

**By
Design
or
Accident**

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By Design or Accident

Reflections
on
Asian Security

Daljit Singh



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Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to write the Foreword to this collection of thoughtful essays written by my good friend and high school classmate, Daljit Singh.

Daljit and I were classmates at Raffles Institution, from 1952 to 1957. He was one of the top students of the school. After completing his university education, he joined the civil service and served in several senior positions. Daljit has always had a scholarly inclination and it was therefore natural for him to transit from the civil service to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. At the Institute he has been the editor of *Southeast Asian Affairs*, the prestigious annual review of the region, and of other scholarly publications; the convener of various conferences and seminars; and a security analyst and commentator on trends and developments in the relations between States in Southeast Asia, Asia and the world.

This book contains thirty-seven essays written by Daljit Singh between 1991 and 2009. They were originally published either in Singapore or in the *International Herald Tribune*. Although I had read the essays when they were first published, I have enjoyed reading them again, partly because of their enduring merit and partly because the author has wisely organised them into four parts. In this way, one is better able to appreciate the coherence and continuity of the author's worldview and his thought process in following

the evolution of a situation, for example, the war in Iraq, over a number of years.

Part I of the book contains nine essays on Southeast Asia and regional security after the Cold War. The essay on Myanmar, although written in 1994, is still relevant today: “Solutions to Myanmar’s problems will have to be found by the Myanmar people themselves. Outsiders can only encourage or discourage certain trends The isolation of the regime and the suspension of aid have not succeeded in getting it to change its mind, let alone remove it from power Some form of political evolution is required for stability and progress. If the new political system envisaged by SLORC (SPDC) can provide this evolution, even with limited democracy and openness, it would constitute movement in the right direction ...”

The essay which I found most fascinating is the one on the democratic peace theory and Asia, written in 1998. It is often claimed by the proponents of democracy that one of its virtues is that democracies do not go to war with each other. In this essay, Daljit Singh asked whether the theory could apply to Asia. In his view, war between a “democratic” India and a “democratic” Pakistan is not unthinkable. The author argued that both India and Pakistan were weak democracies, with deficiencies in the rule of law and extensive poverty and illiteracy. He seemed to imply that the democratic peace theory only applies to mature democracies.

Part II of the book contains eleven essays on terrorism and the war in Iraq. The most important essay is the 2008 essay on how Southeast Asia has succeeded in keeping terrorism at bay.

Part III of the book, “The Big Boys of Asian Geopolitics”, is, for me, the most important section of the book. In these

essays, the author discusses the evolving geopolitical and geoeconomic order of the Asia-Pacific region. I agree with the author that, for the foreseeable future, the United States will remain the dominant power of the region. However, the United States will have to share the stage with the two rising Asian giants, China and India, as well as with a “new” Japan in search of a new role and identity and a resurgent Russia. The author is right to call this the “major drama” of the 21st century. The essay, “ASEAN as a Geopolitical Player”, is a useful reminder to all the ASEAN-sceptics of the vital role which ASEAN plays in this new Asian drama as the region’s convener, facilitator and catalyst.

I commend this book and wish it success.

Tommy Koh
Chairman
Institute of Policy Studies
Singapore
December 2009

Introduction

Asia is rising and will wield greater economic and strategic weight in world affairs. However, Asia also faces numerous challenges like poverty, domestic instability, deficiencies in governance and the rule of law, interstate disputes and rivalries, and military build-ups, to name just a few. The celebration of Asia's rise would be premature if it is not accompanied by lasting peace and cooperation between states and justice and prosperity at home. The achievement of this happy state of affairs will require wise and pragmatic leadership, especially among the major powers.

This book is a compilation of my opinion pieces over the years which first appeared in the Singapore *Straits Times*, *Business Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *ISEAS Trends*. By their very nature as occasional opinion pieces, they do not pretend to provide a comprehensive picture of the events and issues they deal with. For a long time it had not occurred to me to compile them into a book. It was Professor Tommy Koh who persuaded me to do so. In an age already surfeit with books of varying quality, I would like to believe that this thin volume will provide some feel and flavour of the events and times it depicts.

The title *By Design or Accident* suggests that history is shaped both by human design and by fortuitous circumstances. The role of leadership, both state and non-state, is undeniably important. Yet unintended consequences or completely unanticipated developments can make a

mockery of the most carefully worked out plans of human genius, whether benign or malign.

The book is divided into a number of parts by theme, with the opinion pieces under each theme arranged chronologically. Inevitably there are pieces which do not fit comfortably into these neat categories. Also, some overlap across sections has been unavoidable.

Part I contains pieces written mostly between the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks on the United States, although it also includes two on ASEAN which were written later. The period was marked by regional rapprochement, the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum, concerns about the future of the American military presence in Asia, and anxieties about how a rising China could be accommodated into the regional and international systems. ASEAN's international standing fluctuated from a peak attained around 1995 to a low in the wake of Asian crisis. It was also a period when American policy to the region saw a stronger push for democratization.

Part II of the book covers two major conflicts of the first decade of the new century, the struggle against Al Qaeda-linked terrorism and the Iraq war. Iraq and terrorism were two separate phenomena when Saddam Hussain was in power but became partially fused into one as a result of the American invasion. During this period, the security policies of the Administration of President George W. Bush were widely seen as unilateralist and driven by right-wing ideologues. As can be seen in the pieces on the Iraq war, my own thinking on the war evolved quickly from support to deep misgivings as I realized how badly the US Administration had misjudged what it would take to bring change for the better in Iraq. This section also includes two articles on Southeast Asia's efforts to deal with terrorism.

Part III contains writings on the big players in Asian geopolitics, namely, America, China, Japan, and India. The rise of new Asian powers and their interactions with each other and with the “established” powers will be a major drama of the 21st century which will have a crucial bearing on the prospects for Asia. The reader may notice that concern about the balance of power in Asia has been a recurrent underlying theme in my opinion pieces, even when addressing issues like the Iraq war, the war on terrorism, and Sino-Vietnamese relations. Also in Part III is a piece on the Australia-Indonesia security treaty. It does not fit neatly into any of the parts, but is placed here for its possible broader geopolitical significance in relation to the major powers.

Finally, there is a Part IV of just two articles which did not fit into any of the first three parts. These recall two important conflicts of the past, the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War, and seek to show their historical importance.

I am indebted first and foremost to Professor Tommy Koh for encouraging me to publish this book and for graciously offering to write the Foreword. I thank Ambassador Kesavapany, Director of ISEAS, for his support and for encouraging ISEAS researchers to reach out to a wider audience by contributing opinion pieces in the press. I also thank ISEAS Publications Unit, in particular its head, Mrs Triena Ong, for managing the production aspects of this book.

Daljit Singh
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
December 2009

PART I

**Southeast Asia and Regional
Security after the Cold War**

1

Sino-Vietnamese Reconciliation: Cause for Celebration?

The chain reactions produced by the ending of the Cold War and the vast changes in the Soviet Union over the last few years are still working themselves through Asia. In Southeast Asia they are producing another turn of the geopolitical kaleidoscope.

The changes in Soviet policy, including the drastic reduction of aid to Vietnam, are forcing Hanoi to come to terms with China, its giant neighbour to the north with which, until recently, relations had been one of bitter enmity. And with Vietnam thus in dire straits and the Soviet threat to China much diminished, Beijing, for its part, sees this as an opportune time to strike a deal with Hanoi on important issues.

Events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, too, are driving Vietnam and China closer. The elderly leaders of both states have watched the turmoil there with horror and seem determined to prevent at all costs its occurrence in their own countries. Both have agreed that while economic reform must continue, political pluralism cannot be permitted. Communist party rule must be preserved.

What will be the implications for Southeast Asia of a thaw in Sino-Vietnamese relations?