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PART I

International Relations

Introduction to Part I

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Michael Leifer's interest in Southeast Asia was awakened during his first academic appointment at the University of Adelaide where he spent more than three years in the 1960s. In his first book on Southeast Asia¹ published after his return to the United Kingdom, Leifer admitted to having fallen prey to the Australian "national habit" of continually looking to their "near north" — a habit that was to distinguish his own academic achievements in ensuing years. Interestingly Leifer's early research skills were honed in quite a different field — Zionism and Palestine in British Opinion and Policy — a doctoral dissertation topic, which led to his coming under the joint supervision of Elie Kedourie at the London School of Economics. In a tribute to his former teacher, Leifer acknowledged the intellectual influence of Kedourie from whom he acquired "a fuller understanding of the activity of politics and what might be expected of those who indulged in it". Such an understanding, he felt, stood him well in his subsequent endeavours to interpret a vastly different regional field of study.²

In an academic career spanning over three decades, Leifer witnessed and sought to make sense of the historic transition of Southeast Asian states from being objects to subjects of international relations. In his

academic lifetime (when his first book was published the United States was getting increasingly embroiled in the Vietnam War), he also observed a region undergoing transformation — in a process often punctuated by turbulence — from being “a category of convenience” associated with a wartime military command and from the so-called “Balkans of the Orient”, to one with a growing sense of regional oneness and geopolitical coherence. By the time of his death in March 2001, the whole of Southeast Asia had become identified with ASEAN, thus fulfilling the regional association’s putative vision of “one Southeast Asia”.

In this saga of regional transformation, the formal emergence into statehood often marked the beginning of a chapter in the struggle for survival and stability. Indeed the problem of how the new and often vulnerable states of the region were to maintain their independent existence in a less than benign regional environment that threatened to engulf them, posed a central puzzle and refocused his attention albeit in a different context, on “the activity of politics” and “those who indulged in it”. It was not surprising that his early works on Southeast Asia sought to address the security challenges faced by some of the most vulnerable of successor governments in the region — Cambodia seeking a precarious independent foreign policy against the backdrop of an unfolding American intervention in Indochina; the new Malaysian Federation then being confronted by neighbouring Indonesia; Singapore struggling to come to terms with an unexpected independence. The interplay of external providence (or improvidence) and enlightened domestic leadership (or the lack of it) were to result in radically different outcomes for those who indulged in the activity of politics in post-colonial Southeast Asia. These “domestic” developments of regional states are taken up in greater detail in Part II of this volume. Part I looks at Leifer’s analysis of the broad forces at work which shaped the patterns of international relations in Southeast Asia.

His Theoretical Underpinnings and Method

On reading Leifer one is often struck by the detachment of his analysis and avoidance of intellectual faddishness. Others have been left with an impression of his being a-theoretical. He often avoided stating upfront his theoretical approach in his numerous studies of the region, but his largely empirical works were by no means lacking in theoretical

underpinnings. Nor was he unfamiliar with the contending schools of thought in international relations. Indeed he often evinced a strong underlying realism although as a former colleague of his at the LSE noted, it was a tough realism uniquely blended with humanity that made it difficult to categorize him in simple terms.³ If he had appeared traditional and even conservative in his approach it was because his method was one which tended to draw heavily on “substantive examples which have an illustrative function”⁴ — in other words the diplomatic record was usually grist to his analysis of international politics. Be that as it may, his analyses of current events were often cast in cogently developed intellectual frameworks.

Leifer’s realist assumptions were quite consistently reflected in the attraction that power and balance of power analysis held for him in his interpretation of the shifts in foreign policies and patterns of regional relations; in his essentially state-centric “billiard-ball” perspective of international politics and the importance of national interests and national sovereignty as determinants of state action as well as regional co-operation. In his first book on a regional state’s foreign policy, he noted Cambodia’s hypersensitivity to shifts in the regional balance of power and anticipated that it would “maneuver in any direction to preserve its national independence”.⁵

In subsequent works Leifer sought to explain the elusive balance of power concept in terms of a dimension he deemed pertinent to the ASEAN experience namely, of a balancing policy pursued with a view towards preventing undue dominance by one or more states. Such balancing purpose was as he saw it, reflected in the way ASEAN provided a structure for regional partnership that would place checks (“constraints” in later-day parlance) on a willingly accepting Indonesia previously known for its hegemonial aspirations. Leifer also saw a balance of power purpose reflected in the way ASEAN responded as a diplomatic community to Vietnam’s invasion and occupation of Cambodia. His masterly analysis of external power intervention in the conflict similarly highlighted the balance of power considerations behind the respective policies of China, the former Soviet Union, the United States, and Japan. That said, Leifer did not elevate the balance of power to an immutable law of state behaviour in an anarchic world. On the contrary he acknowledged the existence of international society (for which he could be said to reflect a defining strand of thought in the “British School of International Relations”) but without exaggerating the constraining role of the norms therein.

With the end of the Cold War, the changing balance of power and the prevailing condition of stability had made it possible for ASEAN to venture into multilateral security co-operation in the form of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) that took it beyond its geostrategic ambit by the end of the last century. However, to the extent that it was very much dependent on a pre-existing stable balance of power situation (which could change over time, and where the one state capable of redressing that change would be the United States, an extra-regional power), it was seen as an imperfect diplomatic instrument, lacking in teeth and, as Leifer colourfully but also realistically put it in his seminal work on the ARF, not unlike “making bricks without straw”.

A vein of realism also runs through much of Leifer’s reflections on regional co-operation and association. While he saw that ASEAN held forth the possibility of widening functional ties, he did not see much promise in David Mitrany’s theory of functionalism (with its assumption of deepening regional co-operation leading eventually to supra-nationalism) being fulfilled in a Southeast Asian setting given that regional leaders tended to guard jealously their nation’s sovereignty. Such a view held in his early observations of ASEAN co-operation had been sustained through subsequent regional transitions and expanding regional membership and has not lost its relevance in the arena of high politics, despite the rhetoric of regional integration and community-building which has gained currency in recent times.

Although Leifer took an essentially “statist” approach in his analysis of the international relations of the region, he was nevertheless conscious of the non-state variables and the ethical (as opposed to the power) elements to a contentious international issue. This is vividly illustrated in his almost magisterial treatment of the clash of principles over Vietnam’s intervention in Cambodia, cast in terms of the debate between the Rights of State versus the Rights of People. A similar non-partisan approach was reflected in an earlier discussion of Southeast Asian responses to the Vietnam War. If he appeared too much of a realist to some (indeed he never quite rejected the realist label) it could be because the objects of his analysis often seemed to hold a mirror to his own realist inclinations.

Some Recurring Themes

Conflict, co-operation, and order were some of the recurring themes in Leifer’s study of the international relations of the region. His entry into

Southeast Asian studies coincided with the intensifying Cold War manifested in the most cataclysmic manner in the Vietnam conflict, which like the subsequent Cambodia conflict (pivot to another Cold War this time, among the Communist powers themselves) marked a conjunction of local, regional, and global contestations. At the local level, there was also a template of traditional conflicts, which were rooted in pre-colonial antagonisms, contested state identities and disputes over boundaries — which questioned the viability of “regional solutions to regional problems” and set parameters to attempts at regional association.

But it was the management of political order (intertwined between the domestic and regional levels) or how to achieve that condition of politics that is characterized by stability and predictability rather than conflict and violence that preoccupied him intellectually. At the level of international relations he most persistently pursued the issue of ASEAN’s vision of and capacity to bring about a Southeast Asian-wide regional order — a capacity that was found wanting during the Cold War. Indeed with the emergence of an Indochina sub-system following the American departure from Vietnam, Southeast Asia was left with two contending visions of regional order. Be that as it may, Leifer was ungrudging in his acknowledgement of ASEAN’s achievement in sustaining a condition of orderliness (in the sense of a relative absence of violence in the conduct of intra-mural relations) among the members of the regional association. ASEAN effectively presented a viable structure of regional confidence-building, which at the conclusion of the Cold War was embraced by its hitherto regional antagonists. He was more sceptical of ASEAN’s attempts to extend its model of regional order beyond its ambit.

Leifer’s interest in the problem of managing regional order was pursued into the maritime realm where China’s policy has a critical bearing on how local states could bring about more “orderliness” in the South China Sea environs, seen by Leifer as the last frontier of Southeast Asia. His realist inclinations led him to see assertions of maritime claims as most likely where the regional balance of power is in flux and where countervailing power seems doubtful. The post-September 11 regional environment is however witnessing changes in the way maritime security is being redefined. New areas of functional needs to counter threats to maritime security are presenting new opportunities for co-operation between regional and extra-regional states. Complicating such co-operation are the traditional notions of sovereignty, which Leifer had so usefully explored.

And Some Lacunae

Leifer graduated in politics and economics from Reading University, but there is little hint of this background in his works on Southeast Asia. Indeed he seems not to have given fuller treatment to foreign economic policy or the economic aspects of foreign policy-making by the more developed regional states. Where he has attempted a limited politics cum economic approach it has been in connection with his later-day analysis of China's and Taiwan's economic engagement with the region. A sharper political economy angle on the region itself and considerations of emerging new economic interdependence might have provided a prism to a different pattern of regional dynamics and made better sense of the growing impacts (and consequent political implications) of China and India on the geoeconomic terrain of Southeast Asia.

If he were to look at the region today he would probably have more sharply factored in the rising profile of India, which in his time seemed to be diplomatically distant — serving almost as a contrasting footnote to the rise of China. This despite the fact that he anticipated the growing influence of India in the region. Today as India reorientates its international outlook and attitudes towards the Southeast Asian region and extends its strategic reach, it will be an increasing reminder to ASEAN of its strategic presence on its western flank. Indeed the region has never had to face the rise of both China and India at the same time as it is currently, and Leifer would have compared and contrasted their respective impacts.

Among the major external powers which had shaped the strategic environment of Southeast Asia, the United States and China consistently took much of Leifer's attention. Since the demise of the Soviet Union and the onset of economic malaise in Japan, Moscow and Tokyo seemed to have lost their appeal although Leifer had directed his attention on their interests in and diplomacy towards the region during the Cold War years. His interest in the Sino-U.S. relationship underlines its importance to the stability of East Asia of which ASEAN is a part.

Today Leifer would perhaps have linked more clearly the greater significance of an evolving East Asian mega-region to the economic and strategic environment of ASEAN especially since there is growing acceptance of the need to factor in economics in any security and foreign policy evaluations. Regional states' economic entry into China

is also redefining traditional notions of space as they increasingly grow their stakes in the internal stability of China itself — a significant transformation from the early Cold War years when China was all too readily seen as a threat to their domestic security. More importantly he would have revisited the question of regional identity and what underpin that, in the light of what has been claimed as a growing East Asian consciousness and relate that back to ASEAN's place in the greater game of today in East Asia.

Leifer died before the horrendous events of September 11 and the emergence of a transnational threat posed by a non-state network of terror. Since September 11, a whole host of non-traditional security concerns (but particularly international terrorism) are crowding into the security agenda of the region — a phenomenon that would have given exciting materials for Leifer to reflect on although he might still be inclined to focus on the level of states' response and co-operation.

His Sense of the Paradoxical and the Ironic

In his years of observing Southeast Asia, Leifer was able to look out for the paradoxical and the ironic without seeming to be cynical. In his study of Singapore's foreign policy, he drew out several paradoxes including the observation that the island-state needed the region and yet sought to transcend it. The old ASEAN-5 had also seemed like a paradox to Leifer. It was best contemplated as a security organization of a kind — in the sense that its members shared a common interest in preventing radical internal political change and sought to promote mutual security by consultation and co-operation wherever practical. Yet paradoxically, it did not possess the form or the structure of an alliance and its corporate activity was devoted in the main to regional economic co-operation. This "paradox" was "a function of the perception of threat held by the individual governments of the association and of other limits to the degree of co-operation between them".⁶ Leifer returned to this paradoxical element in his comments on the strains registered on Malaysia-Singapore relations as a consequence of Israeli President Chaim Herzog's visit to Singapore in 1986. He saw that the visit once again pointed to a paradoxical quality of ASEAN, present at its creation. "ASEAN was established between adversaries of different kinds in an attempt to promote a structure of reconciliation. The regional enterprise was embarked upon in the full knowledge that certain underlying facts of political life could not be changed at will, including the sense of

vulnerability of some member states; some partners in reconciliation would remain potential enemies.”⁷

In taking stock of ASEAN developments, Leifer often revealed a sense of the ironic. He noted for example that by the end of the last century, the governments of an expanding ASEAN had given coherence to the concept of a Southeast Asian region. “Ironically, just as this coherence has been registered, they have been obliged to expand their regional horizons (through the creation of the ARF) in order to cope with changing strategic and economic environments in a way which casts doubt on the very viability of the concept of South-East Asia.”⁸

Leifer clearly recognized ASEAN’s need at century’s end to reinvent itself — the alternative being institutional atrophy. Yet every solution seems to have its own problems! The dilemma for ASEAN is that the diversity that came with expanding membership underlined the value of “a tightly restricted model of regional security” based on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of neighbours. Keeping in view the debate about revisiting the terms of intra-regional engagement, Leifer warned that, “ASEAN cannot be expected to expand beyond its role which means that the Association is condemned to suffer from the defects of its qualities and the evident limitations of its collective competence ... Its prime saving grace ... has been to sustain an original role of containing and managing intra-mural tensions which is an accomplishment not to be disparaged in an imperfect world. In that respect, ASEAN lends itself to an old adage that in contemplating its future role the best should not be made the enemy of the good.”⁹

Leifer’s familiarity with the region and its many key policy-makers did not lead him into the realm of advocacy. It was as if he believed that vision making was best left to regional visionaries. What he did was to bring a sense of the realistic to bear on the prescriptions of the day — “regional solutions to regional problems”, “going the ASEAN way”, “constructive/flexible engagement in ASEAN”, “towards ‘one Southeast Asia’” — dissected them and spelt out their implications. He subjected to close scrutiny such concepts as diplomatic community, security community, defence community, co-operative security, and the notion of a distinctive ASEAN peace process, which have entered regional discourses. In so doing he forced many to clarify their own thoughts and review the empirical evidence even as they sought to

take issue with his brand of realism. It is this role as the constructive critic that will be sorely missed in Michael Leifer.

Notes

1. Michael Leifer, *Cambodia: The Search for Security* (London: Pall Mall, 1967).
2. Michael Leifer, "A Personal Note", in *Elie Kedourie CBE, FBA, 1926–1992: History, Philosophy, Politics*, edited by Sylvia Kedourie (London; Portland OR: Frank Cass, c1998), p. 29.
3. Adam Roberts, "Obituary: Professor Michael Leifer", *The Independent*, 9 April 2001.
4. Michael Leifer, *Dilemmas of Statehood in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, 1972), p. xi.
5. *Cambodia: The Search for Security*, p. 19.
6. Michael Leifer, "The Paradox of ASEAN: A Security Organisation Without the Structure of an Alliance", *Round Table* No. 271 (July 1978), p. 261.
7. Michael Leifer, "ASEAN's Search for Regional Order" (Singapore: G Brash for Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 1987), p. 18.
8. "Southeast Asia", *The Oxford History of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Michael Howard and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 239.
9. Michael Leifer, "The Limits of ASEAN's Expanding Role", unpublished paper written in mid-1997 in connection with an ISEAS commemoration of ASEAN's 30th anniversary, p. 16.

