

Security in Asia: New threats, new paradigms

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Over the next week, I will be hosting senior military officers from around the globe gathering in Singapore to discuss issues on the Asia- Pacific security agenda. This has set me thinking of the changes in the way that we have been thinking about security over the past 40 years.

Our understanding of security has undergone a radical transformation. At independence in 1965, Singapore's security threats were readily identifiable: We knew who our potential opponents were and how they intended to do us harm. Such certainties are long past. Now we face a series of challenges to security that cannot be identified with states and armed forces.

These new challenges highlight the importance of facilitating more informed exchanges among senior military officers within the region and beyond. This is all the more important since the world's military institutions are undergoing significant changes in order to address new issues. This is the context for the growing trend of meetings among military officers from different countries. As our understanding of security has changed, so must the armed forces address the question of how this transformation is going to affect the future shape, structure and functions of the military as an organisation.

Fundamental to this transformation is the widening of the security agenda. This means that the roles that military institutions have to undertake will also increase. No longer can military organisations focus only on the defence of the realm from external military challenges. They also need to begin to focus on the new challenges in the security agenda, as well as understand the processes that underpin the emergence of these new security challenges.

The militaries of today, like the societies in which they are embedded, have to handle not only the challenges of counter-terrorism, peacekeeping and disaster relief operations, but also globalisation and its more unconventional challenges to the security of states. Increasingly, attention has focused on issues ranging from military transformation to the challenges posed by the new media, from the global economic crisis to post-war peace building and, strikingly, climate change and conflict. The latter is becoming more salient, since climate change has strategic implications for the security of societies and states. Security of energy and water resources as well as food security are also the subject of discussions now.

Students of international security are interested in the 'securitisation' of these issues. Their analyses discuss who securitises such issues, when issues are securitised and how this process occurs. Their assessments are carried in the media and circulated among policymakers. The consequence is that there is a growing consensus within governments on the importance of these issues and recognition that the military has a major role in responding to these challenges.

In Asia, particularly in its developing countries, the military is often the most effective instrument within government in responding to crisis situations. This leads to the military being deployed in response to new perceived threats.

Since the devastating December 2004 tsunami, governments in South-east Asia have placed more emphasis on the role of the military in major emergency and humanitarian operations. Militaries are expanding their mandates to include not just peace-keeping or peace-building tasks, but also disaster relief operations. These tasks have increasingly become an important part of doctrines such as Military Operations Other Than War.

For most of South-east Asia's militaries, threats to the state from domestic ethnic or religious conflict have been as important as external threats. The training of the Thai or Myanmar military, for example, has led them to regard themselves as defenders of the state from both external as well as internal threats. In Indonesia, it was only in the post-Suharto era that the concept of the military possessing *dwifungsi* (dual functions) - in both politics as well as national security - was dropped and the police no longer formed part of the armed forces. The broadening of the security agenda could have the negative effect of providing a justification for a political role for the military in South-east Asian societies.

The sharp economic downturn over the past year will have a significant impact on military capabilities around the wider Asia-Pacific region. Many governments will be forced to reduce military budgets, delay the acquisition of weapons and even cut down on routine maintenance.

Economies such as China and India which are continuing to enjoy economic growth are well placed to continue on the path of military modernisation. Their capacity to handle the new challenges will be greater than that of states whose economic growth trajectories have been derailed by the economic downturn.

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