

## **GIGA and ESIWA Workshop**

# ***“Geopolitics, militarisation and risk - a new case for Confidence Building Measures in the Indo-Pacific”***

**November 27-28, 2023, Berlin and online**

## **Workshop paper**

**Session 2: CBM regimes that respond to the dangers of emerging military technologies: transparency as a means to build confidence and reduce tensions**

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Co-funded by the  
European Union



## CBMs and New Technologies in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific

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### Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) considers itself to be the center of the Indo-Pacific Region and has a keen interest in shaping its economic and security architecture for the purposes of peace, security, stability, and prosperity.<sup>1</sup> However, ASEAN's principal focus on economic cooperation; diverse geographies, political situations, and perceptions of the region; and complex (sometimes adverse) historical relationships, tend to create a blindspot for a common regional understanding of the challenges posed by military modernisation and militarisation, geopolitical competition and its impact on the region, and the evolutionary (or revolutionary) challenges that new and emerging technologies could pose to regional peace and stability.

The previous ESIWA-GIGA workshop noted that simmering tensions in the South China Sea, the Taiwan straits, and the Korean Peninsula are acknowledged as potential flashpoints, yet regional countries tend to play no role in the management of tensions, implying that they prefer the major powers to be the ones to manage the risks. This implicit fatalism, embedded in the regional subconscious possibly by the region's colonial history, accounts for both the fierce sensitivity to any perceived intrusions into national sovereignty and the fairly widespread (often negative) views about great power competition. The general lack of appreciation for geopolitical agency among many smaller States impacts risk- and threat-perceptions, and affects trust and confidence between them and with external powers.

Technology is a potent factor in regional perceptions: today, the geopolitical competition manifests in the technological arena as well as the economic and political. Technological advancement is still led by the great powers, with smaller States staying behind and awaiting whatever new technologies come to be within their reach to acquire, adopt, and use. However, from the standpoint of developing States, technology is a means to hurdle obstacles to national development goals, including the acquisition of cost-effective means of force needed to protect and preserve national resources and options, as well as to maintain the capacity for self-determination and control. The current region-wide attention to military modernisation<sup>2</sup> evinces not merely a need to keep up with modern technology, but also an idea that the operation of

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<sup>1</sup> ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, at para. 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Storey, Ian. Military modernisation in Southeast Asia: Learning from the Russia-Ukraine War. ASEAN Focus, 05 April 2023. Online, <https://fulcrum.sg/aseanfocus/military-modernisation-in-southeast-asia-learning-from-the-russia-ukraine-war/>

modern military forces are essential to well-functioning, fully independent, and secure nation-States.

In this context, how regional States perceive and deal with rapidly developing technologies will tend to reflect not only economic development priorities but also their national security goals. This can raise difficulties for States in the sense that efforts to regulate, monitor, or control the acquisition and use of new technologies may be seen as potential interference with sovereignty and sovereign choices, and deliberate attempts to obstruct the development of self-defense capabilities. Creating CBMs for new technologies therefore must address not only the potential for misunderstanding between competing States that deploy them, but also the potential for misunderstanding of the CBMs by the users themselves. Since most Southeast Asian States are engaged in their respective military modernisation programs, any measures that might be interpreted as restraining their adoption and use of technologies of their own choice might be regarded as problematic.

### **Priority Issues for Southeast Asia**

In recent years, a number of military technologies have come to the limelight as possibly raising the levels of threat or creating new risks, increasing the chances of instability and uncertainty. Some of these technologies are currently out of reach for most Southeast Asian States, whether at present or in the near future, and thus most likely are considered simply as evidence of great power status. Cutting-edge technologies may not necessarily be priorities for confidence-building at present, as there is nothing regional countries can do to influence their development, deployment, or use. Examples of these include hypersonic weapons, anti-satellite weapons, anti-ballistic missile systems, new directed energy weapons, and quantum computing. While there would certainly be interest in monitoring and understanding the development and application of these technologies by the major powers, their advanced and exclusive nature would probably mitigate against interest in active confidence-building beyond knowledge-sharing and awareness-raising at this time.

Developing States have other budgetary priorities and will be more circumspect in national appropriations; Southeast Asia would therefore likely be more interested in new cost-effective technologies within their reach. The demands of social or economic programs and military modernisation will always present fiscal dilemmas and result in trade-offs; cost-effectiveness and maximizing the security benefits out of public spending will always be a prime consideration in national choices. Technologies and systems that offer best value in terms of capabilities will be most attractive for Southeast Asian developing States, thus it would be reasonable to expect that competition will center around only certain technologies.

Lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS), and advanced missile (cruise and supersonic) technologies, are the most likely candidates for proliferation in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific in the near term on account of their being relatively less expensive for their capabilities and power-projection advantages, and increased availability from multiple sources. Unmanned maritime systems (UMS) have been described as “increasingly common enablers for Asian

navies,<sup>3</sup> while aerial vehicles (UAVs) are already being adopted by more Southeast Asian and other Indo-Pacific nations.<sup>4</sup> The rate of diffusion of drone technology in Southeast Asia is thought to provide the opportunity to establish a regional framework for their development and use.<sup>5</sup> Modern advanced missile technologies (cruise and supersonic) are also a marker for modernisation and likely to be the principal focus of acquisitions. Observers note that India's sale of BrahMos missiles to the Philippines in 2019 would be a factor in Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific alignments and acquisitions in the near future.<sup>6</sup>

Cyberwarfare would likely be a major area of attention given the Southeast Asian region's concern over cybersecurity. ASEAN issued a cybersecurity cooperation strategy in recognition of the significant role that digital interconnectivity currently plays as an enabler of economic progress.<sup>7</sup> Although the regional cybersecurity discourse notably avoids the language of cyberwarfare, it is clear that there is a common interest in enhancing defenses against cyberattacks. Cyberwarfare represents a totally new domain of inter-State conflict, and regional countries have only just begun setting up cyberdefenses.<sup>8</sup>

In connection with cybersecurity, the potential military applications of artificial intelligence (AI) may attract greater attention in the near term. The recent and accelerating growth of AI applications in the commercial sphere<sup>9</sup> contrasts with the paucity of information on possible

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<sup>3</sup> Dominguez, Gabriel. Drones becoming indispensable for Indo-Pacific navies. *The Japan Times*, 04 May 2023. Online, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/05/04/asia-pacific/asia-pacific-military-drones/>

<sup>4</sup> See Ng, Jr. Bigger, further, better. *Asian Military Review*, 19 April 2022. Online, <https://www.asianmilitaryreview.com/2022/04/bigger-further-better/#:~:text=Although%20the%20adoption%20of%20MALE,the%20Philippines%2C%20Singapore%2C%20Thailand%2C>

<sup>5</sup> Wyatt, Austin and Jai Galliot. Closing the capability gap: ASEAN military modernisation during the dawn of autonomous weapons systems. 16:1 *Asian Security* 53-72 (2020). Online, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14799855.2018.1516639>

<sup>6</sup> Parameswaran, Prashanth. The significance of an India-Philippines Brahmos missile deal. *The Diplomat*, 23 December 2019. Online, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/the-significance-of-an-india-philippines-brahmos-missile-deal/>; Oak, Niranjan C. What BrahMos deal with Philippines means for Indo-Pacific. *IDSACOMMENT*, 23 February 2022. Online, <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/bramos-deal-with-philippines-means-for-indo-pacific-ncoak-230222>

<sup>7</sup> ASEAN CyberSecurity Cooperation Strategy 2021-2025. ASEAN Online, [https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/01-ASEAN-Cybersecurity-Cooperation-Paper-2021-2025\\_final-23-0122.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/01-ASEAN-Cybersecurity-Cooperation-Paper-2021-2025_final-23-0122.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Venzon, C. and D. Lopez. Philippines turns to hackers amid Chinese cyberthreat. *Japan Times*, 8 January 2024. Online, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/01/08/asia-pacific/politics/philippines-hackers-chinese-cyber-threat/>; also Williams, Lauren. US, Indonesia expand defense cooperation, starting with cyber and space. *Defense One*, 16 November 2023. Online, <https://www.defenseone.com/defense-systems/2023/11/us-indonesia-expand-defense-cooperation-starting-cyber-and-space/392104/>

<sup>9</sup> Uziak, Adam. How artificial intelligence will transform business. *Business News Daily*, 23 October 2023. Online, <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/9402-artificial-intelligence-business-trends.html>; Pratt,

military applications. The development and deployment of AI in relation to cyberwarfare and LAWS could give rise to concerns over the adequacy of control and policies for their use.

### **Existing CBM Regimes and New Technologies in Southeast Asia**

Two ASEAN dialogue mechanisms serve as over-arching and continuing CBMs for the Southeast Asian region, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) inaugurated in 1994, and the ASEAN Senior Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) created in 2006.

Of the two, the ARF encompasses a much broader range of members beyond ASEAN, including middle and major powers, as it was intended to encompass the Asia-Pacific, with the objective of promoting inclusive and constructive dialogues for regional security cooperation and prevention of potential conflicts.<sup>10</sup> It is expressly tasked with the promotion of CBMs, development of preventive diplomacy mechanisms, and development of conflict resolution mechanisms.<sup>11</sup> A plan of action for 2020-2025 identified the ARF's agenda to include maritime security, counter-terrorism, disaster relief, non-proliferation and disarmament, peacekeeping operations and defense, and reinforcing CBMs and preventive diplomacy while building up institutional capacity.<sup>12</sup>

The ARF is regarded as being effective in gradually building up mutual confidence and cultivating habits of dialogue and consultation.<sup>13</sup> The ARF may have allowed ASEAN members and dialogue partners to have a clearer understanding of each other's political and security issues and concerns that arguably contribute directly to confidence building and preventive diplomacy. However, it is also difficult to quantify and assess the concrete impact of ARF dialogues with respect to any given related regional issues or specific incidents and frictions that may have arisen between member States.

Be that as it may, as an existing regional framework, the ARF is a ready and ideal forum for transparency CBMs concerning cutting-edge technologies (e.g., hypersonics, anti-satellite weapons), where advanced States experimenting with or in possession of such can officially inform and orient other States about their nature, capabilities, advantages and disadvantages, and potential applications. Transparency CBMs would be purely for the purpose of enabling smaller States to seek clarification and enlightenment in order to make their own informed assessments and policies about advanced systems and the countries that possess them; they do not require advanced States to secure agreements or strike alliances. These efforts might be

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Mary. 15 top applications of artificial intelligence in business. TechTarget, 21 June 2023. Online, <https://www.techtarget.com/searchenterpriseai/tip/9-top-applications-of-artificial-intelligence-in-business>

<sup>10</sup> Chanto, Sisowath D. The ASEAN regional forum - The emergence of 'soft security': Improving the functionality of the ASEAN security regime. 3 *Dialogue+Cooperation* (2003), 41-47

<sup>11</sup> ASEAN Security Outlook 2021. Brunei Darussalam: ASEAN, 2021, at 17

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum. ARF Online, <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/about-arf/>

viewed as transparency in its pure form, without any particular outcome intended other than to inform the audience and allow them to make their own assessments.

The ADMM is an annual event wherein the defense ministers engage directly in the “highest defense consultative and cooperative mechanism” within ASEAN to “promote mutual trust and confidence through greater understanding of defense and security challenges as well as enhancement of transparency and openness.”<sup>14</sup> It is likewise seen as a successful mechanism, with initiatives covering areas such as maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping operations, military medicine, cybersecurity, border management, defense industry, defense education, and other CBMs. An expanded version that includes external powers such as Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia, and the USA called the ADMM Plus began in 2010 with similar objectives, and additionally seeking the improvement of regional security and defense cooperation.<sup>15</sup> The practical areas of cooperation thus far cover mostly the same areas as in the ADMM with the exception of border management and defense industry/education, but with the additional concern over de-mining operations.<sup>16</sup>

Considering that the key dialogue leaders are the respective ASEAN countries’ defense ministers themselves, the ADMM is likewise a ready and ideal mechanism for discussion of military modernisation programs, and acquisition of new assets and capabilities including LAWS, advanced missile technologies, cyberwarfare, and military AI applications. Since these are existing or emergent capabilities for ASEAN armed forces, CBMs can easily span transparency, communication, constraint, and verification CBMs. Potentially, CBMs that may be of interest include establish deployment constraints, non-interference, inspections, and tension-reduction measures in cases where ASEAN members have similar or comparable assets and capabilities.

ADMM Plus, on the other hand, enables more specific dialogues between ASEAN and specific powers, as well as planning and implementation of other activities such as joint exercises such as those undertaken with China (2018), Russia (2021), and the US (2019).<sup>17</sup> ADMM Plus has conducted over 343 diverse CBM activities since its inception.<sup>18</sup> With the increased engagements of the ADMM Plus and ADMM, ASEAN undertook a stock-taking exercise in 2021

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<sup>14</sup> ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting. ADMM Online, <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm.html>

<sup>15</sup> About the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus. ADMM Online <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> ASEAN Plus mechanisms can involve singular counterparts to ASEAN, called ASEAN +1 mechanisms, such as between ASEAN and China and ASEAN and US, or trilateral ASEAN +3 counterparts for particular regional groupings, such as Japan, Korea, China.

<sup>18</sup> Past meetings and events (2006-2022). ADMM Online, <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/events/past-meetings-and-events.html>

to assess the evolution of the two dialogue mechanism, and realized the need to synergise their initiatives, adopt new expert working group approaches, enhance cross-sectoral cooperation, and strengthen ASEAN-driven processes.<sup>19</sup>

These ASEAN mechanisms are not exclusive. ASEAN member-States have participated in other CBMs sponsored by other powers or participated in by specific armed services. Examples include the West Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS),<sup>20</sup> the annual ASEAN Navy Chiefs Meeting,<sup>21</sup> and the newly-organized ASEAN Coast Guard Forum.<sup>22</sup> ASEAN also began conducting its own multilateral naval exercises, two of which were held in 2023.<sup>23</sup> Maritime CBMs appear to be a particularly strong point within the region, which is only logical and natural given that regional States are fully aware that maritime connectivities underpin their current existence.<sup>24</sup> The broader trend of naval modernisation that has been particularly marked in Southeast Asia for the past two decades, making the annual ASEAN Navy Chiefs Meeting one of the most important CBMs that the region has embarked in, which could be the key for higher forms of naval cooperation.<sup>25</sup>

### **Potential Scope for EU Contributions**

There is no shortage of forums and opportunities for CBMs within ASEAN, and much of the wide range of CBMs remain open for the introduction of new technologies as specific areas of discussion, consultations, and cooperation. Engaging in CBMs over new technologies could be as simple as identifying the appropriate dialogue platform, finding a willing regional partner, and proposing its inclusion in the agenda of the next available meeting date. Beginning with informational activities, interest could be sparked in more practical endeavors such as demonstrative and issue-identification exercises, eventually moving into the cooperative formulation of operational policies and protocols for the deployment and use of new military technologies. Notably, the 2021 ASEAN Security Outlook did not identify new military

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<sup>19</sup> ASEAN Security Outlook 2021 at 19.

<sup>20</sup> Egidio, Joseph. Western Pacific Naval Symposium concludes. Foreign Brief, 10 November 2022. Online, <https://foreignbrief.com/western-pacific-naval-symposium-2022-concludes/>

<sup>21</sup> See for example, ASEAN Navy Chiefs' Meeting 2023. Online, <https://ancm2023.navy.mil.ph/>

<sup>22</sup> First ASEAN Coast Guard Forum takes place in Indonesia. Vietnam Plus, 23 November 2022. Online, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/first-asean-coast-guard-forum-takes-place-in-indonesia/244346.vnp>

<sup>23</sup> ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise 2023. Online, <https://amnex2023.navy.mil.ph/>; Karmini, Niniek. Southeast Asia nations hold first joint navy drills near disputed South China Sea. Associated Press, 19 September 2023. Online, <https://apnews.com/article/indonesia-asean-exercise-south-china-sea-eea83cc917479036df5a915d76045d70>

<sup>24</sup> See for example, Kembara, Gilang. Confidence-building: ASEAN navies lead the way. RSIS Commentary, 12 June 2023. Online, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CO23086.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> See for example, Naval modernisation in Southeast Asia: Nature, causes, consequences. Singapore: Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2014. Online, [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ER110127\\_Naval\\_Modernisation\\_SEA.pdf](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ER110127_Naval_Modernisation_SEA.pdf)

technologies specifically as an area of concern, although it did call attention to cybersecurity cooperation efforts that started in 2018.

The potential scope for EU contributions to CBMs dealing with new technologies is relatively wide. Given that the EU member-States are current users of various types of new technologies (and sometimes even sources of such technologies for ASEAN and Indo-Pacific States), both nascent and proven, a process of knowledge transfer should accompany technology transfer as part of CBMs. The following steps are recommended to enable the EU to engage in an effort to promote confidence building around new military technologies, particularly those that its member States provide to regional countries:

- (1) Initially, organise a group of experts/practitioners on new military technologies, to identify the full range of new military technologies now available or on the horizon, and then take stock of the levels of adoption and use of such technologies within the region;
  - (a) Determine the current geographic distribution of the users such technologies, to see if there is also merit in organising area-based or sub-regional CBMs
  - (b) Determine the extent of deployment and level of usage, to identify what levels of CBMs would be ideal (transparency, verification, communication, constraint)
- (2) Create a prioritized list of new military technologies that could pose problems or induce tensions in the absence of CBMs (prioritisation being based on levels of adoption and use established in item #1 above) and by regional grouping (if any). For example, within ASEAN, an order of priority could be LAWS, cyberwarfare, advanced missiles (including anti-ballistic missile systems), military applications of AI and quantum computing, anti-satellite weapons and space warfare, hypersonics, directed energy weapons. The order of priority may be different in another geographic context.
- (3) Create modular proposals for CBMs for each distinct new military technology, from least controversial (transparency) to most challenging (constraint), forming a menu or program of CBMs that can be offered to the ASEAN and broader Indo-Pacific region through the available forums. The group of experts/practitioners should be available and ready to lend their expertise and participate in these CBMs if they are taken up by the regional States.
- (4) Introduce the proposal for CBMs as an agenda item at the next available ARF or ADMM Plus meeting, offering to open discussions on new military technologies with the various States being given the choice of which CBM proposals to take up. The initial meeting should orient the forum participants on the number, kinds, and nature of these new military technologies, and their potential advantages and disadvantages, and point out the need for CBMs. They may then select which specific technologies they would prefer to hold CBMs on in the current year or following year, and the extent of participation; this would be basis for a series of regional or sub-regional CBMs. At minimum, it is expected that transparency and informational CBMs will attract much attention; but these may lead to further discussions and consultations on the need for higher levels of CBMs.



Expertise and experience in new military technologies and related CBMs are expected to be higher with armed forces of EU member States, thus personnel from armed forces, civilian security sector, developers, manufacturers, civil society organisations including the Red Cross, should be tapped for these CBMs. It is particularly important for the suppliers (and their home and client States) of these technologies to partners in the region. On the regional countries' side, armed services directly using new technologies and their civilian security sector would be the preferred audience and recipients of initial transparency efforts, with the hope that with interests piqued they may then consider the need for the next level of CBMs with their neighbours and potential competitors.

## **Conclusion**

The promotion of CBMs on new military technologies is timely given their increasing adoption on account of ongoing military modernisation within ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific. The fact that there are several pre-existing multilateral dialogue mechanisms provides multiple opportunities for the EU to introduce proposals for such CBMs into the agenda. Transparency CBMs are likely to be received favorably by regional States given rising concerns and tensions in some flashpoints; acceptability of higher level CBMs will depend on the outcome of transparency efforts and whether members States will perceive a need or urgency for them, based on a more comprehensive understanding of the possible outcomes of the unmitigated use of new military technologies. The EU may already take specific steps to propose specific CBMs to appropriate regional dialogues and forums, depending on its own criteria for urgency, participating partners, and geographic areas.