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WHAT'S BEHIND MALAYSIA'S DEFENCE BUILD-UP?

Andrew Tan*

In recent months, a flurry of announcements pertaining to the purchase of new weapons systems has turned the spotlight on the Malaysian Armed Forces. The MAF will get new Polish-made T-91 Main Battle Tanks, 18 Sukhoi SU-30 jet-fighters and 3 French-made Scorpene submarines. It will also spend US\$1 billion to acquire at least 4 Airborne Warning and Control (AWAC) aircraft, with the leading contenders, in order of cost, being the Boeing 737 AEW&C, the Grumman E-2C Hawkeye and the Brazilian Embraer EMB-145.

This steady development of the MAF, hitherto equipped for counter-insurgency warfare, began with the arms modernization program in 1979. The planned purchase of a new generation of major weapons systems such as AWACs, submarines, tanks and fighter aircraft was halted by the economic crisis which hit Asia in 1997. In February 2002, however, Defence Minister Najib Tun Razak announced that the government had renewed its armed forces modernization program as the economy was now back on track.

The latest round of purchases comes on top of the recent acquisition of new offshore patrol vessels (OPVs), armoured infantry fighting vehicles, modern 155mm self-propelled howitzers, Brazilian-made multiple-rocket launching systems (MRLS), MiG-29 and F18D Hornet jetfighters, Hawk ground attack aircraft and air refuelling tankers, suggesting a strong determination to develop an all-round modern conventional capability. The end-result will be a more proficient MAF with enhanced maritime security and power projection capabilities.

These capabilities are important as patrolling the long coastlines and defending extensive maritime territories have presented daunting security challenges, particularly since the US retrenchment from the region after the end of the Vietnam War. The East Malaysian states are about 600 km from West Malaysia at the closest point and some 2,200 km at the most distant. These have been complicated by the potentially serious boundary disputes around the Spratley Islands, the presence of important offshore oilfields, increased concern over acts of piracy in the environs of the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca, as well as refugee and migrant inflows, notably illegal immigrants from Indonesian and refugees from the conflict in the southern Philippines.

The contiguity with a number of ASEAN states (sharing land and/or sea borders with Thailand, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines), and the presence of territorial disputes with all of its neighbouring states, have added to the challenges facing Malaysia. Moreover, given this contiguity with most of ASEAN, any infringement of the region's security, whether in the form of intra-regional or extra-regional conflicts, will have serious implications for Malaysia's security. Malaysia is therefore very sensitive to developments in the regional environment which may impinge upon its security.

In tandem with developing its conventional capabilities, therefore, Malaysia has also given emphasis to an active foreign policy that includes ASEAN regionalism. Malaysia has also made efforts to cooperate in a wide range of areas with its neighbors, including military border cooperation, and an alliance relationship with Singapore through the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). These moves are in line with its National Defence Policy guidelines of self-reliance, regional cooperation and external assistance. These guidelines explain the conventional arms build-up as a measure of self-reliance, with the last two principles providing the rationale for regional security cooperation, including with Singapore.

Najib explains the need for a comprehensive set of defence capabilities in his book *Defending Malaysia: Facing the Twenty-First Century* (London: ASEAN Academic, 2001), in which he outlined the need to develop “full spectrum capabilities” in order to meet the myriad possible security threats to Malaysia. Thus while conventional capabilities would be developed the MAF would also need to develop its counter-terrorism and urban warfare capabilities in order to deal with violent extremism. Indeed, Najib identified internal security threats, in particular, Muslim militancy, as the biggest security threat to Malaysia.

Analysts, however, have also pointed out that Malaysia’s acquisition of certain modern weapons systems seem to be a counter to Singapore’s similar capabilities, for instance, in tanks, artillery, submarines, air refueling tankers, modern fighter aircraft and AWACs. Indeed, the problematic nature of bilateral relations between the two countries seem to lend some credence to the notion of at least some kind of nascent arms race between Malaysia and Singapore.

Najib himself was questioned on 25 May 2003 by the hawkish Malaysian newspaper, *Berita Minggu*, on the potential threat from Singapore, a popular topic amongst some Malaysian analysts and politicians. Najib, however, acknowledged that Singapore had special strategic difficulties due to its small size and that it had a right to modernize its armed forces. He refused to name any potential enemy but stated that “we could not identify or be suspicious of any country that will threaten us ... we must upgrade our defence forces so that everyone will at least respect us.” As indicated above, Malaysia’s security perspectives are in fact broader than any singular obsession with Singapore. While Singapore provides a convenient rationale for more and better arms, the myriad security challenges that Malaysia faces provides a greater impetus for defence modernization and power projection capabilities.

Malaysia’s official defence doctrine is Comprehensive Security, which places equal emphasis on economic development and national unity, in recognition of the broad range of internal, external, traditional and non-traditional security threats that it faces. Indeed, Malaysia’s “Development is Security” approach has been well-articulated, with development seen as *even more important* than military defence. This stems from the perception, articulated by Najib in his book, that the primary security threats to Malaysia emanate from within rather than from any external source, although clearly, Malaysia would also like to be prepared for all eventualities.

The bottom line therefore is that Malaysia and Singapore do not need to have any singular obsession with each other. Care and attention is required to ensure that such a negative, and ultimately self-defeating development, would not occur. Indeed, there are far more pressing problems for the two countries to worry about, in particular, the rise of fundamentalism and the threat of terrorism emanating from radical Muslim groups.

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