

Naval Modernization in Southeast Asia: Under the Shadow of Army Dominance?

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Using a historical institutionalist approach, this article addresses the future of Southeast Asia's naval forces. Much analysis on this subject employs a linear Realist model in which Southeast Asia's navies are expected to be the beneficiaries of declining internal security challenges and a deteriorating external threat environment. However, to date neither of these factors, including increasing Chinese assertiveness in the maritime domain, appear to have significantly accelerated naval force development in Southeast Asia. While there have been some capability increases in areas such as submarines, growth has mainly been in patrol boat and fast attack craft classes. Numbers of larger offshore surface combatants like frigates have fallen. This article argues that in countries where army dominance has become institutionalized, and civil control of the military is weak, governments may be unwilling or unable to reallocate funding away from armies to maritime forces. In a funding environment in which national economic growth is moderate, and spending on defence is a lower priority, naval modernization and expansion can be blocked. This article examines the cases of Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar to demonstrate how their armies became dominant and how this may have diminished the growth prospects of their navies.

Keywords: ASEAN, Southeast Asia, navies, armies, force structure.

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Expectations of Southeast Asian naval development generally follow two lines of thought, both rooted in the Realist paradigm of International Relations. The first is that Southeast Asian nations will respond to a deteriorating threat environment — marked by China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea — by investing more in defence forces, including naval forces. For example, Australian strategist Hugh White argues that “Indonesia's growing economy will allow it to spend more on its armed forces, especially on sophisticated aircraft, ships and submarines, and it may feel compelled to do so as Asia's wider strategic environment changes.”¹ The second view is that as Southeast Asian states overcome their internal security problems, they will seek to develop more externally oriented military forces, thus resulting in increased spending on naval forces. In the 1990s, observers believed that Southeast Asian nations were displaying increasing interest in sea control capabilities.² Thailand, it was thought, was typical of Southeast Asian countries that in the 1980s had begun to shift away from a focus on counterinsurgency capabilities to those required for conventional warfare.³

This article questions whether bigger and more powerful Southeast Asian navies are inevitable. Instead it proposes that institutionalized army dominance, in combination with weak civilian control and low economic growth, could significantly inhibit naval expansion in Southeast Asian states. The article begins by surveying the modest naval growth in Southeast Asia exhibited to date. It then offers an account of Southeast Asian force development that considers the effects of army dominance amidst weak civilian control. The article employs concepts from historical institutionalism to show how army dominance arose in the cases of Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar, and what the consequences have been for their respective navies.

Why have these three countries been selected and not other regional states? It must be admitted that case selection for Southeast Asia is inherently problematic given the region's vast disparities in terms of population, political systems, levels of economic development and history. That aside, the author chose Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar for the following reasons. Firstly, if an explanation based on institutionalized army-dominance does not apply to these three countries whose armies have played highly significant historical roles, the theory is unlikely to be useful for other countries. In other words, these cases will provide a useful

first litmus test for the plausibility of historical institutionalism as a tool for understanding force structure phenomena.⁴ Secondly, the author did not choose Vietnam and Singapore — both significant regional players — because Vietnam's communist party apparatus provides additional levers for control of the armed forces, while Singapore is a country with strong civilian control. These countries could, however, be the subject of future studies. Thirdly, Indonesia and Thailand are very significant Southeast Asian countries in their own right; Indonesia is the largest ASEAN country and widely regarded as a potential major power, while Thailand is the second largest economy in Southeast Asia, and has in the past evinced intentions to develop significant maritime power projection capabilities.

Southeast Asia's Modest Naval Growth

Over the last two decades, Southeast Asian naval expansion has been relatively modest, despite China's increasing maritime assertiveness.⁵ Surveying the development of naval forces across five Southeast Asian states — Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam — from the 1980s, Bernard Loo found some capability enhancement, but also that navies were reducing their overall numbers of vessels.⁶ Bob Nugent saw a similar stasis in quantity of vessels, but some increases in capability.⁷ Data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies' (IISS) *Military Balance* over the last decade show that Southeast Asian nations (excluding landlocked Laos) did increase their patrol and coastal combat classes over the period 2008–16 — from 354 to 524 — but also reduced their principal surface combatants from 84 to 44. Only two countries — Vietnam and Indonesia — increased the number of naval personnel.⁸

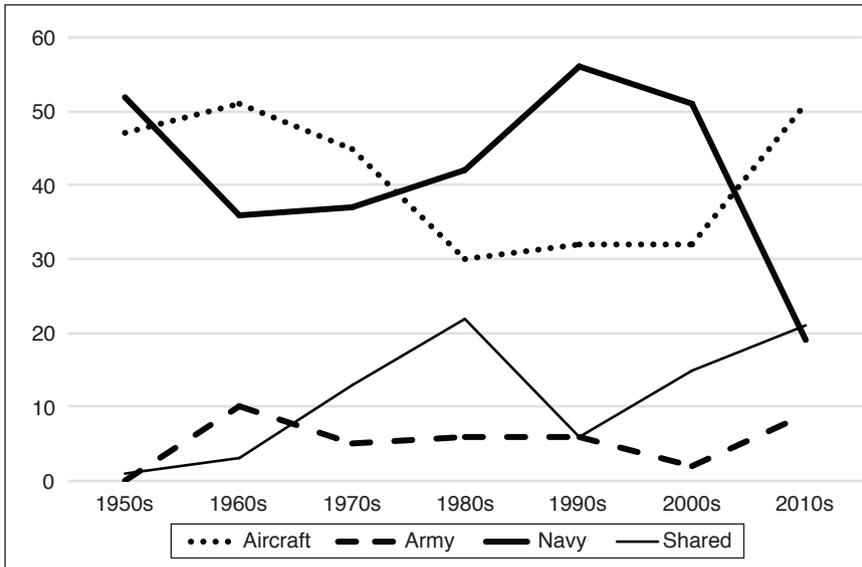
Long-term procurement data supports this view. There is significant evidence that Southeast Asian navies are: first, not being given greater priority over time; and second, comparatively less well-favoured than their Western counterparts. Although budget data detailing individual service allocations is generally not publicly available, we can instead look at patterns of defence imports. Using the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) database of arms trade data, we can compare the breakdown of defence imports of Southeast Asian countries against the five Anglophone countries — Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the

United Kingdom and the United States — from 1950 to 2015. This data is a fair representation of overall procurement patterns since Southeast Asia only has a small indigenous defence industry.⁹ Despite sporadic efforts to develop self-reliance in armaments over several decades, most Southeast Asia countries remain dependent on overseas imports for defence procurement. Sustained indigenous design and production is restricted to small arms, ammunition, artillery systems and light armoured vehicles. More advanced weapons systems are either imported or built locally under license.

The SIPRI data shows, unsurprisingly, that ASEAN armies on average receive a smaller proportion of the imported arms than navies — about 11 per cent compared with 26 per cent by value.¹⁰ Because navies and air forces have a naturally much higher reliance on capital investment, this is not unexpected. An army is feasible with a large number of personnel equipped only with rifles, but an air force without aircraft or a navy without ships, is not. Moreover combat aircraft and surface and sub-surface vessels are very expensive by comparison with rifles. However, two aspects of the data suggest that these raw figures do not provide great comfort to Southeast Asian naval commanders hoping for more powerful navies.

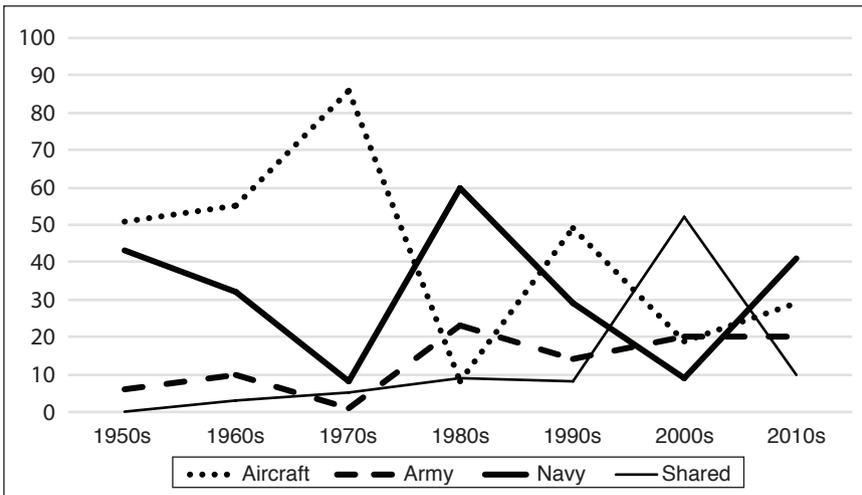
First, if there was a determination to increase the build and expand naval capability, we would expect to see navies obtaining a progressively greater share of defence imports over time. However, when we survey foreign-sourced arms procurement for our three case studies — Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand — over six decades between 1950 and 2015, we do not find sustained increases.¹¹ As shown in Figures 1 to 3, in all three cases the navy's share of imports by 2015 is either lower (Indonesia and Thailand) or about the same (Myanmar) as it was in 1950. That is not to say that there have not been peaks, such as the 1990s for Indonesia and Thailand, and the 1980s for Myanmar. But for all three countries, the navy's most recent share of imports is significantly less than earlier periods of strong investment. In contrast, the armies are doing progressively better. In all three cases, the share of the army has risen over the same sixty-five-year period, by almost 20 per cent in the case of Myanmar and Thailand, and by almost 10 per cent in the case of Indonesia. Moreover, this is likely to be a conservative estimate of army procurement, since SIPRI data does not include small arms and light weapons. As armies are the largest consumer of small and light arms, army procurement shares are likely to be systematically under-represented.

Figure 1
Percentage of Foreign-Sourced Procurement for Indonesia, 1950–2015



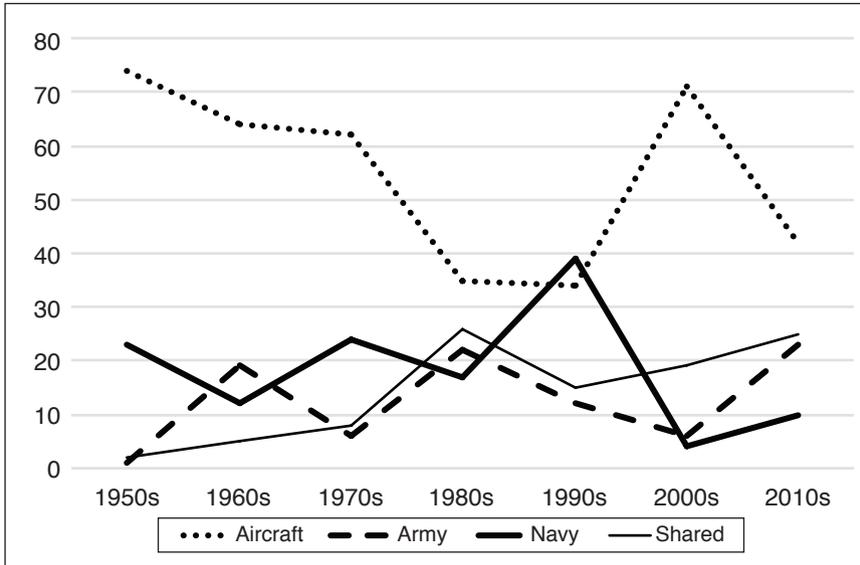
Source: Data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database of arms exports to Indonesia, 1950–2015, available at <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/background>>.

Figure 2
Percentage of Foreign-Sourced Procurement for Myanmar, 1950–2015



Source: Data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database of arms exports to Myanmar, 1950–2015, available at <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/background>>.

Figure 3
Percentage of Foreign-Sourced Procurement for Thailand, 1950–2015



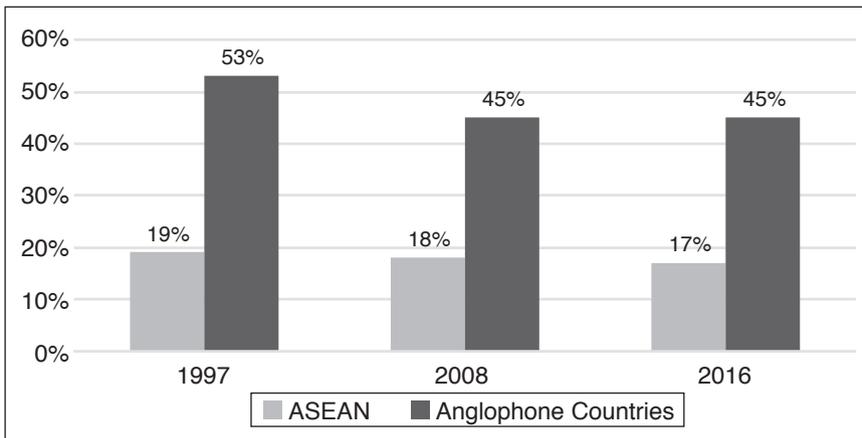
Source: Data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database of arms exports to Thailand, 1950–2015, available at <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/background>>.

Secondly, if our hypothesis that Southeast Asian navies are, relatively speaking, more impacted by the shadow of army dominance is correct, we would expect to see Southeast Asian armies receiving a greater proportion of the total defence imports than their Western counterparts, and conversely, their navies less so. A comparison of Southeast Asian countries (excluding landlocked Laos) against the five Anglophone countries shows that Southeast Asian army procurement as a proportion of total procurement is over twice as high, about 12 per cent by comparison with the average of 5 per cent for Anglophone countries. This statistically significant result is also stronger than might be expected considering that Anglophone countries such as Australia and the United States are prominent navy ship-builders, and hence could be expected to spend proportionally more on imports for their armies.¹²

Another data point suggesting Southeast Asian navies are less well-resourced than their Western counterparts is personnel ratios. Service personnel numbers suggest that the *land-centric* nature of Southeast Asian countries' force structure has shifted very little over the last two decades. Consider the personnel strength of Southeast Asian navies in comparison with their land force counterparts. As Figure 4 shows, the ratio of Southeast Asian navy personnel strength to army personnel strength actually declined slightly between 1997 and 2016.¹³ Southeast Asian navies remain very small compared to their Anglophone navy counterparts. Southeast Asian navies tend to have less than a fifth of the personnel of their army counterparts, whereas the personnel strength of Anglophone navies approach half of their land force brethren.

Even the gradual diminishment of internal security challenges in at least two of the case studies — Thailand and Indonesia — has not brought a “navy dividend”. Indonesia resolved its Aceh conflict in 2005 and there has been no substantial internal conflict since

Figure 4
Southeast Asian and Anglophone Navy Personnel Numbers as a Percentage of Army Personnel Numbers



Source: International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); IISS, *The Military Balance* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2008); IISS, *The Military Balance* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2016).

then. Yet the army's size grew from 233,000 in 2008 to 300,400 in 2016. Following the end of the Cold War, Thailand, having defeated its communist insurgency in the mid-1980s, and seen Vietnam withdraw from neighbouring Cambodia in 1989, did not reduce the size of its army. On the contrary, it grew from 166,000 in 1989 to 190,000 in 1999.¹⁴ This was before the renewal of the insurgency in the southern border provinces in 2004.

It is true that some increases in Southeast Asian naval capabilities are occurring. Vietnam is enhancing its navy to deter possible aggression from China in contested areas of the South China Sea, primarily through the acquisition of six Russian-built submarines.¹⁵ Singapore continues to strengthen its navy with new submarines.¹⁶ Moreover, as James Goldrick and Jack McCaffrie point out, navies can experience increases in capability simply by replacing their hulls every twenty to thirty years. Just as today's luxury items are standard in next year's family car, modern naval vessels incorporate features far beyond those of the 1950s, including over-the-horizon weapons systems, electronic warfare systems, point defence systems, and anti-submarine weapons and sensors.¹⁷ While overall numbers of platforms purchased tend to be small, there are trends towards greater lethality and accuracy at greater ranges, and better battlefield awareness.¹⁸

Nonetheless, Southeast Asian nations are not aspiring to powerful navies with significant numbers of surface combatants such as frigates and destroyers. Realists might attribute this lukewarm naval expansion to free riding on the United States. Certainly restrained national defence spending is likely to be a significant obstacle to Southeast Asian naval modernization. Many Southeast Asian countries remain in what has been described as a middle-income trap, with rates of economic growth insufficient to lift standards of living to high-income developed countries.¹⁹ For these countries, government appetite to increase levels of defence spending to levels necessary to purchase, operate and maintain a large modern navy may be low.

There are, however, additional factors that impede significant expansion of navies in Southeast Asia. Interservice rivalries and civil-military relations can also make the development of significant maritime forces, such as green or blue water navies, less assured.²⁰ This is because where armies are dominant, and where central governments are weak, it can be difficult to divert enough resources to navies over a sustained period of time to effect any significant change.

Interservice Rivalries and Civil–Military Relations

Maintaining the political willingness to commit funding to large shipbuilding programmes over long time frames is difficult, even for democratic superpowers such as the United States.²¹ It is easy for an incoming government to depart from the promises of its predecessor. The trend towards rising unit costs for surface ships is another obstacle. Then there are the formidable management challenges in building a large navy. Efficient acquisition programmes are required, so that new modern ships are acquired rapidly enough to replace obsolete hulls. Only then can fleets be simultaneously modernized and expanded, but this is not easy undertaking. Collin Koh has shown that for Indonesia, programming challenges have already put Indonesia's ambitions to reach the Minimum Essential Force navy by 2024 in jeopardy.²² If these factors were not already significant enough, the aspirations of many Southeast Asian countries for more significant navies are likely to also be hampered by an additional factor: the dominance of their armies.

Interservice rivalry in Western democratic countries is recognized as a challenge, but it is one that energetic governments can overcome. Since at least the Second World War, the United States, for example, has sought to ensure coordinated development of strategy and forces by establishing, *inter alia*, a joint staff. This has included legislation such as the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act aimed specifically at ensuring coordinated development of joint capability.²³ They can do this because civilians can exert real power. Civilians changed French military doctrine after the First World War, forced the UK's Royal Air Force to focus on air defence just in time for the outbreak of the Second World War and changed US nuclear strategy during the Cold War.²⁴ During the 1970s, Australian Defence Minister Malcolm Fraser and civil servant Arthur Tange overcame "entrenched resistance to reform in the armed forces".²⁵

However, in much of Southeast Asia, government control of the military is far more limited. In their 2011 study, Aurel Croissant, Paul Chambers and Philip Volkel classified only one Southeast Asian government, that of Singapore, as exercising civilian supremacy.²⁶ Thereafter civilian control fell away sharply. The Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam exhibited limited civilian control, while the Indonesian, Cambodian and Laotian militaries were only conditionally subordinate to civilian rule. In Thailand and Myanmar, militaries have held considerable or absolute political power themselves.

The issue of whether Southeast Asian interservice rivalry can affect force structure development, and in particular naval modernization, is underresearched. In particular, the scenario where land forces are dominant and civilian government control of the military is weak, has received relatively little scholarly attention. However, in these circumstances, one important path to achieving naval modernization — apportioning more of the defence spending to the navy and less to the army — may be blocked. If a large army is unwilling to downsize, and governments are unable to force change, achieving the more capital-intensive defence force typical of states with powerful navies may be unattainable.

Historical Institutionalism and Southeast Asian Army Dominance

Historical institutionalism can explain why and how army dominance can become entrenched. Historical institutionalism is a theoretical tradition that emphasizes that the timing and sequence of events is critically important in shaping political processes.²⁷ As a discipline, it aims to explain how institutions arise and persist. At critical points in history, the choices of key actors can set in train “the formation of institutions which have self-reproducing properties”.²⁸ The nature of those rules or institutions, regardless of their rationality or productivity, can then become difficult to reverse or undo. Obstacles might be sunk costs in an institution, or the development of significant constituencies with an interest in its maintenance. These institutions may then determine the path that an economy, society or state takes; hence the concept of *path dependency* is central to historical institutionalism. While there is no agreed definition, path dependency definitions frequently incorporate the notion that the past affects the future, initial conditions are causally important and historical lock-in occurs.²⁹ The notion of *critical junctures* is also a key feature of historical institutionalism. Critical junctures are bounded periods when powerful actors make decisions that are difficult to reverse and which have far-reaching and fateful consequences. These periods are relatively short in relation to the duration of the path dependent period which follows, and are “characterized by a situation in which the structural (that is, economic, cultural, ideological and organizational) influences on political action are significantly relaxed for a relatively short period”.³⁰

Historical institutionalism is beginning to be applied to studies in International Relations. To date, it has most frequently been

applied to international structures and regimes such as trade and regulatory regimes rather than state preferences.³¹ However historical institutionalists also consider the role of interest groups, whether in international or domestic settings, to be of importance in the continuation of particular institutional arrangements. Historical institutionalists argue that “Because interest groups frequently owe their position of power to the strategic position occupied at the founding moment of an institution....interest groups often see greater benefits from reproducing extant arrangements than from embracing radical change.”³²

We can apply the concept of historical institutionalism to military force development in the following way. Imagine a point in history where the government of a state makes a critical choice in its defence planning. This choice could be about either opting for a land or maritime strategy for defence. If the decision to prioritize land or maritime forces is made at a highly formative period in the development of a state or its military establishment — that is during a critical juncture — there may be lasting effects, not least if the performance of the maritime or land force results in a significant military victory.

We can also envisage how path dependency for military force development might manifest. If the chosen strategy and service — either land or sea — is victorious or effective, it will hold greater status in the eyes of the population and government decision makers. Subsequent history-writing may continue to laud the correctness of the policy choice, reinforcing this elevated status. The elevated status may effectively institutionalize a pattern of resource allocation in which the ascendant service receives disproportionate resources. In the longer term, the enhanced status of the victorious service may mean they can exert greater influence over subsequent resource allocation decisions. This may reinforce a pattern of preferential funding benefitting the ascendant service, and creating a path dependency. Self-reinforcing path dependency can also arise if the personnel numbers of the dominant service reach proportions that give it political influence, and the political influence is used to resist military reform.

The capacity of governments to change institutionalized patterns of funding will be contingent on the degree to which the military accepts civilian government authority. Although a military may have vacated politics, it may still be resistant to civilian direction in internal matters. Even if a military accepts its overall budget allocation, it may still be resistant to directions on the internal

distribution of that funding. Where the military retains background political power, for example, through its appeal to voters or through the latent threat of a coup, governments may be unwilling to accept the political costs of forcing the military to take a decision counter to its preferences.

The three case studies presented below will demonstrate that in the case of Southeast Asia, it is the land forces that have played decisive roles at critical junctures. These critical junctures comprise both external conflicts and crises, such as wars of independence, as well as major political events, such as revolutions.

Thailand

The Thai army was first put on a path to dominance when the Kingdom's monarch, Rama V, or King Chulalongkorn, chose a land force strategy to defend Thailand. His decision followed an international crisis in 1893, during which French gunboats sailed into Bangkok and threatened the royal palace. While political elites had held the view that diplomacy was the best tool for ensuring Siam's survival, the crisis tilted Chulalongkorn towards developing a genuine military deterrent.³³ The 1893 crisis was the highpoint of the colonialist threat to Thailand, and its aftermath was a relatively short and unusual period of "high uncertainty and unpredictability".³⁴ Chulalongkorn had the freedom and influence to make critical choices in that he could have chosen a naval strategy. In fact, plans did exist for the Thai navy to prevent a hostile navy entering the Chao Praya River or disembarking troops on nearby coasts.³⁵ Moreover, trusted relatives of Chulalongkorn had already trained in the naval arts in foreign academies. However, the king decided that Thailand's defence strategy would be based around the expansion of its army so in 1902, Chulalongkorn legislated for universal conscription.³⁶ His goal was to achieve a significant expansion of the army to ten divisions, each comprising 10,000 soldiers.³⁷ The land strategy was reflected in an increased army budget which more than doubled and as such, passed the navy budget in 1902 and thereafter more than doubled.³⁸

Thailand's 1932 Revolution, which ended the absolute monarchy, was a second critical juncture in entrenching the army's dominance. The Revolution unleashed a highly-contested form of politics between monarchists, the army and a liberal faction. To defeat opponents and reward factional supporters, the army was expanded from 16,000 men in 1933 to 24,486 in 1934. The army

received 70 per cent of total defence funding in 1932 and 74 per cent in 1933.³⁹ These two critical junctures placed the Thai army on a trajectory towards dominance. As Thai political scientist Chai Anan Samudavanija argued:

The greater size of the army and its more powerful position vis-a-vis other forces reinforce each other. To be more influential in the political arena means to be able to ask for more men and materials, thus expanding its own empire and vice versa.⁴⁰

Today the Thai army's dominance manifests itself in several ways. The chief of the Thai army is the most powerful figure in the armed forces, with "its commander wielding considerably greater authority than the Chief of Defence Forces".⁴¹ Of the military men who have become prime minister, all but one have been from the army. Of the forty-eight permanent secretaries to the Ministry of Defence since 1932, forty-five have been army officers.⁴² Attempts to place the army commander and other service chiefs formally under the command of the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Defence have been unsuccessful.⁴³

Indonesia

The seeds of Indonesian army dominance can be found in the military strategy adopted during the independence struggle of 1945–49. Army General A.H. Nasution divided the army into two parts.⁴⁴ The first part, the mobile army, pursued and attacked Dutch forces, while the second part, the territorial army, deployed to specific locations to organize local communities to resist. Nasution's warfighting strategy, which resulted in victory over the Dutch, had lasting and profound consequences. His ideas about guerrilla warfare and the concept of territorial management were preserved in the *hankamrata*, the "Doctrine of Territorial Warfare".⁴⁵ *Hankamrata* subsequently became the blueprint for the Indonesian army's territorial system. In this system, the army replicated Indonesia's five levels of government — province, residency, district, subdistrict and village — with five tiers of command — *kodam*, *korem*, *kodim*, *koramil* and *babinsa*.⁴⁶ The territorial system ensured that army personnel were deployed "throughout the country down to village level"⁴⁷ and also employed a large portion of the army. In 1995, in the territorial command troops made up over 150,000 or over 60 per cent of the regular army's personnel of 235,237.⁴⁸

The ascent of Suharto's New Order government in 1965, amidst the murder of up to half a million communists and perceived sympathizers, was another critical juncture. It reshaped the Indonesian state, its governance and the role of the military. Suharto chose to further entrench the territorial system. It became an important source of army revenue and facilitated the New Order's grip on the provinces, as Suharto also used the territorial system to ensure the army could exert direct pressure on rural voters.⁴⁹ Thirteen years after Suharto's seizure of power, Harold Crouch described a system in which the army dominated the government apparatus at all levels:

Control of the administration meant not only that the army has strong influence over government policies at all levels, but also that officers could distribute benefits and dispense patronage to their military colleagues and civilian friends. Appointments throughout the administration became dependent on the approval of army officers, and power over the issuing of licenses, granting of contracts, and determination of projects enabled the army to reward those who accepted military domination and penalize those who did not.⁵⁰

Today the Indonesian army holds a dominant position in the Indonesian armed forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia* or TNI). The Indonesian army is almost five times the size of the navy and ten times the size of the Indonesian air force.⁵¹ The army's dominance is also reflected in its tendency to dominate the positions of defence minister and armed forces commander. No Indonesian navy officer occupied the armed forces commander position until Admiral Widodo Adi Sutjipto in 1999, and no Indonesian air force officer until 2006 when Air Chief Marshal Djoko Suyanto took the helm.⁵²

Myanmar

The critical juncture that established the dominance of Myanmar's army was Japan's invasion of Burma in the Second World War. The months following the collapse of British colonial administration in January 1942, and the occupation by Japanese forces, were extremely fluid. Japan's choices just before and during this period had powerful unintended consequences that resulted in Myanmar's army taking a central role as a military force, political actor and repository of nationalism. The first choice Japan made was to provide military training to a group of ethnic Burmans prior to the outbreak of war. Later renowned as the "The Thirty Comrades", the group included

the legendary leaders Aung San and Ne Win. The Japanese trained the group in command, combat, espionage, guerilla warfare and political tactics on Hainan Island in July 1941.⁵³ They formed the nucleus of the Burma Independence Army (BIA), which entered Myanmar with the Japanese 5th Army in 1942.

The hasty retreat of the British and their Indian civil servants created an administrative vacuum. The BIA stepped into this vacuum and helped restore law and order. In response, the Japanese tried to put Burmans who had served under the British back in administrative positions, while selecting older politicians to run the government. This was a second fateful choice. This move alienated younger nationalists who stayed with the BIA. It “had the unintended consequence of forming a national army with a strong sense of corporate identity”.⁵⁴ The third choice was attempting to replace the BIA with the considerably smaller Burma Defence Army (BDA). However the “Thirty Comrades” remained in the BDA as battalion commanders, together with a smaller, still ethnically Burman army. The result was an even stronger sense of corporate identity.

Out of the BIA came two key figures, Aung San and Ne Win. At the end of 1945, Aung San led the Burma National Army (the renamed BDA) out of Rangoon to join the Allies. After Aung San was assassinated in 1947, Ne Win accrued prestige comparable to China’s Mao Zedong and North Korea’s Kim Il-sung.⁵⁵ The *Tatmadaw* (army) could muster barely 2,000 soldiers under Ne Win in 1949; but over the next twenty years it emerged as a powerful force able to seize most of southern and central Myanmar. It believed that “against enormous odds and at considerable cost, they had saved the Union from disintegration and deserved a major say in its future”.⁵⁶ As well as being charismatic, Ne Win was a skilled political operator able to build a loyal cadre of officers. In 1962, responding to fears of national disintegration and economic difficulties, he led a military takeover. He formed a Revolutionary Council consisting entirely of army officers. The army had remained a unified and close-knit organization, with the vast majority hailing from southern Myanmar.⁵⁷ The unity was on display when in 1962 BIA members made up all but three of the Revolutionary Council seats.⁵⁸

As with Thailand, the army’s numerical preponderance reinforced its political dominance, shaping a path dependence in which the army consumed the lion’s share of defence resources. The army grew rapidly in size over the second half of the twentieth century; from 3,000 in 1949 to 85,000 by 1961. The 1962 coup, led by Ne Win, accelerated the diversion of resources towards the army, with numbers

growing to 145,000 by 1974 and 184,000 by 1988.⁵⁹ The army's dominance manifested itself in a command structure tilted towards the army. For example, in 1981, the Vice Chief of Staff (Army) was made Lieutenant-General, while the other service heads remained as Major-General.⁶⁰

Civil–Military Relations, Army Dominance and the Implications for Southeast Asia's Navies

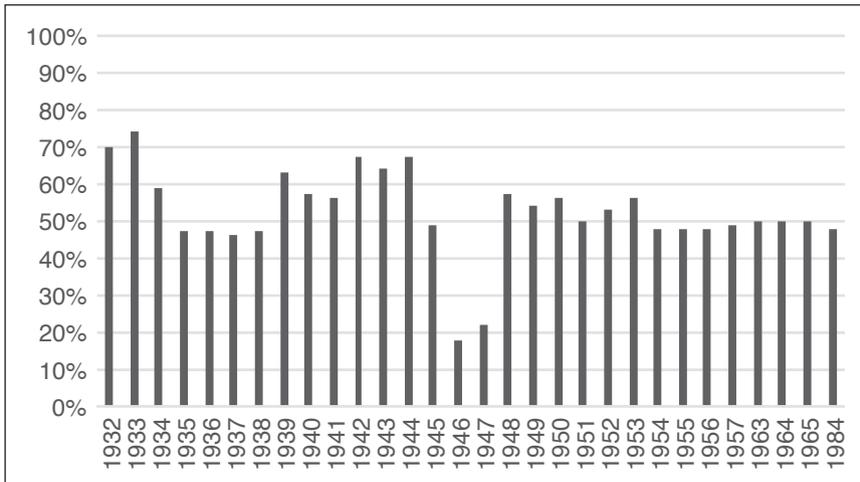
Even where elites are persuaded of the benefits of stronger navies, army dominance prevents the necessary organizational, cultural and financial changes necessary for prioritizing naval development. This is particularly true for Southeast Asian states such as Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar, where governments still have limited control over force development. Given the dominance of the army, how has this affected the prospects of their navies?

Thailand

In Thailand, coups are a deterrent to military reform. Since 1911 there have been thirty-four military-instigated coups and attempted coups, including the 2006 coup and the 2008 “silent putsch”.⁶¹ Thailand's coup culture means that civilian governments do not exert strong control and are hesitant to attempt organizational reform of defence.⁶² In particular, there has been little inclination to alter spending patterns — a budget skewed towards the Thai land forces has remained a feature of Thai defence spending for decades (see Figure 5). In 1984, the Thai army consumed 48 per cent of the defence budget, while the navy and air force were roughly equivalent with about 20 per cent each. The remainder, about 10 per cent, was shared by the Supreme Command and the Permanent Secretary.⁶³ Thai scholar Sukhumbhand Paribatra comments that with respect to the Thai defence budget “the justification is not important, what is important is that the ratio of expenditure 2:1:1 is preserved: army 2: air force 1: navy 1”.⁶⁴

The fixed share of spending apportioned to Thailand's army has impacted efforts to build a more significant navy. In 1996, the Thai government enunciated a plan aimed at building a navy “capable of playing a significant regional role”.⁶⁵ The navy would have an offshore rather than merely a coastal capability, a two ocean capability covering both the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand.⁶⁶ The Thai maritime buildup began promisingly with the acquisition in 1997

Figure 5
Thai Army Share of Total Defence Budget, 1932–84



Source: Data from Chai-Anan Samudavanija, "The Politics and Administration of the Thai Budgetary Process", PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1971, p. 150 and Muthiah Alagappa, *The National Security of Developing States: Lessons from Thailand* (Dover, Massachusetts: Auburn House Publishing Company, 1987), p. 122.

of Southeast Asia's first aircraft carrier, the *Chakri Naruebet*.⁶⁷ This was followed by the purchase of Corsair fixed wing strike aircraft and new frigates from the United States in 1998.⁶⁸ Future planned purchases included new classes of frigates, a second aircraft carrier and three submarines.⁶⁹

However, the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis, and fifteen years of subsequent severe defence cuts, meant that the Thai navy could not proceed with its planned acquisitions.⁷⁰ In fact it faced severe difficulties operating the platforms it had already acquired. In 1999, the aircraft carrier's short-take-off and vertical landing Harrier jet fighters were grounded awaiting spares from the United States.⁷¹ By 2012, the carrier went to sea only infrequently and its Harriers were non-operational.⁷² The navy repeatedly proposed the acquisition of submarines to the government (in 1997, 2001, 2007 and 2011) but each time without success.⁷³ However, at the time of writing, the purchase of at least one Chinese submarine appears to be proceeding.⁷⁴

Table 1
Thai Naval Platforms, 1995–2015

	<i>Total Personnel</i>	<i>Frigates</i>	<i>Submarines</i>	<i>Patrol and Coastal Combatants</i>	<i>Naval Air Personnel</i>	<i>Aircraft Carriers</i>
1995	73,000	14	0	75	1,700	1
2015	69,850	10	0	83	1,200	1
	-3,150	-4	0	+8	-500	N/A

Source: International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 1995* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 195; IISS, *The Military Balance 2015* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2015), p. 291.

The plan for a significant regional navy fell by the wayside. Between 1995 and 2015, the navy acquired multi-role helicopters and a landing platform.⁷⁵ But as Table 1 shows, in net terms the navy had gone backwards. It had fewer personnel, including fewer naval air personnel, and four fewer frigates. The submarines and additional aircraft carriers had not materialized. Only the patrol and coastal combatant class had seen growth. Even after allowing for some qualitative improvement in systems and technology, this was not a navy of greater force projection, capable of playing a significant regional role. Without the option of reallocating defence spending, in particular by downsizing the army, Thailand's navy had borne the brunt of reduced economic growth.

Indonesia

Significant changes to Indonesia's civil–military relations occurred after the fall of Suharto in 1998, including the repudiation of the *dwifungsi* doctrine justifying military seats in parliament and roles in civilian government.⁷⁶ Initially the *reformasi* era also improved the fortunes of the navy and the air force. In 1998, Abdurrahman Wahid, Indonesia's first elected president after the fall of Suharto, sought to break army supremacy by appointing a naval officer as TNI commander.⁷⁷ In 2002 President Megawati Sukarnoputri approved an 18 per cent increase in defence spending, most of which went to improving naval and air force systems.⁷⁸ In 2010, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's government released a Strategic Defence Plan which articulated a Minimum Essential Force (MEF).⁷⁹ The MEF emphasized the strengthening of naval and air force capabilities,

including a pledge to increase defence spending to 1.5 per cent of GDP by 2014. In 2014, the government of President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo unveiled a grand vision of Indonesia as a “world maritime axis”, a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) of the Pacific and the Indian oceans.⁸⁰ The plan incorporated Yudhoyono’s plan for a green water navy by 2024.⁸¹

However, these initiatives have had relatively little impact on the army’s dominance. The territorial structure has remained intact and local TNI commanders have adapted to the post-New Order environment and continued to maintain the military’s political, economic and corporate interests.⁸² The system gives the army considerable political power. During the 2004 election campaign, political party leaders avoided antagonizing the army because of the risk of the territorial structure being mobilized against them as it had in the Suharto years.⁸³ The Indonesian army stresses that the “TNI was born in the cauldron of the struggle for the Indonesian nation’s independence from the Dutch enemy.”⁸⁴ Indonesia’s politicians and leaders are keen to align with this master narrative. In 2004, then-Presidential candidate Amien Rais opposed the idea of placing the Armed Forces Headquarters under the Defence Department, arguing that “Our Army fought for independence with the people. So, if it is trimmed under the Department of Defense that would not fit Indonesia.”⁸⁵

At the same time, civilian supremacy remains elusive. Croissant, Chambers and Volkel classify the Indonesian military’s subordination to civilian control as “conditional”.⁸⁶ The first post-Suharto president, B.J. Habibie, succeeded in compelling the repudiation of the *dwifungsi* doctrine but made no headway on dismantling the territorial system, prosecuting officers involved in human rights abuses committed during the occupation of East Timor (1975–99), reducing commercially derived income or directly managing the military budget.⁸⁷ The Wahid government attempted to exert more control, and succeeded in dismissing TNI commander General Wiranto and appointing an army reformer to a key position as commander of the TNI’s strategic reserve.⁸⁸ Thereafter, however, Wahid began to be resisted by army officers who argued that the President was seeking to use the military as his personal power base. While Yudhoyono sought to ensure most TNI commanders were at least mildly reformist, Mark Beeson argues that there was little effort to “radically curtail military influence or eliminate its privileges”.⁸⁹ Beeson concludes that while Indonesia may have liberalized and democratized, and its military reduced its formal participation in

politics, its civil–military relations remain very different from those of Western democracies.⁹⁰

Against this backdrop of army dominance and weak civilian control of the military, implementation of the GMF initiative remains uncertain. The 2016 Defence White Paper offered little specific budgetary or capability detail on how the defence aspects of the policy would be implemented.⁹¹ The architect of the maritime axis policy, Rizal Sukma, was sent to an ambassadorial posting in London in February 2016 instead of overseeing the realization of the plan.⁹² Prior to this, on 22 October 2015, Defence Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu had launched the *Bela Negara* National Defence programme — a massive programme for indoctrination of nationalist ideology aimed at recruiting 100 million citizens for civil defence purposes — rather than the GMF, as the priority for his ministry.⁹³ In fact, because he was a former army commander, Ryamizard emphasized the army’s centrality to the TNI and devoted less attention to developing naval and air capabilities.⁹⁴ Under Ryamizard, the Indonesian army has been moving “out of the barracks” and into internal security roles such as protecting vital installations, securing prisons, managing public order and curbing radicalism.⁹⁵ The *reformasi* policy of alternating the position of TNI commander between army and one of the other services was overturned, with an army officer, General Gatot Nurmantyo, appointed instead of the expected air force officer as TNI chief.⁹⁶

Where does this leave Indonesian naval modernization? A large army means that personnel costs consume the vast majority of defence spending. In 2005 the navy received only 15 per cent of the total budget compared to the army’s 41 per cent.⁹⁷ In 2014 it was not expected that the navy would receive more than one third of the available procurement budget, noting that “the parliament’s record on meeting the budgetary requests of the navy has been meager”.⁹⁸ In 2015, only 30 per cent of the Indonesian defence budget was available for acquisition and maintenance.⁹⁹ By comparison Australia aims to spend 67 per cent of its defence budget on acquisition and sustainment by 2025, up from the current 54 per cent.¹⁰⁰ President Jokowi has made increasing defence spending conditional on GDP growth reaching 7 per cent.¹⁰¹ However, the World Bank predicts that Indonesia’s GDP growth rate will only reach 5.5 per cent in 2018, up from 4.8 per cent in 2015.¹⁰² This means that without serious military reform, including the downsizing of the army, funding to grow and modernize the navy is likely to remain inadequate. In Evan Laksmana’s view, trying to maintain “strategic relevance” sufficient

to maintain the fleet-in-being is the Indonesian navy's abiding concern.¹⁰³ At this point a "green water navy", and significant TNI power projection capability, remain a long way from reality.

Myanmar

For most of its history, the Myanmar navy has essentially been the army's riverine operations branch. It has been used to transport troops on internal waterways and occasionally for providing cover fire in counterinsurgency operations. After the 1962 coup, the regime's isolationist tendencies meant that the navy was unable to obtain equipment or technical and operational expertise. The regime distrusted the navy because of the presence of Anglo-Burmese, ethnic minorities and foreign trained officers.¹⁰⁴ In the 1970s, 90 per cent of the navy's budget was spent on operating costs, leaving a meagre budget for capital investment, equipment replacement, modernization or spares.¹⁰⁵

The navy has fared better since the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) endowed Myanmar with maritime zones of 148,000 km². The strengthening of military rule under the State Law Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1988 was a significant turning point with the doubling of personnel numbers from 7,000 to 16,000 and an increase in the number of regional commands to five. Ten *Hainan*-class patrol boats were acquired from China in 1989, and another six in the late 1990s.¹⁰⁶ A SLORC-initiated reform programme focused on defending the new maritime zones overall gave the Myanmar navy greater sea denial capability, with improvements in anti-submarine, anti-surface and air defence.

These developments notwithstanding, Myanmar's navy still suffers from chronic under-representation in political positions, and the low prioritization of its interests.¹⁰⁷ It is subject to professionally demeaning treatment, as when the navy commander and twenty naval officers were dismissed after poor performance at a maritime exercise in front of Chinese observers.¹⁰⁸ The 2015 election of a civilian government is unlikely to change the fortunes of the navy in the short term. The new government is highly dependent on army support and is unlikely to seek military reform. In particular the Myanmar military continues to control 25 per cent of parliamentary seats and key ministries including the military and home affairs, reducing the scope of the new National League for Democracy (NLD) government to undertake reforms in these areas.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Southeast Asia is a maritime region, but many of its armed forces exhibit a land force bias reflecting history, rather than geography.¹¹⁰ Southeast Asia is also a region where only Singapore has civilian control of the military sufficient to be able to direct on internal matters. This article has demonstrated that institutionalized land force dominance exists in Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar. However, Cambodia, the Philippines and Vietnam are other states where land forces may be similarly powerful and intransigent. Army dominance means that the gradual increase in strategic tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in the global commons of the South China Sea, is not at this point a sufficiently powerful imperative to catalyze significant navy modernization or expansion programmes for Southeast Asian countries.

Thai, Indonesian and Myanmar army dominance can be better understood with reference to critical junctures and self-reinforcing path-dependence than Realist theory. In both Thailand and Indonesia, military strategic decisions in those countries' early statehood were critical junctures, setting their armies on a path to early prominence. While attempting to deter colonial powers, Thailand embarked on a significant expansion of its army through the introduction of conscription and the building of a ten-division force. While defeating their erstwhile colonizers the Dutch, Indonesia implemented an army-led territorial strategy which was so successful that it became enshrined as the *hankamrata* doctrine, mirrored in practice by the army's multilevel provincial command structure, the territorial system. In Myanmar, Japanese decisions during the Second World War created a cohesive army that saw itself as the repository of Burmese nationalism. In all three countries, subsequent key political events accelerated and accentuated army dominance. In Thailand the 1932 Revolution fostered an unstable political environment in which army leaders sought to build the army as a power base, by directing resources towards expansion and rewarding supporters. In Indonesia the ascent of the New Order regime in 1965 deeply entrenched the territorial system, both as a system of regime political control, and method of military revenue raising. In Myanmar difficulties in quelling ethnic separatism saw the army seize power in 1962.

Path dependent processes have ultimately converted prominence into dominance. In both Thailand and Myanmar, the growth of the

army in concert with their political roles has ultimately rendered their positions virtually impregnable, with size, budget and political power each reinforcing the other. Army officers dominate key positions in the ministry of defence, and armies control and consume most of the military budget. Elected governments are not strong enough to transform this situation. In Indonesia the territorial system has delivered a similar dominance. The territorial system continues to provide the Indonesian army with political influence throughout the archipelago and at the national level, regardless of its formal withdrawal from politics. The fact that the territorial system has many stakeholders and business interests magnifies its importance and its resilience. It is a system that has barely been dented by the consolidation of Indonesia's democratic processes.

Army dominance means that navy development, if it is to occur at all, cannot be at the expense of the army. As Goldrick and McCaffrie admit "short of extraordinary changes in a country's security position", navies will receive only their fixed share of resources.¹¹¹ While this share will allow niche modernization, it seems unlikely to furnish both modernization and significant expansion unless both economic growth and high defence spending return to the levels of the 1990s. With global growth currently low, and Southeast Asian countries stuck in middle-income traps, this does not seem in prospect. This means we ought to treat ambitious policies of naval modernization and expansion with caution. Policy enunciation does not equal implementation.

Historical institutionalism is an analytical tool worth adding to the study of Southeast Asian military capability development. Too often current analysis presumes a force development process which occurs primarily in response to GDP growth and changes in the external environment, or assumes that an inevitable transition from an internal security to external security focus will naturally bring a rational reordering of defence priorities, funding and force development.¹¹² In these analyzes domestic institutional influences and impediments to adjusting to external change are given secondary status. This is not to deny that strategic crises may give rise to significant changes in strategic policy, followed by force structure development. However, it is possible that change in the strategic environment will not be acted on for long periods of time. And even when new policy is formulated, it is uncertain whether it will be implemented. The greatest test of policy implementation is the reallocation of resources.

NOTES

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- ⁹ Richard A. Bitzinger, “Revisiting Armaments Production in Southeast Asia: New Dreams, Same Challenges”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 35, no. 3 (December 2013): 384.
- ¹⁰ SIPRI Trend Indicator Values (TIVs) for all ASEAN countries except Laos generated, 23 January 2017, available at <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/background>>.
- ¹¹ The SIPRI arms transfer data base categorizes its data according to ten weapon types: aircraft, air defence systems, armoured vehicles, artillery, engines, missiles, naval weapons, sensors, ships, and “other” (mostly turrets for armoured vehicles and ships, as well as air refuelling systems). Some of these categories align well with services while others do not. For example, nearly all armoured vehicles and artillery would be reserved for armies (there would be a small amount of naval artillery included here), and nearly all ships to be allocated for the navy, given that armies and air forces do not normally operate significant fleets. On the other hand, because many regional navies have significant fleets of maritime surveillance aircraft, and armies fly their own helicopters and air transport aircraft, the aircraft category does not align well with air forces. Air defence systems are operated by both air forces and armies, and so on. Therefore for the purposes of this analysis, I have simplified these eleven categories into four as follows: aircraft = aircraft, army = armoured vehicles + artillery, navy = ships + naval weapons, shared = air defence systems + engines + missiles + sensors + other.

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- ¹⁴ Data from IISS, *The Military Balance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); IISS, *The Military Balance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); IISS, *The Military Balance* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2008); and IISS, *The Military Balance* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2016).
- ¹⁵ IISS, *The Military Balance* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2015), p. 207.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- ¹⁷ James Goldrick and Jack McCaffrie, *Navies of South-East Asia: A Comparative Study* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2013), p. 3.
- ¹⁸ Richard A. Bitzinger, "A New Arms Race? Explaining Recent Southeast Asian Military Acquisitions", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32, no. 1 (April 2010): 50–69.
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- ²⁰ Green water navies are navies that mainly focus on defending and controlling near ocean areas as well as coastal waters, ports and harbours. Blue water navies are navies with global or regional expeditionary capabilities.
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- ¹⁰⁶ Andrew Selth, “The Burma Navy Under the SLORC”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 2 (29 May 2007): 227–47.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- ¹⁰⁸ Goldrick and McCaffrie, *Navies of South-East Asia*, op. cit., p. 41.
- ¹⁰⁹ James Giggacher, “Will Myanmar’s March to Democracy Trip Up?”, *New Mandala*, 15 February 2017, available at <<http://www.newmandala.org/will-myanmars-march-democracy-trip/>>.
- ¹¹⁰ If ASEAN were a country, it would have the second longest coastline in the world. World Economic Forum, “7 Surprising Things You Probably Don’t Know About ASEAN”, available at <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/05/7-surprising-things-about-asean/>>.
- ¹¹¹ Goldrick and McCaffrie, *Navies of South-East Asia*, op. cit., p. 2.
- ¹¹² Hugh White is an example of the former, and David Denoon and Malcolm Davis examples of the latter. White, “Indonesia’s Rise”, op. cit.; Denoon and Colbert, “Challenges for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations”, op. cit., p. 505; Malcolm R. Davis, “Thailand’s Defence Forces look to the 21st Century”, *Asia Pacific Defence Reporter* XXIII, no. 5 (August–September 1997): 12.