Regional Order by Other Means? Examining the Rise of Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

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Abstract: This article seeks to address why and how defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia has risen in the past decade. By examining multilateral defense diplomacy under the auspices of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), as well as Indonesia’s bilateral defense diplomacy, this article makes three arguments. First, bilateral and multilateral defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia complement one another. Second, the focus of multilateral defense diplomacy has evolved and now reflects the blurring distinction between nontraditional and traditional security issues. Third, the rise of ARF’s multilateral defense diplomacy can be attributed to the concern over China’s rise, while ASEAN, considers it as among the key mechanisms to recover from the fallout of the 1996 Asian financial crisis and the recent regional arms development.

Defense diplomacy is on the rise in Southeast Asia. Observers have noted the growing defense relations between China, the United States, India, Russia, and Japan with many key states in Southeast Asia and the region as a whole.1 Within the region, even smaller Southeast Asian states such as Cambodia and Brunei are expanding their defense diplomacy.2 Bilateral defense relations among Southeast Asian states – such as officer exchanges, joint exercises, and coordinated patrols – have also been increasing in recent years, despite the occasional political spats.3 Multilaterally, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) have held annually an average of 15 formal and informal meetings between 2000 and 2009 involving defense and security officials at various levels to specifically discuss a wide range of security issues.4 The advent of the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) in 2006 and the ADMM+8 in 2010 involving the 10 ASEAN states along with Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States further exemplifies this growing trend.

These activities are significant and puzzling when we consider that for the first four decades of ASEAN’s existence, security issues were considered “off limits”...
among regional countries, and the prospect of open armed conflict, despite increasingly remote, was never completely off the table. Indeed, the majority of intraregional cooperation in that period was focused more on political and economic activities. Regional policymakers often explain away this lack of security and defense cooperation by arguing that ASEAN is neither a military alliance nor a regional security organization. If this argument holds true today, what then explains the rise of defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia in the past decade? A second related puzzle deals with the timing: Why has defense diplomacy risen in the past decade, and not before? This is puzzling because for the past decade, fault lines of major conflicts in Southeast Asia have been less visible than they were before. Today, the region is comparatively more peaceful than it was during the Cold War, when ideological rivalries and regional tensions could still flare up from time to time. If anything, therefore, defense diplomacy should have been more active during the Cold War when the prospect of regional conflict was still considerable, especially as regional armaments grew between the 1960s and the 1980s.

To address these puzzles, this article seeks to examine the focus of and recent trends in Southeast Asia’s multilateral defense diplomacy under the auspices of ASEAN and the ARF. For reasons of space, I will only focus on formal multilateral defense diplomacy. These two institutions are chosen because they represent the majority of the recorded regional defense diplomacy. Admittedly, there are other multilateral defense diplomatic activities, such as those initiated or led by the United States and China. However, this extraregionally initiated defense diplomacy does not always reflect the strategic thinking of Southeast Asian states, nor have they fundamentally overhauled the basic contours of Southeast Asian security architecture. To complement the discussion, this article will also examine the case of Indonesia’s bilateral defense diplomacy to highlight how such defense relations remain a crucial part of regional order.

By assessing both forms of defense diplomacy, this article seeks to unpack the broader complexity of defense diplomacy as one of the major pathways to regional order in Southeast Asia. Defense diplomacy in this sense is not the only pathway because the previous and current political and economic cooperation in ASEAN has arguably been successful in preventing the outbreak of a major regional war while providing the normative foundations of a security community. My analysis of defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia thus seeks to call attention to an understudied, if not ignored, subject in the literature on Southeast Asian international relations. In addition, I also hope to better expand the existing scattered commentaries made by pundits with regards to defense cooperation in Southeast Asia.

This article makes three broad interrelated arguments. First, the various bilateral defense diplomacy and multilateral defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia complement one another and are two sides of the same coin serving two different goals. Bilateral defense diplomacy is geared to achieve specific functional goals (such as technical assistance), it is discriminate in nature (targeted toward states of concern), and it supports overall regional confidence-building measures (CBMs). Multilateral defense diplomacy meanwhile focuses on “soft institutional balancing” vis-à-vis extraregional powers, while “enmeshing” them into regional norms and rules.
Second, the focus of multilateral defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia has evolved from initially being concerned with largely transnational security issues to those that are increasingly blurring the distinction between nontraditional and traditional security issues, such as humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, peacekeeping, and maritime security. This blurring distinction notwithstanding, the growing prominence of nontraditional security in regional discourse has provided the initial “building block” necessary for Southeast Asian states to gradually move into addressing traditional defense issues, both within the region and in their relations with extraregional powers. The changing nature of Southeast Asia’s strategic environment, the creeping democratization among key Southeast Asian states, and the preexisting ASEAN-related cooperative activities dealing with transnational security further explain this evolution in Southeast Asia’s multilateral defense diplomacy.

Third, the growing number of multilateral defense diplomatic activities under the auspices of the ARF between ASEAN and its regional partners concerning a wide range of security issues can be attributed to the concern with China’s rise and the ensuing potential return of great-power politics in the Asia-Pacific. Nontraditional and transnational security issues also provided a “conceptual umbrella” under which ASEAN through the ARF could multilaterally engage key regional players within an overarching framework of confidence building. Meanwhile, the devastating impact of the 1996 Asian financial crisis, the 1997 Southeast Asian haze, the 1998 political transition in Indonesia, and the 1999 East Timor fiasco, all uncomfortably pressured regional policymakers to come to terms with the region’s growing need for a more intensive and elevated security dialogue. Thus, in terms of timing, multilateral defense diplomacy under ASEAN initially rose in the 2000s as a way to recover from the regional anxiety caused by the 1996 Asian financial crisis. But recently, the worrying trend in regional arms development provided further impetus for policymakers to step up and expand such security cooperation, especially through the establishment of the 2003 ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) framework. The following sections will elaborate and expand these three primary arguments.

**Defense Diplomacy and Southeast Asian Security**

Generally speaking, defense diplomacy is hardly a new phenomenon. Since the age of organized warfare, the use or threatened use of military force to achieve foreign-policy objectives has been a staple feature of the international system. In the Asia-Pacific, the so-called “gunboat diplomacy,” for example, redefined the region’s history when in 1853, Commodore Perry sailed four vessels into Japan and convinced the Tokugawa Shogunate that the country should be opened to trade with the United States. The recent events in the South China Sea also reminded us of the relevance of military force in foreign policy. Such coercively oriented use of military assets to achieve foreign-policy objectives, however, is beginning to appear more like an anomaly in the post–Cold War era. Since then, a new form of defense diplomacy is becoming increasingly more common as militaries and their defense ministries undertake a growing range of external peacetime cooperative tasks. These activities include, *inter alia*: the various bilateral and multilateral contacts between senior military and civilian defense officials, the training of foreign military and civilian defense personnel, the contacts and
exchanges between military personnel and units, numerous port calls and ship visits, the provision of military equipment and other material aid, the growing number of bilateral or multilateral military exercises, and others.11

In this new form, not only does defense diplomacy involve nonsecurity state officials and nongovernmental organizations, but it also uses various informal and formal channels and resources. This view of defense diplomacy is broader than the traditional military diplomacy that focuses only on “the use of the military to advance diplomacy and its engagement in various security arrangements.”12 Nonetheless, one of the primary goals of this new defense diplomacy is to provide a low-cost, low-risk “continuation of dialogue by other means” and further reduce the likelihood of conflict between former and potential enemies.13 Specifically, defense diplomacy as a conflict-prevention mechanism could work in a number of ways, as shown in Table 1.

Yet, despite these potential benefits, defense diplomacy has never been significantly featured in regional discourse and policy in Southeast Asia, nor has it been officially adopted by specific regional governments, until recently. Indeed, for much of ASEAN’s history, the management of regional order has been in practice a political-driven business-like affair undertaken by the region’s top leaders, such as Indonesian President Soeharto, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, or Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Furthermore, the region’s diverse political regimes, economic development, and security interests, as well as ASEAN’s seemingly limited role in traditional security issues, have led scholars to hesitate in giving enough credit to Southeast Asian security initiatives. That there is no single regional hegemon in Southeast Asia that can successfully drive the region uncontested14 and that extraregional powers such as China and the United States have had more influence in shaping regional dynamics seem to vindicate the perception that Southeast Asian security policies are more dependently reactive than independently proactive.15

This approach, however, does not take us very far in understanding the rise of defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia during the past decade. Therefore, this article departs from the traditional analysis of Southeast Asian security that generally considers the region to be merely a “playing field” of the great powers and assumes that Southeast Asian states have their own strategic preferences and have actively sought to influence the shaping of a regional order.16 Although the specific meaning of “regional order” in Southeast Asia is contested,17 regional policymakers still strive to have some

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<td><strong>DEFENSE DIPLOMACY AS CONFLICT PREVENTION</strong></td>
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| Military cooperation can act as a symbol of willingness to pursue broader cooperation, mutual trust, and commitment to work to overcome or manage differences. |
| Military cooperation can be a means of introducing transparency into defense relations, especially with regard to states’ intentions and capabilities. |
| Defense diplomacy can be a means of building or reinforcing perceptions of common interests. |
| Military cooperation might also change over time the mind sets of partner states’ militaries. |
| Defense assistance may be used as an incentive to encourage cooperation in other areas. |

sort of order that: (1) maintains ASEAN’s centrality in regional relations, (2) minimizes and reduces the likelihood of open warfare among Southeast Asian states, (3) maintains mutually beneficial relations with extraregional powers, and (4) supports domestic economic development. Although this is a common argument in the literature on Southeast Asian security, a closer examination of the recent developments in regional defense diplomacy suggests a more complicated picture with regard to the pathways by which such order can be achieved.

**Multilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Issues and Trends**

Seven years ago, one prominent scholar of Southeast Asian security affairs proclaimed, “in fact, there are no multilateral defense arrangements among Southeast Asian states.”\(^{18}\) Although this may be correct when one defines multilateral defense arrangements by NATO-like standards – such as the presence of a joint operational command or institutional links – the reality is more complex. First, although ASEAN was established with a political–security–economic cooperation in mind, it was never explicitly conceived of as a NATO-like multilateral defense venue in the first place, nor was it designed to replace traditional bilateral security arrangements. Second, despite ASEAN’s spotty record in tackling critical regional security challenges,\(^{19}\) its ability to provide “strategic space” and compensate for the domestic political and economic weaknesses of its members – by deepening engagement with one another and simultaneously balancing extraregional powers – provides a valuable sociopolitical capital, not just in the event of a regional crisis erupting, but also for a future engagement in other more sensitive issues such as national defense.\(^{20}\) Finally, ASEAN’s multilateral cooperation in transnational and nontraditional security issues has helped provide the initial “building block” for multilateral defense diplomacy in recent years.

This section will examine the key trends and issues in Southeast Asia’s multilateral defense diplomacy under both ASEAN and the ARF. Out of the recorded 177 multilateral defense diplomatic events in Southeast Asia since 1994 until 2009, ARF-related events consist of the majority (72 percent) with ASEAN-related events coming in second (20.5 percent).\(^{21}\) As Figure 1 also shows, the rise of these multilateral defense diplomatic activities coincided with the aftermath of the 1996 Asian financial crisis, which we will further discuss later in the article. But before further examining ASEAN’s and ARF’s defense diplomacy, the next subsection will first describe the focus of Southeast Asia’s multilateral defense diplomacy.

**The Focus of Multilateral Defense Diplomacy**

A good indicator of the strategic orientation of Southeast Asia’s multilateral defense diplomacy is the policy focus or goals of ASEAN’s official public documents. A recent study by the University of Indonesia shows that from 1967 to 2009, ASEAN and its related institutions produced 270 documents, mainly in the forms of declarations, joint communiqués, chairman statements, plans of action, annual reports, and others.\(^{22}\) The majority of these documents are chairman statements and declarations (totaling 119), which are not legally binding. The same study also notes that the majority of the documents produced were targeted to address nontraditional security issues (51 percent),
followed by traditional security (38 percent) and institutional development (11 percent). What the study classifies as traditional security-oriented documents are those dealing with issues such as the South China Sea, the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone, the strengthening of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and others. Meanwhile, from the nontraditional security documents, three issues were featured more than others: economic development, conflict resolution, and human security.

However, a closer examination of the documents and of Southeast Asia’s strategic environment suggests that any clear conceptual distinction between nontraditional and traditional security issues is increasingly untenable. In the maritime domain, for example, piracy, illegal fishing, and sea-lines-of-communication vulnerabilities have coalesced with the growing demand for marine resources and energy – at a time when historical animosities among regional countries have yet to fully evaporate and where maritime boundaries are highly contested. Under these circumstances, incidents at sea in the waters of Northeast and Southeast Asia, especially in the South China Sea, have been increasing. Consequently, regional countries have responded by increasingly focusing on littoral security through the acquisition of maritime patrol aircraft and offshore patrol vessels. Climate change and the changing dynamic of great-power relations could also exacerbate these fault lines of conflict. Studies have shown that climate change in this regard could drive Southeast Asia’s future vulnerability to transnational threats, such as organized crime, illicit trafficking, piracy, infectious diseases, and illegal migration flows. This complexity partially explains why regional security discourse has been increasingly taking on a nontraditional security tone.

Another part of the explanation behind the growing prominence of nontraditional security in Southeast Asia is the creeping democratization process within key regional states since the 1990s. According to one study, this process has broadened the institutional settings of international relations in Southeast Asia, has raised the accountability of regimes, and has allowed the direct participation of a growing number of nongovernmental actors in foreign policymaking. Although some consider the democratic trends in Southeast Asia to be “discouraging,” one study notes that the majority of the population in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia,
and Singapore actually expressed support for a democratic political system. Under these conditions, nontraditional security issues are increasingly becoming a prominent foreign-policy agenda for these states because their respective domestic population (through civil society groups) is pushing the government to pay more attention to the day-to-day issues that they consider more relevant and important.

Civil society groups in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, for example, have been pressuring ASEAN and their governments to pay more attention to environmental issues in the wake of the 1997 regional haze debacle. In 2010, more than 20 civil society groups gathered in Singapore to discuss the recurring haze problem and called on the respective governments and ASEAN to act. When it comes to human security issues, civil society groups in Southeast Asia are also increasingly providing input to ASEAN (through the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights) and their respective governments regarding the need for a comprehensive adoption of the “Responsibility to Protect” principle in regional relations and domestic policy.

Finally, while the changing strategic environment and the creeping democratization provide the “push and pull” factor behind the rise of nontraditional security issues, the fact that these issues are transnational in nature (making them more amenable to multilateral cooperative approaches) and the fact that ASEAN had a preexisting network and activities designed to tackle them provide the opportunity and platform for those issues to be institutionalized. This is important because it provides a conceptual umbrella under which ASEAN could engage regional powers through the ARF. This dense network of structures at the ministerial level downward includes, inter alia, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime, the ASEAN Chiefs of National Police, the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drugs Matters, and the ASEAN Ministers of Home Affairs/Interior. They also provide a platform where regional security officials could increase their “comfort level” with one another – allowing for the possibility that they could engage in traditional defense issues in the future. These “social capital” and modalities, based on mutual expectation, trust, and social networks, when juxtaposed with the ARF’s focus on regional confidence building, help explain the eventual birth of ADMM and ADMM+8. These two latest additions to ASEAN’s multilateral defense diplomacy epitomize the growing nexus of traditional and nontraditional security issues. We will discuss this further in the section on ASEAN’s multilateral defense diplomacy.

Trends in Multilateral Defense Diplomacy: The ASEAN Regional Forum
The creation of the ARF in 1994 started a new web of multilateral security interactions between ASEAN and its partners. The ARF itself can be seen as a consultation mechanism on a wide range of security issues among Southeast Asian states, as well as with their regional partners. In terms of regional order, three significant results are noteworthy. First, the ARF is predicated on the norms of behavior stemming from the “ASEAN Way” that emphasizes consensus building, noninterference, and peaceful resolution of disputes. Consequently, the ARF has become an important vehicle for the spread of regional norms. Second, the ARF is the only regional institution in the world that includes the United States, the European Union, India, Japan, North Korea, South
Korea, Russia, Pakistan, China, and others (totaling 27 states as of 2007). This has contributed to the notion of “ASEAN centrality” in managing regional relations beyond its immediate boundaries. Third, although the ARF is ASEAN-driven, other member states have been allowed to make significant contributions.

Although one can contest the merits of these arguments, the ARF remains one of ASEAN’s primary tools of strategic engagement and confidence building, both within Southeast Asia and with its regional partners. This has included a series of crowded programs of intersessional meetings on CBMs, search and rescue coordination, peacekeeping operations, and disaster relief. These programs have further developed into practical and cooperative measures, including, among others: (1) the publication of annual defense policy statements and defense white papers to reinforce transparency and openness in a region where such abstractions are not the general tradition; (2) increasing military exchanges, including staff college training; and (3) the growing involvement and participation of defense officials in various ARF activities.36

Indeed, through its annual Senior Officials Meetings, intersessional activities, and the numerous Track I and Track II meetings, the ARF has created a series of networks leading to the provision of a “social capital” and a stock of ease and comfort among regional states.

As mentioned earlier, the ARF has dominated Southeast Asia’s multilateral defense diplomacy, which includes the ARF Ministerial Meeting, the ARF Senior Officials’ Meeting, the ARF Intersessional Group on CBMs, the ARF Security Policy Conference (ASPC), the ARF Heads of Defense Universities/Colleges/Institutions, and the ARF Defense Officials’ Dialogue (DOD). The regularly held DOD, in particular, has been increasingly considered a significant event since its first meeting in 2002 as it provides an opportunity for defense officials to exchange views on regional security and discuss defense issues of mutual concern.37 It is also worth mentioning that the Beijing-initiated ASPC involving senior defense and security officials is beginning to receive wider attention with regards to regional security development, despite some concerns about China’s dominance of the proceedings.

Nonetheless, the plethora of ARF-related meetings in the last 18 years has allowed regional states to make some headway in dealing with an increasingly complex nexus between traditional and nontraditional security issues. In 2002, the ARF established an Intersessional Meeting on Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime, which developed a multifaceted and far-reaching work plan that spawned numerous practical proposals.38 In 2005, following the Tsunami, the ARF reinstated the Intersessional Meeting on Disaster Relief, approved the ARF Statement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, adopted the ARF General Guidelines on Disaster Relief Cooperation, and is currently drafting the ARF Disaster Relief Standard Operating Procedures. In 2009, the ARF approved two new working groups, the Intersessional Meeting on Maritime Security and the Intersessional Meeting on Nonproliferation and Disarmament.39

The increasing growth of these meetings and the expansion of the security issues covered between ASEAN and its regional partners can be attributed to the concern with China’s rise – and the ensuing potential return of great-power politics in the Asia-Pacific. Of course, that China has been more willing to engage its Southeast Asian
neighbors facilitated this process. But initially, after the Cold War, policymakers were concerned with the possibility of Southeast Asia falling into the dominant orbit of China. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, one study notes that many regional policymakers in Southeast Asia were increasingly concerned over Beijing’s future foreign policies in East Asia, with particular emphasis on the possible use of force. This was particularly related to the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Most recently, one study notes that despite the improvement in overall China–Southeast Asia relations in the early 2000s, Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea as well as its increasingly assertive military posture and refusal to clarify its claims “play into Southeast Asian questions about Chinese intentions and especially the states’ underlying fears” about China’s stalling strategy. A longer view of the problem suggests, however, that since the 1990s, Southeast Asian policymakers have always considered the South China Sea the ultimate “litmus test” in regional relations with Beijing, especially after the Mischief Reef occupation in 1995. According to former Indonesian Defense Minister Juwono Sudarsono, “barring the possibility that China can gain access to resources other than the South China Sea area, then ASEAN countries will have to face the possibility of imminent military confrontation with China.”

Thus, the ARF was initially conceived by ASEAN as a way to manage great-power relations after the end of the Cold War. Specifically, it was initially seen primarily as a means of “engaging China in multilateral security dialogue without expectation of solving disputes or building a comprehensive regional security structure.” Such concerns stem from both the post–Cold War regional uncertainty and from the enduring perception among Southeast Asian policymakers that their region remains a valuable geopolitical prize. Indeed, while some argue that Asia and America have drifted apart between the 1996 Asian financial and the 2008 global financial crises, Washington still values the reality that Southeast Asia sits astride the major waterways linking the Western Pacific, Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf. This means that the operational capability of the US military in the Southwest Asian or Northeast Asian theaters depends on these waterways. However, as the United States tries to step up its Asian engagement under Obama, the rise of China, India, Japan, and Russia – and their renewed interest in Southeast Asia – suggests the prospect of a potentially divisive power play among these states, especially given the ambivalent nature of ASEAN–China relations.

Amidst all these complexities, Southeast Asian policymakers believed that their best bet was to further raise the profile and activities of its multilateral defense diplomacy through ASEAN and the ARF. According to Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, Indonesia as chair of ASEAN in 2011 has been “identifying [the] basic principles on how the countries of East Asia will conduct themselves, like non-use of force, transparency measures, confidence-building measures,” with the expectation that the region would move forward to create a security community, and where the relations between China and the United States, China and India, Japan and China are critical, as these are “the major axes in the region’s dynamics.” Through ASEAN, Indonesia hopes to project the norms by which “these big countries should conduct themselves in a more peaceful and benign manner.” Indeed, within the context of ASEAN–China relations, cooperation in the field of nontraditional security such as piracy, smuggling, human
trafficking, drug trade, illegal immigration, or terrorism has allowed shared norms to govern an institutionalized process of regularized consultation leading flexibly to various formal agreements while creating a political partnership – and when viewed in tandem with ASEAN China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), such cooperation process may be seen as part of the most advanced and comprehensive working model of regionalism in East Asia.50

Thus, the ARF’s growing defense diplomacy to minimize the potential harmful implications of great-power politics is a continuation of the logic of ASEAN’s “soft institutional balancing” vis-à-vis the region’s major powers. It is “soft” because it falls short of military alliances, and it is “institutional” in that it utilizes multilateral mechanisms to countervail external threats.51 This supports the argument that Southeast Asian states have been using an “omni-enmeshment” strategy of major power engagement to draw them deep into regional norms.52

Trends in Multilateral Defense Diplomacy: ASEAN

Among the first security dialogues at the ASEAN level began in 1996 with the annual ASEAN Special Senior Officials’ Meeting, which brought ASEAN defense and foreign affairs officials together.53 In 2000, the ASEAN army chiefs began meeting informally. Senior intelligence officials from Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia also met multilaterally for the first time in May 2000 in Bangkok to exchange information on regional security.54 Eventually, the list grew and ASEAN’s multilateral defense diplomacy now includes: the ASEAN Special Senior Officials’ Meeting, ASEAN Chiefs of Army Multilateral Meeting, ASEAN Navy Interaction, ASEAN Air Force Chiefs Conference, and ASEAN Military Intelligence Meeting.55 After the goal of creating an APSC was established in 2003, the ASEAN Chiefs of Defense Forces Informal Meeting came into being.

The APSC also led to the ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action that called for more cooperation in the following areas: political development (peaceful settlement of intraregional differences, promotion of human rights), shaping and sharing norms (code of conduct in the South China Sea), conflict prevention (greater transparency though CBMs, more military-to-military interaction, regional arms register), and postconflict peace building (humanitarian crisis center, educational exchanges).56 This action plan also led to the establishment of the ADMM. The stated goal of the ADMM is to provide a platform for constructive dialogue on strategic issues at the ministerial level and strengthen defense cooperation by: (1) promoting operational cooperation among ASEAN militaries through a rolling two-year work plan drawn up by the ASEAN Chiefs of Defense Forces, (2) deepening ASEAN’s engagement with its partners in nontraditional and transboundary issues, and (3) reinforcing ASEAN’s centrality in regional security architecture building.57

Overall, there were close to 50 ASEAN-initiated meetings between 2000 and 2010 that addressed defense-related issues and specifically involved the armed forces of each member state.58 As we can see from Figure 1, this rise in multilateral defense diplomacy seems to coincide with the 1996 Asian financial crisis. The devastating economic impact of this crisis, the 1997 regional haze, Indonesia’s turbulent 1998 political transition, and the 1999 East Timor fiasco all showed that Southeast Asia remains
vulnerable to regional shocks. The financial crisis in particular suggests that the growing regional integration – and in that sense, closer economic interdependence – up to that point has actually had the unintended consequences of the “loss of national autonomy,” where one ASEAN member state will suffer from the negative consequences of the economic upheavals of the other. Singapore, for example, while among the most resilient in the crisis, has had to bear the brunt of the immediate economic contagion of the crisis, perhaps more than other ASEAN states. Meanwhile, the East Timor intervention by the Australian-led UN mission after ASEAN’s failure to provide its own regional “peacekeeping force” also suggests that not only is nontraditional security tied to economic development, but there is also an increasing need to have a more developed regional defense architecture.

Under these conditions, ASEAN policymakers realized the benefits of building on the success of the ARF’s various security dialogues and emulating them in ASEAN. Such thinking was manifested more clearly when Indonesia became ASEAN’s chair in 2003 and in the APSC’s adoption. Thus, within the ASEAN context, multilateral defense diplomacy initially rose as a way to recover from the regional anxiety caused by the 1996 Asian financial crisis. Incidentally, the crisis also came on the heels of the emerging regional security discourse in the late 1990s and early 2000s that favored traditional, rather than critical, security approaches. Consequently, ASEAN not only wanted to utilize its preexisting modality of multilateral security network and emulate the ARF’s best practices, but it also wanted to elevate the pace and scope of its own defense diplomacy, including further exploring issues such as peacekeeping, maritime security, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

This gradual move to a focus on defense-related matters is also related to the increasingly worrying trend in regional arms development. Although the Asian financial crisis had briefly halted plans among regional countries to arm themselves, new regional security requirements, the economic recovery of key Asian states, changes in military doctrines, lingering regional suspicions, and the growing supply side of the international arms trade as well as China’s growing assertiveness all reinforced the rearmament of Southeast Asia. Between 2000 and 2008, Malaysia’s military budget more than doubled, Indonesia’s spending went from US$2.2 billion to US$3.8 billion, while Thailand went from US$2.1 billion to US$3 billion. Northeast Asian defense budgets recovered more rapidly, with overall spending in East Asia increasing by more than 18 percent since 2001. The concern here is that the money is being spent on externally oriented weapons platforms – though there is a debate about which type of military hardware is order-enhancing or order-upsetting.

First, there was an extraordinary build-up of fighter aircraft. Recently, Southeast Asia saw the arrival of advanced fourth-generation aircrafts such as the F-15 (Singapore), SU-27 (Vietnam), SU-30 (Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam), and Gripen (Thailand). Second, regional navies are acquiring major naval combatant vessels and building new submarine fleets. Finally, there have been enhancements in the missile capabilities of each of these weapons systems. The potential danger lies in the plausible scenario that if a state’s decision to modernize its military is poorly matched to its security environment, then the ensuing arms dynamics that it provokes could reduce the state’s security and potentially make war unnecessarily likely. This “arms dynamic” is
exacerbated by Southeast Asia’s strategic environment that is historically characterized by mutual suspicion. This does not suggest that there is an immediate danger of open war. But it does reflect the potential fault lines of regional conflicts in the future. This realization arguably led ASEAN countries to reassess their position on intraregional defense cooperation and to gradually accept the notion that elevating the profile and scope of defense diplomacy is becoming a strategic imperative. Thus, the degree and scope of military modernization remains an important factor in explaining the rise of ASEAN’s multilateral defense diplomacy in the past decade.

Southeast Asian Bilateral Defense Diplomacy: The Case of Indonesia

Despite the discussion in the previous section about the significance of multilateral defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia, regional policymakers have rarely, if ever, entertained the idea of downgrading or abolishing bilateral defense cooperation – which they consider to be more focused and specific, and in most cases, more functional and practical. One scholar dubbed this policy preference as ASEAN’s “spider web of defense bilateralism,” which consists of intelligence sharing, joint exercises, training activities, and others. For reasons of space, this article cannot discuss all the existing dyadic bilateral defense relations among ASEAN member states – each of which has its own contexts and scope (see See Seng Tan’s article in this special issue). In this section, I will only focus on Indonesia’s bilateral defense diplomacy as the largest country in the region to illustrate the enduring relevance and significance of such relations, and how it complements the region’s multilateral defense diplomacy.

For Indonesia, bilateral defense diplomacy could be categorized based on its three key functions: (1) defense diplomacy for CBMs, (2) defense diplomacy for defense capabilities enhancement, and (3) defense diplomacy for domestic defense industrial development. The CBMs include state visits, dialogues and consultations, information sharing, strategic partnerships, officer exchanges, and joint-military exercises. Defense diplomacy to enhance defense capabilities includes military assistance, weapons procurements, and acquisitions line of credit, while defense diplomacy to improve domestic industrial development includes the transfers of technology, research and development cooperation, and investments in joint ventures. In the Indonesian context, the term “defense diplomacy” also implies that the leading agency involved in the events or activities is either the Indonesian Defense Forces (TNI) or the Ministry of Defense (MoD). The role of military officers in foreign policy is certainly not a new phenomenon. Indeed, during much of the New Order period (1966–98), the TNI dominated foreign policymaking, including policymaking toward China in the 1970s, for example. But today, military officers no longer dominate foreign-policy decision making, and instead, they merely act as “ad-hoc diplomats” within Indonesia’s bilateral and multilateral defense diplomacy.

That said, Indonesia conducted 88 defense diplomatic activities between 2003 and 2008, the majority of which were designed for CBMs (58 activities), followed by defense capability enhancement (17 activities) and defense industrial development (13 activities). In these activities, Indonesia engaged 32 countries, the top 10 being the country’s most crucial security partners and potential rivals (see Figure 2). The
dominant focus of increasing CBMs makes strategic sense when we consider that for more than a decade following Soeharto’s downfall, the central government has yet to fully fulfill the budgetary requirements requested by the TNI, especially in light of the country’s worsening geopolitical vulnerability and increasing operational demands.\textsuperscript{76} In the words of one retired general and former MoD official, defense diplomacy is therefore becoming the “first line of defense” in managing Indonesia’s regional strategic environment. A closer examination of the top 10 countries Indonesia targeted in its defense diplomacy also suggests the growing need to reduce its security dependence and diversify its strategic partners, especially with regards to the provision of military hardware.\textsuperscript{77}

The United States, China, and Australia represent the major powers that Indonesia is most concerned with. The first two had previously been seen to undermine the country’s domestic stability and territorial integrity. Indonesia froze diplomatic relations with China from 1967 until 1990 and has remained ambivalent ever since in overall bilateral relations.\textsuperscript{78} The American military embargo in the 1990s over human rights abuses continues to remind defense policymakers of the acrimonious bilateral relations – and of the dangers associated with an overdependence on one country for military hardware. Australia meanwhile is still seen as the country that led the East Timor intervention, and is seen by some as a supporter of separatist movements within Indonesia. These countries, however, along with Russia, France, South Korea, and The Netherlands, are also Indonesia’s most important suppliers of military hardware. By 2007, Indonesia had a record of 173 weapons systems from 17 different countries, many of which are from these countries. Indonesia has also signed strategic partnership agreements with most of them.

Meanwhile, Singapore and Malaysia are Indonesia’s closest neighbors and potential rivals – partly because of the historical legacy of the infamous “Confrontation” of the 1960s and partly because of simmering acrimonious relations with the two over various issues.\textsuperscript{79} Recently, Indonesia–Malaysia relations have deteriorated over maritime boundary disputes and other issues such as the treatment of Indonesian domestic
workers. Contentious issues with Singapore include the city-state’s import of sand (and its use in its land reclamation projects, which Jakarta sees could erode its maritime boundaries), and the absence of an extradition treaty, though this seems to result from the Indonesian Parliament’s reluctance to ratify the treaty signed as a package deal with the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) in 2007.79 These issues notwithstanding, Indonesia has conducted bilateral defense diplomacy with all its ASEAN partners, with Malaysia and Singapore topping the list.

To sum up, Indonesia’s bilateral defense diplomacy can thus be seen as a foreign-policy mechanism that: (1) primarily focuses on increasing regional order through CBMs, and (2) targets a select few of the most important regional neighbors and potential rivals as well as the region’s biggest powerhouses and potential weapons suppliers. More specifically, Indonesia considers defense diplomacy a means to safeguard the country’s territorial integrity, enhance regional order, and improve domestic defense development.

Conclusion: Implications and Future Research
In summary, our preceding discussion has suggested the following. First, bilateral and multilateral defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia is part and parcel of ASEAN’s “soft institutional balancing” strategy vis-à-vis regional powers (mainly through the ARF) and is geared to support overall regional confidence building. In addition to the overarching goal of deepening regional stability, Indonesia’s bilateral defense diplomacy has also been designed to achieve specific functional goals. Second, the focus of multilateral defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia has evolved from initially being concerned with largely transnational security issues to those that are increasingly blurring the distinction between nontraditional and traditional security issues, such as humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and maritime security. These issues provide the initial sociopolitical capital necessary for ASEAN to gradually address traditional defense issues. Furthermore, although Southeast Asia’s changing strategic environment and creeping democratization among key states provide the push-and-pull factors behind the rising profile of nontraditional security issues in regional security discourse, the pre-existing ASEAN and ARF network dealing with transnational security issues provides a better conceptual and institutional umbrella. Third, the growing number of multilateral defense diplomatic activities can be attributed to the concern with China’s rise and the potential return of great-power politics. Meanwhile, the devastating impact of the 1996 Asian financial crisis provided the initial catalyst under which regional policymakers decided to expand and intensify defense diplomacy as a way to recover from the regional anxiety, especially given the recent regional arms dynamic.

These conclusions have several implications for our understanding of international relations and regional security in Southeast Asia. First, while scholars have noted that the “most difficult and sensitive” issues in Southeast Asia tend to relate to the traditional concerns of national security,80 the rise of defense diplomacy in the past decade indicates that regional policymakers are in fact aware of the potential pitfalls of always avoiding the tough questions. But given the entrenchment of historical legacies, domestic political dynamics, and the existing norms of the “ASEAN Way,” some of these activities are not immediately visible nor have they produced legally binding documents
pertaining to specific defense issues. Nevertheless, scholars examining Southeast Asia’s regional security architecture building should now at least account for or incorporate the significance of these multilateral and bilateral defense diplomatic activities.

Second, this article confirms and supports much of the existing literature about Southeast Asian regional security architecture. Specifically, multilateral defense diplomacy, as part of the broader trends in Southeast Asian regionalism, is among the crucial tools to manage regional relations, and it provides a useful framework to reduce intraregional tensions that may undermine economic growth and domestic political stability. However, by unpacking the focus of and trends in Southeast Asian defense diplomacy, this article provides a more complicated picture of defense regionalism that complements the existing processes of political and economic regionalism, despite the criticism that the competing forces of economic integration and identity politics have exposed ASEAN’s constituting ambivalences that leave it ill-equipped to serve as the template for a post–Cold War regional order. Nevertheless, much of the literature of Southeast Asian international relations tends to focus on these other two forms of regionalism while neglecting defense regionalism that was previously considered insignificant or irrelevant. This article also fills a niche area between the traditional political-security analyses of regional security development, most of which relies on a norms-based constructivist worldview, and the discussion over the growing importance of nontraditional and human security issues in Southeast Asia.

Despite these contributions, however, this article could not address several shortcomings that would be best tackled by future research projects. First, the article has provided a broad regional overview of the trends, issues, and mechanisms of Southeast Asia’s defense diplomacy and unpacked their complexity. But the article could not provide detailed policy pronouncements of each individual ASEAN state with regards to their respective views on defense diplomacy, whether within a multilateral, bilateral, or trilateral context. Future research might do well to explore the plausible different policy rationales among individual Southeast Asian states and whether and how their thinking evolved over the years, or whether they are concerned with some defense issues and not others. Laos and Cambodia, for example, are presumably less concerned about China’s posturing in the South China Sea than are Vietnam and the Philippines and thus might approach the great-power politics question differently. Understanding the different dyadic security relationships among key Southeast Asian states (e.g., Singapore–Malaysia, Indonesia–Singapore, etc.) and examining whether and how defense diplomacy influences those relations are also important future research projects.

Second, as the article has sought to examine the issues and trends in Southeast Asian defense diplomacy and unpack their complexities, it does not provide a monocausal explanation, theoretical or empirical. Instead, it has sought to highlight the constellation of issues and factors to understand the rise of defense diplomacy during the past decade. In other words, there is no theoretical argument made in this article to explain the specific causal mechanisms behind the different processes of Southeast Asian defense diplomacy. A future research project might do well to draw from the larger theoretical literature on collective defense and regional security to formulate a theoretical argument to explain defense regionalism in Southeast Asia. An extension of
such a project should also compare the different regional defense diplomacies in other parts of the world. As noted before, this “new” defense diplomacy is now increasingly ubiquitous, and a comparative and theoretically informed analysis might help us better understand why and how defense diplomacy come into being, when and under what conditions it would create regional peace, whether and how military institutions could shape defense diplomacy, and what the implications are.

Third, when we consider the growing economic interdependence in Southeast Asia, the creeping democratization in Southeast Asian states (including Myanmar more recently), and the deeper institutionalization of ASEAN (that now incorporates previously sensitive issues of traditional security), it would be interesting to examine in the future if these three trends could eventually “triangulate” and create a long peace in the region – as predicted by some democratic peace theorists. Critics of ASEAN’s regionalism often point out the inability of the organization or its member states to tackle key regional security challenges. But as our discussion suggests, domestic politics (democratization), organizational evolution (of ASEAN), and economic development all play a role in shaping the foreign policy of regional states as well as the focus of multilateral defense and security cooperation that as of today supports a peaceful regional order. It is worth asking, therefore, under what specific conditions such development would sustain and expand regional peace.

Finally, while the article has allowed a more nuanced understanding of regional security, some of the key arguments made have also raised further important questions. Are the conditions of ASEAN’s expanding institutional role, Southeast Asia’s growing economic interdependence of the region, and the creeping democratization of its members both necessary and sufficient to sustain and expand regional peace, or are they simply necessary but not sufficient? If these three variables are necessary for regional peace, should we then advocate a broader democratization agenda in regional discourse? Or are there other variables, such as the role of China and the United States, that must be taken into account? Can ASEAN’s soft institutional balancing sustain the expansion of the regional security architecture in the future? Which vision of a future regional architecture would win in the face of these developments, and for that matter, how should we then define and measure “regional security”? What role do domestic politics and extraregional economic ties play in the shaping of regional order, and how? Addressing these questions could provide further building blocks in our understanding of Southeast Asian international relations.

NOTES


5. “Formal” here is not defined as legally binding activities, but as Track 1 government-to-government activities or events. The result or output of these events could be either legally binding or not.

6. See more details on these two types of security cooperation in Carlyle A. Thayer, *Southeast Asia: Patterns of Security Cooperation* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2010). One could also think of the role of Track II institutions such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific or the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies. But their immediate impact is often difficult to precisely measure and account for.

7. This is not to suggest that extraregional powers such as the United States and China have no influence whatsoever over regional security. Indeed, for much of Southeast Asia’s history, especially during the Cold War, extraregional powers have tended to “overlay” regional dynamics. See, for example, Barry Buzan, “The Southeast Asian Security Complex,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 10, No. 1 (1988), pp. 1–16. What I am arguing here is that within the context of defense diplomacy in the past decade, it was the ASEAN member states that were behind the development of defense regionalism, as the article seeks to show. Whether or not the current US “pivot” to Asia will ultimately “transform the region” is beyond the scope of this article.


11. For more details on the various activities under the new defense diplomacy, see Cottee and Forster, *Reshaping Defense Diplomacy*, pp. 6–12.


17. According to one scholar, the concept of “regional order” in Southeast Asia, as it was proposed by Michael Leifer, is theoretically underdeveloped and methodologically imprecise. See Yuen Foong Kong, “The Elusiveness of Regional Order: Leifer, the English School and Southeast Asia,” *The Pacific Review* Vol. 18 No. 1 (2005), pp. 23–41.


20. The notion of ASEAN as a provider of “strategic space” is from Juwono Sudarsono, “Indonesia, the Region, and the World,” paper presented to the US Department of Defense Capstone Exercise, Jakarta, August 11, 2010.


23. One study notes that only 39 percent of maritime boundaries in Southeast Asia have been resolved. See Clive Schofield and Ian Storey, “Energy Security and Southeast Asia: The Impact on Maritime Boundary and Territorial Disputes,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly* (Fall 2005). Available at http://www.asiaquarterly.com


25. This will occur as extreme weather events, rising sea level, warming temperature, and others will overlay a litany of preexisting domestic challenges in regional countries – from unemployment, poverty, socioethnic fault lines, resource scarcity, corruption, and urbanization. See Paul J. Smith, “Climate Change, Weak


29. For a discussion, see James Cotton, *ASEAN and the Southeast Asian ‘Haze’: Challenging the Prevailing Modes of Regional Government*, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies Working Paper No. 3 (Canberra: Australian National University, 1999).


33. Thayer, *Southeast Asia: Patterns of Security Cooperation*, p. 22. In some cases, however, as some issues become more prominent than others (e.g., disaster relief or terrorism), ASEAN and the ARF added new institutional activities to this network. Thus, some activities existed before some issues became prominent, while others were added to accommodate new realities.


44. On ARF’s formation and its concern with the regional balance of power, see Ralf Emmers, *Cooperative Security and the Balance of Power in ASEAN and the ARF* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), Ch. 5.


49. This statement was given in an interview with the Council on Foreign Relations on September 27, 2011, in New York. See “A Conversation with Marty Natalegawa,” Council on Foreign Relations. Available at http://www.cfr.org
55. Officially, because these meetings are considered informal, they are classified as “outside the ASEAN framework.” But the nature of the meetings, procedures, and the list of participants still include ASEAN defense establishments within a multilateral nuance and were acknowledged as part of the process leading to the creation of ADMM. See, for example, “Concept Paper for the Establishment of an ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting,” ASEAN Secretariat Web site. Available at http://www.asean.org
56. For more details, see “ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action,” ASEAN Secretariat Web site. Available at http://www.aseansec.org
57. Thayer, Southeast Asia: Patterns of Security Cooperation, p. 25.
58. This figure is based on the author’s ongoing research data set constructed from various Indonesian Foreign Ministry and ASEAN-related documents.
59. The logic and theoretical basis of the argument that growing economic interdependence does not eliminate distrust and in fact decreases national autonomy and in turn exacerbates perceptions of vulnerability is in Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 219–223.
60. Details on the Asian financial crisis’s immediate impact to the Singaporean economy are in Kee-jin Ngiam, “Coping with the Asian Financial Crisis: The Singapore Experience,” in Tzong-shian Yu and Dianqing Zu, eds, From Crisis to Recovery: East Asia Rising Again? (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2001), pp. 146–153. This is perhaps why some believe that Singapore was and still is the champion behind the ASEAN Economic Community plan.
61. Though, of course the respective political elite within ASEAN member states were initially more concerned about maintaining domestic stability and restoring their economic growths. For a discussion on the immediate political impact of the crisis, see Etel Solingen, “Southeast Asia in a New Era: Domestic Coalitions from Crisis to Recovery,” Asian Survey Vol. 44, No. 2 (2004), pp. 189–212.
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74. For more details on the TNI’s foreign-policy role vis-à-vis China, see Rizal Sukma, Indonesia and China: The Politics of a Troubled Relationship (London: Routledge, 1999), Ch. 4.

75. Figures are taken from Syawfi, “Aktifitas Diplomasi Pertahanan Indonesia.”


78. For details on Indonesia’s “Confrontation” with Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei, see J. A. C. Mackie, Konfrontasi: The Indonesia–Malaysia Dispute, 1963–1966 (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1974); Matthew Jones, Conflict and Confrontation in Southeast Asia: Britain, the United States, Indonesia and the Creation of Malaysia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

79. Indonesian parliamentarians recently argued that the DCA could potentially infringe on Indonesia’s territory and endanger its security as it might allow Singaporeans to train with a third-party force on Indonesian soil – and because allegedly almost half of the training area “turned out to be protected forests.” See Markus Sihaloho, “No Extradition Treaty with S’pore Due to ‘Unacceptable Clause’: Lawmaker,” The Jakarta Globe, June 7, 2011.


83. For a historical and longer discussion on Southeast Asia’s political and economic regionalism, see, for example, Denis Wei-yen Hew, ed., Brick by Brick: The Building of an ASEAN Economic Community (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007); Nicholas Tarling, Regionalism in Southeast Asia: To Foster the Political Will (London: Routledge, 2006).

84. There have been numerous published materials that fall under these two camps within the last 10 to 15 years. For recent works representing these two camps, see Hiro Katsumata, ASEAN’s Cooperative Security Enterprise: Norms and Interests in the ASEAN Regional Forum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Yukiko Nishikawa, Human Security in Southeast Asia (London: Routledge, 2010). A good review of the literature on regional security in Southeast Asia is Joseph Chinyong Liow and Ralf Emmers, eds., Order and Security in Southeast Asia: Essays in Memory of Michael Leifer (London: Routledge, 2006).


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