

ASEAN AND NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY

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Introduction

The growing salience of non-traditional security (NTS) problems in Southeast Asia has made it increasingly difficult for regional states to insist on strict separation between domestic affairs and regional problems. No regional state can continue to insist that various non-traditional problems within their respective domestic boundaries can be addressed unilaterally through national response by the state concerned. The magnitude of the problems, and their impacts beyond national boundaries, render any national response inadequate. In other words, the nature of non-traditional security problems requires not only national response but also close regional cooperation to address them.

Indeed, what are now regarded as non-traditional security issues have always been on the agenda of cooperation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since its inception in August 1967, ASEAN has always approached security matters in a comprehensive manner. For Southeast Asian countries, security has always encompassed wide arrays of issues in social, cultural, economic, political, and military fronts. Problems in those areas –especially within the domestic context-- are seen to have the potential to destabilise nation-states and regional peace and security. Based on such conception of security, ASEAN has always distinguished security in terms of what traditional and non-traditional threats. However, until very recently, ASEAN countries tended to see non-traditional security issues primarily as domestic problems of member state which required national solution. It was only after the end of the Cold War, and more so after the 1997 economic crisis, which brought about the growing threats posed by non-traditional security problems, that ASEAN began to intensify inter-state cooperation in dealing with the problems.

The Merits and Limits of ASEAN's Cooperation on NTS

Initially, in resolving regional security issues, both at national and regional levels, ASEAN from the outset undertook two interrelated approaches. First, threats from non-traditional security problems were left to individual member state to resolve, especially through nation-building measures. Second, to enable individual states resolving those problems, regional cooperation is necessary to create a peaceful external environment so that states would not be distracted from domestic priorities. These approaches later evolved into a strategy of building regional resilience, a conception influenced by Indonesia's thinking of *ketahanan nasional* (national resilience). Such thinking postulates that "if each member nation can accomplish an overall national development and overcome internal threats, regional resilience will automatically result much in the same way as a chain derives its overall strength from the strength of its constituent parts".¹ In other words, ASEAN believed that the management of inter-state relations in the region should be founded on the sanctity of national sovereignty of its member states. Regional cooperation was sought in order to reinforce, not erode, that sovereignty.

With the end of the Cold War, however, ASEAN's approach to regional security began to change. ASEAN countries continue to face security challenges in multiple forms, especially in non-traditional forms. For most Southeast Asian countries, the threat of terrorism is but one problem alongside other security problems such as extreme poverty, trans-national crimes, natural disaster, maritime pollution, environmental problems, piracy, human trafficking, and communal violence. ASEAN began to recognise the imperative for cooperation among member states to resolve domestic problems with cross-border effects.

It was the implication of economic crisis of 1997 on human suffering that demonstrated further the significance of non-traditional security problems in the

¹ Jusuf Wanandi, "Security Issues in the ASEAN Region," in Karl D. Jackson and M. Hadi Soesastro, eds., *ASEAN Security and Economic Development*, Research Papers and Policy Studies no. 11 (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1984), p. 305.

region. In 2003, the health crisis triggered by the problem of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and then the Avian flu, clearly showed how security threats in Southeast Asia has increasingly become trans-national, and therefore blurred the distinction between internal and external security. The SARS epidemic clearly reinforced the permeability of state boundaries and highlighted the growing imperative for transnational cooperation. The fact that the spread of SARS could be checked by close regional and international cooperation sent a strong lesson that the containment and resolution to such problems would require close inter-state cooperation. Without a coordinated cooperation, which will be much more effective if it is done within a multilateral institution, this kind of threat could lead to a global catastrophe. Indeed, these problems serve as the latest reminder to all regional states that security interdependence has become an undeniable reality in Southeast Asia.

While the depth and scope of NTS cooperation in ASEAN remain subject to criticism, it does have its merits. For one, the focus of cooperation on non-traditional security issues does provide an additional platform for developing the habit of cooperation among ASEAN states within a formal multilateral setting. Within this setting, states could institutionalise the notion of “security with” rather than “security against” as the dominant paradigm for inter-state relations. As ASEAN’s experience has shown, the process is also important, especially for the institution to mature and induce a level of comfort among the participating states.

Addressing NTS problems, however, still constitutes a formidable challenge for ASEAN for a number of reasons. First, NTS issues do not necessarily mean “non-sensitive” problems. For example, the problem in Burma --which led to the displacement of people and refugees-- has also reinforced the point that human rights is a security issue for the region. The same can also be said regarding the problem of trans-boundary pollution. In other words, NTS problems do relate closely to the issue of national sensitivity. In this regards, the cliché problem of non-interference should not be overlooked.

The second constraint is the continuing problem of limited state capacity to address the NTS challenges. The financial crisis of 1997, for example, clearly reduced the capacity of some states –such as Indonesia– to push through some policy measures and allocate the needed fund for addressing the problem. As most ASEAN countries are facing multiple NTS problems at the same time, there is a competition for limited state resources, thus making it difficult to prioritise.

The third constraint comes from ASEAN's internal working mechanism. Despite recent institutional adjustments after the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007, ASEAN still lacks a mechanism to enforce compliance. The trans-national nature of the problem clearly requires a collective effort among affected states to address and resolve the problems. It is precisely on this imperative that ASEAN has been weak.

The fourth constraint comes from the fact that ASEAN remains an inter-governmental form of regional cooperation. Despite its declaration to become a people-oriented or people-centred, some governments in the region remain suspicious of the civil society organisations (CSOs) and reluctant to work them. Meanwhile, most NTS problems need a strong state-CSOs partnership in addressing them.

Concluding Notes

ASEAN, however, has begun to consolidate its efforts in addressing the NTS problems through a number of initiative. Two most important steps towards this direction have been the adoption of the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC) in October 2003 and the APSC Blueprint in 2004. Indeed, greater cooperation has been evident with regards to the management of the problem of terrorism, natural disasters, and maritime safety. While the extent of the implementation of these measures remain unclear, ASEAN does have a platform through which NTS cooperation could be intensified.

Regarding the principle of non-interference, ASEAN should continue to adhere to this principle. However, this principle should not become an obstacle to greater cooperation in addressing NTS. The principle of non-interference needs to be employed in a flexible way so that it would allow ASEAN to cooperate on trans-boundaries issues, internal problems with clear regional implications, and issues with identifiable humanitarian dimension such as gross violation of human rights, natural disasters, humanitarian crisis, internally displaced persons (IDP) and other human security problems. In other words, ASEAN needs to employ the principle of non-interference within the context of interdependence among states.

Despite the growing recognition on the importance of NTS, however, the place of NTS in security discourse and policy in the region should not be taken for granted. East Asia is at the most important juncture of great strategic transformation. While the existing regional security architecture is better equipped to tackle NTS challenges, it is not so in managing “traditional” or “hard” security problems. Questions are being asked regarding the viability of the current regional architecture in coping with strategic challenges resulting from the changing dynamics and power relations among major powers in the Asia-Pacific region. Changes and strategic realignments in the relationship among the major powers, as a result of global transformation and regional power shift, have begun to galvanise the discourse and studies on the adequacy of the existing architecture. By nature, this debate brings back the attention to the “traditional” or “hard” security issues.

Indeed, as the discourse on the need for a new regional security architecture intensifies, traditional security concerns may once again overshadow the attention and preoccupation with NTS issues. Governments could be easily distracted by the imperative of addressing traditional security problems. In East Asia, there is no shortage of such problems. In addition to the problem of major power relations and regional security architecture, there are also unresolved territorial disputes, bilateral tensions, the implications of military build-up, and nuclear issue in the Korean Peninsula. Government officials and traditional security analysts might find these

issues more “sexy”. The concerns for protecting human beings from sources of threats no less deadly than wars could be easily lost within the overriding concerns over traditional security concerns. These traditional security concerns are important, but they should not be allowed to dominate security discourse and practices in Asia.