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International Maritime Review 2017

Need for More Inclusive Asia-Pac Maritime Diplomacy

By Jane Chan and Collin Koh

Synopsis

The International Maritime Review 2017 marks the 50th anniversary of the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN). But it also attests to the maturing maritime diplomacy in Southeast Asia that contributes to a rules-based maritime order in the wider Asia-Pacific.

Commentary

FOLLOWING A tense 2016 surrounding the South China Sea disputes, especially in the run-up to the arbitral ruling at The Hague, 2017 offers a fresh respite with Southeast Asia's maritime security seascape characterised by the spirit of concord.

The Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) was hosted by Malaysia in March, during which the LIMA Sea Exercise 2017 involving warships of 17 navies was conducted. Two months later in May, Singapore hosted an International Maritime Review (IMR) in conjunction with the International Maritime Defence Exhibition (IMDEX) and International Maritime Security Conference (IMSC). The IMR reflects the growing maturity of maritime diplomacy in Southeast Asia, in no small part a collective effort undertaken by both regional and extra-regional governments alike.

Growing Complexity Requiring Enhanced Cooperation

Despite the tamping down of tensions in the South China Sea, the broader Asia-

Pacific maritime security environment remains tenuous. Maritime disputes are unlikely to go away for the foreseeable future; therein lies the potential risks of inadvertent clashes at sea. But a more immediate concern relates to the increasingly complex myriad of transnational maritime security challenges, for example seaborne terrorism as well as piracy and sea robbery – such as attacks in the Sulu Sea that are taking place with increasing frequency.

The complex array of maritime security challenges generates uncertainties, compounded by enduring geopolitical rivalries between major powers in the Asia-Pacific. There are also persistent differences in how coastal and user states in the region interpret and implement the rules-based maritime order, especially the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Notwithstanding these differences, it remains essential for the maritime forces of Southeast Asia and extra-regional powers to cooperate more closely with each other in order to maintain a rules-based regional maritime order that would underpin stability and prosperity.

However, it should be noted that Southeast Asian governments continue to view the policing of local waters as the littoral states' responsibilities, whereas extra-regional powers could contribute through other forms of assistances, such as technical aid and training.

Sustaining US Maritime Security Engagement

To achieve the objectives mentioned above, the existing, interwoven web of regional maritime cooperation needs to be maintained and further developed. The United States Navy, for example, has been the lynchpin of Washington's maritime security engagement with Southeast Asia, through longstanding exercises such as the bilateral Cooperative Afloat and Readiness Training (CARAT) and the multilateral Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) series.

In recent times, in response to the evolving maritime security environment, US maritime security engagements with Southeast Asia have also taken a new twist. Several bilateral engagements began to incorporate other partners who bring along certain unique skillsets.

One example is Australia's participation in the traditionally bilateral Exercise Balikatan series between the Philippines and US. Such engagements not only enable the regional forces to adapt to the evolving mission requirements, but also allow mutual learning of best practices, and contribute towards confidence-building.

With the uncertainties over sustained US security commitment to the region under the Donald Trump administration, recent statements made by senior US Navy leaders have been assuring. During his recent visit to Singapore, Admiral Scott Swift, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, affirmed the fleet's resolve to contribute towards regional peace and stability. This came not too long after foreign ministers of ASEAN met Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Washington D.C. where he also offered similar assurances.

Towards A More Inclusive Maritime Diplomacy

However, with the growing complexities of regional maritime security, Southeast Asia will likely see greater extra-regional involvement in this capacity-building process. This should be welcomed given the stakes.

Countries such as Australia, China, India and Japan play important roles, as does the US. In the 2015 revised version of A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower published by the US Navy, Washington emphasised contributions by US allies and partners towards maintaining regional maritime security.

Thus far, these countries have begun providing various forms of capacity-building assistances. For example, Japan has provided patrol vessels to Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam to bolster their maritime law enforcement capabilities.

Likewise, using its growing set of maritime security capabilities, Beijing is also reaching out to Southeast Asian partners. The Philippine Coast Guard's recent participation in its Chinese counterpart's training programme is one notable example – adding onto the growing involvement of the People's Liberation Army Navy in regional maritime diplomacy.

More Bite Needed for Maritime Diplomacy

With the emergence and expansion of coastguard-type agencies and increased activities of coastguard vessels in regional waters, it stands to reason that future extra-regional involvement should also focus on these areas. The Indians and Japanese are already conducting regular coastguard ship visits to Southeast Asia as part of their broader maritime diplomacy. Likewise, a greater US Coast Guard presence would also be a welcome move, adding to the sustained US naval presence.

A more inclusive rules-based maritime order would only be more constructive for the maintenance of peace and stability in the global maritime commons. In this regard, while dialogue conducted under the rubric of regional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus and the ASEAN Regional Forum remains important, regional states should look to enhancing practical measures.

One concrete example is greater participation by regional and extra-regional navies and coastguard-type forces in efforts to strengthen regional maritime security and stability. Indeed, such efforts would lend more traction to maritime diplomacy that promotes confidence-building and practical security cooperation against common challenges at sea.

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