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Recalibrating the ASEAN Security Community

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Against the recent conflicts and crises facing the region, the spotlight is once again directed at ASEAN's plans for an ASEAN Security Community (ASC). What is significant in this slew of crises that have unfolded – be it the looming threat of a failing state or complex humanitarian emergencies caused by intra-state conflicts – is their uncanny frequency in occurrence. These issues, often classified as non-traditional security threats, have demonstrated their capacity to deleteriously affect states and societies beyond national borders. As such, they require more attention and should be read as signals to recalibrate the proposals under the ASC.

To be fair, the pioneers who drafted the ASC 2003 blueprint appeared to have had a good sense of the emerging security challenges that would face the region, as reflected in the key strategic thrusts outlined in the ASC. These strategic thrusts have since been expanded from four to five under the 2004 Vientiene Plan of Action and they are: political development, norms setting, conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post-conflict peace building.

Of the key thrusts identified in the ASC, two have become extremely important in the light of the current security challenges. These are the broad areas of conflict resolution and post-conflict peace building. These two elements merit closer attention in order to push the realisation of an ASEAN security community.

Conflict Resolution and the Evolving Nature of Peace Operations

In the United Nations' experience in peacekeeping operations, it has been noted that the separate tasks of peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding have become much more complex to the point of blurring the distinction between one operation with another. Especially after the end of the Cold War, the once limited task of peacekeeping, oftentimes referred to as 'blue helmet' operations, have now gone beyond the traditional peacekeeping functions to much more expanded and large-scale operations. From the UN's peace operations in Bosnia (UNPROFOR), Somalia (UNOSOM), Kosovo (UNMIK) to East Timor in 2000 (UNTAET), it became increasingly clear that it was no longer enough to just keep the peace that usually follows a ceasefire or peace agreement which is generally accepted by the belligerents. Instead, peace operations have become more robust and now involve an array of tasks including deterrence, protective engagement of civilians, peace enforcement and reconstruction.

The implications of these emerging trends of expanded peace operations could only mean

more commitments from an already resource-tight United Nations. In response to these developments, the United Nations came up with the 2000 Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, otherwise known as the Brahimi Report, which underscored the intricate nexus between peacekeeping and peace building. The Report highlighted three key recommendations that were essential to any successful peace operations. These were: (1) clear organizational structures, (2) achievable mandate, and (3) leadership. More importantly, it also highlighted the need for a task-sharing arrangement between regional organizations and the UN in responding to cases for humanitarian intervention.

These developments at the global level, particularly the challenge for some kind of a task-sharing arrangement with the UN, have a significant bearing on ASEAN and its plans for the ASC. This is where a review of the ASC plans is warranted.

This is especially so since amongst the various strategies identified in ASC under the rubric of conflict resolution was the idea of an ASEAN peacekeeping force. At that time, this was considered a bold move on the part of ASEAN. To understand the rationale for such an initiative, one would recall the explanation offered by the spokesperson for the Indonesia government (then Chair of ASEAN) who said that, "ASEAN countries should [already] know one another better than anyone else and therefore have the option… to take advantage of an ASEAN peacekeeping force to be deployed if they so wish." That the main proponent of the idea was Jakarta is indeed extremely important given that there could have been no other country in the region which had the greater propensity for intra-state conflicts than Indonesia.

Defining ASEAN's Role in Peace Operations

If one were to fast forward the sequence of events from the introduction of the ASC blueprint to 2006, the current crisis in East Timor is certainly a déjà vu to an ASEAN that has been trying to build regional capacity to address a growing number of security challenges in the region. It was not too long ago, during the period following the 1997 Asian financial crisis that the grouping was roundly criticized for its inertia in responding to series of crises that hit the region, particularly the 1999 conflict in East Timor. Hence, in recalibrating the ASC, a strong case can be made for revisiting the idea of a regional peacekeeping force which had previously met strong objections from some ASEAN members. Albeit modified in form and short of being a regional rapid deployment force, this peacekeeping force could be a non-standing, multi-national mix of national military and civilian personnel that could be readily volunteered to undertake an array of hybrid tasks related to, but not exclusively, peacekeeping.

Given the history of ASEAN states contributing peacekeepers to a number of UN-led or UN sanctioned peacekeeping missions, having a regional peacekeeping force is no longer quite as controversial as it is made out to be. A number of examples already abound in the region, including: the evolving peace operations in East Timor—from UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) to UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) and UNMISET; the experiences of Malaysian peacekeepers monitoring the ceasefire in Southern Philippines between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF); the monitoring missions undertaken by Thai and Filipino military in Indonesia's Aceh, as well as the similar involvement of other ASEAN members in the EU-led Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM). Altogether, these varying peace operations point to a willingness by ASEAN member states to "pool their sovereignty" in order to address regional conflicts. Thus, after 39 years of building a regional community, ASEAN appears to be well fitted to push ahead with this particular initiative as part of its broader agenda to build regional capacity to respond to regional challenges.

Post-Conflict Peace Building

Another salient component in the ASC that must be given more attention is in the area of post conflict peace building. Transitions from post-conflict situations to 'normalcy' and sustained peace are said to be the most critical periods in peace operations. Often it is also this aspect that gets less attention.

In this regard, the establishment of the UN Peacebuilding Commission in December 2005 is indeed a welcome development. The creation of a global body designated specifically to the function of peacebuilding provides ASEAN members an avenue to participate in the drafting of peacebuilding missions in their regions; identify certain gaps and obstacles that had been encountered and suggest remedial measures.

With regard to ASEAN's own initiative, one should revive the strategies identified under this rubric in the ASC blueprint, which called for the establishment of a mechanism for delivery of humanitarian assistance, including providing safe havens in conflict areas, repatriation of refugees; and creating a regional fund to facilitate post-conflict peace building (e.g. ASEAN Stability fund). But beyond this, attention must also be given to the human security concerns of the internally displaced persons (IDPs), especially women and children. ASEAN in collaboration with UN agencies should examine how humanitarian assistance can best be extended to IDPs and explore possibilities of providing critical service – including assistance in building health care systems and monitoring infectious diseases. One way to proceed is for ASEAN to get other actors (NGOs, business organizations, etc) in their respective countries to contribute toward a more sustainable and long-term strategy in peacebuilding in the region.

Overall, the challenges for ASEAN in building its security community would be the ability to identify situations where regional action is imperative coupled with an understanding of where its member states are able and willing to pool their resources to respond to conflicts with regional implications – particularly those that could potentially lead to humanitarian crises.

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