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# **PART II**

# **Domestic Politics and**

# **Foreign Policies**

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# Introduction to Part II

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Michael Leifer was better known as a scholar of international relations of Southeast Asia rather than of comparative politics. However, an examination of his publications shows that he was outstanding in both fields. In fact, good regional studies should be based on an adequate understanding of the countries in the region. It was, therefore, not surprising to discover that Leifer had conducted research on Southeast Asia's countries. The number of such studies is comparable to his international relations of the region. Nevertheless, due to his strong interest in international relations, his country studies are also often connected with foreign policy studies of the individual country.

Despite the fact that Leifer wrote a doctoral thesis on Zionism and Palestine in the British policy, he was able to make himself a Southeast Asianist. This was related to his first teaching appointment at Adelaide University in Australia where he was persuaded to focus on Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps as a Jew he was interested in the survival of Israel, which was a new state. In Southeast Asia there were plenty of such states whose survival were then in question: Cambodia, Singapore, and Malaysia can be considered as new and fragile states. Another additional factor for his selection of Malaysia and Singapore

was probably due to his British background as both countries are ex-colonies of the United Kingdom. Since Malaysia and Singapore are in close proximity with Indonesia and there have been intensive interaction, Leifer was also drawn into this nation of thousand islands.

### **Focusing on Southeast Asia**

Leifer's first country study on Southeast Asia was on Cambodia, which was published in the *Pacific Affairs* in 1961. Cambodia was not only the earliest country that Leifer wrote about but was also the subject of the largest number of papers that he produced. He even published a book entitled *Cambodia: The Search for Security* in 1967. Many of his works on regional order and international politics were focused on this country.

Leifer also worked on Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore in the early 1960s. His earliest published works on Malaysian politics was in 1964, and he first wrote on Singapore politics in the same year. He kept up his interest in these two countries, especially Singapore, on which he published his last foreign policy book in 2000, a year before he passed away.

Not long after his research on Malaysia and Singapore, he was also drawn into the studies of Indonesian politics and foreign policy. He published his first article in 1965 on the Confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia. In 1978, he produced a book on the Straits of Malacca, dealing with the positions of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. He became very interested in Indonesia and eventually published a book on Indonesia's foreign policy (1981).

Leifer also studied other Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Brunei, the Philippines, and Thailand, but on these four countries, his publications were fewer and not as in-depth compared to those on Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia.

### **General Studies**

In fact, his in-depth and systematic treatment of Southeast Asian domestic politics and foreign policies was reflected in his *Dictionary of Southeast Asian Politics* (1995, 1st ed.). It is comprehensive and very useful for students of Southeast Asian politics and foreign policy. By the time he passed away, the book had gone into third edition.

In his early life as an academic Leifer published two general books. The first was *The Dilemmas of Statehood in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, 1972), which reflected his concern with new states and their problems. The survival of these new states was his major concern. This was his first book on Southeast Asian politics and a useful introduction to the subject. Unfortunately, this book was not widely circulated. In 1974, he produced another general book entitled *Foreign Relations of New States* (Victoria: Longman Australia, 1974). The general impression was that it was a continuation of his first book, but in it he examined their foreign relations rather than domestic politics. Unlike his first book, this book was well distributed and received tremendous attention. Many were impressed by his analysis of the problems in this region and adopted the book for courses on international politics of Southeast Asia.

## Themes and Concepts

In examining Leifer's publications, both books and journal articles, one can easily notice a number of common themes running across his studies. In the field of comparative politics and foreign relations, his major concern was with political stability, institutionalization, succession, civil society, and democracy. He also paid attention to ethnicity and religion, which played an important role in both domestic politics and foreign policy. When dealing with foreign policy, he was particularly interested in the relationships between domestic politics and foreign policy, characteristics of foreign policy, and foreign relations with neighbouring states and major powers.

As Southeast Asian states were mainly new, and many were weak, Leifer focused on the vulnerabilities and limitations of their foreign policy. In fact, he developed the concepts of vulnerability when dealing with Singapore and Vietnam, and the concept of engagement, with Indonesia. His article on Indonesia–China relations details the special nature and limit of the engagement concept, highlighting both unilateral and multilateral engagements. However, he did not come upfront and develop them into theories of foreign policy.

When Leifer dealt with domestic politics, he used concepts in comparative politics. For instance, when examining Indonesia, he discussed the democratic system and civil society even though his theoretical underpinning was not clearly spelt out in many of his

articles as he was not particularly interested in the development of theories. Nevertheless, he addressed conceptual issues in some of his articles. For instance, he wrote a piece on the civil society with special reference to Indonesia, explaining the difficulty in applying this Western concept; another piece was on the “linkage politics” between Islam and Indonesian foreign policy without explicitly using that term.

It may be argued that Leifer was not a “theory-builder” in the American political science/international relations tradition. He was more interested in political and diplomatic analysis rather than abstract conceptualization. No doubt, he had his theoretical underpinnings but he seldom made them explicit in his articles. Some of his writings read like international history or diplomatic history. Because of this tendency, Leifer’s works have much less appeal to American scholars steeped in international relations and foreign policy theory. Nevertheless, those who are interested in diplomatic history would appreciate his works.

There is no doubt Leifer had a deep appreciation of both domestic politics and foreign policies of many Southeast Asian countries. He was also very perceptive in his analysis. However, his seemingly elliptical writing style coupled with the absence of useful sub-headings in his long articles do make reading him a heavy-going experience at times.<sup>2</sup>

### **Individual Country Analysis**

In analysing the politics of Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, he addressed the issue of institutionalization and argued that this was the root of political stability. Succession became a problem because of weak institutionalization. There were no clear rules on political succession and on the transfer of political power in many Southeast Asian countries. This was particularly problematic in Cambodia and Indonesia, resulting in political instability, if not chaos. However, Malaysia and Singapore appeared to have stronger institutionalization than Cambodia and Indonesia, and hence were more stable than Cambodia and Indonesia.

However, these four countries had problems with civil society and democracy. Leifer noted that the concepts of Western liberal democracy and civil society could not be literally applied to Southeast Asian countries as these states had different histories and political cultures. Leifer advocated that to understand the politics of Southeast Asian countries, an in-depth understanding of the countries’ history and

society was crucial. Multi-ethnicity and ethno-nationalism were often sources of conflict. Ethnicity and religion, together with ideology, were also reflected in the foreign policy of Southeast Asian countries.

Indonesia, for instance, has a large Muslim population but, due to the plurality of the Muslim population and the dominance of liberal Muslims in the leadership, Islam was not clearly reflected in the conduct of Indonesia's foreign policy, at least up to the period of Soeharto. However, Leifer was aware of the importance of Islam and noted that it gradually showed in the leaders' decision-making process in Indonesia's foreign policy.

Leifer noted that Indonesia, being the largest country in Southeast Asia, had always harboured the desire of regional entitlement to the leadership role. However, due to its internal weaknesses, this dream could not be entirely realized. Before the 1997–98 economic crisis, it appeared to have been leading ASEAN. But it was problematic for Indonesia. The concept of "regional entitlement", as Leifer called it, became more problematic after the fall of Soeharto. Examining Leifer's writings on Indonesia's foreign relations, this concept and political culture (Islam) were always present.

On the other hand, he focused on different aspects when writing about Singapore. He often focused on the problems posed by vulnerability and the nature of exceptionalism. Leifer argued that pragmatism had become the basis of Singapore's foreign policy. Conscious of its vulnerability, Singapore was eager to build its own defence and to have the presence of major external powers. He was particularly interested in Lee Kuan Yew's role in, and his impact on, Singapore's domestic politics and foreign policy. He gave credit when it was due and offered criticism when it was needed.

On Malaysia, Leifer noted that the role of Islam was often reflected in the conduct of its foreign policy, and it became more obvious during the latter period of Mahathir's tenure as prime minister. Sectarian conflict in the Middle-East had often become part of Malaysian domestic politics. This was different from Soeharto's Indonesia which suppressed political Islam. Anti-Semitism had become a characteristic of Malaysia's foreign policy and Leifer called it "anti-Semitism without Jews", referring to Malaysia's "anti-Semitism" without the presence of a Jewish community in the country. This anti-Semitism policy was meant to serve Mahathir's domestic politics.

When analyzing Cambodia, Leifer focused on its problems of vulnerability and the hostile external environment for the survival of

an independent Cambodia. He noted that Cambodia's foreign policy tried to maintain neutrality in the conflict between neighbouring states. Sihanouk succeeded temporarily but he lost eventually. The sovereignty of Cambodia was later lost to Vietnam as it became the victim of international politics before it became "independent" again.

Leifer paid special attention to the role of strong leaders. Much were written about Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir, Soeharto, and Sihanouk. When analysing Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Cambodia, Leifer often focused on these leaders who had heavily influenced, if not determined, the politics and policy of their countries.

### **A New Type of "Area Specialist"?**

Leifer was different from the traditional area specialist who works on one country and extensively uses the local language source. Leifer had a reading knowledge of Malay/Indonesian, but he did not extensively use the Malay/Indonesian sources in his writings. Nevertheless, he understood the local situation well and conducted fieldwork regularly. He had many graduate students who worked on or in these countries. His intensive interactions with them contributed to his deeper understanding of Southeast Asia.

Also, traditional area specialists focus on mainly one country. Unlike them, Leifer expanded his specialties to at least four Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. This was perhaps one of the reasons why he never claimed any Southeast Asian country in his studies as "his country of specialty". He treated many Southeast Asian countries as an object of his studies and attempted to give a more balanced picture. He was detached and not emotionally involved in any Southeast Asian country; this was reflected in his sober writings.

His in-depth understanding of these individual countries provided the basis for his studies in international relations and comparative politics of the region. He became aware of the similarities and differences of many Southeast Asian countries and discussed the issues in the regional rather than the country's perspective.

Leifer was not accepted by area specialists as one of them. A leading Indonesian historian noted to me that Leifer was not a historian on Indonesia because he did not use Indonesian sources. Leifer never claimed that he was a historian of any country. In fact, he studied political science at the London School of Economy (LSE) and was



never trained as a traditional “area specialist” which requires a mastery of vernacular languages. But it is difficult to deny that he was a specialist on the region of Southeast Asia. He read Western literature widely and conducted interviews locally. He attempted to understand the general patterns of the country and the region. He was not concerned with unique facts or detailed description of a particular country but was able to highlight major characteristics of a political system or an international system without losing sight in history.

His writings on Indonesian nationalism and foreign policy can be used as an illustration. In his chapter on Indonesian nationalism in the book *Asian Nationalism* (Routledge, 2000), he examined the “temper” of nationalism, the changing characters of this movement and its changing functions. He did not present many new historical facts but presented Indonesian nationalism in a new light. It throws light on the studies of Asian nationalism in general and Indonesian nationalism in particular, including the meaning and function of nationalism.

Leifer’s book, *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy* (Allen & Unwin, 1983), presented no theory, but a concise diplomatic history of Indonesia. Unlike American-trained scholars who wrote on foreign policy of Indonesia, who often applied the framework of foreign policy analysis, Leifer painstakingly looked at the long process of diplomacy from independence to the beginning of the Soeharto period. He identified Indonesian foreign policy behaviour, which was concerned with “regional entitlement” to the leadership role, a major characteristic of Indonesian foreign policy across various periods. Nevertheless, when Leifer discussed the interactions between Islam and foreign policy, he abandoned the diplomatic history approach. He focused on the conflict between secular nationalism and Islam, highlighting their unique manifestation in Indonesia’s foreign policy during various periods.

Leifer tried to put himself in the shoes of Southeast Asians with his careful and sharp observations and analyses of the Southeast Asian scene. He was critical of certain policies and practices by Southeast Asian governments, but did not go out of his way to deplore and condemn them. Leifer was a realist; he tended to see things in its reality and was concerned with power relationships. He was also interested in political order and stability. He could see a merit in the status quo, while others would have been more inclined to challenge.

When Leifer passed away, the world and Southeast Asia were undergoing rapid changes. Terrorism was on the rise, and then the

September 11 incident occurred. Leifer's publications do not foresee this development and hence do not address the issue, especially its impact on Southeast Asian politics and foreign policy. Nevertheless, Leifer did discuss Islam in some of his writings and noted the increasing importance of this religion as a significant political force. He had noticed this when dealing with Indonesia and warned his readers not to overlook this issue. Regardless of the gap in his writings on the new development, Leifer's works are still useful in providing insights on Southeast Asia prior to and beyond September 2001. His contribution to the Southeast Asian studies should be recognized. Future generations of scholars who would like to study Southeast Asia's international relations and domestic politics will need to refer to his work to better understand Southeast Asia.

## Notes

1. Michael Yahuda, "Obituary", *The London School of Economics and Political Science News and Views* 25, no. 1 (23 April 2001).
2. For instance, the following long articles do not have sub-headings: "Cambodia and Her Neighbours" (1962, 14 pages); "Politics in Singapore: The First Term of People's Action Party" (1964, 17 pages); "Singapore in Malaysia: The Politics of Federation" (1965, 17 pages); "The Islamic Factor in Indonesia's Foreign Policy: A Case of Functional Ambiguity" (1983, 19 pages); "Brunei: Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy" (1986, 11 pages); "Uncertainty in Indonesia" (1992, 20 pages).