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SOUTHEAST ASIAN AFFAIRS 2017

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SOUTHEAST ASIAN AFFAIRS 2017

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Foreword

It is my pleasure to present the forty-fourth edition of *Southeast Asian Affairs*. The information and analysis in this forward-looking annual review will be useful for all interested in contemporary developments in Southeast Asia.

On the security front, the election of Donald Trump has deepened questions about the role of the United States in Southeast Asia, while the election of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines has sharply altered Southeast Asian approaches to the South China Sea disputes. The 12 July arbitral tribunal ruling that comprehensively undercut China's claims in the Spratlys, while precedent-setting for international maritime law, has had little effect on China's assertiveness.

Domestic politics in 2016 again underlined the region's diversity and different political cycles. In Singapore and Indonesia, consolidation and stability featured after recent national elections. In Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia and Timor-Leste, positioning for upcoming elections took precedence. For the Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos, new governments took office.

The regional economic picture was similarly diverse, though all economies were affected by the regional ramifications of longer-term global economic changes. Exports' contribution to growth continued to weaken, with many Southeast Asian economies suffering from slower GDP growth. Southeast Asia's demographic picture highlights the very different long-term economic challenges facing Southeast Asian countries and their impact on labour migration within the region.

I would like to thank the authors, the editors as well as others who have helped to make this publication possible. The chapters in the volume contain a wide variety of views and perspectives. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute. The authors alone are responsible for the facts and opinions presented in their contributions.

Tan Chin Tiong
Director
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January 2017

Introduction

Vandana Prakash Nair and Malcolm Cook

In the post–Cold War era, 2016 could well stand out as a watershed year for the global order, the Southeast Asian region, and many Southeast Asian states. Events in 2016 saw sharp new changes that may create new continuities going forward within Southeast Asian states and changes within long-term structural continuities that will have important ramifications for Southeast Asia.¹ As suggested by the title of this volume, the events of 2016 covered in the twenty-four chapters by twenty-eight authors will have a determining influence on the trajectories of Southeast Asia and the countries of the region in 2017 and beyond.

Structural Factors

U.S.–China Rivalry

The first regional chapter, by Alice Ba, focuses on a defining post–Cold War strategic continuity for Southeast Asian security and states’ foreign and security policies: the strategic rivalry between the United States as the declining status quo power and China as the rising revisionist power. As Ba discusses, Donald Trump’s victory in the November 2016 U.S. presidential election is a significant change on the U.S. side of this rivalry with unknown but likely profound importance for the U.S. role in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian states’ relations with the United States. At the same time, the author analyses how 2016 saw China become more assertive in its push to develop an alternate China-centred regional order and against obstacles to the pursuit of its national interests in Southeast Asia. These include the 12 July Arbitral Tribunal ruling invalidating most of China’s maritime rights claims in the South China Sea.

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The chapter by Andrew Shearer on the future of U.S.–Japan–Australia trilateral security cooperation delves deeper into the strategic ramifications of the U.S.–China rivalry and the common threat of terrorism. Shearer agrees that the Trump victory is a watershed moment for the United States in Asia. Australia and Japan will be under renewed U.S. pressure to contribute more to their respective alliance relationships with the United States. These relationships and the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue process provides Tokyo and Canberra unique communication channels to Washington DC.

Leo Suryadinata's chapter in the Region section looks at an element of China's rising power and regional and global interests of particular concern for most Southeast Asian states. Suryadinata argues that over the last decade the Chinese government has become more proactive in engaging with Chinese overseas to advance Chinese state and commercial interests. This runs the risk of aggravating long-held fears and prejudices in many Southeast Asian countries towards their respective Chinese overseas communities.

The U.S.–China rivalry and the 2016 changes affecting this rivalry were major considerations for the foreign and security policies of all Southeast Asian states. Donald Weatherbee's chapter on Indonesian foreign policy under the Jokowi administration looks at Indonesian responses in depth. The Malaysia country review chapter by Helena Varkkey, the Philippine one by Aries Arugay, and the Vietnam one by Phuong Nguyen each canvass this issue as well.

Terrorism

The year 2016 saw heightened concerns about the threat of terrorism in the region aided and abetted by strengthening ties between local terrorist groups and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). The thematic chapter for Singapore by Kumar Ramakrishna focuses on the Singapore state's proactive response to this threat and the difficulties of countering it. The thematic chapter for the Philippines by Joseph Franco focuses on the Duterte government's approach to the stop-start peace process in Muslim Mindanao. As noted by Franco and Ramakrishna, Muslim Mindanao has long been a safe haven for terrorists in Southeast Asia due to its stateless nature and the lack of an effective peace deal between the Philippine government and the main insurgency groups.

The Economic New Normal

Building on trends identified by Cassey Lee in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2016*, the regional economic outlook chapter by Tham Siew Yean and Andrew Kam Jia Yi

looks at key economic trends in Southeast Asia and more broadly those routinely packaged under the term the “new normal”. These include a slowdown in global and regional trade, slower economic growth and softer, if recovering, commodity prices. Tham and Kam analyse how the effects of these global trends are not common but rather quite varied across the individual Southeast Asian economies.

The chapter on the ASEAN Economic Community by Tan Sri Munir Majid reflects how the “new normal” and the election of Donald Trump increase the importance of regional economic integration and the ASEAN Economic Community for Southeast Asia and more broadly. Yet, Tan Sri Munir does not shy away from the implementation challenges facing this nascent Community.

Demographics

The chapter on demographic trends in Southeast Asia by Tey Nai Peng, as with the Tham and Kam one, reflects the diversity of economic challenges across Southeast Asian economies and societies and how regional statistics can be misleading. While Southeast Asia as a whole is enjoying a demographic dividend with a growing working-age population, Singapore and Thailand are aging societies with worsening dependency ratios. Demographic trends are extremely difficult to alter and have a significant impact on government spending, growth rates, and labour migration flows within Southeast Asia.

Tension and Transition: Southeast Asia in 2016

Leadership was the name of the game in Southeast Asia in 2016. While most states in the region underwent some form of internal transition, each state’s ability to respond to external and internal tensions depended upon the inherent stability of its leadership and governance model. International forces favouring populism also reached Southeast Asia’s shores, auguring even greater uncertainty in 2017.

Enduring Models: Consolidation and Accommodation

In Singapore in 2016, the People’s Action Party (PAP) government’s eye was on the future as it focused on the twin tasks of regime consolidation and leadership renewal. In their review on Singapore, Kenneth Paul Tan and Augustin Boey identify key measures taken by the government to achieve both objectives, including a constitutional amendment to ensure minority representation in the Elected Presidency, revamping the education system to address a widening inequality gap, and an extensive economic restructuring programme. Despite the

stability of Singapore's governance model, Tan and Boey point out that the PAP's uncharacteristic tardiness in identifying and grooming Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's potential successor will mean greater unpredictability as the nation-state grapples with growing hostility from China and the increasing risk of a terrorist attack. In fact, in his exposition on the threat that Islamic extremism poses to Singapore, Kumar Ramakrishna lists a number of planned attacks in 2016 where the authorities managed to uncover the plots in advance. Ramakrishna stresses the dual importance of effectively engaging non-violent extremist ideologues and battling "Islamaphobia" in the fight against physical terrorism.

Leadership renewal was also the focus for Laos in 2016, as the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party held its Tenth Party Congress in January, which was particularly significant for the retirement of several members of the revolutionary generation, including Secretary-General and State President Choummaly Sayasone. Soulatha Sayalath and Simon Creak consider the renewal process an exercise in preserving "the status-quo" in Laos. Indeed, the party's structures and processes had been designed both to maintain party stability and to ensure that elite prerogatives remain unchallenged. They predict that the Lao system is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, in order to effect a similar level of regime stability, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP)-led government adopted both hard and soft approaches in 2016 to strengthen its credibility while simultaneously undermining the growing popularity of the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). Thearith Leng posits that these efforts were generally successful, resulting in a tamed CNRP. However, he warns that the CPP cannot rest easy, as the growing discontent of the middle class is certain to pose more governance challenges in the future.

Brunei's governance model endured in 2016 along with its government's pursuit of economic sustainability. The oil and gas sector continues to disproportionately ballast the country's economy, accounting for eighty per cent of exports in 2016. Even so, Asiyah az-Zahra Ahmad Kumpoh believes that the government is on the "right track" with its extensive economic diversification programme which includes increased emphasis on infrastructure investment and improving Brunei's business environment. Certainly, as Kumpoh points out, some of the government's efforts have borne fruit, as Brunei climbed the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index in 2016, reaching 72nd out of 190 countries from its previous rank of 84th.

Transitioning Models: Stress and Instability

By and large, while predictability prevailed in Singapore, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei, traditionally stable systems in Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Timor-

Leste contended with leadership challenges largely caused by unresolved political and economic problems.

In Malaysia, the 1MDB corruption saga continued to pose problems for Prime Minister Najib Razak's government in 2016. In her review chapter on Malaysia, Helena Varkkey narrates that in response Najib employed the twin strategies of removing dissenting individuals from his party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and consolidating his government's authority over public spaces through the increasing use of laws such as the Sedition Act and the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012. Far from quelled, however, Malaysia's civil society is slowly building momentum. In November 2016, 25,000 Malaysians participated in the Bersih 5 rally, an annual anti-corruption demonstration. In a more formidable leadership challenge, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad quit UMNO to form his own new opposition party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia. Despite the efforts of the opposition, Varkkey contends that "[i]t is a race against the clock as to whether the opposition parties can organize themselves to stand as a united front before the next general election". The potent mix of political drama, the ringgit's sustained slide, and increasing social tension arising from growing Islamization means that instability will characterize Malaysian politics well into 2017.

Governance models in Thailand and Vietnam also came under particular stress in 2016 due to leadership transitions in both countries. In the case of Thailand, transition took the form of the passing of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, hitherto the world's longest-reigning monarch. In Chookiat Panaspornprasit's view, 2016 was a year of "shock and unpredictability" for Thailand, largely due to King Bhumibol's passing but also because there was no clear sign that democracy would be restored even after the national referendum held in August saw sixty-one per cent of the population vote in favour of the new draft constitution. In Panaspornprasit's opinion, "the military establishment in Thailand is still poised to hold on to power... Democratization in Thailand is therefore ... in indefinite transition".

Meanwhile the 12th Congress of the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party was held in January 2016, where former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung failed to secure the post of General Secretary despite his best efforts. Instead, Dung was outmanoeuvred by his rival Nguyen Phu Trong who was re-elected General Secretary. In his analysis of the long-term implications of the leadership transition, Alexander Vuying demonstrates that the influence of rent-seekers and conservatives in Vietnamese politics has decreased, while moderates and modernizers have become more powerful. In effect this means that the party-state will have to rely more on legitimacy to stay in power. Beyond politics, Phuong Nguyen relates in her review chapter that Vietnam is still searching for a new growth model after thirty years

of market-reforms, or *doi moi*. While Vietnam's leaders have achieved the main goal of turning the country into a "basic industrialized country", they are unsure of how to build a socialist-oriented market economy, which Phuong anticipates will be a major fault line in Vietnamese policymaking in the years to come.

In the words of Dennis Shoemith, "Timor-Leste in 2016 occupied a seriously ambivalent political space". This ambivalence has been brought about by the country's ongoing transition to a "consociational democracy" where the opposition agreed to effectively surrender its role in return for a share of government. Former Prime Minister and founding father Xanana Gusmão bears responsibility for this unique transition, maintaining his powerful influence over the country's politics. In 2016 Timor-Leste was also brought to the brink of a constitutional crisis due to the machinations of President Taur Matan Ruak, an opponent of Gusmão's, who unilaterally appointed the Vice Chief of Staff of the Defense Forces. Shoemith argues that Timor-Leste's new governance model has undermined an already underdeveloped party system, questioning its ability to survive the 2017 elections. Certainly, more change is in the offing for Timor-Leste.

Transitioned Models: Consolidation and Disruption

The year 2016 saw leaders of transitioned models in Indonesia and Myanmar consolidate their power. This process was not without its challenges. For Dirk Tomsa, 2016 was the year in which political outsider Joko "Jokowi" Widodo matured into his role as President of Indonesia and managed to consistently consolidate his power through a series of political manoeuvres. His efforts were disrupted, however, near the end of the year when his political opponents and Islamist hardliners like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) teamed up to demonstrate against Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), Jokowi's ally, who faced blasphemy charges. The demonstrations and Ahok's blasphemy trial were not only manifestations of the FPI's growing political clout but were reportedly sponsored by powerful political interests who sought to undermine Jokowi's position. The anxiety and uncertainty produced by the demonstrations have only been exacerbated by what Tomsa labels as Jokowi's failure to shape a consistent and coherent policy agenda.

Incoherence is echoed in Indonesia's foreign policy agenda. Using the Garuda as a metaphor to represent Indonesian foreign policy, Donald Weatherbee is lyrical in his appraisal that under Jokowi's leadership "the Garuda has been hovering, circling a more self-restricted flight zone while casting about for direction, still unsettled on a course". Taking the example of the Indonesia–China fisheries

confrontation in March 2016, Weatherbee maintains that there is no single voice speaking authoritatively from Jakarta to the world or providing a rational, cross-government foreign policy agenda, often provoking the question, “Who’s in charge?”

In Myanmar, the newly elected National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi spent the year slowly finding its footing. Ardeth Thawngmung and Gwen Robinson note that early signs were positive, with the NLD transforming its relationships with the military and the former ruling party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, into a workable dynamic with compromises on all sides. The NLD dropped charges for or released 235 political prisoners, broadened anti-corruption rules for officials, and increased agricultural loans to farmers, amongst other progressive measures. In a surprise move, the two NLD-dominated houses of parliament passed a bill appointing Aung San Suu Kyi as State Counsellor, averting constitutional restrictions that prevent her from assuming the Presidency. By holding the two portfolios of State Counsellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, a post that carries with it membership of the National Defense and Security Council, Suu Kyi has established herself as the most powerful member of the NLD government.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to democratic consolidation in Myanmar is the Tatmadaw’s (Myanmar Armed Forces) entrenched role in the political life of the country, with its constitutionally mandated right to occupy twenty-five per cent of seats in the national and regional parliaments. Maung Aung Myoe makes it clear that Myanmar does not enjoy democratic civil–military relations, but the Tatmadaw’s position has been tempered by a gentle shift from direct involvement in state administration to a more consultative role. Instead of challenging constitutional limits, the NLD is attempting to reduce the Tatmadaw’s influence by bypassing it in the policy process. On the whole, Myoe believes that the NLD and the Tatmadaw are “learning to live with each other”.

Perhaps the most disruptive transition of 2016 occurred in the Philippines, which, contrary to earlier expectations, witnessed the presidential election of maverick political outsider Rodrigo Duterte, with 16.6 million out of the 44 million votes cast. Aries Arugay describes the circumstances surrounding his election thus: “Coming from Mindanao, Duterte’s unprecedented triumph is an important rebuke of the elites who have dominated politics for decades.” Not known for mincing his words, Duterte’s populist sentiments and hard-line policies have caused ripples within the Philippines and across the region. Within his first hundred days in office, Duterte had implemented a war on drugs which resulted in more than three thousand deaths, sparking condemnation from international human rights groups. In Arugay’s assessment, Duterte has delivered on his campaign promise

of “Change is coming!”, proving that actual change can occur within a year. Even so, Duterte’s promises to make constitutional amendments aimed at transforming the Philippines into a federal republic could end up polarizing the country, leading to political instability and a lost chance to create meaningful change.

State–Centre Relations

Leadership transitions and resulting tensions have also made an impact on the ability of national governments to navigate state–centre relations, particularly in the Philippines, Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Reflecting the uncertainty introduced by President Duterte’s election, Joseph Franco provides insight into the current situation in Mindanao and the new President’s approach to the challenges of secessionism and terrorism in that region. In a positive development, Duterte’s government appears to have adopted former President Aquino’s peace paradigm in relation to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. His government has been concurrently pursuing a security-centric strategy to defeat terrorists in Mindanao. Even so, in Franco’s estimation, Duterte’s policies towards terrorist groups can be characterized as ambivalent at best, and generally volatile. Of particular concern to regional stability is the Basilan-based faction of the Abu Sayyaf extremist group in Mindanao that has pledged allegiance to ISIS, providing a base from which ISIS can operate in the region. Duterte’s conflicting messages could exacerbate the security situation in Mindanao, with regional implications.

Similarly, Myanmar’s peace initiative under the NLD government has come to naught. Fighting between the Tatmadaw and armed ethnic groups in Shan and Kachin states intensified towards the latter half of the year, and in October the Tatmadaw responded aggressively to a series of attacks on police units in Rakhine state. Thawngmung and Robinson recount that widespread reports of human rights abuses by the military fuelled questions about Aung San Suu Kyi’s lack of control over the army. The unabating conflict in these areas provides one explanation for the Tatmadaw’s lasting prominence in the political life of Myanmar.

Thailand and Malaysia offer less violent examples of state–centre relations. Porphant Ouyyanont provides a historical analysis of Thailand’s northeast region and how it evolved to become a thorn in the ruling military government’s side with its overwhelming support for Thaksin Shinawatra and political parties associated with the former prime minister. Ouyyanont points to the development of a unique northeastern identity, separate from the dominant and cohesive Thai identity propagated by the government, based on the region’s distinct historical

development, ethnic makeup, religion, social structure, and economy. The region's relative poverty and the superior attitude which colours the Bangkok elite's interactions with it have also served to aggravate challenges in state–centre relations.

In the case of Malaysia, Neilson Ilan Mersat uses political developments in the state of Sarawak to illustrate how a strong, charismatic Chief Minister can negotiate the boundaries of state power within a federal system. According to Ilan Mersat, “When Adenan Satem took over from Taib Mahmud as the new Chief Minister in early 2014, centre–state relations changed and business as usual ended.” Through his willingness to work unceasingly to advance the interests of the state by negotiating with the opposition, advocating for change in the education system, repeatedly pushing for an increase in the state's share of oil and gas royalties, and promoting the use of English in Sarawak, Adenan Satem managed to increase his state's leverage vis-à-vis a federal government mired in a corruption scandal. Adenan Satem's untimely death in early 2017, post the writing of this chapter, has cast doubt on the hopeful expectation that “the voice of Sarawak and its state interests will grow louder in Malaysia”.

The Road to 2017

The authors of this volume have shown that the dynamics of disruption characterized Southeast Asian politics in 2016, setting the stage for even greater unpredictability in 2017. As leaders and governments across the region consolidate power and undertake reform in 2017, their interactions with international forces will test their political dexterity and the region's unity. States will need to engineer unilateral and multilateral strategies to manage growing Chinese assertiveness coupled with the possibility of an ambivalent U.S. presence in the region under a Donald Trump presidency. The United States' withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement will have negative ramifications, particularly in countries like Vietnam and Brunei where the prospect of participating in the TPP had driven economic reform. The threat of violence from extremist groups will not diminish, while the status of the Rohingya will continue to be a question mark.

There is still cause for optimism. ASEAN will commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of its establishment in 2017 with much to celebrate as it perseveres in providing a platform for regional engagement. Regional states will unceasingly pursue economic integration through the Asian Economic Community and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Community. Governments will have more opportunity to harness the power of disruptive technologies to boost domestic economies if they introduce policies to soften any adverse social consequences.

With the prospect of elections in 2017–18, the leaders of Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Timor-Leste will be obliged to steady their respective ships. And it is hoped that in the midst of international anxiety, Southeast Asia in 2017 will be a region of peace, if not stability.

Note

1. *Southeast Asian Affairs 2017* reflects the speed and breadth of these two sources of change. Authors were required to submit their chapters for editing and preparation for publishing in early December 2016 with little scope to revise them to take into consideration new changes or the unfolding consequences of changes identified. ISEAS would like to thank the authors and the readers for their appreciation of this unavoidable situation.

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