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**“ASEAN, Regional Security and  
The Role of the United States:  
A View from Southeast Asia”**

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**ASEAN, REGIONAL SECURITY AND  
THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES:  
A VIEW FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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**Introduction**

After the end of the Cold War, many Southeast Asian countries resented the fact that the strategic importance of the region in the eyes of the United States (US) had receded due to dramatic changes in the global and regional environment. The post-Cold War emphasis in American foreign policy on promoting free trade, democracy, and human rights, while being welcome by some in the capitals of the Association of Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN), has also created much animosity and resentment in others. They complained that their countries, and the region as a whole, have not been given adequate attention by the US.<sup>1</sup> Southeast Asia, however, was soon to receive a much greater attention after the terrorist attacks on September 11 in the US. Such attention, however, did not come in a form that many would have expected. The significance of the region in post-9/11 American security policy increased substantially, primarily due to its Muslim population in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. Indeed, as the US declared and waged its “global war on terror,” Southeast Asia has come to be seen as a “second front” in that war.

This paper looks at the impacts of the post-9/11 US security policy in Southeast Asia on the management of regional order in the region. It argues that while ASEAN countries do recognise Washington’s legitimate security interests in Southeast Asia, US policy in Asia in the post-9/11 has certainly posed several challenges to the management of regional order and security. One such challenge is the widening “security gap” between ASEAN’s expectation of the US on the one hand and what the US is willing to provide on the other. The paper also focuses on how that “gap” has been created, and what can be done about it. The discussion is

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Charles Morison, “US Security Relations with Southeast Asia: Possibilities and Prospects for the Clinton Administration,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 47, no. 2 (October 1993).

divided into three sections. The first section examines the security situation in the region and the role of ASEAN in managing regional order, especially since the end of the Cold War. The second section looks at the US security policy towards Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorists' attacks, and how it affects the management of regional order in particular and the US-Southeast Asia relations in general. The third section discusses how Japan can play a positive role in filling "the security gap" left by the US current policy in Southeast Asia.

### **ASEAN and Regional Security**

For more than a decade since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN has been struggling to redefine its role in order to reaffirm its relevance and efficacy in responding to a new security environment. Since then, ASEAN has been trying to resolve persistent traditional security issues –such as competitive major power relations, intra-ASEAN territorial disputes, the problem of South China Sea, and traditional suspicions among some members of each other. At the same time, ASEAN has also actively directed its efforts to address the increasing importance of non-traditional security challenges in the region. A number of initiatives –such as the expansion of membership, the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the strengthening of the ASEAN Secretariat and other institution-building measures—were taken in order to strengthen ASEAN's response to the new challenges.

The post-September 11 security environment –at national, regional, and global level—has certainly increased the magnitude of security challenges facing ASEAN. The rise of terrorism as a new lethal threat clearly adds a new security burden on ASEAN. While some key member states remained preoccupied with internal conflicts –such as the spate of bloody communal violence in Indonesia, and separatism in Indonesia and the Philippines—the problem of terrorism clearly highlights the inter-connectedness between national problems on the one hand and regional security and stability on the other. The threat of terrorism in the region serves as the latest reminder to all member states that security interdependence has become an undeniable reality in Southeast Asia. What happens in one country certainly has an impact on others.

Despite the growing magnitude of the threat of terrorism, ASEAN's approach to security has never been driven by an overriding concern over a single issue. Since its inception in August 1967, ASEAN has always approached security matters in a comprehensive manner. For Southeast Asian countries, security has always encompassed wide arrays of issues in social, cultural, economic, political, and military fronts. Problems in those areas –especially within the domestic context-- are seen to have the potential to destabilise nation-states and regional peace and security. Based on such conception of security, ASEAN has always distinguished security in terms of what we now conceptualise as traditional and non-traditional threats. However, until very recently, ASEAN countries tended to

see non-traditional security issues primarily as domestic problems of member state which required national solution. The growing salience of non-traditional problems since the end of the Cold War, however, forced ASEAN to recognise the important of inter-state cooperation in dealing with such issues.

In resolving regional security issues, both at national and regional levels, ASEAN from the outset undertook two interrelated approaches. First, threats from non-traditional security problems were left to individual member state to resolve, especially through nation-building measures. Second, to enable individual states resolving those problems, regional cooperation is necessary to create a peaceful external environment so that states would not be distracted from domestic priorities. These approaches later evolved into a strategy of building regional resilience, a conception influenced by Indonesia's thinking of *ketahanan nasional* (national resilience). Such thinking postulates that "if each member nation can accomplish an overall national development and overcome internal threats, regional resilience will automatically result much in the same way as a chain derives its overall strength from the strength of its constituent parts".<sup>2</sup> In other words, ASEAN believed that the management of inter-state relations in the region should be founded on the sanctity of national sovereignty of its member states. Regional cooperation was sought in order not to erode but rather to reinforce that sovereignty.

Despite its apparent inward-looking, ASEAN's strategy to nurture and maintain regional security did not ignore the role of external powers. Indeed, during the Cold War, Southeast Asia had always been a theatre for rivalries and competition among major powers; notably China, the US and the Soviet Union. Aware of such reality, however, ASEAN sought to limit the negative effects of rivalries among major power on the region. ASEAN also maintains its preference for regional solution to regional problems, and agreed that the presence of foreign military bases is temporary in nature. In 1971 ASEAN declared the region as a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), and in 1995, the region was declared as a nuclear free zone (SEANWFZ). For most part of the Cold War period, however, these measures served as no more than declaration of intent. Due to differences in security interests of ASEAN member states, the role of major powers remained a significant factor in the security of the region. For example, it has been acknowledged that "since the end of World War II, the U.S. has provided Southeast Asia with a security umbrella that has been a stabilising factor for the development of the region."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jusuf Wanandi, "Security Issues in the ASEAN Region," in Karl D. Jackson and M. Hadi Soesastro, eds., *ASEAN Security and Economic Development*, Research Papers and Policy Studies no. 11 (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1984), p. 305.

<sup>3</sup> Tommy Koh, "Southeast Asia," in Kim Kyung-won, Tommy Koh, and Farooq Sobhan, *America's Role in Asia: Asian Views*, (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2004), p. 38.

With the end of the Cold War, ASEAN's approach to regional security began to show some indications of change, though limited in nature. First, while some ASEAN countries began to be more flexible, the notion of sovereignty as the basis for regional cooperation remains paramount. For example, ASEAN has recognised the imperative for cooperation among member states to resolve domestic problems with cross-border effects. Such an acknowledgment, however, is more visible among the old members of ASEAN, especially Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. However, the principle of non-interference is still jealously guarded by ASEAN states. Second, ASEAN countries continue to believe that security challenges facing the region are numerous and take multiple forms, especially in non-traditional forms. The threat of terrorism is but one problem along side other security problems such as extreme poverty, trans-national crimes, piracy, children and women trafficking, communal violence, and separatism.<sup>4</sup> On the traditional front, ASEAN is also unsettled with the situation in the Taiwan Straits, Korean Peninsula, and the future of China-Japan relations. Third, in coping with security challenges, ASEAN believes that multilateral approach would be more realistic and more beneficial to every one in the region, both regional and extra-regional players.

Indeed, ASEAN has played an instrumental role in instituting a multilateral security framework in Asia-Pacific. The creation of the ASEAN regional Forum (ARF) is a testament for that. With ASEAN's role as a primary driving force, the ARF serves as the only multilateral forum for security cooperation the region, involving not only Southeast Asian, South Asian, and Northeast Asian countries, but more importantly also Russia and the US. Through the ARF, member countries are expected to seek and attain national security with, not against, the regional partners. ASEAN also expects that the ARF could serve as a constructive venue for major powers –especially China, Japan, and the US-- to engage each other in a spirit of cooperation. Indeed, for ASEAN, the ARF --despite its shortcomings-- serves as a venue through which its security interests, and the interests of extra-regional powers, could be best attained.

Within ASEAN itself, member countries have begun to deepen their cooperation in political and security areas. During the 9<sup>th</sup> Summit in 2003 in Bali, Indonesia, ASEAN leaders reached an important agreement to work closely in order to transform the Association into a security community by 2020. In the Bali Concord II, ASEAN leaders affirm that the ASEAN Security Community (ASC) “is envisaged to bring ASEAN's political and security cooperation to a higher plane to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment”.<sup>5</sup> The agreement reflects ASEAN's commitment to create a community of nations at

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<sup>4</sup> Singapore is rather different in this regard. Even though it subscribes to the notion of comprehensive security, in the post-September 11 environment Singapore seems to see terrorism as the overriding security threat in the region, much more than other security problems.

<sup>5</sup> The Bali Concord II, signed in Bali, Indonesia, by ASEAN leaders on 7 October 2003.

peace with one another and at peace with the world, characterised not only by the absence of war, but also by the absence of the prospect of war among ASEAN member states. It is a regional grouping that has renounced the use of force, and the threat of the use of force, as a means of resolving intra-regional conflicts. An ASEAN Security Community would strengthen ASEAN's commitment to resolve conflicts and disputes through a depoliticised means of legal instruments and mechanisms, and through other peaceful means. If realised, this initiative would contribute greatly to regional stability and security.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Role of the United States: Security-Enhancing or Security-Complicating?**

It has been mentioned earlier that prior to the September 11, most Southeast Asian countries viewed the US as a stabilising factor in the region. Despite differences in the declaratory policy of individual member states on the US military presence, a majority of ASEAN countries recognised that such a presence served a deterrent to potential aggressors in the region.<sup>7</sup> This view was indeed reinforced by the fact that after the closure of US military bases in the Philippines, a number of key ASEAN countries –Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore—agreed to provide access and port calls arrangements for the US.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, with the end of the Cold War, ASEAN countries were worried that “a possible reduction of the American security presence in the region might lead other regional actors to push for greater influence.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, there have been complaints in the region that the U.S has treated Southeast Asia with “benign neglect” or “indifference.”

At the same time, however, ASEAN was also worried about the prospects of the U.S. relations with China. When President George W. Bush entered office in 2000, ASEAN countries were anxious with Washington's anti-China rhetoric and its determination to defend Taiwan with “whatever it takes”. The US' view of China as “a strategic competitor” became a source of great concern among ASEAN countries. They were worried about the possible conflict between the two major powers in the region, and a possibility that Japan would also be drawn into it. Indeed, if such scenario became a reality, ASEAN was worried that it would be forced to take sides. Meanwhile, ASEAN countries believe that good relations

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis on the challenges facing ASEAN in realising such an ideal can be found in Carolina Hernandez, “The Current State of ASEAN Political-Security Cooperation: Problems and Prospects in Forming an ASEAN Security Community,” paper presented at The Fourth U.N.-ASEAN Conference on *Conflict Prevention, Conflict Resolution, and Peace Building in Southeast Asia: ASEAN Security Community and the U.N.*, Jakarta, 23-25 February 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Charles H. Stevenson, “U.S. Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia: Implications for Current Regional Issues,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 14, no. 2 (September 1992), p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> Carolina Hernandez, “Security Issues in Southeast Asia: Implications for U.S. Relations with the Region,” paper presented at Workshop on “America's Role in Asia”, The Asia Foundation and the Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore, 18-20 February 2004, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Tadashi Yamamoto, Pranee Thiparat, and Abul Ahsan, *America's Role in Asia: Asian Views* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2001), p. 40.

between the US and China are critical for the region's stability and prosperity. However, these two major elements of US policy in Southeast Asia –benign neglect of Southeast Asia, and an assertive (if not hostile) policy towards China -- changed dramatically after September 11, 2001. Southeast Asia soon became an important locus for the US' global war on terror. And, with that, ASEAN's task of managing regional order has become more complicated

### *The War on Terror and Regional Order*

It has been asserted that “one of the unintended consequences of 9/11 is the strategic return of the United States to the region.”<sup>10</sup> Southeast Asia has now occupied an important place in American security policy as a “second front” in the war on terror. It has been declared, for example, “Southeast Asia will be another important front in this war.”<sup>11</sup> It has been suggested also that “one frontier in the next round [in the fight against global terrorism] will likely be Southeast Asia.”<sup>12</sup> At official level, it was reported that the Bush administration has identified Indonesia as “a place of interest.”<sup>13</sup> And, together with the Philippines and Malaysia, Indonesia was reportedly named as “potential Al Qaida hubs” by the U.S. State Department.<sup>14</sup> When a number of suspected terrorists were arrested in Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, such speculations seemed to have been confirmed. And, due to the American concerns about the presence of trans-national terrorist links in Southeast Asia, the region is now, once again since the Vietnam War, given more attention by foreign and defence policy makers in Washington.

Indeed, there has been no single view within ASEAN on the characteristics of the US security policy since September 11 and its war on terror in the region. However, some general elements can be ascertained. First, some countries in the region view the US policy in Southeast Asia, especially in carrying out its war on terror, as too intrusive. In Indonesia, for example, there are perceptions that the US often interferes in domestic affairs in demanding the country to take stronger measures against the problem of terrorism. Second, most ASEAN countries complain and are worried that signs of growing appreciation for multilateralism in East Asia by the Clinton Administration have now begun to disappear under President Bush Administration. Since September 11, the US preference for unilateralism is seen to have grown stronger. For example, the ARF –the only

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<sup>10</sup> Rommel C. Banloi, “Southeast Asian Perspectives on the Rise of China: Regional Security After 9/11”, *Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly*, vol. 33, No. 2 (Summer 2003), p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> Dana R. Dillon and Paolo Pasicolan, “Southeast Asia and the War Against Terrorism,” *The Heritage Foundation's Backgrounders*, No. 1496, 23 October 2001, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Chatarin E. Dalpino, “Southeast Asia: A Second Front,” *Knight Rider Newspapers*, 21 December 2001, found at *Taiwan News.com*, accessed on 21 February 2002.

<sup>13</sup> See, David L. Philips, “The Next Stage in the War on Terror,” *International Herald Tribune*, 23 March 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Richardson, “Southeast Asia Bars Help of U.S. Troops,” *International Herald Tribune*, 4 December 2001.

prototypical cooperative security organisation in East Asia-- is conspicuously missing in the *National Security Strategy* (NSS) of 2002.<sup>15</sup> Third, there have also been perceptions, especially in Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, that the US war on terror is fraught with a degree of bias towards Islam and the Muslims in Southeast Asia. Fourth, as it has always been the case, Washington's Southeast Asia policy continues to reflect a persistent tendency in the US foreign policy which is driven by a single-issue only at global level: strategic rivalry with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, promoting democracy and human rights since the end of the Cold War, and now since 9-11 the war on terrorism.

These four characteristics of US security policy in Southeast Asia have complicated the management of regional order in at least five respects. First, as mentioned earlier, ASEAN prefers to see the problems of stability and security managed through cooperative multilateral security dialogue and cooperation. The US tendency to resort to unilateralism clearly poses a challenge to ASEAN's attempts at promoting the habit of cooperation through multilateral security dialogues with the ARF as the main vehicle. Second, the US war on terror has also brought about a divisive impact on ASEAN. While no ASEAN country is in principle opposed to the imperative of combating terrorism, they differ regarding the US-led war on terrorism. On one end of the spectrum, Singapore has been totally supportive of whatever measures the US are taking. Meanwhile, at the other end, Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed their reservations on how the US conducts its war on terror. If not managed carefully, these differences could pose a problem to the unity of ASEAN.

Third, the US war on terror has complicated the domestic politics of some countries, especially Indonesia. It appears that the US earlier attention to supporting democratic transition in the country has now been diluted by a narrower focus on combating terrorism and the radical Islam. This becomes a hindrance the process of domestic recovery and democratic transition, which in turn, delays the process of rebuilding regional stability. Fourth, the perceived bias against Islam in the US foreign policy in general, and in the war against terrorism in particular, has generated anti-American sentiment in a number of ASEAN countries, especially within some segments of the Muslim society. It can also create a serious problem in a country where Muslim is a significant minority. The case of Southern Thailand, for example, is illustrative. Fifth, the US focus on terrorism has put additional pressure on ASEAN's attempt to deal with the more complex reality of regional security problems. The pressure to focus exclusively on terrorism has made it difficult for ASEAN to address other security problems, especially in the non-traditional areas. ASEAN cannot expect much from the US in its efforts to deal with the problems in areas other than terrorism-related, unless a

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<sup>15</sup> See, Harry Harding, "Asia in American Grand Strategy: The *Quadrennial Defense Review* and The *National Security Strategy*," in Robert M. Hathaway and Wilson Lee, eds., *George W. Bush and Asia: A Midterm Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), p. 52.

link to the threat of terrorism can be demonstrated. It might also dilute ASEAN's initial commitment to engage and resolve security problems in a comprehensive manner.

By looking at these impacts of the US security policy on ASEAN, it is clear that there have been a "security gap" in the relationship between the US and the region in the post-9/11 era. That gap is visible in ASEAN's expectations of the US on the one hand and the US readiness and willingness to fulfill those expectations on the other. First, while ASEAN expects that the US contribute to the domestic stabilisation in key countries such as Indonesia, the US policy has in fact complicated the process. Second, when ASEAN expects the US to support, promote and strengthen cooperative multilateral security institutions such as the ARF, it in fact tends to recoil and increasingly becomes more unilateralists. Third, when ASEAN expects the US to carry out the war on terror in a purely security context, its policy has in fact failed to avoid religious controversies. Fourth, when ASEAN expects the US to play a supportive role in helping the Association to address non-traditional security problems in a comprehensive manner, the US involvement in, and attention to, Southeast Asia has in fact been driven and dictated by a single issue of terrorism. As a result, the regional security environment in the post-9/11 era has become more complex for ASEAN to deal with.

*Regional Response:  
The ASEAN Security Community*

Aware of such complexity brought about by the changes in the US security policy in the post-9/11 era, ASEAN began to ponder on new ideas to adequately response to the changing external environment in Southeast Asia in particular and East Asia in general. It realises that the management of regional order in the post-9/11 period needs to be carried out through more creative ways. Such new ideas came in the form of Indonesia's proposal to transform ASEAN into a security community. Indonesia believes that the multiple threats and complex security problems facing ASEAN requires the Association to rethink its rationale, strengthen its institutions, and embark upon a new course to renew itself. ASEAN can no longer be allowed to "float" without a sense of purpose; without a practical goal that needs to be achieved, without a future condition that needs to be realised. The idea of ASEAN Security Community (ASC) is meant to provide such a sense of purpose, a practical goal, and a future condition that all member states should strive for.

As adopted in the 9<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in Bali, Indonesia, in October 2003, the ASC is primarily meant to provide a framework for the management of intra-mural relations within ASEAN member states. As envisaged in the Bali Concord II, the ASC is meant "to bring ASEAN's political and security cooperation to a higher plane to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and

with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment.”<sup>16</sup> Despite its nature as an internal working mechanism, however, the ASC also provides some guidelines on how ASEAN would manage its relations with non-regional countries, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. The Bali Concord states that the ASC “shall contribute to further promoting peace and security in the wider Asia Pacific region..” and that “the ARF shall remain the main forum for regional security dialogue, with ASEAN as the primary driving force.” It also maintains that the ASC will be “open and outward looking in respect of actively engaging ASEAN’s friends and Dialogue Partners to promote peace and stability in the region, and shall build on the ARF to facilitate consultation and cooperation between ASEAN and its friends and Partners on regional security matters.”

The idea of ASC will be achieved through cooperation in five main areas: political development, norms-setting, conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and post-conflict peace building. ASEAN is now in the process of devising a plan of action that will lay out concrete measures needed to transform itself into a security community. Despite the initial reluctance of the part of some ASEAN countries to endorse some aspects of Indonesia’s drafted ASC Plan of Action, a compromise seems to have been reached. The challenges, however, are enormous. ASEAN can not fulfill its ideal without the support from others. Besides the existing differences among ASEAN countries, the capacity of the Association to embark upon such a plan is also limited. In such circumstances, the role of Japan, especially to close the “security gap” identified earlier, would be critical. The question, however, remains: will and can Japan fulfill that expectation? If so, how?

### **Concluding Remarks**

The opportunity for Japan’s increased role in helping to create regional stability and security in Southeast Asia has become greater given Tokyo’s desire to play a greater international security role. As part of that plan, Japan can help ASEAN in areas where the US has not been willing, or has failed, to engage in. A closer cooperation coping with non-traditional security problems beyond terrorism would be one main area of mutual interests. The Tokyo Declaration for the Dynamic and Enduring ASEAN-Japan Partnership in the New Millennium, agreed upon by ASEAN and Japan leaders during the First ASEAN-Japan Summit in December 2003, and the subsequent ASEAN-Japan Plan of Action, can certainly provide the basis for such cooperation. Indeed, ASEAN and Japan has pledged “to enhance political and security cooperation and partnership at all levels in order to consolidate peace in the region, and work together towards peaceful settlement of disputes in the region bilaterally and through the ARF and other regional and international for a” and “enhance cooperation in the areas of counter-terrorism, anti-piracy and in combating other transnational crimes through the ARF, ASEAN

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<sup>16</sup> The Bali Concord II.

Plus Three process, ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime Plus Three as well as other regional and international fora.”<sup>17</sup>

Japan’s greater security role in Southeast Asia, however, needs to take into account a number of issues sensitive to the some countries in the region. First, in playing a greater security role in Southeast Asia, Japan should avoid the impression that such a role is only an extension of that of the US, or meant to serve larger American interests in the region. For such a purpose, the focus on broader agenda of security cooperation, which extends beyond terrorism, is imperative. Second, in order to avoid such impression, Japan needs to maintain a degree of autonomy in its policy towards Southeast Asia. Third, such autonomy will be easier to be demonstrated if Japan is soon able to define the precise form of security role it desires to play. In the Southeast Asian context, ASEAN wishes to see Japan become a peace-maker for humanity in security front, and maintain its role as the promoter of prosperity in the economic front. Over more that five decades, Japan has proven to be the most reliable partner and friend for ASEAN. It is certainly capable of doing so in the future.

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<sup>17</sup> The Tokyo Declaration for the Dynamic and Enduring ASEAN-Japan Partnership in the New Millenium.