

BOOK REVIEWS

***ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia.* By Michael Leifer.** London and New York: Routledge, 1989. 198 pp. ISBN 0-415-01008-X.

The publication of Dr Michael Leifer's book *ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia* is timely. With the Cambodian conflict expected to end later this year, the question which is being asked now is: Can the six-member states of ASEAN continue to maintain their unity? This question has been openly debated in newspaper articles and in academic forums. To the inquisitive reader searching for an answer to this question, Dr Leifer's book can offer some help. However, it does not pretend to provide a definitive answer. The reader can come to a considered opinion on this question for himself. He will be forgiven if after reading Chapters Two and Three he is less than sanguine about the prospect of ASEAN displaying the same kind of unity of purpose after Cambodia. In these chapters, Dr Leifer documents the two major reasons for the dismal record of ASEAN co-operation which may continue to dog this regional group in the future.

The first reason is that the ASEAN member states are unwilling to submerge their national interests for the sake of the larger interests of the group. Compounding this problem are the historical bilateral differences among member states such as the dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines over Sabah, the difficulties between Malaysia and Thailand along their common border, and the estrangement between Singapore and Malaysia after separation. The second reason is that the ASEAN members hold differing strategic perspectives. On the Cambodian conflict, for example, Indonesia and Malaysia have tended to view China as the main

threat to the security of the Southeast Asian countries whereas Thailand and Singapore feel that Vietnam is the real threat to ASEAN. This explains why ASEAN failed to take a firm stand against Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia in the initial years. ASEAN started to project a greater sense of unity after Indonesia submerged its strategic interests in favour of Thailand's, partly to preserve unity and partly because the latter's security was seriously threatened by the presence of Vietnamese troops in neighbouring Cambodia.

The making of ASEAN unity on Cambodia is well discussed by Dr Leifer in Chapter Four. Though there was a genuine desire on the part of the other ASEAN members to help Thailand ward off the Vietnamese military threat, it did not stop Jakarta from pursuing its own initiatives with Hanoi to help bring an early end to the conflict. Dr Leifer continues to discuss this theme in Chapter Five which is aptly titled "The Elusiveness of Regional Security". He cites the furore in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei over Singapore's invitation to Israeli President Chaim Herzog to visit the Republic as an example to illustrate his argument that, despite years of co-operation on Cambodia, the ASEAN members continue to pursue their own independent foreign policies, which might at times hurt the sensitivities of fellow members.

Despite this, Dr Leifer is sanguine about ASEAN's future. He says that the most that can be expected is the enhancement of members' security through political co-operation. And if this habit of co-operation is sustained in the full understanding of its limited but practical merits by succeeding generations of political leadership, then ASEAN should pass its third decade as a going concern. Dr Leifer is skeptical about economic co-operation among the ASEAN countries. Perhaps he has in mind the kind of economic integration that the European Community is undergoing. If so, he is right in saying that it offers limited promise. But ASEAN was never intended to follow the same direction as the EC because the economies of the ASEAN members are so different and, moreover, they are at different stages of development. Recent developments have shown that the six ASEAN countries are prepared to co-operate to project unity in the international arena on economic issues. This is based on the simple logic that unity is strength. Individually, the ASEAN members lack the clout to take on the big economic boys. But collectively, ASEAN, which has a combined population of more than 250 million and is rich in natural resources, can command the bargaining strength *vis-à-vis* the economically more powerful countries or groups of countries. This is the direction that Malaysia would like ASEAN to take after Cambodia, as suggested by Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his Singapore Lecture in December 1988.

A much underestimated factor, which Dr Leifer does not fully address, is the kind of impact that the ASEAN diplomatic success in the last decade has had on member-states. Dr Leifer acknowledges that ASEAN's standing in the international community has been greatly enhanced as a result of successfully mobilizing diplomatic opposition to Vietnam at the United Nations and other international forums. The best compliment for ASEAN, in fact, comes from the Soviet Union. While in the past it had derided ASEAN for being a tool of U.S. imperialism, the Soviet Union now seeks to be one of ASEAN's dialogue partners. Surely, there are benefits that can accrue to member-states with the enhancement of ASEAN's status in the world community. Early in 1989, Malaysia won a non-permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council, while Singapore secured a place on the important U.N. Committee on Contributions. While these could have been due to the excellent lobbying efforts made by the two countries, one cannot dismiss the proposition that their diplomatic successes owe something to the respect other countries have for ASEAN and its constituent members. If ASEAN is reckoned to be more than just a vehicle for enhancing members' security through political co-operation, it would be foolish of them to allow ASEAN to revert to the pre-Cambodian conflict working arrangements through neglect or members' preoccupation with other ventures such as Thailand's proposed pursuit of the *Suwanabhum* or Golden Peninsula concept.

Though Dr Leifer has not explored such ideas here, he has written an immensely informative book on ASEAN's perception of security in Southeast Asia, particularly on the arguments that went into the making of ASEAN's stand on Cambodia. Unfortunately, the book may not appeal to the general reader because of the ponderous language.

MIKE YEONG
Straits Times
Singapore

Regime Change in the Philippines: The Legitimation of the Aquino Government. Edited by Mark Turner. Political and Social Change Monograph 7. Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1987. Bibliography, Index, vii, 154 pp. ISBN 0-7315-0140-3

In reviewing a book concerning contemporary political affairs eighteen months after the book is published, it would be somewhat unfair to the