

***Security Sector Reform in Southeast Asia: From Policy to Practice.***  
**Edited by Felix Heiduk. Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan,**  
**2014. Hardcover: 245pp.**

The problem of fragile, failing and failed states within the international community has become endemic in the two or three decades since the end of the Cold War. The causes are many and the solutions equally varied, but normally involve an external intervention of some kind. At the core of most of the solutions, with or without an external intervention, is the concept of Security Sector Reform (SSR) and at the heart of that concept is the understanding that unless the security sector (however defined) is reformed (whatever that means), the state concerned will remain fragile, failing or failed. And intuitively that understanding seems eminently sensible.

In the context of SSR, Southeast Asia is interesting because, with the exception of Timor-Leste, the states are not generally described as fragile, failing or failed (although they all have or have had their own problems) and, again with the exception of Timor-Leste, reform of the security sector has been primarily driven by internal forces rather than as a consequence of external intervention. That fact alone makes this potentially a very interesting book.

Are there significant differences between externally imposed and internally driven reform processes and issues? On the evidence of this book, probably not. Both externally imposed and internally driven processes and outcomes have problems revolving around unclear intent, competing institutional agendas and a general lack of understanding of what is necessary, compounded by an inclination to produce “standard solutions” rather than solutions tailored for the specific situation.

All of this means that writing about SSR is difficult. While it is completely possible to give insights it is much more difficult, perhaps impossible, to give prescriptions. Fortunately, this book does not set out to give prescriptions. Instead, it aims to widen the discussion of the issues beyond the “narrow scholarly focus on military reform” (p. 11), examine process rather than outcome to assess “whether these changes reflect new approaches to the governance of Southeast Asian security sectors” (p. 13) and to examine the impact of any new “norms, institutions and/or practices on the domestic level” as a result of the reform processes (p. 14).

The book is in three parts. The first part includes the introduction, discusses the concept of SSR and its international context. The second is a series of national case studies from Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Timor-Leste (two chapters) and the role of private security providers in relation to reform. The third is the conclusion, which attempts an overall assessment of SSR in the region.

The book has two major problems. The first is that it is not a “book” in the sense that it has a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. It is instead a collection of conference papers around a common theme, but with no guiding hand excising the repetitive and the superfluous. This is seen, for example, in the varying discussions of the context within which reform of the security sector is carried out and the varying definitions of the concept itself. Thus, Felix Heiduk, Carolina G. Hernandez and Jörg Krempel all define the concept (in slightly different ways, although the sense is the same) and all discuss the context within which it is utilized. These are necessary discussions, but they do not need to be repeated. Compounding this, the empirical country case study chapters are examined apparently according to the interests of the chapter writers rather than the needs of a coherent discussion. This is presented as a strength: these are “empirically rich ... thick descriptions”, rather than having any “single overarching theoretical framework” (p. 225). That is a pity because although the descriptions are indeed empirically rich, comparison between the different jurisdictions becomes difficult to the point that we have to wonder if there is a Southeast Asian approach, or merely a bunch of countries doing their own thing to modernize.

The second problem is that the book does not really meet the aims it set itself. There were three: to go beyond an examination of the role of the military and military reform; to determine how reform has been interpreted in this region; and to assess the impact of the reforms. For the first aim, two of the empirical chapters (those relating to Thailand and the Philippines) focus on the military, two relate to Timor-Leste (and thus do not really conform to the model of internally driven reform and are, in any case, very narrowly focused) and the other two dealing with civil society and SSR in Indonesia and the role of private security providers and reform are interesting in themselves, but too narrow to give regional insights. The other two aims are similarly compromised by the lack of a common analytical base, although in the book’s

final chapter Heiduk does a very good job of bringing whatever evidence there is together.

One very minor issue. ISSAT is defined in the glossary as “International Security Sector Assistance and Training”. In this context the term more normally would refer to the Geneva-based “International Security Sector Advisory Team”, which specializes in security sector reform and which is itself a part of the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces.

Overall, this is a book for scholars not for practitioners. It gives insights rather than answers, and the insights have to be examined closely to determine whether they are insights about the region and its processes, or about the issue under discussion within the specific context. This then is a book that will be cited to support other scholarly discussion rather than read for its practical understanding of the issues

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