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“Smaller Small Navies” of Southeast Asia: Greater Regional Resilience?

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Synopsis

The rise of the hitherto low-key, “smaller small navies” of Southeast Asia, such as Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar and the Philippines, bodes well for regional resilience, and fits well in the broader schema of the envisaged ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC).

Commentary

CHINA'S HIGH-PROFILE participation in the recently-concluded Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) multinational naval exercise held in Hawaii has been described as a milestone. Equally, this event was also a milestone of sorts for ASEAN because Brunei Darussalam participated with ships for the first time. Two of its warships, the offshore patrol vessels KD Darussalam and KDB *Darulaman* were deployed and debuted their combat capability by successfully conducting their first anti-ship cruise missile firing in the Pacific Missile Range Facility.

RIMPAC 2014 represents one example symbolising the low-key emergence of the “smaller small navies” of Southeast Asian countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar and the Philippines in particular. Unlike the more notable “Big Five” small navies in the region – Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam – these relatively unknown “smaller small navies” have taken comparatively smaller but no less important steps to enhance their capabilities and international presence. On the whole, this bodes well for ASEAN.

Low-key but significant capability creep

Unlike the high-profile acquisitions of new warships and submarines amongst the “Big Fives”, the low-key capacity-building efforts of these “smaller small navies” largely went unnoticed, with the exception of the Philippine Navy which garnered much attention with its ambitious modernisation plans. The Royal Brunei Navy (RBN) is one such navy which has made tremendous “creeping” improvements in its capabilities. It has replaced its traditional fleet of small coastal patrol and missile fast attack craft with larger and more capable German-built offshore patrol vessels since 2009.

The other “smaller small” navy whose capacity-building programme has had little media attention is that of Myanmar. In recent years, Myanmar shipyards, reportedly with Chinese technical assistance, had managed to construct and put into service a modest fleet of stealthy-looking patrol craft and missile-armed frigates. These represent a quantum leap over the relatively antiquated inshore and coastal patrol vessels obtained from an array of foreign sources.

Even more notably, according to a recent IHS *Jane’s* report in July this year, the Myanmar Navy was in the process of “preliminary discussions” about the purchase of a small number of vessels from Indonesian shipbuilder PT PAL, based on the 11,000-tonne full-load displacement *Makassar*-class landing platform dock (LPD) currently operated by the Indonesian Navy.

If the deal goes through, the Myanmar Navy would become the fifth ASEAN navy after Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand to operate an LPD-type large amphibious landing vessel which has so far proven its utility in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) during recent natural calamities.

Greater international participation

The induction of longer-range, higher-endurance seagoing platforms allows these “smaller small navies” to take part in major multinational operational and training initiatives conducted in distant waters they had never ventured into before because their limited force projection capabilities confined them to coastal waters. Their engagements in such initiatives deserve attention.

A good example was the case of the Myanmar Navy which participated in the India-hosted Exercise Milan – its first-ever multinational training engagement – in 2003, during the time when it started incorporating newly-built missile corvettes into its fleet. If the Myanmar Navy proceeds with the LPD purchase, it may in future expand its participation in the regional HADR and other emergency response initiatives.

Prior to this year’s RIMPAC, its first-ever ship participation in a major international exercise, the RBN had attained a milestone last October when KDB *Darulaman* joined the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus Maritime Security Field Training Exercise in Australia.

The Philippine Navy has been buoyed by the recent acquisition of better seagoing capabilities, particularly the newly-inducted patrol frigates sourced from the United States, to be augmented by new missile-armed frigates and reported purchase in January 2014 from PT PAL of a pair of Strategic Sealift Vessels also based on the *Makassar*-class (in January 2014). Likewise, the Philippine Navy will likely deploy warships to major multinational exercises such as RIMPAC.

Implications for ASEAN Political-Security Community

The continued salience of non-traditional security challenges makes it more imperative for closer intra-ASEAN cooperation and with external partners. Collective capacity-building effort constitutes the prerequisite for ASEAN to become more self-sufficient in responding rapidly in times of disasters and emergencies. Singapore’s offer to establish a regional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief centre at the Changi Command and Control Centre, a plan which was supported by the other ASEAN governments, is one such initiative aimed at strengthening regional resilience.

In this regard, the capacity-building efforts of the “smaller small navies” of Southeast Asia, albeit low-key and more modest in scope compared to the “Big Fives”, would go a long way in contributing to regional resilience. This will put into practice the shared responsibility amongst ASEAN member states for comprehensive security – one of the objectives stated in the ASEAN Political-Security Blueprint promulgated in 2009.

The gradual catching-up by the “smaller small navies” in terms of capabilities has the potential to bear more fruits into the future, judging by the recent activities of some of these services. Notably for example, in the aftermath of the Super Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013, the RBN deployed the offshore patrol vessel KDB *Darussalam* to deliver HADR supplies to the Philippines.

The entry of the Philippines and potentially Myanmar into the “club” of ASEAN navies operating LPD-type large amphibious landing ships would further bolster the collective pool of assets that can be utilised by the regional grouping for future contingencies.

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