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Maritime Insecurity and Diminishing Resilience in Southeast Asia: The Case for Minilateralism

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SYNOPSIS

*Escalating great power rivalries have put Southeast Asian countries under strain. While such rivalries have existed since the Cold War, today they have turned seaward, undermining maritime security and diminishing regional resilience. **Ristian Atriandi SUPRIYANTO** suggests that minilateralism may be the way forward.*

COMMENTARY

Indonesia has taken over the chairmanship of ASEAN this year. On the chairman's agenda is the ["ASEAN Maritime Outlook"](#) (AMO), which Jakarta proposed in November 2022. While details on the AMO are still sketchy, the proposal is consistent with the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" ([AOIP](#)). Article 14 of the AOIP recognises that "existing and arising geopolitical challenges facing countries in the region also revolve around maritime issues such as unresolved maritime disputes that have the potential for open conflict."

Although maritime geopolitical challenges are not new to Southeast Asia, their manner and the consequences they could bring to bear today are. Unresolved maritime disputes, especially in the South China Sea, have exacerbated great power posturing at sea – posturing that largely spared ASEAN countries during the Cold War but is bedeviling the grouping today. As ASEAN grapples for a response, it may mount yet more norm-building exercises like the AOIP and AMO but these provide little in the way of action. Extra-ASEAN measures through "minilateral" arrangements may be a viable option. [Minilateralism](#) could reinforce ASEAN's "regional resilience" as its

member states anticipate and respond to escalating maritime great power rivalries in and around Southeast Asia.

Regionally Resilient

The concept of regional resilience has been ASEAN's hallmark approach to security since the group's founding in 1967. The Cold War roots of the concept [rested](#) on enhancing domestic stability through regional cooperation to build strong economies. The resulting resilience would mean that ASEAN would not in principle have to rely so heavily for its security on the military presence of Western countries, to which some member states had pledged allegiance of some sort.

Ideologically, however, the ASEAN countries were not impartial to the rival Cold War blocs. The original member states – Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines – had non- or anti-communist governments. Indonesian scholar Jusuf Wanandi [recalls](#): “the socio-economic ‘front’ of ASEAN was just a cover for the strategic build-up of a force that could withstand communist pressure in the region.” Discreetly, regional resilience was conceived with a pro-Western tinge despite ASEAN's [appeal](#) for a “Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality” in Southeast Asia.

Irrespective of domestic stability, the geostrategic nature of the Cold War had given ASEAN member states some semblance of regional resilience. The West's maritime superiority limited the extent of Soviet and Communist Chinese military interventions mainly within the continental boundaries of Europe and Asia (hence, the Soviets [conceded](#) to the US naval blockade on Cuba in 1962).

The Soviet Union's ascent to a “blue-water navy” in the 1970s did not tilt the balance of maritime power in favour of the communists, with the Chinese navy still lagging far behind. US State Secretary Henry Kissinger [told](#) Indonesia's foreign minister Adam Malik in June 1976: “while their [the Soviets'] fleet is obviously growing, we have every confidence that ours [the US navy] is superior. The greatest threat is their submarines. We believe that their surface fleet can be handled.” Moreover, argued Kissinger, the Soviets had to reduce their economic growth simply to keep their military operational.

Benign Seascape

Washington's maritime superiority to that of Moscow's, let alone Beijing's, rendered ASEAN's seascape relatively free from potential major military conflicts at sea. Soviet and Chinese maritime deficiencies spared ASEAN countries from the geostrategic conundrum then bedevilling continental Europe and mainland Asia: communist expansionism overland. Soviet premier Joseph Stalin reportedly [said](#): “whoever occupies a territory also imposes his own social system. Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise.” During the Cold War, the Soviet army overran much of Eastern Europe and Afghanistan; so did the Chinese invade Korea and Vietnam. Neither the Soviet nor Chinese navies, however, posed any major threat to ASEAN countries back then.

Soviet and Chinese continental expansion and ideological propagation turned ASEAN's security landward. Indeed, Sino-Soviet rivalries over Indochina in the 1970s and 1980s threatened the survival and anti-communist integrity of Thailand's

monarchic [government](#). Save for Thailand, however, the geography of Cold War ASEAN was mainly maritime. With Southeast Asia's maritime domain relatively secure from *unsolicited* Soviet or Chinese military power projection, the threats of subversion and insurgency topped the [priorities](#) of many ASEAN governments. Simply put, ASEAN's regional resilience oriented landward, and security turned "non-traditional" in its focus on rebels, criminals and terrorists, who posed threats that surpassed naval rivalries in national priorities.

Maritime Insecurity

The landward focus of ASEAN's regional resilience seems moribund today as two trends have upset Southeast Asia's otherwise benign geostrategic seascape: maritime disputes and the rivalries they sow among the claimants and their supporters. Unresolved and protracted regional maritime disputes, especially those in the South China Sea, have triggered some of the anxieties that partly justify, if not motivate, post-Cold War expansion in maritime defence capabilities among some ASEAN and other countries. These competitive cycles in capability acquisitions and their subsequent deployments stoked concerns among some extra-regional maritime powers about the safety and security of sea lines of communications across the Indo-Pacific that have Southeast Asia sitting at the centre.



A South Korean Type-209 submarine, the CHONG BOGO (SSK 061). Indonesia is planning to modernise its submarine fleet with the Type-209. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Although many ASEAN countries eschew partaking in great power rivalries, especially between China and the United States, the geostrategic fault lines run along China's [periphery](#). From Sino-Indian border conflicts to military escalation in the Korean peninsula, almost all contingencies – even landbound ones – contain or closely relate to elements of maritime warfare, thanks to the land strike capabilities of naval power. Anticipating such contingencies obliges emerging and existing major naval powers, including China with its rapidly growing [navy](#), to foray beyond their primary area of operations. These forays often criss-cross Southeast Asia, where inadvertent

escalation or even accidental conflicts can happen should rival naval units engage in provocative if not hostile manoeuvres towards each other.

New Problem, Old Tool

Facing this new geostrategic conundrum, ASEAN is left with a rather obsolete tool at its disposal – the Cold War-era regional resilience – for two paradoxical reasons. First, the maritime focus of the geostrategic problem necessitates greater security or even defence collaboration among the member states. Whereas subversions and insurgencies of the past lay within the exclusive land/continental domain of each member state, the maritime domain is more diffuse, with overlapping national, regional and global interests. Furthermore, the maritime domain calls for more capability-driven than manpower-heavy approaches, which ASEAN countries may find harder to shoulder individually.

Nevertheless, the necessity to collaborate can founder upon the second reason: greater diversity in ASEAN membership. Larger membership (with Timor-Leste being the latest [addition](#)) erodes the distinct albeit discreet ideological commonality that made ASEAN work during the Cold War. Meanwhile, the “ASEAN way” of working on the lowest common denominator entails a race to the bottom. Consequently, [consensus](#) overrides action. While Cold War ASEAN also had its own intramural disputes, ASEAN today is less likely to initiate Wanandi’s “strategic build-up”. Instead, ASEAN finds it harder to withstand external pressures since there is no consensus on what the pressures are or, in other words, where the actual geostrategic fault lines lie.

Hail to Minilateralism!

The gap between necessity and consensus may have given rise to minilateralism, where three or more countries decide to collaborate since multilateral or pan-regional consensus is hard to reach or irrelevant. Perhaps, the current maritime patrol arrangements among the ASEAN littoral states of the Malacca Straits and Sulawesi (Celebes) Sea may provide models for collaboration in the South China Sea, where maritime poaching is rife, among other issues. Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam can initiate similar patrols in the South China Sea where their maritime boundaries are contiguous. Indeed, the recently concluded Indonesia-Vietnam exclusive economic zone (EEZ) [agreement](#) should give impetus for minilateral maritime patrol arrangements in the South China Sea.

The potential for a minilateral approach is also evident in defence diplomacy. The proliferation of multinational joint military exercises in ASEAN tends to coalesce on either the bilateral or multilateral/pan-regional format, with little to nothing in between. Where minilateral exercises exist, ASEAN member states seem to favour holding such exercises with extra-regional countries. However, Indonesia’s recent [ratification](#) of the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Singapore can prompt change. With Indonesia’s consent, the DCA does accommodate joint military exercises with third countries, including fellow ASEAN member states.

While not perfect, minilateralism may plug the gap between ASEAN’s geostrategic necessity, on the one hand, and struggles for consensus, on the other. It could partly

compensate for the vain promises of regional resilience in today's world – not because the concept rings hollow, but because geopolitics has rendered it less relevant.

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