

Renewed Military Buildups Post-Asian Crisis: The Effect on Two Key Southeast Asian Bilateral Military Balances

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Abstract

Southeast Asia's security dynamics, rather than getting simplified in the post-Cold War era, have become more complex and multifaceted. Though the ten states of Southeast Asia are now part of the unitary structure of ASEAN, an undercurrent of tension and suspicion continues to be a feature of relations between several states. This has been one of the reasons, if not the central reason, for the on-going process of the modernization and expansion of arsenals in Southeast Asia. This paper will look at that process through the rubric of two key military balances, that between Myanmar and Thailand, on the one hand, and Malaysia and Singapore, on the other. It is developments in the armed forces of these four states which have generated the overall military buildup in the region.

Introduction

Like most other regions of the world, Southeast Asia faces new threats to the security of its resident states. These non-traditional threats include those related to environmental issues, the cross-border movement of people, health issues, and terrorism. Though these are increasingly important security issues, it is the traditional security concerns — related to perceptions of threat emanating from other countries — that continue to take centre stage in engaging the time, effort, resources and energy of the governments of Southeast Asia. Those governments have adopted a variety of means to strive to enhance their national security. These means have included the multilateral security processes embodied in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the broader ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the stress on alliance relations — both formally and informally — with outside powers. However, it has been through military buildups — particularly a region-wide military buildup, given renewed emphasis in the aftermath of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis — that has become the most visible aspect by which the states of Southeast Asia have striven to enhance their security.

This paper will first look at the nature of Southeast Asia as a distinct geographical region where security issues tend to have a dynamic of their own. It will then examine some of the multilateral approaches to security, and why those approaches, rather than shoring up regional security, have in fact impelled resident states to give renewed stress to military buildups in enhancing their individual state security. In that respect, the paper will focus squarely on two key Southeast Asian bilateral military balances — that between Myanmar and Thailand, on the one hand, and Malaysia and Singapore, on the other. These two bilateral military balances highlight the most significant aspects of conventional arms rivalry between states in Southeast Asia.

The Preoccupation with Traditional Threats to Security

It can be argued that Southeast Asia is a compartmentalised region (as against the notion of sub-region) in its own right. It is a region that can be distinguished from other regions of the Asian continent by a number of features. These features include: the delineating characteristics of its geographical configuration, the region's historical experience, and the extent of its cultural and ethnic diversity (as against the sense of greater homogeneity that seems to obtain amongst the peoples in South Asia, East Asia, and Central Asia). It can also be argued that Southeast Asia's compartmentalised nature extends to its security dynamics. This is demonstrated not merely by the kinds of security concerns that bedevil the region, but also in the attitude and policies of external powers towards the region. There are of course exceptions that suggest linkages between Southeast Asia's security dynamics and that of other regions, such as Northeast Asia and the South Pacific. However, such exceptions do not invalidate the central point of this paper's thesis — that of the compartmentalised nature of Southeast Asia's security dynamics. In fact the exceptions merely validate the essence of the generalisation being advanced here.

Being a compartmentalised region, Southeast Asia's security dynamics are very much multidimensional in nature. They include internal security concerns (including that pertaining to regime instability); problematic bilateral relations between neighbouring states which have encouraged the modernisation and expansion of military capabilities (which is the central focus/theme of this paper); and potential

sources of extra-regional threat. In previous periods, the states of Southeast Asia tended to largely face singular threats: either emanating internally or externally, and not generally both at the same time. And these threats were also rather cyclical in nature; that is to say they tended to come in cycles. Today, however, a number of countries are facing problems of internal instability while also having to contend with an uncertain and fluid external geopolitical environment, and structural problems in relations with neighbours.

ASEAN as the Basic Unit of Southeast Asian Security: An Expansion Gone Awry

Since the end of the Cold War, the compartmentalised nature of Southeast Asia in security terms has become even more apparent. To a large extent, this has derived from changed diplomatic and geopolitical circumstances. The most significant of these changed circumstances was the expansion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to now include all 10 countries of Southeast Asia; this reinforced the geographical construct of Southeast Asia as a single strategic entity. The ideological divide between a non-communist and communist Southeast Asia is now no longer relevant. ASEAN expansion to include all of Southeast Asia (East Timor excepted) was to suggest the shared destiny of the countries within the region. The underlying premises of the expansion however had a significant security dimension to it.

Clearly, one of the premises of ASEAN's expansion was to reinforce a key originating principle that led to the organisation's establishment in 1967: the regulation of inter-state relations amongst its members that stressed peaceful coexistence and the pacific settlement of disputes between member-states. Bringing the residual countries of Southeast Asia which had not been a part of ASEAN into the grouping would underscore this principle and would anchor the region on a more solid foundation of peace and security. However, that objective has had mixed results. For instance, paradoxically, since Myanmar's accession to ASEAN membership in July 1997, its relations with neighbouring Thailand have in fact been more volatile than it has been for a number of years. There have also been occasional spats between other ASEAN states since 1997, the year which witnessed the onset of

the Asian financial/economic crisis, leading to political instability in a number of states and which was to have regional implications. Cordiality has, however, continued to characterise relations amongst most ASEAN states at the multilateral (that is, organisational) level, even if bilaterally problems exist between certain states.

Another aspect of the security dimension that underlay ASEAN's expansion was the intention to shore-up the geopolitical weight of the organisation in confronting the new challenges thrown up by the post-Cold War era. One of those challenges lies just to the north of Southeast Asia. It is constituted in the remarkable China growth phenomenon. The expansion of Chinese power in all of its dimensions — economic, political, diplomatic, and military — has cast a longer shadow across China's southern expanse, Southeast Asia. When one considers that the combined populations of the 10 ASEAN states do not even make up half of China's population (they make up about forty percent), one then begins to get the measure of the difference in geopolitical weight between China and ASEAN (a point which becomes even more apparent when the ASEAN states are disaggregated as single entities in comparative terms to China). There is little doubt that China will increase its diplomatic, cultural and economic influence in Southeast Asia in the coming years. Indeed, Chinese influence is already evident in Myanmar. To that extent, one of the reasons why Myanmar had been encouraged by its Southeast Asian neighbours to join ASEAN was so as to lessen China's influence in that country. However, thus far, there has been no evidence of any lessening of Chinese influence in Myanmar. On the contrary, the Myanmar regime's reliance on Chinese weapon systems and other forms of military assistance is said to have increased since 1997 in tandem with a deterioration in Myanmar's relations with neighbouring Thailand (a point to be dealt with at length later). China's influence has also increased in the Indochinese states of Laos and Cambodia as these two states have consciously sort to re-adjust their relations with Thailand and Vietnam, as a sort of counter-balancing strategy on mainland Southeast Asia.¹

The expansion of ASEAN had achieved the vision of its founding fathers, of one-day bringing the whole of Southeast Asia into the organisation, but it is also clear that it has not fully achieved the rationale of those who had advocated that expansion in the 1990s. Difficult relations between member-states, such as between Myanmar

and Thailand, and Malaysia and Singapore, still obtain, and in some respects have in fact become more acute, making ASEAN's cohesion less apparent. ASEAN, however, has continued to provide the multilateral framework whereby problematic bilateral relations between member-states can be papered over and kept manageable in line with the ASEAN spirit.

In geopolitical terms, however, the expansion of ASEAN has been a more pronounced failure. Membership expansion, rather than shoring-up ASEAN's geopolitical weight has made the organisation look bloated and unwieldy. ASEAN has been able to operate effectively on the international stage largely due to the goodwill of the major powers.² Absent that goodwill and ASEAN's international effectiveness becomes questionable. To that extent, Myanmar's membership of the organisation has caused problems with a number of major powers, most notably the European Union (EU). Due to the Myanmar regime's gross violation of human rights, the EU has occasionally refused to attend ASEAN-EU dialogue meetings if a delegation from Myanmar is present.³ This kind of action does not add to ASEAN's stature. It detracts from it.

Similarly, while an expanded ASEAN may have erased the ideological divide in Southeast Asia, it has tended to sharpen the divide between the relatively more prosperous countries (Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand) on the one hand, and the poorer countries (Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam) on the other.⁴ The clubby atmosphere of the original ASEAN-5 is no longer apparent, with some member-states not being able to relate to others. Inclusiveness, as a regional ideal, has been a disappointment to those who had been its greatest advocate.

More recent events have also put to the test the ASEAN states' ability to shape the destiny of their own region. And ASEAN has generally failed that test. The Asian financial/economic crisis in 1997-98 showed ASEAN largely impotent in grappling with the crisis, even if dealing with that kind of crisis — economic in nature — had never been an objective behind the very idea of ASEAN. Indeed, during the Asian crisis there were more aspects of disunity — and rivalry — rather than unity within ASEAN's ranks, a spectre which tended to undermine the organisation's credibility.⁵ And two years later, in 1999, ASEAN was both unable and unwilling to take a leading role in yet another crisis in its midst — East Timor. The organisation

was effectively marginalised during the East Timor crisis, leaving an outside power and a multilateral international institution, Australia and the United Nations respectively, to take the lead roles in the resolution of that crisis.

ASEAN may have, for much of its existence, been a pillar underpinning security in Southeast Asia, but its member-states had as early as the late 1980s come to realise that they cannot count on the organisation's operating principles and the sense of general goodwill in maintaining security in Southeast Asia. In that regard there has been an emphasis by a number of Southeast Asian states on more traditional, or realist, approaches to enhancing security. This has become more apparent as these states have recovered economically from the Asian financial/economic crisis of 1997-98, and therefore have had the wherewithal to funnel more resources into costly weapons acquisitions.

The Build-up of Military Capabilities: The Effect on Bilateral Balances

Up to around the time of the onset of the Asian financial/economic crisis the defence modernisation and expansion within Southeast Asia had generally not tended to raise controversy. This was despite the fact that there were instances of competitive weapons acquisitions. An example one could cite was Thailand's decision (subsequently aborted because of the Asian crisis) to acquire F/A-18 Hornets from the United States after Malaysia decided to purchase that aircraft together with Russian MiG-29 Fulcrums. Another example was the interest shown by Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand during 1995-96 in acquiring diesel-electric submarines; in 1999-2000, Malaysia and Thailand, and now also Indonesia, showed renewed interest in acquiring diesel-electric submarines shortly after Singapore acquired 4 refurbished secondhand submarines from Sweden. Were these examples of apparently competitive acquisitions (or announcements of planned acquisitions) merely "benchmarking" or were they aspects of arms racing which, in classic terms, is defined as "escalation dominance"? The answer to that question would likely turn on one's national perspective.

Since the Asian financial/economic crisis, the military buildup by states in Southeast Asia has been renewed and with some vigour. It would appear that some states have viewed Singapore as having pushed ahead with arms acquisitions during

the Asian crisis, when many of them had to reduce significantly defence budgets. As such, it could be argued that these same states have resolved to reduce Singapore's significant lead in sophisticated weaponry. That might well be a general dynamic in the renewed military buildup in the region.

However, to understand the specifics of the buildup, its effect on certain bilateral military balances in the region needs to be examined. The observable buildup of conventional military capabilities tends to have direct implications for bilateral relationships, and, *ipso facto*, bilateral military balances. In that respect, two bilateral military balances are significant here as they have largely driven the general conventional regional military buildup. The two bilateral military balances are that between Myanmar and Thailand, on the one hand; and Malaysia and Singapore, on the other.

Myanmar-Thailand Military Balance

Volatility has almost always characterised the relationship between Myanmar and Thailand. It is a volatility that had become more obvious since the late 1990s. Volatile relations between the two countries have been a consequence of certain structural factors. A long period of historical animosity, marked by some 700 years of invasion and conquest, is one such factor. Another is the porousness of a 2,400 kilometer long land border, of which only some 59 kilometers have been properly demarcated. A third factor is the lucrative industry in illicit drugs in Myanmar, which is dominated by ethnic minority groups located along the common border, and who export a substantial amount of such narcotics into and via Thailand. A fourth factor is the assistance — which the Myanmar government says — the Thai army extends to ethnic minority rebels, such as the Shan and Karen, along the border region. These factors, among others, have combined to make the relations between Myanmar and Thailand problematic, even in the best of times. And specific incidents in recent years — such as the seizure of the Myanmar Embassy in Bangkok by rebels in October 1999 and the Thai government's lenient treatment of the rebels — have made relations more difficult.

Tense and volatile bilateral relations have meant that “thousands of Thai soldiers, border police and volunteer forces are strung out along Thailand's western

border”.⁶ Thai troops under the command of the Third Army Region, which covers northwest Thailand facing Myanmar, have also been reinforced over the past few years. For its part, Myanmar has also bolstered its forces — particularly with significant numbers of mortar and light artillery — along the common border.⁷ Estimates vary of anywhere between 100,000 and 150,000 Myanmar troops, out of a force of just under half-a-million strong deployed along the border with Thailand.⁸

The Myanmar armed forces (the *Tatmadaw*) has in fact doubled in size since the late 1980s. Despite that, in an interview in October 1999, the Royal Thai Army’s Commander-in-Chief, General Surayudh Chulanond appeared rather sanguine when he noted:

We can crush any foreign incursion. The threat of foreign troops from that direction [the western border], each time, is less than 100 men. This could increase to battalion strength, which is considered a considerable threat. But, in any case, I think we can handle a threat this size coming across the border. For a larger size — regiment or division — I cannot foresee that kind of threat in the near future.⁹

In January 2000, it seemed that either the assessment had changed or the Thai military was trying to employ a plausible pretext to advance its cause for an increased budget allocation. Thai Supreme Military Commander, General Mongkol Ampornpisit, drew attention to Myanmar’s steadily expanding military capabilities. He said: “Though posing no threat now, Myanmar could change in the future... While most countries are downsizing their armed forces, Myanmar keeps expanding its military capability.”¹⁰

Although increases in army strength have been the most visible aspect of the enhancement in the *Tatmadaw*’s capabilities, it has been repeated media reports of the *Tatmadaw*’s interest in acquiring big-ticket items, such as fighter aircraft, which have raised some concerns among Thailand’s senior military staff. Many reports have suggested that the Myanmar air force has been actively interested in acquiring additional squadrons of the F-7M Airguard fighter bomber (a derivative of the Soviet era MiG-21 Fishbed) from China, to add to the three squadrons it currently operates.¹¹ However, there has been little firm evidence of the delivery of additional F-7Ms to Myanmar since the last aircraft were delivered in late 1993.¹² There have also been persistent reports of Myanmar being interested in acquiring attack and troop-carrying

helicopters, in addition to air-superiority fighters from Russia. Indeed, as early as February 1996, it had been reported that a deal was about to be struck between the Russian and Myanmar governments for the supply of a squadron of twelve MiG-29 Fulcrums to the Yangon junta.¹³ In point of fact no supply of MiG-29s took place. Reports of a MiG-29 deal were again to re-surface in early July 2001, this time indicating that Myanmar would acquire 10 MiG-29s from Russia. As it turned out, those reports proved accurate. (We will return to this point later.)

However, the substance or otherwise of other reports of Myanmar increasing its military capabilities by acquiring conventional armaments have clearly spurred Thailand to enhance its own military capabilities.¹⁴ In July 1999, it was announced that Thailand would purchase 50 secondhand Alpha ground-attack aircraft from Germany to replace its ageing OV-10 Bronco and Peacemaker aircraft.¹⁵ In the event, budget constraints restricted the Thais to purchase only half the original number of Alphas they had intended — 25 aircraft.¹⁶ A year later, July 2000, it was reported that Thailand would purchase 16 secondhand early variant F-16 fighter aircraft from the United States for US\$132 million to add to existing inventories of F-16s operated by the Royal Thai Air Force.¹⁷

The Alpha and F-16 aircraft purchases suggest that concerns with contingencies related to Myanmar were behind them. The aircraft types match the capabilities of the potential adversary. The Alpha is a light strike aircraft suitable for operations over jungle and mountainous areas. And the early variant F-16 would be more than a match for the F-7Ms in the Myanmar arsenal. Thus, if concerns with the upgrading of Malaysia's air force in the mid-1990s had impelled the Thais to want to acquire (a purchase subsequently aborted) top-of-the-line F/A-18 Hornets, by the late 1990s, the Thai perception of rising potential threat had swung from the south to the west — from Malaysia to Myanmar.

The reports that Myanmar planned to buy 10 MiG-29 air-superiority Fulcrums from Russia, had also motivated Thailand to acquire advanced AIM-30 air-to-air missiles from the United States, and which would arm the Thai air force's F-16s. The AIM-30 purchase was confirmed by Bangkok on 17 July 2001. One report claimed that "sources within the Royal Thai Air Force said the sale of air-to-air missiles was definitely a reaction to Yangon's plan [to acquire MiG-29s]".¹⁸

Although there is a significant degree of simple modernisation of arsenals by both Thailand and Myanmar, the new weapon systems that have been, or will be, acquired bring with them capabilities that are of a significantly greater order of magnitude than the systems they have replaced or will soon replace. However, the types and numbers of weapon systems that are being inducted into the arsenals of both countries are such that as of today they are not considered destabilising. To that extent, the military balance between both countries is still more-or-less in equilibrium, with Myanmar's strength lying in its large ground forces, and Thailand's in its air force. Whether that situation will stay the same in the future remains to be seen.

Malaysia-Singapore Military Balance

If the Myanmar-Thailand military balance is in equilibrium, that between Malaysia and Singapore is far less so. For quite a number of years now — probably from the early 1980s onwards — the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) have been ahead of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) in *almost* every aspect of military capability.¹⁹ And over the years, the gap between the two armed forces has continued to widen. Indeed, the SAF's constant accent on mobility, firepower and technological sophistication in all its three arms — air force, army and navy — is such that it has propelled it to be the leading military force in Southeast Asia in comparative order-of-battle terms. A slew of assessments by Western analysts in recent years have confirmed that view.

A few of the high profile acquisitions or planned acquisitions in recent years that have given the SAF its exalted status include: the acquisition in 1996 of the first of four Swedish Sjoormen-class diesel-electric submarines;²⁰ the acquisition in late 1999 of the first 12 of an indeterminate number of multi-role F-16C Fighting Falcons intended to replace A-4SU Super Skyhawks which have been the mainstay of the Republic of Singapore Air Force's (RSAF's) ground-attack force;²¹ and the plan announced in March 2000 to acquire 6 French-designed stealth frigates (based on the La Fayette class of frigates) for a reported US\$1 billion.²² These are just a few of the kinds of acquisitions that have raised eyebrows both within Southeast Asia and beyond. They also appear to have unnerved Singapore's closest neighbour — Malaysia.

Public statements from Malaysia's political and military leaders have, however, not given much impression of being unnerved by what Singapore has been doing militarily. Political leaders, such as Defence Minister Najib Tun Razak, have tended to express a general understanding over Singapore's military buildup. They have said that the SAF had to be externally oriented for the simple fact that the island-state is minuscule in size. In April 2001 Datuk Seri Najib commented on Singapore's planned acquisition of stealth frigates:

Malaysia also has an acquisition programme regarding Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPV) for the Royal Malaysian Navy. By the year 2004, we will have the first OPV and subsequently another six, with two units delivered yearly. This OPV acquisition programme is in keeping with our efforts to step up our capability, apart from updating outdated assets. Thus, we see the purchase by Singapore [of stealth frigates] not as an arms race.²³

And in October 2000, Datuk Seri Najib also stated publicly that Malaysia did "not see Singapore as a potential enemy".²⁴ In June 2001, the Acting Chief of Staff of the Malaysian Armed Forces, Lieutenant-General Mohammad Zain, noted: "Singapore's need to acquire massive military firepower is acceptable, but we have to keep a watch and study its implications on us. There is no cause for concern that an arms race is in the making, as military development is every nation's right."²⁵

Can such statements be taken at face value? Whatever the answer, it is clear that these kinds of statements do have one particular effect: they keep the atmospherics between the two countries good, and they assist in *not* making any perceived notion of threat a self-fulfilling prophecy. To that extent, the statements serve a useful purpose.

But beyond statements, looking at the pattern of announcements by Malaysia of plans to acquire military hardware, it seems that there is a clear trend of reacting to some of Singapore's own acquisitions. In 2000, it was announced that Malaysia would acquire 3 diesel-electric submarines,²⁶ a move which, the respected journal, *US Naval Institute Proceedings* said, was "spurred by the recent creation of Singapore's submarine arm".²⁷ In April 2001, reports out of Kuala Lumpur indicated that Malaysia was interested in acquiring 24 F/A-18E/F Super Hornets to supplement its existing F/A-18D squadron.²⁸ It can be argued that the Malaysian interest in more

F/A-18s was a consequence of Singapore pressing ahead with plans to acquire, what are likely to be, significant numbers of F-16C/Ds, even if only as replacements for existing Super Skyhawks. Singapore's considerable lead in air power is probably what unnerves Malaysia more than anything else.

Air power is the bedrock of the SAF's ability to launch heavy attacks on any potential adversary. And the RSAF's, and broader SAF's, methodical and systematic enhancement of capabilities come across to some in the region as being relentless and unflagging. To that extent, if the Malaysian Armed Forces wanted to close the gap between itself and the SAF, it might have decided that it could *not* compete on a like-for-like basis, but rather would have to emphasise its own comparative advantage in relation to Singapore. That comparative advantage appears to be artillery. In that regard, the announcements in November 2000 of Malaysia having agreed to procure 22 155mm G5 medium-range artillery from South Africa, and a battalion of 18 Astros II multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS) from Brazil, must be considered significant.²⁹ In particular, MLRS, which is an area artillery system, would provide the MAF with a quantum leap in firepower. And, when the Astros II battalion is eventually operational, armed with a hard-target kill capability (that is to say, high explosive squash head — HESH), it would go a long way to close the very significant “firepower gap” that currently exists between Malaysia and Singapore. The Astros II MLRS might well be the first of other batches of MLRS that the Malaysians could possibly acquire, including the more formidable twelve-tube Smerch MLRS from Russia. That would be a natural progression from what the Malaysians already have in the pipeline. Acquiring a battalion of the formidable Smerch MLRS might make sense only because of the likely easy payment terms, including counter-trade, the Russians would probably offer, being very much redolent of the nature of Malaysia's acquisition of MiG-29s from Russia in the mid-1990s.

A simple description of the effect of the different impact of artillery employed by Malaysia and Singapore against each other is suffice to make the point of how artillery could skew the dynamic and provide a possible equaliser in firepower terms for Malaysia. A battalion of MLRS, such as the Astros II, although an area saturation system, is essentially a tactical unit. If such a battalion is deployed by the Singapore Armed Forces to the northern part of the island facing Malaysia, it remains a tactical

unit. However, if the same MLRS battalion is deployed by the Malaysian Armed Forces to the southern part of peninsular Malaysia, facing Singapore, it is likely to instantly transform itself from a tactical to a strategic unit, because it brings the entire, heavily builtup and densely populated island of Singapore within range. Geographical asymmetry thus results in a significant military asymmetry. Indeed, in conceptual terms, this in fact can be viewed as a form of asymmetrical warfare.

The argument can be advanced further and put it in more graphic terms. Once the Malaysian MLRS battalion and other heavy artillery become operational and are deployed in significant numbers in the near future, one might then be able to describe the Malaysian Armed Forces in relation to the Singapore Armed Forces by drawing an analogy from medieval times. The Singapore Armed Forces could be described as a rapier; it is manoeuvrable, slick, and, in the hands of a skilled swordsman, can do all the fancy moves in attempting to deliver the lethal stab. On the other hand, the Malaysian Armed Forces is like a broadsword; its not very manoeuvrable, not slick, and, even in the hands of as skilled swordsman, is unlikely to do all the fancy moves. Indeed, it is fairly lumbering and unwieldy. However, in the ultimate analysis, a single slash of the broadsword could well result in the rapier snapping in half.

Perhaps sensing the effect of its announcement of artillery acquisitions, Malaysia's Deputy Defence Minister, Shafie Apdal, said in November 2000: "Other countries should not be unduly worried as this exercise is part of an ongoing process to establish a credible force with sufficient deterrent power, not for aggression. We feel the time has come for us to modernise our force, and this is what we are doing."³⁰

Singapore might well have felt differently. On 12 July 2001, it was reported that Singapore would be acquiring 12 Apache attack helicopters from the United States, to add to an initial 8 which it first announced in March 1999 that it was acquiring. The Apaches would be very effective against tanks, armoured infantry fighting vehicles (such as the 211 ACV300 AIFVs Malaysia said in September 2000 it was acquiring from Turkey³¹), and MLRS. If need be, the Apaches would have the capability to seek out and destroy these targets. If past trends of the way acquisitions are made and announced are any guide, Singapore is likely to increase the number of Apaches it requires as Malaysia's artillery capabilities grow.

The seemingly action-reaction phenomenon between the two countries' armed forces does not appear to end there. Malaysia has made attempts in recent times to enhance its ground-based air defence capabilities. In February 2001 it was announced that Malaysia would procure an undisclosed number and type of surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries from Pakistan for RM48.6 million.³² This new system would supplement the Starburst SAM unit currently operational with the MAF, and which is effective against low-flying threats, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and helicopters. More pointedly, the MAF has recently stepped up its air defence exercises, employing its Starburst unit and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA), in Johor.³³ In itself, Johor has seen a buildup of military infrastructure, the most recent example being the announcement in March 2001 that a new RM400 million, 950 hectares commando training camp, to house some 10,000 personnel and their families, would be built near Mersing.³⁴ The trajectory of defence developments — which include matching particular weapon systems to particular operating environments — suggest other infrastructure developments taking place in Johor in the years ahead.

If an action-reaction phenomenon can be discerned between Malaysia and Singapore, does that mean that conflict between the two countries is likely or possible? Not really. All it means is that the phenomenon is an aspect of the exercise of power between the two countries. In fact, notwithstanding a bilateral relationship that has had its ups and downs, there are more things that actually unite Malaysia and Singapore than actually divide them. And at the end of the day, enlightened self-interest suggests the unlikelihood of conflict between the two countries. That, in fact, was the view of former Malaysian military intelligence chief, Lieutenant-General Raja Abdul Rashid Raja Badiozaman, who in an interview in October 2000, said that a war between Malaysia and Singapore was “a zero possibility”.³⁵

Conclusion

The turn of the millennium has seen the region of Southeast Asia confronting a host of challenges in the security realm. ASEAN, as the basic unit underpinning security in the region, has however been found somewhat wanting. Consequently, that has spurred a renewed military buildup by most ASEAN states, especially Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Thailand.

The significance of the military balances between Myanmar and Thailand, on the one hand, and Malaysia and Singapore, on the other, tends to highlight an undercurrent of tension and suspicion between the said countries. The introduction of increasing numbers of warplanes and warships into the fairly confined common air and sea spaces of Southeast Asia would always hold the potential for accidents between air forces and navies of neighbouring countries. However, adroit diplomacy and enlightened self-interest are likely to ensure that such accidents remain just that — accidents, that do not spiral into conflict, where the countries concerned would have too much to lose and not much to gain. This does not mean that the buildup of capabilities in the four countries does not have other effects on their bilateral relationships. Clearly, the buildups have an important psychological and symbolic effect on neighbouring countries. Indeed, in the power game in Asia, great store is placed on symbolism — it emphasises a specific variable in a nation's credentials of power.

NOTES

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4. Lee Kim Chew, "Call to help poorer ASEAN states keep pace", *Straits Times*, 23 July, 1999, p. 32.
5. For elaboration, see Derek da Cunha, "Division and Unity: ASEAN During the Asian Crisis", *Comprehensive Security and Multilateralism in Post-Cold War East Asia*, edited by Kwang Il Baek (Seoul: Korean Association of International Studies, 1998), pp. 327-346.
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8. Different sources provide different figures for the Myanmar armed forces' troop strength; they range from a low of 400,000 to a high of 520,000. However, the higher-end figures are likely to include paramilitary forces.
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10. Quoted in "Thai general warns of Myanmar's might", *The Straits Times*, 8 January 2000, p. 46.
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19. One says "almost" simply because the Royal Malaysian Navy was ahead of the Republic of Singapore Navy for much of the 1980s.
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