

Book Review

Small Powers and Trading Security: Contexts, Motives and Outcomes, by Michael Intal Magcamit. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. 269. ISBN 9783319388151.

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Empire expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the conventional practice that “trade follows the flag” (TFTF). Economic relations were particularly determined by the dictates of the hegemon vis-à-vis the weaker polity. Following the post-Cold War era, pundits would point to an ironic reordering of the phrase—“the flag follows trade” (TFFT). Australia, as a case in point with its then Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith, took note and pride that its private sector has been quicker to recognize the economic importance of Africa than the public sector, specifically, concerning mineral resources (Donnelly and Ford 2010).

In *Small Powers and Trading Security: Contexts, Motives and Outcomes*, author Michael Magcamit de facto argues contrarily to a purist neoliberal perspective of a reversal of practice from TFTF to TFFT. Magcamit contends that “the pursuit of trade is a highly political and strategic affair... The relationship between security and trade is two-way. On the one hand, trade helps promote, enhance, and secure a wide range of security referents and interests. On the other, the security threats/issues undermining these referents/interests influence the facilitation and outcome of trade interests” (p. 31).

In what seems to be a twist of the trade-follows-the-flag dictum, Magcamit investigates the linking of security interests and trade activities of small powers, namely: Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia. This is interestingly peculiar as TFTF cases would normally highlight the dominant power. Magcamit’s cases prove pertinent given his region of choice, East Asia. The author proffers

the term security-trade linking (STL) process given a “cohabitative” security framework, the view that incorporates both state and human security (p. 23). In Magcamit’s frame of reference, a cohabitative security framework amalgamates “high politics” of states with “low politics” of humans—the individuals, groups, and societies that constitute the states.

Through the seven chapters of his book, Magcamit ushers the reader from the theoretical to the applied dimensions of the STL process.

Chapter 1 introduces the key concepts of the study and expounds on the relationship between trade and security. It notes the small powers’ dispositions and dilemmas such as: (1) seeking but not being able to rely exclusively on its capabilities to obtain security; (2) favoring the status quo; (3) high regard for international laws and institutions; and (4) tendency to display high levels of paranoia. The chapter highlights security from the statist and humanist vantage points, and propounds on trade engagements and activities vis-à-vis security referents and threats.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of what the author deems exegetical of the STL process in East Asia, making cases out of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) experiences. Magcamit regards the ASEAN linking approach as demonstrative of the statist security referents above the humanist referents. Partly explained by what Magcamit reckons as the intrinsic nature of the ASEAN institutional framework, the association has looked into security within the ambit of sovereignty and territorial integrity (p. 59). As for APEC, until the 9/11 attacks, it has been reluctant to modify its orthodox economic agenda. However, 9/11 provided the jolt which compelled its members to accommodate poverty, illegal drugs, terrorism, climate change, migration problems, disasters, SARS and HIV, and other non-traditional security threats in the APEC discourse from a human security perspective.

In Chapter 3, the author discusses Taiwan’s statist utilization of free trade to secure its “shrinking de facto sovereign space” (p. 67) via multilateral and preferential trade activities given the One-China Policy. He points out the continuing paradox of Taiwan being “de facto free” by remaining “de jure unfree” (p. 32). Per Magcamit, aside from China’s constrictive strategy, Taiwan’s STL campaign is hampered by domestic institutional mechanisms, nationalist rhetoric and agenda, an export-oriented economy, and cross-strait economic pacifism.

Chapter 4 examines Singapore's statist resort to employ free trade to secure its "shrinking defense space" given the complex multidimensional security. For Magcamit, Singapore's strategy manifests the fusion between realist security interests and liberal trade objectives. Via methodically parlaying on multilateral and preferential trade channels, Singapore successfully plugged itself at the hub of regional-global arrangements.

Chapter 5 details what Magcamit calls as the Philippines' humanist security-trade linkages anchored on employing free trade to secure a "shrinking development space." He points to a systemic culture of oligarchism and patrimonialism undermining a development-based national security model, and to the lack of a countervailing measure to rectify the system, a development space necessary for improving the people's economic security will likely shrink even more.

In Chapter 6, Magcamit relates humanist security-trade linkages for Malaysia. He discusses Malaysia's utilization of free trade to secure its "shrinking diversity space" on the pretext of protecting Bumiputera interests. Magcamit notes though that Bumiputera welfare has come at the expense of non-Bumiputeras such that Malay security is made inversely proportional to non-Malay security. He bewails, however, that the Bumiputeras' cause have conveniently become the pretext of the rather narrow objective to ensure the political legitimacy and supremacy of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party and the Barisan coalition.

In Chapter 7, the author recapitulates what he considers to be the main lessons of the study. Despite the apparent mixed positive and negative observations, Magcamit consoles readers with calibrated optimism that small powers are "not helpless pariahs in the international system" as the constantly evolving security landscape provides them an "impetus and platform for acting interdependently" (p. 224).

Undoubtedly, the Magcamit study ushers readers into the largely unexplored strategies that small powers pursue to survive the complex international security landscape. When it comes to understanding how powers navigate treacherous regional and global environments, much focus has been paid to the bigger, if not, hegemonic actors. For detailing the varied directions and actions pursued by the small powers, Magcamit draws our attention to the choices available for them. In the four cases employed, one finds no conclusive pattern that statist security or humanist security is preeminent when linking trade to security is concerned. In all the cases though, it is made evident that

security is not a single-dimensional issue. It is multifactored, complex, and even evolutionary.

That the author marshals readers to a seldom probed facet of security—that of trade—comes as a seminal treat to international relations (IR) students, analysts, and policymakers. That being said, the book provides a good interface in understanding the domestic underpinnings of foreign policies and the ramifications of external developments on local affairs.

Caution, however, must be observed so as not to oversimplify or overgeneralize a single factor (trade) as explanatory to the larger concept of security. Despite Magcamit's conspicuous efforts to narrow down his discussions and analyses on the security-trade linkage, politics, culture, technology, sociology, demographics, history, leadership, and other factors that come to the fore either as providing pertinent contextualization of, or justification for, the measures pursued by the polity, one must guard carefully against false consequences and false causes. Following Magcamit's proposition, trade and the attendant motives on its conduct may help explain the security orientation and agenda of a polity. However, trade alone would not explain the whole gamut of security considerations of a country. The reader should be prudently advised of the dangers as well of gratuitous securitization of trade as that tendency looms large. Just as in any theoretical exercise, modeling requires the selection and non-selection among a range of variables.

From a conceptual plane, one cannot help but notice the author's seeming predilection, if not fixation, to the use of terms “shrinking” and “space” in referring to Taiwan (“shrinking sovereign space”), Singapore (“shrinking defense space”), the Philippines (“shrinking development space”), and Malaysia (“shrinking diversity space”). Magcamit should be commended for attempting to offer a working definition for each of those concepts. But then, sovereignty, defense, development, or diversity, as the respective case studies show, may ebb and flow, and thus display not only “shrinking” but also “expanding” variances through different periods. For example, while development space in the Philippines may have considerably contracted during the martial law years, there was material leveling of the playing field, if not, enlargement during the Fidel Ramos administration.

From one angle, Magcamit may be simply offering a fresh nomenclature, new names to old concepts such as autonomy, defense, welfare, and ethnicity (or collective identity). He makes a modest claim

that his study adopted a qualitative approach, albeit the investigation “may be viewed as an explanatory type of research” (p. 28). Magcamit though sounds as if security-trade linking is distinctly a new concept. From a social sciences and IR standpoint, STL appears more akin to “(international) political economy” that analyzes the linkage between economics and international relations.

Magcamit appropriately narrates each of the case studies in a chronological fashion. Thus, the discussion and analysis orient the reader to a progressively linear pattern of developments, be it, for example, the ASEAN’s largely statist security disposition or the APEC’s eventual acceptance of an expanded notion of security. But in reality, there are instances of clear breaks effected by defining moments such as 9/11 in the United States or the “People Power” ascendancy of Corazon Aquino to the presidency in the Philippines. These are clearly divergent, if not discontinuing, from the prior regime. Perhaps a more conscientious caveat—that patterns and evolutions are not always linear—can be broached through certain qualifiers as to the time period being covered. Even Lee Kuan Yew’s STL policy in the early decades of Singapore would have certain qualitative differences to his later years as prime minister. Malaysia’s Bumiputera policy, to cite, would have variants from the 1960s and to the latest. Although constantly weighed down by Beijing’s One-China prescript, Taipei’s different regimes from the 1970s to date, from the Kuomintang to the Democratic Progressive Party, demonstrated recognizable policy gradients despite much similar limited policy options available, from co-optation to confrontation.

Overall, Magcamit challenges readers to join in the security-trade linking debate. Moreover, he prompts a widened discussion on the meanings and foundations of security, especially, which or who stands as security referents. Pared to its essence, STL is a strategy that is instrumental to achieving security. But then, for whom or for what? Magcamit offers a clue to the security gauntlet:

... State security and human security complement one another. State security does not always undermine human security nor does it deliberately compete with individuals and communities. Similarly, human security does not necessarily threaten state security nor does it have to be in constant competition with state actors and agencies. In short, state and human security are mutually constitutive than mutually corrosive.

Such security formulation enables states to have a more positive and nurturing image in the security narrative, and is particularly relevant in the context of growing recognition of human security as a necessary condition for peace and stability. (p. 14)

Instead of making an exclusive choice for one or the other, the answer to the security conundrum lies in conjoining the two security archetypes, much like having a fair coin with two facets, each contributing to the identity and utility of the piece. And, if we may hazard to suggest as we go back to the introduction on trade and the flag, there are cases where trade follows the flag, and there are also cases when the flag follows trade. Both may coexist at certain points in time.

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Reference

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