

Building maritime capacity in South-East Asia

Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) has been on a roll since January. In the span of slightly over a month, the 10-member regional bloc participated in four major events: the commemorative summit with India, Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting Retreat, Asean Foreign Ministers' Retreat, and an informal defence ministers' meeting with China.

Underlying all the bonhomie of these major events has been a constant worry about what future lies ahead. The joint statements and press releases say it all. The region continues to face strategic uncertainties arising from numerous security challenges. Asean is certainly more preoccupied with the scourge of extremist violence and terrorism, especially following the Marawi debacle. However, as Asean grapples with this insidious threat, it is also coping with the evidently intensifying great power rivalries. The South China Sea problems look as if they have been successfully managed for now. But Asean could not hide its anxiety. The latest chairman's statement from the Asean Foreign Ministers' Retreat flagged concerns over the persistent militarization activities in the disputed waters. The statement did not call out anyone in particular, but most would have almost instinctively linked it to China.

Altogether, the challenges posed by terrorism and other non-traditional security issues, as well as great power rivalries and the South China Sea disputes, present a less than rosy picture for Asean, which seeks to preserve its driver's seat in the regional security architecture. That said, however, one cardinal norm that will not change, and may continue to serve Asean well, is the idea of inclusivity—enmeshing all Asean and extra-regional players by giving each a veritable stake in regional peace and stability.

This norm works well when it comes to maritime security capacity-building in South-East Asia. Maintaining good order at sea—safeguarding the maritime commons and ensuring freedom of navigation—is everyone's responsibility, both coastal and user states. But as the Malacca Straits patrols and the latest Sulu-Celebes Seas trilateral cooperative arrangements have demonstrated, Asean governments regard policing the waters as first and foremost the primary responsibility of coastal states. Extra-regional actors are welcome to offer fiscal, technical and training aid.

While the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte not too long ago suggested roping China into the Sulu-Celebes Seas patrols, it remains to be seen whether Asean will really open a Pandora's box and set a precedent for future extra-regional intervention. It is more possible to see greater Asean participation in such intramural initiatives as those in the Sulu-Celebes Seas, before the bloc decides to seek extra-regional direct involvement. But this preferred approach runs against yet another, pragmatic challenge of persistent maritime security capacity shortfalls faced by some Asean governments.

It is in this backdrop that one could see extra-regional powers play significant roles. The US is a longstanding player, elevating its role with the recent freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. In the near future, the US navy looks poised to continue shouldering this thankless yet critically important task while others serve as essentially little more than cheerleaders or silent bystanders. Nonetheless, before this situation changes, the various other extra-regional players can still do more to build maritime security capacities in South-East Asia.

In this respect, Japan trails the US via a structured programme known as the Vientiane Vision. Australia does not have an equivalent programme, despite maintaining a longstanding set of maritime security partnerships with Asean countries. India has more room to grow its involvement. Some, if not all, Asean governments have long viewed New Delhi as a counterweight to China. Recall a few years ago when Vietnamese officials beseeched India to "rise faster"—a sentiment

becoming more prevalent amid the current geopolitical uncertainties.

What New Delhi has in South-East Asia is what Beijing has only in the past decade started doing and so far not yet accomplished in the Indian Ocean. It is the set of bilateral maritime security and naval relations as well as the geographical familiarity and knowledge accumulated over many decades by Indian maritime forces conducting regular deployments east of the Malacca Straits. The established interoperability built up with Asean counterparts, such as through coordinated naval patrols with Indonesia and Thailand, is priceless. But it is time for India to do more. For example, creating more institutionalized patterns of joint training and exercises along the lines of the Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX), involving navies and coastguards. The latest Sambandh Initiative, and Mobile Training Team programme are targeted at the smaller Indian Ocean neighbours as part of the overall response to China's increasing presence in the region. It might be worthwhile extending these programmes to South-East Asia.

Where technical capacity is concerned, India's extension of credit to Vietnam for acquiring new patrol vessels is noteworthy, but a more structured programme aimed at South and South-East Asia along the lines of Australia's Pacific patrol boat programme, could be feasible. New Delhi could also leverage its space technology strengths, especially remote-sensing capabilities for maritime domain awareness. Technical tie-ups between the Indian Space Research Organization and its Asean counterparts in the area of micro- and nano-satellites—for which such national programmes already exist in South-East Asia—can be another way forward.

However, it is finally important to highlight that instead of disparate national approaches to assist South-East Asia's maritime security capacity-building, which could lead to duplication and overlap of efforts, it may reap greater benefits for these extra-regional powers to coordinate with each other in the absence of a joint framework. Despite criticisms directed at its relevance and efficacy, the Quad may serve as such a platform, short of being a formal alliance, to facilitate such efforts. A more robust "Act East" approach for India could well begin with initiating discussions within this set-up.

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