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Security Architectures in Southeast Asia: Non-Traditional Security and ASEAN Perspectives

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Image: NASA Earth Observatory

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Overview of the Concept of Security

1. From Defence to "Non-Traditional" Security

Before exploring the current situation in ASEAN, it is necessary to briefly revisit the theory of security and the various perspectives around this concept.

Originally, the Security Studies defined security primarily through a military lens, where the sovereign state was the referent object demanding protection against external threats. Individual or society related issues were not associated with security, because they were managed in a routine bureaucratic and administrative manner (crime, pollution, epidemia…).

Since the 90's, and as a consequence of globalization, a "non-traditional" meaning has appeared - precisely incorporating individuals and societies -, which addressed vulnerabilities such as economic stability, public health, and environmental and climate sustainability. Those risks and issues are considered as having more impact than their direct immediate effects, either because they cross international borders or because they trigger complex, interconnected impacts.

An illustrative example of this is the recurring seasonal haze in Southeast Asia, mainly caused by Indonesian forest fires. Originally only seen as a conventional administrative or ecological concern, it has evolved due to climate change, public health risks, snow ball effect on global warming and economic impacts. Consequently, this atmospheric crisis has been reframed as a non-traditional threat demanding extraordinary political prioritization and multilateral regional mechanisms within the ASEAN architecture, marked by various public responses among affected nations (Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia).

2. Security as a Political Construct: the Securitization Theory

Moreover, this shift of the concept of security also brings an interesting perspective to analyze how distinct cultural and regional backgrounds shape governmental measures and public responses to emerging crises.

According to the Copenhagen School, security is a political construct created through securitization. By framing specific issues as existential threats, political actors can bypass routine politics to justify extraordinary measures. Conversely, treating such issues mainly as risk-mitigation topics can prevent societies from confronting the underlying political choices responsible for them. ("You deplore the consequences whose causes you cherish.", Bossu

Defining what constitutes a threat, what requires protection (the referent object), and which entities need it is rarely neutral. As critical theorists say, security discourse serves various purposes: genuine protection, social control through surveillance, or regime stability to consolidate power.

In the case of the haze in South East Asia, it is interesting to notice that, based on media coverage, Singapore handles the question as a pollution and health issue with rather a risk management approach on public health and air quality reporting, Malaysia explicitly says than ASEAN mechanism needs strengthening because haze in affecting life, Indonesia stresses that the country applies ASEAN haze agreement.

ASEAN's Perspective on Security

The shift from traditional security, which primarily focuses on defense, to non-traditional security is particularly relevant and interesting to analyze within the context of Southeast Asia. This region possesses a unique historical background, originating from diverse indigenous societies. These societies were subsequently "hybrided" by the influence of overseas Chinese, Indian, and Arabic populations, and finally subjected to Western colonization before generally achieving successful independence.

For the purpose of the analysis, Southeast Asia can be broadly divided into three areas based on historical origin. The first area is the Malay world, which combines what are now Malaysia and Indonesia. This region saw the settlement of Chinese migrants (predominantly from Guangdong and Fujian) starting in the 15th century, was already influenced by Muslim civilization, and was eventually colonized by the Dutch and the British. Singapore is part of it but has had a very specific evolution. The second group comprises the countries in the Thai-Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia area, characterized by specific Khmer and Siamese origins, influenced by China, and either not colonized (Thailand) or subjected to French colonization and Vietnam war. The third group is the Philippines, which bears a strong Western influence, initially Spanish and then American.

The security politics, culture, and ultimately the architecture and framework established within the ASEAN countries are significantly driven by three major factors that have shaped their history.

1. The Sense of Vulnerability

The first factor is a feeling of vulnerability common to most of these countries. This is largely attributable to several recurring issues: the frequency of natural disasters (e.g., the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami affecting Indonesia and Thailand, or regular typhoons in the Philippines); the uncertain geopolitics and inherent risks in the area (e.g., territorial disputes in the South China Sea); the exposure to instability in policy regimes, terrorism linked to a “global threat of islamic terrosim” and finally the severe economic crises, particularly the Asian Financial Crisis ("Asian Tigers crisis") at the end of the 1990s. This collective memory of fragility encourages governments to maintain a narrative that security is a key area of attention requiring significant investment and serving as a major driver of national priorities.

A compelling example is the concept of Total Defence applied in Singapore, which aims to involve all citizens in protective measures and actions across different pillars (Military, Civil, Economic, Social, Psychological, and Digital Defence) in the event of a crisis. This vulnerability narrative is equally valid for archipelagic nations like the Philippines and Indonesia, which face numerous potential disasters and inherent difficulties in assuring safety and security due to their extensive maritime exposure.

2. The Colonial History

The second factor is the colonial history. Following the end of the Second World War and the Japanese occupation, European colonial powers attempted to re-establish rule in the countries they thought were definitely acquired as oversea territories. However, populations showed strong sentiments of insurgency. These movements were often related to the rise of international communism but were also a reaction against the colonial domination of indigenous peoples. This instability significantly jeopardized the economies of these nations and created international "boiling pots" of communism, threatening the connections between liberal European countries and their former colonies undergoing the independence process.

This dynamic was particularly evident in the Malayan Communist Revolution, which drew support from the Chinese poor population in the urban areas and sought to join the Pan-Malayan political structure. Counter-insurgency actions by the British authorities were ultimately successful in Malaya and convinced the government that maintaining security was paramount to preserving the regime. A similar, though opposite in outcome, situation occurred in Vietnam, where securing the society to remain stable and politically aligned was also seen as essential, even if the eventual success was with the insurrectionary communist forces. Singapore's most prominent example is Lee Kuan Yew's bestseller, "From Third World to First," which demonstrates how dedicated efforts to overcome external challenges stemming from colonialism drove Singapore's success.

3. Asian Values and the ASEAN Framework

The third important factor is geopolitics, specifically the cultural and political alignment or non-alignment with China, in a context where there is a willingness to develop a specific region around the ASEAN framework.

The Chinese diaspora has played a pivotal role across ASEAN nations, maintaining close political and cultural ties with the People's Republic of China grounded in shared Asian values. For instance, this influence inspired parts of the Vietnam insurgency and helped develop economies based on strong ties, especially with South China. Furthermore, the security and stability historically brought by the structure of the Chinese family and society has often served as a cultural model, which in turn has been used to justify specific government approaches to security that lean towards social control and collective harmony over Western-style individual liberties. Those "Asian values" have been particularly used in Singapore policy in the 2000s.

This approach was softened following the establishment of ASEAN in 1967. ASEAN gradually built transnational ties to promote mutual security and set specific frameworks of cooperation —always limited by the core principle of non-interference, as we explain below. However, despite shared values, ASEAN unity remains loosely structured, making common security policies difficult to establish except on well-recognized issues like environmental protection, supply chain security, struggle against scams and regional migration management.

Doctrine, Governance and Technology in ASEAN

Over the past four to five decades, the unique cultural and administrative foundations of these countries, coupled with the ingredients described above, have led successive governments to establish an architecture of security, driven by operational doctrines, robust governance, public engagement, technologies and investments.

This has been remarkably supported by the population : the sense of security being deeply ingrained in the citizens, often as an internalized foundational aspect of life.

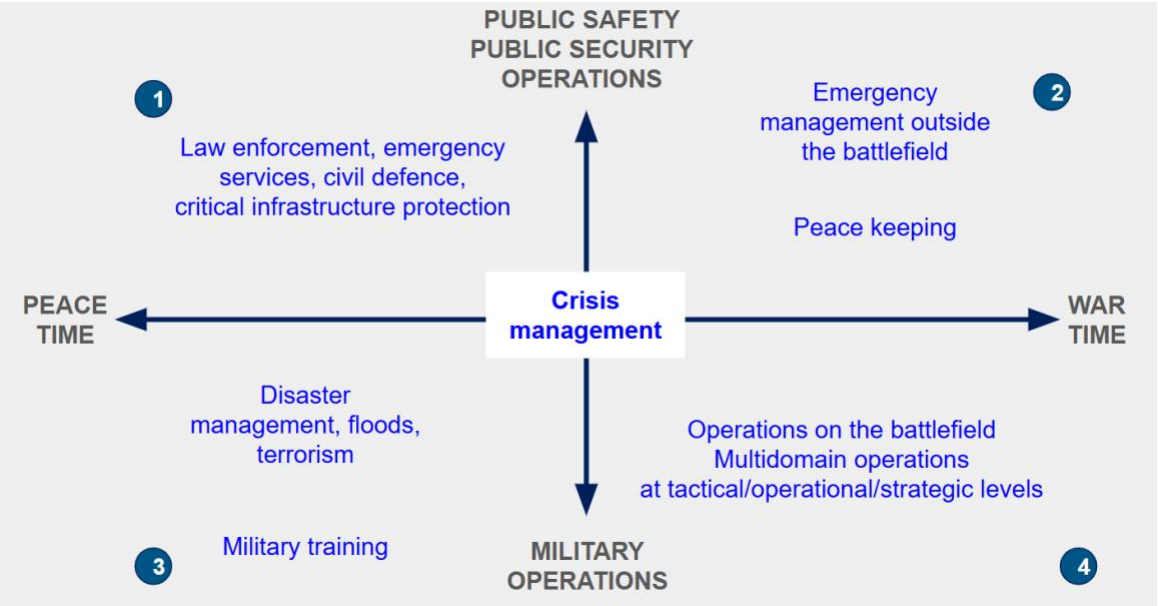
1. Defence vs Security, Peace Time vs War Time

Security related operations can be categorised depending on whether they are applied in War or Peace time and whether they are more military based - e.g. peace keeping, local border conflict or large scale disaster management - or civil defence based - such as fire brigades or emergency response management in cities -.

Military operations during War time include offensive and defensive combat missions, intelligence gathering, and securing strategic assets. In Peace time, military operations often shift to peacekeeping missions, counter-piracy patrols (especially in vital sea lanes like the Malacca Strait), and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions.

Civil defence during War time may involve managing mass evacuations, maintaining essential services under threat, and operating public shelters. During Peace time, civil defence encompasses a broader range of non-military activities such as search and rescue (SAR) operations (e.g., following building collapses or big fires), managing public health crises (like pandemic response), and ensuring critical infrastructure protection (e.g., power grids, water supply, sensitive public sites).

The following scheme illustrates the various situations that can be encountered across four quadrants corresponding to four operational situations.



Depending on the countries and their respective doctrines of operation, the engagement of military and civil defence forces will be different.

SouthEast Asia remains very much influenced by its context of counterinsurgency actions experienced during colonial war. This can be illustrated with some examples of typical usage of military forces for peace time operations.

First, the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) deploy specialized engineering battalions and naval assets to remote islands after a major earthquake or tsunami, providing medical aid and transportation, operating under the direction of BNPB (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana).

Second, Thailand's recent history showed deploying defence resources and means for law enforcement or demonstrations..

2. Cooperation, Interoperability and Data Interconnexion

Interoperability between organisations, first responders, and officers is a critical factor for ensuring effective decision-making and preventative measures. However, implementing this interoperability often raises initial concerns about its technical practicality, followed by worries about the potential impact of misuse.

A prime example is Singapore, which places security as a paramount national priority, similarly to contemporary China. Successive governments have effectively communicated to the population that certain security measures are a necessary element of national stability. This approach has allowed this country to achieve both operational effectiveness and public support. Consequently, this strategy has led to a high degree of interoperability among the various security means.

Mutual support, interoperability and security reciprocity commitments among ASEAN countries are another significant aspect of this question. When ASEAN was founded, the focus was on economic growth and the post-colonial reconstruction of nations. Security and defense were never really placed on the agenda as a common concern to be addressed and ultimately formalized in a treaty. The non-aligned movement, led by Indonesia during the Suharto era and supported by China (as evidenced by Zhou Enlai's presence at the 1955 Bandung Conference), upheld non-interference as a sacred principle, and subsequently refrained from establishing commitments on internal issues. Only emergency management, especially large population migration in the region due to a crisis is a topic of cooperation. And bilateral agreements apply.

3. Centralized vs fragmented security architecture

The way a country's decision-making process is structured, along with its principles of governance—specifically how central and local or provincial administrations interact—significantly influences how security assets are deployed during a crisis. While this is not unique to ASEAN, it is essential for understanding how ASEAN members research, decide upon, and finance their security frameworks. Broadly, these countries fall into three categories, mainly due to their historical post colonial transformations. First, those that are highly centralized, like Vietnam and Singapore. Second, those where most decisions are made at the provincial level with independent operations. Third, a hybrid of the first two, exemplified by Indonesia, where key decisions on investment, doctrine, and engagement are highly centralized—sometimes focused on a single individual— but

where there is substantial fragmentation of forces on the ground and where resource allocation is very localized, particularly for crises below a certain severity threshold.

4. Human vs technology based security

The question of the right balance between human or technology incentive security is a permanent dilemma that is valid for intelligence collection, surveillance and detection as well as operations.

Several factors are currently reshaping this long-standing security discourse, beside the China influence - esp. in relation to its military-civil duality-. First, the rapid evolution of the technologies make the application of security checks much easier and it accelerates the impact of the security framework as an essential, intuitive, and internalized shield in daily life. Paradoxically, this same evolution simultaneously fuels the growth of cybersecurity as a countermeasure. Second, the quick and easy dissemination of images and information intensifies the perception of insecurity and validates the necessary usage of technology.

Singapore is a very illustrative example of this trend, where technology is central to the continuous implementation of increasingly stringent security measures. The most prominent example is the new concept of man - unmanned cooperation, where robots and first responders would interoperate in order to both take the best of technology and maintain a human-in-the-loop oversight.

Conclusion

In conclusion, contemporary security is not a monolithic concept but a complex framework encompassing traditional military defence, daily public safety and security topics and a vast array of human concerns. It is always defined and utilized through a political lens that determines what is threatened, who is protected, how and why.

The analysis of security within the ASEAN context reveals a diverse and historically influenced approach. Driven by a shared sense of post-colonial vulnerability, the need for regime stability, and the geopolitical weight of China and "Asian Values", ASEAN nations have forged a first step of security architecture that prioritizes collective harmony and stability.

ASEAN countries have developed a security framework based on a rather peace time oriented model with engagement of military means in some countries. This shows a heterogeneous landscape with a cooperation between agencies and the decision making process which is dependent on the maturity and the culture of the countries. The same can be mentioned for human-based versus technology-driven security, the situation remains various despite an important move to the usage of technologies which improve efficiency and social control.

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