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Indonesia-Singapore Submarine Rescue Pact: Promoting Southeast Asian Naval Cooperation

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Synopsis

In view of the ongoing quest for submarines in Southeast Asia, the recent signing of a submarine rescue pact between Indonesia and Singapore bodes well for future regional cooperative efforts among existing and future submarine operators in Southeast Asia.

Commentary

The signing of a submarine rescue pact between Indonesia and Singapore on 10 July 2012 constitutes a pioneering move amid the ongoing regional quest for submarines. Comprising protocols for resource-sharing and development of joint operating standards, this agreement is one of a handful of new naval cooperation initiatives observed in Southeast Asia in recent years.

The Submarine in Modern Naval Warfare

The submarine is long valued for its ability to exert disproportionate impact in naval warfare. A suitably-equipped and skillfully-crewed submarine may allow a weaker navy to create problems for a stronger navy. Notwithstanding the advent of the nuclear-powered submarine, the diesel-electric powered submarine (SSK) remains relevant till this day and continues to feature in the global naval arms market. It remains an attractive choice for smaller navies seeking a credible sea denial capability.

Modern SSK designs have since evolved to incorporate new capabilities to increase their versatility and lethality. For instance, some can be armed with submerged-launch, long-range standoff weapons such as land-attack cruise missiles. Major international submarine manufacturers nowadays also offer new SSKs equipped with air-independent propulsion (AIP) which extends submerged endurance for weeks without the need to snorkel. Dubbed the 'poor man's nuclear submarine', an AIP-equipped SSK expands the range of warfighting options for a smaller navy, including a credible power projection capability hitherto unavailable in earlier SSK designs.

Southeast Asia's Submarine Quest

Therefore, it is little wonder that several Southeast Asian navies eagerly seek modern SSKs, regardless of whether it is a mere token force of one or two boats in service, as part of the overall pattern of regional naval modernisation since the 1990s. Singapore became the second submarine operator in Southeast Asia after

Indonesia in the 1990s. Plans by Malaysia and Thailand to acquire their own around the period were stymied by the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98. In the early 2000s, Malaysia revived its submarine program and commissioned a pair of Scorpene-class SSKs equipped with submerge-launched Exocet anti-ship cruise missile. They were then arguably the most modern SSK in the region until Singapore inducted the first Swedish, AIP-equipped Västergötland-class SSK in 2011.

Probably the most conspicuous was Vietnam's acquisition of 6 Russian-built Project-636MV Kilo-class SSKs, reportedly armed with Klub-series cruise missiles, in 2009. In December 2011, Indonesia inked a deal with South Korea for 3 Type-209/1400 SSKs to bolster its existing two-boat force. Even though Thailand recently axed a plan to procure decommissioned German Type-206A SSKs, it continues to express serious interest in acquiring such a capability soon. Even cash-strapped Philippines included at least one SSK in its long-term wish-list as part of its armed forces modernisation program.

Potential Source of Destabilisation

With more submarines projected to roam the mostly semi-enclosed Southeast Asian waters, potential risks exist for regional maritime safety and security. Further compounded by the customary lack of transparency in submarine operations, there is greater hazard of at-sea collisions considering that navigable strategic waterways in the region are characterised by shallow waters.

Equipped with modern signal intelligence suites, submarines can also loiter near or inside foreign waters thus creating a potential source of tension. One may recall the infamous 'Whiskey on the Rocks' incident in 1981 when a Soviet submarine ran aground on the Swedish coast near a strategic Swedish naval base in Karlskrona. That incident sparked heated diplomatic exchanges under Moscow's threat of force to secure the release of the boat and crew.

Therefore, the potential risk of similar incidents occurring in volatile Southeast Asia remains. In fact, such a danger was well amplified in April 2000 when former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid cautioned Singapore's submarines not to stray outside designated sea lanes when traversing through Indonesian waters while urging the Indonesian Navy to stay vigilant.

Progressing Beyond the Bilateral Pact

Prior to the Indonesia-Singapore pact, the primary submarine-related naval activity was Exercise Pacific Reach, a multinational submarine rescue drill first held in 2000. Seen in this context the promulgation of this bilateral submarine rescue pact is significant. It marks not only a furtherance of longstanding cooperation between the two navies but also symbolises increased trust in the traditionally sensitive undersea domain.

Viewed in the wider context of naval activities in Southeast Asia, this bilateral pact is even more significant since previous regional initiatives mostly revolved around more 'traditional' modes such as information sharing and intelligence exchange; ship-to-ship communication and maneuver; as well as surface gunnery and missile firing exercises – but never before in the undersea realm. The implementation of the bilateral pact thus heralds advancement towards broader intra-Southeast Asian naval cooperation.

However, for this bilateral pact to expand into a wider regional initiative, three ingredients are needed. First, bilateral-level trust needs to proliferate among all navies in the region. Second, information-sharing in submarine operational safety needs to gain traction. The recent ASEAN Maritime Security Information-Sharing Exercise co-hosted by Indonesia and Singapore is notable in this respect and may serve as a useful basis.

Lastly, in view of the considerable expanse of Southeast Asian waters wherein submarines are envisaged to operate, it is necessary for all submarine operators in the region to each establish at least a rudimentary submarine rescue capacity. This will facilitate effective pooling and sharing of submarine rescue know-how and resources in Southeast Asia.

Such future initiatives may hold huge promise for regional maritime safety and security, for they provide for not merely better submarine operational safety in the region but also further promote mutual confidence and trust as well as enhanced interoperability amongst Southeast Asian navies.

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