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## **Rebellions, Stability and Defense Spending in Southeast Asia**

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## Review Article

### Rebellions, Stability and Defense Spending in Southeast Asia

LYDIA N. YU-JOSE

GOVERNMENTS AND REBELLIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. Edited by Chandran Jeshurun. Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985. xiii, 288 pages.

DURABLE STABILITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. Edited by Kusuma Snitwongse and Sukhumbhand Paribatra. Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987. xiii, 237 pages.

DEFENSE SPENDING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. Edited by Chin Kin Wah. Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987. ix, 326 pages.

The comparative approach is a demanding task, especially when attempted by a scholar working by himself. When done through a collaborative effort, however, it becomes more manageable.

Three books from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) Regional Studies Programme (RSSP) may be considered as an attempt towards a comparative analysis of security issues in Southeast Asia, in spite of a conspicuous absence of an explicit claim to this endeavor.

All three books —*Governments and Rebellions in Southeast Asia* (1985), *Durable Stability in Southeast Asia* (1987), and *Defense Spending in Southeast Asia* (1987)— follow a uniform format: each has two parts, the first one consisting of chapters that address the whole region; and the second containing chapters that discuss each of the countries in the region. The country studies are, however, so varied in approach and focus, that it would not do them justice to lump all of them in a general brief summary. On the other hand, to present a brief summary of each would be beyond the nature of this review article.

There is, however, one chapter that needs to be mentioned here, in order to call attention to the danger of international comparisons, when not done

within proper historical and cultural perspectives. This chapter is "The Philippines: Defense Expenditures, Threat Perception and the Role of the United States," one of the most interesting chapters in *Defense Spending in Southeast Asia*.

It traces the pattern of military expenditures in the Philippines from 1970, and compares their magnitude with that of other developing countries, including ASEAN. A cursory look at the comparative figures shows that the Philippines is the least militarized among Southeast Asian countries. For example, the ratio of Philippine military expenditures to central government expenditures for the period 1972 to 1986 was 15.9 percent, the third highest in ASEAN, but below the ASEAN average of 17.4 percent (due to the much higher ratios of Singapore, which was 21.1 percent, and Thailand, which was 19.9 percent). In terms of ratio of military men to the total country population, the ASEAN average of 7.0 percent was more than twice that of the Philippines.

Felipe B. Miranda and Ruben F. Ciron, authors of the chapter, hasten to point out that this international comparison is misleading, because the military build-up in the Philippines started from a historically low level. It is indeed wrong to compare the Philippines, which has the oldest democratic tradition and history of civilian rule in Southeast Asia, with countries that historically have been ruled by monarchs, or the military.

The figures for the Philippines from 1972 to 1985, if compared with the Philippines' own past records, show a sharp increase in military expenditure. The military manpower in the Philippine Armed Forces increased 2.54 times, and the ratio of military men to the national population practically doubled, from 1.61 percent to 2.92 per 100. Appropriations for the military increased at an annual average of 54 percent.

This chapter on the pattern of Philippine defense spending is one of the few chapters in all the three books that explicitly compares the Philippines with other developing countries, without losing sight of the historical and cultural differences between the countries compared, and thereby using comparative analysis effectively. The majority of the chapters treat only individual countries, without any attempt at comparison. The implicit aim of the series, however, is to present a comparative study of security issues in Southeast Asia. In the absence of an explicit comparison in most of the country studies, the comparing is done by the reader.

It is in the chapters of the first part that comparisons are more deliberately done, and generalizations about Southeast Asian problems of security are cautiously stated.

The first three chapters of *Governments and Rebellions in Asia* attempt to give a general view of postcolonial rebellion and counter-insurgency in the region, and to examine the failures and successes of the governments' responses to them. Karl D. Jackson, author of the first chapter, makes a survey of the region from 1945 to 1984, and advances the observation that factors such as GNP, corruption and socioeconomic inequality, commonly assumed as having a relationship with rebellion and counter-insurgency, are not actually significant. He proposes, rather, to look into leadership factors, local politics, attractiveness of the opposite ideology, and the insurgents' organization and access

to external support. Thus, in the case of the Philippines, he attributes the success of the Huk counter-insurgency in the 1950s to Magsaysay, that of minimizing the MNLF threat in the seventies to Marcos and the growing threat of the NPA in the eighties to the decline of Marcos' power.

While Guy J. Pauker's "comparative examination of failures and successes" of the Southeast Asian governments' responses to armed insurgency, explicitly claims to be comparative, and attempts a sophisticated categorization, it does not use the comparative approach in a way more convincing than that of Miranda and Ciron, or of the authors of other articles who proceed with the discussion in an unassuming way, making the comparison surface naturally. Pauker draws a continuum from a successful response to a failed response, placing Burma at the extreme end of failure, and Indonesia at the extreme end of success. Malaysia is then placed close to Indonesia, and the Philippines close to Burma. He then points out, correctly, that assessment of failure and success varies according to the historical period covered, as well as the given situation. The Philippines was successful in the fifties, but not in the eighties. The Indonesian Government is still facing some ethnic insurgencies in Irian and Timor, and Burma may not really be a failure, because it has not been overthrown.

In *Durable Stability in Southeast Asia*, attempts are made by scholars from Thailand, and one from Europe, to find what, in terms of security, Southeast Asian countries share. The Thai scholars, Chai-Anan Samudavanija and Sukhumbhand Paribatra, are cautiously optimistic about the prospects of durable stability in Southeast Asia. They predict that the problems of security will not improve considerably, but instead, there will be "more of the same." Incidentally, it is ironic that the Asian scholars, participating in an academic activity that endeavors to maximize input of Southeast Asians themselves, quote heavily from the work of a Western scholar, Lucian W. Pye (*Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimension of Authority*, Harvard University Press, 1985), who finds the quality shared by Asians not a common past, but a similarity of hopes for a future that is different from the past: a future of economic growth and of modernization. The quotation simply brings the discussion back to the point where the whole series of conferences on the Issues in Southeast Asian Security began, the point of the many-faceted problems of political and social development, which naturally is based on the countries' hope for a better future.

Pye's insight may also be used in a negative way. When the lack of a common past is emphasized, it is a statement of the lack of cohesiveness among Southeast Asian countries.

Although the other article, "Regional Organization and Stability in the ASEAN Regions," which is an assessment by a European scholar of ASEAN as a regional organization, does not quote Pye, it bases its modest assessment of ASEAN's success on the lack of cohesive factors within ASEAN: the member countries do not share a common historical past. In addition, they do not share the same objectives and the same sets of priorities. ASEAN is a congregation of states, each jealously protecting its sovereignty. If there is one quality that they have in common, it is their intense preoccupation with national security.

This does not say much about ASEAN cohesion, because preoccupation with national security is universal, and has been so since the beginning of states.

Chapter II, "Prospects for Stability in Southeast Asia: The Ethnic Barrier," compares ethnic problems in the region, and the governments' reactions to them. The comparison is made richer by parallelisms with European experiences. It vividly pictures the heterogeneity of Southeast Asia, yet remains inconclusive as to whether each of the governments can create unity amidst diversity.

The third book, *Defense Spending in Southeast Asia*, starts with a chapter hypothesizing that if defense spending is closely monitored and due allowance is given for other factors, it can be a useful gauge for the assessment of threat perception. Threat perception, in turn, is colored by the psychological make-up of the elite, the geopolitical environment, and ideological differences.

The second chapter, "Defense Expenditures of Asean States: The Regional Strategic Context," shows through figures that, with the exception of the Philippines, defense spending by ASEAN countries has increased since 1975. Classifying the role of the military into internal and external, it attributes the increase to the intensification of the external role of the military. This includes the reaction to the U.S. military withdrawal from SEA, Soviet political and military gains in the region, the Chinese military intervention in IndoChina, and the Vietnamese military occupation of Cambodia. Consequently, a peaceful environment in the region may be foreseen only, the author suggests, if Sino-Soviet relations are normalized, the Cambodian problem is solved, and the U.S. maintains a continued military presence.

If this is so, and if, as "Regional Organization and Stability in the ASEAN Region" (*Defense Spending*) observes, external threat like the Cambodian problem and the Chinese problem are what keep ASEAN together, then a peaceful environment in the region may give the death blow to ASEAN as an organization. Indeed peace is the ultimate goal and regional cooperation, at least in the Asian context, is only an instrument for its realization. No tears will be shed if ASEAN self-destructs after the attainment of peace; rather, laurels will be offered on its graveyard if peace comes through its efforts. However, ASEAN does not seem able to go beyond being a mere forum for the discussion of these external threats. Solutions still seem far away.

The third article, "Defense Spending in ASEAN: An Overview," examines the increase in defense spending from a different perspective. During the period 1973-83, the following pattern of defense spending in Southeast Asia may be observed: Indonesia spent the most on the military, but its rate of increase has been modest, and there was an actual decline in 1981-83. Malaysia and Indonesia had sharp expenditure increases in the 1979-81 period, but Malaysia's outlays were the most variable in the region, with sharp cuts in 1975, 1977, and 1982-83. Thailand and Singapore had the most steady increases in military funding. The Philippines had minor fluctuations, but its military spending has been essentially cut in real terms since 1975. (Miranda and Ciron point out that from 1972 to 1986, the salary of a soldier nominally increased over 300 percent, but its real value had shrunk by 38 to 45 percent of 1972 pay).

What are the explanations for the fluctuations in defense spending in the region? Five theories which may explain the levels and rates of change in military spending in general are given. They are: 1) governments are responding to actual military threats; 2) domestic political concerns determine which groups will be recruited into the military, where troops will be stationed, and what levels of readiness are desired; 3) governments determine, through relatively fixed ratios of total available revenues, what resources the military will get; 4) military-industrial complexes press for a given or increasing share of government procurement funds; and 5) arms rates drive up military spending. The second and third theories are singled out as the most compelling explanations for Southeast Asia during the 1973-83 period: defense spending rose and fell depending on local political considerations, and the total availability of money from which military expenditures were obtained.

It is not surprising, then, that the article does not find allocations for the military a great deduction from the allocations that could have gone to economic development. Except for the Philippines, ASEAN economic growth rates have been quite high and military spending has been a small percentage of GNP.

The foregoing review of part one of the three books shows the vast area covered by issues of national security in Southeast Asia. It covers ethnic problems, problems of regional organization, communist subversion, economic development, nation-building, and military spending. Facts and observations are presented in a comparative way, without any attempt at clarifying the framework within which the comparison is made. Comparison without any clear over-all framework is the strength, rather than a weakness of this particular endeavor.

Southeast Asia and ASEAN definitely exist both as geographical units and concepts, so that it is practically impossible to look at problems of national security in this part of the world without any reference to them. At the same time, the region is so heterogeneous, that forcing a uniform framework of analysis will only result in distorted generalizations, if not accompanied with multiple caveats and exceptions. It is therefore wisdom that led the collaborators to keep the comparative approach obvious, without being enslaved by the so-called scientific method over which not a few otherwise significant studies on states and their problems have crumbled.

The series does not even discriminate whether a country is an ASEAN member or not. Thus, while two volumes do not have a chapter on Brunei, which is an ASEAN member, one, *Defense Spending in Southeast Asia*, includes it, as well as Vietnam, which is not ASEAN member.

The loose make-up of the series underlines the fact that it is difficult to make generalizations about Southeast Asia, and that in matters of national defense, at least, each country has its own particular characteristics.

Given very few shared grounds on which to build, a regional defense system in ASEAN is a remote possibility. Communism, the one ideological factor against which ASEAN stands in unity, is inadequate to make the member countries pull their resources together. Territorial issues between Brunei and Malaysia, and between Malaysia and the Philippines are only two examples of hindrances to this.

One more strength of the series may be mentioned. The majority of the contributors are scholars or practitioners from the region, with varied professional backgrounds and points of view. They complement one another, and the reader is given the advantage of experiencing exposure to different, not infrequently contrasting views, without having to sit it out in an actual conference or workshop. Thus, there is a dialogue not only between the reader and the writers, but also among the writers. *Governments and Rebellions in Southeast Asia*, in particular, includes comments by reactors, often quite frank and demanding. This inclusion stresses the fact that the volume is not the last word on SEAN rebellions, but rather, an attempt to brainstorm on the issue.

Individual chapters leave much to be desired, especially in terms of documentation. There is, in general, a heavy dependence on secondary sources. Moreover, while the majority of the contributors are Asians, there is still a heavy Western influence in conceptualization, due to the dependence of the Asian writers on the published works of Western scholars.

The dilemma in a project like this is that it can be an exciting work if documentation consists of reliable statistics and facts obtained from the defense establishments and the insurgents or rebels. For obvious reasons, these cannot easily be obtained, hence, the heavy dependence on secondary sources. The chapter on "Defense Spending in ASEAN: An Overview," calls attention to the fact that military statistics are seldom accurate, and that official, government-supplied statistics are usually understated.

Dependence on Western works may not be easy to avoid at the present time, because of the edge that Western scholars have over their counterparts in Southeast Asia. Scholarly research on rebellions, nation-building, national security, and defense spending is still in its infancy in Southeast Asia, and time is needed to develop sophisticated conceptual frameworks suitable to the Southeast Asian situation. The three books are undoubtedly significant contributions towards this end.

Language, the vehicle of concepts and communications, is, although the participants in the conference and workshops from which the books have been culled, may not have realized it, one big factor that sustains dependence on Western scholarship. It is ironic that in an endeavor like this, which aims to create a body of Asian experts on issues of national security, the language used is not one of the indigenous languages in Southeast Asia, but English. Ironical, indeed, but it is unthinkable now and in the future for a Southeast Asian conference or workshop to be conducted in one of the indigenous Southeast Asian languages.

These three books in the series of publications on Issues in Southeast Asian Security are not only a rich source of information on the subject, but also, unwittingly, a strong evidence of how remote still is unity among Southeast Asian countries. In terms of methodology, they are an eloquent statement for the merits of an unstructured comparative approach.