THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ARMS DYNAMICS & THE SECURITY DILEMMA - AN ANALYSIS

by MAJ Sean Paul Magness

ABSTRACT

The essay argues that despite the defence spending increases, the situation in Southeast Asia does not qualify as an arms race due to the lack of adversarial relationships exemplified in the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC). All Southeast Asian states maintain normal diplomatic relations and trade with each other and exhibit a constructivist approach to political, economic and security co-operation as seen in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF), yet the perception that there is an arms race remains. The essay will use the example of Singapore and Malaysia to examine these perceptions and explain why there is no arms race.

Keywords: ASEAN; Arms Acquisitions; Defence Spending; Action-reaction Model; Constructivism

INTRODUCTION

Asia has seen some of the largest defence expenditure increases over the past 28 years. Quantitatively, defence expenditure grew from US$129 billion in 1988 to US$456 billion in 2016. This increase coupled with the tensions in the region, have fuelled concerns of an arms race. However, due to the sheer size of Asia and its varied geopolitical dynamics, this essay will focus on the Southeast Asia subregion.

This essay argues that despite the defence spending increases, the situation in Southeast Asia does not qualify as an arms race due to the lack of adversarial relationships exemplified in the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC). All Southeast Asian states maintain normal diplomatic relations and trade with each other and exhibit a constructivist approach to political, economic and security co-operation as seen in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF), yet the perception that there is an arms race remains.

DEFINING ARMS RACES AND THE ARMS DYNAMIC

There have been several attempts at defining arms races. Grant Hammond defined it as ‘an intense competition between two or more rival states seeking to improve the quality or quantity of their forces relative to the other’s for the attainment of some political goal’. Colin S. Gray defined it as involving ‘two or more parties, perceiving themselves to be in an adversarial relationship, who are increasing or improving their armaments at a rapid rate and structuring their respective military postures with a general attention to the past, current and anticipated military and political behaviour of the other parties’.

Hammond further elaborated eight criteria for an arms race. However, six of them were criticised by Buzan and Herring due to their narrow descriptions and
difficulty in measurement. Therefore, this essay will use Gray’s definition as it captures the essentials and is not too proscriptive. To distinguish abnormal arms acquisition behaviour from the normal, the case study presented will examine Singapore-Malaysia arms acquisition trends over time. This will show that there was no period of rapid growth in arms acquisition coupled with the underlying political and military tensions that signify an arms race. Other internal and external factors that drive arms acquisitions and may be misattributed to an arms race will also be explained.

‘Arms competition’ occupies an ambiguous area below an arms race, yet is more than a mere maintenance of the status quo and is seen when one state tries to get ahead of the other to gain the upper hand before their rival joins, or when one state already holds an existing advantage and another tries to narrow the gap.

While Gray’s definition captures the essential characteristics of an arms race, it is but one end of the entire arms dynamic spectrum theorised by Buzan and Herring. This theory (Figure 1) relates the action-reaction aspect of arms acquisition to the fundamental security dilemma. In this theory, ‘Arms race’ describes a situation in which a state commits significant resources in an effort to gain an edge over a rival. Just below this is a ‘build-up’ which is similar to an arms competition but can be conducted without a target in mind and without attracting a response. ‘Arms competition’ occupies an ambiguous area below an arms race, yet is more than a mere maintenance of the status quo and is seen when one state tries to get ahead of the other to gain the upper hand before their rival joins, or when one state already holds an existing advantage and another tries to narrow the gap. The term ‘maintenance’ defines a ‘normal level’ of arms acquisitions aimed at preserving the status quo. At the lowest end of the spectrum is ‘build-down’, where specific weapon systems are either retired or replaced by new systems which are more limited in capability or numbers. This understanding of the arms dynamic will be applied to the relationship between Singapore and Malaysia to disprove the existence of an arms race.
SINGAPORE-MALAYSIA TENSIONS

Singapore-Malaysia relations have undergone periods of tension since Singapore’s independence in 1965. Then, political tensions between their respective ruling parties became so serious that Singapore had to be separated from the Federation of Malaya to avert racial conflict. Later, during the reign of Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Bin Mohamad, there were threats to cut the supply of water, a ‘red line’ in Singapore’s strategic calculus.

Relations have since calmed, though tensions still exist. Airspace, immigration and water supply have all been issues of contention. In 2002, territorial disputes over the sovereignty of Pedra Branca came to the fore. The issue was settled in 2008 by a ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) which awarded the sovereignty of the island to Singapore. However in 2017, Malaysia launched a counter-claim citing new evidence. The matter is still unresolved. These issues, when seen together with the defence acquisitions of each state, have led observers to believe that military build-up by both states can be a potential arms race.

EVIDENCE OF AN ARMS RACE

Both Singapore and Malaysia have undergone a substantial force modernisation programme since independence. Singapore acquired Leopard 2 Main Battle Tanks (MBT), M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) rocket artillery, and by 2019, the Next Generation Armoured Fighting Vehicle (AFV) will replace the old M113 armoured personnel carriers in the armour units. The air force has been modernised by the acquisition of Boeing AH-64 attack helicopters, F-15 fighter jets and G550 Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft. Meanwhile, the navy has acquired Formidable-class frigates, Archer-class submarines as well as the indigenously built Independence-class Littoral Mission Vessels (LMV).

Malaysia has purchased 211 Turkish-made Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFV), 48 Polish-made PT-91 MBTs, and Brazilian Artillery Saturation Rocket Systems (Astros II) Multiple Rocket Systems (MLRS). Its air force acquired the Russian Sukhoi SU-30, American F-18D Super Hornets and Augusta 109M helicopters. The navy has also purchased Agusta and Scorpene-class submarines. A summary of both country’s weapon inventories are shown in Table 1.

Superficially, these acquisitions seem to suggest the classic action-reaction model of arms races as many of these acquisitions are of a similar type, and comprise of platforms meant to combat each other. However, examination of the factors proposed by Gray weaken this argument. Despite their disputes, there is little open antagonism between both countries. This is evident in the Pedra Branca issue, where both countries agreed to resolve the case through the ICJ without being compelled to do so by a third party. The Malaysian rail road land dispute was also settled diplomatically. These cases bear strong testament to the resolve of both countries to settle their disputes without resorting to using armed force.

Both countries also regularly engage in Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) and economic strengthening measures. This is seen in bilateral military exercises such as Semangat Bersatu, maritime security co-operation through the Eyes in the Sky (EIS) initiative and Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP), multilateral defence relationships such as the Five Power Defence Agreement (FPDA) and ARF, as well as economic partnerships like the Iskandar Malaysia and ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA).

Both countries also regularly engage in Confidence and Security Building Measures and economic strengthening measures.

This detraction from an action-reaction relationship is further illustrated in the defence budgets of Singapore and Malaysia which are capped at 6% and 2% to 3% respectively. There has been no spike in defence budget in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Percentages by either country, indicating that the increases in absolute budget are mostly attributed to the growth of each country’s economy. Figures 2 and 3 compare the defence budgets of both countries. As can be seen, during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Malaysia’s defence spending dropped to 1.6% of GDP even though Singapore raised hers from 4.6% to 5.4%. If there was an action-reaction relationship at work, Malaysia would have increased its defence spending in response to Singapore.
The pace and quantity of weapons acquired also does not suggest the existence of an action-reaction relationship. Singapore first decided to purchase General Dynamics F-16s Fighting Falcon Aircrafts in 1983, but Malaysia only decided to purchase F-18s and Mikoyan Mig-29 jet fighters in 1994. Quantitatively, Malaysia’s purchase of SU-30s did not amount to a significant quantitative difference compared to the number of older aircraft they were meant to replace.

**ALTERNATIVE REASONS FOR ARMS ACQUISITIONS**

To further disprove the existence of an arms race, an examination of other factors influencing arms acquisitions is necessary. Central to this are both states’ approaches to security which demonstrate that while they both pursue arms acquisition to hedge against their realist fear of larger states, this is balanced by their liberal and constructivist viewpoints, which focuses on...
aspects of soft power to resolve disputes. Their world view is a mix of realism, liberalism and constructivism. The realist aspect of this outlook stems from their concerns of predatory extra-regional powers exerting influence on their sovereignty. However, both states share the same liberal view towards trade and commerce, believing that this can reduce the risk of conflict.

Both countries have a shared view on constructivism which is expressed through ASEAN. There is also the ‘ASEAN way’ and TAC which seeks to create security and stability in the region by focusing ASEAN states on viewing security as a common goal. This socialisation of the ASEAN way also reduces the tendency of states to resort to armed conflict.

In addition, each country has different motivations for arms acquisition which are not influenced by their bilateral relationship.

**MOTIVATIONS**

Both Singapore and Malaysia have several internal and external motivations that affect arms acquisitions. The relation of economic growth to defence spending is one such internal factor. As highlighted earlier, Malaysia’s defence budget is affected by its economic fortunes while Singapore has always maintained a consistent defence budget regardless of economic performance. This emphasis is borne from the fear of regional political destabilisation which may warrant the use of force either as a deterrent or in the name of national defence. This fear is mainly due to Singapore’s inherent strategic vulnerabilities, i.e., a lack of strategic depth and resources, the historical legacy of the Japanese occupation during World War II (WWII) which gave rise to a siege mentality, and ‘Konfrontasi’ in the 1960s.

Equipment obsolescence also drives arms acquisitions. Singapore and Malaysia were both former British colonies, and consequently inherited most of their weapons and equipment from them after gaining independence. Eventually, a combination of increased weapon failure and a lack of technical support and spare parts spurred both countries to modernise their inventories in the 1970s and 2000s.

The inherent prestige and deterrent effect in acquiring advanced arms also motivates arms acquisition. Possessing a high profile weapon system acts as a ‘status symbol’ that represents a country’s technological capability and expertise. This, coupled with the ability to maintain and operate advanced weapons demonstrates a country’s military might and acts as a deterrent. While all the reasons mentioned

ASEAN leaders sign the 2015 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the establishment of the ASEAN Community and the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together during the 27th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 22nd November, 2015.
A future ready RSN to protect Singapore and her SLOCs.

However, the existing arms dynamic is more than just mere military modernisation as the systems acquired are both quantitatively and qualitatively greater than what each country possessed previously.

The domestic structure model is also insufficient to explain the existence of an arms race, primarily because it was developed to explain the arms dynamic of major arms producers, namely the United States (US) and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War. At best, domestic structural factors only contribute a secondary arms dynamic in the case of Malaysia and Singapore. As Malaysia is a non-producer and Singapore only a part-producer of arms, there is little evidence of a ‘Keynesian demand management of the economy’ to drive arms procurement. Neither are there production sector pushes nor electoral factors that greatly contribute to an arms race. In fact, there...
have been vocal calls from political opposition parties in Singapore to increase social spending at the expense of the defence budget.

Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) are essential to both states due to trade. Singapore has a near complete reliance on its SLOCs for basic necessities such as food and fuel. Threats to its SLOCs are one of the key reasons that Singapore has invested heavily in its navy and air force. Malaysia also has its unresolved dispute with Indonesia over the Ambalat sea block which saw face-offs between their naval forces in 2005 and 2009.

CONCLUSION

The evidence does not justify the existence of a Southeast Asia arms race. Despite the tensions and existential threats made in the Singapore-Malaysia example, the relationship can hardly be considered antagonistic due to the number of CSBMs between the two states and their diplomatic approach to handling disputes. Neither can the pace nor quantity of acquisitions be classified as extraordinary. Structurally, while both have acquired weapon systems that can counteract each other, there is little to prove that this is done with that specific aim in mind due to other influences such as their realist world views and concerns over regional instability.

Similarly, the domestic structure and technological imperative models do not provide evidence of an arms race. Thus, the arms dynamic between the two states should be more aptly described as an arms build-up. It falls short of an arms race due to a lack of an adversarial relationship and relatively low intensity compared to the ‘iconic’ examples of arms races. However, the existing arms dynamic is more than just mere military modernisation as the systems acquired are both quantitatively and qualitatively greater than what each country possessed previously. These acquisitions are more likely oriented to the regional threat landscape in Southeast Asia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Hammond, Grant T. Plow-shares Into Swords (University of South Carolina, 1993).
The Relationship Between Arms Dynamics & The Security Dilemma – An Analysis


Huntington, Samuel. “Arms Races, Prerequisites and Results,” Public Policy, A Yearbook of the Graduate School of Public Administration, vol. 8, 1:2 (Harvard University, 1958).

Huxley, Tim, Defence Policy, Threat Perceptions and Strategy, Defending the Lion City, the Armed Forces of Singapore, Talisman Publishing (2000).


ENDNOTES


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 79.

11. Ibid., 79-81.

12. Huntington, Samuel, “Arms Races, Prerequisites and Results”, *Public Policy, A Yearbook of the Graduate School of Public Administration*, vol. 8, 1:2, (Harvard University, 1958), 41-42.


15. According to Wikipedia, The Pedra Branca dispute was a territorial dispute between Singapore and Malaysia over several islets at the eastern entrance to the Singapore Strait, namely Pedra Branca (previously called Pulau Batu Puteh and now Batu Puteh by Malaysia), Middle Rocks and South Ledge.


17. Huxley, Tim, *Defending the Lion City, the Armed Forces of Singapore*, 63-68.

18. According to Wikipedia, a main battle tank (MBT), also known as a battle tank or universal tank, is a tank that fills the armor-protected direct fire and maneuver role of many modern armies.

19. According to Wikipedia, the M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) is a light multiple rocket launcher developed in the late 1990s for the United States Army, mounted on a standard Army M1140 truck frame.


21. According to Wikipedia, An airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) system is an airborne radar picket system designed to detect aircraft, ships and vehicles at long ranges and perform command and control of the battlespace in an air engagement by directing fighter and attack aircraft strikes.

According to Wikipedia, An infantry fighting vehicle (IFV), also known as a mechanized infantry combat vehicle (MICV), is a type of armoured fighting vehicle used to carry infantry into battle and provide direct-fire support.

According to Wikipedia, A multiple rocket launcher (MRL) or multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) is a type of rocket artillery system.


According to MINDEF, the exercise involved the joint planning and execution of a combined battalion mission exercise. There were also opportunities for soldier interactions and professional exchanges between both armies, such as the cross-training of soldiers on both countries’ weapon systems.

According to MINDEF, The EiS initiative is the conduct of combined maritime air patrol over the straits to reinforce sea patrols with air surveillance. Using maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, each MPA will carry a Combined Mission Patrol Team, comprising a Mission Commander from the host country and officers from the participating states.

According to MINDEF, The Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP) is a set of practical co-operative measures undertaken by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand to ensure the security of the SOMS. It comprises the Malacca Straits Sea Patrol (MSSP), the “Eyes-in-the-Sky” (EiS) Combined Maritime Air Patrols, as well as the Intelligence Exchange Group (IEG).

According to Wikipedia, the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) are a series of defence relationships established by a series of multi-lateral agreements between the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore (all Commonwealth members) signed in 1971, whereby the five powers are to consult each other "immediately" in the event or threat of an armed attack on any of these five countries for the purpose of deciding what measures should be taken jointly or separately in response. There is no specific commitment to intervene militarily.

According to Wikipedia, Iskandar Malaysia (IM; Jawi: إسكندر ملیسیا, formerly known as Iskandar Development Region (IDR; Malay: Wilayah Pembangunan Iskandar; Jawi: ویلاه فیسامبونن إسكندر) and South Johor Economic Region (SJER), is the main southern development corridor in Johor, Malaysia. It was established on 8 November 2006.

According to Wikipedia, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) is a trade bloc agreement by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations supporting local trade and manufacturing in all ASEAN countries, and facilitating economic integration with regional and international allies.


According to Wikipedia, The Asian financial crisis was a period of financial crisis that gripped much of East Asia and Southeast Asia beginning in July 1997 and raised fears of a worldwide economic meltdown due to financial contagion.


The Relationship Between Arms Dynamics & The Security Dilemma: An Analysis


39. This is echoed by Singapore’s MM Lee Kuan Yew when he attributed Singapore’s emphasis on defence to the need “to resist pressures from larger neighbours” (see “Arms Sales in Asia”. (3 Mar 2011). unpaginated).


According to Wikipedia, The Indonesia–Malaysia confrontation or Borneo confrontation (also known by its Indonesian/Malay name, Konfrontasi) was a violent conflict from 1963–66 that stemmed from Indonesia’s opposition to the creation of Malaysia.


42. Ibid.


48. Sea lines of communication (abbreviated as SLOC) is a term describing the primary maritime routes between ports, used for trade, logistics and naval forces.


---

MAJ Sean Paul Magness is currently doing his Masters at RSIS on a part-time SAF Postgraduate Scholarship. He graduated from the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology with Military Studies.

MAJ Magness is a Commando Officer by vocation and is currently the S2 of 3rd Singapore Infantry Brigade.