CHAPTER III
CHAPTER III: ASEAN DEFENCE

Introduction

When speaking about "security", the word "defence" automatically come to mind. Both of these notions are highly complex. In this context, "defence" may be regarded as the broad aspect of "security". Security is viewed as encompassing the internal and external dimensions which contribute towards the stability of a nation. In other words, "security" in the ASEAN context, involves the framework for the peaceful progress, development and betterment of the ASEAN states. On the other hand, "Defence" is a narrower concept. It has to do with the military aspects for deterring or defeating external aggression/interference by another power.¹

Determining hostile military action by non-military mean is cheaper and should be encouraged. Malaysian Foreign Minister, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had said it was important that security be viewed in a comprehensive manner to cover both military and non-military well-being. Datuk Abdullah argued that regional prosperity cannot rely on economic fundamentals alone because economic growth and development is subject to stability and security.²


The question of the role of military defence in the security of Southeast Asia is rather interesting. Generally, military defence policy deals with the relationship of military capabilities to possible threats to security. The military component of "national resilience" would involve armed forces structural arrangement and weapon systems acquisitions based on the need of each individual state to face the perceived threat environment. Once more, the phrase "regional resilience" could accurately be represented in this context as contributing to collective goal in facing a common threat environment.

ASEAN Defence Cooperation

The subject of ASEAN defence cooperation is not merely complex, it is also highly sensitive. Before looking into the prospects of enhancing ASEAN defence cooperation and ties as well as ASEAN's approach to defence problems there are some issues which need to be addressed. Firstly, should ASEAN form a defence pact along the lines of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)? Secondly, would such a formal alliance be desirable and could it enhance ASEAN security in the long term? Thirdly, are the grouping's current defence ties need to be
enhanced? Fourthly, what is the scope of enhancing defence cooperation? If this is so, how and in what direction.

Advantages of Military Pact

It would appear that there are many advantages to be gained from a formal military pact. The establishment of a long tradition of formal multilateral military cooperation, could be a positive factor in discouraging any external aggression. An ASEAN pact involving all six members would greatly improve the chances of aid arriving on time, or the probability of getting military help from other ASEAN partners against an external foe. A close-knit military alliance of six nations with a track record of cooperation could be a positive deterrent to any would-be aggressor. It seems that the current bilateral defence links are largely based on personal ties established between the current crop of political and military leaders.

Obstacles to Defence Cooperation

The greatest problem with ASEAN defence cooperation is that the internal dimension of ASEAN security - hinders the possible joint military cooperation. In addition, perceptions of external threats do differ from
member to member, and if this is so, it is virtually impossible to bring together the six members of ASEAN into a common alliance or military pact if the aggressor is not a common enemy. Thailand, for instance, feels that China poses a long-term threat to its security. Jakarta alone among all the ASEAN nations, does not consider Vietnam to be a belligerent power. Furthermore, the unique geo-strategic location of each ASEAN state makes it difficult to reconcile national force structures and national defence plans with overall ASEAN military requirements. Another problem in assessing defence co-operation is that military information is classified. The opportunities for co-operation vary from country to country, and service to service and defence co-operation on land has always been thorny and sensitive.

Another factor which militates against the possibility of a formal military pact being worked out in the near future is the conscious desire among ASEAN members to prevent Southeast Asia from being an exclusive bloc which would evoke a response from other countries in the region leading to an arms race in this part of the world.

Nonetheless, defence arrangements among small nations have never really worked; small nations joined in a
military alliance have historically never really deterred superpowers. In order for ASEAN alliance to be militarily effective and resilient, all its members must embark on a massive arms build-up programme which is financially prohibitive and politically unacceptable at the moment, and potentially very destabilising for the region too. A weak ASEAN alliance would lead the members to tilt towards one or the other of the superpowers, sacrificing the spirit of ZOPFAN. Independence and non-alignment can only be achieved by strength.

Defence Pact Not Desirable

It is most unlikely that the current ASEAN leaders would want to establish a military pact at the moment. All the ASEAN states have taken great pains to point out every now and then, that the grouping is definitely not a defence pact, although Singapore's did raise the idea in September 1982. However, other ASEAN leaders were again quick to point out that a defence pact was simply not on. The establishment of ASEAN was never base to take the form of a military pact because it was not designed to be one when it was set up. In October 1989, General Try Sutrisno, the
Indonesian Armed Forces Commander, argued that ASEAN countries should "spin their own defence web" and not depend on others to go to their rescues. He reaffirmed his belief that ASEAN should "create regional resilience through military cooperation but not (through) military pacts." General Sutrisno called for enhancement of bilateral military co-operation so that interlocking co-operation reaches the state of a "spider web" in the ASEAN region. He said that "A pact is a contract and we do not want that." Rather, "we want something that is based on friendship and on the perception of mutual benefit."

In the same vein, General Benny Murdani, the former Indonesian Defence and Security Minister, called for the setting up of "security belts" in Southeast Asia to ensure the stability of individual countries. This, he said, "would not only ensure regional peace, but was also important to guarantee the continuation of national development." While he did not elaborate on how this could be achieved, it was obvious that he was indirectly expressing his objections to the achievement of security through an ASEAN-wide military pact. His concept would appear to be more akin to having "peace in parts" in line with the Indonesian thinking of national and regional security.

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3 The Straits Times, October 5, 1989.
4 The Straits Times, December 8, 1989.
5 The Straits Times, December 25, 1989.
A new twist was added to this suggestion when General Murdani, while speaking at a seminar in Bogor on September 8, 1990, proposed that a forum on regional security be established among countries in Southeast Asia. He argued that despite the absence of external threats to Indonesia, due to the recent change in the world, future trends in political, economical, socio-cultural, defence and security, show that the threat to security still exists in the world. Instead, a new pattern and strategy were required to deal with such threats in the wake of the new political and power structure in the world. General Murdani argued that regional and extra-regional military pacts had lost their importance and could even become a source of unnecessary tension. In view of these circumstances, the former Indonesian Defence Minister argued that "in the absence of a threat from a common enemy, development of a forum on security on a regional basis will be more effective than any military pact alliance."\(^6\) Such a forum, he thought, would also be better able to meet the post-Cold War challenges.

Beyond the extra-ASEAN defence co-operation, all the ASEAN member-states have bilateral, even multilateral defence arrangements with each other on a non-ASEAN basis. Here, land, air and naval forces co-operate with each other

\(^6\)The Straits Times, September 11, 1990.
on a limited basis and some of these defence arrangements preceded the formation of ASEAN.

The ASEAN member-states, while hesitant, over the ASEAN-wide military co-operation, have, without exception, supported bilateral military co-operation. The thinking behind this was aptly put by former Malaysian Foreign Minister Ghazali Shafie when he argued that projects under ASEAN (and other regional bodies) which are generally limited in scope and that this limitation of regional co-operation within a formal framework should not prevent countries in the region from trying to force the closest possible links on the bilateral basis with one another. In pursuance of this policy, Malaysia therefore has entered into close bilateral economic/cultural and security/military arrangements with a number of countries in the region. Malaysia's joint border operations with Thailand in the Thai/Malaysian boundary and with Indonesia on the Sarawak/Kalimantan border of East Malaysia as well as co-operation with Singapore in the context of the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA), are cases in point in the field of security and defence.

Enhancing this, Singapore former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew supported the idea for the expansion of the
ongoing bilateral military exercise when he said that this military exercise will have to evolve naturally and that the next stage which is the trilateral exercise will be simple. The former Prime Minister commented that the ideal would be multilateral exercise encompassing all the ASEAN member. 7

General Try Sutrisno voiced similar sentiments on December 7, 1989 when he called for increased bilateral defence co-operation among the ASEAN member states. 8 Perhaps Singapore mooted the idea of a defence pact because she felt that such an arrangement would tilt ASEAN towards the U.S. camp, thereby making it more difficult for the other superpowers to gain access to the South China Sea and the vital Malacca Straits.

**ASEAN Defence Arrangements**

It seems generally, that ASEAN is at ease with the current loose arrangements it has established with the major powers. While Thailand and the Philippines have military pacts with the U.S., Singapore and Malaysia are part of the Five-Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) with its extra-regional links. Although a consultative pact and not


8The Straits Times, December 8, 1989
a binding mutual defence treaty, that accord is used by its members to promote security cooperation, including military exercises. The activities which take place under the auspices of the FPDA have evolved in recent years to conform with Malaysian and Singaporean priorities and the arrangements have been revitalised. In current form, these activities are of value to all parties involved. In the case of the tiny state of Brunei, it has defence treaty with Great Britain, which maintains a battalion of Gurkhas in the Sultanate.

The above defence arrangements, while loose, are comfortable and provide some assurance of a protective umbrella. In the case of FPDA, this arrangement should be seen as but one of a range of cooperative defence activities in the region, and it would make sense for the parties concerned to work, in a low-key and incremental way, towards the establishment of complementary kinds of defence cooperation with Thailand and Indonesia. This will, however, take time. While ASEAN is officially non-aligned, most of its members privately feel that a U.S. countervailing presence in the region is not only comforting, but necessary. The areas where defence links can be really improved within ASEAN are technical cooperation, training and operational procedures, which in many ways, are politically less sensitive.
Dr. B.A. Hamzah, for one, feels that the FPDA could provide a framework for co-operation. Dr. Hamzah's argument is that the involvement of Australia and New Zealand would protect ASEAN's southern flank, while the emphasis on the maritime aspect of co-operation would make the proposal acceptable even to the Indonesians. Dr. Sheldon Simon was of the view that Brunei will probably affiliate with Malaysia and Singapore in the FPDA by 1990s. Brunei already has strong defence ties with FPDA members who regularly train in Brunei's jungle. However, it seems that Brunei has not opted to join the FPDA concluded in 1971. So far, Brunei has deferred to Indonesian objections to its membership. Nonetheless, there seems to be little regional sentiment favouring the FPDA dissolution. Dr. Simon felt that possibility exists for an expansion of the current Integrated Defence System (IADS) among the five to include Thailand and Indonesia as they acquire sophisticated aircrafts. Adding Bangkok and Jakarta to the FPDA air defence arrangements would virtually create an ASEAN-wide system for monitoring the sea and air spaces of Southeast Asia.


11Sheldon W. Simon, ibid., p. 222.
The scope for enhancing operational and technical co-operation could encompasses joint exercises; training; control, command, communication and intelligence; joint surveillance and patrols; joint facilities; rationalisation of equipment and logistics; arms and equipment production; and commanders' conferences.

The ability to work cohesively, therefore, is vital for ASEAN's forces, and the series of exercises held since the formation of ASEAN indicate that the member nations are at least attempting to ensure that their military can work together to some degree. Nevertheless, the fact remains that most of these exercises have been bilateral, the significant exceptions being the ones held under the auspices of the FPDA which involve Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore. One logical answer would be to enlarge the scope of the bilateral exercises to include trilateral exercises, and ultimately, exercises involving all six partners. The aim is to evolve standard operating procedures, common control and command routines and even tactics. Unfortunately, multilateral exercises are still politically unacceptable at the moment since they could be misrepresented as an ASEAN attempt at creating a de facto military pact.
The strength of current ASEAN defence co-operation lies in the fact that whatever one might say about bilateral relations, a framework of co-operation already exists. Where defence co-operation is concerned, the mood may be described as one of cautious optimism. Malaysian policy-makers generally feel that ASEAN should enhance what has already been established, and that the grouping should be more careful in exploring new ventures. ASEAN members are aware that for defence co-operation to be successful, members must benefit from it — militarily, strategically, economically and even socially. But quite obviously again, balance must be struck between individual and collective self-reliance in defining ASEAN defence goals.

It appears that the current strength of ASEAN is that its members have expressed the willingness to get involved militarily, even if it is still on bilateral basis. In fact, the present low-profile bilateral defence ties can be considered an asset because they have proved to be politically acceptable and non-abrasive.
ASEAN Military Modernization Programmes

Before we discuss on the modernization of the armed forces of the members of ASEAN, let us take a look at the background of ASEAN security capabilities during the mid-and late 1970s. ASEAN shift from a predominant concern with internal insurgencies to the establishment of conventional forces with limited power projection occurred for several reasons. Firstly, the weakening of communist insurgent groups in the late 1970s and increased in political and economic stability within ASEAN. Secondly, the concern of ASEAN states particularly about the military capabilities and intentions of the former Soviet influence and Vietnamese intrusion of Cambodia. Thirdly, the realization of defending the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). By the late 1980s, ASEAN governments had acquired respectable regional power projection forces. It was after the Cold War that ASEAN states were beginning to upgrade their air and naval inventories.

With the end of the Cold War, most of the NATO and former Warsaw Pact countries are reducing their military expenditures and slowing the development of new weapons. However, many East Asian countries are raising their military outlays - in some cases by a significant percentage. Not all these countries will develop at the
same rate and not all can afford to acquire large supplies of sophisticated systems. Nevertheless, the growing accumulation of modern arms by the Pacific Rim powers at a time of diminishing military expenditures elsewhere is a matter of great concern.

Clearly the growing military potential of the Pacific Rim countries is closely tied to their rapid growth in economic power. Propelled in most cases by an export-driven industrial strategy, these countries have achieved impressive gains in Gross National Product (GNP) over the past two decades, while the economies of most other nations have declined. Between 1979 and 1989 the combined GNP of China, Japan and the newly industrialized countries (NICS) of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand - increased by 166 percent, from US$1.5 trillion to US$4 trillion, while the total GNP of the world increased by only 109 percent.12

The steady rise in GNP in these countries has provided their governments with access to increased economic resources, which many have chosen to invest in the expansion and modernization of military

infrastructures. Total military spending by Japan and the six NICS rose from US$31.7 billion in 1979 to US$51.4 billion in 1989, an increase of 62 percent. More recent data suggest that military spending by these countries, excluding Indonesia, continued to rise in the early 1990s. To equip their new forces and to enhance the combat capabilities of existing units, the Pacific Rim countries are buying significant quantities of modern weapons and support systems. Total spending on imported arms by the Pacific Rim countries (China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and the two Koreas) rose from an average of US$2.5 billion per year in 1979-81 to US$4.6 billion in 1987-89, an increase of 84 per cent.\(^\text{13}\)

There has been growing investment in naval forces by the ASEAN countries. Singapore is building five Type-62 corvettes under licence from Germany, Malaysia has ordered two missile frigates from Britain, Thailand has acquired six jianghu-class frigates from China, and Indonesia has purchased 39 former East German naval vessels (including 12 guided missile corvettes) from Germany. In addition, Indonesia has taken delivery of four Harpoon equipped frigates.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{13}\text{Ibid., p. 144.}\)

In the southern area, regional powers—notably Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand—are developing modern multi-service military forces with significant power projection capabilities. These countries had until recently emphasized the counter-insurgency capabilities of their militaries and thus lagged behind the northern powers in the development of modern air and naval forces. But, with the changing international and regional security environment coupled with rapid growth economic powers, ASEAN countries are giving greater emphasis to improving external defence capabilities.

The members of ASEAN are investing substantially in upgrading their respective navies. Efforts are planned by Malaysia to acquire two modern frigates (with more likely to follow) from Britain and to create a division-sized rapid deployment force (RDF) equipped with mobile artillery and anti-tank weapons. In addition, the Malaysian navy has purchased six Wasp anti-submarine helicopters. Singapore is also constructing a blue water navy (to be organized around the Type-62 corvettes now being built) and, like, Malaysia is creating a division-sized RDF. Meanwhile, Thailand is modernizing its navy and air force.

15 Ibid.
and building new air and naval facilities on its southern coast, giving Bangkok a greater military presence in the South China Sea. In the area of air defence, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia are purchasing F-16 aircraft. Malaysia had also purchased F16 and Russian MIG fighter aircrafts. Singapore possesses four E-2C advanced early-warning aircraft.

Meanwhile the Malaysian Government's has said that its decision to equip the Royal Malaysia Air Force (RMAF) with the Russian-made MiG-29 Fulcrum and American made F/A-18D Hornet jet fighters would not upset the region's military balance.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia strategic studies and security unit coordinator, Associate Professor Dr. Zakaria Ahmad had said that the phase "upsetting the military balance" should be clearly redefined and not to be construed that "the aircraft to be purchased for the RMAF is superior than other makes operated by other air forces in the region".\textsuperscript{16}

Dr. Zakaria Ahmad is of the view that the existing imbalance is due to the fact that "the RMAF was way behind in technology and sophisticated equipment compared with

\textsuperscript{16} The New Straits Times, July 4, 1993.
its ASEAN neighbours."\textsuperscript{17} He disagreed with the Western perception that by buying the MiG-29, Malaysia was allowing the Russian a foothold in the Southeast Asian arms market.

Echoing Malaysian Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's statement that Malaysia's arms purchase should be seen as contributing towards collective regional security, Dr. Zakaria commented that the upgrading of the country's self-defence would in turn result in the strengthening of the region's armed forces capability.

Singapore Defence Minister Yeo Ning Hong has said that the increase in defence expenditures and procurements by the six members of ASEAN do not constitute participation in a regional arms race. Mr. Yeo cautioned that if an arms race in the Asia-Pacific region is to be averted, the administration of President Bill Clinton should remain committed to maintaining a strong U.S. military presence. Defence Minister Yeo added that "no one in ASEAN sees these expenditures as an arms race,"\textsuperscript{18} echoing assurances recently voiced by other ASEAN member states. Mr. Yeo argued that economic growth as a general rule permits a country to modernize its armed force. He was of the

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18}"ASEAN members are not joining arms race," \textit{The Japan Times}, January 25-31, 1993.
opinion that gradual upgrading and replacement of outdated weapons systems "are essential for our forces to have credibility."\(^{19}\)

Linking increased defence expenditures and procurements to a growing financial wherewithal achieved during the high-growth of 1980s, Mr. Yeo acknowledged ASEAN concerns over the prospect of U.S. isolationism and China's power projection in the South China Sea. Mr. Yeo was of the view that this would also reflect ASEAN members' efforts to maximize the region's attractiveness as a stable haven for foreign capital amid intense global competition for investment opportunities.

Mr. Yeo argued that "If we in ASEAN, who are so dependent on foreign investment, do not spend enough to ensure the stability of our countries and the region as a whole, almost certainly we'll become less attractive to investors from Japan, Europe and America."\(^{20}\) Growth of military expenditures in the Asia-Pacific region is reported to have surpassed that in all other regions in the mid-to-late 1980s. Singapore's expenditures have more than doubled during the last decade.

\(^{19}\)Ibid.

\(^{20}\)Ibid.
Potential Military Threat

As memory of the Cold War recedes, and with the fear of Russia, regional security concerns will increasingly be shaped by worry over the potential military threat posed by China and Japan, the two most powerful nations in the area, and by regional antagonisms.

China has recently increased its military spending and appears to be placing greater emphasis on preparation for regional conflict — an emphasis that has understandably generated anxiety in neighbouring countries, especially Taiwan. China's recent acquisition of long-range aircraft and in-flight refueling technology from the former Soviet Union is considered particularly menacing. Should Beijing continue to acquire advanced weapons and technologies at its current pace, it will undoubtedly spur neighbours such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia to accelerate their own arms-acquisition efforts and to place further emphasis on the development of high-tech arms industries.

While Japan has avoided any intention of building up a large, offensive oriented military capacity, its neighbours retain such traumatic memories of the Japanese conquest and occupation during World War II that any sign of increased military activity by Japan inevitably
generates anxieties throughout the region. Thus, Tokyo's decisions in sending its peacekeeping forces to Cambodia - the first overseas deployment of Japanese troops since World War II - has provoked much concern in Southeast Asia. Also worrisome to some neighbours is Japan's planned procurement of large tank-transport ships and long-range transport aircraft-acquisitions that suggest an interest in power projection capabilities of a sort the Japanese have not possessed since 1945. Should Tokyo proceed with these plans, it will surely rekindle fears of Japanese expansionism and thereby spark increased arms spending by other Pacific Rim nations.

In Southeast Asia, Vietnamese army remains a potent military force, and is often cited by Thailand as a justification for its continuing arms buildup. Similarly, the military buildup in Malaysia evokes understandable concern in neighbouring Singapore, as does the steady improvement in Indonesia capabilities. All of these rivalries are balanced by growing trade and political links within the region, but are nevertheless to figure in the long term security planning of Southeast Asian states.