

***The Changing Dynamics of Southeast Asian Politics.* By Jörn Dosch.
Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2007. Hardcover: 269pp.**

Jörn Dosch, a reader at the University of Leeds and frequent visitor to Southeast Asia, declares in the opening sentences of his publication that Southeast Asia is usually written about from either the point of view of domestic politics or from the standpoint of the region's international relations. Dosch's volume seeks to "bring these two perspectives together in an attempt to arrive at a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the region's political dynamics" (p. ix). In order to achieve this the author pursues the following through individual chapters: the impact of democracy (in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand) on foreign policy formation; terrorism and separatist conflict; cooperation in the Mekong; decentralization and democratization in Cambodia; and regionalism in ASEAN and wider East Asia.

There are several themes that are worth entering into a fuller discussion with. First, Dosch's treatment of democracy in Southeast Asia quite rightly judges that political change in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand has made a "far reaching impact" on the way foreign policy is constructed (in short, these governments must now consult internal voices [p. 66]). The aforementioned chapter on Cambodia is entitled "Decentralizing Cambodia: The International Hijacking of National Politics", which alerts the reader to the central finding of this section that the West/OECD has externally driven what Dosch dubs a "D&D program" (decentralization and democratization) which is "not rooted" in Cambodian society: "democracy in Cambodia has to be seen as the project of the international donor community" (p. 160). (Earlier the author has posited that the "non-democratic" states of Southeast Asia are Burma, Laos and Vietnam, [p. 15].). This raises the question as to how Dosch might classify all the various states of Southeast Asia, and whether the author has considered the issue of a continuum of political practice that exists in Southeast Asia between the polar opposites of authoritarian and democratic rule. For a book that aims to square domestic politics with international politics, this volume gives the impression that democratization in Southeast Asia (where it exists) is one fundamentally driven by external actors. Where this happens, and returning to Dosch's example of Cambodia, externally planted versions of democratic development are likely to enjoy little more than shallow legitimacy. However, strong domestic demands for political change have been seen in several Southeast Asian countries, resulting in relatively more durable (but still fragile) representative systems. The point might be made more forcefully and

systematically that there are limits to what the international community can realistically achieve on this front without a receptive domestic audience, and indeed, that political change, where it occurs, is far from dependent on Western/OECD cajoling.

Second, the author takes issue with what he terms the “Al-Qaidaization” of Southeast Asia, and by this he means the conflation of local separatist conflicts with the problem of international Islamic terrorism. Dosch makes the apposite point that conflicts in southern Thailand, southern Philippines and Aceh are the result of local grievances that stretch all the way back to colonial times, and offers sensible explanations in each case. Dosch also claims that “discussion of the insurgency hotspots in Southeast Asia under the header of the global ‘war on terror’ has emerged as a popular discourse” (p. 14). It has to be asked just how “popular” this discourse is. For example, none of the leading separatist groups in the case study regions selected currently appear on the U.S. State Department’s list of international terrorist entities — something not noted in Dosch’s references to U.S. foreign policy. Dosch does point to a handful of scholars who have made explicit connections between the aforementioned conflicts and al-Qaida, but is there really an enormous groundswell of opinion that confuses the two? Furthermore, the author has also set aside the important cases of Papua and East Timor, two cases, taken together with Aceh, that explain official and public anxiety in Indonesia. There is a wider discussion to be had on overlapping themes of separatism and sub-state violence in Southeast Asia.

Third, Dosch comes across as a bit of a critic of ASEAN’s record, making (perhaps naturally for someone based in Europe) direct comparisons to the European Union. Dosch judges that “ASEAN has barked on many occasions knowing that it cannot bite” (p. 167). Dosch further claims that ASEAN has been found wanting not just in accordance with the expectations of outside observers, but in accordance with the stated aims of ASEAN and its member-states. Here one should tread carefully about taking the rhetoric that has accompanied ASEAN from its inception with its true underlying aims. ASEAN’s charter, for example, speaks of social and economic cooperation and other lofty goals without explicit mention of its real intended purposes — foreign policy coordination and the codification of non-interference would become apparent at a later time. Dosch offers a list of issues that show ASEAN’s “limits”, namely failures of co-operation over the economic crisis, the haze, avian flu, terrorism, changing power relativities in the Asia Pacific, South China Sea and tensions between member-states due to unresolved territorial

issues (p. 167) as well as ASEAN's inability to play a mediating role in separatist conflicts (p. 210). Is the picture really as grim as it is painted here? It is true that ASEAN failed to provide solutions to the financial crisis, but raw economic growth figures may obscure for some the fact that ASEAN member-states are still largely developing countries (Singapore being the major exception) and that the region simply lacked the financial wherewithal to cope. ASEAN has also been a substantial mechanism for member-states to air differences on haze and terrorism issues, while the headline grabbing Avian Flu is hardly a leading health issue at the moment (especially when stacked up against a host of more "mundane" diseases in Southeast Asia that actually claim many lives). ASEAN has played a substantial role in maintaining the status quo in the South China Sea issue (albeit without full resolution), and individual ASEAN member-states have mediated separatist problems. Tensions between ASEAN states continue to flare over a host of bilateral issues, including territorial differences, as they have since ASEAN's inception, yet it is remarkable how carefully ASEAN countries have been able to manage these differences since 1967. There is no territorial dispute within ASEAN that threatens to cause unmanageable tension that might result in war and/or a forced territorial grab. These are not inconsiderable achievements.

These points of discussion are testament the tremendous value of Dosch's thought provoking volume. This book is well written and tightly argued. This volume makes a strong attempt to bridge understandings of domestic and international politics. Given that the two cannot be understood in isolation from each other, Dosch points to exactly the right direction in which to understand dynamics in Southeast Asia. Dosch's volume does not exhaust the discussion on macro-political trends in Southeast Asia by any means, but his careful selection of themes underpins a text that is rich in empirical research and analysis.