

Southeast Asian Perspectives on Security

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Southeast Asian Perspectives on Security

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Preface

The conventional understanding of strategic issues in the modern world has been very much a Western-driven phenomenon. That is to say, Western strategists, thinkers and writers have tended to establish the principles of strategic concepts, and to develop theories around them. While there is utility in much Western strategic thought, it is also apt to note that some of it does not have full relevance or validity when applied to a regional setting that is far removed from the geographical boundaries of the Western world. The problem that arises here is that when one adopts Western concepts in understanding the dynamics of international security, Western interests and the Western point of view are invariably always taken as the point of reference. This is not necessarily wrong. But it is equally true to say that the conclusions derived from such an analytical approach may not have as much relevance to non-Western countries than is sometimes made out to be. This is partly because there is always a tendency by any analyst — whether Western or otherwise — to mirror-image another country's interests or capabilities (whether it be economic, military or diplomatic) against that of his own country. Thus, an American military analyst of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) would likely be generally dismissive of PLA capabilities because he would compare those capabilities to U.S. military capabilities, and when that is done it is quite clear that the PLA falls short in every category of military power.

But what relevance do those findings of PLA capabilities have for the states of Southeast Asia, for example? Probably very little. For the fact is that what is seen as generally obsolete Chinese military equipment in Western eyes is seen very differently in the eyes of Southeast Asian military analysts. A single example would suffice: a Chinese H-6 bomber, which is of 1960s technological vintage, armed with land-attack cruise missiles, also of 1960s technology, would likely face very little opposition, if any, if it were to launch an attack sortie against Philippine positions in the South China Sea. In such a context, Chinese military capabilities are hardly obsolete. And this is precisely the point, a certain context has to be established whenever the important subject of security is discussed. Regrettably, though, this is not always done.

Many analysts tend to be a product of their countries' geopolitical circumstance and historical legacy, and subconsciously or otherwise these realities tend to show through in their commentary on international security issues. Thus, it is well-known that many Canadian academics in the field

of international relations and security studies tend to be great advocates of multilateralism in international relations, giving credence to institutional structures as providing a panacea to security problems and issues. Yet, it should be asked: what conceivable threat does Canada face to its national security? It is difficult to arrive at any concrete answer to that question, simply because there is really no conceivable threat. That, however, has not prevented Canadian academics in hymning the virtues of multilateral security approaches to far-flung Southeast Asia. This a region where internal or external threats to the security of countries are all too apparent, and where traditional concepts in maintaining security — the notion of military build-ups and balance of power — are seen as key determinants in keeping the regional order quiescent and in equilibrium. But, unsurprisingly, the Canadian mind might find it difficult to accept this.

Just like many of their Canadian counterparts, quite a number of Australian and New Zealand academics and security analysts tend to view the security concerns of Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific from a standpoint that emphasises the national interests of Australia and New Zealand, but not necessarily those of the states of Southeast Asia. Viewing their countries as being on the margins of Asia, and geographically removed from the main strategic areas of concern, most Australian and New Zealand commentators on Asia-Pacific security issues invariably articulate a conception of Asia-Pacific as a single operational entity in security terms. They do so, not because they are entirely convinced that the security concerns in one localised area of this sprawling region might directly affect another area, but rather because they desire that their countries be “players” in the geostrategic game. Commentaries on regional security issues by such analysts should therefore be treated with a degree of circumspection.

In that connection, this volume is partly intended to serve as an antidote to much of the Western commentary on Asia-Pacific security issues by providing a range of perspectives on those issues from the Southeast Asian point of view. It is axiomatic that Southeast Asians have more of a vested interest in the security of their own region than do Westerners. The operative word in this volume is “perspectives”. For even within Southeast Asia there is no common view or consensus on the range of security issues that confront the Asia-Pacific in the post-Cold War era. This is symptomatic of the very fluid geopolitical situation that currently characterizes Asia-Pacific security. It is also symptomatic of the different schools of thought that analysts in the region have chosen to subscribe to.

As characteristic of the free-wheeling nature of the discussion on security issues in this volume, some of the chapters adopt a conceptual and theoretical approach; some others are empirically grounded; yet others exemplify the virtue of the historical approach, seeing certain trends as essentially structural in nature and, therefore, enduring. This volume, thus, offers up a smorgasbord of perspectives on the multi-faceted security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. The volume is by no means comprehensive in its scope. Rather, it is a modest effort that deals with those issues which the individual chapter-writers feel are salient to an understanding of current geopolitical trends and what these might imply for the future.

If anything, the objective of this volume is to encourage other analysts within Southeast Asia and, indeed, even those beyond, in Northeast Asia, to develop further some of the themes essayed here, and to do so from their own understanding of the security dynamics of the region, rather than what others from outside the region might say on the subject. If the volume were to achieve that objective, than it would have been a worthwhile exercise.

Seven out of nine chapters contained in this volume were drawn from a collaborative project between the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, and Germany's Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik on the theme of Strategic Concepts and Strategic Cultures. Chapters Two and Four were written specially for this volume.

Derek da Cunha

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Abbreviations

AFTA	—	ASEAN Free Trade Area
AMDA	—	Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement
AMM	—	ASEAN Ministerial Meeting
APEC	—	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF	—	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	—	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEAN-ISIS	—	ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies
ASEM	—	Asia-Europe Meeting
ASORR	—	ASEAN Seminar on Regional Resilience
BMD	—	ballistic missile defence
CBM	—	confidence-building measures
CPM	—	Communist Party of Malaysia
CPP	—	Communist Party of the Philippines
CSBM	—	confidence and security building measures
CSCAP	—	Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific
CSCE	—	Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe
CTBT	—	Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty
EAEC	—	East Asia Economic Caucus
EEZ	—	Exclusive Economic Zone
FPDA	—	Five-Power Defence Arrangements
ICBM	—	intercontinental ballistic missile
IMF	—	International Monetary Fund
ISM	—	Inter-Sessional Meeting
KR	—	Khmer Rouge
NATO	—	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NFU	—	No First Use
NPT	—	Non-Proliferation Treaty
NSA	—	Negative Security Assurances
ODA	—	Overseas Development Aid
PACOM	—	Pacific Command (US)
PACTAD	—	Pacific Trade and Development Council
PBEC	—	Pacific Basin Economic Cooperation
PECC	—	Pacific Economic Cooperation Council
PLA	—	People's Liberation Army
PMC	—	Post-Ministerial Conference (ASEAN)
PRC	—	People's Republic of China
RMA	—	Revolution in Military Affairs
SAR	—	search and rescue
SDP	—	Social Democratic Party
SEANWFZ	—	Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone
SEATO	—	Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation
SOM	—	Senior Officials Meeting
START	—	Strategic Arms Reduction Talks
THS	—	Theory of Hegemonic Stability
UNCLOS	—	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
ZOPFAN	—	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality