

BOOK REVIEW

*Borders in Globalization Review*  
Volume 5, Issue 2 (Spring & Summer 2024): 117-118  
<https://doi.org/10.18357/bigr52202422079>

## Book Review/Commentary: *Geo-politics in Northeast Asia* by Iwashita, Ha, and Boyle

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### *Geo-Politics in Northeast Asia*

Edited By Akihiro Iwashita, Yong-Chool Ha,  
Edward Boyle

Routledge, 2023

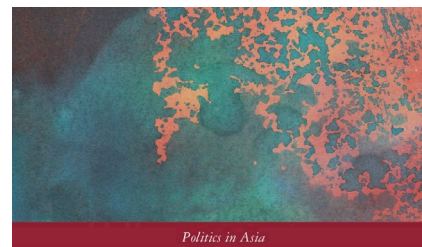
Hardback, 264 pages

ISBN 9781032263809

<https://www.routledge.com/Geo-Politics-in-Northeast-Asia/Iwashita-Ha-Boyle/p/book/9781032263816>

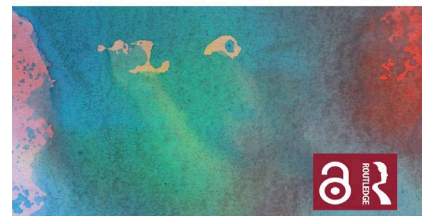
Asia is the site of much research in geopolitics and in border and borderland studies. This particularly important book looks at the edges of Japan adjoining China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Russia. The authors study those states and in particular Japan from the perspective of the edges themselves. This is a borderlands point of view that complements our 2022 review of Billé and Humphrey's 2021 *On the Edge*.

*Geopolitics in Northeast Asia* (2023) asks what a Northeast Asian community could be. This idea emerged in the literature on geopolitics in the 1990s, vividly illustrated in *As Borders Bend* (2005), where Xiangming Chen discusses transnational spaces across China's seas. Indeed, this is a literature primarily focused on border regions or subregions of this area of the world, and the literature suggests that trade is globalizing the region. In *Geopolitics in Northeast Asia*, editors Iwashita, Ha, and Boyle, along with their contributing authors, assess the shared interests in



### GEO-POLITICS IN NORTHEAST ASIA

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multilateral cooperation across South Asia. Looking at the past, the turn of century, and the present, the authors note with regret that national governments lack incentive to cooperate multilaterally because of the rise of national populist movements in numerous countries.

The authors distinguish between 'geopolitics' and 'geo-politics', or in reference to Foucault and Gerald Toal to the idea of "geo-power", i.e., a distinction between *political space* and *political power*. In turn, the authors question the positivist assumption of objectivity in geopolitics, the mutability of spatial

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scales, and their multilayered entanglement in the local, the regional, the national, and the international. They note with discernment the importance of a region looking at its own *geo-politics*, that is, a region that looks at its own margins, its borderland people and communities, and their political and economic clout within that geo-politics. The works focus our attention on the spatiality of power at the margins of the region, opening our eyes to see beyond a traditional statist view of East Asia and Northeast Asia. This is a fresh analysis of the political clout of communities at the margins of a world-region. The analyses are innovative and fascinating.

The book is made up of eleven chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion, divided into three sections. The first section looks at historically important actors in the region: the United States, Japan, and South Korea. The second section examines the role of specific subregional geographies (maritime, terrestrial, and in between, i.e., archipelagos) in the production of identity, culture, and economy, rather than the role of states. The third section looks at current and possible future developments in broader Northeast Asia. In Chapter 1, Yong Choo Ha and Akihiro Iwashita discuss the historical background of the region in greater detail and introduce the book's first major section. Chapter 2 by Yoshifumi Nakai focuses on China's transformation as a regional power and into a global power and how that rise has been perceived as a threat in the United States, even as, for China, Northeast Asia is perceived as a minor region with backyard security concerns. In Chapter 3, Yasuhiro Izumikawa looks at the adversarial impact of the Trump Administration's America First policy, noting that it does not disappoint Japan and South Korea. Chapter 4 by Mitsuhiro Mimura focuses on the disruptions caused by North Korea, not only to its allies but the whole region, indeed pitting the Korean peninsula as the geographical core of the region.

Part II of the book takes on the 'B/Ordering Society and the Region' by focusing on borderlands' views of their respective states and life in sovereign spaces at the margins of those states. Chapter 5 by Yuji Fukuhara reviews competition over fishing waters between Japan, South Korea, China, and North Korea, noting that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has made those relations more difficult; the author suggests ways to alleviate tensions. Chapter 6 by Norio Horie looks at land deals and migration along the Chinese-Russian borders, arguing that those relations are improving. Chapter 7 by Naoki Amano focuses on the maritime edges of the countries of the region, particularly on the Sakhalin and Okinawa islands, where the local borderlands experience their states as attempting to "discipline" the island populations, which the author characterizes as a process of "exorcising phantom borders", drawing on Sabine von Löwis's notion of phantom borders (2015), i.e., borders that don't exist anymore.

Part III of the book asks whether there may be a "Regional Shared Future"? Chapter 8 by Mihoko Kato analyses the operation of sovereignty in the region and how diverse views impact ideas about regional regimes; Kato points to the Taiwanese legal disconnect in particular, where Taiwan, the Republic of China, is not part the international community but exists as an important partner in the international community. Chapter 9 by Shinichiro Tabata questions whether economic integration is progressing, with only a very small amount of trade between the core countries of Northeast Asia, indeed, only about one-to-two percent of imports or exports (173)! Chapter 10 by David Wolf points to the implications of Confucian culture and lowest-common-denominator politics, for instance, in family loyalties and official obligations extending to the edges of Confucian civilization, thus including Korea and Japan and posing challenges to democracy. Chapter 11 by Naomi Chi returns to the idea of (mis)trust through social and psychological lenses, examining Japan's difficult relations with Korea, stemming from unresolved historical grievances such as the sensitive issue of Korean "comfort women"; yet Chi suggests that trust in each government internally has become more important today than trust between countries. Finally, the book's Conclusion emphasizes the worrisome extent of tension and dispute across Northeast Asia, striking a marked contrast with Southeast Asia, across the Mekong region, which has been integrating economically despite tensions along the South China seas.

Collectively, the authors question the sovereign and spatial future of the region and the prospects for an international community. At stake, they argue, is power over liquid and gas and over mobility. Yet the editors remind the reader that peripheral regions had traditionally been understood as crossings, as 'spaces of connections.' Today these spaces do not receive enough state attention, leading the authors to advocate for more relations, so borders may expand into gateways.

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