

# IS THERE A LIKELIHOOD THAT WEAPONS ACQUISITIONS CAN BECOME DESTABILISING?

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## ABSTRACT

According to the author, over the past 15 years, with weapons acquisitions playing a central role, the total defence expenditure for ASEAN has doubled in absolute terms. Against this backdrop, researchers have questioned if the changing arms dynamic would have an adverse effect on regional stability. The author will use the ASEAN context to argue that the weapons acquisition processes alone do not lead to destabilisation. The author presents his argument in three segments. In the first segment, he provides a review of weapons acquisition to establish a common understanding of key terminologies that would surface throughout his essay. He then proceeds to analyse the reasons behind the weapons acquisition processes and highlight if there are other underlying factors that would cause destabilisation. Finally, the author provides an antithesis analysis on the India-Pakistan conflict to evaluate the robustness of the hypothesis and to discredit the argument that weapons acquisition alone contributes to destabilisation.

Keywords: *Power, Destabilisation, Volatile, Stability, Competition*

## INTRODUCTION

While many countries globally are reducing their military expenditure, several Southeast Asian countries are heading in the opposite direction.<sup>1</sup> Over the past 15 years, with weapons acquisitions playing a central role, the total defence expenditure for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has doubled in absolute terms.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop, researchers have questioned if the changing arms dynamic would have an adverse effect on regional stability.<sup>3</sup> As such, this essay will use the ASEAN context to argue that the weapons acquisition processes alone do not lead to destabilisation.

The essay is broadly divided into three sections. In the first section, a literature review of weapons acquisition would be performed to establish a common understanding of key terminologies that would surface throughout this essay. The second section would 'deep dive' into ASEAN to analyse the reasons behind the weapons acquisition processes and highlight if there are other underlying factors that would cause destabilisation. In the last section, an antithesis analysis on the India-Pakistan conflict would be undertaken to

evaluate the robustness of the hypothesis and to discredit the argument that weapons acquisition in a more volatile environment would result in a different conclusion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Varying Levels Weapons Acquisition Pressures

The ultimate yardstick of national power would be a state's military capabilities for self-defence and pursuance of interests.<sup>4</sup> In tandem with advancing technology, the acquisition of weapons remains an integral component of a military's modernisation effort. Structured under the arms dynamic framework, Buzan and Herring categorise the varying levels of weapons acquisition pressures as (1) 'arms build-down', (2) 'arms maintenance', (3) 'arms competition' and (4) 'arms race'.<sup>5</sup>

**The ultimate yardstick of national power would be a state's military capabilities for self-defence and pursuance of interests.**

The 'arms build-down' category relates to the condition in which weapons are decommissioned or replaced with a new capability that is numerically inferior, while the 'arms maintenance' category describes the status quo condition of military capabilities. With a sustained build-up of weapons, states could potentially trigger an 'arms competition' as they constantly seek to improve their respective positions by challenging the status quo. At the most extreme of the arms dynamic framework lies the 'arms race'. This phenomenon occurs when states do their utmost to commit the maximum resources to gain military advantage. Best described by Gray, the basic conditions of an 'arms race' would be (1) two or more parties conscious of their antagonism, (2) development of the military structure to counter or deter each other, (3) competition in terms of quality (men, weapon, organisation, doctrine, deployment) and/or quantity of armament (men, weapons) and (4) rapid increases in quantity and/or improvements in quality.<sup>6</sup>

Stabilising	Destabilising
Status quo	Revisionist
Value of peace: High	Value of peace: Low
Secure	Insecure
Defensive Military Strategy	Offensive military strategy
Deterrence	Compellence
Reassurance	Reliance on threats
Risk averse	Risk acceptant
Averse to difficult tasks	Acceptant of difficult tasks

Table 1: The Impact of Motives.<sup>7</sup>

### Impact Of States' Motives

In terms of stability or lack thereof, Buzan and Herring also highlighted the impact of states' motives (in terms of strategic objectives) on the arms dynamic (see Table 1). For instance, an 'arms competition' could easily escalate to an 'arms race' if a state, who is in an antagonised relationship, suddenly adopts revisionist policies and begins purchasing weapons at a rapid rate. These actions would most likely compel the other affected state (in the antagonised relationship) to embark on similar counter measures to 'do one better and gain the upper hand'.

### 'DEEP DIVE' INTO SOUTHEAST ASIA

Despite the extremely diverse cultural and political differences, there have not been any prolonged armed conflicts between Southeast Asian countries since the end of the Indochina wars in 1975.<sup>8</sup> However, this 'stability' has not prevented ASEAN from investing in its military. Conversely, the defence expenditure (in terms of absolute terms) in the region has doubled in the past 15 years. Tightly interlinked to the increase in defence expenditure would be the acquisition of weapons.<sup>9</sup> Here, the author will analyse the possible reasons for the increase in weapons acquisition, and highlight other underlying factors that could affect regional stability.

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### FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WEAPONS ACQUISITION

#### Defence Expenditure In Proportion To Economic Growth

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the ASEAN economy has grown at an exponential rate over the past 10 years.<sup>10</sup> (See Figure 1). Boasting an economic growth rate of 2.1% higher than the market in 2018, the strong ASEAN economy continues to provide a stable foundation for weapons acquisition.<sup>11</sup> As most Southeast Asian countries had more or less spent the same percentage on defence in proportion to their respective GDP, the increase in weapons acquisition may have been erroneously portrayed as an 'arms race' which could potentially destabilise the region. ASEAN countries could afford to spend on military growth and did not require to 'do their utmost' to commit financially at the expense of other domains (i.e. reduce the budget for education to support military growth).

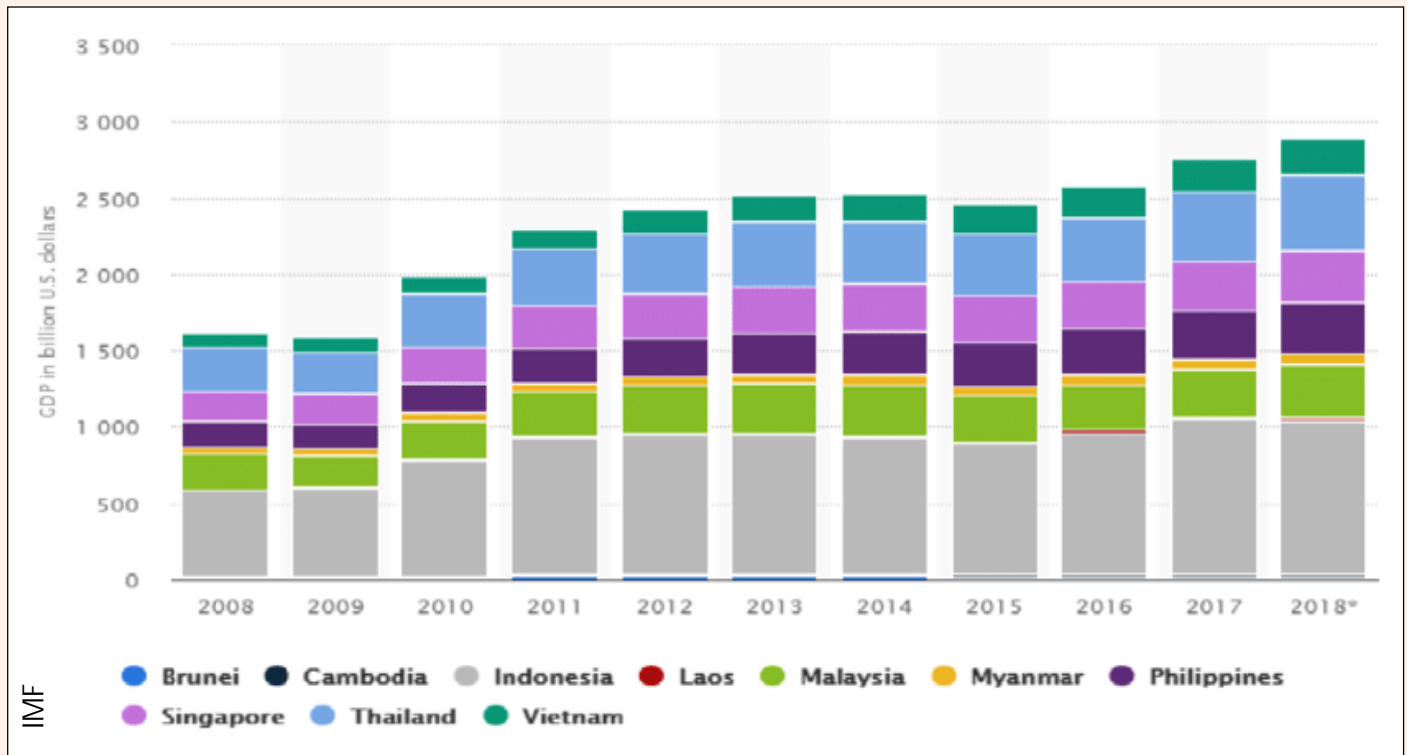


Figure 1: GDP of ASEAN Countries from 2008 to 2018.

## Technological Advances And Weapons Market Conditions

Rapid technological advances and favourable weapons market conditions have been influential in the acquisition of weapons by Southeast Asian countries. In the early 2000s, countries like Malaysia, Vietnam and Philippines had an arsenal comprising of ageing weapons inherited from the colonial era and second-hand weapons from foreign partners. These weapons had lived their expected life span and the modernisation efforts were deemed logical as there would have been a limited form of deterrence in 'bringing a knife into a gunfight'.<sup>12</sup> Hence, these countries were compelled to step up their efforts on arms modernisation to be aligned with the 'modern age' armed forces.<sup>13</sup> Aptly categorised as 'arms maintenance', the rapid advances in technology enforces the continued investments in maintaining the status quo condition of their military capabilities.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the influx of arms sellers into the region has resulted in a buyer's market in which suppliers were compelled to make attractive offers in terms of prices and payment approaches.<sup>15</sup> Coupled with the development of local defence industries in recent years, the favourable weapons market was one of the contributing factors for the proliferation of arms

within the region.<sup>16</sup> Hence, these non-provocative factors would make it difficult to establish that the increase in weapons acquisition would result in an increased animosity between the countries.

## National Interests And Deterrence

National interests and deterrence factors also influence the weapons acquisition process. For instance, the territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea has directly affected the defence posture of Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam. Instigated by China's assertive behaviour in the overlapping sovereignty dispute, these countries would need to actively protect their respective maritime interests and borders in the region.<sup>17</sup> It was reported that Vietnam purchased six *Kilo-Class* submarines to better protect its interests in the South China Sea. Combating piracy would also be in the interests of ASEAN countries for economic reasons. From 1995 to 2003, 41% of the world's pirate attacks were reported to have occurred within ASEAN waters.<sup>18</sup> With the Straits of Malacca being one of the most important passageways for East to West global trade, Southeast Asian countries have been collectively working together to provide the necessary security to the commercial shipping routes. Thus, for such instances, the weapons acquisition would not destabilise the region.

## Timing Of Weapons Acquisition

Over the past couple of decades, the timings of weapons acquisition suggest the presence of 'arms competition' within the region. For instance, shortly after the Su-30s fighters were delivered to Malaysia in 2007, Singapore rolled out its F-15SG fighters in 2008.<sup>19</sup> In a similar fashion, the development of naval capabilities has involved a few Southeast Asian countries in the 'action-reaction' process. Since the early 2000s, the acquirement of naval assets has witnessed a growth in submarines, corvettes, frigates and Landing Platform Dock (LPD) amphibious support ships within ASEAN regional waters.<sup>20</sup> As of 2015, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam had submarines, while countries such as Myanmar, Thailand and Philippines expressed interest in procuring similar subsurface assets to 'keep pace with the neighbours'.<sup>21</sup> The constant efforts to improve respective positions, coupled with the procurement of inherently offensive weapons (e.g. submarines), led to an increase in anxiety and tensions among ASEAN countries.<sup>22</sup>

In summary, despite some indication of an 'arms competition', the above analysis seems to suggest that the arms dynamic of ASEAN would fall under the realm of 'arms maintenance'.

In the next part of the essay, the author analyses other underlying factors that may affect regional stability.

## OTHER UNDERLYING FACTORS THAT COULD AFFECT REGIONAL STABILITY

### Lack Of Transparency And Information Sharing Platforms

Some argue that the perennial dilemma continues to be one of most important sources of conflict within the region, as actions undertaken by a country to increase its own security could lead to adverse reactions from others.<sup>23</sup> Even if a country has no intention of causing harm, actions such as weapons acquisition often cause others to 'second guess' the arming state. This would not improve the confidence and trust among countries especially if the weapons procured are offensive in nature (e.g. tanks, submarines, etc). As such, information sharing and transparency of defence

related matters would greatly enhance confidence and reduce the scepticism among states. Unfortunately, ASEAN has a lack of transparency mechanisms and it does not possess a regional agreement on arms control. To make matters worse, various ASEAN have constantly failed to comply with the global arms control agreements of Arms Trade Treaty and Register of Conventional Arms.<sup>24</sup> Such actions could generate mistrust and possibly heighten tensions among ASEAN countries, and thus affecting the region's stability.

## Political Influences

Domestic politics within ASEAN countries have also proven to be an influential factor in regional stability. While ASEAN has not experienced any prolonged conflict since 1975, occasional cases of skirmishes and aggressive posturing have occurred due to disputes primarily driven by political motives. From 2008 to 2011, the long-standing dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the area surrounding the Preah Vihear temple escalated to occasional exchanges of fire by troops from both countries. Reports indicated that the Thai Nationalist Group (known as the royalist Yellow Shirts) used the Preah Vihear conflict to topple then Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej (Jan-Sep 2008).<sup>25</sup> His successor, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva (2008-2011), faced his own challenges in controlling the military as the Thai Nationalist Group had colluded with them in the attempt to weaken the government. Correspondingly, in Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen deliberately exploited the armed clashes to enhance his power position and portrayed strong nationalistic emotions to win over public support.<sup>26</sup>

Closer to home, since the differences in political ideology had resulted in the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965, there have been several disputes about land reclamation, water pricing and issues regarding sovereignty (e.g. Pedra Branca) between the two countries.<sup>27</sup>

All these various examples show how politics could be interwoven with military to create a massive impact on the region's stability.

In summary, the analysis has proven that weapons acquisition processes alone do not lead to

destabilisation as there could be other factors that could affect regional stability. While ASEAN can be considered a good test bed to perform this analysis, critics may argue that the impact of the weapons acquisition would be destabilising in a more volatile environment. Hence, in the next section, the author will present an antithesis analysis to evaluate the robustness of his findings.

With the global rising trends in unmanned systems, cyber weaponry and transnational threats (e.g. terrorism), ASEAN will arguably continue its investments in weapons acquisition to deal with the 'modern age' security threats.

### THE SOUTH ASIAN RIVALS: INDIA-PAKISTAN

With 118,930 sqm of disputed territories, the India-Pakistan conflict has lasted for over 70 years.<sup>28</sup> Having fought three major wars against each other, coupled with the continued violence in Kashmir and heightened terrorist activities, India and Pakistan have never experienced regional stability. Although both the nuclear-armed countries have maintained a fragile cease fire agreement, there have been regular exchanges of fire along the heavily contested border. In Feb 2019, tensions almost spilled out of control when the Pakistani militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) was allegedly responsible for an attack on an Indian paramilitary convoy. Categorized as the single deadliest attack on Kashmir soil in the past 30 years, this incident killed at least 40 Indian soldiers.<sup>29</sup> In response, India undertook surgical air strikes on the militant bases in Pakistan occupied Kashmir territory. The subsequent days of military confrontations resulted in destruction of fighter jets and the capture of an Indian Air Force pilot.<sup>30</sup>

Often cited as being in an 'arms race' that greatly affects the region's stability, both countries have

steadily invested in the development of nuclear capabilities over the past few years.<sup>31</sup> (See Table 2). In Nov 2018, Pakistan declared that it would counter India's latest nuclear-powered submarine and this has caused diplomats to worry if 'the development would only fuel another arms race'.<sup>32</sup> As such, in this section of the essay, the author will analyse if the weapons acquisition processes between India and Pakistan has led to the destabilisation of the South Asian region.

Year	Nuclear Warheads	
	India	Pakistan
2010	60-80	70-90
2014	90-110	100-120
2018	130-140	140-150

Table 2: Nuclear Development of India and Pakistan.<sup>33</sup>

While empirical data has shown an increase in military expenditure for both countries, it has not increased as a percentage of GDP. (See Figure 3). India's drastic increment in military expenditure (in gross terms) is consistent with its economic growth, while Pakistan had to depend on aid from the United States (US) to mitigate against its slow economic growth.<sup>34</sup> While both countries could afford to acquire more weapons to support its military growth, the reality of the situation is much more complex than just being an 'arms race'.

### External Influences

External influences from China has evolved the dynamics between India and Pakistan into a triangle of strategic calculations that affect the security paradigm of South Asia. India believes China is suppressing her aspirations to be a global power by establishing partnerships with India's neighbours to encircle the country. For instance, China's assistance to Pakistan for the development of the Gwadar commercial port offers Pakistan a broader strategic utility to counter India's projection of power.<sup>35</sup> Hence, India has altered its

deterrence posture in direct response to China's threat.<sup>36</sup>

population ethnicity, etc.) exacerbates the uncertainty of the environment.

In summary, the antithesis analysis has proven that even in a more volatile environment, there are other underlying factors (apart from the weapons acquisition process) that contributes to destabilisation.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding sections have proven that the weapons acquisition processes alone do not lead to destabilisation as there are other underlying factors that affect regional stability. It would be common for countries to be sceptical about the true intentions of their neighbours, especially when there are conflicting/overlapping areas of national interests. While the reasons behind the weapons acquisition in ASEAN would not be destabilising by nature, the lack of transparency and information sharing platforms would continue to result in mistrust and anxiety among ASEAN countries. Other factors such as political influences have also shown to have played a heavy weightage on regional stability.

With the global rising trends in unmanned systems, cyber weaponry and transnational threats (e.g. terrorism), ASEAN will arguably continue its investments in weapons acquisition to deal with the 'modern age' security threats. Thus, it is important for ASEAN to embed transparency mechanisms as Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBM) to improve mutual trust among countries. In addition to the existing platforms available to promote regional peace and defence co-operation (e.g. ASEAN Ministers Meeting, multi-lateral military exercises, etc.), ASEAN could also explore the possibility of developing a regional agreement on arms control to 'mitigate' against the impact of weapons acquisition.<sup>40</sup>



Figure 3: India and Pakistan Military Expenditure.<sup>37</sup>

## Complex diversity

A detailed analysis of the Kashmir region provides a different perspective on the 'straightforward bilateral dispute' between India and Pakistan. Kashmir is a multi-ethnic region that has different distinct political goals. The Pakistan controlled Kashmir region wants to become formal provinces of Pakistan in order to gain more political autonomy over their internal affairs, while the Muslim-majority of India controlled Kashmir region (in Kashmir Valley region) views India as an occupying power and seeks independence.<sup>38</sup> Throughout these years, the desire for autonomy within the different areas of the Kashmir region has led to multiple violent uprising movements. Militant groups like JeM have exploited this discontent to recruit its followers and this was apparent when the suicide bomber of the Indian paramilitary convoy attack was identified to be a Kashmiri.<sup>39</sup> The complex diversity of the Kashmir region (in terms of political allegiances,

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