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Securing the seas by closing ranks
Report on
Enhancing Asian Maritime Security and Confidence Building Measures Seminar
Singapore, 26 January 2010

Nazery Khalid

The treacherous seas

The *Enhancing Asia Maritime Security and Confidence Building Measures Seminar*, held in Singapore on 26 January 2010, underscored the enormous challenges faced by nations to maintain comprehensive security in the oceans. This is especially so in Asian waters which contain some of the world's most important shipping lanes and strategic sea lines of communications (SLOCs).

The seminar provided a platform for the meeting of the minds for around 60 representatives of principal navies with interest in the Asian region and academicians and researchers to discuss these issues and examine other risks, concerns, challenges and prospects related to maritime security in the regional seas. It was organized by the Foundation for Strategic Research of France, International Institute for Strategic Studies Asia of Singapore, and Council for Security and Cooperation in Asia Pacific of France. The seminar was supported by the Directorate for Strategic Affairs of the Ministry of Defense of France.

Discussion at the seminar was divided in three sessions addressing the challenges faced in fulfilling the massive task of enhancing maritime security and promoting CBMs in Asian seas, and the multiplicity of factors and actors involved. The first session was themed *Maritime Security in Asia : A Global Assessment* which featured presentations on the traditional and non-traditional issues in maritime security, the strategic implications of maritime security for Asia Pacific, and a European perspective on maritime security in Asia. The broad tone of the presentations in the session set the stage nicely for a more detailed discussion of regional naval developments in the following session on *Modernisation of Asian Navies and the Submarine Factor*. Presenters in this session deliberated the pros and cons of the ‘submarine race’ among Asian navies and the potential impact on the balance of power and strategic calculations in regional waters. The third and last session was on *Confidence Building Measures : Challenges and Prospects*. The session heard presenters sharing their thoughts on measures undertaken to build confidence among ASEAN navies, in the context of naval cooperation, preventive diplomacy and maritime security.

Contemporary maritime security dynamics and realities demand navies to play roles and undertake activities beyond their traditional blue water confines. This is especially so in the vast Asian region which encompasses strategic maritime areas such as South East Asia and East Asia. More than ever, navies of nations in these regions are expected to operate beyond their territorial waters to protect their interests and the sovereignty of their countries. This point was strongly emphasized throughout the seminar amid open and frank discussions among senior naval officers and leading scholars in the field of maritime security and diplomacy.

The building blocks of confidence building

At the seminar, the importance of using Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) as a key tool to promote peace, security, stability and cooperation in the regional seas and among their stakeholders was highlighted. CBMs are crucial not only to address traditional security concerns within the maritime sphere in the region such as piracy but also non-traditional threats such as maritime pollution and the menace of maritime terrorism. The need for CBMs has taken a more pressing tone in this era of globalisation and amid today’s internationally integrated security matrix.

The importance of promoting CBMs is crucial especially in Asia which largely consists of developing nations with many socio-economic priorities and which do not possess the necessary or adequate resources and expertise to address the plethora of complex challenges across the expanse of the regional seas. To this end, the more technically savvy and financially endowed

countries within the international community which has plenty of stake riding on regional seas should come to the fore to assist the regional countries to manage the seas. Assistance should be rendered to the needy in various areas such as intelligence sharing, surveillance, human capital development, trafficking, smuggling, navigation safety, environmental protection, search and rescue, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, among many others. These form of CBMs can create a virtuous cycle all around as they promote safety, security and stability in the regional seas which in turn will lead to safer and secure seas that can benefit regional nations and the larger global community.

Participants of the seminar also took home the message that CBMs and coordinated efforts to boost maritime security can act as a conduit in promoting regional economic development and integration, and camaraderie among international maritime stakeholders. They also warmed up to the growing call for higher level CBMs to be promoted in the Asian maritime sphere among regional and international navies and governments.

It is an open secret that various historical, political, strategic, economic and even cultural factors act as obstacles that constrain maritime security cooperation at a much higher level among Asian navies and governments. The high level of cooperation in maritime security that European Union navies and governments enjoy still eludes their Asian counterparts. However, there have been admirable efforts among Asian navies to engage in more intensive, meaningful cooperation to address common maritime security threats and concerns. The success of coordinated, trilateral patrols among the navies of the littoral states of the Straits of Malacca through the Eyes in the Sky air-naval surveillance initiative provides evidence of the kind of high-level engagement that can be attained if nations set aside differences and work together to address common threats and attain mutual objectives. The positive impact of the cooperation among the littoral states in the Straits of Malacca, which contributed to the decline of piracy cases in the waters, stands testimony to the virtues of CBMs.

Calm oceans = peaceful region

The discourse at the seminar provided a timely reminder that cooperation among nations can certainly boost security in the Asian region. Although this is a daunting task to achieve, it is critical that efforts to enhance security in the regional seas are continuously promoted and sustained. Given the trans-boundary and non-asymmetrical nature of security threats in the maritime milieu, it is essential that nations cooperate, collaborate and engage in activities that propagate trust, confidence and mutual understanding among them to address common maritime threats effectively.

Given the high dependence of regional Asian countries and the international community at large on the safety, security and stability of the regional seas, it is imperative that issues concerning security and strategic affairs in these waters are addressed resolutely and judiciously. One on hand, there is no denying the importance of the stakeholders and actors to engage in cooperative and collaborative efforts to ensure security and develop domain awareness in the regional seas through CBMs. On the other hand, it is also imperative that any efforts to promote CBMs should

not run afoul of international laws and impinge on the sovereignty, sovereign rights and territorial integrity of any regional nation.

The message of the seminar is loud and clear : a secure maritime domain in the Asian region is pivotal not only to regional stability and development, but also to the international community at large. With the right approach, the promotion of CBMs in Asian seas can lead to the regional waters to become a platform for prosperity instead of a chessboard for conflict.