Transnational Security Concerns, Defence Modernization and Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia

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Conditions that allow transnational threats to develop and flourish are evident in many Asia-Pacific countries. A mixture of local conditions and the forces of globalization challenge existing governments and social structures. The spill-over of regional problems in a mobile society, exacerbated by globalized trade and fast-moving banking and financial services systems can amplify their effects internationally. The repercussions of this affect many aspects of people's lives, and extend to inter-state relations and beyond to military security. This paper shows how in Southeast Asia transnational threats, important as they are, do not directly augment the possibility of inter-state war. State responses to the threats have not yet reached a level where deterrence capability strengthens defence capability.

The Nature of Transnational Security Threats

Transnational security issues, defined as non-military threats that cross borders and either threaten the political and social integrity of a nation or the health of that nation's inhabitants, are emerging as key security challenges for Southeast Asian states. Examples of key transnational threats include, among others, transnational crime, terrorism, maritime piracy, arms trafficking, illegal migration, infectious disease and environmental degradation. It is important to emphasize that these threats do not necessarily pose direct challenges to 'territorial' sovereignty, but rather to 'state authority' and 'effective government'.

There may be an exhaustive list of what so-called transnational threats to security are. Causes vary, such as uneven distribution of wealth, depletion of natural resources, boundary eroding, pan-ideology and politics of identity, and failing states. These all threaten distinct consequences for their primary targets, which could be individual safety, state authority (legitimacy), and/or (internationally recognized) territorial boundaries. More importantly, local security challenges can spread rapidly to acquire a regional or global reach.

Individual cases can be found elsewhere. Piracy has been on the increase, particularly in the waters around Indonesia and the Philippines. In the first nine months of 1999, 66 actual or attempted pirate attacks took place on Indonesian waters – representing 67% of the total for Southeast Asia – and double the number of incidents for the same period in 1998. Besides that, illegal migration is increasingly viewed as a security problem. There are hundreds of thousands of illegal Indonesian migrants in

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Malaysia, including many Acehnese suspected of links with Acehnese secessionist organizations.

These problems have all been on the increase since the Asian financial and economic crises of 1997-98. Since the late 1990s, the 'old global' security challenges, such as the massive, indiscriminate trade in arms, drug trafficking and international terrorism, have grown out of all proportion, and have also acquired global dimensions. Indeed, it may be concluded that technological development and globalization were the main impulse for such increases – apart from the magnifying effect of chaotic conditions in the region.

Nevertheless, there could well be two more relevant causes. First, there is growing evidence that transnational threats are becoming increasingly enmeshed in the fabric of global organized crime. Uneven distribution of wealth and depletion of natural resources magnify the brutality and expand the scope of armed conflicts around the globe. Violent conflict and economic hardship boost largely uncontrolled migration, threatening both social and political stability in some countries.

Second, official corruption at various levels of government, from customs officers to senior executives, compounds these problems. It is very likely that criminal organizations and terrorists use corruption to breach the sovereignty of many states and then continue to employ it to distort domestic and international affairs. There are regions of Burma, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines that are virtually ungovernable by the central government, and a number of groups, including terrorists, insurgents and mafias, have all but replaced state authority.

Law Enforcement and Military Measures

Long-term policies are needed to neutralize the primary cause of non-traditional threats to security. Unlike traditional security challenges, transnational threats emerge slowly and often do not elicit a focused or timely policy response. And transnational security issues straddle both domestic and foreign spheres. Nevertheless, in most Southeast Asian countries the practice is that law enforcement officials are responsible for dealing with domestic threats and the military is responsible for dealing with external military threats.

This has its own merits. In principle, the use of force is a narrow response to a problem and not particularly useful against such dispersed threats. The military is often too blunt an instrument to use against criminal organizations. Organized hierarchically, the armed forces are not well suited to dealing with networks. The responsibility for transnational threats should not rest primarily with the armed forces. The military should only take a leading role in dealing with transnational threats where territorial sovereignty is at stake.

The irony is that in fact the existence of defined borders has serious implications for law enforcement. National boundaries make it difficult for law enforcement agencies to deal with transnational threats, apart from cooperation with law enforcement officials across the border. As a result, law enforcement has always been the least favoured means of dealing with transnational threats, and there is a greater possibility that it will fall to the military to deal with.

The military should play a supporting role only where primary responsibility and

initiatives lie elsewhere. In this capacity, however, the military has much to contribute. It can provide transportation, emergency medical care and other non-combat roles. It can certainly play an important part in the interception of drug and criminal products and can make useful contributions in the intelligence area.

This poses some constitutional and security challenges, particularly in the case of Indonesia. On the one hand, institutions that have only recently been separated should now learn to work closely together and blend their strategies in order to ensure security. On the other hand, the division of the military and the law enforcement function is closely linked to the preservation of liberties and democratic credos, and the task of merging them is fraught with hazards.

Defence Modernization in Southeast Asia

There is no arms race currently underway in Southeast Asia. No state currently possesses, or is seeking to possess, the capabilities necessary to dominate the core territory of its potential adversaries. Confidence-building measures have been used. So has preventive diplomacy. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and other declaratory measures appear to have provided Southeast Asian countries with political cushions.

Nonetheless, geographic vulnerability to blockade and interception make Southeast Asia's security dilemma particularly acute. Among Southeast Asian nations, Singapore, Malaysia and, to a lesser extent, Thailand have been devoting their resources to defence modernization. In March 2000, Singapore bought six French-designed stealth frigates. Malaysia answered with various anti-ship missile systems. To narrow the gap, Malaysia acquired multiple launch rockets. Singapore bought Apache helicopters and added more when Malaysia answered with starburst missiles and SAM surface-to-air batteries, which are effective against low-flying Apache helicopters. Singapore this year added additional Apaches with enhanced 'fire and forget' missiles and all-weather capabilities.

While this does not mean that any Southeast Asian countries are going to war with other countries in the region, some may be operating on the assumption that it is prudent to prepare an umbrella before it rains. In fact, few changes are evident in equipment procurement programmes. In spite of increasing demands upon military forces in nearly all nations to adapt and expand their capabilities to deal with transnational threats, most remain focused upon the core business of war fighting.

In the longer run, however, this could be dangerous. The types of weapons being procured favour punishment-based strategies that are highly unstable and war-prone. Undoubtedly there are mutually reinforcing characteristics of traditional and emerging security threats. Theoretically, the new nature of conflict should become visible in the process of creating new technological dimensions and in new concepts and strategic instruments. The asymmetric strategies involved in informational warfare will lead us to an army with a higher capacity to use unconventional force during peace time and in crisis situations.

Concluding Notes

Most people would agree that ASEAN's lack of development into an effective instrument for regional security cooperation over the past decade was a major lost opportunity. Certainly, regional cooperation to combat terrorism is growing, but there are constraints. Information sharing within and among governments in the region has been improving, especially since September 11.

In many forums, the governments of Southeast Asia have committed to undertake a series of measures to deal with 'increasingly violent international crime'. Declarations have endorsed ongoing efforts to establish a legal framework for regional cooperation in order to tackle transnational threats to security. More importantly, there have also been pledges to enhance cooperation in the implementation of relevant international instruments for the suppression of piracy and armed robbery against ships.

Nevertheless, all proposed cooperation would be on the basis of respecting territorial integrity, sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction, and participation would be voluntary–. Also, nothing in the statement, or any action carried out in pursuance of it, should prejudice the position of countries with regard to any unsettled dispute concerning sovereign or other rights over territory. No statement spells out the mechanisms and processes to implement the anti-piracy measures, beyond working individually with existing institutions like the International Maritime Organization and International Maritime Bureau.

Seen from this perspective, what is clearly needed in the development of a security community is the building of practical operational cooperation among the militaries of countries in Southeast Asia in particular, and Asia and the Pacific in general. This will provide a solid foundation for developing the kind of variable and flexible bilateral and multilateral relationships that are critical to the success of cooperative endeavours.