the Law of the Sea agreement, the Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, the Kyoto agreement, and the international agreements on limits to whaling and fluorocarbons are efforts at an international level to resolve transboundary problems.

Scarcity of fresh water is, I believe, correctly identified as the primary threat to international security. The author emphasises that appropriate pricing of water is necessary to reduce the enormous waste and to allocate water to its most productive use. The sharing of major river and groundwater systems between nations has proven to be a most difficult problem to resolve. As far as management of water flows is concerned, however, the author is clearly in the 'anti-dam' camp and does not give any consideration to the incredibly important role that dams have played in the provision of fresh water — the greatest contribution ever to human health. Also, as far as East Asia is concerned, the author notes the great fluctuations in supply of and demand for water, yet does not appreciate the role that dams have in managing these fluctuations.

On unregulated population movement (UPM) Chapters 7 and 8 provide salutary reading for those who believe that Australia is an outlier in its efforts to control its border. People smuggling in order to avoid entry controls is clearly a major international activity and efforts are being made by both rich and poor countries to control it. However, whether unregulated movements of people are likely to be a major cause of international instability is another matter. Dupont acknowledges that the link between UPM and rapid population growth, environmental degradation, high rates of urbanisation and pollution and, in turn, with international conflict is not well established, but is happy enough to accept it. North Korea is used as an example to justify his position (p. 166). But North Korea is such an outlier in terms of international norms of behaviour that it would

appear to be an inappropriate case upon which to make a judgement about the countries of the East Asian region.

Transnational criminal organisations (TCOs) are seen as posing a threat to national security as they are undermining the political authority of governments through challenging the state monopoly over taxation and violence. International security concerns raised include drug and arms trafficking, smuggling of nuclear material, illegal migration, money-laundering, and technology crime (p. 183). Chapter 9 provides an interesting description of criminal organisations around the world. However, there is no theoretical foundation provided for their existence. Nor is there a convincing argument as to why they pose a threat to regional security. It is argued that they pose a threat because they subvert the political authority of the state and imperil its economic and social foundations. But this is a tautological statement. Dupont in fact argues that criminal organisations are tolerated, even encouraged, by governments, and gives the examples of North Korea, Burma, and even Japan. Why is this? Mancur Olson's (2000) analysis of governments as 'stationary bandits' may throw some light. Maybe organised crime is tolerated as part of the taxation system. But Olson argues that 'stationary bandits' do not over-tax their subjects. Thus, it might be argued that organised crime will not go past a certain point in its collection of 'taxes' so that it will not destroy the economy through over-taxation or lead to the creation of tensions that give rise to international conflict.

There is a chapter devoted to a discussion of the development of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the region and efforts to control its spread. The spread of AIDS is linked to organised crime and its involvement in trafficking in drugs, sex and people. It is argued that the pandemic could destabilise states but there is no evidence for this yet. As far as national and international security is concerned, the claimed infection rates of military forces of two to five times higher than the general population is a concern. AIDS also has the potential to weaken states economically through the debilitation of its working age population and the high costs of medical treatment.

In assessing the book's contribution, how justified is the claim that the realism paradigm is no longer appropriate, or that it is not appropriate for East Asia because of the increased importance of these so-called transnational problems? Even the author does not wish to take the argument too far, as he ends up concluding that 'balance of power' considerations should still be the 'core' of the analysis of national security, and that these transnational issues are 'outer core' factors (p. 231).

How important may the various transnational factors be in terms of weakening nation states and leading to conflict? In particular, how valid is the claim that they are 'reshaping East Asia's security landscape' and 'will play a seminal role in determining East Asia's future security environment' (p. 12)? Dupont himself notes that most armed conflicts since 1989 have been internal. Hence, it is difficult to argue that it is the transnational dimension of factors such as population growth, resource scarcity, organised crime, etc., that is the problem.

Even within states, Dupont's concerns about population growth and environmental degradation leading to increased problems of access to food and energy are seriously in doubt. Certainly, problems such as organised crime, drug use and AIDS can adversely affect economies. But there is no evidence presented of these factors posing problems for national or international security. True transboundary issues, such as air pollution, access to fresh water and fishing, are areas where use has grown to the point that these resources can no longer be treated as though they are in unlimited supply. Hence, their use has to be allocated between countries and between individuals. But instead of these issues being seen primarily as potential sources of international conflict, they are in reality being managed more or less effectively through international cooperation that could be considered to be strengthening international security. Access to water involving two or more countries appears to be the most difficult issue to resolve in an equitable and efficient way. Hopefully, this problem is not beyond the wit of man to solve.

References

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