

Interview – Ava Patricia Avila

Written by E-International Relations

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Ava Patricia Avila is a Strategic Fellow at Verve Research, where she concentrates on gender, development, and civil-military relations. Ava's professional experience encompasses working for both government and non-government organizations in the Philippines, Singapore, and Washington DC. From 2007 to 2011, she worked at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies as Associate Research Fellow. Prior to that, she worked with the Mindanao Commission on Women where she helped develop training materials on three areas of programming: politics and governance, peace and multiculturalism, and poverty reduction. In 2018, she provided strategic guidance to Equal Access International as they were selected to implement a U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center project focused on enhancing indigenous capacities to develop countering violent extremism (CVE) alternative messaging strategies by and for vulnerable youth in Mindanao. Following this role, she provided research support to RAND Corporation's evaluation of the said CVE project. Ava holds a Ph.D. in Defense and Security from Cranfield University. Her writing can be found in the Asia Pacific Journal of Education, The Diplomat, Rappler, Mindanews, and Analyzing War. Her published work focuses on the Philippines, such as the Philippine-US Relations: The Relevance of an Evolving Alliance and Increasing Female Filipino Peacekeepers and the WPS Agenda. As both a researcher and practitioner, her long-standing goal is to work towards bridging research, policymaking, and grassroots activism to effectively impact public policy. Follow her on Twitter @ava_patricia.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

While most Asian countries remain considerably freer and more democratic today than during the Cold War, there is growing concern about a regression of democracy due to rising authoritarianism and the resurgence of illiberalism. In the field of civil-military relations, current debates have intensified, particularly in Southeast Asia through the substantial role of uniformed military personnel in governmental responses to COVID-19. A number of these have focused on top-down questions: What role should retired generals play in a public health crisis and in other non-traditional security issues? What are the consequences of having so many former military leaders being appointed to civilian positions? In the same vein, there is also an interest in the importance of examining civil-military relations from a bottom-up perspective. As the military intrusion into civilian polity continues to grow, what is the current state of military professionalism? What is society's view on civil-military relations given several Southeast Asian nations have a history of military rule? How are ethics and professionalism taught to soldiers and other security personnel? How is an increasingly polarized political environment affecting democracy in Asia?

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I was in my senior year in college when I watched the Twin Towers on television go down during that fateful day in 2001. From thousands of miles away, I had no idea how the events of 9/11 would impact my life. What I was excited about was joining the field of development as encouraged and inspired by my volunteer experience in the university. Early in my career, I traveled all around Mindanao working with women on three areas of programming: peace and multiculturalism, poverty reduction, as well as politics and governance. When I was offered an opportunity to pursue a PhD on defense and security, my dissertation was motivated by the conversations I had with the people on the ground, the development advocacies we engaged in, along with my research work on terrorism issues while based in Singapore.

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I am also fortunate to have good mentors—many of them were women who have been a critical part of both my professional and personal development. I met them in school, at work, in my community, at church, and within my family. Through their experiences, I have seen how women can choose to lead lives apart from perceived norms and break barriers. They have served as role models, anchors, life coaches, motivators, and firm reminders of who I am and what I can become.

I also believe that it is important to set a time for reading. This habit I developed as a child and continue as an adult, has refined my ability for empathy. Adam Garfinkle’s article in *National Affairs* very much resonated with me, where he wrote, “deep literacy has wondrous effects, nurturing our capacity for abstract thought, enabling us to pose and answer difficult questions, and empowering our creativity and imagination.” Likewise, Nadia Murad’s memoir, *The Last Girl*, a story about her captivity and the Yazidi’s fight against the Islamic State helped increase my knowledge and understanding of other conflicts around the world. While we have made great strides in the empowerment of women and girls, there are still many communities who do not support this endeavor.

Southeast Asian states have steadily been enhancing their defense capabilities and acquiring new ones over the past decade. What is driving Southeast Asia’s military build-up?

Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows that military expenditure in Southeast Asia has risen, on average, by almost 10 percent annually since 2009. Many identify China’s behavior in the South China Sea (SCS) as the primary driver of Southeast Asia’s military build-up. In 2013, the Philippines filed an arbitration case against China in the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). In 2016, ITLOS ruled in favor of the Philippines and against the Chinese “nine-dash line” maritime claim of nearly the entire SCS. Manila has acquired two former US coast guard Hamilton-class cutters as well as two new South Korean frigates. Vietnam’s response to China’s militarization of the SCS has included procuring new capabilities such as Kilo-class submarines and multi-role aircraft, along with advanced frigates and corvettes.

However, the more recent concentration on Chinese assertiveness is just part of the story. Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have been seeking to modernize their military capabilities to counter a wide range of challenges that include piracy, trafficking, and territorial incursions. Acquisitions budgets have also been allotted for the replenishment of old equipment, where in the case of Vietnam, Laos, and the Philippines, the age of equipment averages at least 35 years. Further scrutiny of the budgets will also reveal that a huge chunk of the defense appropriations of most ASEAN countries is budgeted for personnel costs such as salaries, benefits, and training. In the Philippines, more than a quarter of its personnel expenditure is allocated to fund pensions of retired servicemen, which poses sustainability concerns to the country’s overall security strategy.

How has this military build-up affected multilateral security cooperation within ASEAN?

This year marks the 15th anniversary since the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) and 11 years since the ADMM-Plus was launched. Within that time, multilateral cooperation through strategic dialogue and practical security cooperation has advanced remarkably. Militaries of ADMM-Plus members (10 ASEAN member states with Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the United States) conduct exercises to jointly train and build confidence and habits of cooperation. In addition, the platform also serves as a venue for defense ministers to dialogue with their counterparts on sensitive issues like the SCS and the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Seeing that these engagements had been so useful to their work, defense ministers agreed to meet once a year, rather than once every three years as was originally agreed in 2010.

ASEAN has a recent history of struggling to form cohesive responses to important regional issues. What explains the divided responses among ASEAN Member States especially today concerning the military coup in Myanmar?

ASEAN states have often been challenged when called upon to address allegations of human rights violations by a member state as the group upholds the principles of mutual non-interference in domestic affairs along with

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consensus-based decision-making as core values of the regional grouping. The lack of a punitive sanction-based compliance mechanism is often cited to explain ASEAN's inability to hold its members accountable. It was not that long ago when ASEAN was also criticized for its failure to effectively address Myanmar's Rohingya crisis. Again, its member states find themselves split over intervening in the current crisis in Myanmar. This pattern emboldens the Tatmadaw as they have not faced consequences for their actions.

On the surface, one could easily conclude that ASEAN is unable to effectively confront such situations. However, there have been instances (e.g., 2008 Cyclone Nargis response) when collective action has been used by ASEAN states to address an internal crisis within one of its members. Despite the threat of sanctions by Western countries, ASEAN members willing to engage Myanmar in a constructive manner must continue to do so. While this may be an inadequate response, ultimately, credibility is essential if ASEAN centrality is to endure in the competitive Indo-Pacific environment Southeast Asian nations contend with.

In your article, you talk about the military's prominent role in disaster response, specifically in the Philippines. In what ways have militaries institutionalized their role in areas beyond the defense sector and how has this affected civil-military relations?

While the practice is not novel, military engagement beyond the defense sector has grown in the last two decades. There is a growing recognition of the importance of fostering stronger civil-military coordination in responding effectively and efficiently to humanitarian crises. For example, military assets, primarily air transport, were utilized in response to the earthquake disaster that struck Kashmir in 2005. At the time, the U.S. military's response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake was its largest international disaster response in history. Similarly, domestic and international military personnel were deployed to the Visayas in the Philippines during the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan response.

In Asia, disaster management is embedded in the structure of multiple regional bodies such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, ASEAN, and the East Asia Summit. Involved in the response process are non-governmental, civilian officials, and military personnel, who attend meetings and support the development of planning response guidelines that enhance the multi-faceted response required by these contingencies. Furthermore, the Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination, supported by the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, is the framework that guides political and military actors on how best to support any humanitarian assistance and disaster relief initiatives.

How does integrating a gender perspective enrich research on civil-military relations?

Civil-military relations is a huge interdisciplinary field that asks both normative and empirical questions about the relationships between the government, the military, and broader society. We want to know what these relationships look like, whether they are healthy and if they are not, how to make them healthier. Feminist activists and researchers have long recognized the significance of a gender perspective in the study of civil-military relations. Integrating gender into civil-military relations research ensures a critical examination and understanding of social, economic, political, cultural, and religious practices; of how equality and inequality manifest themselves in the distribution of and access to resources and of decision-making authority. A gender perspective also has the potential to provide competencies and perspectives that can help improve the conduct of operations.

Just over 20 years ago, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security," which reaffirms the role women play in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding. It also called for increased participation and representation of women at all decision-making levels and increased focus on integrating gender perspectives into all efforts aimed at promoting peace and security. When included as meaningful participants in the negotiation of peace agreements, women enlarge the scope of those agreements to include the broader set of critical societal priorities and needs required for lasting peace. For example, women played a key role in the negotiations that led to the 2014 comprehensive peace agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The peace agreement was hailed for two reasons: (1) its strong provisions on women's rights as well as for women's political, social, and economic participation, and (2) three of the 12 signatories are women.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I would advise young scholars to read more history. This has been one of the most important things I have learned while conducting security research as well as in doing development work. In today's world, where people are bombarded with information via social media and often cherry pick data to prove a point, it helps to place current events in historical context. History is an evidence-based discipline. So, knowing how and where to find the information one needs to gain a fuller understanding of today's contentious debates can help us discern not only what is being said, but also help us grasp the implications of the decisions being made and why leaders are making them. I would also encourage them to submit pieces for publication and learn through the writing and editing process, including learning the essential lesson that feedback is a gift.