The Asia Pacific region was by-and-large relatively stable throughout 2009. Yet, beneath the flurry of "regional architecture" building throughout the year, strategic developments within the region have actually been following four main trends that will have significant ramifications for Indonesia's strategic relevance.

First, great power politics seemed to be making a comeback - as did the use of military aid and cooperation as their tools.

Extra-regional powers, most notably America and Russia, continue to vie for influence within the region as new powerhouses China and India begin their ascent. Indeed, as the latter has drawn closer to the US and Israel in recent years, Pakistan's ties with China have also grown - which could be seen when China delivered Islamabad's first domestically assembled JF-17 fighter aircraft in November as part of a joint-development program.

Chinese and Singaporean forces also held their first joint exercise in June. Similar enterprises between US forces with Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other regional militaries climbed as well in 2009, as did their International Military Education and Training (IMET) and Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programs.

Second, overall regional defense spending continued to rise.

In Northeast Asia, spending increased by over 19 percent since Sept. 11, 2001, with China, Japan, and South Korea forecasted to spend some US$60 billion over the next five years on their naval fleets alone. India is also reportedly going to spend $100 billion on weapons acquisitions in the next decade.

Defense spending in Southeast Asia also grew annually by 13.5 percent on average between 2005 and 2008 (reaching US$26 billion by 2009). The 2008 global crisis will only slow this growth down by 4-5 percent until 2012, said Jane's Defence Weekly.

While Australia, with their talk of regional integration, actually spent 6.4 percent more on defense in 2008-2009 and will continue to raise spending by 3 percent annually until 2017.

Overall, Asia's defense budget will account for 32 percent of global military spending by 2016, said the Asian Defense Yearbook 2009.

Third, regional naval and air power, especially their force projection capabilities and their C4ISR network, grew more sophisticated.

Australia launched its Defense White Paper in May that envisioned 12 new submarines, eight new frigates, and a commitment to buy up to 100 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters (JSF), among others. In July, they released a 4-year defense capability plan worth AS$A 54.4 billion and unveiled its new 24 F/A-18F Super Hornet fighter aircraft.

In October, during its 60th anniversary, China also unveiled more than 50 new defense systems, while new
facilities at their Jiangnan Shipyard were reported to be making preparations to start working on the country's first aircraft carrier.

Closer to home, Malaysia commissioned both of its new French-built Scorpene submarines in November and was reported to have signed a letter of intent for two British-built Jebat-class frigates. In July, the sixth and last of the first batch of their locally built New Generation Patrol Vessels (NGPV) was launched as well.

In May, Singapore received the first of four Gulfstream G550 Conformal Airborne Early Warning aircraft and the first four Boeing F-15SG multi-role combat aircraft. They also received a delivery of Swedish-made Sjoormen-class diesel submarines and established a cyber-defense command in October, known as the Singapore Infocomm Technology Security Authority.

Thailand also agreed in early 2009 to obtain the second batch of six JAS 39 Gripen fighter aircraft, though by June the schedule was delayed. The procurement of the first batch of six was already well underway.

Finally, aside from China and Singapore, who continued their mark as the region's top weapons producer, regional militaries were outlining serious policies to move toward a self-sufficient defense industrial base.

In late 2009, Australia announced plans to re-orient their defense industry to have a sectoral approach, focusing on global supply chains, with a "new approach" to procurement. Previously, Thailand also announced plans to increase indigenous defense manufacturing. The creation of a Defense Technology Institute in January was the first step in this direction - as was their all-around offset policies as part of the Gripen purchase package.

Malaysia, who is becoming assertive about its local defense industry, proposed to establish an ASEAN Security and Defense Industry Council (ASDIC), which was endorsed by the group's defense ministers in November.

These trends are set to continue for the foreseeable future as many of the programs were within a 10 to 20-year time frame.

This means that not only will the strategic parity between us and our neighbors widen, but their increasingly sophisticated network-centric systems and surveillance capabilities could make our geo-strategic space harder to defend. Unstable development - and ongoing naval rivalry - in Northeast Asia might also destabilize our northern zone of defense.

Also, Australia's ongoing focus on China's growing powers - our biggest neighbors to the South and North - might pit us in a future geo-strategic bind. Not to mention the Sino-Indian rivalry that could destabilize our western flank.

Thus, aside from upping the ante on technological modernization, we must also tackle key defense economic issues, especially on acquisition, personnel planning, bureaucratic reform, and budgetary efficiency. The "Minimum Essential Force" concept needs to be reassessed as well.

Adaptability is the law that governs survival, said Basil Liddell Hart. Will we step up or step out?

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