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Ageing Arsenals in Southeast Asia: Impact on Military Modernisation

By Wu Shang-su and Eddie Lim

Synopsis

Military modernisation in Southeast Asian countries has been viewed as an issue of military procurements threatening regional stability. Many regional armed forces face the challenge of managing a proper life cycle for their equipment, which in turn could influence regional stability.

Commentary

CONTRARY TO the popular notion of an arms race in Southeast Asia, the region is currently in a phase of unbalanced military modernisation, which constrains the military options open to regional states. Apart from Singapore and Brunei, which benefit from robust investments and relatively small armed forces to maintain a good life-cycle management of their military asset, most of the other Southeast Asian militaries face different levels of ageing arsenals – much of them a lingering legacy from the early and middle stages of the Cold War.

Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand are able to selectively modernise certain defence capabilities, such as advanced fighters and submarines. However, the rest of their militaries have to operate ageing equipment, especially the land systems. Indonesia has some vehicles, such as the Ferret armed vehicles and PT-76 amphibious tanks, dating back to the *Konfrontasi* era, Malaysia retains OTO model 56 howitzers of the Malaya Emergency period, while Thailand keeps M-41 light tank of the Korean War years. Interestingly, Vietnam has not obtained any new land systems since the end of the Cold War.

Antiquated arms and Technological Gaps

The other regional countries have larger collections of antiquated arms, and their modernisation concentrates on introducing similar old designs to retain operability rather than acquiring new systems. The Philippines acquired used UH-1 helicopters, M-35 trucks and M-113 armoured personnel carriers (APCs) from the United States and other former users, while Cambodia purchased Soviet T-55 tanks and BTR-60 APCs from ex-Warsaw Pact members.

Due to its poor financial capacity and lack of donors, Laos has an arsenal full of Cold War equipment almost without any modernisation. Myanmar, despite a proactive approach to modernisation, such as its acquisition of Russian Mig-29 fighters and Chinese frigates, its military capability is essentially dependent on importing used arms from Chinese, Indian and East European sources.

Technological development creates gaps of capability and leaves outdated weapon systems vulnerable. For the aerial arena, the 'beyond vision range' (BVR) capability supported with aerial warning and command system (AWACS) makes second and third generation fighters vulnerable.

In naval combat, long-range anti-ship missiles assisted with over horizon surveillance platforms would put surface vessels with point air/missile defence systems in a difficult situation of survival. On land, armed vehicles without armour of reactive, layered or other modern designs would easily become "iron coffins" from anti-tank weapons.

Short-range artillery pieces without quick positioning capability and high mobility would easily be neutralised by retaliatory attacks. Synergistically, ageing assets lacking network connectivity would be obstacles in a joint command, seriously limiting combat efficiency. Furthermore, antiquated systems usually increase the logistical burden of armed forces, accentuating readiness issues and raising safety concerns.

Reasons for Ageing Arsenals

Southeast Asia's ageing arsenals could be attributed to limited financial capacity and the changing context of security considerations. Even when large amounts of arms were obtained cheaply during the Cold War, the receiving states were seldom ready to put in place a replacement or upgrade plan for them.

After the Cold War ended and a relatively peaceful atmosphere in the region emerged, other infrastructure demands, such as education and health constrained defence budgets. Based on procurement records, despite the booming regional economy and concomitant increase in defence budget, most regional states did not carry out comprehensive military modernisation.

Selectively modernising capabilities based on strategic priorities has become a common practice in the region. For instance, maritime issues have drawn the attention of Southeast Asian states in the post-Cold War era, leading to larger portions of national resources being allocated for maritime security and aerial

surveillance. In contrast, the life cycle management of assets of relatively neglected capabilities, mainly land systems, gradually become neglected.

It is understandable for land systems to share less funding for modernisation. As accidents of military platforms could damage national pride or the public image of armed forces, land systems incidents are less likely to occur with large impact. When a tank malfunctions, it just stops there, perhaps at a remote training ground. In contrast, if a vessel or aircraft fails during its operation, it may cause sea wreckage or air crash with much stronger impact in mass media.

Many land systems, such as armour and artillery units with their focus on conventional scenarios, do not have high probability to carry out their assigned missions, and these assets have little use in disaster relief. However, some aerial and naval capabilities in the region also face ageing issues. For examples, some Indonesian C-130 transporters are more than 50 years old, and various World War II vessels are still operated by the Philippines.

Influence on Regional Security

Obsolescence in Southeast Asian states' armed forces results in their unbalanced military capabilities. Some military options requiring joint or overall effort, such as a large-scale invasion, would become unfeasible because of relatively low performance and state of readiness of aging assets. Such restrictions could persuade regional countries not to consider using force to resolve disputes, or at least prevent escalation.

However, in the face of China's rising military power, the aging arsenals would present an obvious vulnerability and could place the regional countries in an inferior position during negotiation with China. According to the current trends of regional military modernisation, a proper life cycle of equipment may not be established soon, and ageing arsenals would continue to be a factor for most Southeast Asian states, unless those states rearrange their resource allocation or find a cheap source of arms.

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