

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Asian Military Evolutions: Civil-Military Relations in Asia.* Edited by Alan Chong and Nicole Jenne. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2023. Hardcover: 354pp.**

Over the last 60 years, civil-military relations have been a significant focus in studies of the politics of the “Global South”, particularly in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in Asia—notably Pakistan and South Korea—where the armed forces have played prominent political roles. In their extensive Introduction to *Asian Military Evolutions*, editors Alan Chong and Nicole Jenne note that scholars interested in civil-military relations initially employed a “control, effectiveness and efficiency” framework (p. 3). This approach centred on exploring how civilian politicians can constrain the military in order to defend or promote democracy. Chong and Jenne describe this as “a Western approach to civil-military relations that ignores the many hybridized perspectives that do not necessarily condemn the militarization of society as an unmitigated evil” (p. 5). Subsequent scholarship introduced “vital variation” (p. 11) by examining the role played by militaries in the Global South in terms of national development—or, in the editors’ words, their role in “salvation amid the turbulence of modernization” (p. 9). This approach was particularly relevant to Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Myanmar.

However, earlier analytical frameworks that posited the military’s political role as the antithesis of liberal democracy persisted. At the turn of the twenty-first century, amid widespread Western expectations that the “end of history” would culminate in the global triumph of liberal democracy, some scholars prematurely anticipated “the ultimate decline” of political influence for Asian militaries (p. 11). However, Chong and Jenne explore more recent analyses

that argue that militaries remain significant economic actors and that “democratization is not the only political game domestically” (p. 13). They note that such assessments of contemporary Asia show that there is “a permanent window of opportunity for the military to anchor itself into a domestic role equal or greater to the one aspired to by civilians” (p. 15). Furthermore, they assert that, since the end of the Cold War, Asian armed forces have expanded their political activities beyond the domestic sphere through engagement in regional and international defence diplomacy and in “Military Operations Other Than War” (MOOTW).

Having established a focus on the evolution of Asian militaries, Chong and Jenne set various research questions for the authors who wrote the 14 national case studies from Southeast, Northeast and South Asia for this volume. Instead of more traditional matters—such as colonial legacies on civil-military relations and how Asia’s armed forces perceive their own role in promoting developmental goals—these questions focus on whether Asian civil-military relations are “a strength in handling defence diplomacy” (p. 18) and how the military and civilian dimensions of defence diplomacy operate in practice. However, most contributors to the book seem to view these questions as having limited importance for their own case studies, and only some of the chapters engage with them. The main exceptions are the chapters on Bangladesh and Malaysia. Additionally, Jenne’s own chapter—the only one that adopts a supranational perspective—provides a useful assessment of Southeast Asian involvement in international peacekeeping. She concludes, among other things, that the development of peacekeeping activities could potentially give some of Southeast Asia’s militaries a role in designing ASEAN’s Political-Security Community and executing its policies (p. 189).

The general lack of engagement with defence diplomacy does not detract from the value of this volume’s national case studies. Multi-author volumes often suffer from disparate quality between chapters, but those included in *Asian Military Evolutions* are all well-grounded and provide persuasive assessments of the continuing evolution of civil-military relations across Asia. This reviewer was drawn particularly to some of the thought-provoking chapters on Southeast Asia. Because of the nature of Singapore’s political system, Jun Yan Chang and Shu Huang Ho argue that a “civil-military gap” (p. 103) does not exist in the city-state. Alexander Vuving points to the “mutual embeddedness” (p. 145) of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the People’s Army of Vietnam. He credibly contends

that “Vietnam’s military will likely be the last Leninist bulwark” (p. 144) in the country.

Some of the non-Southeast Asian chapters also make crucial points. James Char, for instance, focuses on how Chinese President Xi Jinping has asserted his control over the People’s Liberation Army and concludes that this amassing of power could lead to “insurmountable” challenges in civil-military relations for Xi’s successor (p. 219). Il Wool Lee and Alan Chong argue that South Korea is a “national security state” in which “the disguised features of authoritarian continuity” impede “any reform of civil-military relations” (p. 265).

While the book’s coverage of important national case studies across Asia is quite comprehensive, chapters on Cambodia, Pakistan and Timor-Leste might have been useful considering the liveliness of civil-military relations in those countries, but this is a minor quibble. The editors have successfully compiled a substantial collection of original, well-written and tightly argued case studies.

The editors draw an important conclusion from these chapters: there is “an Asian preference for civil-military fusion to power national development” (p. 344). However, whether this is a substantial, distinct Asian paradigm is less clear. The ambiguity is partly because of the expansiveness of the volume’s case studies, which examine not just Southeast Asia but also Northeast Asia and parts of South Asia. As a result, the extreme diversity of national experiences—stemming from what Chong and Jenne refer to as “the thickness of local contexts” (p. 12)—often stands out more than the commonalities between the countries. Even within Southeast Asia, the differences in civil-military relations between countries are so broad that identifying strong similarities is challenging. Indeed, patterns of civil-military relations in Asian states sometimes seem to have less in common with each other than with those of countries from different regions. Nonetheless, the editors’ approach is sufficiently stimulating, and the individual chapters are sufficiently strong, to make *Asian Military Evolutions* valuable to students, scholars and policy practitioners interested in contemporary civil-military relations across the broad region.

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