

Naval Modernisation in Southeast Asia: Problems and Prospects for Small and Medium Navies edited by Geoffrey Till and Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 126, 57.19 €

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Against the backdrop of growing competition between the US and China, maritime security has become a high priority in the strategic policy narratives of most Southeast Asian countries. The book, *Naval Modernisation in Southeast Asia: Problems and Prospects for Small and Medium Navies*, edited by Geoffrey Till and Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto, analyses the varying problems and challenges faced by small and medium navies in Southeast Asia as they seek to increase their maritime power in response to their perceptions of strategic necessity. It focuses on the conflicting interests and viewpoints that are resulting in the growth of navies of the Southeast Asian countries, particularly Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. Further, it studies the acquisition pattern, economic affordability and political developments peculiar to individual countries, thereby defining the importance being accorded by them to the maritime domain. The book, therefore, not only discusses the strategic context in which naval modernisation is being undertaken in the Asia-Pacific region, it also brings together the cogent experiences of developing navies, including the political, economic and operational challenges they face.

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In the introduction, Geoffrey Till discusses the processes of naval modernisation evolving from grand strategy or national security policy down to the mechanics of fleshing it out at the level of naval policy. Interestingly, he takes the modernisation of the Indian Navy as a reference for comparison. Till argues that as a regional power whose navy has been growing for several decades, India's 'experience provides pointers to the challenges that other countries in the Indo-Pacific region will face as they follow suit, if they do'. However, a comparison at the policy level is difficult as the challenges faced, political discourse, industrial capacity and national priorities would widely differ for smaller navies evolving in a different strategic environment. He points to the lack of national defence industrial base and 'less than perfect' relationship between the service headquarters and the bureaucracy at the Ministry of Defence in India as being one of the major dampeners in India's defence modernisation. He also highlights the challenges faced for naval resource allocation at the national level against other competing requirements of education, health, social care, etc., due to the difficulty in 'getting its case heard' by the not-so-involved political class. Till argues that despite the myriad challenges faced by the Indian Navy in its modernisation, it has still been 'remarkably successful'. Though he builds a compelling narrative, the interpretation and lessons for other smaller navies to learn from an Indian context are ambiguous.

The chapter by Bernard Fook Weng Loo, 'Naval Modernisation versus Naval Development', deconstructs the developing naval arms race in the Asia-Pacific region. Towards this, he analyses the navies of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, observing that these countries have individually enhanced their spending on naval platforms by US\$ 1 billion each decade between 1970 and 1999. The author does not find this alarming as the defence expenditure in Southeast Asia has remained consistent when seen as a percentage of the national gross domestic product of national budgets of the countries. The only major deviation from an otherwise consistent naval platform procurement policy has been acquisition of submarines by most of these countries. The Southeast Asian region rests on an unwritten understanding of strategic stability between the countries, with the exception of lingering disputes in the South China Sea. The final position echoed by Bernard, from a long-term perspective, is that of a 'slow-motion development' towards establishing 'fully rounded naval

forces' by the Southeast Asian countries, which is consistent with the current strategic landscape as we see it.

In the chapter, 'A Common Setting for Naval Planning in Southeast Asia?' Ying Hui Lee and Collin Koh Swee Lean compare the naval capacity development of Thailand and the Philippines. According to the authors, though both countries are allies of the United States (US) and are facing equally severe resource constraints, there are certain divergences as they face completely different security challenges, whilst nursing dissimilar internal security architectures. In both cases, the authors bring out the contest for resources that the navies face with their respective armies, which limits their scope for planned naval expansion. In case of the Philippines, it is evident that the navy is the main beneficiary of military assistance from the US. In comparison, Thailand has had a more diverse, though not planned, acquisition experience. While the authors bring together what is already known of both the navies by an avid reader of the subject, they have stopped short of suggesting a possible road map for the planned expansion of both the navies.

The last four chapters of the book survey the naval modernisation of Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, each penned by different authors. In all four cases, the evolution of the navies has been closely linked to their economic ascendancies. While Singapore may not be a part of the South China Sea imbroglio, it is this very reason that validates its need to protect its sea lanes of communication, its indispensable lifeline, against disruption. Collin Koh Swee Lean correctly identifies this, along with a declining fertility rate, as challenges for Singapore's defence planners. He interestingly uses these very reasons to justify Singapore's choice of 'technology based solutions' and procurement of 'force multiplier' capabilities to maximise resources, with an emphasis of quality over quantity. Therefore, out of the four navies analysed, the Singapore Navy clearly stands out for its remarkable resilience in planned force development and up gradation to a well-rounded three-dimensional navy since the 1990s. The author highlights Singapore Navy's surface fleet transition to corvettes operating the ScanEagle remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) and the eight locally designed littoral mission vessels (LMVs), among other surface ships. Also, despite its small size, the Singapore Navy has one of the more mature submarine arms among the Southeast Asian navies, correctly classified as an asset by the author. Overall, the author's assessment that the Singapore naval modernisation

trajectory is a 'good model' to emulate is premised on solid arguments and well-supported reasoning.

Indonesia's experience has been vastly different. Being an archipelagic nation of more than 17,000 islands, it is but natural to consider Indonesia a maritime nation. Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto is at pains to explain the sea blindness that has afflicted the nation since its independence, which has constrained it from becoming a true maritime power. Though straddling some of the most strategically important seaborne trade routes, Indonesia military resources have mostly been consumed in balancing its inner contradictions. The author's explanation for this is the divide-and-rule policy followed by the Dutch during the colonial period, which seems plausible. Each archipelagic region of the country was encouraged to be self-sufficient and resilient, thereby minimising intra-island communication, which in turn killed any incentive for Indonesia to become a maritime power. President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) has attempted to balk this trend by introducing the concept of *Poros Maritim Dunia*, translated as 'World Maritime Axis'. The author highlights President Jokowi's maritime development thrust, which envelopes all spheres from defence to industry to infrastructure to culture. He further emphasises the inner contradictions that presently stymie Indonesia's efforts to being a maritime power, which interestingly includes 'corruption'. However, the crux of naval development has only been fleetingly mentioned by the author, which seems slightly disappointing.

The strategic context of Malaysia's naval development has, in most cases, mirrored that of Indonesia. However, as Geoffrey Till and Henrick Z. Tseng bring out, the path being followed by Malaysia is anything but similar. From an opaque military acquisition system to uncertainty over the threats to be prioritised, Malaysia's naval modernisation process has swung from one post to the next. The authors exemplify the apparent absence of consensus that exists in the establishment over the capabilities that Malaysian Navy should develop. On the one side, Malaysia is a beneficiary of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) largesse, and on the other side, it is contesting with the same country for the islands in the South China Sea, thereby leaving it in a confused political space. It is the authors' conviction that the Malaysian Navy has a much clearer vision of the inventory it needs to develop; however, this seems contestable when its presently developing capabilities are considered. The chapter is lucid on the policy perspective of Malaysia's maritime development, while avoiding a discussion on specifics of naval development.

Among the navies discussed, Vietnam's case can be considered unique, both militarily and geostrategically. Geographically, Vietnam literally finds itself at 'hells gate', being right on the doorstep of an assertive China, resulting in limited maritime space for manoeuvre. With most of its wealth being derived through maritime trade or resources, the necessity to focus on the development of the maritime sector, including a robust navy, has always been indisputable. This is further accentuated when we consider its ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea. However, it was not until 2006 that Vietnam truly turned towards modernisation of its navy. In this chapter, Truong-Minh Vu and Nguyen The Phuong have traced the evolution of the Vietnam Navy from its 'brown water' origins to its present 'three-dimensional' capability. It is evident that this naval development has had the backing of focused national priority with adequate funding, unlike the other Southeast Asian navies. Its journey from being primarily a client of erstwhile Soviet equipment to its presently more diversified portfolio is interesting—though the disadvantages of maintaining a varied asset set is having an effect on the Vietnam Navy today. Another constraint of an 'explosive expansion' is that technology absorption and crew training suffers, which has not been adequately discussed in the chapter. The Vietnam Navy, today, can boast of a potent naval arsenal of effective deterrence. However, to make this effective in the long term, they will now require consolidation and absorption. The absence of supporting strategic thought in the Vietnamese intelligentsia along with current budgetary limitations have been correctly highlighted as present-day constraints of the Vietnam Navy.

Naval modernisation is a complex process for any nation, starting with the strategic policymaking at the top to the tactical implementation at the bottom, where decision making could get compromised by varied factors ranging from international to domestic. However, considering the importance of the maritime domain that has emerged in strategic thought in the last two decades, it has not deterred Southeast nations from prioritising this over other considerations. Nonetheless, with limited budgets and ever-shifting strategic considerations, naval planners will always find it difficult to match 'resources to commitments', as brought out by the authors in the concluding chapter. Therefore, the way forward for emerging navies, as the authors correctly pontificate, is to discard 'threat-based planning' and adopt a more realistic 'capability-based planning', which has always been the panacea for good naval planners.

This book presents a succinct synthesis of naval modernisation in the Asia-Pacific region and hence, would be of immense interest to scholars of the maritime domain with a focus on security in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as those concerned with developments in the navies of the Southeast Asian countries in general.