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THE CHALLENGE FOR THE MALAYSIAN AND REGIONAL ARMIES

The Army *Qua* Institution in Asia in the Twentieth Century

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Whatever else might be said, the army *qua* major, institutional actor in the politics and societal development -- some may add, in the economy as well – in Asia is both an indelible and undeniable factor when the region is looked at in this twentieth century. The armies of Twentieth-century Asia may well be what the armies of Europe had heretofore been in the Nineteenth-century in the era of modernisation and the onset of modern warfare. In Asia, armies have been a primary force in the era of colonial control and imperial onslaught of the region, signifying both cause and effect in the region's political travails and modernisation. *Prima facie*, it does not look likely that such an impact and /or role will considerably diminish into the next century, dubbed by some, even feared, as the 'Pacific Century'. Perhaps, after all, the Pacific Century will not be so pacific if armies as the repositories of national violence and state power will continue to play significant roles within their societies and in the relations between states.

As national instruments of force or violence, armies in Asia have played political roles. In this respect, we should be reminded of Mao Zedong's famous quotation that 'political power grows out a barrel of a gun' - indicating that he understood what an instrument of force and violence armies are. It is equally important to be reminded his qualifier to this famous quote in which he added 'but it is the party that controls the gun'.

This raises the issue that armies in Asia have to be viewed *vis-à-vis* countervailing organisations that have emerged in the modern politics of the region. Whether armies play political roles and in what ways are a function of its relationship with other institutions such as political parties, public bureaucracies and even police forces and other branches of militaries such as navies and air forces. Armies rise to power because of the weakness of other institutions, it can be argued, and in Asia, armies are definitely a potent force. And as long as they are considered to be modern, they will remain a potent force.

It is said, for example, that political power that resides within civilian authority in contemporary Pakistan must have the consent, tacit or otherwise, of the Pakistani army, if the government of the day wishes to obtain legitimacy. Similarly, it is the SLORC (State of Law and Order Council) in Myanmar that has stymied the political process is the name of stability in that country. That having said, whether or not armies intervene or withdraw from politics, and in this regard as well in other areas of society and economy, may well not be the question, but rather their political or non-political role is a function of time and circumstance, both salutary and otherwise. It seems apparent, however, that once armies have tasted the fruits of political power, they are unlikely to want to shun it, albeit armies as political entities themselves are not spared from being wracked from the politics within their own organisations. In other words, armies must be understood as like any complex organisation and having politics within them.

A few years ago, in a masterful overview of the politics of the Pacific Asian region, Professor Robert Scalapino outlined four major issues confronting its political development, namely

- that of stability vs. openness,
- nation-building,
- political institutionalisation, and
- military vs. civilian rule.

The military's role, more specifically that of the army, is of course relevant to all the four areas mentioned, but the last area of enquiry touches on an aspect that is particularly relevant to the theme of this conference, in particular this session and the next.

Will the Twenty-first century political system of Asia require the army to play a role not only as defenders of the various countries against external aggression (and even of overcoming threats from within) but also as vital political and socio-economic actors? Or will one expect armies to lose relevance once these societies of Asia travel the road of modernisation that will not require the skills and expertise of the men in uniform or what the Chinese refer to as 'military men' (as opposed to the 'men of business' and the scholar gentlemen)? More to the point, does the future point to political systems of civilian supremacy or that of systems in which the army is in control or has to be in control?

The army's role in politics and society and its performance has been and is a mixed one. On the one hand, one cannot but credit the military in South Korea as having paved the way for economic modernisation and leading that country to what it is today as an economic powerhouse of East Asia. Or that in Indonesia, military intervention in 1965 brought about three decades of stability and, it can be argued, a fair measure of prosperity and economic development. On the other hand, one cannot be too sure of the positive effects of military rule in a case like Myanmar – while the jury is still out as regards the SLORC, I think I would be justified in saying the pre-SLORC army's record when it tried the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' as definitely having been a disastrous one in terms of retarding the country's economic development. In the case of pre-Communist China, Lucian Pye has argued that the army's role led to a period of warlordism but which also paradoxically laid the basis of democratic politics in terms of bargaining, trade-offs and compromises in modern Chinese, post-imperial politics.

It would appear that military intervention brings about a process of 'civilianisation'. To be legitimate, armies that intervene in politics have to appear, in the words of one observer, *in mufti*. But once armies are 'civilianised', they have to shed their military bearing and wherewithal of force, as it were, and be accountable. This process is very much a complex one and consonant with the nature of political modernisation in their respective societies. Several years ago, the Royal Thai army found that their use of force was countered by civilian protest and the heavy weight of public opinion made them retreat to the barracks. On the other hand, more recently calls have been voiced by the public that political ineptitude and a measure of corruption among civilian politicians should be rectified by army re-intervention in politics.

In terms of military modernisation and the impact of militaries, armies by virtue of their *land function* have exercised a dominant role in virtually all societies. Even today, armies are usually numerically the largest component of all military forces. One can expect correspondingly that armies can and do exercise a certain degree of influence based on this characteristic. Most coups are carried out by armies and in any military operation at some given point armies have to be involved. Even in the 1990-91 Gulf War, if Iraq had had to be invaded the Allied armies would have had to be utilised and would have been a critical factor in the outcome of that war.

In Asia, the army is a national war machine. To a great degree, the armies of Asia are carbon copies of Western or European armies; at least I believe this is the model on which Asian armies have been built. There are only one or two examples which would not fit the genre – an outstanding one being the Army of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The opposite to this example would be the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) which would easily - in its heyday – could have been mistaken for a field army of the US Army in terms of organisation, equipment and *modus operandi* (the last at least on paper).

This duplication of Asian armies on the Western model had a lot to do with the Western impact that began basically in the mid-nineteenth century and reached its apogee in this twentieth century. Because of Western intrusion, Asian societies in their bid to modernise actually used the similar mode of the use of force in order that they can withstand or oppose colonialism or in turn use that organisation of force for their political ends even after the departure of the Western colonial powers from Asia.

Armies in this respect are clearly a part of the g(ıeral process of modernisation in Asia – some might even say a part of Westernisa on. Quite often, armies played a role as agents of modernisation not only in Asia bu also in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. But what is less clear now is whe ıer the Western-style army of Asia has undergone indigenisation so that it will becom(more of an 'Asian-style' army. In recent years there has been talk and debate abou Asian values and an 'Asian way' that stands out in contrast to Western norms and w ys. Certainly in a few armies, the leadership had been questioned as to whether ce ıin ways of doing things conflict with local norms. What is to be the code of condu of the officer corps and the rank-and-file? Is it right for officers to constitute a 'cla '? Should soldiers start to march with the left foot or should it be with their right f ot? This last question, I believe, was raised in the Malaysian army a few years ago when it was argued that Moslems should initiate their march with the right, not the le ,foot.

The nature of armies and their organisation in Asia is a sensitive topic, particularly when one views if they are truly 'Asian'. I would say that there is a veneer of the Western impact because of the nature of modernity. On the surface today, Asians armies retain an appearance as not being unlike Western armies, but here is a lot of fusion of traditional elements within all of Asia's armies. This traditional or indigenous emphasis requires more study, but one example will suffice for our attention. I believe the Indonesian Army (ABRI) is a good example of the infusion of indigenous concepts, especially its well-known doctrine of *dwi-fungsi*, meaning that it has both a military and political role. This is a concept that the SLORC now would like to emulate and adapt to Myanmar's own political circumstances.

As Asia modernises, increasingly its armies would train locally rather than abroad as was the case at its inception, especially if these armies were set up by colonial authorities. The inculcation of local values provides a tremendous impact to the armies' value systems and *Weltanshauung*. Whatever it is, armies in Asia have to interact with the nature of organisation of their societies and cannot stand apart from the development of these societies. Over the long run, I would think, armies would have to play constrained roles, not expanded ones, even if they become more 'powerful' as war machines.

It is likely, therefore, that an Asian-style army is more likely to be imbued with a strong sense of utility as a fighting force if it wishes to survive into the twenty-first century. When one looks at the Chinese People's Liberation Army of today, I believe its concern is to be a modern and technologically-based fighting force, not an army ready a fight a people's war which is something best left to its past and in another era.

This raises an important factor about armies, and which does not exclude the armies of Asia - and that factor is that armies are institutions established for the purpose of fighting a country's wars. In this twentieth century, various armies of Asia have fought with each other and they have learned many lessons. To be viable institutions, armies have to pass the tests of efficiency and effectiveness. To understand this, however, means that armies must be understood as part of the level of development of the society of which they are part. Clearly, armies are not self-existing entities. It is not likely that this will change as long as the future of Asia is one in which it will continue to be a state-centric region.

The process of modernisation indicates that state authority will persist or even strengthened in Asia , and strong states will want to have strong armies. Some of the world's largest armies, in fact the world's largest armies in Asia – China, India and North Korea in 1993 all had armies of more than a million men. During the Third Indo-China War, the Vietnamese army too had about a million men. This pattern is in direct contrast to Europe where since the end of the Cold War, armies have basically been reduced numerically. In Asia, among small and medium powers, armies have also been downsized but the process is quite gradual and even slow.

In the last five years of this century, I find it difficult to think that armies in Asia will be involved in any combat with each other. This is so because the security environment is quite 'benign', and there is no real problem about a balance of power or imbalance of power in the region. However, I am less certain of what portends in the Twenty-first century when it is said there will be a balance of power problem in which armies will be used or at least be symbolically utilised to indicate the strength of nations. There is much talk that it is geoeconomics that is now important in the region, not geopolitics. However, as a realist I believe that armies and armed forces in Pacific Asia will continue to be vital indicators of state authority and national power in the future.

On the other hand, in the past few years, armies in Asia have come into increasing contact with one another. This would seem in retrospect inevitable as the societies of Asia themselves come into closer contact with one another because of economic interdependence as well as the forces and circumstances that seem to draw these societies into closer contact. But what of these army-to-army contacts, some of which have developed into joint training and exercises? I believe they are useful and allow for better security environment in which confidence is built across armies. Armies in Asia therefore, perhaps, contribute over a process of time to regional peace-building.

Armies as national organisations do provide the sinew of societal development in Pacific Asia and Southeast Asia as they become institutionalised. From a liberal non-Marxist Western perspective, it is often assumed that the correct place for armies, indeed their very professionalism, is to be subservient to political authorities, but the

revisionist thinking has been to regard armies *qua* coercive organisations as formative in nation-building and state-building processes, especially when the challenge of political legitimacy in post-independence or post-colonial times had been utmost and onerous. The debate on the role of armies in modernisation, especially so as economic development has brought about substantial change from the states of subsistence or agrarianism to manufacturing-type economies, however, is still on-going. When armies intervene in politics and society, is this salutary or a setback to these societies? Are armies really legitimate political and nation-building/state-building organisations, and more pertinent to our discussion, do army-to-army contacts play a role in broadening respective understanding between societies so that regions ultimately benefit? Opinions and assessments differ in response to these queries but it is difficult to gauge the finality of cause and effect in each society. That said, it may however be observed that in the South Korean case, the army under General Park Chung Hee brought about the changes that transformed Korea into a newly-industrialising country and subsequent economic change basically brought about political liberalisation that led the army back to the barracks. We can only ask: was that a freak development, or are these lessons that can be learnt from the Korean example for all the armies in Southeast Asia and Pacific Asia, including Australasia?

It is important to be reminded that inasmuch as our discussion has been centred on Pacific Asia, this region has not really experienced the phenomenon of 'failed states', an issue that has risen especially with the end of the Cold War. Neither can we describe the Pacific Asian region as one composed of 'weak states', a terminology that Professor Lawrence Freedman of the Department of War Studies at King's College in London so persuasively used in his analysis of the Western response to the

Gulf War of 1990-91. It can therefore be argued that in Pacific Asia we have the phenomenon of 'strong states', and if not that 'strong governments'. On the other hand, it is not conclusive if state-building had been successful simply because armies in the region were able to provide for the security of their societies from both external and internal predators; this is not to deny the institutional importance of armies in these societies, but rather to suggest a more complex and dynamic mix of factors that bad been at work in these societies. Armies must themselves (what is implied is more its officers and leaders) understand that they do not exist in a void and whatever role they play to help build their societies were and are not single-handed feats, ever if primary. It is also relevant that such a role was not without reference to countervailing institutions, adversarial or otherwise.

We cannot deny that conflict remains very much a part of the international scene, and Peacekeeping (PKO) efforts, for example, are being stepped up and seems unlikely to abate in this last decade of the twentieth century. By its very nature, armies are established and organised to provide for national defence; in spite of whatever international change taking place, armies must perform the functions of military power, which in the definition of Sir Michael Howard, means defence, deterrence, compellance and reassurance. It can be advanced that armies, as they professionalise, will appreciate these four functions as they uphold the security and sanctity of the nation-states that they serve. Armies, after all, can only be legitimate institutions if they enhance the national power of states.

By the end of this twentieth century, a significant number of armies of Pacific Asia would have achieved considerable progress in their evolution and development as

national, modern instruments of violence in the region. In large part this will be a consequence of the rapid economic growth that marked the region in the 1980s and 1990s and which in turn had made possible procurements of hardware for armies to develop as conventional, land warfare machines. This development, however, would be an uneven one because of different and divergent national priorities, the nature of the regional security scenario(s) in which there had been a lessened perception of external threats but still a mood of uncertainty given a flux in the balance of power, and the competing demands emanating from navies and air forces.

In the final analysis, armies as the national representatives of violence across borders and within their respective societies have to be seen as elements of national power and sovereignty, a tool of their own respective countries. As armies professionalise, it is more likely they will become agents of national interests, not themselves purveyors of their own interests as had been in the past case in a variety of contexts. This element or theme will become increasingly important in the coming century as the respective countries of Asia advance socially, economically and politically. Perhaps, the armies of Asia in the twenty-first century may become like the armies of Europe in the twentieth century, more as subdued instruments of state-craft of the modern state.