## Articles

- **A Nuclear Weapon-Free Southeast Asia and Its Continuing Strategic Significance**
  - M C Abad, Jr
  - Page 165

- **“Enhanced Interaction” with Myanmar and the Project of a Security Community: Is ASEAN Refining or Breaking with its Diplomatic and Security Culture?**
  - Jürgen Haacke
  - Page 188

- **Political Reforms in the Philippines: Challenges Ahead**
  - S. C K. Yu
  - Page 217

- **Authority and Law Enforcement: Local Government Reforms and Security Systems in Indonesia**
  - Stein Kristiansen and Lambang Trijono
  - Page 236

- **A “Fair Go” for East Timor? Sharing the Resources of the Timor Sea**
  - Clive Schofield
  - Page 255

- **Trickle-down Hegemony? China’s “Peaceful Rise” and Dam Building on the Mekong**
  - Alex Liebman
  - Page 281

- **Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning?**
  - Denny Roy
  - Page 305

## Book Reviews

- **Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries**
  - Diane K. Mauzy
  - Edited by Timothy P. Barnard
  - Page 323

- **The Thaksinization of Thailand**
  - Thitinan Pongsudhirak
  - By Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand
  - Page 327

- **Regionalism and Multilateralism: Essays on Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific**
  - Renato Cruz de Castro
  - By Amitav Acharya
  - Page 330

- **Remapping East Asia: The Construction of a Region**
  - Hal Hill
  - Edited by T.J. Pempel
  - Page 333

- **Japan’s Role in Asia: Mutual Development or Ruthless Competition**
  - William T Tow
  - By Lim Hua Sing
  - Page 336

- **Asian Discourses of Rule of Law: Theories and Implementation of Rule of Law in Twelve Asian Countries, France and the U.S.**
  - Rajenthran Arumugam
  - Edited by Randall Peerenboom
  - Page 339
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position and Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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The Michael Leifer Memorial Prize is awarded by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in memory of the late Michael Leifer (1933–2001), Professor Emeritus in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science and the founding Director of the School's Asia Research Centre.

Professor Leifer has rightly been described as the doyen of Southeast Asian Studies. He wrote and edited over 20 books and published over 150 scholarly articles on the international relations and domestic politics of Southeast Asia. His analysis of contemporary regional developments reached a worldwide audience through his regular broadcasts over the BBC. At the LSE he nurtured a generation of Southeast Asianists from all over the world, most significantly from Southeast Asia itself. Many of them became prominent in academe, think-tanks, media and government. His encyclopaedic knowledge of the region was masterfully displayed in his Dictionary of the Modern Politics of Southeast Asia, which has gone through three editions. During one of his sojourns at ISEAS he brought his editorial skills to bear on the speedy publication of David Marshall's Letters from Mao's China. Professor Leifer's last book, Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerabilities, remains an unrivalled study on Singapore, the place that was his first steppingstone in a lifetime of academic journeying into Southeast Asian Studies.

Professor Leifer first visited Singapore in 1963 as a young lecturer from the University of Adelaide. During a professional life spanning nearly 40 years he paid numerous visits to Singapore where his considered views and analysis were much sought after by academics, the media and policy-makers alike. Appointed Senior Professorial Fellow at ISEAS between 1995 and 1997, he made many valuable contributions to the work of the Institute. He also served on the international advisory committee for Contemporary Southeast Asia, a major journal of ISEAS.

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