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Arms Races in Asia?

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Synopsis

An arms race has several characteristics, two of which are increased defence spending and rapid military modernisation. While some Asian countries are rapidly modernising their militaries, it might be premature to call this an arms race.

Commentary

THERE IS no doubt that a number of countries in Asia are modernising their military forces in a very significant way. From aircraft carriers to modern diesel-electric attack submarines in the naval arena, advanced combat aircraft and air defence systems in the air domain, certain parts of Asia are increasingly awash with modern sophisticated and highly capable combat systems. What makes this buying spree all the more significant is that it has been conducted in the midst of more than a decade of economic uncertainty, starting with the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s through to the recent US financial meltdown and the current economic problems throughout much of Europe and the United States.

This buying spree has bucked the previous trend when most Asian countries slashed defence spending in response to global economic uncertainties. Not surprisingly, this has raised the spectre of arms races in Asia. But are these concerns valid?

Military Modernisation in Historical Perspective

A little historical perspective is useful in providing an answer to this question. This, quite simply, is not the first time that concerns about arms races in Asia have emerged. Looking at Southeast Asia specifically, concerns about a potential regional arms race first emerged in the 1980s, when the regional air forces started to acquire supersonic combat aircraft for the first time. Those concerns were misplaced: the combat aircraft being acquired were largely early 1970s-vintage technologies; these acquisitions were not accompanied by supporting acquisitions of air-refuelling capabilities that would have suggested ambitions to acquire the capacity to project power away from national borders.

Moving away from the air domain, the countries in Southeast Asia were largely not acquiring other land and naval power projection capabilities that would be necessary to supplement their investments in supersonic air combat platforms. If there was a plausible alternative explanation to this 1980s phenomenon, it was that Southeast Asian air forces were modernising their existing obsolete air combat capabilities. Another plausible alternative explanation is national pride and prestige, almost vanity.

The second time concerns about Asian arms races emerged was in the 1990s, when the world witnessed a downsizing of military forces and defence spending in the West, while defence spending in Asia was starting to dominate the global defence market. Again, it was air combat platforms that dominated, as 1980s-vintage technologies began to penetrate the Asian defence markets. Towards the end of the 1990s, early-1990s-vintage air combat technologies entered into the Asian markets. Commanding significantly less attention was the growing interest in modernising naval capabilities, through the planned acquisitions of green-water capabilities such as frigates.

Throughout this decade, however, there was also greater interest in acquiring rudimentary power projection capabilities – air-refuelling platforms, heavy airlift, and amphibious platforms. Yet again, however, there was a plausible alternative explanation: given the significant downsizing of western military forces, the global defence market was awash with relatively cheap and recent technologies, and Western arms producers were desperate to sell to make up for the decreases in purchases from their traditional western buyers. The global arms market was, simply put, a buyers' market and Asian countries having experienced rapid and sustained economic growth throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s were buying modern capabilities at almost bargain-basement prices.

Defining Concept of Arms Races

But why not an arms race? An arms race is almost universally regarded as a very rare phenomenon in international politics. Almost all scholars would agree that there was an Anglo-German naval arms race in the first decade of the 20th Century; whereas the candidature of the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States in the era of the Cold War remains somewhat more disputed. To qualify as an arms race, several elements are regarded as absolutely necessary.

The first necessary element is a relationship of mutually acknowledged hostility. The countries involved in an arms race must acknowledge each other as putative adversaries. As a consequence, these countries will develop and structure their respective military forces based on anticipated military operations against each other. As each country builds up its own military forces, as it acquires new capabilities, the other will look to either acquire similar capabilities, or seek other capabilities that nullify those that its putative adversary has acquired. There is, in other words, an element of “anything you can do, I can do better”. As such, if one country acquires attack submarines, the other will either seek to acquire better attack submarines, or invest in anti-submarine capabilities. There has to be, in other words, an element of racing, of competition.

Evaluating the Evidence – Arms Races in Asia?

Seen in this light, the current spurt in military spending in Asia begins to look somewhat less than an arms race. It may be true that for countries like Japan and India, their acquisitions might be shaped by what China has or is acquiring. But to attribute to these countries a relationship of mutually acknowledged hostility with China might be something of an over-stretch. Similarly, alternative explanations for their military acquisitions are equally plausible. In the case of India, it might simply be using its newly found financial muscle to modernise its military forces. In the case of Japan, this might be the end result of a decades-long debate as to its role in international politics writ large, and its strategic partnership with the US in particular.

Similarly, the current emphasis on naval acquisitions in Southeast Asia might plausibly be motivated by the spectre of an increasingly assertive China. An equally plausible alternative explanation, however, might be that these countries are finally placing greater attention to their maritime interests, given the relative neglect that naval forces suffered in this region throughout the 1980s and 1990s. For at least some of the Southeast Asian countries, now that they have built up their respective air forces to a technologically competent level, it may well be time to turn their respective attentions to building up their naval forces.

In the final analysis, it is too sanguine to rule out the possibility of arms races in Asia. If the current military modernisation being witnessed is manifestations of arms races, then caution must be exercised by these countries. The fact that alternative explanations for this military modernisation are plausible, however, suggests more a watching brief than outright alarm might be sufficient for the time being.

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