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The Search for MH 370: Time for Stronger ASEAN Cooperation

By Dylan Loh Ming Hui

Synopsis

Beijing is growing increasingly frustrated with the slow search for the missing flight MH370 which carried many passengers from China. Domestic pressures have further pressed Beijing into chiding Malaysia publicly. What does this mean for ASEAN?

Commentary

THE SEARCH for the missing flight MH 370 should have been an exemplar of ASEAN unity and cooperation. Indeed, after coming under some criticism for the lack of effort and coordination during Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, this would have been the chance for ASEAN to seek redress and to mute criticism.

On the contrary, the lack of joint effort by ASEAN in the search for the missing airliner – as opposed to the involvement of individual ASEAN states on a bilateral basis – was noticeable. Is it time for ASEAN as a group to step up to support the multinational search drive?

Lack of trust?

Initial information released by Malaysia pointed to a possible crash in the South China Sea, and help was forthcoming from ASEAN members. Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines contributed either naval and/or aerial assets to help in the search. However, there was no mention of tapping on the ASEAN-Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ASEAN-ERAT) nor was there any concerted response from ASEAN.

Subsequently, there was confusion over the plane's location, in part due to the slow release of relevant information. While this was largely because of the need to verify and ascertain the accuracy of facts before release, the perception that Malaysia had delayed or withheld information from its ASEAN neighbours was not lost on some of them. Vietnam's deputy Minister of Transport, Pham Quy Tieu, noted that "...five days after the plane went missing, Vietnamese authorities only exchanged information with a Malaysian military official, who refused to provide any information about the search mission carried out by the Malaysian authorities".

When asked if the plane had slipped off the radar or suddenly disappeared from it, Malaysia's acting transport minister, who is also defence minister, said the information was "too sensitive". If Malaysia and other ASEAN members are unwilling to share crucial information openly in an event as serious as this, the prospects of any

form of security cooperation in the region seem dim.

Beijing's reactions

Naturally, with the majority of passengers -153 out of 227 - being Chinese nationals, Beijing would take a keen interest in the search. It deployed several helicopters, several naval assets including two warships and re-calibrated its satellites to join in the search efforts.

The implication and significance of naval assets from rival territorial claimants participating in the search and rescue efforts in contested territories was portrayed as a rare sign of collaboration with many headlines cheering on the cooperation. But was it really cooperation or simply multiple parties conducting independent searches? It is worth reminding that while the search was at its height in the South China Sea, China blocked two Philippine vessels from sending personnel and supplies to the Second Thomas Shoal on the 9 March 2014 which caused the Philippines to lodge a diplomatic protest.

China also stepped up the public pressure on Malaysia by releasing several statements subtly criticising the way Kuala Lumpur had handled the incident. The Chinese Foreign Ministry, for example, released a statement requesting "the Malaysian side to step up their efforts to speed up the investigation and provide accurate information to China in a timely fashion". Increased domestic pressures have pushed the Chinese government to intensify its own search efforts while keeping up the heat on Malaysia.

From the Chinese perspective, this presents the perfect opportunity for it to assert itself over the South China Sea. Given the lack of ownership shown by ASEAN, China can make a case for it being the regional leader. Moreover, if it needs further justification, there is no better time than now for it to impose an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea under a veneer of legitimacy: ensuring civil aircraft safety; safeguarding disaster-relief, search and rescue (SAR) efforts; and protecting its national citizens.

Way forward?

As the search for the missing plane shifts away from the South China Sea towards the Indian Ocean, Indonesia has been asked to lead efforts in the southern Indian Ocean. However ASEAN should pause and take stock. One of the primary goals of the ASEAN-ERAT is "...to respond to disasters, and ensure rapid and collective deployment of ASEAN's resources following a major disaster in one or more Member State within the ASEAN region".

ASEAN-ERAT should have its capacities and capabilities upgraded to better achieve its primary goal. It needs to be further professionalised and better staffed to build up its minimum capabilities well enough that ASEAN members can trust and tap into it in times of emergencies. Indeed, given the disaster-prone geographical location of many ASEAN states, one of the foremost priorities should be to strengthen ASEAN's HADR and SAR competencies.

But more than purely humanitarian purposes, having a robust and credible disaster response mechanism would be a necessary step in promoting greater trust and safeguard ASEAN's primacy in the region.

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