

Testing time for Asean

BY BUNN NAGARA



Joint effort: Naval ships from Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia in a coordinated patrol along the Straits of Malacca, one of the world's most important shipping lanes. — Reuters

The South China Sea is experiencing what the Straits of Malacca did – overcrowding by big external powers, making the case yet again for stronger Asean representation

THE Straits of Malacca was once a narrow, shallow and crowded waterway with increasing volumes of international shipping – and little security protection.

It also happened to be a vital West-East maritime corridor. As a conduit for massive fuel shipments and global maritime trade, it was a great strategic prize whose vulnerability to attack raised the stakes all-round.

It was seen as a natural target for pirates, terrorists and other nefarious elements bent on upsetting the established order. It was both strategic asset and prospective liability, whose hopes for continued peace could not be assured.

Thus the venerable Straits, for millennia a key portal for intercontinental trade giving rise to the Malacca Empire, had been reduced in our troubled times to a ticking time bomb just “waiting” for a colossal international outrage.

How long would the safe and peaceful times last? Shipping agents were on edge, insurers were tense, the relevant authorities were vigilant over the Straits as a “war-risk zone.”

Scenarios sketched included hijackings for ransoms, coordinated attacks on ships with deep draughts negotiating the narrower channels, and the commandeering of tankers turned into huge bomb-laden torpedoes.

That was just over a decade ago. Speculation spiralled, setting off alarm bells in the region – and among external major powers. The US, with its massive Pacific Fleet already on standby, wanted to wade in.

And so would China, and consequently India, Japan, Russia and any great power with pretensions to even greater influence. That was a second round of alarm for the littoral states of Asean.

Peace would be disrupted with any attack, any unilateral response to or pre-emption of it by an external major power, or any entanglement among the major powers streaming into the Straits.

The result was one of the swiftest actions within Asean: Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore hastened to form the Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) on the water and in the air, with logistical coordination and intelligence sharing.

Thailand soon joined. The multilateral operation pre-empted violent criminal action as well as unsolicited meddling by major powers.

In 2009, al-Qaeda called for strikes at important maritime chokepoints. The next year intelligence picked up terrorist “chatter” about Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) considering attacks in the Straits.

By then, the MSP was in full swing. Attacks in the Straits, along with major power play, had become harder to launch than ever before.

Today, the Malacca Strait is even more important because of the indigenous security regime by the four Asean countries. Their security cooperation is unprecedented for nations long sensitive about their respective borders and sovereignties.

Can the same be said soon for the South China Sea? The US and China have lately made strategic waves lapping on the shores of this region and beyond.

The year started with a Chinese Song-class diesel-electric submarine surfacing in Kota Kinabalu. It was enough to set US and Indian pundits’ fancies aflutter.

In March, Japan announced a “test” of its largest warship, the Izumo, in the South China Sea. The nine-helicopter carrier would tour the region on its way to India for US war games in Japan’s biggest military venture here since invading South-East Asia.

Indian strategists soon wanted a slice of the “action” also. In April, sources in New Delhi announced India’s expectation of joining the MSP, quite oblivious to the sub-Asean group’s other purpose besides deterring unlawful activity.

However, statements can and do substitute for actual action. Privately, Indian defence sources say there is no capacity for naval assets to venture much beyond the Andaman Sea.

Nonetheless, China is not having everything its way in the South China Sea either.

In a hiccup in Beijing-Manila relations, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte ordered his navy in March to grill Chinese survey ships on their presence in waters around Benham Rise claimed by the Philippines.

A week later, Manila announced plans to file a firm protest against China's construction of a radar station on Scarborough Shoal. The Justice Ministry indicated that Beijing's clumsiness had forced Manila to work closer with Washington, again.

In April, Duterte ordered a stronger military presence in all Philippine-held islands and outcrops in the South China Sea. Later that month senior Philippine officials paid a high-profile visit to Thitu, the second-largest of the disputed Spratly Islands.

Predictably, China protested. Days later, it launched its first China-built aircraft carrier, expected to be fully operational in two years and still relatively unsophisticated.

While some of Duterte's orders on military manoeuvres might have been short on details, they still shored up Manila's bargaining position for talks in Beijing in May.

For all his bluntness, Duterte's position on his country's defence relationship with the US has shifted subtly yet significantly. Now, his complaint sounds like that of a disappointed ally who had been left in the lurch.

At another level, there was always more hype than substance in his supposed shift in alliances. Even at the height of his bluster, he conceded that he wanted a change in Philippine foreign policy but not in its defence policy, posture and partnership with the US.

How that would work in practice is still an unknown, including to Duterte himself. Still, he is not the only politician to hold two seemingly inconsistent positions at the same time.

In his meeting with Xi Jinping in May, Xi pledged continued friendship but not at the cost of China conceding any claimed territory. Duterte told Xi of plans to drill for oil in the area, and Xi told him China would go to war if it had to.

That was Xi's version of a double bind: a velvet gauntlet with a silken wallop. Then he took it further with Duterte by raising the prospect of joint exploration in the South China Sea.

Far from resolving anything for anyone, that accentuated the double bind for Manila within Asean. In what only seemed like a trophy for Duterte from his talks in Beijing, it became a diplomatic impasse.

With at least three other Asean members with claims in the disputed area rattled, Foreign Secretary Alan Cayetano said Manila would consult all other Asean countries before taking any decision.

As a former prosecutor and mayor, Duterte must know the dodgy implications and obligations of agreeing to joint activity with a rival claimant. Like it or not, Manila remains at the forefront of dealings with China over disputed territories involving four Asean countries.

Meanwhile, US military forces continue to defy China's disputed claims and demarcations. A US spy plane flew over the East China Sea in May, US bombers flew over the South China Sea in June, and a US warship sailed near the Paracel Islands early this month.

Not to be left out, Britain announced two days ago that it would also engage in military exercises in the disputed area next year. After joining Japan in limited military exercises last year, a warship and up to two aircraft carriers may be dispatched in 2018.

Like the Straits of Malacca before, the South China Sea is getting uncomfortably crowded. Once more, Asean nations should be motivated to act.

There are additional challenges as the situation is more complex, which only makes the case for a credible, predominant Asean role more compelling.

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