

**Strategic perceptions from  
Indonesia, Malaysia  
and Singapore  
1989 - 1992  
and the implications for  
Australia's security policies**

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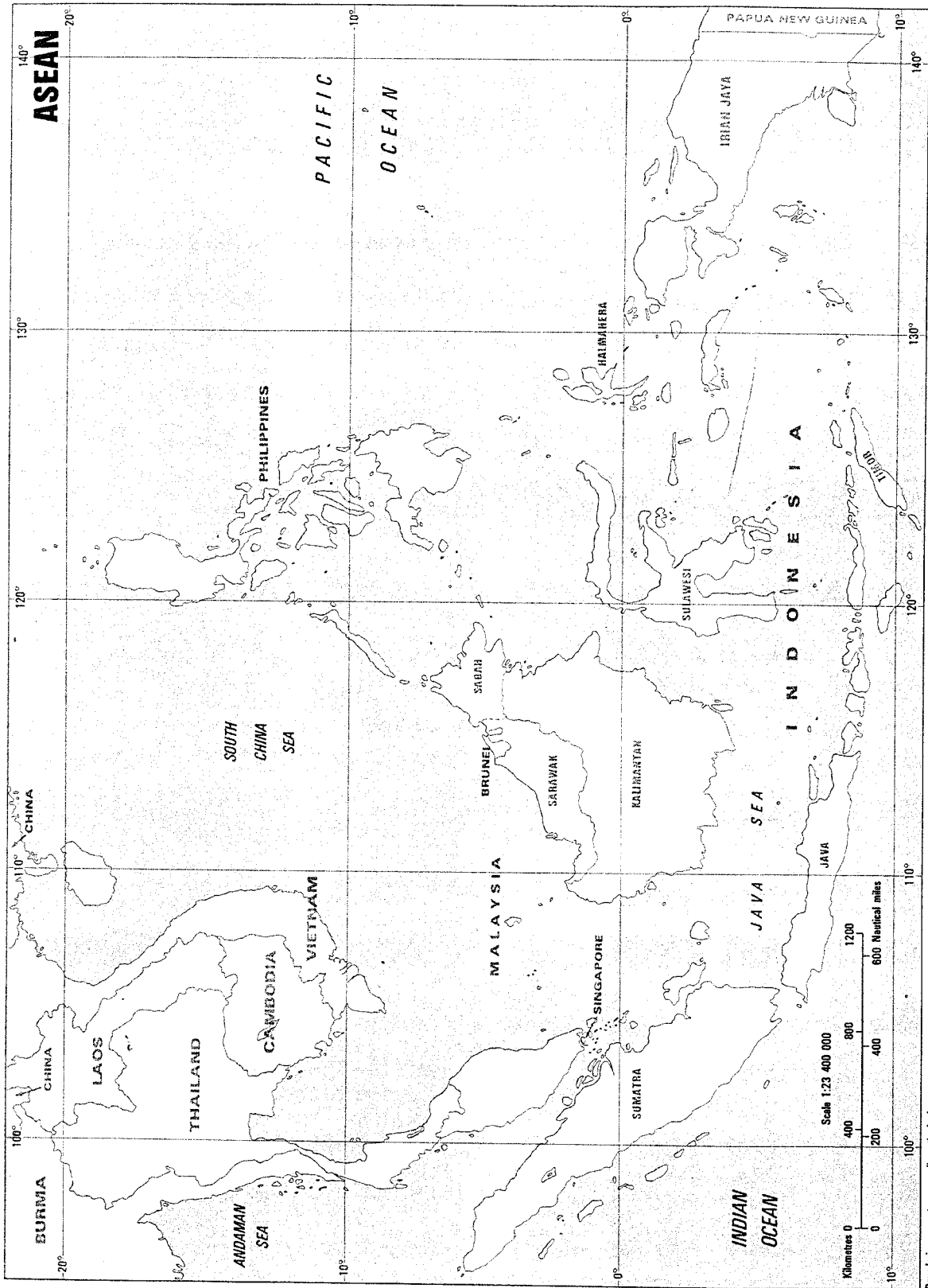
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## Introduction

Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are of key strategic importance for Australia. These three nations form the geographic and arguably the political core of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The growing resilience of ASEAN over the last quarter of a century has been a major factor in Australia's secure strategic outlook. In addition, the Indonesia - Malaysia - Singapore triangle lies across the most feasible military approaches to Australia. Hence strategic cohesion in this triangle greatly reduces the prospect of any kind of military threat to Australia. As the Australian Government said in The Defence of Australia 1987<sup>1</sup>:

the northern archipelagic chain...is the most likely route through which any major assault could be launched against Australia. [Hence] developments in the archipelagic states, especially Indonesia, are of great strategic significance to us.<sup>2</sup>

Just as important as developments in the archipelago to our north are the strategic perceptions of the nations located there. As the editor of The Indonesian Quarterly said:

Indonesia and Australia have different perceptions, historical backgrounds, traditions, and cultures which in turn have led to differences in value and behaviour. Differing perceptions usually affect the relationship between countries. Accordingly, Indonesia's perceptions on Australia determines its policy vis-a-vis Australia and vice versa...disregarding or exaggerating another country's perceptions is bound to create tensions.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from avoiding tension, an understanding of regional perceptions is essential for achieving other key strategic

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as 'the 1987 Defence White Paper'.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Defence, The Defence of Australia 1987, A.G.P.S., Canberra, 1987, 15

<sup>3</sup> The Indonesian Quarterly, vol. XX, no. 2, 1992, 128-129.

objectives of Australia. The Defence of Australia 1987 states that a principal national defence interest is "the promotion of a sense of strategic community between Australia and its neighbours in our area of primary strategic interest."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Foreign Minister Senator Gareth Evans' 1989 statement on Australia's Regional Security states that an essential element of "comprehensive engagement" with Southeast Asia is to participate "actively in the gradual development of a regional security community based on a sense of shared security interests."<sup>5</sup> Developing a sense of "strategic community" or "shared security interests" is clearly not possible without an appreciation of the strategic perceptions of regional nations.

A survey of regional strategic perceptions per se would cover a broad spectrum. Robert O. Tilman, for example, in Southeast Asia and the enemy beyond - ASEAN perceptions of external threats<sup>6</sup>, examines ASEAN nations' perceptions of the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Japan and Vietnam amongst a wide range of potential threats. The following study, however, looks at regional perceptions from the perspective of Australia's security policies. First, it looks at perceptions of key factors in regional stability. An awareness of key influences on regional stability as perceived by our neighbours is important for Australia's central foreign policy aim, ie "the maintenance of a positive security and strategic environment in our region".<sup>7</sup> Second, the study examines perceptions of the United States. The United States

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Defence, op. cit., 22.

<sup>5</sup> Senator Gareth Evans, Australia's Regional Security, Canberra, 1989, 44.

<sup>6</sup> Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Senator Evans, op. cit., 1.

is likely to remain a major military ally of Australia. It will therefore be of continuing strategic importance for Australia to be aware of attitudes towards the United States in the region. Finally, the study looks at the view Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have of Australia itself, including specific perceptions of our security policies.

It is not the case, of course, that Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore themselves have 'perceptions'. Rather, the views of a range of individuals represent the perceptions of each nation. Individual perceptions can vary. Indeed, one of the main findings of this study is that there is a divergence in attitudes towards the United States and Australia on the part of different elements of government and society, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia.

In considering whose perceptions to take account of, the views of those who decide national policy are obviously the most important. The opinions of national leaders, however, are not always accessible. While Singapore's leaders, especially Lee Kuan Yew, have regularly offered their views on a multitude of issues, other national leaders - particularly President Suharto of Indonesia - have been less forthcoming. Apart from other government ministers and officials, this study also presents the views of members of the academic community, and opinions put forward in leading newspapers and journals. In Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, there is generally greater scope for academics to influence government decisions than is normally the case in Australia. Moreover, attitudes in the wider community form the context in which

national decisions are made. Hence it is important to be aware of wider opinion in the three countries.

This study concentrates on strategic perceptions from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in the years 1989 to 1992. This was a period when Australia's approach to regional security was consolidated. After The Defence of Australia 1987 set out a program for defence self-reliance, Foreign Minister Senator Evans released his 1989 statement on Australia's Regional Security, which explained Australia's overall regional security approach. In considering the implications for Australia's security policies, the study draws on these two documents, plus the recently declassified 1989 government document, Australia's Strategic Planning in the 1990s<sup>8</sup>. It also looks at various initiatives and statements on regional security made by Senator Evans since 1989. In addition, it looks at the alternative policies put forward in the Liberal/National Coalition's 1992 document, A Strong Australia - Rebuilding Australia's Defence.<sup>9</sup>

It is not the role of this study to debate the merits of the security policies adopted or advocated by the Australian Government or the opposition Liberal/National Party Coalition. For example, the argument put forward by some Australian critics that The Defence of Australia 1987 represented a return to an aggressive 'Forward Defence' strategy<sup>10</sup> is not analysed in detail. Such views do have some significance for this study to the extent that they influence perceptions in regional countries of Australia's security policies. This

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8 Australian Government, Australia's Strategic Planning in the 1990s, Canberra, 1992.

9 Federal Liberal Party/National Party Coalition, Canberra, 1992.

10 See, for example, G. Cheeseman, 'Over-reach in Australia's Regional Military Policy', in G. Cheeseman, St John Kettle (eds), The New Australian Militarism, Sydney, 1990, 73-92.

study's main focus, however, is not the rationale for Australia's current security approach, but the extent to which strategic perceptions from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in the years 1989 to 1992 might affect that approach.

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