Session I: Security Environment in the Asia Pacific Region

SECURITY ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Mohamed Jawhar Hassan

Introduction

This paper will focus on the security challenges confronting Southeast Asia. Because the focus will be on the problems, it can be all too easy to lose perspective. In order to preserve balance and perspective, it has to be stated at the outset that despite various challenges to the domestic security of some regional states as well as some bilateral disputes and other problems, the security environment of Southeast Asia at present and in the foreseeable future is expected to continue to be generally stable and peaceful.

Southeast Asia in the first decade of the twenty-first century is generally more peaceful and stable than at any time in the previous half century. The region is also more stable and peaceful than Northeast Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia.

Among the constructive and stability-inducing forces at work in the region is the absence of serious inter-state conflict, bilateral arrangements for enhancing cooperation and dispute management, and the culture of cooperation based on mutual interest that is being fostered by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Human security

Contrary to mainstream security discourse driven by realist perspectives that tends to focus on the "hard" security threats, human security issues are arguably the greatest security challenges for Southeast Asia. Poverty and poverty-related security problems are at the core of national security concerns. Half the regional states have low human development according to UNDP benchmarks. Between one-fifth and one-third of the population in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines and Vietnam subsist below the national poverty line. Indonesia, with 18 percent or 40 million people estimated to be living below the national poverty line, is not far behind.

Poverty and low human development lead to numerous other human security problems, including hunger, disease, poor access to healthy drinking water, poor access to satisfactory health care and crime. Poor communities are also least able to take care of themselves against the effects of natural disasters like the tsunami, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, and most vulnerable to killer contagious diseases like HIV/AIDS and bird flu. Poverty and lack of jobs also cause millions to leave their homes and families in search of work in difficult living conditions overseas, sometimes causing social and security problems in recipient countries as well.

Human security problems are not directly relevant to ARF EEP work in the strictest confidence-building and preventive diplomacy sense, which is focussed more on "hard" security problems. But it bears reminding that improving human security should be the primary concern of the ARF and ASEAN, whether it is addressed within the rubric of conventional security or of socio-economic development.

Resurgence of big power interest

Big power rivalry receded in Southeast Asia, as in many other regions, following the end of the Cold War. However, the economic rise of China and its diplomatic and strategic initiatives in the region, though essentially constructive and benign,

has caused other major powers, in particular Japan but also the United States, India and Russia, to direct greater attention and interest in the region. Concern regarding Chinese domination among some regional states as well as major powers is also leading to the consideration of hedging strategies by these countries that include attempts to engage extra-regional states more closely in regional initiatives like East Asia cooperation and community building. Greater security collaboration between defence allies Japan and the United States in East Asia is also adding a more overt military dimension to emerging big power competition and rivalry.

For the present, big power initiatives and manoeuvres in the region are essentially benign and indeed beneficial to the larger interests of the countries of Southeast Asia. But if competition between the big powers deteriorates into more antagonistic rivalry the strategic environment in Southeast Asia will become stressed. This will be especially so if some regional states begin to align themselves with competing major powers even if ASEAN as an entity remains "neutral".

The ARF Chair and its EEP instrument can play a constructive confidence-enhancing role among the major powers to contain the situation from deteriorating further. Priority would need to be accorded to such issues as restoring cordial and cooperative relations between Japan on the one hand and China and South Korea on the other. Other initiatives could include initiating bilateral and multilateral discourse to address apprehensions regarding the rise of China as well as extreme and uncalled for responses that aggravate rather than ameliorate problems. This is well within the writ of the ARF EEP terms of reference and the concept of preventive diplomacy as understood by the Forum. Early intervention by the ARF can help arrest the slide in the confidence and trust among the major powers.

Territorial disputes

Southeast Asia, like Northeast Asia, has several territorial disputes on land as well as sea. Every country, without exception, has these disputes, which are generally the legacy of colonial history as well as the enactment of the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which enabled littoral states to lay claim to waters and features that they hitherto had not. Some of these disputes have been resolved amicably through mutual agreement and resort to the International Court of Justice, but others remain.

They include disputes between Indonesia and Australia, East Timor and Australia, East Timor and Indonesia, Australia and Indonesia, Indonesia and Malaysia, Singapore and Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia, Brunei and Malaysia, Thailand and Malaysia, Cambodia and Thailand, Laos and Thailand, Myanmar and Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, Vietnam and Cambodia, and overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea involving China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia.

The disputes are generally being addressed peacefully in accordance with international law or are being left dormant. No serious disruptions to security are anticipated in the foreseeable future, including in the South China Sea where the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea as well as cordial relations between the disputing states and territory are helping to sustain peaceful approaches to resolving the disputes. Any conflict in the area is likely to be of the isolated, low intensity variety, and be quickly contained.

The ARF EEPs can have a limited but significant role to play in the sphere of territorial disputes. They obviously cannot help resolve the disputes, but they can assist in reducing tensions and restoring confidence when disputes turn acrimonious.

Insurgencies and domestic conflicts

Contrary to trends elsewhere that have seen a surge in intra-state conflicts following the end of the Cold War, Southeast Asia actually has witnessed a general decline in domestic conflicts and insurgencies. Domestic insurgencies that used to rage in nearly all Southeast Asian countries after the end of the Second World War have either disappeared or generally subsided in the countries where they still persist, namely Myanmar, southern Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia. Nevertheless, serious problems remain in areas in the last-mentioned countries, and some of them continue to have negative spillover effects on neighbouring countries.

The existing consensus within the ARF, based on the "Paper on Concept and Principles of Preventive Diplomacy" that was adopted by the ARF at its Ministerial Meeting in 2001, is that the EEP option can only be considered for conflicts between and among states. It is perhaps time that the ARF widen the use of the option to domestic conflicts as well provided the government and parties involved consent to a role being played by EEPs. The consent of the government concerned resolves the impediment posed by the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs. Indeed, the fact that in the case of the conflict between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), the conflict between the Government of Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the domestic unrest in Timor Leste both regional countries as well as outside states have been invited to participate in monitoring the peace process and ceasefires and help restore security, puts the ARF hesitance to play a role in the resolution of domestic conflicts in a regressive and negative light. Given the existence of ASEAN, it would perhaps be useful for the ARF EEPs from the ASEAN region to be given a prominent though not necessarily exclusive role. Initiatives are also perhaps better launched under the aegis of ASEAN rather than the ARF if the governments concerned are positively disposed towards it.

Maritime security

Maritime security issues in Southeast Asia, especially safety, security and environmental protection in the Straits of Malacca, have become among the foremost of security issues driven by concerns over piracy and terrorism linked to piracy. As a consequence the littoral states have stepped up security measures in the strategic waterway, and there has been a dramatic drop in the incidents of piracy and armed robbery in 2005 and to-date this year. According to International Maritime Bureau annual reports, attacks on vessels in the Straits declined from 38 in 2004 to 12 in 2005, and no incidence of piracy has occurred in the first quarter of 2006. There has been zero incidence of terrorism in the area as well.

Despite this significant improvement from what was in any case never as alarming a situation as painted by some parties such as the Lloyd's Market Association that classified the Straits as a "high risk" zone (most of the incidents of piracy and armed robbery that did occur have been minor), calls have continued for increasing security in the Straits. Among the measures being pressed is the participation of user states in the security measures in the Straits which has been resisted by the littoral states. The focus on security and foreign participation in the maintenance of security in the Straits of Malacca is also odd given that incidents of piracy and armed robbery are far more frequent in the South China Sea (86 incidents in 2004 and 80 incidents in 2005) and the Indian Ocean (31 in 2004 and 35 in 2005).

It is obvious however that maritime security must continue to be enhanced through close cooperation and consultation among the littoral states as well as major user states. Given serious political sensitivities regarding foreign military presence in the narrow waterways of the Malacca Straits, the emphasis should be on assistance for enhancing the capacity of littoral states, information sharing among the relevant security agencies of littoral as well as user states, preventive measures and practical formulas for contribution by user states to the maintenance of the environmental security.

Terrorism

Terrorism is not new to Southeast Asia, as it is not new to the rest of the world. Nor has terrorism been confined to Muslims. Nevertheless the activities of the al-Qaeda linked-Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has led to Southeast Asia being dubbed the second front of international terrorism, and the campaign against terrorism has risen in the scale of regional security priorities. JI has its own political agenda, namely the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in the Muslim-populated areas of Southeast Asia. The agenda does not have much credence, and hardly any progress has been achieved in this direction.

JI has another, al-Qaeda-linked agenda that targets the interests of the United States and its allies in the region, and it is in this area that it has been most active in, and where it presents the gravest threat. Concerted measures taken by Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia on their own as well as within the framework of ASEAN, ARF and other multilateral organisations have resulted in the operational threat being effectively neutralised in Malaysia and Singapore, and curbed in Indonesia. The movement however continues to pose a threat in the region and requires sustained vigilance as well as enhanced measures for eradication.

The threat posed by the al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda-linked international terrorism in the region and elsewhere cannot be eliminated by punitive security measures alone. The strategy must be both preventive as well as punitive, involving comprehensive campaigns that embrace political, socio-economic and conventional security measures. In the preventive sphere, discourse and attention cannot be focussed upon the distortion and exploitation of Islamic teachings alone, or on fora for dialogue among faiths and civilisations that are so trendy now. It must also address the political and socio-economic drivers of international terrorism, including the Palestinian issue, Western policies in the Middle East, political oppression and marginalisation, and poverty. In the punitive sphere measures must include the enhancement of the intelligence and operational capacity of the security agencies, as well as more forthcoming and

effective collaboration among the security agencies within a country and among countries.

Many of the institutions to which the ARF EEPs belong to are already conducting studies in the area of terrorism. Some of them have produced policy papers both individually as well as collectively in such processes as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). The ARF could make more effective use of the products and potential of the EEPs in this field.

Conclusion

This brief survey of the security challenges in Southeast Asia is far from exhaustive. It does not highlight other important challenges such as transnational crime, human trafficking, illegal immigration, drug addiction and the illegal drug trade, AIDS, avian flu and other lethal contagious diseases, natural disasters that the region is so prone to, and the spread of religious extremism, intolerance and sectarian conflict in some countries. These issues have not been highlighted because they are less relevant to the task of confidence-building, preventive diplomacy and conflict management that is the core business of the EEPs. They nevertheless pose compelling challenges for the comprehensive security of Southeast Asia.