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Singapore and the MH370 Saga: A Friend in Need

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

The disappearance of flight MH370 holds invaluable lessons. Despite having no passengers on the flight, Singapore's proactive role in the crisis reinforces the close ties with Malaysia while providing pointers for the future.

Commentary

IF AND when the MH370 saga is resolved, the consequences and knock-on effects will reverberate not just through the aviation industry but also the political, military and diplomatic domains. Being a proximate neighbour of Malaysia with a complex web of close relationships, Singapore could not avoid the ripple-effects of the episode.

Even though there were no Singaporeans on the missing aircraft, Singapore's involvement in the search for MH370 stood out in a number of ways.

Leadership rapport

Immediately at the outbreak of the crisis, Singapore's leaders, from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong downwards, expressed shock and sadness while offering to assist in whatever way possible. The ministers of foreign affairs and defence, K. Shanmugam and Ng Eng Hen, spoke to their Malaysian counterparts, expressing solidarity and offering to deploy military assets to assist the search for the missing Boeing 777. The air force and navy chiefs of both countries were also in constant communication to deploy and coordinate their respective military assets.

Singapore sent aircraft and warships in this endeavour. Following Prime Minister Lee's telephone conversation with Prime Minister Najib Razak, Singapore, with Malaysia's concurrence, deployed two C-130 transport planes, a Fokker-50 maritime patrol aircraft, a naval helicopter, two warships and a submarine support and rescue vessel.

Even after Malaysia called off the search from the South China Sea region and withdrew its military assets there, the Singapore government continued to provide whatever support or assistance Malaysia might need in the Malacca Strait. This followed Prime Minister Najib's statement on 15 March 2014 that new information revealed the high probability of the missing plane having flown in a westerly direction away from the original

search area.

Strengthening bilateral ties

Singapore's deployment of its assets was driven primarily by humanitarian considerations, namely, to help search for the missing plane and to lend whatever military support that might be needed in the eventuality of a recovery operation. Military materiel and logistical assistance have been deployed to save lives and alleviate human suffering in the past, chiefly in response to the 2004 Asian tsunami.

Military assets aside, the MH370 saga provided Singapore the opportunity to strengthen its bilateral ties with Malaysia, building further on the close personal relationship between Prime Minister Najib and PM Lee. Since 2009, Singapore-Malaysia relations have risen to new heights, as evident from various bilateral breakthroughs such as the proposed high speed train between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. While history, geography, demography, economy and recent political experiences have made bilateral relations 'special', the boost in ties reflects the personal rapport of the two leaders.

Singapore's wholehearted support for the search for MH370 can be appreciated against the backdrop of developments since 2009. The Iskandar development project has emerged as an area of close cooperation for mutual benefit. The intractable issues of the past such as the relocation of Tanjong Pagar Railway Station and the Customs and Immigration Quarantine Complex have been amicably settled.

To these have been added the holding of annual leaders' retreats; the re-establishment of links between their stock exchanges; Malaysia's agreement to sell electricity to Singapore; the amicable post-Pedra Branca technical talks to resolve legacy issues over the islands' dispute; and the establishment of a Singapore consulate in Johor Baru.

The ASEAN backdrop

Another dimension of the MH370 saga is the importance of ASEAN cooperation. Besides Singapore and Malaysia, ASEAN member-states such as Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines and Myanmar, have also joined in the search effort, signaling that whatever differences there may be, when a crisis emerges, ASEAN members would always come together. This was all the more significant as the search also covered disputed areas of the South China Sea.

Finally, as a small and vulnerable state with limited natural resources, Singapore's assistance and activist approach to the MH370 crisis also projects its soft power. Despite having made big investments in military hardware since 1965, Singapore has always signaled that this is not just for national security but also to contribute to building a stable regional security architecture.

While it has much to showcase, an important dimension of its foreign policy is to ensure that the immediate neighbourhood also benefits and Singapore's security will also have a positive spillover effect for its neighbours.

Through adroit leadership and building of consensus at home and in the immediate neighbourhood, Singapore hopes to enhance its security, emerging in the process as a model for emulation. It is not just about the work ethics of its leaders and people but the exceptionalism that drives the island Republic.

What can go wrong

Yet at the same time, the MH370 saga is also a reminder of what can go wrong - and without warning. The continued need for credible and timely intelligence, regional and multilateral cooperation, preparedness to preempt potential threats and resilience in times of crisis are key goals that should not be ignored. While Singapore has stood by Malaysia in the current crisis, at the same time, much can be learnt so that a similar crisis does not break out in Singapore - one of the world's busiest aviation hubs.

While focus has been placed on who could have deliberately diverted MH370 from its scheduled Kuala Lumpur to Beijing flight, many other security issues have also surfaced. One of these is the importance of checkpoint security to counter the use of illegal and stolen travel documents, as seen in the use of stolen passports by two of the passengers on MH 370. Though they might be economic migrants, their modus operandi exposed a window that can be utilised by potential hijackers and terrorists.

While the hope is that the MH370 crisis will be resolved with the safety of all the passengers and crew assured, this episode bears many more lessons on how to prevent another aircraft disappearance in future.

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