Chapter II

Conflicts in Southeast Asia

Global, regional and domestic developments have initiated far-reaching changes in the dynamics of international security of Southeast Asia. In conflict-torn mainland Southeast Asia favourable signs are emerging due to the efforts of ASEAN. The perceptions of Thailand and Vietnam of each other have become more positive while Laos has become a more stable political unit. The Cambodian conflict is moving towards resolution. While domestic political legitimacy is still a problem in many of these countries, international legitimacy is becoming more pronounced.

Minority ethnic groups in Burma, Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia did not, and in a number of cases still do not identify with the state. They aspire to maintain their distinct identities. Indigenous minority ethnic groups have been engaged in armed struggle against the political centre in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Burma. The systemic consequences of conflicts issuing from the multinational/multi-ethnic character of states have been much more limited. These conflicts have been largely confined to the local level, although in nearly all cases they affect bilateral relations with neighbouring countries. Domestic inter-ethnic conflicts between indigenous and immigrant minority communities have, in some ways, been more productive of tension and conflict between states. Domestic inter-ethnic conflicts have also influenced external threat perceptions as in Malaysia and Indonesia. Singapore is the only state which can be regarded as relatively stable in Southeast Asia. Tension and friction has resulted due to domestic

inter-ethnic conflicts between indigenous and immigrant minority communities. Malaysia experienced the most radical inter-ethnic tension in 1969 with a near-crisis situation in 1987. Such tensions also occur in Singapore, though to a lesser degree.

Three distinct groups can be identified in Thailand on the basis of religion, namely, Christians, Buddhists and Muslims. Of these, the Muslims are especially distinct for two reasons. Firstly, over 50 per cent of the total Muslim population is concentrated in the four southern provinces of Pattani, Yala Naratiwat and Satul where they constitute the majority. The existence of a fairly well-insulated stretch of territory where Muslims predominate and where they appear to have a closer affinity with their ethnic brethren across the border in Malaysia has become the principle source of the birth and growth of the problem of both Muslim secessionism and Malay irredenticism in these southern provinces of Thailand.2

Secondly, almost all Muslims in Pattani, Yala and Naratiwat are ethnically Malay and speak primarily a Malay dialect. Hence Muslim-Malays in these provinces are politically significant since they are the only minority group within the country to have actively and consistently resisted its policy of assimilation.3 Despite the government’s attempts at conscious political integration and cultural assimilation, Muslim-Malays have periodically expressed their demands for self-determination.

These agitations for greater political autonomy — and sometimes political independence — have been considered a threat to the national security and unity of Thailand, and consequently the government has put a lot of effort into settling the conflict. However,

these efforts of the government never really succeeded. The socio-cultural and political realities of the Muslim-Malays which prevent their identification with, or assimilation into, the Thai state, have not been sufficiently recognised. The conflict between the central Thai government and the Muslim-Malays in southern Thailand has provided motivation to their ongoing struggle for supremacy. The problem has been manifested not only by the existence of various armed groups but also a high incidence of political violence and an on-going guerrilla war in the region. This, despite the fact that in recent years their Malay identity has undergone a great deal of transformation.

Of the numerous organised groups which have emerged to recruit members and mobilise and engage the Muslim-Malays to fight the Thai government, only three — the BNPP (Barisan National Pambebasan Pattani),\(^4\) the BRN (Barisan Revolusi National)\(^5\) and the PULO (Pattani United Liberation Organisation)\(^6\) have succeeded in penetrating their organisations. The Muslim-Malay struggle continues unabated with mass support fluctuating according to internal and external conditions.

The situation has not been helped by the fact that for the greater part of its recent history Thailand has been under military rule which generally encouraged local repression by intolerant, irresponsible and corrupt officials.\(^7\)

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\(^4\) BNPP- It was formed on 10 September 1971 in Kelantan, by a splinter group of the BRN claiming to succeed it. Initially it stressed at Islam and Malay nationalism. Later it started emphasizing in favour of a thoroughly Islamic platform. Its aim is to liberate all Muslim areas in southern Thailand from Thailand for establishing the sovereign Islamic state of Pattani.

\(^5\) BRN-It was formed in 1960 as the first truly political organization within the Muslim-Malay provinces.

\(^6\) PULO- It was formed by the foreign trained Malay Muslims who wanted a political role to further the cause of Malay Muslim separatism.

Source: Farouk, n.2

\(^7\) ibid
The armed struggle waged by the Malay-Muslim separatist groups in southern Thailand has made and continues to create friction in Thai-Malaysian bilateral relations. Thai government officials believe that the separatist organisations cannot survive without support from Malaysia. Malaysia insists that this is an internal matter of Thailand and that it provides no assistance to the separatist groups. Notwithstanding this official position, there is little doubt about popular sympathy for the separatists in certain segments of the Malay community in Malaysia, especially in the northeastern states which are predominantly Malay-Muslim. Opposition parties which have a strong base in these states have provided sanctuary and material support. Hence Bangkok made its cooperation in countering the threat posed by the MCP contingent upon Malaysia's non-support for the separatist groups. Although Malaysia acknowledges the Thai concern, it is not prepared to give in to Thai requests to cooperate in suppressing the separatist movements due to its own political considerations. It outrightly rejected the Thai request for "right of hot pursuit" in 1982. Some Thai officials also advocated abrogation of the bilateral security arrangements instituted in 1948.

In Malaysia the problem of Malay-Muslim separatism, even in its embryonic form, involved Malaysia just as it did Thailand. There was a general feeling amongst Malay-Muslims that because of common culture, religion, ethnic background and past history, the Malays of Malay would come readily to their rescue. However, whilst popular Malay support and sympathy from Malaysia played a pivotal role in helping Malaysia to fuel the

8 MCP or CPM—It was formed on August 31, 1944. It was predominantly Chinese. The remnants of the 1948-1960 Emergency made infrequent forays from their southern Thailand retreat. They unsuccessfully attempted to infiltrate organizations such as trade unions and political parties. In 1968, "armed struggle" replaced "united front" as the party's guiding principle following which it had some success in expanding its activities but still posed no serious threat to the government. Source: John N. Funston Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of UMNO and PAS, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd., Singapore, 1980
political aspirations of the Malay-Muslim separatists, the Malaysian authorities have been, in various ways collaborating with Thailand to subdue the threat of Malay-Muslim succession. Earlier Malaysia used to be a relatively safe haven for their political and military operations. Therefore, although Malaysia might have been the breeding ground for separatist organisations, it was the attitude and action of the Malayan government towards them that stifled their operations within the boundaries of Malaya.

The recognition of the need to overcome a serious credibility dilemma and the necessity to resolve the problem of the political malintegration of the Muslims in that part of Thailand which appeared most vulnerable to secessionist pursuits compelled Thailand to grant a number of concessions to the Muslims.

Tensions have gradually reduced and both Thailand and Malaysia have since been careful not to allow the issue to sour bilateral relations. Both recognise that there is much to be gained by continuing bilateral cooperation within the ASEAN sphere. Both countries proclaim to uphold the principles of peaceful neighbourly coexistence on the basis of mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of one another.

Furthermore, both Malaysia and Indonesia have advocated moderation in the Organisation of Islamic Conference and counseled respect for the territorial integrity of Thailand and the Philippines which also suffers from secessionism in the south.

Philippines also harbours the notion that Malaysia provides sanctuary and material support for the Muslim Moro separatist movements in southern Philippines. Fighting in earnest against the government troops began in the late sixties. The military arm of the
Communist Party of the Philippines, the NPA (New People’s Army)\(^9\) which had started with only 60 men in 1969 also successfully identifies itself with agrarian grievances.

Political violence started in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago by mid-1972. Conflict reached its peak in 1973-75 when the military arm of the Banga Moro Army fielded its armed fighters.

While it is not likely that Malaysia has or would provide support to separatists, there is no doubt that the East Malaysian state of Sabah, when it was governed by the predominantly Muslim USNO\(^10\) it provided sanctuary as well as financial and military (small arms and ammunition) support. When Sabah was controlled by USNO, the Moros were allowed easy entry, which resulted in a large Filipino-Muslim population in that state. The PBS (Party Bersatu Sabah) which holds political power in Sabah, has been eager to repatriate the illegal immigrants. The Moro insurgency problem is further complicated due to the Philippines’ claim to Sabah as well as the conflicting territorial claims of the Philippines and Malaysia in the South China Sea. “Unlike the problem of armed separation in southern Thailand, which has remained relatively contained, the separatist problem in southern Philippines has become intertwined with domestic problems in Malaysia and also with other bilateral problems between Malaysia and the Philippines.”\(^11\)

\(^9\) NPA- In the sixties there was a revival of a Communist inspired insurgency by the newly constituted Communist Party of the Philippines — the New People’s Army. The NPA along with the CPP and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) served as the major focus of Left wing opposition to Marcos. Source: Raul Guzman and Mila Reforma (eds.), Government of the Philippines, ISEAS, Singapore, 1988

\(^10\) USNO- It was formed in 1963 prior to the formation of Malaysia. Its members are overwhelmingly Muslim. Source: N.T. Madale, “Philippines — The Future of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) as a separatist movement in southern Philippines,” in Jock and Vani (eds.) Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia, ISEAS, 1984

\(^11\) Alagappa, n.1, p. 9
This influx was perceived by the majority Christian Kadazan community (the largest but only by a narrow margin) as threatening their position. The Party Bersatu Sabah (PBS) nominally multi-racial but predominantly Christian Kadazan and was holding political power in Sabah until recently, had been eager to repatriate the illegal immigrants. The federal government however, while recognizing the problem, has not been enthusiastic for a number of reasons including the fact that center-state relations were in trouble when the PBS was in power in Sabah.

Federal-states relationship continues to remain a problem in Sabah and Sarawak where there is resentment due to interference from Kuala Lumpur. One of the important reasons is the failure of Kuala Lumpur to abide by the provisions of the Malaysia Agreement (an official document detailing the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, signed by the governments of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak, and Britain.) The separation of Singapore is also a precedent for both the states to break up with the federation.¹² Any confrontation will have implications, directly or indirectly, for neighbouring countries in the region. An important implication for Indonesia as the supporting region of Sabah and Sarawak is the influx of refugees into Indonesia.¹³ In case of an open confrontation between Sabah and the Federal government, the non-Muslim indigenous group in Sarawak (Dayaks) will most likely support Sabah. The same will be the case in other parts of Kalimantan.


¹³ ibid, p. 200
The issue of Moro insurgency in the Philippines-Malaysia bilateral relations was further complicated by the Philippines' claim to Sabah in concert with the territorial claims of both the Philippines and Malaysia in the South China Sea.

In spite of the fact that the Moro issue in conjunction with other bilateral problems, has led at times to friction in Philippines-Malaysia bilateral relations, including occasional armed clashes, there has been no outbreak of hostilities.

Conflict persists on the island of Mindanao. Despite the 1996 Peace Accord signed by the main insurgent group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), confrontation between the Moro Islamic Front (MILF) and government forces persists. 14 Difficulties in bilateral relations between Malaysia and Singapore are mainly outcomes of inter-ethnic tension between the Malay and Chinese communities. Normal relations of the Malaysian Malays with Singapore have suffered greatly due to the separation of Singapore from Malaysia under strained circumstances. The delicate racial balance (due to the Chineseness of Singapore) as also the communal character of domestic politics in Malaysia have led to increased animosity and bitterness. However, both countries are aware that they have more to gain through cooperation rather than conflict.

Burma has also been confronted with numerous ethnic rebellions along its border with Thailand. Yangon believes that Bangkok through intentional neglect of the region, tacitly provides sanctuary and economic sustenance for the ethnic resurgent movements with a view to using them as a lever against Myanmar.

When in 1959 a number of ethnic minorities had revolted, Yangon had sought Thai help to seal off the border for the “right of hot pursuit.” Although a bilateral security

14 For details see The Military Balance, 1998-99, IISS, OUP
cooperation agreement was made in 1963, it was never implemented. Relations
deteriorated when Thailand permitted the former Burmese Premier U Nu to form a united
front of the Burmese separatists and to launch a military campaign against the Burmese
government against bases in Thailand. However, the attempts failed. There were only
diplomatic protests from Burma, which was determined to maintain its isolationist
international orientation. Consequently, in spite of the historical animosity between
Thailand and Burma, the transnational consequences of the ethnic minority rebellions in
Myanmar have not been of very serious proportions. Since 1988 the Burmese military
government and the Thai military have been cooperating on security matters. Of late the
relations between Thailand and Myanmar have deteriorated considerably due to border
issues. It is estimated that about 10,000 Burmese troops have assembled just across the
border backed by an additional 2,500 troops from the ethnic minority United Wah State
Army. On the other hand are fewer but more mobile and better-equipped Thai border
patrol police units and army border troops. As these troops face each other in the most
serious potential border confrontation in several years there is widespread speculation
over whether it is an internal power struggle or a testing of the resolve of the new Thai
government on the part of the Burmese generals. The Burmese military junta claims that
it is preparing an assault on the Shan guerrillas who occupy a mountainous area near the
border. Shan fighters have a habit of withdrawing across the border behind Thai military
troops whenever they are attacked. This has led to the Burmese army accusing the Thais of
helping the Shans and even assisting their drug trafficking. The general thinking is that a
border conflict with Thailand would unite the Burmese military which is otherwise rife with internal divisions and power struggles.\textsuperscript{15}

The question of the ethnic Lao in Cambodia is also a cause for concern.


Vietnam invaded Cambodia due to the activities of the Khmer Rouge against ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia and intense hostility towards Vietnam.\textsuperscript{16}

Cambodians view the presence of a large number of ethnic Vietnamese in that country as reflective of the Vietnamisation of Cambodia and continuation of a historical trend, which if unchecked, will result in the political extinction of Cambodia. Hence, Cambodia wants the repatriation of all Vietnamese 'settlers.' Vietnam however reiterates that since these people have lived in Cambodia for generations, any international arrangement must provide for their security. Thus, the issue is quite explosive and has been a major irritant in Vietnam-China and Cambodian-Vietnam relations.

However these tensions do not appear to threaten the integrity of existing states for the immediate foreseeable future. Domestic conflicts do play a major role in shaping the Southeast Asian security environment and are mainly due to the multi-ethnic, multinational character of the states. Though they have been largely confined to local

\textsuperscript{15} For details see Bertil Lintner, Chiang Mai, Rodney Tasker, "Border Bravado", \textit{Far Eastern Economic Review}, March 8, 2001

\textsuperscript{16} For details see Udai Bhanu Singh, "Whither Cambodia," \textit{Strategic Analysis}, vol. XVI, no. 5, August 1993, pp.577-588; Yoneji Kuroyanaga, "Kampuchean Conflict and ASEAN: A View From the Final Stage," \textit{Japan Review of International Affairs}, vol. III, no. 1, Spring-Summer 1989, pp. 57-81
levels, in nearly all cases they have affected bilateral relations between the Southeast Asian countries.

The Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in 1978 put an end to ASEAN’s hopes for a Southeast Asia free of great power rivalry since it had to accept US and Chinese support against perceived Vietnamese (backed by the erstwhile Soviet Union) expansionism.

Until the later part of the Eighties, the prospects for regional order and peace in Southeast Asia remained more closely linked to the dynamics of Sino-Soviet and US-Soviet rivalry than to ASEAN’s own concept of peace through neutrality. ASEAN had no choice but to be pragmatic and let regional order and conflict resolution become a function of great power priorities and policies, even in the case of the Cambodian conflict. This became the main agenda for its political and diplomatic role in the Eighties. ASEAN-Indochinese divide was the stumbling block to ASEAN’s concept of regional order based on its principles of non-intervention (by external powers in the region) and non-interference (by the ASEAN states in their domestic conflicts). Despite initial failure, Cambodia became a major testing ground for regional approaches to conflict-management in Southeast Asia. Armed Communist movements posed serious challenges to regime survival in post colonial Southeast Asia.

In Philippines, the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines (NPA) had started with only 60 men in 1969. Over a period of time it identified itself with local agrarian grievances. It capitalized on rising popular resentment in the last years of the Marcos regime and its numbers increased. However, under the Acquino regime there was a decline in its numbers. There were serious internal divisions due to the failure of a
combination of political campaign and armed struggle, which was the insurrectionary strategy of the Communist party. In spite of the fact that the movement is still a force to reckon with, there are serious doubts as to whether the movement can regenerate itself. Communist insurgency in the Seventies was a major hindrance to Thai political stability. It was active on the Laos border among the ethnic minorities. A massive amnesty campaign launched by the Thai government resulted in a rapid decline in the pro-Beijing Communist Party of Thailand (CPT).\(^\text{17}\) Subsequently, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM or MCP) led by Chin Peng surrendered to the Thai and Malaysian authorities and agreed to dissolve its guerrilla army.

A number of reasons accounted for the success of the ASEAN governments over Communist insurgencies. Decline of external support especially from China (as part of its attempt to cultivate ASEAN friendship against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia) was especially important in their success against the Communist insurgents of Malaysia and Thailand. Withdrawal of Chinese support helped to neutralise whatever support the insurgencies might have derived from the Communist occupation in Indochina. Factionalism also tended to weaken the domestic roots of insurgency.

Despite the end of the Communist insurgency, the ruling regimes of ASEAN faced a number of threats in the Eighties and Nineties. These arose from a combination of factors like trends in civil-military relations, the issue of leadership succession, the scope of religious extremism and the political implications of rapid economic growth.

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17 CPT – The Communist Party of Thailand was formed on 1 December 1942. It grew rapidly in the sixties and Seventies. In 1965 the CPT launched an armed struggle which lasted till the 1976-78 period. During this period the government acknowledged it as a threat to national security. The threat posed by the CPT is essentially political in nature and is directed at the ideological component of the state. Source: Muthiah Alagappa, The National Security of Developing States: Lessons from Thailand, ISIS, Malaysia, 1987
In fact, internal political unrest in ASEAN states remains closely linked to the legitimacy of the state as also the regime.

Domestic conflicts play a major role in shaping the Southeast Asian security environment. These conflicts are mainly due to the multi-ethnic, multinational character of the states. Though they have been largely confined to the local levels, in nearly all cases they affected bilateral relations between these countries. Armed separatist movements involving indigenous ethnic minorities challenged the very basis of statehood and national identity in the region.

The current national disintegration problem that Indonesia is facing is mainly due to its multi-ethnic composition and at the same time the transmigration policy of Suharto. The state used the military to suppress these movements in Irian Jaya, Aceh, Ambon, Riau and East Timor but failed miserably especially in East Timor and Aceh.

In the face of escalation of violence between the separatists and the military, East Timor gained its independence after a referendum. Taking cue from East Timor, the movement in Aceh has assumed a popular character. Unless Indonesia is able to soon restructure centre-state relations on the basis of wider autonomy for the provinces, it risks a repeat of the situation in East Timor in Aceh, Irian Jaya, Riau and Ambon. 18

In Aceh, the agreement signed by the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement in Geneva on May 12, marks President Abdurrahman Wahid's new approach to dealing with Indonesia's trouble spots — a new chapter after East Timor. "The interests of the people of Aceh must come first in any policy or agreement made by Jakarta. The joint understanding meets that criteria, despite the political implications for

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18 Hazi Ahmad Zakaria and Baladas Ghoshal, "The Political Future of ASEAN After the Asian Crisis," *International Affairs*, October 1999, p. 777
Jakarta. The humanitarian pause called for in the agreement will at least bring a long-overdue respite from the violence which has wreaked havoc in Aceh since the mid-Seventies."

Sectarian clashes in Ambon and ethnic violence between the Dayaks and Madurese in west Kalimantan have only exacerbated the government's political-social concerns on the one hand, the separatist movement and religious and ethnic clashes on the other. In Ambon, it is not only about sectarian violence, they also seek to breakaway from Indonesia and establish the Republic of Moluccas.20

In Ambon the situation is worsening day by day as violent fighting erupted between Christians and Muslims recently. The government has declared a state of national emergency to check the cycle of sectarian violence and revenge.21

The Malaysian and Indonesian cases are comparable in terms of the role of Islam. Both countries have been undergoing a religious revival since the Seventies. While Malaysia has never experienced the type of religiously-motivated violence as in Indonesia and has had no significant instances of racial violence for thirty years, both countries have long had mass-based Islamic organizations and Islamic political parties.

New levels of inter-ethnic alliances in Malaysia, contrary to the process of ethnic rationalization appear on the surface to be political partnerships of convenience, bringing together disgruntled Malay politicians and technocrats with non-Malay opposition parties. To what extent these alliances will stabilize as new types of political organization depends upon several factors, the chief of which is the willingness of Malay politicians to

21 The Telegraph, Thursday, 29 June, 2000
transcend nationalist ideals by offering non-Malays more than just a surrogate role in the technocratic system. Mobilized through Islamic groups, Muslims, especially young, middle class, are seeing Islamic parties and quasi-theocracy as a viable alternative in Malaysia. While the ultimate electoral fortunes of the PAS and its Indonesian counterparts are yet to be determined, these parties will undoubtedly remain stronger than in pre-Reformasi (a broad-based popular movement for social, political and economic change) times for years to come.

There are other problems as well so far as national resilience for the ASEAN states was concerned. The situation in this region has remained fragile, with peace being a distant dream and domestic instability combined with strained relations with other countries affecting the political fabric of most of these states. Various territorial disputes have also harmed intra-ASEAN relations. ASEAN members have resorted to a large-scale arms build-up mainly due to intra-mural suspicions and the uncertain strategic environment.

The Pedra Blanca island off the coast of Johor continues to be the bone of contention between Malaysia and Singapore. In 1981 an understanding was reached between the two countries which specified that the dispute should be resolved by the exchange of documents. Singapore suggested arbitration by the International Court of Justice in 1989 but the deadlock persists. There was increase in tension as a result of the construction of a helipad on the lighthouse in Johor as also the chasing away of Malaysian fishermen by the Singaporean navy. There have also been occasions when the two countries have put their armed forces on alert.

22 Raymond L.M. Lee, "The state, religious nationalism, and ethnic rationalization in Malaysia, Asian Profile, vol. 18, no. 4, August 1990, p. 498
Malaysia and Indonesia are engaged in a dispute over the Sipadan and Ligitan islands in the Sulawesi Sea near the Sabah-Kalimantan border. Both countries cite maps under Dutch and British colonial administrations, respectively, to put forward their claims. According to the accord of 1982 status quo was to be maintained in the islands. There were protests from Indonesia in June 1991 after Malaysia made attempts to develop tourist facilities on the islands. No final settlement has accrued in spite of both countries having agreed to let a joint committee resolve the dispute. The dispute has since then forwarded to the International Court of Justice, which is now looking into the issue.

The dispute over the Limbang territory in Sarawak between Malaysia and Brunei persists. Relations between Malaysia and the Philippines are strained due to the Sabah dispute. At one point of time it was the most dangerous bilateral dispute within ASEAN, although it was now considerably muted.

Malaysia and Thailand are engaged in a dispute over the question of border-crossing rights. Malaysia wants the review of a 1992 treaty allowing Thai military personnel to conduct cross-border operations. In December 1991 a shooting incident in which Thai forces fired shots at the Pedang Besar area led to tensions. Malaysia alleged that Thailand had abused the provisions of the treaty for frequent intrusions. The matter was referred to the Malaysian-Thai Joint Commission and the Malaysian-Thai General Border Committee for developing a “conservative mechanism” to deal with future incidents.

Malaysia-Singapore relations were recently strained over the Tanjong Pagor issue. In July 1998, Malaysian customs immigration facilities were shifted from the Malaysian-owned Tanjong Pagor railway station in downtown Singapore to a destination near the

24 Mark J. Valencia, Malaysia and the Law of the Sea: The Foreign Policy Issues, the Options and their Implications, IISS, Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1991, pp. 81-84
Singapore-Malaysian border. Malaysia stepped up efforts to divert its large import-export trade through Singapore to its own Port Klang provoking business alarm when stringent customs checks disrupted cross-Causeway shipping. Malaysia revoked Singaporean rights to enter its airspace and hinted that it might use the pending renegotiation of a water supply agreement to bring its arrogant neighbour to heel. Sharing of waters of Johor river is another bone of contention between these two states.

Uncertainty over future energy supplies will remain a significant factor in prompting maritime conflict in the Western Pacific. Improvement in oil-exploration techniques has led to an increase in drilling activities in previously inaccessible offshore sites.

The rise to prominence of the dispute over the Spratlys Islands in the South China Sea has coincided with seismic surveys and oil-exploration activities which have reinforced the view, at least in the region, that the island sits astride huge deposits of oil and natural gas. China insists that these reserves must be protected from the "predatory advances" of other states which, it complains have taken advantage of China's tolerance and restraint.

The economic and strategic importance of the Spratlys is due to its location near the major sea lanes in eastern Asia. The Philippines claims 60 islets, rocks and atolls collectively known as Kalaayan. Malaysia claims three islands and four groups of rock. Brunei claims the Louisa Reef. Vietnam's claims on the Spratlys are mainly due to historical reasons.

In 1994 the official China Youth News noted that the "South China Sea holds reserves worth US$1 trillion. Once Xijiang is developed this will be the sole area for replacement

of resources......Developments southwards is perhaps a strategic orientation that China
will have to choose.”

Among the states claiming sovereignty over the Spratlys, China and Vietnam in
particular are using foreign oil companies to “stake out” positions in deep-water zones as
a precaution against future energy scarcity.

An uneasy standoff between China and Vietnam which followed a brief but bloody clash
over the Spratlys in 1988 ended in 1997. In March China moved the Kan Tan III
exploration rig to a location about 65 nautical miles off the coast of central Vietnam,
where it began drilling for gas. Hanoi which claimed the area, strongly denied the
Chinese foreign ministry statement that the rig was operating within its rights under
international law. The Vietnamese coast guard issued repeated warnings to Chinese
vessels near the rig. When these were ignored, the official Vietnamese News Agency
took the unusual step of publishing the extracts of a blunt letter from the government
demanding that Beijing “stop the operation of the Kan Tan III oil rig and withdraw it
from the Exclusive Zone and continental shelf of Vietnam.”

Vietnam also threatened to widen the dispute by soliciting the support of its fellow
ASEAN members and in a bid to raise the strategic stake, opened discussions with the US
on a possible military relationship.

China’s aggressive oil exploration activities in the South China Sea heightened tensions
with ASEAN generally. Indonesia’s growing wariness of China’s strategic intentions was
directly related to concerns that Beijing’s territorial claims might overlap with those of

26 Alan Dupont, “The Environment and Security in Pacific Asia, Maritime Disputes in the South China
Sea,” Adelphi Papers, no. 319, p. 31
Jakarta to the north of the Natunas, a chain of 300 islands and atolls owned by Indonesia south of the Spratlys.

Intra-ASEAN relations are also clouded due to disputes over maritime boundaries. The unilateral extension of exclusive economic zones have also made for disputes relating to jurisdiction and rights to living and non-living resources in areas of overlap and also in areas which were previously high seas but now under normal control. According to the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Coordinating Centre, of the 15 maritime boundaries in the South China Sea (excluding the Gulf of Thailand), 12 are disputed, two have been agreed (one partially), and, one resolved through a joint exploitation agreement. Six of these boundary disputes involve ASEAN countries with Malaysia engaged in disputes with most of the ASEAN members. Malaysia and the Philippines were involved in the most recent heightening of tensions over maritime boundaries, in the eastern Sabah-Sulu archipelago region. The arrest of 14 Filipino fishermen who allegedly entered into Malaysian waters by the Malaysian navy caused a lot of tension including military mobilization by the Philippines.

The South China Sea could well become a regional flashpoint in the near future which could also lead to an involvement of major external powers. Both the Philippines and Malaysia have established their military presence in the Spratlys. Philippines occupies eight of the islands, with an air strip on one of them. Malaysia occupied three atolls between September and November 1983. The conflict aggravated the existing sensitive relations between Malaysia and the Philippines. The limited prospects for joint development might lead to armed conflicts over the islands at a later date.
In Southeast Asia, competition for fish and other living maritime resources has historically been most intense in the Gulf of Thailand. With the third largest fishing fleet in Pacific Asia, Thai fishermen had begun to exhaust stocks in their traditional fishing grounds by the late Seventies and begun to encroach into the EEZs and territorial waters of neighbouring states. In the late Eighties and Nineties seizures of Thai fishing vessels became more common throughout Southeast Asian waters, particularly along the Tenasserim coast of Myanmar, the Gulf of Tonkin, the Luzon Strait and in the waters off Indonesia.

Illegal fishing by Thai fishermen was a source of great tension between Thailand and its neighbours. In the Andaman Sea Thai vessels regularly violate Myanmar's EEZ. The larger Thai vessels commonly carry heavy machineguns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers which they regularly use whenever required. Myanmar does not have the capability to fully protect its extensive coastline. Thai fishermen also have better intelligence information from radio centers that warn of approaching patrol boats. Since 1945 Thai fishing boats have regularly clashed with the navies of Malaysia and Vietnam. On May 31, 1995, there was exchange of fire between Thai and Vietnam gun boats after the Thai navy attempted to protect Thai fishing vessels from being seized by the Vietnamese navy; a Thai fisherman and two Vietnamese sailors were billed and five of the six Thai fishing boats impounded, along with 62 of their crew. For Thailand, the incident is a reminder of how serious the competition for resources in the region's waters is becoming. In fact, the Thai military considers that hostilities could break out over just this sort of incident. A Defence Ministry White Paper published in 1994 cites overlapping maritime economic zones as a possible cause of conflict between countries in the
region. But for Thailand’s neighbours it is a worrying sign that Thailand is prepared to use force to uphold its economic interests. Indeed, Thai fishing fleets seem to have a knack for annoying neighbouring countries. During this period about 20 Thai boats were seized by Malaysia, Burma and Vietnam.

Thailand may be the worst offender but it is not the only culprit. The fishing vessels of nearly all Southeast Asian countries regularly intrude into the neighbouring EEZs and territorial seas. Vietnam has fired on fishing boats from China, Malaysia and Taiwan and the Philippines has seized Chinese and Taiwanese vessels. The arrest of 23 Chinese fishermen by the Philippines in August 1997 proves the potential of these disputes to damage broader political and security ties.

Among the problems of maritime security, those related to piracy in ASEAN waters are of major importance. According to recent reports there is a decline in the number of piracy attacks in the region which might be due to the success of the joint Singapore-Indonesia patrols. A multilateral approach to countering piracy might prove to be useful in expanding the scope of the existing bilateral defence links within ASEAN. Such an arrangement will not prove to be a controversial base for more elaborate forms of regional military cooperation.

A number of other events illustrate the vulnerability of the situation in the region.

The Chinese occupation of the Mischief Reef in the vicinity of the Spratlys in 1994, and Beijing’s publication in 1993 of a map which showed the extent of China’s territorial


28 ibid
claims in the South China Sea (the Chinese boundary appeared to overlap with a portion of Indonesia’s EEZ to the north of the Natunas) became a major reason for conflict.

In September 1996, the Indonesian armed forces staged their biggest-ever exercise in the South China Sea, involving 20,000 troops, 40 aircraft and 50 naval vessels. Given its scope and timing, and despite public statements to the contrary, the exercise was clearly meant to warn China that Indonesia would not tolerate any attempt to encroach upon the Natuna gas field or Indonesia’s EEZ. However, despite occasional conflicts and existing suspicion there was never any major exchange of fire between the ASEAN countries over any potential dispute due to the efforts of ASEAN.

Mainly due to the Indo-Chinese conflict and the practice of cooperation developed through regular political, diplomatic, cultural and military exchanges, ASEAN states were faced with a situation where intra-ASEAN conflicts had eased considerably.

There was consensus against the use of force in the region including the set of regional norms honouring territorial integrity and the peaceful settlement of dispute as contained in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Chapter IV, Articles 13-17 of the same treaty also provides for an official dispute-settlement mechanism called a High Council consisting of ministerial level representatives from member states. This council is responsible for taking cognizance of the existence of disputes and situations likely to disturb “regional peace and harmony” and in case no solution is reached through direct negotiations, to recommend to the parties in dispute, appropriate means of settlement such as good offices, mediation, inquiry and conciliation. But till date no meeting of the High Council has been convened despite the existence of intra-mural disputes.
Direct bilateral mediation has been the preferred mode of conflict management in the major inter-state disputes such as those between the Philippines and Malaysia, Indonesia and Malaysia and Thailand and Malaysia with the Sabah dispute providing a rare example of successful informal third party mediation by Indonesia in May 1969.

ASEAN’s approach to conflict resolution rests on an assumed ability to manage conflicts within its membership without resorting to formal multilateral measures. Indeed, direct bilateral negotiations have been the preferred mode of resolving conflict in the major inter-state disputes such as those between the Philippines and Malaysia, Indonesia and Malaysia and Thailand and Malaysia. The Sabah dispute provides one of the best examples of successful informal third party mediation (by Indonesia in May 1969).

ASEAN was previously reluctant to assume a high profile and provocative role in regional security. This explains its approach to conflict resolution. It also explains its general aversion to formal institutions for promoting regional security cooperation, be it the notion of an ASEAN military alliance, or the more recent proposals for a security conference for the Asia-Pacific region. Some experts regard this as a weak point in regionalism.

The protagonists of ASEAN however, believe to the contrary, that, the intangible but real spirit of ASEAN has been as effective in sublimating and diffusing conflicts as in actually finding solutions to them.

Specific national and regional circumstances after the end of the Cold War led to ASEAN’s success in maintaining peaceful intra-mural relations. The absence of a more active role in resolving conflicts undermines ASEAN’s claim to be a regional “security

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community." A "security community" requires the absence of armed conflicts within a regional setting as also the absence of armed conflicts as also the absence of arms acquisitions and contingency planning in anticipation of a possible conflict, none of which is true for ASEAN.

So far as the maritime disputes are concerned, the perceived strategic importance of the Spratlys and the desire to prevent the South China Sea from becoming the next flash point in the region were cited as reasons for Jakarta for its role in resolving the disputes peacefully through a series of workshops. Indonesia's motives should also be considered in view of its dispute with Vietnam over the Natuna islands, which makes it an interested party in the general security environment of the region, as also its desire to assume a leadership role in post-Cambodian Southeast Asia. The first workshop consisted of members of ASEAN states only as delegates, in January 1990 in Bali. The meeting was held to discuss whether the lessons of the Cambodian conflict as well as those arising from ASEAN regional cooperation may prove useful for the resolution of possible conflicts arising in the South China Sea. Subsequently, a workshop was held in post-Cambodian Southeast Asia. 30

The first workshop consisted of members of ASEAN states only as delegates, in January 1990 in Bali. This meeting was held to discuss whether the Cambodian experience as well as other past experiences would help resolve future conflicts in the South China Sea. Subsequently, a workshop was held in Bandung in July 1991, which involved the ASEAN members as also China, Taiwan, Vietnam (which was not a member of ASEAN at the time) and Laos. The third workshop was held in Yogyakarta in June-July to discuss

Chinese hostility (considered by highly provocative by many participants). This was followed by granting of a three-year contract to an American company (The Creston Oil Company) by China to begin exploration for oil in the South China Sea, in an area just 160 km from the Vietnamese coast. However, the contract was cancelled following protests from Vietnam subsequently.\textsuperscript{31}

Despite the fact that these workshops were presented by Indonesia as an integral part of ASEAN’s general interest in regional conflict management, in reality, there were no votaries for any “collective” ASEAN position or action on the dispute. The first formal consultations on security organized by ASEAN and based on the Singapore Declaration adopted a collective position.

The Manila meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in July 1992 focussed on the South China Sea conflict which resulted in the ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea. It stressed the “necessity to resolve all sovereignty and jurisdictional issues pertaining to the South China Sea by peaceful means without resort to force”\textsuperscript{32} and urged all parties concerned to exercise restraint.

The chief virtue of ASEAN’s efforts regarding the South China Sea till date has been to bring it into the international limelight and imply a potentially severe diplomatic cost for any party which may consider military action to settle the dispute.

Joint security measures of a military nature, in order to cope with the possibility of armed confrontation involving external great powers such as China, are still a distant possibility for ASEAN. One exception to this however, was the understanding between Indonesia

\textsuperscript{31} Vietnam Information Bulletin, vol. XXX, no. 9, 1994, p. 2
\textsuperscript{32} Sunday Times of India, April 9, 1996, p.15
and Malaysia reached in the Eighties. Joint naval exercises were also undertaken by other ASEAN states like Thailand and Singapore, and Singapore and Malaysia.

Thus, within the framework of regional cooperation, with national interests and threats from external powers as driving forces, ASEAN grew as a political community. However, bilateral disputes among the ASEAN members remained unresolved, with new disputes arising due to overlapping claims of exclusive economic zones. Philippines’ claim to Sabah, one of the most prominent intra-ASEAN disputes, which disputed the functioning of ASEAN in its early years, was about to be resolved before the third ASEAN summit in December 1987.

Domestic conflicts in Philippines prevented this development. ASEAN countries prefer bilateral arrangements in order to retain maximum national control over the issue in question. Good offices and conciliation have been used on a number of occasions but primarily for diffusion of tension and not resolution of disputes. Therefore the pacific settlement provisions were not put into operation. Even the constitution of the High Council was not implemented. Avoiding conflicts rather than attempting to resolve them has been an important ASEAN agenda.

ASEAN attempts at cooperation were an important factor in enhancing the security and stability of the region before the crisis. Member states which were conflict-ridden in the mid-sixties improved their bilateral relations considerably subsequently. ASEAN was also instrumental in preventing the kind of fratricidal wars that characterised the Indochina sub-region. By containing the ambitions of the larger states within the framework and principles of the association, it guaranteed the security of small states like Brunei and Singapore. It helped considerably in preventing undue interference in internal
affairs of other states which is of paramount importance in a region where nearly all
states are experiencing domestic conflicts, many of which transcend national barriers.
ASEAN faced its first real test in 1979 when Vietnam invaded Cambodia.
Conflicting views as regards the conflict were unified by ASEAN attempts. While
Thailand would have been a natural rival with Vietnam for influence in Indochina,
Indonesia and Malaysia would have seen Vietnam as a potential ally to counter Chinese
influence — the challenge forced them to take a collective decision. "By working
together on the Cambodian issue ASEAN was able to develop a sense of community and
by the end of the Eighties the Association had become more than simply a symbol of
friendship or a consultative forum." In June, 1979 both Singapore and Indonesia
promised military assistance to Thailand if she were invaded. Mahathir Mohammad
indicated Malaysia's willingness to assist Thailand if there were external aggression to
that country that would pose a threat to Malaysia and provided Thailand requested that
assistance. Both Singapore and Indonesia's offers were bilateral offers to Thailand as is
Malaysia's stand. Not one of these countries committed to ASEAN. ASEAN remained
what it had always been and would continue to be — an organisation aimed at economic,
social and cultural cooperation. The leaders of ASEAN made it very clear that it was not
a military pact. As it was Malaysia already had a bilateral border agreement with
Thailand and Indonesia. In neither of these agreements were any of the other ASEAN
countries involved. As with the existing border agreements, so in this particular case
where the invasion of Thailand was concerned — the fact that all the countries involved
were ASEAN members was incidental.

33 Koro Bessho, "Identities and Security in East Asia," Adelphi Papers, no. 325, 1999, p.45

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Where Malaysia was concerned, Thailand and Malaysia had been cooperating successfully over a considerable period of time along the common border against the common enemy. Neither country involved itself in the internal problems of the other. While ASEAN itself never intended becoming a military pact, the member countries of ASEAN were free to make military arrangements on a bilateral basis for security reasons. In June 1979 Malaysian home affairs minister Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie said, “although the present cooperation between both countries had been more than satisfactory, it is necessary to strengthen such collaboration in accordance with the needs of the situation.”

He stressed that such cooperation would be based on national and regional resilience on which ASEAN was built. The two countries would continue to review the security situation from time to time, including the refugee problem as it was one of the elements that contributed towards instability.

Similarly, Malaysia was also in close consultation with Indonesia and Singapore on such matters. During this time public opinion in ASEAN countries had begun to consider whether it was necessary to turn ASEAN into a military alliance to cope with the Vietnamese expansion. But leaders of some ASEAN countries objected to this suggestion. In fact, the then Indonesian foreign minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja reiterated that ASEAN was not a defence pact.

The Indonesian minister of information Ali Murtopo told correspondents on October 13, 1979 that his country was deeply concerned about the Indo-China conflict especially in view of the bleak prospects for a peaceful settlement there and the possibility of another massive offensive by Vietnam into Kampuchea. To Indonesia and Vietnam, the minister

34 SWB, June 18, 1979
said the best option for Vietnam would be to have an early political solution in Kampuchea, as this would minimize the involvement of China and lessen Vietnam's dependence on the erstwhile Soviet Union. He further said that whilst the ASEAN countries could cooperate in facing the worsening Kampuchean situation, this should not necessarily lead to a military pact.

On November 13, 1979 the Malaysian news agency Bernama quoted Dr. Mahathir Mohammed, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia as saying that although ASEAN was not a military pact, "ASEAN members had an understanding in military aspects."\(^{35}\)

ASEAN also helped to boost the domestic legitimacy of incumbent regimes, as it did for example, during the third summit in Manila where the heads of government met despite grave concerns for their security. When the six heads of government gathered in Manila in December 1987, they constituted a collective act of faith in the association, and in the government of President Corazon Acquino which had been buffeted by a series of abortive coups. Indeed, given the violent abortive coup in Manila in the preceding year, as well as the terror unleashed by Communist insurgents, security for the participants was a major cause of concern. This was not only an important recognition for Corazon Acquino's new government but also for the first time despite its principle of non-intervention, ASEAN intervened in the internal affair of a member country.

ASEAN has aided in the promotion of goodwill, trust and confidence among its member states in the past, thus facilitating the transformation of a sub-region of turmoil into a more stable and peaceful one, in which the use of force was minimized. The stable environment boosted the mobilization of domestic and international resources in the

\(^{35}\) SWB, November 13, 1979
pursuit of economic growth and development. This was because the compulsions of remaining within a framework acted as a subduing effect and prevented the differences and conflicts among the ASEAN members from flaring up into open hostilities. Periodic interaction between officials and non-officials provided scope for discussion for sorting out differences even before actual measures were defined or undertaken. But all this was before the crash of 1997. The inflation changed a number of equations in the region and other more pressing concerns have assumed priority for the ASEAN states.