

# Military Developments in the South China Sea Basin

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*With all of the recent changes around the world, it is easy to focus on one region of the world at the expense of other areas. The author examines changes in the South China Sea basin since the breakup of the Soviet Union. He looks at the different threats to the region and how each impacts on the region. He discusses the regional military forces and their effect on security. Finally, he looks at the role to be played by the Association of Southeast Asia Nations.*

**T**HE SOUTH China Sea basin, long a strategic region, has changed in character as the world political climate has changed. Formerly an area of superpower confrontation and competition for influence and power, the region is successfully adjusting to a new world order. While it continues to be a region of major national interest to the United States, the countries in the South China Sea basin now look toward economic development and regional harmony as their prime objectives, rather than the need to balance the conflicting interests of the superpowers.

The United States continues to place great emphasis on the region and, as the last superpower, remains the preeminent military power in the region. However, competition for the political and economic base of influence in the region must be shared to varying degrees with outside regional powers such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), China, Japan, Taiwan and the Republic of Korea. But the US has maintained its influence and credibility through more than 15 years of post-Vietnam policy evaluation, while the breakup of the Soviet Union and the continued struggle over political and economic reforms restrains China. To one extent or another, countries with interests in the

South China Sea region have embarked on a new era of political change in which economic and social issues will become increasingly more important to maintain regional stability.

Most significantly, the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have themselves gained a greater appreciation of their own strategic importance and are, for the most part, riding a tide of strong economic growth. Realizing the increased importance of economic development, trade and commerce,




## Differing Views of the Threat

The major strategic threat in the South China Sea region is the potential for conflict among nations contesting claims of sovereignty. The governments in the region have differing views of the outside threat. Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, base their security policies on a view that the People's Republic of China (PRC) poses the main threat to their security because of past experience. The Chinese threat is based not on a capability to mount a military invasion but on the historical experiences that these countries have had with past internal subversion conducted with Chinese encouragement and support. Establishment of diplomatic relations by Singapore and Indonesia with the PRC reflects a lessening in tension and better commercial and trade ties, but there is a latent worry about China's political influence in the region.

Several of the ASEAN states view the large Vietnamese army as a possible threat and have maintained a more or less cohesive ASEAN stance toward Vietnam. Thailand has been the most concerned with the military threat from Vietnam and is more closely tied to China than the other ASEAN countries. The Thai government has taken the lead in formulating a new approach that views the Indochina countries as potential economic partners rather than military foes.

Indonesia has the closest relationship of the ASEAN countries with Vietnam and would like Vietnam to establish itself as a useful buffer between China and the rest of Southeast Asia. In the Indonesian view, Vietnam does not pose a threat to others in the region. Balancing that point, Indonesia also sees Vietnam as a strong and potentially powerful regional actor. They would prefer to see both ASEAN and US policies designed to lessen CIS influence in Vietnam and encourage Vietnam to modify its command economy and political outlook to permit effective national development and a more moderate political posture.

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they take a new view of regional security as they modernize their military forces. Fortunately, this process is directed at improving individual and collective security against perceived threats from outside the immediate arena. There is no potentially debilitating arms race among these countries, all of which are friendly to the United States and to each other.

attempt in Indonesia in 1965 and the long communist insurgency in Malaysia color those countries' view of the threat today. Vietnam, with a millennium of struggle against China, remains suspicious of that country despite Chinese assistance in Vietnam's successful wars with France and the United States and despite recent normalization of relations between the Vietnam and the PRC. Conflicting claims to the Spratly and Paracel islands remain a source of potentially destabilizing confrontation.

Although China has assured the region's governments that it no longer supports subversive activities directed against their specific countries, such assurances are taken with a grain of salt. It is difficult for them to differentiate between party-sponsored and state-supported subversion.

The significant enlargement of the naval capabilities of India and Japan are also of concern to the region. It is difficult for Southeast Asian countries occupied during World War II to forget their experiences with Japan. There is considerable concern about the new reach of the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF). America's role in urging a greater strategic role for the Japanese is matched by assurances to Southeast Asian friends that no offensive capability to threaten the region is either intended or would be allowed.

Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia are concerned about the growth of the Indian navy. Those Indian Ocean littoral countries eye with suspicion the expansion of Indian military facilities in the Andaman Islands and question the need for an apparently expansionist offensive capability in India's historically inward-looking, ground-based forces.

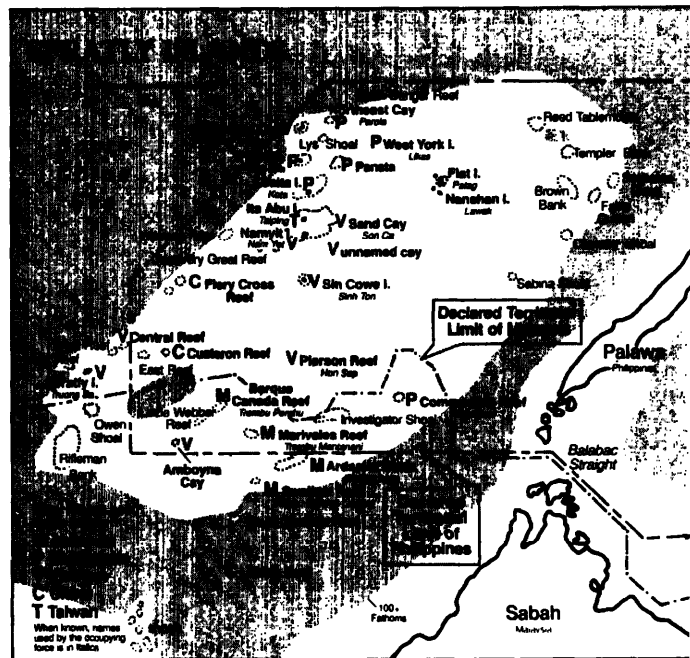
More immediately, a plethora of overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea pose the most serious near-term threat to stability. Various claims to tiny, barren, but potentially oil-rich specks of land in the Spratly Islands, nearby reefs and the region north of Indonesia's Natuna Island involve the PRC, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. Hopefully, these competing claims can be settled by nego-

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tiations that recognize territorial claims, as well as provide for economic zones that give each litigant a chance for exploiting the lands' natural wealth.

## Regional Military Forces

Southeast Asian military forces share several points in common. All are modernizing their equipment and major weapon systems within limits imposed by tight budgetary constraints. They are acquiring new weapon systems from a variety of outside sources. Logistic and maintenance problems loom large. Most are making



progress in developing domestic defense industrial capabilities. Each has had to contend with a different set of circumstances impelled by a range of domestic policies and priorities.

While all ASEAN countries are buying new systems, the emphasis is on gaining competence in new technology rather than on racing to keep up with potentially threatening neighbors. All are striving for increased professionalism and technical capability and—particularly after the dramatic events in Thailand—tend to play a lesser role politically than in the past. A look at four of the regional military establishments illustrates the nature of current developments.

**The Socialist Republic of Vietnam.** The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) maintains one of the largest armies in the world, one that is far larger than any realistic appraisal of the country's defense needs would require. While hindered by the country's dire economic problems, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) is strong, well armed and well disciplined. Its equipment comes from domestic production, as well as outside sources including the old Soviet and Chinese equipment and a variety of US weapons recovered after 1975. Foreign equipment is kept operational by locally manufactured spare parts, as well as those purchased on world markets. However, each year the amount of such equipment that is operationally usable decreases.

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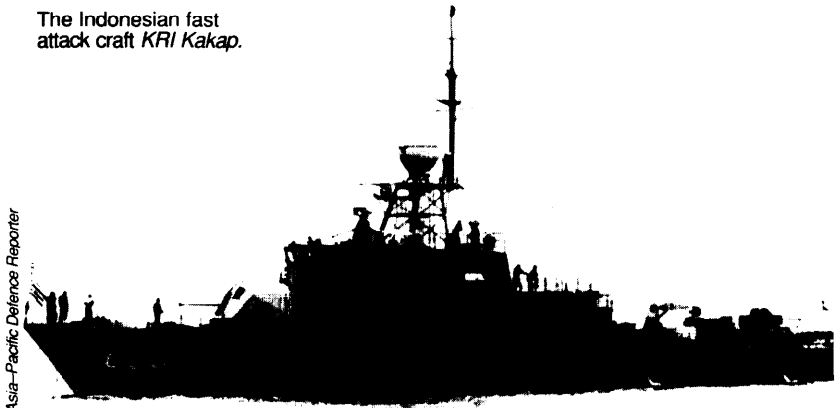
The number of Vietnamese troops deployed abroad is not

known with certainty. The withdrawal from Cambodia has returned over 100,000 men to Vietnam. The number of troops in Laos has been drastically reduced as well. Vietnamese strategy is to retain as much influence in Cambodia and Laos as UN policies and internal factional squabbling will allow. In Laos, the Vietnamese want a nominally independent government closely tied to them through "advisers" and viable economic and political ties.

There are over 2,500 Russian "advisers" and technicians in Vietnam now, although those numbers are in decline as the Russian presence in the Pacific is reduced. Russian force deployments to Cam Ranh Bay have decreased significantly from levels of the mid-1980s. However, the facility remains available for use by Russian forces. In return for access to Vietnamese bases and as part of its commitment under the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship, Russia provides significant military and economic assistance to Vietnam and Laos.

Since 1975, the Soviet Union and its successor government have provided over \$6 billion in arms aid to Vietnam and an additional \$9 billion in economic assistance. The magnitude of

The Indonesian fast attack craft *KRI Kakap*.



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changes and the significant social, political and economic pressures inside Russia make it clear that this level of assistance will decline dramatically. This makes it important for Vietnam to find new sources of assistance for economic development, and it probably signals a decline in the size of the potent Vietnamese military establishment.

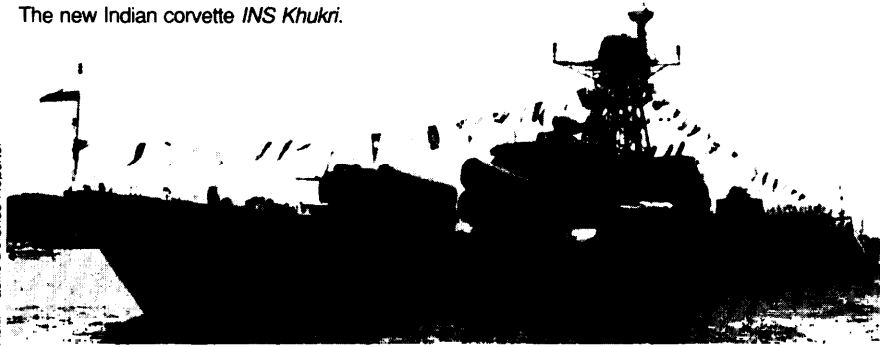
The possibility of a UN-brokered settlement in Cambodia and the probability that Vietnam will finally move to settle the emotional US POW/MIA issue makes it probable that Vietnam will be able to make major shifts in its international political and economic relations in the near term. Normalization of relations with the United States seems now a matter of "when, not if." The economic and political implications of normalization are of major importance to Vietnam and to its regional neighbors. The new economic and trade implications for the region are significant, with most countries positioning themselves for the advantages that will come with increased world trade and investment in Vietnam.

**Indonesia.** Indonesia, the fourth largest country in population in the world and the most strategically located of the ASEAN countries, maintains the largest armed forces of the non-communist states in the region. However, since 1985, Indonesia has significantly reorganized and streamlined its force structure and completed a changeover to a new, younger generation of military leadership.

The army emphasizes two types of forces referred to in Indonesian doctrine as the territorial force and the tactical force. A majority of the army's personnel strength is assigned to the geographically oriented territorial force. The largest formations are the 10 powerful Military Regional Commands, commanded by army major generals. In 1985, the number of these commands was

The new Indian corvette *INS Khukri*.

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reduced from 16 to 10. The air force and navy have also streamlined their headquarters and operational commands.

The net result is a somewhat smaller armed force with a compartmented defense system in which the principal component is the major island or island group. During an emergency, the army commander in a threatened area will take command of all forces in the region, coordinating air and naval activities through service liaison officers on his staff. The navy and air force would provide tactical support (air-to-ground gunnery and bombing), strategic support (air and sealift), as well as forward defense support (patrolling and interdiction of invading forces). The army has adopted low-intensity conflict as its primary tactical doctrine.

The reorganization did not neglect the tactical force. The Army Strategic Reserve Command (Kostrad) was designated as the tactical force of the army. It was reorganized into two infantry divisions, both based on Java, and a separate brigade on Sulawesi. All Kostrad units have both airborne and standard infantry capabilities. A Kostrad quick reaction force is capable of rapid movement to any area of the country on short notice. The army's Red Berets, redesignated as

the Special Forces Command, retain their traditional missions resembling those of the familiar US Army Green Berets.

Of greater significance than reorganization is the regeneration of the armed forces leadership. A major generational change was completed in

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1986 when officers of the "Generation of 1945" retired from active duty. The armed forces are now led by officers who graduated from the Indonesian military academy system after 1959. This transferred leadership to a new breed of officer molded from a post-independence civil and military education system. These officers are professionally skilled in military science and management techniques but are somewhat less sophisticated in international affairs and world politics than some of their predecessors.

Indonesia has been slowly modernizing its military equipment. Unique among developing nations, the Indonesian armed forces have low priority for funding in the national development plan, and armed forces acquisitions have slowed in recent years. The most recent major acquisition was the F-16 aircraft, matching Thailand and Singapore as its primary fighter force. The navy has refurbished its US-origin destroyers and has purchased a variety of fast patrol crafts from South Korea, as well as other ships from Great Britain, the Netherlands and Germany.

Indonesia zealously guards its nonaligned posture. Reflecting the confidence its economic modernization has brought, its leadership stresses a more active foreign policy, and the country has increased its visibility on a number

of international issues. The most important to its ASEAN partners has been its strong advocacy and leadership on the Cambodia issue. Currently, there is no major external threat to Indonesia, whose geography isolates it from potential dangers on the Asian mainland. In 1992, Indonesia became the chairman of the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) and President Soeharto wants to take the NAM away from confrontational east-west politics to emphasize the need for a meaningful north-south partnership for economic development.

**Thailand.** Thailand's recent history has been marred by violence in both the domestic and international arenas. The tragic violence of its army firing on its own people was followed by dramatic political change, and the historic ability of the Thai people to "bend like the bamboo" has enabled the country to emerge from its trauma with a new spirit of civil-military cooperation under an elected civilian government.

In recent years, Thailand has also experienced armed clashes with both Vietnamese and Laotian forces on its borders and a tense frontier with Burma. Though the threat to Thailand is now reduced, the country must contend with often fractious relations with the Laos army and with ethnic and ideological separatists in Burma whose conflicts often spill across their long border. The end of the Thai communist insurgency in the 1980s, and the end of disruptive Malaysian Communist Party activity and Muslim separatist operations along its border with Malaysia have removed a major irritant, although banditry remains a problem in the south.

Thailand has been particularly anxious to resolve the threat from Vietnamese forces in Cambodia and has taken a lead role in seeking to establish a new relationship with Vietnam based on economic and market ties and a more open political association. Withdrawal of Vietnamese forces calmed the volatile Cambodian border situation and reduced the threat on Thailand's eastern border. But until a lasting peaceful settlement has been reached among the factions inside Cambodia, the southeastern border region will remain unstable.

Thailand has tailored its armed forces to confront two widely differing threats. Infantry-heavy forces stressing small-unit jungle warfare and the Border Patrol Police guard frontiers with Burma, Malaysia, Laos and Cambodia. More heavily armed units, including substantial armored forces all backed by field artillery, are prepared to engage more substantial threats.

Recent major purchases of Chinese armor and aircraft at "friendship prices" have brought the PRC and Thailand closer together. But similar Chinese sales to Burma make it inevitable that the ruthless Burmese government will increase the level of its attacks against autonomy-seeking ethnic groups along the Thai border and perhaps raise border tensions again.

**Republic of the Philippines.** The domestic political situation in the Philippines remains problematic. The most obvious changes have been a result of the changed political and military association with the United States. US withdrawal from its bases there ushered in a new era of security relationships in the region. The new world political order enables the United States to maintain its forward-deployed security presence in the region without permanent bases in the region. However, the policy requires continued reliable access to repair, logistics and replenishment facilities in the region; the loss of the Crow Valley aerial gunnery range used by several ASEAN countries besides the United States makes unilateral and bilateral training considerably more costly. Given the political volatility of the Philippines and the change in the level of the American commitment there, the capability of the New Armed Forces of the Philippines (NAFP) to regain cohesiveness and effectively combat communist insurgency is of paramount interest.

Since the Philippine revolution of February 1986, the role of the military in Philippine society and politics has changed dramatically. Once vilified for its support of the late President Ferdinand Marcos and criticized for politicized corruption, the armed forces regained considerable public favor by their support for governmental change and "people power" that brought Presi-



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Thai troops on the Cambodian border.

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dent Corazon Aquino to power. Since then, repeated coup attempts by various factions of the military undermined public regard for the military and caused an endless challenge for the fragile central government. Election of retired General Fidel Ramos to the presidency provides the chance for fundamental political and military rapprochement in the Philippines, but it remains to be seen if this historically fractious country can overcome a seemingly impossible obstacle to fiscal and political stability.

The strength of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its New People's Army (NPA) insurgency continues to pose a challenge to the government. The Moro National

Liberation Front (MNLF) and other separatist movements in the Moslem southern part of the country are experiencing a resurgence in activity. The NAFP is not capable of simultaneously waging effective operations against these multiple threats.

The NPA has remained strong despite losses after the departure of Marcos in 1986 and the political buffeting it has faced since then. The

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NPA remains well armed and is capable of conducting effective operations against the government throughout the country. In addition, the CPP and NPA have thousands of part-time noncombatant supporters. Factions within the NPA have fractured the movement. Nevertheless, it retains a formidable capability for terrorist activity to destabilize the government.

The armed forces are hampered by woefully low levels of funding and inadequate logistics and maintenance support systems. An increase in US security assistance funds might improve the situation and move toward establishment of a professionally capable armed force that can truly "move, shoot and communicate" effectively. The NAFP has the desire to become self-reliant and to defeat the insurgencies. However at present, the NAFP could not repel a major external invasion of its territory and could not cope effectively with concentrated armed opposition from both the NPA and the MNLF.

## **The Role of ASEAN**

It is indeed fortunate that the strategic importance of the South China Sea region and the political change affecting the countries there has not translated into disharmony within the region. Stability in the region is due, in large part, to the solidifying role of ASEAN and the determination of its members to maintain this stability.

While ASEAN is not, and in all likelihood will not become, a defense pact, ASEAN solidarity has served its members well. The 1992 ASEAN summit meeting in Manila devoted unprecedented attention to regional security issues. Though it is not likely there will be any change from ASEAN members' policy of bilateral military cooperation rather than a multilateral security pact, a change in the level of security cooperation appears inevitable. Military modernization, as well as military and political consultation have brought a more common understanding of the nature of the internal and external threats to the region, as well as a keen realization of the benefits that can accrue through cooperative modernization.

While the military forces of ASEAN have sought new equipment from a variety of sources, there is considerable parallelism in acquisition of major weapon systems. This facilitates standardization and interoperability, advantages the various countries are experiencing as they conduct increasingly frequent bilateral military consultations, training and exercises. It is of great help in logistic and operational cooperation.

Military cooperation is a major component of the ASEAN partnership. Although no member advocates establishment of formal multilateral military ties, the countries are tied to each other by a web of bilateral programs that permit each country to become familiar with the operational capabilities and procedures of the others. Many cooperative programs have been in place for years. Indonesia's bilateral exercises with Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, border meetings between Indonesian and the Philippines and between Indonesian and Malaysia, and Thailand's



cooperation with Malaysia in counterinsurgency operations along their common border are examples of the bilateral military cooperation that has strengthened the region. The newest formal agreement between Singapore and Indonesia provides for joint use of aerial and air-to-ground ranges in Sumatra. These programs are likely to continue for the foreseeable future, bringing benefits to all concerned.

The reduction in presence of superpower forces in the region has also brought the realization that increased regional military cooperation is essential. Most countries have stepped up regional bilateral training and exercises. For example, in August 1991, Indonesia and Malaysia conducted their first major tri-service combined training exercise, which is likely to become an annual event. Tough political issues still remain. Malaysia and Singapore squabble periodically over military and security issues. This was illustrated by Singapore's publicized irritation that the training exercise was conducted too close to Singapore and that it coincided with Singapore's National Day.

Indonesia's armed forces' Commander in Chief, General Try Sutrisno, likened the regional security process to that of a spider web. Each link of the web ties together two elements of the multinational ASEAN partnership, as well as other friendly regional countries such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The web as a whole, representing political, economic, trade and security ties and strengthened by the sum of its parts, provides a viable security net for the entire South China Sea region.

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No longer viewed in a "win/lose" political framework, American forces are seen as a viable security asset that benefits all regional countries without bringing intrusive great power political-military competition to bear on the countries of the region. Nonalignment, however, makes it difficult for some ASEAN countries publicly to support a US presence. US military access in the region will be discreet and is likely to consist of increased visits to existing military facilities rather than establishment of new US bases or basing rights in the region.

Thus, the countries of South China Sea basin have witnessed great changes in superpower relations, as well as gained in their own self-confidence. In this strategically important area, during a time of continued tensions, the countries of the region have taken advantage of relative stability and economic prosperity and development to improve the professional character of their own armed forces. While each nation faces unique circumstances in the modernization and professionalization processes, all are meeting key challenges with a firm sense of their individual and collective security roles in the region. **MR**

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