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Southeast Asian navies: national interests, regional competition and co-operation and international obligations

Abstract

The seas of Southeast Asia are pivotal to the region's security and socio-economic wellbeing. To the international community Southeast Asian waterways such as the Straits of Malacca and Singapore and the South China Sea are vital sea lines of communication for trade and navigation. The task of securing the region's maritime realm rests with the navies of Southeast Asia. The size and order of battle of these navies reflect the maritime security requirements of the different countries and it is not possible to group the navies under a single category. Southeast Asian navies typically provide traditional maritime security services and also perform limited constabulary role particularly in resource protection. Increasingly however, Southeast Asian navies as with other navies of the world are being looked upon as guarantees against non-traditional maritime security threats such as crime at sea and terrorism. For Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand this also meant deploying vessels to far-away troubled spots such as the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia. This paper examines how Southeast Asian navies react to these challenges. In the final analysis, it argues that current maritime security challenges require navies to be flexible in their policy, planning and deployment of resources.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, maritime security, traditional security, non-traditional security.

Introduction – the maritime Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is by-and-large a maritime region. Apart from Laos which is land-locked, all other Southeast Asian countries have maritime territories. Southeast Asia's maritime realm is large comprising the from west to east the Andaman Sea, the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, the Gulf of Thailand, the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea and the Sulawesi Sea, not to mention smaller straits such as Makassar, Sunda, Lombok and Balabac (Figure 1).

By virtue of its maritime nature, countries in Southeast Asia also share common maritime boundaries. The juxtaposition of these boundaries sometimes resulted in disputes where the boundaries have not been delimited. In general however, Southeast Asian countries have been "model" international citizens in maritime boundary delimitation with 25 maritime bilateral boundary agreements signed between them (Forbes and Basiron, 2010).

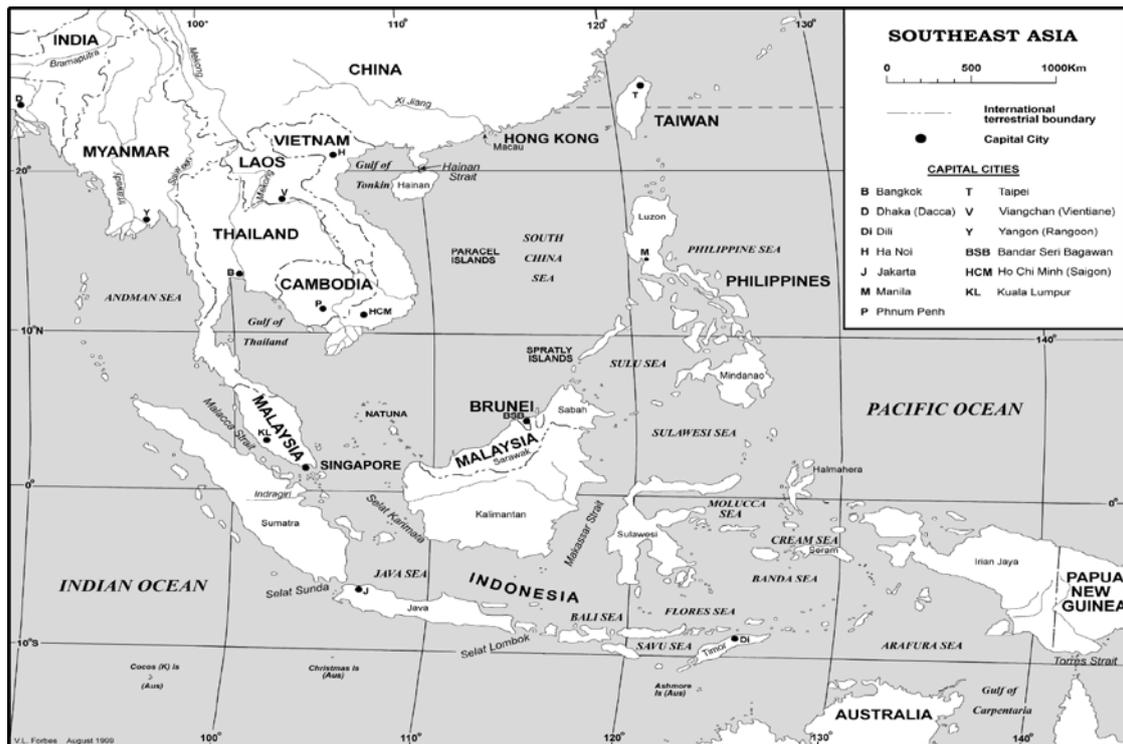


Figure 1: Maritime Southeast Asia

Geographical realities aside, Southeast Asian nations depends on the sea for their socio-economic well being. Apart from being trading routes and sea lines of communications (SLOC), the seas of Southeast Asia also provides goods and services ranging from fisheries and marine resources to places of recreation. The tasks of ensuring national sovereignty, SLOC security and resource protection are carried out by the region’s navies and influence the strategic and operational doctrines and determine the ways in which the navies are equipped. Increasingly however, Southeast Asian navies are facing threats from non-traditional security actors such as pirate and terrorist groups who are less interested in sovereignty matters but more keen on economic gains and political mileage respectively.

The “push-and-pull” factor, i.e. the regional navies push towards more conventional capabilities such as submarine warfare and the pull of non-traditional security issues would no doubt play an important role in the future shape, structure, ambition and strategies of Southeast Asian navies. This paper examines the factors which are and would be influencing the growth of Southeast Asian navies, their future strategies and procurement trends.

Southeast Asian navies in brief

Because of doctrinal differences and disparities in capability and equipment, it is difficult to pigeon-hole Southeast Asian navies into a single category. As shown

in Table 1, there are significant differences between the larger, “blue-water” oriented navies and those which are focused on coastal operations. The differences is accentuated by the geographical nature of Indonesia and Philippines which are archipelagic States and require different naval capabilities than countries such as Malaysia and Thailand whose navies are focused on operations in their respective exclusive economic zone. At the other end of the spectrum is the Republic of Singapore Navy which is an integral part of the island-state “forward defence doctrine” and its SLOC protection requirements but is directly responsible for only a small sea area.

Table 1. Southeast Asian navies “order of battle”

Country	Number of Vessels							
	Types of Vessels							
	Aircraft Carriers	Submarines	Frigates	Corvettes	Patrol and Coastal Combatants	Mine Countermeasures	Amphibious	Logistics and Support
Singapore		4	6	6	23	4	38	2
Malaysia		2	2	10	14	4	115	9
Indonesia		2	7	23	41	11	83	27
Thailand	1		10	9	90	19	27	15
Myanmar				3	50		18	10
Vietnam		2	5	6	38	14	32	22
Philippines			1		62		46	
Brunei					16		4	
Cambodia					11			
Laos								

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2010.

The preponderance of patrol and coastal combatants can be attributed to history when Southeast Asian navies are primarily coastal navies involved in constabulary roles such as resource protection. The introduction of the 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone concept in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea necessitated larger vessels to patrol these newly acquired areas and Southeast Asian navies began acquiring offshore patrol vessels in the late 1980s and in the case of Thailand, an aircraft carrier in 1997 (Jane’s Fighting Ships, 1996-1997).

While Southeast Asian navies have also expressed the desire to become “blue water” navies, this is not necessarily reflected in the acquisition trends. The need for a wider reach however, was brought to attention when several Malaysia, Singaporean and Thailand flagged vessels were hijacked in the Gulf of Aden and the region’s navies were compelled to send warships for secure the sea lanes there. There would obviously be some useful lessons from these deployments

which could contribute towards determining the future orientation of Southeast Asian navies.

Traditional security issues in Southeast Asia

While Southeast Asian countries have been diligent in resolving their maritime territorial disputes, there remain a number of traditional maritime security hotspots in the region, namely the South China Sea and the Sulawesi (Celebes) Sea. These are also areas where the conventional strength of Southeast Asian navies is evidence. Malaysia for example is basing both of its recently acquire submarines (Bernama 3 July 2010) as well as its six New Generation Patrol Vessels in bases on the South China Sea while Indonesia's four new Sigma class corvettes are often observed patrolling in the Sulawesi Sea where it has a maritime boundary dispute with Malaysia.

Recent exchange of words between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and China's Minister of Foreign Affairs on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi and China's response to the presence of the USNS Impeccable off the coast of Hainan and the new Philippines' baseline law in 2009 may have awoken the claimants of the South China Sea from the slumber that came with the signing of the Declaration on the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South between ASEAN and China in 2002.

The DOC as it is known was an interim instrument to manage conflicts between claimants in the South China Sea while the countries work towards "a peaceful and durable solution" to the problem. While the declaration has contributed to a reduction in the intensity of the conflict, it has not all been smooth sailing between 2002 and now. The signatories to the DOC for example, have hardly been reticent in carrying out activities which could reinforce their claims in the South China Sea (Basiron 2009). China, Vietnam and the Philippines for instance completed a joint seismic survey in 2007 and China has imposed a strict ban on fishing in parts of the South China Sea claimed also by Vietnam much to the indignation of the Vietnamese Government and fishermen (Pham, 2009).

There are also bilateral security issues in Southeast Asia that are related to maritime boundary delimitation. For example, from 2001 to 2009 the navies of Malaysia and Indonesia were involved in "near" clashes in the waters off the islands of Sipadan and Ligitan. The situation is currently being addressed at the political and diplomatic level and through the MALINDO prevention of incidents at sea agreement signed in 2002. The situation in the Sulawesi Sea highlights the difficulty of naval operations in disputed areas even for navies which cooperate with each other closely in other parts of Southeast Asia. The Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) and the Tentara Nasional Indonesia – Angkatan Laut (TNI-AL) for

example have worked closely to address the piracy situation in the Straits of Malacca.

Traditional security issues are currently driving the procurement trends among some Southeast Asian navies. In January 2009 for example, Singapore commissioned the final vessels of its Formidable class frigates (Embassy of France, 2009), while in July this year Malaysia took delivery of the second *Scorpene* submarines it ordered in 2000. Not wanting to be left behind, both Indonesia and Vietnam are contemplating additional submarines for their respective navies (National Institute of Defence Studies, 2010).

Besides traditional or conventional naval functions such as SLOC security and protection of national territorial sovereignty, navies throughout the world, Southeast Asian navies included are now involved in addressing non-traditional maritime security issues such as piracy and terrorism. The section below discusses these issues and some of the actions taken by the Southeast Asian navies to address them.

Non-traditional security issues in Southeast Asia – *casus belli* for co-operation and new challenges for navies

The subjects of piracy and terrorism in the Strait of Malacca have largely fallen off the international community's radar screen as a result of increased co-operation among the littoral states of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, improvements in economic conditions in Indonesia and the signing of the Aceh Peace Accord in 2005. At its height, though the piracy scare resulted in unsolicited and subsequently rejected offers for patrolling assistance from the United States, Japan and India (Huang, 2007; Vavro, 2007). It also contributed to unprecedented levels of co-operation between the three littoral States in the form of the trilateral Malacca Straits Coordinated Patrol which was established in July 2004, and the "Eyes in the Sky" aerial surveillance programme which was launched on 13 September 2005. The coordinated patrol and aerial surveillance while criticised by some analysts as being more for "show" (Bradford, 2005 & Raymond, 2007) presented a major political step for the three littoral States which until then accorded different priorities to security in the Strait of Malacca (Raymond, 2009). It also had the effect of discouraging external involvement in securing the Strait.

Unfortunately, the reduction in piracy incidents in the Strait of Malacca has been somewhat negated by an increase in incidents in the South China Sea. Up until September of this year, 26 cases were reported in the South China Sea particularly around the islands of Natuna, Anambas and Mangkai within Indonesia's archipelagic waters including nine attacks in August and early

September (AP 2 Sept 2010) prompting the Regional Piracy Centre of the International Maritime Bureau to issue piracy alerts in the area (AFP, 2010).

The Southern Philippines also saw an increase in non-traditional security threat in the form of terrorist attacks and kidnappings at the start of the millennium. The threat largely created by separatist and terrorist groups namely the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group resulted in a number of attacks on maritime transportation in the Philippines and kidnapping of tourists from Malaysia. The attacks on the cargo-passenger *MV Our Lady Mediatrix* on 27 December 2000 and the ferry *Superferry 14* on 27 February 2004 highlighted the deadly potential of maritime terrorism especially on civilian targets (Banlaoi, 2005). The kidnappings which occurred in the Malaysian islands of Sipadan on 3 May 2000 and Pandanan on 30 August 2000 had security as well as economic ramifications as Malaysia had to deploy defence personnel on 55 of its islands in the Sulu Sea under a security programme known as “Ops Pasir” while at the same time evacuating resorts on Sipadan to the island of Mabul.

Unlike the littoral States of the Strait of Malacca, the Philippines were more welcoming of the presence of foreign military personnel in its territory. Southern Philippines now hosts contingents from the United States which has been there since 2002 as part of the “Operation Enduring Freedom” (Maxwell, 2004) as well as Australia who have had special forces operatives in the Southern Philippines since 2006 (Sheridan, 2006). The presence of these forces has significantly boosted the Philippines’ counter terrorism and counter insurgency capabilities resulting in increased pressure on the militant groups.

The United States has also contributed equipment including radars such as those deployed along Malaysia’s coastline on the Sulu Sea (Keith, 2008) and the twelve land-based and seaborne radars valued at USD 56 million donated to Indonesia for deployment throughout its vast archipelago (Antara News, 2008). This shows that while some Southeast Asian states are averse to foreign military presence in the region, they are willing to receive materiel assistance. Japan has also contributed a training vessel to the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency and patrol crafts to Indonesia.

Non-traditional and asymmetrical security threats present new operational dimension to Southeast Asian navies which are gearing towards “blue water” operations. Missile armed frigates, corvettes and fast attack crafts are of limited use against small size, fast moving crafts such as those used by terrorists or separatists in the Southern Philippines. Malaysia for example had to make urgent operational requirement acquisition of 12 CB 90 patrol crafts from Sweden in 2001 to meet the challenge of patrolling the shallow waters between the Philippines and Malaysia in the Sulu Sea. However, more conventional naval assets can and do contribute significantly to low-level conflict operations. Three possible areas where navies can play a role are intelligence processing,

responding to specific assignment and intercepting specific targets and wide area surveillance (Mak, 2003).

Piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off Somalia: emerging international obligation?

In August 2008, the shipping community in Southeast Asia was shocked by the successive hijacking of two Malaysian flagged vessels the *Bunga Melati 2* and *Bunga Melati 5* in the Gulf of Aden. On New Year's Day January 2010 a Singaporean flagged vessel the *MT Pramoni* was also hijacked followed by the *MT Golden Blessing* in June 2010. Thailand also was not spared as from August 2008 to April 2010 five Thai fishing vessels and a cargo vessel the *MV Thor Star* was hijacked by Somali pirates. Thailand also suffered the ignominy of having one of the hijacked fishing vessels fired upon by an Indian navy frigate resulting in the loss of lives among the crewmembers. Table 2 summarises the hijacking incidents involving vessels flagged in Southeast Asian countries.

Table 2. Summary of hijacking incidents involving vessels flagged in or owned by Southeast Asian countries

Flag State	Vessel name	Date hijacked	Remarks
Malaysia	<i>Bunga Melati 2</i>	19 August 2008	Released on 30 Sept. 2008 after ransom paid
	<i>MT Bunga Melati 5</i>	29 August 2008	Released on 27 Sept. 2008 after ransom paid
Singapore	<i>MT Pramoni</i>	1 January 2010	Released 26 February 2010 after ransom paid
	<i>MT Golden Blessing</i>	28 June 2010	Ransom negotiations ongoing
Thailand	<i>MT Thor Star</i>	14 August 2008	Released 13 October 2008 after ransom paid
	<i>FV Ekawat Nava 5*</i>	18 November 2008	Sunk by Indian navy frigate INS Tabar
	<i>FV Thai Union 3</i>	29 October 2009	Released on 7 March 2010
	<i>FV Prantalay 11</i> <i>FV Prantalay 12</i> <i>FV Prantalay 14</i>	18 April 2010	Ransom negotiations ongoing

Source: http://www.australia.to/2010/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4363:9-september-status-of-seized-vessels-and-crews-in-somalia-the-gulf-of-aden-and-the-indian-ocean&catid=99:status-of-abducted-vessels-in-somalia&Itemid=223

* The *FV Ekawat Nava 5* is a Thai owned but Trinidad flagged fishing vessel.

The hijacking of the vessels in Table 2 prompted the concerned Governments to dispatch naval vessels to the Gulf of Aden to assist in the international effort to secure this vital SLOC. Malaysia initially dispatched the frigate *KD Lekiu* and support ships *KD Inderapura* and *KD Mahawangsa* in September 2008 followed by the *KD Inderasakti* in December 2008 and *KD Hang Tuah* in February 2009. Because of the high cost of deploying the navy vessels to escort commercial shipping, a decision was made in early 2009 to convert a Malaysian International Shipping Corporation (MISC) container ship into a naval auxiliary vessel. The *MV Bunga Mas Lima* which is manned by an MISC crew with a complement of Malaysian defence forces personnel deployed to the Gulf of Aden in June 2009 (MISC, 2009).

Singapore has made two deployments so far to the Gulf of Aden. The first was the RSS *Persistence* from April to June of this year and the second was the RSS *Endurance* which deployed on 18 June 2010 (Chow, 2010). During its first deployment the Republic of Singapore Navy also took command of the multinational Combined Task Force 151 (Singapore Ministry of Defence, 2010)

The spate of hijacking against Thai registered vessel compelled the Thai Government to also dispatched two Royal Thai Navy (RTN) ships to the Gulf Aden. The *HTMS Pattani* and *HTMS Similan* left on a three months mission on 10 Sept 2010 (Baird Maritime, 2010).

The deployment of vessels to the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia could possibly place added pressure on the regional navies more accustomed to patrolling their respective countries EEZ. There is also the cost factor. The initial deployment of the three RMN vessels reportedly cost an estimated USD 8.7million (RM 27 million) while the government of Thailand will spend an estimated USD 8.7 million (270 million Bath) to deploy the two RTN vessels (Bangkok Post, 2010). This is presumably one of the reasons behind the conversion of the MISC ship into an RMN auxiliary vessel.

Southeast Asian navies – *quo vadimus?*

The end of the cold war brought with it aspirations of a more peaceful world and the then much touted ‘peace dividends’. Almost twenty years on, the world remains a dangerous place and the so-called peace dividends are nowhere to be seen. The only discernable change is the issues which now shaped global security. Superpower rivalry is now replaced by asymmetrical warfare and the rise of none state players such as terrorist organisations and criminal groups. The war fighting role of navies worldwide has always been supplemented by constabulary functions primarily in resource protection.

However, the rise of non-traditional security threats in the form of piracy, ship hijacking and maritime terrorism has added a new dimension to the role of navies

which transcend traditional or conventional functions of navies. In Southeast Asia this means acquiring new assets and skills to operate in shallow and confined waters found in parts of the Sulu Sea for example. The situation also calls for more flexible policy, planning and deployment of naval assets and personnel. Increasingly, however, Southeast Asian governments are seeing the need for navies to focus more on their war fighting duties and less on constabulary ones. In 2005, Malaysia for example established a dedicated maritime enforcement agency modelled on existing coast guards.

The roles navies worldwide have no doubt changed. In Southeast Asia this means balancing the traditional functions of navies in protecting the maritime integrity and sovereignty of nations, SLOC security and resource protection with non-traditional functions of anti-crime, anti-piracy and anti-terrorism. In the case of the navies of Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand this involves deploying vessels to areas outside of normal areas of operation, in this instance, the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia, certainly not what the great naval strategists and theorists such as Mahan, Corbett and Gorshkov had in mind.

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