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Saving Timor: Whose Responsibility Is It?

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The current debacle in Timor Leste has raised concerns about the possibility of its impending demise as a nation-state. Recent developments have also led to calls on Asian countries to join the coalition in order to restore peace in Timor. As the Australian defence minister Brendan Nelson urged his audience at the recently concluded Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, “It’s in all our interests to see that we do not have failed states in our region”. To date, about 2,250 troops from Australia, New Zealand, Portugal and Malaysia have reportedly been dispatched to Timor following formal requests from the embattled Dili government to those nations. Further, Australia has doubled the size of its police contingent in Dili, with the Australian police commissioner warning against any expectation of a “quick fix” while also preparing the ground for the prospect of his forces being in Timor “for the long haul”. For its part, Malaysia has committed 330 peacekeepers for three months with the possibility of extending their commitment if necessary.

As the sole ASEAN – for that matter, the only Asian – member in the coalition, Malaysia’s involvement has prompted some to question the commitment of ASEAN to managing peace and security in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific. This concern could partly be attributed to the Malaysian deputy prime minister and defence minister Najib Abdul Razak’s recent comments on his country’s involvement in Timor. When asked by the Australian media about the reasons which prompted Kuala Lumpur to respond as it did, Mr. Najib noted, aside from the obvious danger posed by the potential disintegration of Timor’s political structure and a personal appeal by its premier Mari Alkatiri (significantly, the top Muslim official in the Dili government), that “some Asian role” in helping Timor was entirely apposite given that ASEAN has plans to become a security community. According to Mr. Najib, “it would be a shame” if there were no Asian or ASEAN representation in the coalition, which “doesn’t speak well of our commitment to the peace process in this region”.

ASEAN: Inept or Inapt?

The point has also been made that inaction by ASEAN as an institution to the Timor crisis is all the more conspicuous in the light of the inaugural ASEAN defence ministers meeting (ADMM) held last month in Kuala Lumpur. Further, that some ASEAN members – in particular Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore – had roundly objected to an Indonesian proposal in 2004 to create an ASEAN peacekeeping force may have fostered, correctly or otherwise, the image of the Association as unable and/or unwilling to tend its own regional backyard, much less attend to a failing neighbour on its eastern doorstep. But should ASEAN be held responsible for saving Timor?

That Asian countries other than Malaysia ought to also participate in helping to restore law and order in Timor is incontrovertible. That said, it is not immediately apparent, however, that responsibility for Timor falls within ASEAN's institutional purview. And while Timor Leste is well within the geographic footprint of the ASEAN Regional Forum – “indisputably” so, according to the Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer – it is less clear, however, whether a similar case can be made regarding ASEAN. Above all, security communities are principally about the maintenance of peace amongst their own members; witness, for example, the European Union's inaction in the western Balkans in the 1990s. Unquestionably, quibbling over where precisely the ASEAN's jurisdictional limits end would strike even the most jaded as callous, given the propinquity Timor clearly shares with neighbours from the ASEAN region, not least its erstwhile colonizer Indonesia. However, Timor Leste has arguably not seen itself as part of the ASEAN region as much as the Pacific Forum group of states in the south Pacific. The point here is simply to argue the dubiousness of appropriating the security community idea as the rationale for ASEAN to act. But the issue of Timor's well-being is far from academic.

That said, individual ASEAN member countries *have* contributed – significantly, in some instances – to peace missions in the region and beyond, including in Timor during its infancy. Further, the swift and sweeping responses by ASEAN states to the humanitarian crisis wrought by the tsunamis on Boxing Day in 2004 is a clear indication that ASEAN members which possess the requisite capabilities have assisted when needed. Hence, rather than asking if ASEAN has been inept in responding to the Timor crisis, we may want to ask whether the placing of responsibility for Timor at the feet of ASEAN is *inapt* for the reason that there are more pertinent frameworks through which to conduct peace missions in this part of the world. ASEAN states are clearly not opposed to helping their ailing neighbours, but the institutional context has to be right. As a framework for regional peacekeeping efforts, ASEAN is plainly unsuitable, at least for now.

Getting the Institutional Context Right

A 2004 study conducted by the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies on regional peace missions in Southeast Asia found that getting right the institutional contexts within which peacekeeping efforts take place is vital to their success, especially a context to which parties involved – peacekeeping forces, mediators, host authorities and local actors – can agree. Reassurance is crucial in mitigating mistrust, and ASEAN members above all are agonizingly aware of this fact in their own long drawn efforts at addressing intramural concerns amongst themselves.

Intervention in Timor under the ASEAN banner would likely be inappropriate today if one considers the mistrust evoked by the prospect of ASEAN members' forces on Timorese soil during the early phase of peacekeeping efforts in 1999. Importantly, it was not only the Indonesians who harboured suspicions, but as Mr. Najib pointedly noted in his interview, the Timorese were equally apprehensive at the time about Malaysia's involvement given the perceived close ties between Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. The present crisis is no different. As Singapore's premier Lee Hsien Loong noted, as much as his government is prepared to help Timor if asked, sending a Singaporean team chockfull of ethnic Chinese into a territory adjacent to Indonesia could antagonize Jakarta. As such, Indonesian “consent” may be warranted. All said, short of a formal request by the Dili government, unilateral participation by any country, no matter how well intentioned, is clearly undesirable.

ASEAN countries have actively participated in regional peace missions and will likely continue to do so as long as the appropriate institutional context exists. At present, the United Nations serves as the most viable framework for ASEAN members' participation, whether in terms of missions conducted under the UN banner or those mandated by the UN. Previous missions in Timor following the latter's independence – the Australian-led, UN-mandated International Force for East Timor (INTERFET), the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), the UN Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISSET) – had all been well supported and staffed by individual ASEAN countries.

Saving Timor is not just the responsibility of ASEAN. Indeed, it is debatable whether the Association, for all the reasons suggested, is the right institution for the task. The painful lessons of Rwanda, Srebrenica and most recently Dafur highlight the dire need for the international community to be actively involved in humanitarian "intervention". The current Timor crisis requires the watchful attention and action not only of its closest neighbours, but also that of the world at large.

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