

An unlikely senior partner

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In a recent survey undertaken by the East-West Centre, Honolulu, most security analysts believed that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was more effective at creating a sense of regional community than a US-led alliance system. Such findings are likely to be utilised by ASEAN to support its arguments that it is internationally recognised as an exemplar of enlightened regionalism. Despite pockets of political and economic difficulties ASEAN's commitment to pragmatism has allowed it to become a sub-regional organisation of global significance. Key to success has been ASEAN's ability to

overcome ideological differences amongst member-states. This was recently demonstrated at last month's Third ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting in Thailand. In response to increasing concerns of the impact of non-traditional security threats ASEAN declared its willingness to engage with wider civil society on these issues. Yet to overcome perceived difficulties ASEAN further declared that member states will retain full and final discretion regarding its engagement with civil society. However, ASEAN's discretionary approach to tackling security concerns is by no means restricted to civil society engagement.

ASEAN in particular has a vested interest in maintaining maritime security in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. With a third of the world's trade and half its oil transiting through this region, the Straits are a major artery for global trade. Yet acts of piracy and illegal trafficking also pose a challenge to security within the region. Furthermore, there are increasing concerns that the Straits could become a target for Islamic terrorists. Such challenges are a particular concern for the littoral states of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Any disruption to shipping in this region potentially impacts upon each state's economies. A key response from ASEAN is the ASEAN Regional Forum Statement on Cooperation Against Piracy and Other Threats to Security. Issued in 2003, the Statement encourages multilateral cooperation amongst ASEAN states. Such cooperation envisages information exchanges and anti-piracy exercises. Yet the Statement also indicates that such activities are developed in accordance with the principles of voluntary cooperation.

ASEAN's emphasis upon the voluntary nature of cooperation therefore helps to explain fluctuations within Indonesia's, Malaysia's and Singapore's contributions towards security in the Straits. Furthermore, each state's respective contributions also reflect their individual political and economic considerations. In the case of Singapore, any challenge to its status as a hub for transshipment trade and oil refining presents an existential threat. Its links with Western businesses and support for the 'war on terror' also makes Singapore a potential target for Islamic terrorists. Since 2007 Malaysia has also argued that maritime terrorism presents a threat to security. Yet traditionally Malaysia's main maritime security challenges come from illegal trafficking and narcotics. Indeed a particular source of such problems has been

Indonesia. This situation reflects arguments that Indonesia is less concerned with security in this region as the majority of its trade travels via the Lombok and Sunda Straits. Indonesia's weaker economic conditions, territorial integrity and the challenges of domestic militant Islam are also more pressing security concerns.

Such divergence of concerns has inevitably impacted upon external initiatives aimed at securing the Straits. Since 2004 nations outside ASEAN frameworks have attempted to introduce initiatives aimed at enhancing cooperation. The US-led Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI) seeks to develop partnerships with littoral states of varying capacities to combat maritime threats. Yet the prospect of a heavy US naval presence in the Straits led to objections from Malaysia and Indonesia. The RMSI is regarded as a challenge to the littoral states' sovereignty and responsibility towards maintaining regional security. It was further argued that an increased US presence would likely fuel Islamic radicalism and terrorist attacks. Indonesia has also raised objections to elements of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). In effect since late 2006, ReCAAP is multilateral agreement to enhance maritime security cooperation that includes Japan, China and India. Key to coordinated activities is the development of an Information Sharing Centre (ISC) in Singapore. As ASEAN's largest nation, Indonesia argues that it should be the location for the ISC. Accordingly, Indonesia has yet to ratify ReCAAP.

Yet despite a number of well-documented challenges, significant security cooperation amongst the littoral nations of the Straits has occurred. Despite objections to an increased US naval presence the RMSI has inspired collective action. In July 2004 trilateral Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP) began with seventeen warships patrolling the Straits. By 2005 maritime patrols were complemented with 'Eyes in the Sky' (EiS) initiatives. These currently involve a handful of air sorties a week along the Straits. The enhanced surveillance of maritime air patrols is utilised to report suspicious activities for follow-up actions by law enforcement agencies. Of further benefit to all agencies are elements of the Republic of Singapore Navy's (RSN) 'Project Surpic.' These include the development of technical systems that facilitate a shared situational awareness specifically between Singapore's and Indonesia's command-and-control structures (C2).

But despite an impressive record of recent cooperation trilateral initiatives remain problematic. MSP initiatives, for example, are coordinated rather than joint activities. This means that each state's navy is responsible for patrolling its own territorial waters and has no right of 'hot pursuit' across boundaries. Instead each littoral state needs to include 'hand-off' mechanisms for continuous cross-boundary enforcement. EiS initiatives also experience similar complications. Whilst EiS flights are able to cross territorial boundaries individual foreign liaisons are on board every flight. These officers control EiS activities over their territories thereby ensuring that flights are not used for intelligence gathering. A further complication is that EiS flights are not conducted at night. As a result of the lack of night-vision, security in the Straits is restricted to naval vessels at a time when most maritime crimes occur. According to Ian Storey of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies for twenty-four hour coverage of the Straits to occur seventy air sorties a week need to be undertaken.

Although it increasingly portrays itself as *primus inter pares* within ASEAN it remains questionable that Indonesia is currently in a position to enhance its security posture in the

Straits. Despite being a littoral state with an interest in the Straits Indonesia also needs to patrol its vast territorial waters. Although it has recently entered into arms deals and procurement projects with Russia and China Indonesia's naval capacity remains stretched by a lack of funding and general poor maintenance. A recent RSN report estimated that only 60% of Indonesia's fleet is currently operational. This in turn contributes to a significant shortfall in the estimated three hundred ships required to protect Indonesia's territorial interests. Contributing to the lack of resources is a government unaccustomed to high levels of military spending. Expenditure for 2006, for example, was US\$3.1 billion for 375,000 personnel. Government justification for such expenditure is that the Indonesian military controls vast networks of businesses capable of raising revenue outside budget processes.

In contrast, Singapore's geopolitical outlook allows it to make an individual contribution to maritime security that stands in stark contrast to Indonesia. Fundamental to Singapore's efforts is the recent formation of the Maritime Security Task Force (MSTF). Organised to incorporate all armed services, coastguard and port authorities, the MSTF is an inter-agency initiative mirroring the RSN's objectives of securing Singapore's sea lines of communication. Sharing similarities with ReCAAP, the MSTF also seeks to develop information sharing networks to facilitate integrated planning and execution of maritime operations. This initiative extends upon a 2007 announcement for the development of C2 facilities to accommodate the Singapore Maritime Security Centre and multinational operations facilities. Furthermore, in February the MSTF undertook Exercise APEX. Utilising 39 RSN vessels, aircraft and 1,800 personnel APEX tested installation protection and anti-smuggling initiatives. These included measures to counter small boat threats and the deployment of Accompanying Sea Security Teams to undertake the interception and boarding of vessels. The MSTF's initiatives are likely to be bolstered by the recent acquisition of two new frigates. Amongst hardware that may be of use against maritime crime and terrorism are multi-function radars and Sikorsky S-70 helicopters.

In reaching a conclusion it firstly needs to be established that differences in response to security challenges in the Straits demonstrate the importance of discretionary approaches to collaboration amongst ASEAN partners. Whilst Malaysia and particularly Indonesia are geographically significant members of ASEAN their importance to the global economy differs from Singapore. This ultimately means that Singapore has greater access to materials which allows it to make a substantial contribution to security in the Straits. From a geographical perspective, Singapore is also not compromised by the need to defend an expansive territory. Despite recent cooperation amongst the three littoral states, Singapore's economic strength and political stability make it the most significant partner in initiatives to secure the Straits. As its economics, infrastructure and military gradually improve Indonesia may wish to challenge this status as the most populous and largest ASEAN state. Yet Singapore's development of multilateral initiatives to improve maritime security in the Straits ensures that it will remain a significant partner.