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Editorial

Our first issue for 2021—Vol 47, No. 1 is a compilation of essays from students of our local Command and Staff Course (CSC) of the Goh Keng Swee Command and Staff College (GKS CSC).

The first of the essays, 'Challenges To ASEAN's Regional Security' is written by LTC Lau Jianmin Jamin. In this essay, LTC Lau argues that the ASEAN region is beset by a range of regional security challenges and that co-operation in the ASEAN region is undermined by a number of factors. He begins his essay by outlining the international security threats facing the ASEAN region and the transnational phenomena that can potentially destabilise the region. He then assesses how regional co-operation has been undermined by a lack of common identity and the complex and varied internal politics of ASEAN countries. LTC Lau then examines the institution of ASEAN and contends that the mechanism of co-operation amongst ASEAN members is undermined by a range of factors. He makes a holistic assessment of how successful ASEAN has been in fostering regional security and co-operation, in relation to its stated challenges. LTC Lau then concludes that despite its criticisms, ASEAN's overall success in preventing armed conflict in a highly volatile region is indeed commendable.

LTC Goh Nichola wrote the next essay, 'Is Non – Offensive Defence Viable As A Strategy For National Security?' According to LTC Goh, non-offensive defence is described as the strategic defence stance taken by a country to safeguard its national interest. Without being aggressive with its military, a nation can potentially deter an aggressor, through its uneven terrain or foreign alliances. LTC Goh goes on to add that non-offensive defence is viable as a strategy only if certain conditions are fulfilled—suitable geography, benign strategic environment and neutral foreign outreach. In the case of Japan, she puts forth an additional condition, which is alliances. In LTC Goh's opinion, however, non-offensive defence is only fully viable if the three conditions highlighted above are met.

In the next essay, 'Is There A Likelihood That Weapons Acquisitions Can Become Destabilising?' MAJ Ragumaran s/o Davindran highlights that over the past 15 years, with weapons acquisitions playing a central role, the total defence expenditure for ASEAN has doubled in absolute terms. Against this backdrop,

researchers have questioned if the changing arms dynamic would have an adverse effect on regional stability. In the essay, MAJ Ragumaran uses the ASEAN context to argue that weapons acquisition processes alone do not lead to destabilisation. He presents his argument in three segments. In the first segment, he provides a review of weapons acquisition to establish a common understanding of key terminologies that would surface throughout his essay. He then proceeds to analyse the reasons behind the weapons acquisition processes and underlines other underlying factors that can cause destabilisation. Finally, MAJ Ragumaran examines the weapons acquisition processes between India and Pakistan and concludes that these processes alone do not contribute to destabilisation as there are other underlying factors that affect regional stability.

ME5 Tang Zhan Sheng wrote the essay, 'How Can Threat Assessments Become Self-Fulfilling Prophecies?' In this essay, ME5 Tang explains the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy which results from actors believing and expecting a purported eventual state of affairs and then unwittingly rendering it true via their corresponding attempts to manipulate its emergence. He then explores how states make threat assessments in the context of an anarchic system. Through the examples of the Cuban missile crisis, Al Qaeda in Iraq and bioterrorism, ME5 Tang illustrates the role of perception and misperception in transforming threat assessments into self-fulfilling prophecies. He then discusses the nuclear domino theory and its association with Taiwan to exemplify how a vicious, self-fulfillment spiral can be negated. Finally, ME5 Tang concludes that when caught in a self-fulfilling prophecy, it will be best to reflect on the prophesied outcome and alter one's behaviour in response, so as to break out of the self-fulfillment cycle.

The final essay in this compilation entitled, 'Despite Changes In Technology, It Is Still Possible To Identify Continuities in Naval Warfare' is written by ME5 Dhanashanker s/o Ramakrishnan. Here, ME5 Dhanashanker elaborates on the relevant continuities in naval warfare within the maritime operating environment which can dictate naval warfare principles.

He first defines the maritime operating environment and what it means to attain supremacy within the maritime domain. Then, he highlights how technology has shaped naval warfare tactics. Subsequently, ME5 Dhanashanker discusses emerging naval hybrid warfare. He concludes with a current case study concerning naval activities in the South China Sea.

At this juncture, we bid farewell to Mr Kuldip Singh, a key member of the POINTER Editorial Board as

he retires after 50 years of service in MINDEF. We wish to thank Mr Kuldip for his full support of POINTER. Happy Retirement, Mr Kuldip!

POINTER would also like to offer our very best wishes to CFC Toh Jie Hung and CPL Ong Jing Xian as they leave to pursue further studies. We thank them for their contributions and wish them well in their future endeavours.

The POINTER Editorial Team

CHALLENGES TO ASEAN'S REGIONAL SECURITY

By LTC Lau Jianmin Jamin

ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author argues that the ASEAN region is beset by a range of regional security challenges and that co-operation in the ASEAN region is undermined by a number of factors. He begins by outlining the international security threats facing the ASEAN region and the transnational phenomena that can potentially destabilise the region. He then assesses how regional co-operation has been undermined by a lack of common identity and the complex and varied internal politics of ASEAN countries. He then examines the institution of ASEAN and contends that the mechanism of co-operation amongst ASEAN members is undermined by a range of factors. The author makes a holistic assessment of how successful ASEAN has been in fostering regional security and co-operation, in relation to its stated challenges. He concludes that despite its criticisms, ASEAN's overall success in preventing armed conflict in a highly volatile region is indeed commendable.

Keywords: *Co-operation, Peace, Threats, Dispute, Challenges*

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967 with the aim of enhancing regional co-operation in order to promote economic growth, regional peace and stability.¹ While the aim of regional security was not overtly registered on the Association's agenda, it is difficult to imagine advancing regional co-operation and economic growth without the underpinnings of a conflict-free Southeast Asia. In 2003, the ASEAN Political-Social Community was established as one of three pillars of ASEAN—aimed at enabling that Southeast Asian states to 'live at peace with one another and with the world in a just, democratic and harmonious environment.'² Some 52 years after its inception, ASEAN's effectiveness in achieving its stated and implied aims—especially in the domain of security co-operation—is a widely polarising issue amongst critics and advocates of the Association.

This essay will argue that the ASEAN region is beset by a range of regional security challenges and that co-operation in the ASEAN region is undermined by a number of factors. It will begin by outlining the international security threats facing the ASEAN region and the transnational phenomena that can potentially destabilise the region. The essay will then assess how

regional co-operation is undermined by a lack of common identity and the complex and varied internal politics of ASEAN countries. It will then focus upon the institution of ASEAN, and argue that the mechanism of co-operation amongst ASEAN members is undermined by a range of factors. Finally, this essay will make a holistic assessment of how successful ASEAN has been in fostering regional security and co-operation, in relation to its stated challenges.

SECURITY THREATS

An examination of ASEAN's external and internal threat environment provides us with insights on the extent to which these threats pose challenges to regional security and co-operation. Externally, ASEAN needs to contend with the economic and military rise of China, which has endowed the latter with reserves of hard power. This poses a security challenge for ASEAN countries, especially those with disputed territories with China.³ Increasingly assertive Chinese actions around the disputed territories in the South China Sea—such as China's unilateral reclamation and military build-up of disputed islands, and her employment of state controlled fishing fleets for spying, ramming and other coercive actions—are indications that China is

increasingly relying on military means to resolve disputes with ASEAN countries, and appears to be prepared to continue on this trajectory in the future.⁴

According to Huong Le Thu, in his article, *China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement Towards ASEAN*, beyond military aggression, China has also sought to undermine ASEAN unity through employing a combination of coercion and inducement methods against individual ASEAN member states.⁵ Methods employed include the offering (or withholding) of economic incentives, and they have succeeded in abusing ASEAN's consensus-based approach, effectively preventing ASEAN from playing an active role in resolving the South China Sea dispute.

Emmers suggests that ASEAN's and the ASEAN Regional Forum's (ARF's) co-operative security mechanisms feature a strong balance of power element.⁶ ASEAN member states also run the risk of entanglement in great power rivalry, by becoming proxies for great powers vying for regional domination through flashpoints like the South China Sea.⁷ Furthermore, the notion of ASEAN centrality—in which the grouping's interests (disparate as they may be) and collective voice are given due consideration in regional discourse—risks being derailed as major powers become more assertive in their regional approach.

ASEAN member states also run the risk of entanglement in great power rivalry, by becoming proxies for great powers vying for regional domination.

Internally, the ASEAN region is subject to transnational threats such as terrorism, drug trafficking, organised crime and internal human rights abuses potentially spilling across borders. Many of these threats were not present during the formation of ASEAN, but were later introduced by the onset of globalisation. One approach to overcoming the limitations in the capacity of state governments is to involve and engage other actors, such as non-governmental organisations, which are able to meaningfully contribute towards tackling these challenges.⁸

Overall, ASEAN faces both external and internal threats that it is ill-prepared to tackle. These challenges arise in part due to the institutional characteristics of ASEAN; these considerations will be discussed in depth in subsequent sections.

THE LACK OF A COMMON IDENTITY

Beyond ASEAN's threat outlook, the fundamental nature of the ASEAN grouping also poses challenges to regional security and co-operation. Constructivists argue that beyond material capabilities and hard power interests binding regional players together, other factors—such as a shared identity, common norms and socialisation processes—necessarily define the successes and failures of a regional grouping.⁹ In ASEAN's case, it has been argued that the lack of a common identity in Southeast Asia undermines efforts in regional security co-operation. A closer examination reveals that ASEAN member states are dissimilar across many dimensions—ethnicity, religion, language or political ideology. This wide range of different cultures and systems of governance, therefore, preclude the formation of a coherent and cohesive Southeast Asian identity.¹⁰

In the absence of compelling unifying factors, ASEAN's identity has been described as 'socially and politically constructed', and consequently, subject to influence by geopolitical and geo-economic shifts.¹¹ Should ASEAN member states opt to marginalise the Association in their foreign policy as a result of these influences, both ASEAN and its associated intuitions face the risk of unravelling and becoming irrelevant. The relative instability of Southeast Asian regimes also means that individual states are often not seen as possessing a consistent identity, which augments the wider failure of being unable to establish a coherent regional identity to bind ASEAN nations together.¹² Furthermore, ASEAN's firm normative emphasis of national resilience also impedes the process of regional identity building. Instead, it leads to a collection of self-reliant states coming together under the auspices of ASEAN without developing a sense of common identity, ultimately undermining efforts at greater social transformation in Southeast Asia.¹³

Unlike the Western European and North American countries that are party to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), ASEAN member states also

lack a present-day common external threat to bind them together.¹⁴ Conversely, the threat perceptions of many ASEAN member states are centred upon their fellow member states. In 1967, ASEAN was founded in spite of the founding members' animosity towards each other—Indonesia was engaged in Confrontation against Malaysia and Singapore, who had just separated. The Philippines claimed sovereignty of Sabah, which had just joined the Federation of Malaysia; and the tenuous allegiances of the populace along inter-mural borders strained Malaysia-Thailand and Indonesia-Philippines relations.¹⁵ Today, inter-state fault lines persist, and are amplified by ASEAN's expansion into a ten-member grouping.

On the other hand, Kausikan argues that it is precisely due to member states' diversity that necessitates the existence of a regional grouping like ASEAN.¹⁶ In this light, ASEAN's purpose was therefore one of 'managing diversity to prevent inevitable tensions from erupting into conflict'.¹⁷ Singapore's founding Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam, has been quoted as saying to the founding members of ASEAN that 'if we do not hang together, we of the ASEAN nations will hang separately', implying that founding members would 'hang separately' as a result of their inter-state rivalries and tensions in the absence of a unifying organisation.¹⁸ As a mechanism to prevent inter-mural conflict, ASEAN has a proven track record—as is discussed in depth in the penultimate section of this essay.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

An analysis of the institution characteristics of ASEAN also reveals further challenges to regional security and co-operation. Central to ASEAN's normative framework is the 'ASEAN way'—which refers to member states' approach towards the conduct of relations with each other. The three key tenets of the ASEAN way are: 1) non-interference in the domestic affairs of other member states, 2) a consensus-based style of decision-making, and 3) the non-use of force to settle disputes.¹⁹ The ASEAN way undermines regional security and co-operation in several ways.²⁰

Specifically, the principal of non-interference entails refusing to criticise the internal affairs of other ASEAN countries, denying support and sanctuary for

rebel groups seeking to overthrow the government of an ASEAN country, and providing political and material assistance to governments fighting against internal dissidents.²¹ The non-interference principle ensures intra-mural cohesiveness and harmony, especially in a diverse organisation like ASEAN. However, this doctrine of non-interference is increasingly incapable of addressing the multitude of challenges that globalisation and interdependence pose for ASEAN members.²² For instance, in relation to tackling international terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11, the emphasis on transnational co-operation apparent in Western Europe could not be matched by ASEAN due in large part to the principle of non-interference.²³ The question of how to deal with complex internal conflicts with cross-border implications within countries like Myanmar, where human rights abuses are being committed, has also affected this principle of non-interference.²⁴

ASEAN members have debated whether a switch in policy to 'flexible engagement'—in which the principle of non-interference is lifted on issues that have cross-border implications—or the more nuanced principle of 'enhanced interaction', in which individual member states may comment on other states' policies with cross-border implications, but strictly outside the ambit of ASEAN, in order to be able to foster a more constructive approach to regional co-operation.²⁵ Notwithstanding these discussions, ASEAN's non-interference principle persists.

Like the principle of non-interference, the second tenet of consensus-based decision making has been hailed as a cornerstone for successful co-operation amidst diversity. However, it has also drawn its fair share of criticism. Other criticisms of this principle include the delay in prompt action resulting from the lengthy discussions required to gain consensus that precede a decision, as well as decisions that are invariably based around the lowest common denominator.²⁶

Tan suggests that with the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2008, the ASEAN way is gradually evolving to include rules-based elements, which is a departure from its regular approach that emphasises informality.²⁷ Such a development would eventually go some way towards addressing the criticism levied at the ASEAN way. In



A commemorative stupa filled with the skulls of the victims at the Killing Field of Choeung Ek in Cambodia.

dealing with heftier geopolitical rivals, a rules-based approach will also favour ASEAN as smaller states rely on rules to assert their rights.

Beyond the ASEAN way, it is also worthwhile to examine the efficacy and shortcomings of ASEAN-led institutions. Foremost among these is the ARF, the first of the ASEAN-led expanded frameworks, and a forum focused on regional political and security issues that consists of twenty-seven member states, including China, the US and Japan. The ARF was designed to promote confidence—building in relation to security issues amongst members. Security co-operation under the ARF was supposed to progress through three stages—confidence building, preventive diplomacy, and then elaboration of approaches to conflict. However, the ARF's progress has been hampered by intra-ASEAN hurdles, politics and functional challenges. One common grievance is that the ARF seems permanently stuck within its espoused first and second stages.²⁸ Additionally, the fact that the great powers within the ARF are led by the smaller ASEAN member states have

given rise to questions of whether ASEAN is exercising only nominal leadership.²⁹

The ASEAN Regional Forum was designed to promote confidence-building in relation to security issues amongst members.

Furthermore, the centre-piece of the ARF process is an annual ministerial meeting in which ASEAN foreign ministers meet with their counterparts in various configurations. However, the remit of these meetings is often vague and the broad formulations designed to offer foreign ministers greater flexibility often lead to a lack of focus and depth in terms of the discussions.³⁰ The broader question of how the ARF is supposed to marry a broad array of competing foreign policy and security objectives from countries such as China, Japan and the US without any explicit mechanism to stop conflict remains unaddressed.³¹ Ultimately, the ARF has been criticised as failing in its objective of promoting preventative diplomacy, in particular due its emphasis on 'process over outcomes'.³²

The establishment of the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting (ADMM) in 2006, and thereafter the ADMM-Plus in 2010, represented an opportunity to rethink ASEAN's approach to regional security co-operation. The ADMM-Plus, while still in relative infancy, has demonstrated promise in fostering practical co-operation and collective capacity-building in response to non-traditional transnational threats.³⁵ While the ARF has been criticised for its unwillingness to get involved in the South China Sea dispute, the ADMM-Plus has managed to sidestep thorny issues such as the legality and validity of conflicting claims, and has succeeded in securing its participating states' commitment to adopt the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in 2017.³⁴ This set of practical measures goes some way towards diffusing an otherwise tense situation at sea, preventing potential conflict escalation. The ADMM-Plus navies have since taken the implementation of CUES one step further by putting it into practice during the 2019 ADMM-Plus Maritime Security Exercise.

ASEAN'S VALUE IN PROMOTING REGIONAL CO-OPERATION AND SECURITY — AN OBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT

Having analysed ASEAN's challenges to regional security and co-operation across various dimensions, the penultimate section of this essay will discuss ASEAN's overall effectiveness in enhancing regional security and co-operation. This section argues that despite the challenges faced, ASEAN has made significant progress in the areas of regional security and co-operation, and is poised to continue these contributions in the future.

Laksmana reminds us that the open discussion of security issues within the ambit of ASEAN was generally considered to be out-of-bounds for the first 40 years of the Association's existence.³⁵ This was especially so in the light of the levels of strategic mistrust between member states, with the notion of military conflict a not-too-distant reality. In this context, ASEAN's achievement of delivering 52 years free of armed conflicts between member states to the region—in a period where inter-state conflict has broken out in the Middle East, Northeast Asia, South Asia, and the Korean Peninsula—is not insignificant.³⁶

Furthermore, while fora like the ARF have been accused of being mere 'talkshops', the role of dialogue as a tool to engage major powers should not be understated. In particular, ASEAN has been effective both as a means to socialise major powers in engaging the region, as well as fostering a conducive environment for great powers to engage each other.³⁷ 'ASEAN's strength can be found in its weakness'—as it lacks the wherewithal to threaten, great powers are therefore willing to engage and trust ASEAN.³⁸

In particular, ASEAN has been effective both as a means to socialise major powers in engaging the region, as well as fostering a conducive environment for great powers to engage each other.

Looking to the future of effective security co-operation in the ASEAN region, the outlook is mixed. The earlier sections of this essay have described the threats to ASEAN's continued relevance posed by the intensified geopolitical competition of great powers.



Minster of Defence, Dr Ng Eng Heng attending the ASEAN-China Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting on 9th December, 2020.



Exercise participants receiving a brief on the progress of the exercise on RSS Stalwart during ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise in 2018.

However, ASEAN, particularly through its defence sector institutions, continues to be a relevant vehicle for great power engagement through practical co-operation and capacity building. For instance, the inaugural ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise was conducted in 2018 amidst China's growing assertion in the South China Sea. In a similar vein, the first ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise was conducted in 2019.

CONCLUSION

This essay has examined the challenges to regional security and co-operation faced by the ASEAN region. First, this essay has examined the range of security threats faced by ASEAN—which encompass a rising China, great power competition and transnational terrorism, crime and human rights abuses. Second, from a constructivist perspective, the wide variety of different regimes, cultures and systems of governance preclude the formation of a coherent regional identity, which undermines genuine co-operation.

Third, the essay delves into the institution of ASEAN, where norms of non-interference and consensus-based decision making are increasingly out of

step with a globalised and interdependent security environment. The organ of the ARF also evidences significant problems in relation to dealing with threats emanating from the relationships between great powers, while the ARF's lack of structure and teeth means that the ability of ASEAN countries to deal with international security threats is questionable. The essay has also discussed how the introduction of the ADMM and ADMM-Plus mechanisms have gone some way to overcome the ARF's shortcomings through the fostering of practical co-operation and collective capacity building in the defence sector.

Finally, the essay has analysed ASEAN's overall effectiveness in enhancing regional security and co-operation in relation to both its successes and challenges faced. It concludes that despite its criticisms, ASEAN's overall success in preventing armed conflict in a highly volatile region is worth recognising. The outlook for future regional co-operation in ASEAN is indeterminate—with increasing great power rivalry threatening to derail the Association, yet there are signs of continued progress in the areas of practical co-operation with major powers.

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IS NON-OFFENSIVE DEFENCE VIABLE AS A STRATEGY FOR NATIONAL SECURITY?

By LTC Goh Nichola

ABSTRACT

Non-Offensive Defence is described as the strategic defence stance taken by a country to safeguard its national interest. Without being aggressive with its military, a nation can potentially deter an aggressor, through its uneven terrain or foreign alliances. In this essay, the author states that non-offensive defence is viable as a strategy only if certain conditions are fulfilled—suitable geography, benign strategic environment and neutral foreign outreach. In the case of Japan, the author puts forth an additional condition, which is alliances. In the author's opinion, however, Non-Offensive defence is only fully viable if the three conditions highlighted above are met.

Keywords: *Offence, Defence, Strategic, Conditions, Environment*

INTRODUCTION

Non-Offensive Defence (NOD) gained prominence during the height of the Cold War in the late 1970s to early 1980s as a strategy for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Nevertheless, it has remained prominent in the discourse of security studies till today. In this essay, the author argues that non-offensive defence is viable as a strategy for national security only if the following conditions are fulfilled—the geography of the country in question must be defensible, its strategic environment must be benign, and the way it conducts foreign policy must be neutral and predictable.

STRUCTURE OF ESSAY

In this essay, the author will first introduce the concept of NOD. Next, he will make an argument that three factors of geography, strategic environment and foreign policy are critical before NOD can be considered. She will also use Switzerland and Sweden as case studies to illustrate this argument. Lastly, the author will discuss participation in a strategic alliance as an additional and final factor that determines the viability of NOD. NOD will be considered in the context of the post-Cold War environment and the scope will be limited to non-nuclear states. The discussion will also be confined to conventional threats posed by state actors as it is outside the remit of this essay to discuss the effectiveness of NOD against non-state actors (e.g.

extremist groups) and hybrid tactics (e.g. cyberattacks) employed by state actors.

THE CONCEPT OF NON-OFFENSIVE DEFENCE

The concept of NOD originated during the Cold War as a means of defusing tensions between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Moller and Wiberg identified the three purposes of NOD as follows: (1) to facilitate arms control and disarmament, (2) to strengthen peace by ruling out pre-emptive and preventive wars, and (3) to provide effective yet non-suicidal defensive options.¹ The armed forces of a state which adopts NOD should be seen to be capable of credible defence, yet incapable of offence.² However, NOD still allows for the conduct of a tactical offensive or counter attack as these are seen as defensive moves to repel an enemy to restore the status quo, rather than an offensive move that takes the war to the enemy.³ In other words, a NOD strategy allows for self-defence within and near to one's borders, but precludes offensive force projection for purposes beyond immediate self-defence.

NOD - The Security Dilemma and the Offence - Defence Theory

The concepts of security dilemma, co-operative security and offence-defence theory must also be discussed to develop a comprehensive understanding of NOD.

One of the first explanations of the security dilemma was offered by John Hertz who stated that 'self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs, tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and the measures of others as potentially threatening'.⁴ In other words, the security dilemma is key in generating a competitive process of arms racing amongst countries.

The concept of NOD as a solution to the security dilemma stemmed from the Offence-Defence Theory (ODT). Describing ODT, Jervis argued that the severity of the security dilemma depended on two factors: (1) the offence-defence balance, which determines if the offence or defence has the advantage on the battlefield, and (2) offence-defence distinguishability, which determines whether offensive and defensive capabilities can be distinguished.⁵ When the offence-defence balance favours the offence, the probability of war increases as arms races intensify and there are perceived advantages to launching a pre-emptive strike.⁶ Moller posits that NOD is the answer to this phenomenon.⁷ With NOD, a state's acquisition of strictly defensive armaments should not lead to the acquisition of offensive weapons by its adversaries, unless they are indeed harbouring aggressive intentions.⁸ Second, adopting 'unmistakably' defensive steps in a crisis situation eliminates the risk of the adversary launching pre-emptive attacks.⁹

With NOD, a state's acquisition of strictly defensive armaments should not lead to the acquisition of offensive weapons by its adversaries, unless they are indeed harbouring aggressive intentions.

Critics of NOD often point out that NOD is doomed to fail as its workability is premised on one's adversary being able to distinguish between weapons that have been procured purely for defence, and those that have been procured for offensive purposes. This is

exemplified in Buzan's description of the power security dilemma where each state views its own measures as defensive, and the measures of others as potentially threatening.¹⁰ While logical solution would then be to develop a 'demonstrably defensive system', this is easier said than done.¹¹ In rebuttal, Moller suggests that meaningful distinction between offence and defence can only be made at the level of postures; conceptually, NOD can still work as an overall defensive posture, is what ultimately counts, as opposed to the complete lack of offensive weapons.¹²

NOD and Common Security

Common Security was first mooted as a solution to the security dilemma in the 1982 Palme Commission which suggested that in the nuclearised world of the Cold War era, security is first achieved with, and not against, the adversary through United Nations (UN) sponsored collective security and confidence building measures.¹³ Riding on the concept of common security, advocates of NOD point to its ability to resolve the security dilemma and facilitate common security by removing any misperceptions about the intentions of a state's defensive military preparations.¹⁴

NECESSARY PRE-CONDITIONS FOR NOD

As much as advocates present NOD as the panacea to the security dilemma, the author argues that NOD is viable only under specific conditions. First, the geography of the country in question must be defensible. Second, the country must be situated in a benign strategic environment and be strategically unimportant. Third, a non-offensive military posture must be backed up by consistently neutral foreign policies in order to eliminate any doubts from potential adversaries regarding a state's intentions. Furthermore, all three conditions must be fulfilled simultaneously in order for NOD to work. The following section will explain the relation of each factor to NOD, while the next will introduce Switzerland and Sweden as case studies for and against the viability of NOD. The author further posits that if the above conditions cannot be fulfilled, NOD is still possible under one unique circumstance—when a state enjoys the security provided by a strong strategic alliance.

(1) Defensible Geography

Geography determines the attractiveness and susceptibility of a country to attacks by potential aggressors. Natural barriers in the form of mountain ranges or water bodies form fortifications upon which a country's defensive military posture can be based. This is best characterised by New Zealand. New Zealand is situated in a remote corner of the Pacific Ocean, at least a thousand miles away from its nearest neighbour and strategic ally, Australia. New Zealand's remoteness almost all but rules out foreign invasion as a plausible threat. This has translated into New Zealand's steadfast commitment to NOD. The Strategic Defence Policy Statement of New Zealand published in 2018 continued to articulate the Defence Forces' ability to detect, deter and counter threats to New Zealand's territorial integrity and sovereignty as one of its key defence outcomes.¹⁵ However, complex disruptors that transcend physical distance such as climate change, developments in the cyber and space domains, terrorism and nuclear proliferation were given more attention as security threats to the country as opposed to the threat of invasion from a conventional adversary.¹⁶ As such, New Zealand continues to maintain an order of battle with no offensive

capabilities such as fighter aircraft, main battle tanks, destroyers.

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Natural barriers must be conceptually distinguished from possessing strategic depth. The first is determined by geographic features such as impassable mountain while the latter is conferred purely by land size. Strategic depth offers advantages to the defender, as the amount of force that an attacker can project is reduced considerably if it has to travel a long distance just to reach the defender.¹⁷ However, a state cannot rely solely upon strategic depth to defend itself, as witnessed by the invasion of Russia by Germany in World War II (WWII).

In this discussion of geography, physical geography is given more importance than human geography. Some authors on NOD have incorrectly identified ethnic or ideological homogeneity as pre-conditions necessary for the fostering of strong



German Invasion of Russia in 1941.

nationalistic sentiments, which in turn fuels popular resistance against would-be aggressors.¹⁸ This view is deeply misguided and ignores the many examples of pluralistic nation-states which include the mobilisation of all aspects of society in their national defence strategies. Examples include Switzerland's concept of general defence which includes the entire population, and Singapore's total defence which encompasses military, civil, economic, social, psychological and digital defence.¹⁹ Rather than homogeneity, a high degree of socio-political cohesion is necessary for states which wish to pursue NOD.²⁰

(2) Benign Strategic Environment

Two elements of a country's strategic environment encourages the adoption of NOD. They are: (1) location in a strategically benign environment, and (2) lack of major power conflicts or strategic interest.²¹ A strategically benign environment is defined as the absence of neighbours who harbour aggressive intentions. New Zealand once again serves as an excellent case study of this factor. While regional developments in Southeast Asia and even further afield in China and North Korea have been cited as having implications on New Zealand's security outlook, New Zealand's situation in the peaceful neighbourhood of the South Pacific has enabled it to adopt NOD as a defence strategy. NOD would not have been viable if New Zealand had aggressive neighbours capable of and wishing to launch a war of aggression against it, as movement towards NOD is dangerous when viewed by an aggressive adversary as a sign of weakness.²²

On other hand, NOD has also remained viable for Switzerland despite its location in the historically tumultuous region of Western Europe because it serves little strategic interest. This is explained by Collins who postulates that a state is less likely to feel threatened by external aggression if its geography is of no interest to a power or belligerents in a conflict.²³ This postulation is vindicated by Switzerland's non-involvement in WWII.

(3) Neutral and Predictable Foreign Policy

The last determining factor of the viability of NOD is the way in which the country in question conducts its foreign policy. According to Roberts, a successful

defensive posture is predicated on 'conducting foreign policy in a consistent, cautious and responsible manner over a long period.'²⁴ This stems from the argument that the security dilemma arises not only from the ambiguity of the adversary's military intentions, but also from foreign policy intentions.²⁵ Hence, NOD is demonstrated not only through a state's military doctrine but also its political intentions.²⁶ In other words, the overall offensiveness or defensiveness of a state's security strategy is signalled through both its military order of battle and the way it conducts its international relations.

SWITZERLAND — AN EXEMPLAR FOR NOD

While New Zealand and Switzerland have both been discussed as examples of countries for which NOD is viable, New Zealand's NOD is largely predicated on its geographical remoteness, a luxury few countries can afford. As such, Switzerland has been chosen for further analysis because it has been uniquely successful in avoiding war since 1815 despite its location in Europe.

NOD in the context of Switzerland cannot be discussed without first addressing the country's offensive capabilities. In his criticism of NOD, Gates points out that Switzerland's main battle tanks are proof that a defensive system is 'impossible even for a country blessed with geography.'²⁷ However, Swiss tanks and fighter aircraft are not incompatible with NOD; they simply form a strategy of deterrence-by-denial by setting a high price for would-be invaders.²⁸ Besides, pure defence is near to impossible as one's adversaries would be free to act as it chooses if one is purely defensive and projects no offensive threat at all.²⁹ Given the history of European armed conflict, it would naive for Switzerland to adopt a purely defensive posture. Instead, it has chosen to maintain some offensive capabilities for the sole purpose of repelling attackers, while relying largely on passive defences such as anti-aircraft missiles, early-warning radar systems and obstacles against tanks.³⁰

Switzerland's non-offensive military posture is enabled by the trinity of factors outlined in the previous section. First, even though Switzerland is not a large country, it enjoys the protection of the Swiss Alps which form a natural barrier against invaders. Second,

the importance of strategic environment is highlighted by Switzerland's experience in WWII. While the neighbourhood of Europe was anything but benign in WWII, Switzerland's lack of primary strategic significance and raw materials were contributing factors in Germany's decision not to invade Switzerland.³¹ Lastly and most importantly, Switzerland's NOD is underpinned by an overarching foreign policy posture of neutrality that is 'consistent, non-assertive and predictable'.³² This is backed by a commitment not to take sides in international conflict and denying right of transit for foreign forces.³³ A unique combination of three factors have allowed Switzerland to maintain its policy of 'armed neutrality'.³⁴

Switzerland's NOD is underpinned by an overarching foreign policy posture of neutrality that is 'consistent, non-assertive and predictable'. This is backed by a commitment not to take sides in international conflict and denying right of transit for foreign forces.

While the case study of Switzerland proves that NOD is viable if the necessary geographical, strategic environmental and foreign policy pre-conditions are met, it also serves as a reminder that NOD must be based on an overall coherent defensive stance backed by neutral foreign policy, rather than a paucity of offensive capabilities in one's inventory.

SWEDEN — A CASE AGAINST NOD

Like Switzerland, Sweden's policy of armed neutrality has enabled it to avoid war since the Napoleonic Wars. However, compared to Switzerland, Sweden's less defensible geography, tenuous strategic environment and wavering foreign policy all mean that NOD is less viable as a national security strategy. These factors, especially the evolving strategic environment, have culminated in Sweden's readjustment of its approach towards defence in recent years.

While Sweden stands as the fifth largest country in Europe, it also has one of the longest coastlines in Europe, which is not easily defended.³⁵ The difference in geography between the country's northern and southern regions has necessitated a variable NOD system. Territorial defence is to be sufficient in the landlocked Northern region bordered by Finland and Norway, while deterrence-with-punishment led by the air and navy is required in the South with its long coastline along the Baltic Sea.³⁶ While defence of the South involves more offensive capabilities, Sweden's overall military posture can still be described as defensive with a focus on territorial defence near to its borders.³⁷



Russian BMP-2 from the 58th Army in South Ossetia, Georgia.

Swedish policymakers were so confident in the lack of military threats that the country underwent massive self-disarmament in the 1980s which saw the wartime strength of the army reduced by 95% and that of the navy and air force by 70%, scraping of conscription in 2010 and the steady reduction of spending on defence from 2% in 1990 to 1% in 2016.³⁸ However, Sweden's evolving strategic environment has been a key factor in the country's recent rethinking of its NOD policy. Sweden was forced to acknowledge a 'dramatic' shift in the strategic environment of Europe and the Baltic Sea first with the invasion of Georgia by Russia in 2008 and then again in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea by Russia.³⁹ This was exacerbated by the fact that Sweden's location as a strategically important outpost in the Baltic Sea meant that there would be a rush for Swedish territory if conflict were to break out in the Baltics.⁴⁰ As a result, Sweden has been forced to consider membership in NATO while



Wikipedia/JMSDF

JS Izumo, an Izumo-class helicopter destroyer being refitted to carry F-35B stealth fighters

increasing military co-operation with NATO, Finland and the United States (US), while simultaneously rebuilding its military capabilities with a US \$1.2 Billion increase in the defence budget from 2016 to 2020.⁴¹

While Switzerland's unassailable neutrality forms the foundation upon which its NOD policy is built, the same cannot be said about Sweden as its activist foreign policy is in constant tension with its policy of NOD.⁴² In the aftermath of WWII, as a member of the United Nations (UN), Sweden chose to apply its neutrality when the UN Security Council agreed on sanctions.⁴³ During the Cold War, while Sweden maintained a facade of neutrality by resisting membership in NATO, discreet agreements were made on how NATO would come to the aid of Sweden if it were invaded by the USSR.⁴⁴ After the end of the Cold War, Sweden's membership in the European Union (EU), NATO's Partnership for Peace programme, and its thriving arms export industry all called Sweden's self-proclaimed neutrality to question, as did the 2009 parliamentary declaration of military solidarity with any EU or Baltic state that comes under attack.⁴⁵

While these developments in Sweden's military capabilities and alliances do not signal abandonment of NOD in its entirety, they signal a grudging yet urgent acknowledgement by Sweden that a weak defensive

posture is no longer sufficient to ensure national security and sovereignty. While it be a stretch to presume that Sweden will discard NOD entirely in the future, one cannot ignore the small but gradual moves that it is making towards strengthening its offences.

STRATEGIC ALLIANCES — CASE STUDY OF JAPAN

The above section outlined the three conditions necessary for NOD to be viable as a national strategy, and illustrated why all three conditions must be met simultaneously using the case study of Switzerland. However, NOD success stories like Switzerland are few and far between. Does this then mean that NOD is a largely unworkable concept? At this point, the author puts forth a fourth condition for consideration—NOD is viable for countries which find themselves without the benefits of defensible geography or a benign strategic environment if they are part of a powerful security alliance. Japan will be used as example to illustrate this.

Despite a sizeable fighter fleet and the refitting of the Izumo and Kaga helicopter destroyers to carry F-35Bs, the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) is no misnomer.⁴⁶ While it cannot be said that Japan's capabilities are purely defensive, Japan has significant defensive limits, most notably its lack of conventional first strike or counteroffensive capability.⁴⁷ The Izumo

and Kaga helicopter destroyers currently carry only short-range self-defence missiles, and its modern fleet of fighters is warranted by the frequent intrusion of Japan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) by Russian and Chinese aircraft.⁴⁸ Then Prime Minister Abe had maintained that Japan remained committed to the 'defense-only doctrine' and was completely reliant on the US's strike capabilities, including nuclear capabilities.⁴⁹ In the face of aggression from North Korean, tensions with China and wariness of Russia, Japan is only able to maintain a defensive posture because of its security alliance with the US provided for under the 1951 US-Japan Security Treaty and the updated 2015 Guidelines for Co-operation.⁵⁰ In the unlikely event that Japan loses the comprehensive

defence provided by the US umbrella, there is no doubt Japan will pursue an offensive stance to ensure its defence.

CONCLUSION

The concept of NOD has been the subject of much debate between advocates and critics. This essay has acknowledged the arguments for and against NOD and illustrated how NOD is viable only under very specific conditions such as those enjoyed by Switzerland. This essay has also presented Sweden as an example of how national security strategy cannot remain static and must evolve with changes in one's strategic environment, even if NOD as a national strategy has worked well in the past.

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IS THERE A LIKELIHOOD THAT WEAPONS ACQUISITIONS CAN BECOME DESTABILISING?

By MAJ Ragumaran s/o Davindran

ABSTRACT

According to the author, over the past 15 years, with weapons acquisitions playing a central role, the total defence expenditure for ASEAN has doubled in absolute terms. Against this backdrop, researchers have questioned if the changing arms dynamic would have an adverse effect on regional stability. The author will use the ASEAN context to argue that the weapons acquisition processes alone do not lead to destabilisation. The author presents his argument in three segments. In the first segment, he provides a review of weapons acquisition to establish a common understanding of key terminologies that would surface throughout his essay. He then proceeds to analyse the reasons behind the weapons acquisition processes and highlight if there are other underlying factors that would cause destabilisation. Finally, the author provides an antithesis analysis on the India-Pakistan conflict to evaluate the robustness of the hypothesis and to discredit the argument that weapons acquisition alone contributes to destabilisation.

Keywords: *Power, Destabilisation, Volatile, Stability, Competition*

INTRODUCTION

While many countries globally are reducing their military expenditure, several Southeast Asian countries are heading in the opposite direction.¹ Over the past 15 years, with weapons acquisitions playing a central role, the total defence expenditure for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has doubled in absolute terms.² Against this backdrop, researchers have questioned if the changing arms dynamic would have an adverse effect on regional stability.³ As such, this essay will use the ASEAN context to argue that the weapons acquisition processes alone do not lead to destabilisation.

The essay is broadly divided into three sections. In the first section, a literature review of weapons acquisition would be performed to establish a common understanding of key terminologies that would surface throughout this essay. The second section would 'deep dive' into ASEAN to analyse the reasons behind the weapons acquisition processes and highlight if there are other underlying factors that would cause destabilisation. In the last section, an antithesis analysis on the India-Pakistan conflict would be undertaken to

evaluate the robustness of the hypothesis and to discredit the argument that weapons acquisition in a more volatile environment would result in a different conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Varying Levels Weapons Acquisition Pressures

The ultimate yardstick of national power would be a state's military capabilities for self-defence and pursuance of interests.⁴ In tandem with advancing technology, the acquisition of weapons remains an integral component of a military's modernisation effort. Structured under the arms dynamic framework, Buzan and Herring categorise the varying levels of weapons acquisition pressures as (1) 'arms build-down', (2) 'arms maintenance', (3) 'arms competition' and (4) 'arms race'.⁵

The ultimate yardstick of national power would be a state's military capabilities for self-defence and pursuance of interests.

The 'arms build-down' category relates to the condition in which weapons are decommissioned or replaced with a new capability that is numerically inferior, while the 'arms maintenance' category describes the status quo condition of military capabilities. With a sustained build-up of weapons, states could potentially trigger an 'arms competition' as they constantly seek to improve their respective positions by challenging the status quo. At the most extreme of the arms dynamic framework lies the 'arms race'. This phenomenon occurs when states do their utmost to commit the maximum resources to gain military advantage. Best described by Gray, the basic conditions of an 'arms race' would be (1) two or more parties conscious of their antagonism, (2) development of the military structure to counter or deter each other, (3) competition in terms of quality (men, weapon, organisation, doctrine, deployment) and/or quantity of armament (men, weapons) and (4) rapid increases in quantity and/or improvements in quality.⁶

Stabilising	Destabilising
Status quo	Revisionist
Value of peace: High	Value of peace: Low
Secure	Insecure
Defensive Military Strategy	Offensive military strategy
Deterrence	Compellence
Reassurance	Reliance on threats
Risk averse	Risk acceptant
Averse to difficult tasks	Acceptant of difficult tasks

Table 1: The Impact of Motives.⁷

Impact Of States' Motives

In terms of stability or lack thereof, Buzan and Herring also highlighted the impact of states' motives (in terms of strategic objectives) on the arms dynamic (see Table 1). For instance, an 'arms competition' could easily escalate to an 'arms race' if a state, who is in an antagonised relationship, suddenly adopts revisionist policies and begins purchasing weapons at a rapid rate. These actions would most likely compel the other affected state (in the antagonised relationship) to embark on similar counter measures to 'do one better and gain the upper hand'.

'DEEP DIVE' INTO SOUTHEAST ASIA

Despite the extremely diverse cultural and political differences, there have not been any prolonged armed conflicts between Southeast Asian countries since the end of the Indochina wars in 1975.⁸ However, this 'stability' has not prevented ASEAN from investing in its military. Conversely, the defence expenditure (in terms of absolute terms) in the region has doubled in the past 15 years. Tightly interlinked to the increase in defence expenditure would be the acquisition of weapons.⁹ Here, the author will analyse the possible reasons for the increase in weapons acquisition, and highlight other underlying factors that could affect regional stability.

An 'arms competition' could easily escalate to an 'arms race' if a state, who is in an antagonised relationship, suddenly adopts revisionist policies and begins purchasing weapons at a rapid rate.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WEAPONS ACQUISITION

Defence Expenditure In Proportion To Economic Growth

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the ASEAN economy has grown at an exponential rate over the past 10 years.¹⁰ (See Figure 1). Boasting an economic growth rate of 2.1% higher than the market in 2018, the strong ASEAN economy continues to provide a stable foundation for weapons acquisition.¹¹ As most Southeast Asian countries had more or less spent the same percentage on defence in proportion to their respective GDP, the increase in weapons acquisition may have been erroneously portrayed as an 'arms race' which could potentially destabilise the region. ASEAN countries could afford to spend on military growth and did not require to 'do their utmost' to commit financially at the expense of other domains (i.e. reduce the budget for education to support military growth).

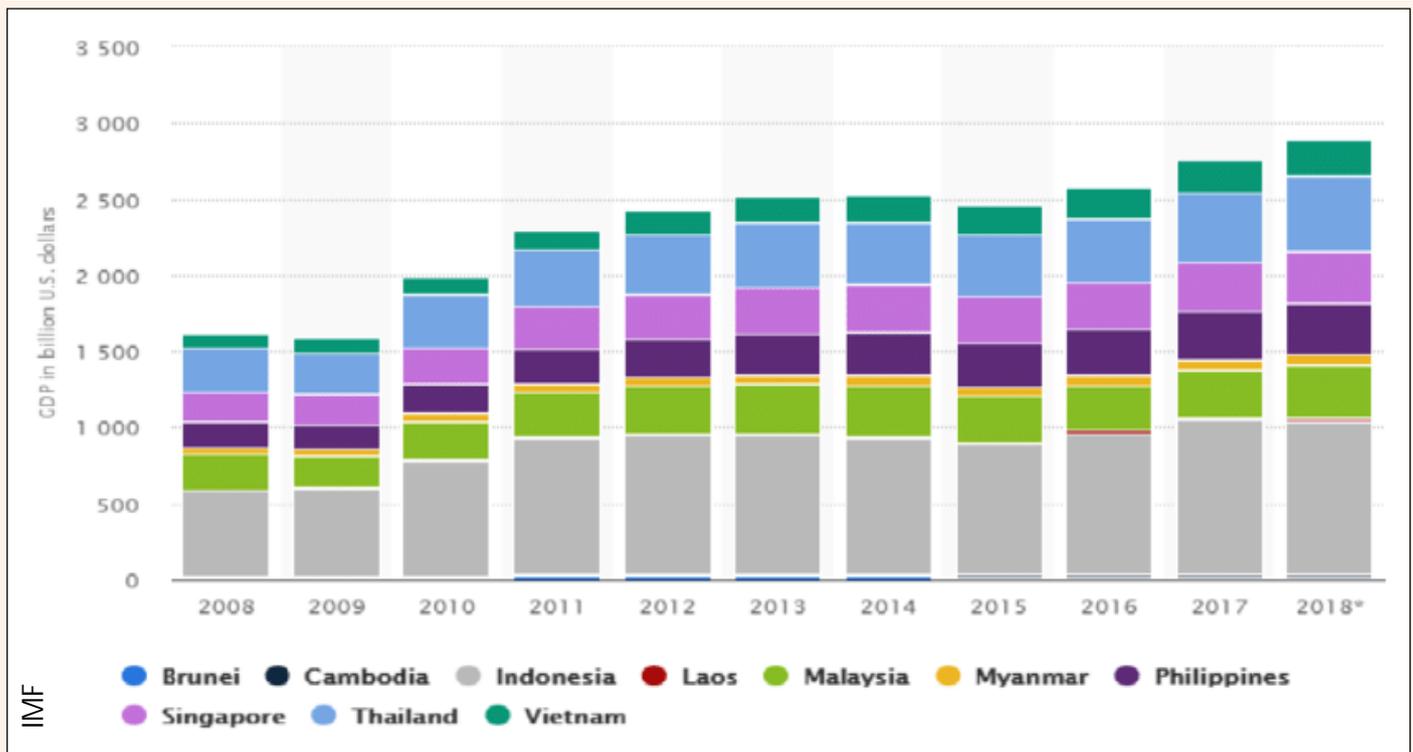


Figure 1: GDP of ASEAN Countries from 2008 to 2018.

Technological Advances And Weapons Market Conditions

Rapid technological advances and favourable weapons market conditions have been influential in the acquisition of weapons by Southeast Asian countries. In the early 2000s, countries like Malaysia, Vietnam and Philippines had an arsenal comprising of ageing weapons inherited from the colonial era and second-hand weapons from foreign partners. These weapons had lived their expected life span and the modernisation efforts were deemed logical as there would have been a limited form of deterrence in 'bringing a knife into a gunfight'.¹² Hence, these countries were compelled to step up their efforts on arms modernisation to be aligned with the 'modern age' armed forces.¹³ Apty categorised as 'arms maintenance', the rapid advances in technology enforces the continued investments in maintaining the status quo condition of their military capabilities.¹⁴

In addition, the influx of arms sellers into the region has resulted in a buyer's market in which suppliers were compelled to make attractive offers in terms of prices and payment approaches.¹⁵ Coupled with the development of local defence industries in recent years, the favourable weapons market was one of the contributing factors for the proliferation of arms

within the region.¹⁶ Hence, these non-provocative factors would make it difficult to establish that the increase in weapons acquisition would result in an increased animosity between the countries.

National Interests And Deterrence

National interests and deterrence factors also influence the weapons acquisition process. For instance, the territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea has directly affected the defence posture of Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam. Instigated by China's assertive behaviour in the overlapping sovereignty dispute, these countries would need to actively protect their respective maritime interests and borders in the region.¹⁷ It was reported that Vietnam purchased six *Kilo-Class* submarines to better protect its interests in the South China Sea. Combating piracy would also be in the interests of ASEAN countries for economic reasons. From 1995 to 2003, 41% of the world's pirate attacks were reported to have occurred within ASEAN waters.¹⁸ With the Straits of Malacca being one of the most important passageways for East to West global trade, Southeast Asian countries have been collectively working together to provide the necessary security to the commercial shipping routes. Thus, for such instances, the weapons acquisition would not destabilise the region.

Timing Of Weapons Acquisition

Over the past couple of decades, the timings of weapons acquisition suggest the presence of 'arms competition' within the region. For instance, shortly after the Su-30s fighters were delivered to Malaysia in 2007, Singapore rolled out its F-15SG fighters in 2008.¹⁹ In a similar fashion, the development of naval capabilities has involved a few Southeast Asian countries in the 'action-reaction' process. Since the early 2000s, the acquirement of naval assets has witnessed a growth in submarines, corvettes, frigates and Landing Platform Dock (LPD) amphibious support ships within ASEAN regional waters.²⁰ As of 2015, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam had submarines, while countries such as Myanmar, Thailand and Philippines expressed interest in procuring similar subsurface assets to 'keep pace with the neighbours'.²¹ The constant efforts to improve respective positions, coupled with the procurement of inherently offensive weapons (e.g. submarines), led to an increase in anxiety and tensions among ASEAN countries.²²

In summary, despite some indication of an 'arms competition', the above analysis seems to suggest that the arms dynamic of ASEAN would fall under the realm of 'arms maintenance'.

In the next part of the essay, the author analyses other underlying factors that may affect regional stability.

OTHER UNDERLYING FACTORS THAT COULD AFFECT REGIONAL STABILITY

Lack Of Transparency And Information Sharing Platforms

Some argue that the perennial dilemma continues to be one of most important sources of conflict within the region, as actions undertaken by a country to increase its own security could lead to adverse reactions from others.²³ Even if a country has no intention of causing harm, actions such as weapons acquisition often cause others to 'second guess' the arming state. This would not improve the confidence and trust among countries especially if the weapons procured are offensive in nature (e.g. tanks, submarines, etc). As such, information sharing and transparency of defence

related matters would greatly enhance confidence and reduce the scepticism among states. Unfortunately, ASEAN has a lack of transparency mechanisms and it does not possess a regional agreement on arms control. To make matters worse, various ASEAN have constantly failed to comply with the global arms control agreements of Arms Trade Treaty and Register of Conventional Arms.²⁴ Such actions could generate mistrust and possibly heighten tensions among ASEAN countries, and thus affecting the region's stability.

Political Influences

Domestic politics within ASEAN countries have also proven to be an influential factor in regional stability. While ASEAN has not experienced any prolonged conflict since 1975, occasional cases of skirmishes and aggressive posturing have occurred due to disputes primarily driven by political motives. From 2008 to 2011, the long-standing dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the area surrounding the Preah Vihear temple escalated to occasional exchanges of fire by troops from both countries. Reports indicated that the Thai Nationalist Group (known as the royalist Yellow Shirts) used the Preah Vihear conflict to topple then Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej (Jan-Sep 2008).²⁵ His successor, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva (2008-2011), faced his own challenges in controlling the military as the Thai Nationalist Group had colluded with them in the attempt to weaken the government. Correspondingly, in Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen deliberately exploited the armed clashes to enhance his power position and portrayed strong nationalistic emotions to win over public support.²⁶

Closer to home, since the differences in political ideology had resulted in the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965, there have been several disputes about land reclamation, water pricing and issues regarding sovereignty (e.g. Pedra Branca) between the two countries.²⁷

All these various examples show how politics could be interwoven with military to create a massive impact on the region's stability.

In summary, the analysis has proven that weapons acquisition processes alone do not lead to

destabilisation as there could be other factors that could affect regional stability. While ASEAN can be considered a good test bed to perform this analysis, critics may argue that the impact of the weapons acquisition would be destabilising in a more volatile environment. Hence, in the next section, the author will present an antithesis analysis to evaluate the robustness of his findings.

With the global rising trends in unmanned systems, cyber weaponry and transnational threats (e.g. terrorism), ASEAN will arguably continue its investments in weapons acquisition to deal with the 'modern age' security threats.

THE SOUTH ASIAN RIVALS: INDIA-PAKISTAN

With 118,930 sqm of disputed territories, the India-Pakistan conflict has lasted for over 70 years.²⁸ Having fought three major wars against each other, coupled with the continued violence in Kashmir and heightened terrorist activities, India and Pakistan have never experienced regional stability. Although both the nuclear-armed countries have maintained a fragile cease fire agreement, there have been regular exchanges of fire along the heavily contested border. In Feb 2019, tensions almost spilled out of control when the Pakistani militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) was allegedly responsible for an attack on an Indian paramilitary convoy. Categorized as the single deadliest attack on Kashmir soil in the past 30 years, this incident killed at least 40 Indian soldiers.²⁹ In response, India undertook surgical air strikes on the militant bases in Pakistan occupied Kashmir territory. The subsequent days of military confrontations resulted in destruction of fighter jets and the capture of an Indian Air Force pilot.³⁰

Often cited as being in an 'arms race' that greatly affects the region's stability, both countries have

steadily invested in the development of nuclear capabilities over the past few years.³¹ (See Table 2). In Nov 2018, Pakistan declared that it would counter India's latest nuclear-powered submarine and this has caused diplomats to worry if 'the development would only fuel another arms race'.³² As such, in this section of the essay, the author will analyse if the weapons acquisition processes between India and Pakistan has led to the destabilisation of the South Asian region.

Year	Nuclear Warheads	
	India	Pakistan
2010	60-80	70-90
2014	90-110	100-120
2018	130-140	140-150

Table 2: Nuclear Development of India and Pakistan.³³

While empirical data has shown an increase in military expenditure for both countries, it has not increased as a percentage of GDP. (See Figure 3). India's drastic increment in military expenditure (in gross terms) is consistent with its economic growth, while Pakistan had to depend on aid from the United States (US) to mitigate against its slow economic growth.³⁴ While both countries could afford to acquire more weapons to support its military growth, the reality of the situation is much more complex than just being an 'arms race'.

External Influences

External influences from China has evolved the dynamics between India and Pakistan into a triangle of strategic calculations that affect the security paradigm of South Asia. India believes China is suppressing her aspirations to be a global power by establishing partnerships with India's neighbours to encircle the country. For instance, China's assistance to Pakistan for the development of the Gwadar commercial port offers Pakistan a broader strategic utility to counter India's projection of power.³⁵ Hence, India has altered its

deterrence posture in direct response to China's threat.³⁶

population ethnicity, etc.) exacerbates the uncertainty of the environment.

In summary, the antithesis analysis has proven that even in a more volatile environment, there are other underlying factors (apart from the weapons acquisition process) that contributes to destabilisation.

CONCLUSION

The preceding sections have proven that the weapons acquisition processes alone do not lead to destabilisation as there are other underlying factors that affect regional stability. It would be common for countries to be sceptical about the true intentions of their neighbours, especially when there are conflicting/overlapping areas of national interests. While the reasons behind the weapons acquisition in ASEAN would not be destabilising by nature, the lack of transparency and information sharing platforms would continue to result in mistrust and anxiety among ASEAN countries. Other factors such as political influences have also shown to have played a heavy weightage on regional stability.

With the global rising trends in unmanned systems, cyber weaponry and transnational threats (e.g. terrorism), ASEAN will arguably continue its investments in weapons acquisition to deal with the 'modern age' security threats. Thus, it is important for ASEAN to embed transparency mechanisms as Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBM) to improve mutual trust among countries. In addition to the existing platforms available to promote regional peace and defence co-operation (e.g. ASEAN Ministers Meeting, multi-lateral military exercises, etc.), ASEAN could also explore the possibility of developing a regional agreement on arms control to 'mitigate' against the impact of weapons acquisition.⁴⁰

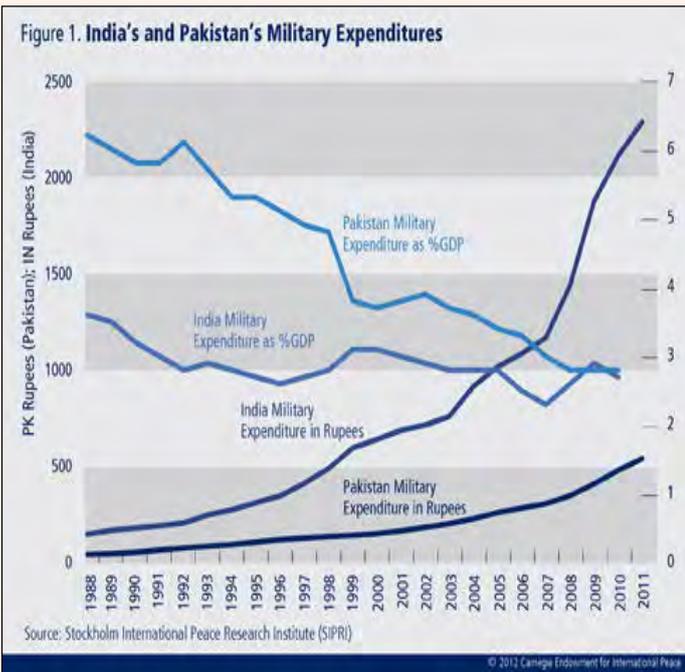


Figure 3: India and Pakistan Military Expenditure.³⁷

Complex diversity

A detailed analysis of the Kashmir region provides a different perspective on the 'straightforward bilateral dispute' between India and Pakistan. Kashmir is a multi-ethnic region that has different distinct political goals. The Pakistan controlled Kashmir region wants to become formal provinces of Pakistan in order to gain more political autonomy over their internal affairs, while the Muslim-majority of India controlled Kashmir region (in Kashmir Valley region) views India as an occupying power and seeks independence.³⁸ Throughout these years, the desire for autonomy within the different areas of the Kashmir region has led to multiple violent uprising movements. Militant groups like JeM have exploited this discontent to recruit its followers and this was apparent when the suicide bomber of the Indian paramilitary convoy attack was identified to be a Kashmiri.³⁹ The complex diversity of the Kashmir region (in terms of political allegiances,

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HOW CAN THREAT ASSESSMENTS BECOME SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES?

By ME5 Tang Zhan Sheng

ABSTRACT

In this essay, the writer examines how threat assessments can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Firstly, he explains the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy which results from actors believing and expecting a purported eventual state of affairs and then unwittingly rendering it true via their corresponding attempts to manipulate its emergence. Next, he analyses how states make threat assessments in the context of an anarchic system. Through the examples of the Cuban missile crisis, Al Qaeda in Iraq and bioterrorism, he illustrates the role of perception and misperception in transforming threat assessments into self-fulfilling prophecies. He then discusses the nuclear domino theory and its association with Taiwan to exemplify how a vicious, self-fulfillment spiral can be negated. Finally, the writer concludes that when caught in a self-fulfilling prophecy, it will be best to reflect on the prophesied outcome and alter one's behaviour in response, so as to break out of the self-fulfillment cycle.

Keywords: *Capabilities, Prophecy, System, Threats, Paradox*

INTRODUCTION

Since the discovery of Iran's nuclear facility at Natanz a decade ago, Israel has been engaged in cloak and dagger operations, actively seeking to derail Iran's nuclear ambition. However, the Islamic Republic has managed to remain defiant despite the onslaught of implicit threats, muscle flexing, convoluted diplomacy and intelligence intrigues. This notwithstanding, Israel has consistently warned that a nuclear-armed Iran would not be tolerated, and that direct military intervention would be an eventuality if Iran does not change course. Yet, taken to its logical conclusion, if Israel opts for pre-emption and prevention, the attack would probably harden Iran's resolve to secure nuclear capabilities, if only to retaliate at Israel for the humiliation. In other words, Israel would have initiated a self-fulfilling prophecy, trading the mere possibility of an attack for its certainty.¹ Is this the fate awaiting the Israelis? Can the cycle of self-fulfilment be broken?

This essay examines how threat assessments can become self-fulfilling prophecies. First it will review the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy, also variously

known as the 'Oedipus effect', 'boot-strapped induction' or the 'Barnesian performativity'.² Next, it analyses how states make threat assessments in the context of an anarchic system. Through the examples of the Cuban missile crisis, Al Qaeda in Iraq and bioterrorism, it will illustrate the role of perception and misperception in transforming threat assessments into self-fulfilling prophecies. He then discusses the nuclear domino theory and its association with Taiwan to exemplify how a vicious, self-fulfilment spiral can be negated. The writer then concludes that since the process of threat assessment is inherently imperfect, states should practice self-reflexivity if they wish to avoid the tragedy of King Laius of Thebes and Macbeth, who in their efforts to forestall an undesirable outcome, consequently perpetrated a course of events that ironically realised that very outcome.

CONCEPT OF SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

A self-fulfilling prophecy, as defined by sociologist Robert Merton, is 'a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true.'³ In coining the



*The Peloponnesian War alliances at 431 BC.
Orange; Athenian Empire and Allies
Green: Spartan Confederacy*

term, Robert Merton drew inspiration from fellow sociologist W. I. Thomas, who observed that ‘If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.’⁴ David Houghton suggested that it is not necessary for the espoused outcome or idea to be patently false from the outset, to qualify as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ambiguity regarding its actualisation is a sufficient criterion.⁵ Michael Biggs added that the concept implied that ‘the actors within the process—or at least some of them—fail to understand how their own beliefs have helped to construct that reality.’⁶ In essence, a self-fulfilling prophecy results from actors believing and expecting a purported eventual state of affairs and then unwittingly rendering it true via their corresponding attempts to manipulate its emergence.

Self-fulfilling prophecies involve institutional facts, which become true only when they are widely believed, rather than brute facts, which remain true

regardless of the degree of acceptance. For example, the prevailing notion that ‘democracies do not fight each other’ is an institutional fact that would be invalidated should two or more cases of war break out between established democracies. In contrast, the existence of electricity is a brute fact, and no amount of disbelief would ever make one immune to the effects of being struck by lightning.⁷

For a proposal to seize the imagination and become self-fulfilling, it must possess what Malcolm terms the ‘stickiness factor’ and the ‘power of context’.⁸ This means that the proposal must be memorable and communicated when the timing and climate is apt, so that the audience is receptive. If the idea fails to take root or elicit a response, the mechanism promoting self-fulfillment breaks down, since behaviour that would lead to the predicted outcome evolving into the empirical truth is not set in motion.

Arguably, the Peloponnesian War is an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which a prevalent belief in the inevitability of conflict between the belligerents contributed to its commencement. As Thucydides explained in the Melian Dialogue, the fierce rivalry between Athens and Sparta led to the anticipation that they would eventually come to blows.⁹ Thus, each made military preparations accordingly to defend themselves. However, this was misread in turn by the other as signs of mobilisation for hostilities, propagating further mistrust. Anticipation then became reality when the situation degenerated into hegemonic warfare, thus consummating the opposing Greeks’ worst fears.

In essence, a self-fulfilling prophecy results from actors believing and expecting a purported eventual state of affairs and then unwittingly rendering it true via their corresponding attempts to manipulate its emergence.

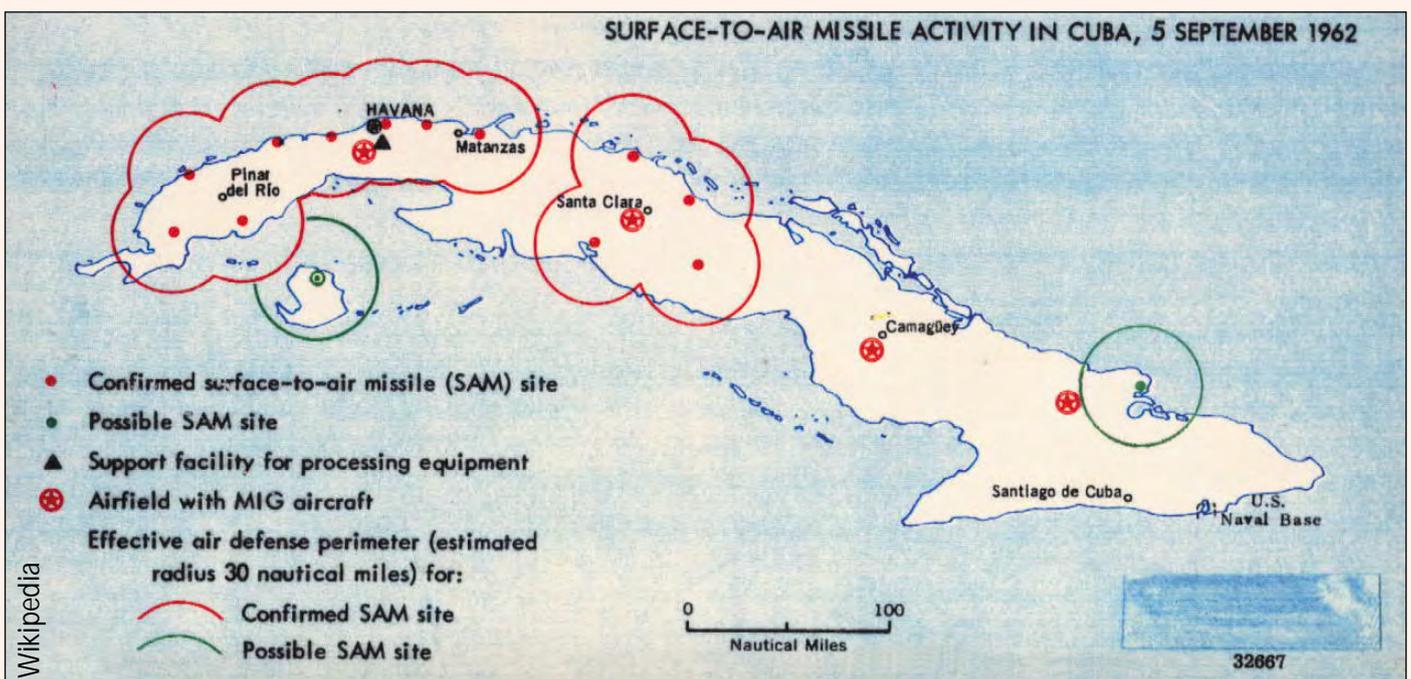
THREAT ASSESSMENT, SECURITY PARADOX AND THE PROBLEM OF MISPERCEPTION

From the realist’s perspective, power is the currency of international politics and states have little choice but to pursue its accumulation in order to obtain security. According to John Mearsheimer, in this system of anarchy where there is no overarching arbiter to maintain order, states vie for power with hegemony as their final goal.¹⁰ This is because only by becoming the hegemon can survival be considerably guaranteed. The quest for power is thus a self-help, zero-sum game in which one state’s gain is another state’s loss. In order to maximise their relative power, states are inclined to think offensively. Even states ‘which seek only to be secure ... [are forced to] act aggressively towards each other.’¹¹ This implies that there is an inherent uncertainty and fear surrounding the intent of states. In such an environment, each state ‘interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially threatening’, thereby creating the perception that a pre-emptive (or offensive) attack is a safer, more preferable course of action than (defensive) co-operation.¹²

In general, there are two kinds of threats—conditional and situational.¹³ Conditional threats—are issued to signal commitment and resolve, for instance,

to deter a would-be challenger. For conditional threats, what matters is not the amount of punishment it can muster but its perception by the other actor. On the other hand, situational threats are those that are intrinsic to the environment. However, they are comparatively harder to identify and pin down, as states may view and consider the same environment differently.

When confronted with matters affecting security (e.g. military developments and political postures), states have to meticulously interpret and assess the putative adversary’s motives, intentions and capabilities, and then rationally calibrate an appropriate response.¹⁴ If the threat assessment is inaccurate and an overly muscular reaction is instigated, the scenario risks devolving into a security paradox, defined as ‘a situation in which where two or more actors, seeking only to improve their own security, provoke through their words or actions an increase in mutual tension, resulting in less security all round’.¹⁵ Conversely, if the response is overly tame, it could be construed as a sign of weak resolve, which carries the risk of inviting adventurism from the putative adversary. The security paradox becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when a state fails to appropriately define its security situation within the anarchic system. Though a state’s behaviour is internally deemed to be rational from the state’s perspective, it can be perceived externally by another state as provocative and threatening. This then prompts



Map created by American intelligence showing Surface-to-Air Missile activity in Cuba, 5th September, 1962.

the affected state to build up its arms to counter-balance the foreboding menace, thus causing the very threat that the original state was seeking to deter.

Though a state's behaviour is internally deemed to be rational from the state's perspective, it can be perceived externally by another state as provocative and threatening. This then prompts the affected state to build up its arms to counter-balance the foreboding menace, thus causing the very threat that the original state was seeking to deter.

Fear underlies the dynamics of the security paradox. Robert Jervis adds that even if another state 'is benign today, it can turn malign in the future.'¹⁶ This conundrum leads many states to assume the worst and build up military might for defence in a competitive manner. Consequently, threat assessments tend to be extremely conservative since states 'must assume the worst because the worst is possible'.¹⁷ Two factors constrain states from reliably assessing potential threats to their well-being: the ambiguous symbolism of weapons and the 'other mind' problem.¹⁸ The former refers to the predicament of differentiating between offensive and defensive weapons. For example, how should a shield be categorised if it is used offensively as a blunt attacking instrument, despite its intended function of absorbing the opponent's assault? Is it a false dichotomy to begin with? As for the latter, it is the difficulty of approximating the putative adversary's psychological and cultural filters, and cost-benefit calculus. Compounding this is the quandary that states are customarily coy about their ends, ways and means and would withhold information for flexibility and surprise. On matters of strategic importance, they may even engage in deliberate deception. Hence, while it is

achievable to attain a modest level of empathy, to fully experience and understand the motives, intentions, hopes, fears, emotions and feelings as the 'other mind' would is typically beyond reach, even with a formidable intelligence apparatus. In fact, most political leaders are deficient in their capacity to empathise and display no sensitivity to their putative adversary's sense of vulnerability, whilst they dwell on and become preoccupied with their own perception of threat.¹⁹

Due to the inalienable condition of 'unresolvable uncertainty,' threat assessments are commonly plagued by misperception, which 'involves a discrepancy between the psychological environment of the decision makers and the operational environment of the real world'.²⁰ Decisions and actions may be determined by the former, but their effects and consequences (e.g. defeat in war and foreign occupation) are constrained by the latter. Of particular concern is the misperception of the putative adversary's capabilities or intentions, since these predominately and directly contribute to the processes leading to war.²¹

THREAT ASSESSMENT AND SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

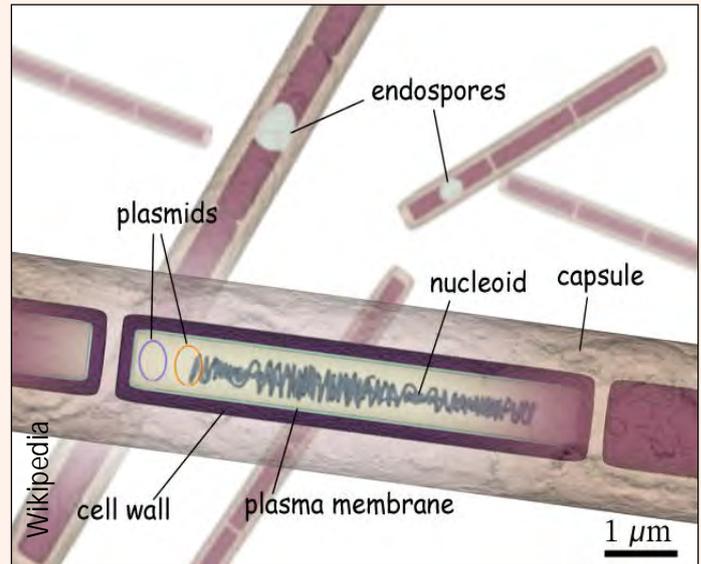
In *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Robert Jervis repeatedly emphasises the role of the self-fulfilling prophecy as a cognitive pathology.²² The 1962 Cuban missile crisis is a notable observation of this phenomenon. According to Richard Lebow and Janice Stein, the crisis began as a result of mutual misperception. Soviet officials testified that the American strategic buildup, missile deployment in Turkey and assertions of strategic superiority exacerbated their insecurity.²³ President Kennedy considered all these actions as prudent, defensive measures against Soviet threats, especially in Berlin. Instead of restraining Khrushchev, they convinced him of the need to do more to protect the Soviet Union and Cuba from American military and political challenges. Through their avowedly defensive actions, the leaders of both superpowers made their fears of an acute confrontation self-fulfilling.²⁴

During the crisis, there was widespread agreement amongst United States (US) President John Kennedy's advisors that the Soviet Union had placed the

medium range SS-4 and intermediate range R-14 missiles in Cuba as part of an offensive strategy. No consideration was given to the alternative hypothesis that the Soviet Union did so out of weakness. At that point in time, the Soviet Union was keenly aware that its Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) were inferior in terms of quantity and range to that of the US. Moreover, the Soviet Union knew that the US had already found out about this strategic vulnerability since the US Deputy Secretary of Defense, Roswell Gilpatric, had directly referenced the weakness of the Soviet ICBM system when he spoke publicly about US strategic superiority a few months prior. Yet, despite entering the crisis from a position of strength, the US exaggerated misperception of the Soviet threat persisted. Thus, the US myopically saw itself as the primary determinant of Soviet action, which meant excluding any other plausible interpretation of Soviet intentions.²⁵

In comparison, Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) after 1985, was able to wind down the Cold War because he understood how threatened the West felt by the USSR's aggressiveness. He sought to alleviate those fears by offering to withdraw hostile military deployments and review antagonistic foreign policy positions.²⁶ In this case, Mikhail Gorbachev exhibited the rare ability to empathise with and appreciate the dilemma experienced by his putative adversaries. He comprehended how mutual mistrust and suspicion could result from security paradox dynamics and embarked on dampening them through no-strings-attached trust-building initiatives.

Another illustration of the self-confirming belief is the decision by the US to invade Iraq in the aftermath of 9/11, on the misperception that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had a secret nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programme, enjoyed an intimate relationship with Al Qaeda, and that the two were conspiring to attack the US, possibly with weapons of mass destruction. As history has revealed, 'it was false that there was Al Qaeda in Iraq before the invasion, but then it became true after the invasion.'²⁷ The dismantling of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime left a power vacuum that subsequently birthed a spontaneous nation-wide insurgency against the US-led coalition occupying Iraq.



Photomicrograph of *Bacillus anthracis*

Capitalising on the internal chaos, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, leader of the Jordanian militant group Al Tawhid wa al Jihad, started perpetrating anti-coalition and Sunni-Shia violence in Iraq. After pledging his allegiance to Osama bin Ladin in 2004, al Zarqawi renamed his group to Al Qaeda in Iraq, which later earned a gruesome reputation for savage beheadings and other atrocities.²⁸ Despite the brutal death of al Zarqawi in 2006 in a US air strike, Al Qaeda in Iraq survived and grew from strength and strength, eventually morphing into the notorious Islamic State (IS) in 2014, the only Islamist terrorist group to achieve proto-state status (including the minting of its own currency) via the military conquest of urban population centres. Thus, it may be said that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 created the pre-conditions for the rise of al Qaeda in Iraq and IS.

In 2008, the Partnership for a Secure America assessed that 'a nuclear, chemical or biological weapon in the hands of terrorists was the single greatest threat' to the US.²⁹ Disputing this, Milton Leitenberg countered that 'terrorist groups with an international presence and international political objectives ... have little or no scientific competence, little or no knowledge of microbiology, and no known access to pathogen strains or laboratory facilities' to engender the development of biological weapons.³⁰ He suggested that bioterrorism was at best an over-imaginative assessment and at worst a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, a 1999 message from Ayman al Zawahiri—who was to succeed bin Laden in 2011 (following his death) as the leader of Al Qaeda—

had admitted that ‘we only became aware of them [biological weapons] when the enemy drew our attention to them by repeatedly expressing concerns that they can be produced simply with easily available materials.’³¹ This was a clear indication that for Al Qaeda, the idea for utilising biological weapons was seeded and imported from the analytical minds of counter-terrorism experts, rather than organically conceived. Currently, most non-state terrorist groups lack the sophistication and technical know-how to culture biological weapons. While the possibility of a mass-casualty biological attack cannot be ruled out, it is likely to be remote. After all, besides an inept and ultimately thwarted attempt by Al Qaeda to obtain *Bacillus Anthracis* in 2001, there has been no other known efforts till date by terrorist groups pertaining to the planning and conduct of bioterrorism.³² Should such an attack come to pass, it would be difficult to absolve from blame the unrelenting stream of forewarnings on the viability, potency and desirability of infectious biological agents as attack vectors capable of creating mass panic and terror.

NEGATING SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

Richard Betts once boldly claimed that ‘intelligence failures are inevitable.’³³ Do self-fulfilling prophecies suffer the same fate? Is the chain of events impossible to disrupt once it has been precipitated? If not, how can the situation be arrested or reversed? The answer lies in self-reflexivity. Human beings are capable of reflecting on an observed finding and altering their behaviour in response to it. In other words, knowing about the circumstances in which a socially undesirable outcome occurs can lead to changes in behaviour that make the original prophecy self-negating. This ability to be self-reflexive makes human behaviour somewhat unpredictable, akin to a moving target.³⁴ Consequently, self-fulfilling prophecies are inherently fragile and can be turned into self-negating prophecies accordingly. The nuclear domino theory, which asserts that ‘proliferation breeds proliferation’ is a case in point.³⁵

In October 1964, China attained prominence as the world’s fifth nuclear power when it successfully conducted a nuclear detonation at Lop Nur. This feat was a situational surprise, since analysts had doubted

China’s capability to develop a nuclear weapon on its own, following the withdrawal of Soviet technical assistance in 1959 due to the Sino-Soviet split. Immediately, the nuclear test sparked off US concerns that anxious states like Australia, India, Japan and South Korea would soon pursue their own nuclear capability to allay their sense of vulnerability, leading to widespread cascading nuclear proliferation.³⁶

Presently, less than ten states are known to possess nuclear weapons, a fact that seemingly throws the validity of the nuclear domino theory into question. However, the comparatively small number of nuclear weapon states (US President John Kennedy pessimistically warned in 1963 that there could be 15 to 25) is actually testament to the laborious behind-the-scenes manoeuvring to persuade as well as deny states from embarking on their own nuclear weapons programmes.³⁷

The power of self-fulfilling prophecies lies in expectancy.

For Taiwan, the Chinese nuclear test critically triggered its insecurity—in terms of defence against a nuclear attack as well as prestige. As Derek Mitchell puts it, a nuclear-armed China directly challenged Taiwan’s status as ‘the keepers of China’s historical great-power status’.³⁸ As such, Taiwan felt compelled to secretly acquire nuclear weapons to counteract China, despite being a 1968 signatory of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. In 1973, based on credible intelligence, the US pressured Germany not to sell reprocessing equipment (needed to recover plutonium from the spent fuel rods of light water nuclear power reactors) to Taiwan, warning the latter that ‘we would be forced to react’ if it did not curtail its unsanctioned nuclear weapons programme.³⁹ In 1976, the US detected that Taiwan was again attempting to obtain reprocessing technology via Belgium. This time, Taiwanese Premier Jiang Jing Guo had to contain the fallout by personally giving assurance that Taiwan would not ‘manufacture nuclear weapons’.⁴⁰ Yet, this was nothing more than lip service. It was only in 1977, when US President Jimmy Carter threatened to deny military and economic assistance as well as cut off diplomatic relations that Taiwan decided

to concede and suspend its ambition of becoming a nuclear weapon state. Even so, sustained US pressure was required up till 1987 to still-birth intermittent, opportunistic attempts at reviving lingering interest on the subject.⁴¹

As demonstrated, the underlying concerns and assumptions of the nuclear domino theory are not in doubt. Today, a nuclear-armed Iran may induce Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey to similarly develop nuclear capabilities, much like how the emergence of a nuclear-armed China spurred Taiwan's dalliance with nuclear weapons. In fact, the ubiquity of nuclear powers would probably be a foregone conclusion if the 'reactive proliferation behaviour in the form of nuclear exploration and pursuit' predicted by the nuclear domino theory is left unattended and unaddressed.⁴² Instead, the theory's predictions did not bear out because of the efficacy of the active measures leveraged on aspiring nuclear weapon states—international pressure, security guarantees, technology denial, military intervention, etc—and not because they were manifestly wrong. As Nicholas Miller contends, 'the belief in the nuclear domino theory has been instrumental in inspiring the policies needed to transform the theory into a largely self-defeating prophecy.'⁴³

CONCLUSION

In an anarchic system, states vie for power to obtain security. This harsh competitive environment dictates that fear and uncertainty are the two constants

confronting states when they interact with each other. As such, the process of threat assessment is inherently imperfect, in view of the ambiguous symbolism of weapons and the 'other mind' problem. The issue of objectivity is further coloured by the tendency of states to interpret one's own measures as defensive and the measures of others as threatening. Often, this leads to misperception in terms of capabilities and intentions, and can result in the creation of self-fulfilling prophecies, in which efforts designed to forestall an undesirable outcome end up triggering a course of events that ironically bear that very outcome into fruition.

A self-fulfilling prophecy results from actors believing and expecting a purported eventual state of affairs and then unwittingly rendering it true via their corresponding attempts to manipulate its emergence. The power of self-fulfilling prophecies lies in expectancy. Hence, when reluctant to accept an ominous eventuality, one can deliberately react in a manner that causes the undesirable prediction to be falsified. This process is known as self-reflexivity. Self-fulfilling prophecies are not inevitable and can be made self-negating; this also means that they are also inherently fragile. When caught in a self-fulfilling prophecy, the gambit to avoid the tragedy of King Laius of Thebes and Macbeth is to reflect on the prophesied outcome and alter one's behaviour in response, so as to break out of the self-fulfillment cycle.

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DESPITE CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY, IT IS STILL POSSIBLE TO IDENTIFY CONTINUITIES IN NAVAL WARFARE

By ME5 Dhanashanker S/O Ramakrishnan

ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author elaborates on the relevant continuities in naval warfare within the maritime operating environment which could dictate naval warfare principles. He first defines the maritime operating environment and what it means to attain supremacy within the maritime domain. Then, he highlights how technology has shaped naval warfare tactics. Subsequently, the author discusses emerging naval hybrid warfare. He concludes with a current affair case study regarding the naval activities concerning the South China Sea.

Keywords: *Maritime, Naval, Control, Command, Dominate*

*'Science and Technology revolutionize our lives, but memory, tradition and myth frame our response. Expelled from individual consciousness by the rush of change, history finds its revenge by stamping the collective unconscious with habits, values, expectations, dreams. The dialectic between past and future will continue to form our lives.'*¹

- Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr
American Historian, Social Critic, and Public Intellectual.

INTRODUCTION

In naval history, the 20th century was the most technologically dynamic period where control and application of naval technology was at its peak. Wooden sailing vessels were replaced by steel warships enabled by steam propulsion and fitted with heavy weapons which provide greater speed, manoeuvrability and better fire power. Today, in the 21st century, technology has influenced the maritime domain and naval warfare in a complex manner and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. The discovery of aircraft carriers and submarines during World War II (WWII) revolutionised naval warfare tactics. Whoever had these capabilities had command of the sea while dominating sea control and sea denial. This enabled superiority in naval warfare and boosted economic development. As scientific and technological advancements continue, it will impact

military, economic, political and societal activities at a global level.

According to *Understanding Modern Warfare*, the nature of the maritime environment is one which is enduring even as technological advancements continue to profoundly impact on naval operations' tactics.² Throughout history, naval strategists such as Mahan and Corbett have developed naval strategies and concepts which have evolved based on the shifting maritime landscape. Today, modern naval strategists are taking advantage of the technological landscape which is growing at a fast pace and through limitless possibilities—to apply and effect change on maritime operations. These technological advancements, coupled with tactics of naval warfare, suggest that continuities in naval warfare may become less relevant.

In this essay, the author elaborates on the relevant continuities in naval warfare within the maritime operating environment which could dictate naval warfare principles. He first defines the maritime operating environment and what it means to attain supremacy within the maritime domain. Then, he highlights how technology has shaped naval warfare tactics. Subsequently, the author discusses emerging naval hybrid warfare. He concludes, with a current affair case study regarding the naval activities concerning the South China Sea.

MARITIME OPERATING DOMAIN

The maritime operating domain consist of the 'oceans, seas, bays, littoral areas and the even the air space.'³ For the ocean and seas, both at surface and underwater level, are operating areas which are part of the maritime domain. Given that three-quarters of the world is covered in water and has an inhospitable environment, this area is really vast. The sea is not suited for human life as it is on land and requires sophisticated platforms to travel far. Nevertheless, Alfred Thayer Mahan referred to this domain as the 'great highway' and 'wide common' for maritime forces and economic development passageways.⁴

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As early as the 15th century, the maritime environment provided the 'highway' for maritime nations to embark on 'exploration voyages in search of knowledge, wealth and new trading routes.'⁵ In the 12th century, Booth claimed that people use the seas for three purposes.⁶ They are mainly for passage of goods and people, 'passage of military for diplomatic purposes or for use against targets on land and sea' and lastly to acquire resources above and below the sea.⁷ During WWII, the importance of naval warfare within the maritime operating theatre rose to great importance, driven together by the Second Industrial Revolution and technological discoveries to boost war capabilities. Today, while most maritime nations are strengthening partnerships so as to maintain maritime security for safe economical sea passageways, some emerging superpower maritime nations are intent on expanding their own political and military agendas.

ACHIEVING MARITIME SUPREMACY

To achieve maritime supremacy, naval force attributes and capabilities such as 'forward presence, deterrence, sea control, power projection, maritime security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations' must be the optimally exercised as the focus areas.⁸ These capabilities are best executed with naval

vessels and strategies to achieve the dominance over the maritime domains.

Beyond naval ships, Mahan argues that there are six elements of naval warfare which contribute to the attainment of maritime supremacy.⁹ These elements are (1) geographical location—proximity of a country to the sea, (2) physical confrontation—waterway access to the sea and ocean, (3) physical layout of the coastline, (4) population of a nation, (5) national approach towards economic growth through trade and commerce and lastly, (6) the character of the government and its relationship with its military. Mahan's argument essentially highlights that the success in maritime supremacy, in addition to naval vessels, also stems from physical and non-physical aspects.

In terms of naval strategies, both Mahan and Corbett similarly defined the command of the sea as the command of the communications at sea through the securing of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) upheld by vessels at sea.¹⁰ Whilst both the maritime strategists' theories were not extremely different through traits, one focused on an offensive approach while the other took a defensive approach. Mahan focuses on winning a decisive naval battle via a concentration of a nation's fleet to destroy an enemy's fleet.¹¹ Corbett, on the other hand, concentrates on the securement of sea command and the preventive measures from losing it.¹² Even though Mahan's theory would usually be the fastest approach to achieve command of communications, it is just one way of achieving that goal.

Command of the sea is said to be the 'primary aim of naval warfare'.¹³ Some examples of this claim would be the naval activities taking place in South China Sea (SCS) and Malacca Straits (MS). China's naval activities in the SCS and its nine-dash-line claim has created much tension and disputes amongst the Southeast Asian countries in the region. Within the Malacca Straits, there is a need to provide maritime security for the economic SLOC against the increased piracy attacks on merchant and goods vessels. Hence, the nature of the maritime environment influences the characteristics and capabilities of naval forces to embrace technological developments and optimise its effectiveness to complement maritime strategies to counter adversarial naval forces.

Within the Malacca Straits, there is a need to provide maritime security for the economic SLOC against the increased piracy attacks on merchant and goods vessels.



Suspected pirates assemble on the deck of a dhow in waters off western Malaysia, January 2006.

TECHNOLOGICAL IMPACT ON NAVAL WARFARE

Naval weapons technology, from the 19th to late 20th century, has evolved from ‘explosive sea mines, long range heavy guns and self-propelled torpedoes’ to the ‘aircraft carriers, nuclear weapons and long-range missiles for anti-air and anti-surface warfare.’¹⁴ Even ‘ancient naval capability such as the naval ram’ still have operational relevance in today’s maritime environment.¹⁵ One such example would be the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) *Independence*-class littoral mission vessels. Even though these vessels are designed with high-tech stealth like features, it has also been design-fitted for ramming capabilities given today’s wide range of naval requirements.

In addition to the discovery of the destructive arsenal of weapons, technological developments in improved ship designs for greater distance and manoeuvrability, and Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to obtain a holistic situation picture, greatly shaped how naval tactics and strategies were employed. Having an accurate maritime intelligence picture would deem any superior guns irrelevant as the counterstrategy against the adversary

would have the critical element of surprise first mover advantage.

These technological discoveries played a vital role in shaping maritime warfare tactics and strategies as it acts as a key enabler to dominate SLOCs and doubles up as a force multiplier. Nevertheless, the traditional concepts and broad principles of maritime strategies continue to be relevant in the 21st century. Hence, despite such changes, there are still continuities for existing maritime concepts.

HYBRID WARFARE IN MARITIME DOMAIN

The United States Navy Institute journal article, *Maritime Hybrid Warfare Is Coming* by retired navy admiral, Stavridis, highlights that such warfare will be conducted in the waters of the littorals to maintain ambiguity.¹⁶ Instead of using military naval platforms, ‘civilian vessels such as large fishing vessels, light coastal tankers and small fast crafts would be command-and-controlled’ by naval task forces to mount hybrid warfare.¹⁷ These hybrid warfare platforms would be managed by ‘little blue sailors—individuals who are not exactly uniform personnel’ who would be categorised as nationalist, rogue actors or even terrorists for deniability reasons.¹⁸ A recent and notable example of such a hybrid warfare would be the Annexation of Crimea by Russia where the Kremlin was able to ‘deny any Russian troops present on Ukrainian soil.’¹⁹

According to Stavridis, the advantages of mounting maritime hybrid warfare would (1) allow a nation to conduct intimidating operations without any certain attribution, (2) possess the element of surprise, (3) provides the user an effective control of the tempo and timeline and lastly, (4) require low cost compared to naval platforms.²⁰

Hybrid warfare can be considered a military strategy that fuses conventional warfare with asymmetrical tactics complemented by fake news through cyber means. Murray and Mansoor highlights that though hybrid warfare sounds like it is a new form of combat, it is actually something that existed since ancient times.²¹ In essence it does ‘not change the nature of war but merely changes the way forces engage in its conduct.’²²



The Republic of Singapore Navy Littoral Mission Vessel (LSV).

Though hybrid warfare sounds like it is a new form of combat, it is actually something that existed since ancient times.

Another area of technological advancement to watch out for would be Artificial Intelligence (AI) and autonomous capabilities. According to the book, *Artificial Intelligence and International Affairs: Disruption Anticipated* by Cummings, Roff, Cukier, Parakilas and Bryce, there are many challenges in designing the perfect warfare system while being completely independent.²³ Having said this, much research and development (R&D) efforts are being poured into this area across the government and commercial sectors globally. There are existing military system developments with incremental progress being made such as 'autonomous helicopters and underwater vehicles directed by a smartphone'.²⁴ Based on current estimation, 'it will be many years before AI will be able to approximate human intelligence in high-uncertainty settings—as characterised by the fog of war'.²⁵ However, when it becomes a reality, naval warfare as we know it today, would change form again.

CHINA AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

According to the article "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower" by Conway, Roughead & Allen, the expansion of China into the Pacific and Indian Oceans provides a plethora of opportunities and challenges to the global maritime environment.²⁶

In a given instance, China advocates 'counter piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden' and 'conducts humanitarian assistance and distance response missions' which is enabled by its respective hospital ship.²⁷ As such, it becomes a huge participant in 'large scale multinational naval exercises' and a huge morale booster, in addition to the American naval forces, for weaker regional naval forces.²⁸

Despite China's naval expansion advantages, it creates its own set of challenges through its employment of force against other sovereign countries in the attempt to 'assert territorial claims'.²⁹ The developments and disputes arising amongst the member countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the SCS were further complicated when China announced its nine-dash line claim over SCS. The fast economic growth experienced by China has seen her investing heavily in naval expansion as there is an increased dependence on seaborne trade.³⁰



Subi Reef being built by the People's Republic of China and transformed into an artificial island, May 2015.

In addition, China had focused on developing a 'range of joint capabilities across all domains' to ensure its authority over the command of sea.³¹ It utilises an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy by 'projecting power beyond the first island chain' to 'challenge US access and freedom of manoeuvre.'³² The first island chain stretches from the Japanese archipelago through Taiwan to the Philippines. The island chain plan highlights the 'geostrategic value of Taiwan, postulates Chinese military options at sea, and engages important economic interests.'³³

The A2/AD strategy employed by China includes some hybrid warfare techniques as well. It has prioritised the 'development of anti-satellite and cyber weapons' that could disable the US forces communications network to effectively command and control its forces.³⁴ In China's inventory today, it has 'integrated air defences, anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles, maritime bombers missile and torpedo carrying submarines and fast patrol crafts', which are all intended to deter any country from operating within proximity of the first island chain.³⁵

In addition to its weaponry developments, it has built artificial islands in the South China Sea to declare Air Defence Identification Zones (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. Chinese military forces have also been ramping up aggressive naval activities to exercise its claimed sovereignty rights. This included dangerously

'close and unprofessional intercepts of US and allied ships and aircraft operating in international waters and airspace.'³⁶

The examples cited earlier would clearly argue that China is a practitioner of the six elements of naval warfare by Mahan while optimising Mahan and Corbett's theories on securing the command of the sea to realise its geostrategic maritime leverage in the SCS region.³⁷ This was a key enabler for it to establish expeditionary forces and have forward presence via its fortified artificial islands within SCS. With their advanced naval technology, China would be able to exercise their sovereign rights claim and enhance their naval attributes and capabilities. China's evolving technology together with proven maritime strategies and theories combine to make a lethal concoction which could threaten and undermine US bases within the region and keep US forces away from Chinese interests.

With the developments mounted by China in SCS, the geostrategic dimension of China's maritime supremacy could possibly dominate the command of sea with lasting implications for regional harmony and stability.

CONCLUSION

Technology continues to be a critical driver for naval warfare in the maritime operating environment. Ultimately, 'technology shapes warfare but not the

war.³⁸ Warfare will be defined by the type of technological developments. Nevertheless, dominant instruments of warfare have ceased to exist over time even though war continues to exist throughout the history of mankind. As such, no matter how much technology can influence warfare, 'it cannot always determine it in terms of its conduct and eventual outcome.'³⁹ Hence, there will be continuities observed in naval warfare based on the existential evidence highlighted in this essay.

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Huxley, *Defending the Lion City*, 4.

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Ibid., 39 – 50.

Mark J. Valencia, "Regional Maritime Regime Building: Prospects in Northeast and Southeast Asia," *Ocean Development and International Law* 31 (2000): 241.

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Michael I. Handel, "Introduction," in *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy*, ed. Michael I. Handel, (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 3.

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