

Weingartener Asiengespräche

Asien im Fokus: Souveränität, Sicherheit, Nachhaltigkeit?

Weingarten, 18 – 20 November

The 2016 edition of the Weingarten round-tables on Asia focused on the meanings and implications of “sovereignty”, “security” and “sustainability” in Southeast Asia, while also considering relevant related concepts and phenomena such as stability, migration and territoriality. Organised and chaired by Heike Wagner (Academy of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart), Claudia Derichs (University of Magdeburg), Martina Padmanabhan (University of Passau) and Stefan Rother (University of Freiburg), the conference was attended by approximately 50 participants.

In his preliminary remarks Stefan Rother warned his audience against methodological nationalism, a mindset based on a conception of the nation state as a hermetically closed system and centred exclusively on the premises and perspectives of the researcher’s own national context. Moreover, he criticised one-sided discursive practices on migration security, which fail to address the protection *of* migrants, focusing exclusively on the protection *from* migrants. Such practices were particularly widespread in Southeast Asia, he stated. In a similar way, Claudia Derichs challenged oversimplified and narrow understandings of “security”. She pointed out the valuable contributions likely to be made by alternative concepts such as “human security” or certain feminist approaches. Alternative perspectives on security could be particularly fruitful with regard to sustainability issues, she underlined.

In her talk “What Role for the US and the EU in the Security of East/Southeast Asia?” Gabriela-Maria Manea (University of Freiburg) outlined the EU’s and the US’s security policies in the region. She emphasised the contrast between the perception of the EU as a civilian and normative power and the contested but enduring hegemonic position of the US. According to Manea, the EU lacks a clear political vision of the role it could and would be willing to play in Southeast Asia in the years to come.

Jürgen Rüland analysed the continuing conflict among the countries adjacent to the South China Sea. The aggressive territorial claims put forward by several states, notably China, have a catalytic effect on the armament tendencies in the East Asian area. Despite ASEAN’s attempts to unite the smaller Southeast Asian countries and to settle the conflict, it remains doubtful whether the organisation can successfully counter China’s territorial ambitions. A further increase in mistrust towards China seems indeed more likely. Rüland said he also expected an even greater number of external actors to become involved in this regional conflict.

The interrelation between migration, sovereignty and security was examined by Mandy Fox (University of Passau). In her talk “The Legacy of the Past: Ethnoreligious Challenges in the Rhakine State and Their Implications for the Peace Process in Myanmar” she outlined the unresolved conflict between the Buddhist population of the Rhakine State and the predominantly Muslim Rohingya group. The latter, perceived as “illegal Bangladeshi immigrants”, are denied citizenship and all related rights, facing at times violent persecution. At the national peace conference held in Myanmar’s capital Naypyidaw in 2016 the subject was intentionally left aside. Fox discussed the complex interests and involvements of the conflict’s three main players: the Rhakine population, the Rohingya group and the national government.

Claudia Derichs delivered a talk on “State Appropriation of Religion” in Southeast Asia, elucidating the role of religion as an instrument of power in the region. Derichs chose a comparative approach examining the appropriation of religion, namely Islam, by state actors in Malaysia and Indonesia, two countries with different regime types. In both countries religious marginalisation is oriented along intra-religious rather than inter-religious lines. Paradoxically, tolerance towards extremist groups is being legitimised with reference to state stability. This observation is as accurate in the authoritarian context of Malaysia as it is with regard to the democratic regime of Indonesia, Derichs found.

The Indonesian example remained the centre of interest when the participants turned towards sustainability issues in Southeast Asia. Martina Padmanabhan pointed out research prospects in the field of organic farming in Indonesia. She explained that it was crucial to adopt a transdisciplinary approach in order to assess organic farming’s potential for societal transformation. Local stakeholders with non-scientific backgrounds should be involved to a larger extent. According to Padmanabhan, the “intra-face” model allows a discursive determination of the exact meaning of “sustainability”, of the importance of different players and of promising strategies in the implementation of sustainable development measures. She stated that the rural population was in general frequently viewed as backward. Changing this attitude towards the rural population would be vital in order to make organic farming a locally-rooted and socially-supported movement, Padmanabhan argued.

A stronger involvement of the local population is also one of the core principles of the UN’s environmental project “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation” (REDD+). Kristina Großmann (University of Passau) showed how direct contact between international and local players strengthens the position of local NGOs and civil society groups

while simultaneously causing “frictions” between the two levels. The REDD+ project does not sufficiently consider local specificities in land use practices, Großmann explained. Taking into account local ontological foundations of and traditional rights to land use would be vital in order to promote a non-essentialist understanding of sustainability. She pointed to the danger of further consolidating the elitist character of the sustainability discourse.

Sustainability issues were further discussed in two of the three workshops held by the conference chairs. One workshop was focused on the interrelationship between sustainability and democracy. The workshop’s participants discussed whether sustainability measures were easier to implement in authoritarian than in democratic systems. Participants of the second workshop explored major lines of conflict in the field of sustainable coal production. Principles of environmental protection and social justice were rarely considered in this sector, they found. This workshop provided several interesting links to the screening of the film “Samin vs Semen” attended by all conference participants. The film exposed the social and environmental costs of cement production in Indonesia. The third workshop concentrated on questions of state sovereignty in the light of significant migration flows in Southeast Asia. Participants studied in particular the example of the Philippine state’s attempt at exercising state sovereignty over its citizens residing abroad.

One last topic addressed in the course of the conference was the interrelationship between religion and security. Friederike Trotier (University of Frankfurt) explained how religion served a security purpose, not only on the political but also on the individual level. In the personal sphere religion frequently provides “moral safety”. Using the Malaysian planned city Putrajaya as an example, she illustrated the two dimensions of religion’s security function. The city, having been planned and built in accordance with ideals and principles of ethnic and religious “purity” and a shared identity, satisfies its inhabitants’ individual needs for “moral safety” while at the same time exhibiting and reinforcing the ethnic and religious foundations of the state. An increasing demand for “moral safety” through religion has contributed to the development of a “religion of prosperity”, Trotier argued. With the rise of a middle class in Indonesia, the demand for religious consumer goods has, for instance, increased dramatically.

In the course of the conference’s numerous talks and debates the concepts “security”, “sovereignty”, “sustainability”, “migration” and “democracy” were discussed with regard to their meanings and implications, their interdependencies and the frictions among them in Southeast Asia. Traditional conceptions of security were repeatedly subjected to critical reflections, stressing the wide variety of possible security concepts. Participants

also questioned the conventional understanding of sovereignty. Despite the importance generally attributed to sovereignty in Southeast Asia, the concept is being challenged by significant migratory movements. On the whole, discussions were very lively and the conference format allowed participants to engage in fruitful exchange and interaction with each other. Next year's edition of the *Weingartener Asiengespräche* is to take place from 3–5 November 2017 and will focus on: "Asia in the Plural: Political, Social and Cultural Diversity in Transition".

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