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Pan-ASEAN Maritime Security Cooperation: Prospects for Pooling Resources

By Koh Swee Lean Collin

Synopsis

To effectively cope with transnational maritime security challenges in Southeast Asia, ASEAN should consider institutionalising intra-regional maritime security cooperation such as those operating in Europe. Existing national and bilateral surveillance capabilities could be connected in a new ASEAN maritime security framework.

Commentary

ASEAN LEADERS at their summit in Brunei last month pledged to realise the ASEAN Community by 2015. The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) component envisages regional cooperation in the area of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. In this regard, maritime security carries overlapping potential for ASEAN-wide cooperation.

In view of the recent armed seaborne incursion into eastern Sabah and the refugee boat issues affecting Indonesia, Thailand and Australia, it is clear that existing, largely bilateral maritime security cooperation arrangements in the region have limited effectiveness against an array of non-traditional security challenges. These may come in the form of human trafficking, illegal fishing, sea robbery and piracy, as well as maritime terrorism – all of which carry potential trans-boundary security ramifications.

New challenges, new needs

Since 2011, ASEAN has begun to embrace intra-regional multilateral maritime security cooperation. For example, in 2012, the ASEAN Information-Sharing Portal for member states' navies was inaugurated, along with the first ASEAN Maritime Security Information Sharing Exercise. In collaboration with extra-regional partners, ASEAN is slated to conduct the first ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus Expert Working Group Maritime Security Field Training Exercise this September.

Clearly, more can be done to put flesh on the bones of these exploratory efforts. Sovereignty remains one of the key obstacles, as are disparities in national capacities. As a result, ASEAN is stuck at capacity-building at the national level.

International examples may offer useful insights into how national sovereignty concerns can be tackled

alongside pragmatic cooperation, and show that the creation of institutionalised mechanisms for stronger ASEAN maritime security cooperation can go hand in hand with national capacity-building efforts.

The first is the multilateral Sea Surveillance Cooperation Baltic Sea (SUCBAS), which is an enhancement of an originally bilateral framework – Surveillance Cooperation Finland-Sweden – in 2009. SUCBAS comprises graduated levels of information-sharing amongst national authorities – both military and civilian – such that facilitating an institutionalised mechanism of maritime security information-sharing in the Baltic Sea does not prejudice member states' national sovereignty over data which can be deemed too sensitive for sharing.

Beyond information exchange and sharing, ASEAN member states should seriously consider embarking on joint maritime security operations. An example of such comprehensive, institutionalised maritime security cooperation can be found in the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union, or FRONTEX. Since its inception in 2004, FRONTEX has conducted regular joint maritime border control and surveillance operations in European, Atlantic and Mediterranean waters.

The cornerstone of FRONTEX is a three-phased, pan-European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR) first promulgated by the European Commission in 2008. The first phase fosters national-level capacity-building, thereby melding national surveillance assets within the EUROSUR Network. National authorities may retain control over what data is being shared and with whom and when. The second phase establishes a round-the-clock, pan-European maritime situational awareness picture available to all users. Finally, EUROSUR envisages a common information-sharing platform in diverse maritime security dimensions such as fishery control and environmental protection.

SUCBAS and FRONTEX demonstrate that bold yet incremental approaches could be adopted to promote pragmatic regional cooperation, rectifying national capacity shortfalls by efficiently pooling and utilising scarce resources to effectively tackle trans-boundary maritime security challenges on the one hand while preserving national sovereignty on the other. In this respect, these examples are worth ASEAN consideration.

Institutionalising ASEAN maritime security cooperation

ASEAN may utilise and expand upon existing maritime security cooperation arrangements before involving extra-regional partners. The Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP), established in 2004 by Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore (Thailand joined later) to counter piracy and sea robbery, may be a useful platform. MSP possesses several features found in SUCBAS and FRONTEX, though on a smaller scale, including coordinated surface patrols, later augmented by an aerial surveillance component dubbed “Eyes in the Sky” and intelligence exchange.

MSP could be broadened into an ASEAN-wide maritime security institution akin to FRONTEX, dealing with a wide range of trans-boundary maritime security challenges in Southeast Asia's littoral expanse. In July 2010, non-members – Brunei, Philippines and Vietnam – were invited as observers, thus highlighting its potential.

A new FRONTEX-like institutional ASEAN maritime security framework would connect existing national and bilateral surveillance capabilities (for instance, the Indonesia-Singapore Surface Picture or SURPIC I and II created in 2005 and 2009 respectively) with the eventual goal of establishing a pan-ASEAN maritime situational awareness network. Information exchange and sharing in this regard can be a scaled-up enhancement of the ASEAN Information-Sharing Portal. Existing coordinated patrols could be broadened in scope and elevated to “joint” status, with reciprocal rights of hot pursuit permitted for patrol forces of member states under established procedures.

Singapore's role

Where does Singapore feature in this endeavour? Long regarded as a strong regional security cooperation advocate and, in recent times, having called for a review of ASEAN's processes and institutions, Singapore can play a key role. Notably, the Changi Command and Control (C2) Centre has also already facilitated regional maritime security cooperation since 2009. Its multi-national staffed Information Fusion Centre may serve as the data fusion node for a round-the-clock pan-ASEAN maritime situational awareness network. The Changi C2 Centre's Multinational Exercise and Operations Centre could coordinate ASEAN multilateral joint maritime surveillance operations.

Sufficient political will amongst ASEAN governments is needed to propel this institutional effort. Yet, to cope with the complex maritime security challenges that carry trans-boundary ramifications, ASEAN needs to move beyond existing arrangements to embark on institutionalised cooperation. In the long run, the strategic benefits are enormous. This not only helps facilitate ASEAN's community-building goals but also cements its centrality in

the regional security architecture. Efficient pooling and utilisation of scarce national resources may result in more effective policing of Southeast Asian waters against trans-boundary maritime security threats that impede socioeconomic developments in the region.

As one of the better-equipped and endowed ASEAN members, Singapore could help play a facilitation role and contribute in niche capabilities. To succeed, however, maritime Southeast Asia must be prepared to pool its collective weight.

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