Security Challenges to South-East Asia and the Prospects of Conflict

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SECURITY CHALLENGES TO SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND THE PROSPECTS OF CONFLICT

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This paper examines the global geostrategic outlook from an Australian perspective by elaborating on five primary factors that directly affect Australia's perceptions of national security. It then identifies and analyses eight major security challenges, five of which are common to all nations of the world, before, in turn, studying three that are unique to South-East Asia. Thereafter the paper very briefly examines the prospects of conflict in the region before making three concluding remarks that will have continuing influence primarily on the security environment within the South-East Asian region. By design, the paper intends to keep the analysis at the strategic level without delving into the specifics pertaining to any one nation.

**Geostrategic Outlook**

The geostrategic outlook will need to take into account the global strategic environment, the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region, the South Pacific, South Asia and the impact of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism on international security.

**Global Strategic Environment**

The global strategic environment has never been static but in a state of constant evolution, with the rate of change varying with a number of factors at different times in history. The past decade has seen the strategic environment change at a pace greater than in most other times with the changes themselves being radical, and therefore occasionally more visible. There are three fundamental factors that drive the contemporary changes taking place in the strategic environment. First is the alteration in the global distribution of power. From the end of World War II until the final collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1993-94, the world was divided along bipolar lines with two acknowledged super powers balancing each other. The collapse and eclipse of Soviet power brought about a unipolar world with the United States (US) being the only global power. However, this situation lasted only for a very short time, and while the US remains the only truly global power even now, the world power distribution has become more diffused, providing regional powers the ability to dominate their areas of interest. This point is discussed in some more detail at a later part in the paper.

Second is the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). The GFC that started to be felt around 2008 has persisted for the past four years and continues to trouble most nations in different ways and with varying intensity. One of the more significant developments is the manner in which the GFC has affected nations in the European Union. Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland have already received financial bailouts, and a number of other nations are battling to stay afloat against overwhelming debt and a restive population that opposes the austerity measures that governments are being forced to adopt. The European Union suffers from deep structural problems, and although efforts are being made to address the issues, the implementation of remedial measures will be slow.
because of the spreading discontent in the countries receiving the bailouts. From being the centre of trade and financial activity, Europe has become a destabilising factor within a global economic downturn. The impact will spawn both secondary and tertiary effects that will cascade across the globe for a further number of years.

The third factor is the unsettled situation in the Middle East. The so-called Arab Spring that started in Tunisia and swept the autocratic regimes of Egypt and Libya from power was hailed as the harbinger of democracy in the region. Within two years, this optimism seems to have been misplaced, with all the nations struggling to bring about stability in governance and an acceptable level of democratisation. Islamist forces, both moderate and radical, are attempting to shape the evolution of the political structure of these states. The religious fundamentalism that had been held in check by forceful secular autocracies have now come out in the open and threaten to turn the newly liberated states into theocracies that may not subscribe to the Western understanding of democracy and protocols. Under these circumstances, the liberal and secular part of the population will be silenced, to the detriment of real progress and stability. While the Arab Spring has not yet encroached on the existing autocratic monarchies in the Gulf States—Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan and Kuwait—the potential for spontaneous or pre-calculated demonstrations in these states is very high. If the rebellion spreads to the entire Middle East, there is bound to be regional geo-political changes of great significance with the potential for the entire area to become a tinderbox and subsequently the breeding ground for even more severe Islamic fundamentalism. More than the threat posed by radical religious extremism is the impact that disruption of energy supplies will have on the global economy and stability.

The ongoing civil war in Syria, which has turned into a war of attrition, is another aspect of the turbulence in the Middle East that requires careful monitoring and analysis. The fact that the rest of the world, meaning the Western world and the United Nations, has not been able to arrive at a consensus on action to be taken and intervene as was the case in Libya has not been lost on the larger population of the Middle East. The end-state in Syria, whenever it happens, is of critical importance in determining the future path that the Middle East will take in terms of democratisation, secular governance, and the security environment. Even if, or perhaps as and when, the Assad regime is removed there is no assurance that the nation will transition to stability and democracy. If past history is anything to go by, it seems almost certain that Syria will descend into ethnic and sub-religious bloodletting, culminating in yet another theocracy taking shape.

The question of Iran pursuing nuclear ambitions and the reaction of the Western world to this development is a simmering point of discord that could grow into a large crisis. Iran is fundamentally involved in ensuring that its influence is not overshadowed by the Sunni state of Saudi Arabia and its allies. While the US is adopting more of a wait-and-watch attitude, there might come a time when more forceful methods of coercion may be employed. Such steps could be irrevocable and therefore have serious long-term consequences. The Israel factor in this issue is also significant and must be considered in any calculation aimed at diffusing the situation. There is an underlying US-Israel disagreement regarding what constitutes a ‘red line’ to initiate a military strike which would negate any pre-emptive Israeli action. The reality is that any precipitate action to neutralise the Iranian nuclear development will have global repercussions. Although Iran has so far been reticent to initiate any unreasonable actions, under what could be perceived as extreme provocation, their initiating actions that would destabilise the entire region cannot be ruled out.

**Asia-Pacific Region**

The Asia-Pacific region is the area in which the interests of the major powers—the US, China, Japan, India and Russia—intersect. Even without any belligerence on the part of a nation, the mere act of interacting on a routine basis while protecting national interests is likely to heighten tensions. If an underlying sense of competition already exists, the situation can exacerbate. In addition, the US has declared its intention to ‘pivot’ its interest to the Asia-Pacific, creating another intangible factor that could be both stabilising and destabilising in a contextual manner. However, there has not yet been any visible allocation of resources to support this initiative; although this could be because of the pre-occupation of the US administration with the recently concluded elections and the concerted military draw-down from Afghanistan. From the point of view of the regional nations, the debate is not so much the ability of the US to make good on this policy shift in the short-
term, but more importantly its willingness to stay fully engaged in the region for the long-term. The fact that the US is only just started to come out of a decade-long war, the longest the nation has ever fought, is not lost on the regional nations while assessing this criterion.

A palpable uncertainty pervades the geostrategic environment in the region. The major power interactions tend to heighten the tensions between the smaller economies in their quest for stability and the ability to grow at an acceptable rate at least for the mid-term future. The nations of the region will not want to be seen as taking sides in any confrontation that might eventuate, and therefore will be extremely careful in their diplomatic exchanges with the major powers. This necessity to walk a rigid line could have negative influence on their small, and at times, fragile economies. In an indirect manner, the major power intersection in the region could create some amount of economic downturn, which would tend to bring the anti-Western sentiment, almost always palpable below the surface, to the top and destabilise already restive regions.
There are a number of small nations that are spread across the South Pacific, some in close proximity to Australia. Most of these nations suffer from economic stagnation, and political and social instability. Further, these nations are unable to contain the fallout from an abnormally high incidence of crime that is covertly instigated by international gangs who want to gain a foothold in lawless areas to extend their influence. Since the economies of these nations are small, and their capacity to ameliorate physical damages caused by natural disasters almost non-existent, they are prone to rapidly becoming failing states even when the initiating reason is minimal. Compounding this situation is the inability of the governments to stem the rising rate of HIV and AIDS incidence, that in turn creates fractures in the socio-economic fabric of the country. These nations straddle a thin line between failing and failed states, and since they are in close geographic proximity to Australia, generate endemic security implications.

For Australia, intervention to stabilise such a nation is inevitable, and the fundamental question is therefore, to identify the correct time to intervene—too late and the risk of failure grows exponentially; too early and the risk of impinging on the sovereignty of a nation becomes very real.

Next to the Middle East, the South Asian region is perhaps the most volatile, with Afghanistan and Pakistan as the nucleus of a growing instability brought about primarily through religious extremism combined with the issues of a porous border that defies a solution. There are two independent factors that influence the geostrategic environment. First is fundamentally related to Pakistan; its relationship with India and the issue of nuclear security. For a number of disparate and interrelated reasons, Pakistan has become one of the most destabilised nations in the region. The historic mutual animosity that India and Pakistan have for each other almost invariably results in insurgencies in the Kashmir area where the countries have fought four wars, and continue to maintain hostile postures across the entire line of control that acts as a de facto border. The almost
constant skirmishes can degenerate into an armed conflict very quickly, especially when both nations are faced with a restless domestic population and a prevailing political situation that is volatile. In effect, the confrontational India-Pakistan relationship makes their shared border one of the major possible flashpoints in the world.

Pakistan’s nuclear security has long been an international concern, especially its proclivity to aid nuclear proliferation to destabilising and rogue nations like North Korea. Further, it is reported that Pakistan is continuing to increase the number of warheads that it possesses in a mistaken belief that increased numbers will enhance its status and add to deterrence. In recent times, the rise of fundamentalist groups in the country and their ability to carry out anti-government and unlawful activities openly without fear of being chastised has increased the uneasiness regarding the security of its nuclear arsenal. In fact, it would be catastrophic to global stability if even a single nuclear weapon falls into the hands of radical extremists. The two attacks on Pakistani military bases in the recent past has been viewed with trepidation and has brought into question the veracity of the assertions of the authorities that their nuclear warheads are fully secure. External action to secure the warheads cannot be initiated without impinging the sovereignty of the nation and inviting a comprehensive backlash from the extremist groups rampant in the country that is currently unstable. This is a quandary that world leaders will have to grapple with to find a solution. There may be no soft answers.

South Asia

The other major challenge to emerge from South Asia is the increasing competition between China and India in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean has always been critical for the smooth conduct of global trade, and China, South Korea and Japan are almost completely dependent on its sea lines of communications (SLOC) being kept open to meet their enormous energy needs. China is also very cognisant of the possibility of being
blockaded by a powerful naval force that can operate outside both the North and South China Sea and the island chains within them. Perhaps as a counter to this scenario, China has been pursuing a policy of creating naval facilities in the Indian Ocean region, much to the chagrin of India, who considers the ocean, as it is aptly named, as their own ‘backyard.’ The ensuing competition for influence and control has the potential to escalate, but not to the extent of open conflict like in the case of Indo-Pakistan borders. However, even limited manoeuvring that could lead to confrontation, and stand-offs can destabilise the smooth flow of trade and commerce in the region.

**ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM**

Pockets of Islamic fundamentalism and religious radicalisation have existed for a number of decades in various parts of the world. However, the attacks on the World Trade Centre towers in September 2011, and the US reaction to it, have assisted in amalgamating the fundamentalist tendency of the extremist elements within Islam into a generic anti-Western ideology. Although there is ample evidence of this fundamentalist movement being state-sponsored in a large number of cases, there is a visible reluctance for the governments to initiate actions to curb the activities of these extremist groups, both domestically and internationally. The reasons for this reluctance could be many, including an implicit sympathy for the cause, domestic instability, the fear of violent retribution and simple inability to counter the power of these groups.

There are a number of groups that operate within South-East Asian nations and most of them are oriented towards domestic activities, normally to achieve autonomy or separation into an ‘Islamic’ state. However, they also display overt anti-Western sentiments, which could spill over into anti-government activities that target state institutions, especially in countries that are perceived to be friendly to Western nations or being openly influenced by them. Further, if these activities are allowed to continue unchecked, it could bring about socio-political changes in nations with a small demographic spread that could lead to violence and subsequent fracturing of the state. Such developments will immediately impact the region and act as a destabilising force that is likely to create a ripple effect with far broader influence than can be easily contained.

**COMMON SECURITY CHALLENGES**

This paper discusses five security challenges that impact South-East Asia while also having far wider international implications and therefore affect all nations in some form or the other. It then pinpoints three challenges that are unique to South-East Asia. There are a number of other challenges that the author has identified, but the nine discussed here are the ones that are felt to be the primary ones that need to be highlighted. The first five challenges are the era of transition, economic challenges, ideology, urbanisation, and migration.

**ERA OF TRANSITION**

The world is going through an era of transition—there is an ongoing shift of the locus of power and influence from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. Like all transitions, this too brings with it a certain amount of instability that must be carefully monitored and contained. In addition, the world itself is moving from the unipolar post-Cold War environment to a multipolar entity where no one power can assume to be able to create positive influence globally. This shift in the distribution of power is being brought about by the diminishing financial and commercial capabilities of Europe and the simultaneous strengthening of the Asian economies. The result will be a period of international instability for at least the next two decades. The instability will be further fuelled by the intense competition between the major powers—US, China, Japan, Russia and India—for the creation of spheres of influence that are supportive of their ambitions. Within the Asia-Pacific, there will be a concurrent increase in competition between the smaller nations for regional influence and status.

The economic growth and increased stability of Asian nations manifest themselves in greater military expenditure and the build-up of technologically advanced capabilities. Further, economic growth leads to greater political confidence in the international arena and the open quest for increased influence in the broader region. In a region where the nations have so far been struggling towards better governance and to come to terms with
post-colonial trauma the concept of the pursuit of influence is likely to bring about conflicts of interest between them. Uncertainty and instability will invariably follow the clash of interests and could well lead to confrontation. Although unlikely, limited regional conflicts cannot be entirely ruled out.

The security environment is volatile, but there is a factor that perhaps makes the situation a little less unstable than what is the general perception. It is a fact that the economic development and stability of individual states is a fundamental cause for the growth of instability. However, there is no assurance nor is it certain that this development will continue at the same rate for the foreseeable future. In addition, there has been a tendency across the world to overstate or overestimate the growth potential of the Asian nations creating a false level of appreciation regarding their influence into the mid-term future. The fact is that while the security environment is unstable and several destabilising factors can be identified as influencing the situation simultaneously, the growth potential and influence of the emerging ‘power houses’ of Asia has been overemphasised and must be looked at realistically.

**ECONOMIC CHALLENGES – GLOBALISATION**

There are two interlinked parts to the economic challenges that face most nations—globalisation and inequality.

Globalisation has influenced all economies, however remote. The accelerated growth of some economies, as well as the gradual decay of some others, impacts on developments across the world in different ways. The most important factor in this interconnected economic situation is that fluctuations in one economy are automatically and rapidly transmitted to others in varying degrees, dependent on the proximity and interaction of the two. The other effect of globalisation is that it will throw up very clear economic ‘winners and losers’, eventually increasing the disparity in wealth—and all the associated difficulties—between nations. In these circumstances, even the well-established political, cultural and economic alliances and associations between nations will tend to gradually unravel, becoming more diluted and informal. In essence, nations will have to learn to stand on their own in the global economic space without any assured support form even close allies. For smaller economies this could be a frightening prospect.

Globalisation that has led to interdependent economic success is almost completely based on the adequacy of the infrastructure. In fact there is an over-reliance on complex networks of both physical and virtual infrastructure—air and sea lines of communication, associated ports and other installations, road and rail networks, financial establishments, banking infrastructure—for global trade and economy to function smoothly. The probability of attack is directly proportional to the importance of the infrastructure, the impact a disruption will cause and the relative ease with which an attack can be mounted. In all three counts, any element of the economic infrastructure can be considered a vulnerable and valuable asset to be targeted. Both the physical as well as virtual infrastructure that support trade and commerce, the life blood of the globalised world, are at risk of attack and disruption that could bring down the economy of a nation that in turn very rapidly demonstrates the cascading effects of interdependency before it can be contained. The challenge to surmount this is enormous.

**ECONOMIC CHALLENGES – INEQUALITY**

Globalisation also brings about inequality in wealth distribution and availability of opportunities for growth, between nations at the global level, for reasons such as the inability of a particular nation to adapt to rapid changes, the lack of infrastructure to support international trade and commerce and political instability. This inequality, while it existed to a certain degree in antiquity, has become clearly apparent to the losing nations because of the spread of instant and widespread global communications. The challenge is to ensure that tangible measures are instituted to redress this inequality so that the disadvantaged nations will not be pushed into a failing state and its population become susceptible to radicalisation.

The other side of growing inequality is the increasing gap between the rich and the poor within a nation. Contrary to what could be expected, this inequality is more prominently visible in middle and developing economic powers than in poorer and unstable nations of the world. This situation sets the scene for social
instability that is the ideal condition to promote radicalisation. Further, the process of radicalisation becomes far more rapid when the affected population is young, educated and under-employed, which is normally the case in developing economies. Such radicalisation can be through either political or religious ideology and is one of the fundamental causes of civil unrest that can swiftly escalate into violence. Clearly visible inequality sets the conditions for both inter- and intra-state confrontation and conflict.

**Ideology**

Ideologies are constantly evolving to cater for changes in the geostrategic and political environment with relatively new ideologies emerging in rare occasions. The changes and developments are driven by a combination of ethnic differences, religious convictions, nationalism and perceived or actual inequalities. However, it is extremely difficult to pin down one foundational root cause supported by other secondary inputs for the initiation of a new ideology or adaptation of an existing one. It is almost always a combination of factors. Irrespective of the cause, inequality leads to the acceptance of more extreme ideologies by the affected population. Ideological extremism inevitably leads to intolerance and violence that normally starts at a local level but invariably spreads at a rapid pace to the region. The most significant downturn of such an occurrence is that even if the state or nation is able to contain the disruptive violence, and irrespective of the response of the government, ideological extremism will always create ingrained terrorism and insurgency within the state. The challenge is to be able to identify the beginning of the development of ideological extremism and be able to take concerted corrective action—an extremely difficult activity, which is normally beyond the capability of most nations.

**Urbanisation**

It has been reported in different forums that by 2040, an estimated 65 per cent of the world population, some six billion people, will live in urban areas. The reasons are many and multifarious, some of which are already entrenched in a number of nations making it difficult to reverse the trend. This trend will have significant consequences for the broader security environment. The migration of people to urban areas will invariably result in the proliferation of poor neighbourhoods, or slums, in the outskirts of the larger cities, a phenomenon that will be more pronounced in the developing nations. In turn these neighbourhoods have a high probability of becoming centres of criminal activity because of poor governance and the inability of the state to provide even minimal standards of civil services. The end result is a vicious cycle of non-governance, followed by the development of embryonic extremist ideology that inevitably leads to incipient urban insurgencies.

While larger developing nations may be able to contain the spread of such ideologies and insurgencies to a certain extent, the smaller nations—smaller in terms of economy, population and geographic spread of the state—that develop such insurgencies will be destabilised, and could even become embroiled in self-defeating civil wars and the eventual breakdown of state control. For these nations, the descent into becoming a failing, or even a failed state, could be extremely rapid and create all the associated regional security issues. The other aspect of urbanisation is that vociferous separatism will decline, since cultural, racial and ethnic differences will become diluted. However, the separatist elements will tend to establish links with the organised criminal gangs and incipient insurgencies to enlarge their support base, taking advantage of the difficulty in curbing urban crime. The trend towards urbanisation will have to be carefully checked before it evolves into a security challenge, because once it becomes a fully formed security issue, the remedial measures will have to be very explicit and extremely difficult to implement.

**Migration**

Improvements in communications, ease of international travel and the globalisation of trade and commerce have substantially increased migration. In addition, the large numbers of insurgencies, conflicts and civil wars that are being fought in the poorer regions of the world and the lure of a better life elsewhere have resulted in an increase in the number of people claiming refugee status and resorting to illegal immigration. There is a global
increase in the diaspora communities in the more developed nations of the world. This situation creates three fundamental challenges that impinge on the security environment of the host nation and could spread into the wider region. One, the differences in language, culture, accepted societal norms and the attitude to law and order could make it difficult for the immigrant society to fully assimilate into the host nation and its ethos. These differences and the failure to assimilate can lead to pockets of resentment that fester openly and create a sense of ‘us and them’ which is counter to developing an overarching and smooth national fabric of peace and stability.

Second, the immigrants will normally continue to be involved in the conflict or challenges of their home country, which could be based on political or religious ideology. These ideologies may be inimical to the interest of the host nation and thereby create a rift with the host community, increasing mutual hostility that might exist. Third, the differences in the behaviour pattern of the immigrants and their failure to integrate can lead to a backlash from the host community that will further alienate them, leading to a vicious cycle that can spiral out of control. In smaller communities or nations with small populations, this alienation can be exploited by extremist elements on both sides that in extreme cases can lead to social disintegration. The security repercussions in such a case are all too apparent. Developed nations that accept large numbers of immigrants will do well to ensure that sufficiently robust procedures are in place and enforced to ensure that the immigrant population is well-assisted in integrating with the mainstream society at a reasonably fast pace to avoid any chance of creating pockets of resentment.

**Challenges Unique to South-East Asia**

There are three unique security challenges to South-East Asia—maritime security challenges, major power rivalry, and nation building. While all three could be extrapolated or adapted to the peculiar conditions that are prevalent in nations in other parts of the world, for the purposes of this paper, the unique manner in which they influence the South-East Asian region will be discussed.

**Maritime Security Challenges**

There is an intimate link between a nation’s prosperity and its trade relationships and energy supplies. A majority of trade is seaborne, with the World Bank statistics showing a dramatic rise of seaborne trade with it being predicted that it will double between 1999 and 2014. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to state that the SLOC are the lifelines of every nation’s wellbeing. With this increase in seaborne trade and energy movements, there has been a proportional rise in the threats to the use of SLOC through increasing incidents of piracy, maritime terrorism, container security breaches, transcontinental crime, and drug and human trafficking.

From a South-East Asian regional perspective, there are three factors that must be considered in discussing the challenges to maritime security. One is the issue of the choke point of the Straits of Malacca—a channel that is 800 kilometres long and is funnel shaped with a width of only 65 kilometres in the south that broadens gradually to 250 kilometres in the north. It is estimated that 9.4 billion barrels of oil pass through these straits every day to meet the huge demands of the industrial giants to the north—China, Japan and South Korea. Any disruption of this movement will have catastrophic effect not only on the economy of the region, but to the global economy. Energy flow disruption is inimical to the national security of any nation, and it is safe to assume that if the Straits of Malacca are subjected to interference, the affected nations will initiate concerted action to safeguard the vital SLOC. Confrontation and conflict can therefore never be ruled out. Second, the littoral states of the region are extremely diverse in terms of economy, military capabilities, developmental needs, societal norms, politico-religious status, and security alliances. Within this melee it is next to impossible to obtain convergence of security interests and the consensus to initiate proactive security measures.

The third factor is the need for extensive cooperation to counter emerging challenges, especially when the security of SLOC is concerned. The nations of South-East Asia have very divergent views and perceptions regarding the concept of national sovereignty, and some also have long-standing bilateral border disputes that percolate in mutual animosity. That there have been periodic border skirmishes for the last few decades is proof of this slightly vexed security environment. On the other hand, there is also tacit acknowledgement that the
security of the Straits of Malacca, vitally important to the prosperity and growth of the region, can only be assured through joint anti-piracy patrols. How this reality plays out in the region will determine the security environment.

**Major Power Rivalry**

The South-East Asian region has always been influenced by major power rivalry at different levels depending on a number of extraneous factors. The intensity of these rivalries have ebbed and flowed, prompting the nations of the region to adapt their own development as well as foreign policy initiatives. The latest involvement of the major powers—US, China, Japan, India and Russia—in a concerted manner in the region has generated an emphasis on the build-up of military capabilities by almost all South-East Asian nations. While the build-up has not reached the level of an ‘arms race’, it still has the potential to increase the volatility of the geostrategic environment and introduce an element of instability in all bilateral and multilateral interactions. Diversion of resources to building military capabilities, unless the capacity building is done by indigenous industry, will in turn tend to slow actual economic growth and also impinge negatively on the growth potential of the nation. For most of the South-East Asian nations this is a diversion that they can ill-afford.

There is however, a saving grace. Collectively, the nations of the region are averse to resorting to the use of military force since direct confrontation goes against the grain of the cultural ethos of the regional population. This is evidenced by the Association of South-East Asian Nation’s insistent adherence to the concept of solving security issues in a bilateral manner without outside interference. From this viewpoint, the military build-up would seem to be out of character. However, there is increasing apprehension regarding China’s offensive claims of territorial sovereignty, even in clearly disputed and common areas. The renewed US focus on South-East Asia is also viewed with a certain amount of apprehension bordering on cynicism, perhaps emanating from the strong anti-colonial feelings that are prevalent even now in most of the regional nations. There is a palpable wariness regarding the US initiative and worry regarding how it will play out in the end.

**Nation Building**

The South-East Asian region is only now moving into stable democratic governance, after several years of autocratic rule with all the turmoil that it involves. There is an intense necessity to build and nurture strong legislative, executive and judicial institutions in order to ensure that they do not slip back into autocratic or dictatorial rule again. However, this might strain the body politic to an extent that it may lead to unintended instability, a situation that the reforming agencies must guard against at all times. The nations of the region are still in their nascent form and must move forward very cautiously. The immediate need is to strengthen domestic peace since most of these nations have to contain domestic insurgencies that are in varying degrees of maturation. This is more of a threat to South-East Asian nations than international terrorism or external aggression. Internal insurgencies have the potential to grow in intensity and become beyond the capacity of the nation’s law enforcement agencies to contain, thereby becoming a resource-sapping element. Domestic insurgencies cannot be considered minor aberrations, but must be taken seriously and contained through a multi-layered approach at the earliest opportunity.

Regional institution building will greatly enhance the ability of smaller nations to ensure domestic peace leading to growth and stability. However, this requires a minimum level of consensus which is not very apparent in the current security environment and also because of a lack of confidence building measures between neighbours. There is inherent animosity based on historic wrongs, religious sentiments, differences in cultural ethos and misunderstandings caused by rival claims to disputed areas and unclear borders. Great power rivalry in the neighbourhood only adds to the prevailing confusion, making building regional institutions of consequence even more difficult.
Prospects of Conflict

In the South-East Asian region, the prospect of a war—as the term is understood in its formal meaning—taking place is highly unlikely for the reasons mentioned above regarding the non-confrontationist approach of most nations. However, as nations develop and become stronger economically and stabilise as well-governed entities the chances of coercive methods being used to gain an edge over a neighbour cannot be ruled out. In fact, coercion will be increasingly employed and could lead to an undeclared state of confrontation. The outcome will be that smaller nations at the receiving end of coercive activities could resort to asymmetric means, both overt and covert, to even the balance in their favour. In turn, such activities can create the potential to escalate the confrontation to a level even beyond the control of the perpetuating nation. Coercion, retaliation and further coercion can become a cycle that could spin out of control leading to unintended confrontations and in extreme cases even violent reactions. The fact is that confrontations will take place; the necessity is to contain the confrontations within reasonable limits without allowing it to degenerate into uncontrolled quid-pro-quo conflict situations.

Since the number of confrontations are likely to increase, it is also likely that incidence of conflict, as opposed to war, will also increase. This can be attributed to two reasons. One, the newfound confidence of smaller nations will translate to unwillingness to compromise even on trivial matters. This could also be exacerbated by the need of the incumbent government to pamper the domestic political factions by demonstrating a strong nationalistic stance in matters that may not require such posturing. Two, the intersection of great power interests will invariably create new regional rivalries and strengthen old ones. In this context, ongoing border disputes will be the least complicated to contain, whereas resource scarcity and the scramble to obtain the necessary resources with sufficient assurance will be on top of the agenda. This will be the point of contention, and great power rivalry will exacerbate the situation. In addition, ethnic, religious and ideological confrontations will tend to degenerate into conflict situations much more easily than has been the case till now, especially because the distinction between state, state-sponsored and non-state actors in the security environment will blur to a point of being indistinguishable from each other. The prospects of conflict involving two or more nations cannot be ruled out, if at all the chances are higher than in the immediate past.

Concluding Remarks

There are three factors that will form the framework for the evolution as well as mitigation of security challenges in the context of the South-East Asian region. First is that the outwardly visible stability of the region is not an entrenched state of affairs. In fact there are far too many fault lines beneath the surface that can become visible very quickly when the stable façade is disrupted for even the smallest reason. The geo-political environment is very fragile and the slightest disruption can create far-reaching consequences. Second is that the SLOC on which the region depends for its continued prosperity and growth are very vulnerable. No nation will accept disruption to their trade and energy routes without attempting to remedy the situation. Even small nations have the potential to retaliate and escalate an already tense situation beyond a threshold from which it is possible to contain the spread of instability. Third, and perhaps the most important, is the unease that all the nations of the region feel in differing degrees because of Chinese belligerence and unyielding stance regarding disputed territories. Along with this, the US intention to become more actively involved in the region is viewed as being confrontationist and likely to ramp up the tensions if there is an attempt to ‘contain’ China. More than any other group of nations it is the South-East Asian nations that are aware that when two elephants dance in a limited enclosure, it is the grass that gets trampled.