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The Armed Forces of Southeast Asia in 2020

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A fundamental question that the armed forces of Southeast Asia will have to ask of themselves is what their future shape and structure will be. How the regional armed forces answer this question will be shaped by three considerations.

WHAT IS THE future for the armed forces of Southeast Asia? What will these organisations look like in the near to medium term future? An examination of current trends yields no definitive answers. Nevertheless, they provide clues as to the challenges that the regional armed forces will face, as they seek their answers to these questions. In particular, three sets of issues will have to be addressed by the regional armed forces, as they address the questions regarding their future shape and structure.

Technologies of the Revolution in Military Affairs

As it stands, the levels of technological sophistication amongst the regional armed forces can only be described as mixed at best. Some regional armed forces have maintained close tabs with the cutting edge of global military technology trends; however, other national armed forces remain mired in long-obsolete technological capabilities and legacy systems.

Technological change is one of the critical determinants of military change. It is somewhat analogous to the decision to sell an old car: the lack of spare parts for regular maintenance; poorer performance as the age of the car engine increases; higher levels of fuel consumption because of the absence of modern and more fuel-efficient engines; even pride and prestige.

What further complicates the technological issue is the Revolution in Military Affairs – the RMA for short. The RMA is pushing the cutting edge of military technologies towards very exotic directions. These technologies are not simple. If an armed forces wants to acquire these new technologies, it will need to put in place a complex system – based on a human talent pool that is highly technologically savvy, extremely computer-literate, and with complex systems integrations capabilities. Such a skills-intensive system will allow it to both properly utilise these technologies as well as maintain them.

These are issues that address social and education policies, national economic conditions, amongst others; they are not the purview of armed forces.

Escaping the United States' Technological Universe

To be fair, the RMA is an issue that needs to be addressed only if an armed forces is reliant on the United States for its military hardware. The US is, after all, the principal (if not the sole) driver of the RMA. This brings up the problem of the centrality of the US in the Southeast Asian arms market.

With exception of the Indochinese states, the armed forces of maritime Southeast Asia have traditionally relied on the US or other NATO countries for much of their military hardware. This is especially true with regards to high-value, big-ticket items such as advanced air combat or naval platforms. The US still commands about 60 percent of all military trade in Southeast Asia. Recently, Malaysia and Indonesia have begun to look towards Russia as an alternative to the US. That being said, neither country appears to have decided to migrate totally into the Russian technological universe – Malaysia's recent acquisitions in naval combat platforms as an example.

Continuing to rely on the US for military hardware will increasingly demand levels of technological sophistication that are simply absent for many Southeast Asian societies. Does this therefore mean most of Southeast Asia's armed forces will have no choice but to migrate from the US' technological universe to that of Russia? This can be a very difficult decision to make.

Affording the RMA

What this begins to highlight, which is the second difficulty that the US military-industrial complex poses to Southeast Asian military modernisation, is the issue of costs.

The technologies that underpin the RMA are very often the product of, or have applications in, the civilian world. Moreover, in many cases the basic research, product development, and availability are of commercial interest. As a result, there are two arguments about the affordability of the RMA. One argument asserts that since these technologies are commercially available off the shelf, this makes the RMA more affordable. This is inasmuch as armed forces have been able to avoid many of the large and often long-term investments in research and development that characterised the traditional military technology model. A second argument, however, asserts that modern military technologies are increasingly expensive.

The global trends suggest that the latter argument is more likely true. Military technologies have become increasingly expensive. Modern weapons systems have turned out to be costlier than their predecessors, leading to some defence economists to describe this as structural disarmament. Simply put, the replacement weapons systems typically are acquired at smaller numbers than the predecessors they replace.

Plotting the Path Ahead

The point is that the armed forces of Southeast Asia face a difficult two decades ahead. These organisations face challenges that push and pull them in different directions. Remaining within the US technological universe will impose both tremendous financial costs, as well as demand of these armed forces highly sophisticated technological skills they may not have. To abandon this technological universe for a Russian technological universe will, however, be neither cheap nor easy to accept.

For some armed forces in Southeast Asia, the conundrum these push and pull factors create is resolvable: Singapore, clearly, has decided that it cannot avoid the RMA, and has put in place an RMA-inspired agenda known as the 3rd Generation Fighting Force. It is underpinned by what it

considers as revolutionary new concepts such as the Integrated Knowledge-based Command and Control system. At the opposite end of this spectrum, the armed forces of the Philippines and Laos, for instance, appear to have concluded that the RMA is not for them. For a third group, this conundrum remains: Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia are clearly attracted by the RMA, but are concerned about the uncertainties and costs attendant with this phenomenon.

What this promises to deliver is a Southeast Asia where its armed forces will range from the highly sophisticated to those essentially stuck in the 1950s. An ancient Chinese curse says: “May you live in interesting times.” Clearly, for the military organisations of Southeast Asia, the next two decades promise to be precisely that.

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