Promoting Regional Cooperation: Towards Reduced Threat Perceptions
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ASEAN: A Community of Opportunities for All

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Promoting Regional Cooperation: Towards Reduced Threat Perceptions

The ASEAN Secretariat
Jakarta
Recognizing that the maintenance of peace, stability and security has been the foundation of economic growth, developments and prosperity in the region, issues related to arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament have always featured as important priorities for ASEAN. This was demonstrated by the signing of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty in 1995, which embodied ASEAN’s commitment to make the ASEAN region free from the dangers of nuclear weapon proliferation and the threats of weapons of mass destruction, while enjoying peace and stability.

Moreover, with the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 1976, the ASEAN Member States have committed themselves to having and maintaining a peaceful relationship with one another, as guided by the principles of mutual respect, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, and the peaceful settlement of disputes, among others. By invoking such fundamental principles, the TAC has served and continues to be a leading framework of inter-state relations not only among the Member States of ASEAN, but also in conjunction to ASEAN’s relations with its external partners. These principles are enshrined in the ASEAN Charter and stipulated in the Declaration of the East Asia Summit (EAS) on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations which was adopted in 2011.

Over the decades, ASEAN has successfully built trust and confidence among its Member States and enhanced relations, cooperation and partnerships with its External Partners, which includes through the ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). While defence and military spending by individual ASEAN Member States may have increased through the years, the rise has been relatively modest, and have been borne by the necessity to address an increasing array of defence and security challenges.

By proactively building confidence and promoting strategic trust, ASEAN is making a substantive contribution in addressing and mitigating the security challenges faced by states, thereby lessening their reliance on additional weapons acquisition to promote and safeguard their security. Coupled with the strong commitment by the ASEAN Member States to keep the region peaceful and stable, each Member State is assured that whatever spending the other members put into their respective militaries are for legitimate purposes and would never be considered to direct at a fellow member of ASEAN.

I am confident that you will find the 5th Volume of the APSC Outlook insightful, useful and play a vital part in contributing to peace, stability, security and development of the Southeast Asia region and beyond.

DR. KAO KIM HOURN
Secretary-General of ASEAN
Towards Less Military Spending: The Case of ASEAN

R.M. Michael Tene

To better understand the matter of defence spending in Southeast Asia, it is imperative to understand what ASEAN is all about and what it is not. ASEAN is an association of ten nations which means that all Member States retain full sovereignty on all areas of cooperation. Member States have different outlooks, perspectives and approaches in terms of security arrangements, including security cooperation with fellow ASEAN Member States and beyond ASEAN itself.

ASEAN is not an alliance. It does not have regular ASEAN-wide military exercises. Military exercises are instead initiated by individual members of ASEAN, with the other members being invited including other partners of ASEAN. This is the prevailing type of military cooperation, especially since ASEAN is not a military alliance.

Having said that, there is quite significant defence cooperation in ASEAN. Currently, ASEAN defence cooperation covers areas such as counter terrorism, maritime security, humanitarian assistance, disaster response involving military and civilian personnel, military medicine, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian mine action, as well as cooperation on cybersecurity. Aside from defence cooperation, there is also cooperation on transnational crime, which is a multi-dimensional security concern.

It is therefore evident that cooperation on defence is developed based on areas that all Member States have agreed upon. It is not an encompassing defence cooperation, but more on specific areas agreed upon among Member States.

In regard to ASEAN’s contribution to less military spending, this is achieved by the reduction of the perception of threat among ASEAN Member States as well as in the wider region surrounding Southeast Asia. ASEAN cooperation, although not the sole factor, plays a major role in reducing such perception of threat among its Member States.

This is the foremost contribution of ASEAN in terms of reducing military spending. Other arrangements such as arms control arrangements, or other similar arrangements are very useful but they merely address the symptoms. The core issues relating to whether

* Based on the remarks delivered at the 79th Session of the United Nation Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters (ABDM) Panel Discussion I on “Opportunities for Strengthening and Promoting Regional Cooperation on Military Spending” held on 1 February 2023 via videoconference including the discussions during the open forum.

** R.M. Michael Tene is Deputy Secretary-General for ASEAN Political-Security Community.
to increase or reduce military spending is about the perception of threat among the countries concerned.

Figures about military spending of ASEAN countries reveals that between 2017 to 2021, the average military expenditure as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was only about 1.96 percent or slightly below 2 percent. The average spending in general in the past five years up to 2021 as a percentage of GDP was quite low. Furthermore, notwithstanding some increases, military spending has remained relatively flat over the years.

As previously mentioned, ASEAN has contributed to the reduced perception of threat among its Member States. How exactly does ASEAN do it, one would ask?

Foremost is the promotion of peaceful relations among ASEAN Member States. It must be stressed that the non-use of force is a very important principle in ASEAN cooperation as well as in its relationships with its partners. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) specifically mentions about the reduction of threat in terms of the relationship between ASEAN Member States. With the TAC having been signed by all of ASEAN partners, it is not only a treaty that binds the ASEAN Member States, it also provides the normative framework on how ASEAN External Partners are expected to behave in engaging countries in the region. As a treaty, the TAC is a legally binding instrument and underpins the cooperative mindset in ASEAN.

Non-use of force and the peaceful resolution of conflicts are important elements to build trust and confidence. These fundamental tenets of the TAC are directly related with threat perception. If trust and confidence are low, the perception of threat easily increases. Likewise, if there is a high level of trust and confidence, then the perception of threat will be significantly lower. Whether it is in regard to the domestic context or interstate relations, the reduced perception of threat will have significant impact on military spending.

As it is widely acknowledged, cooperation in ASEAN through the years has contributed to reduced threat perception among ASEAN Member States. The relatively stable domestic environment of each ASEAN Member State as well as the relatively peaceful relations among ASEAN Member States are the key factors that contribute to the reduced perception of threat in ASEAN.
The pursuit of comprehensive cooperation in ASEAN undertaken through the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, contributes to peace and prosperity among ASEAN Member States. For example, climate change is one of the current issues that are dealt with by ASEAN across the three community pillars, including efforts to build green economy and sustainable development. The issues of women, peace and security (WPS) is also high on the ASEAN agenda.

ASEAN comprehensive cooperation has created a dense network of common interest.

This comprehensive cooperation has created a dense network of common interest that can counter-balance any possible aggravation of conflicts among the Member States. At the same time, this directly and indirectly contributes to a stable domestic political situation within each ASEAN Member State.

III

ASEAN is also cognisant of the fact that the peace and stability of the Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region does not only depend on the relationship among the ASEAN countries. It is also shaped by other external players. Southeast Asia as a region is surrounded by many major powers, both global and regional powers.

In this context, it bears reminding that Southeast Asia is an open region. It is one of the most important sea lanes of communications for global trade. So, there are many outside powers that have a legitimate interest in the region’s peace and stability. It is in this context that ASEAN engages these powers through the various fora that ASEAN has established such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) where regional powers that are relevant to the peace and prosperity of the region are invited to engage ASEAN. Cooperation both within ASEAN and with its External Partners are indeed pursued in an array of mechanisms.

In terms of countries that have nuclear weapons, there are India and Pakistan in the west of Southeast Asia; in the north, there are China and Russia; there is North Korea in the east/northeast; and further in the east across the Pacific, there is the United States. Some of the countries mentioned are global major powers and some of them are considered as regional powers that have huge regional and global potential.
And here it is useful to briefly discuss the nexus between nuclear weapons and disarmament. While the term disarmament is specific to the elimination of nuclear weapons, it is nevertheless useful to put these efforts within two practical and realistic perspectives: (1) efforts to limit or to reduce the ownership of nuclear armaments spreading throughout the Nuclear Weapon States; and (2) the non-proliferation efforts by the global community to make sure that the ownership of nuclear weapons does not increase. None of the ASEAN Member States is a nuclear weapon state and ASEAN itself is active in terms of non-proliferation efforts.

There is the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty which ASEAN Member States signed in 1995. The issue with SEANWFZ pertains to its protocol that has yet to be signed by the Nuclear Weapon States, which are the five permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council. ASEAN is currently in the process of negotiating and encouraging the Nuclear Weapon States to sign on the protocol of SEANWFZ Treaty because in the end, if this Treaty is not respected by the Nuclear Weapon States, then the effectiveness of this Treaty will be significantly reduced.

Going back to major power relations, it is unfortunate that the region has witnessed a deterioration of relations among some of the major powers in the past five to six years. The deterioration of this relationship, which manifests in increased competitions and increased strategic rivalry, affects the perception of threat among them and the perception of threat of countries in Southeast Asia. The implication of such deteriorating relationships among countries that are important partners and friends of ASEAN will have implications on the region. The emergence of minilaterals like the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) partnership or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), is something that could be considered as a reaction to the deteriorating situation. AUKUS is an example on how the reaction of some of ASEAN External Partners to the deteriorating relationships of the major powers.

It is worth noting that while there is an increased perception of threat from external factors and outside the Southeast Asian region, ASEAN is becoming more important. The deteriorating relations among some major powers, at least in their engagement in Southeast Asia or in the wider region of Indo-Pacific, actually accentuates ASEAN’s importance.
ASEAN provides the platform for external powers to engage with ASEAN as well as among themselves to address challenges faced by the Indo-Pacific region. As previously mentioned, they interact through various ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the EAS, the ARF and the ADMM-Plus. These are the fora whereby ASEAN engages its partners, as well as for them to engage with one another.

Through the AOIP and its principle of inclusiveness, ASEAN mitigates the impact of major power competition.

This is actually what is at the core of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), whereby ASEAN tries to mitigate and address the impact of the major power competition, at least in their relationships with the region, or in their engagements in Southeast Asia. Whatever they are doing elsewhere, they, at least, have to take into account the interest of the region. This actually gives more importance to ASEAN not only in Southeast Asia, but in the wider region which is now referred to as Indo-Pacific. All these major powers have, on many occasions and consistently, stressed the Centrality of ASEAN as well as its important role.

The matter of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) is an example on how ASEAN deals with security issues with its partners. ASEAN is aware that there are many issues related to maritime borders, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and the intercontinental shelf. Even among ASEAN Member States, there are many maritime borders that are yet to be resolved. The matter of overlapping claims is not only with an ASEAN partner, which is China, but there is also overlapping claims on some of maritime areas among ASEAN Member States themselves.

What is done in this situation?

ASEAN engages China in developing the Code of Conduct, which is an effort to create a code of behaviour among ASEAN Member States and China on how they conduct themselves in the South China Sea. It is an effort to create trust and build confidence, and to manage potential crisis. The COC is not about addressing maritime boundary issues because this matter is to be negotiated directly between the countries concerned. But through the COC initiative, at least ASEAN is engaging China to build a conducive environment so that the existence of disputes on overlapping maritime borders can be contained or managed properly. The resolution of boundaries has been an issue for decades, or even hundreds of years, but the situation can be managed if there is the political will to do so. The COC is an effort of ASEAN to create a

Cooperation in and through ASEAN has contributed to a reduced perception of threat among regional countries.
conducive environment with China. It is also an effort to manage the potential conflicts that may arise from the existence of overlapping claims in the South China Sea.

IV

ASEAN does not have any coordination or cooperation regarding how much Member States should spend in terms of their military spending. But cooperation through ASEAN has contributed significantly to the reduced perception of threat in ASEAN, as well as efforts to engage its External Partners makes the perception of threat beyond Members of ASEAN becomes manageable. Transparency is a key so much so that there is a clear understanding on the intention and behaviour of ASEAN’s partners vis-à-vis Southeast Asian region through the various fora that are available.
Contextualising Military Spending in ASEAN: Factors and Trends

I

The matter of military spending at any given point in time on the one hand could be seen as indicative of the current state of global and regional affairs, and on the other hand as a factor that could contribute to or undermine global peace and stability. The build-up of arms, resulting from increases in military purchases for example, could lead to an arms race which in turn could make the security dilemma faced by states more acute.

II

In recent years the world has witnessed a dramatic increase in military spending across all regions. It is said that global military spending in 2021 (when latest data is thus far available) “reached $2.1 trillion, rising for its seventh year in a row”.¹

And with the increasing strategic competition among the major powers and amidst what would be considered as “volatile relations” among countries, it is easy to see these increased military spending as either being caused by an arms race or could lead to one in the foreseeable future.

In the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions alone, the key players in the last five years have increased their defence spending. Four of the five countries which top the global military spending list (the United States, China, India and Russia) are actually from the region. It can be seen that these countries have consistently increased their military spending for the past five years, except for Russia which spent USD 66.9 billion in 2017 but had slightly lower military spending by 1 billion in 2021 at USD 65.9 billion.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>646.8</td>
<td>682.5</td>
<td>734.3</td>
<td>778.4</td>
<td>800.7</td>
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<td>232.5</td>
<td>240.3</td>
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<td>293.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>65.2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adapted from https://www.visualcapitalist.com/ranked-top-10-countries-by-military-spending/.

For the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a notable increase in their individual defence spending is also observed. To put these increases in the appropriate context, the following points should be considered.

First, the military spending of the ASEAN Members States for 2021 was roughly only 5 percent of the total collective military spending of 27 countries which are part of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The aggregate defence spending of ARF participants is used as the benchmark considering that the ARF includes most, if not all, the relevant countries in the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions, including the major powers. It becomes evident therefore that the military spending of ASEAN Member States constitutes a small fraction of overall defence spending in the region.

Second, looking at the available data thus far, the average increase from 2017 to 2021 in military spending by the ASEAN Member States was roughly 3.5 percent, a modest quantum to say the least specially if this is benchmarked with the average inflation rate in the region for the same period which was around 2.3 percent. These figures would indicate that the increases in military spending are actually been just modest enough to have covered the increases in inflation across all Members of ASEAN.
Not: Figures in the table have been extracted from data available at the World Bank website.

Third, available figures also indicate that across ASEAN, defence spending for the same five-year period (2017 to 2021) was roughly on average 2 percent (1.96 percent to be exact) of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). On a yearly basis, the average military expenditure as a proportion of GDP has also remained at the level of 2 percent (see yearly average in the chart below). And for defence spending as a proportion of overall government spending of ASEAN as a group, the average was at 8.6 percent.

### III

It could be argued that the increase in defence spending is attributed to the attempt by individual ASEAN Member States to develop and upgrade their respective defence capabilities, which in turn, is borne out of the need to replace equipment that are becoming obsolete and to enable their defence forces to effectively address an increasing array of challenges, both traditional and non-traditional.

In the latest **ASEAN Security Outlook** (ASO) issued in 2021, all ASEAN Member States have identified the following as a threat to their security: (1) terrorism and violent extremism; (2) transnational crimes to include trafficking in persons, people smuggling, irregular movement of people, illicit drugs trafficking, arms smuggling, and cybercrime; and (3) natural disasters.

Maritime security, territorial disputes and cybersecurity were identified as security challenges by seven ASEAN Member States while five mentioned foreign terrorist fighters, climate change and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing as security challenges. Marine environmental protection including marine debris and food security were considered as security challenges by four ASEAN Member States.

It therefore becomes obvious that the primary consideration why ASEAN Member States are embarking on upgrading their defence capabilities is exactly to have the capability to address the increasing number of issues that they consider as challenges to their security and their peoples’ well-being.
It must be understood that most of these challenges are so-called “non-traditional” and while primarily dealt with by law enforcement agencies, defence forces of ASEAN Member States also deal with these issues, including in responding to natural disasters and more recently the effects of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. It is notable that a key area of cooperation within the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM-Plus is actually humanitarian assistance and disaster response.

It is also worth noting that those ASEAN Member States (Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand) which have not alluded to territorial disputes as a security challenge have had modest increases in their defence spending. This could mean that while disputes, particularly among states, could be a driver of defence spending, other factors could account for such increases because there are cases in ASEAN where there are increases in the defence spending of those which do not consider territorial disputes as a challenge to their security.

It is also worth observing that the increase in defence spending primarily in upgrading equipment to meet the increasing security challenges could have become imperative given the fact that personnel recruitment for the defence sector across ASEAN Member States has remained almost constant from 2017 to 2019 (where latest available figures are available). Singapore even experienced a decrease by 27 percent from the figures it had in 2017 to the number of armed personnel it had in 2019. With the increasing array of challenges to their security, needed improvements in materiel capability (which meant increases in defence spending) compensated for the relatively constant number of military personnel at the disposal of defence forces.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>8,200</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>191,000</td>
<td>191,300</td>
<td>191,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>676,000</td>
<td>675,500</td>
<td>676,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>129,000</td>
<td>129,100</td>
<td>129,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>136,000</td>
<td>136,000</td>
<td>136,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>513,000</td>
<td>513,000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
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<td>153,350</td>
<td>155,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>81,000</td>
<td>59,000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
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<td>454,850</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>522,000</td>
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It must also be stressed that ASEAN Member States remain committed to promoting the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and continue to support the quest for the promotion of disarmament. This commitment is evident not only in the
continued pursuit of ASEAN to ensure that the Southeast Asian region is a nuclear weapon-free zone but also in the fact that the matter of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and disarmament consistently appeared in the submissions of ASEAN Member States for the ASEAN Security Outlook mentioned earlier.

IV

Defence spending and the commensurate increases in recent years are thus for legitimate defence purposes so much so that while commentators may allude to an arms build-up being observed in our region, there is definitely no arms race taking place thus far. An arms race results when increases in military spending and resulting defence procurements are pursued by one country in reaction to a similar previous undertaking by its neighbour. Fortunately, in Southeast Asia, there is no evidence of this “action-reaction” dynamics. Coupled with the fact that there exists a very low level or near absence of threat perception between and among ASEAN Member States, an ASEAN or Southeast Asian arms race is all but a myth.

Referring to the figures above, it is noted that for some ASEAN Member States, there has actually been a drop in military spending in the years 2020 and 2021, which could be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic with the defence sector in these countries having been affected by the attendant budgetary crunch. This may, however, be likely reversed as the region’s economy recovers and budgets are normalised. In the coming years, it may be expected that military spending among ASEAN Member States will increase as a consequence of “making up the COVID-19 deficit” and the anticipated upward trend is not tied to any purported arms race.

What needs to be done is to ensure that the current increases in defence spending do not lead to an arms race among regional countries. Important in this regard are transparency and confidence building measures that are pursued both by ASEAN Member States and other regional participants in the several ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the ARF and the ADMM-Plus. Examples of such positive engagements include the publication of the ASEAN Security Outlook and the ARF Security Outlook.

On a related note, ASEAN has been working closely with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In 2019, ASEAN and the IAEA signed the Practical Arrangements between the IAEA and ASEAN on Cooperation in the Areas of Nuclear Science and Technology and Applications, Nuclear Safety, Security and Safeguards (PA). Through this framework agreement, ASEAN hopes to build its capacity relative to nuclear science and technology and applications as well as nuclear safety, security and safeguards. There have
been enhanced exchange and consultation between the two sides to promote a regional approach in IAEA’s activities in the region.

Regional organisations play an important role in implementing global advocacies, programmes and projects such as those towards mitigating the effects of increases in defence spending, an agenda of the United Nations (UN) itself. As has long been recognised in the UN Charter’s Chapter VIII, regional organisations play an important role because they are more familiar with “specific political, strategic and normative conditions” of their respective regions. One practical area of cooperation which should be pursued and which would be worth revisiting is the idea of a regional arms register. Such a tool would further contribute to the building of confidence across the states in this region, and at the same time help ensure that increases in defence spending if any would continue to be seen as legitimate and help preclude the possibility of an arms race taking place in our region.

Through the ASEAN mechanisms in place, ASEAN would continue to make a modest contribution in promoting regional peace and stability.

It is hoped that ASEAN, through the mechanisms that have been put in place, would continue to make a modest contribution towards promoting regional stability which contributes to global peace and stability. Other regional powers must also continue to ensure that their defence spending remains as transparent as possible to help prevent mistrust from developing among regional countries. An unstable regional environment would be detrimental for the region.
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