

## Information and Security: Arguments for a Regional Information Network

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In the information age, the ability to gather, process and disseminate information plays a vital part in the enhancement of regional security. Information being the strategic resource in the 21st century, ASEAN member-states must recognize the indispensability of information-sharing and strive to install a regional information network by interlinking their respective national information systems. Despite potential drawbacks, the establishment of a regional information network will give ASEAN states a sense of community and certainty thereby inducing greater cooperation, transparency and interdependence among them.

As the 21st century dawns, information, not labor or capital, becomes the strategic resource. There emerges, as a consequence, a new social order in which inequality based on information becomes a major challenge. Those who have the information become the advantaged ones and those who do not have it become the disadvantaged. If this relationship is translated into the realm of security, those who have the information will feel secure, and conversely, those who do not have the information will become insecure.

Information is any data which is processed systematically. It may come from various sources — from printed text (magazines, newspapers, journals and books) to electronic text (data stored in CD-ROM disks, magnetic disks and tapes). The advent of personal computers enhances the processing and dissemination of data into information. The network of computers further accelerates information processing and dissemination.

Security, on the other hand, "consists of the feeling that accompanies actual, perceived, or sustained satisfaction of values and/or reasonable and stable expectation of their realization."<sup>1</sup> This implies that security is a "psychological condition, a feeling." Furthermore, this conceptualization of security assumes that there are objective conditions that bring about the feeling of security or insecurity.<sup>2</sup>

Value, in turn, refers to those things which are considered worthy either by the state or by the people.<sup>3</sup> Things which are considered of value

are given priority. Security, therefore, becomes dependent on the things people value. For example, if the people value economic prosperity, then security for them is hinged on economic growth and development. As long as their economic well-being is taken care of, they will feel secure. If they value the protection of their environment, then security takes on an environmental dimension.

It is in this conception of security where information takes on a vital part. The availability of information and the individual's capacity to acquire and process that information may serve as the objective conditions which may lead to the satisfaction of the individual and hence, to his feeling of security. A person who is informed knows what is happening around him. In other words, the more informed an individual is, the more certain he is of developments within his environment. Thus, he can decide more rationally if information is available to him. This, in turn, leads him to feel satisfied as he can act more decisively and appropriately as circumstances warrant. The more satisfied he becomes, the more secure he will feel.

But it must be noted that the availability of information to an individual does not always lead to a feeling of security. There might be cases in which the more informed he is, the more he feels insecure, especially if the information is detrimental to him. For example, someone who is informed that he has cancer and has only a few months to live may feel less secure than one who did not know of his real predicament.

But in the final analysis, it is better to be informed than to be kept in the dark. The availability of information enables an individual to anticipate what is about to come. This enables him to decide more rationally. In the end, his capability to act rationally will give him a sense of certainty and eventually, security.

If the individuals comprising the state feel secure, the state as a whole (being a product of the parts) becomes secure. The Philippines, for example, has recognized that the security of the state depends on the security of its people. It has defined national security as a "condition wherein the people's way of life and institutions, their territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as their welfare and well-being are protected and enhanced."<sup>4</sup>

In the same manner as the individual, a state becomes more secure if it keeps abreast of global and regional developments. Moreover, states

have the tendency to feel insecure if transparency measures are absent in other states. If states withhold information on arms acquisition and military intention, for example, a feeling of distrust permeates the environment. Thus, the more transparent the policies of states are, the more certain states will be of their neighbors' defense capabilities. This will lead to greater confidence among the states within the region. Confidence leads to stability and a sense of security among the states.

But again it must be noted that the availability of information to a particular state does not always lead to a more secure environment. It is possible that the more a state is informed, the less secure it might become, especially if the information is detrimental to its national interest or makes it aware of its own vulnerability.

However, the availability of information at the disposal of the state enables it to act rationally and more appropriately in different situations affecting its national interest and populace. This will eventually lead to a more secure state.

If a state is to develop the capacity to gather, process and analyze information, an information system within it must be established. However, this necessitates the enhancement of its manpower to operationally manage and control the facility.<sup>5</sup> Alongside the establishment of an information system, therefore, is the preparation and training of the work force to handle the facility.

In the case of the Philippines, it must first lay down the prerequisite infrastructure of an information system. Foremost is the telephone system. Telephone lines, being the backbone of modern society, are necessary for communications facilities. Information networks cannot function without them. The Philippines, therefore, must ensure that its telephone system is extensive and efficient. The government, in collaboration with the private business sector, must be more aggressive in bringing the telephone density down to the level where at least each Filipino household has a telephone. At present, an average of 44 Filipinos line up for a single telephone.<sup>6</sup> Other ASEAN countries have been ahead in establishing the primacy component of an effective communications system — telephone lines. For example, Singapore has only 2 persons per telephone, Brunei has 3.8 individuals per telephone and Malaysia, 6.8 persons per telephone. Thailand is fast catching up with an average of 24 persons per telephone.



The skills and ability of a country's human resources to operate and manage an information system is another necessary component. The Philippines, through government and private sector partnerships, should, therefore, ensure that it has a work force trained in the use of computers.

The potential benefits of a country's information system cannot be harnessed to the fullest if it does not get linked with those of neighboring states. There is, thus, a need for countries in Southeast Asia to create a regional information network. ASEAN nations must recognize the indispensability of information-sharing among themselves and resolve to put up a network for the generation, processing and sharing of information.

In order to develop a regional network, each ASEAN state must first have the national capacity to put up a functional communications system. Thereafter, these national systems must be interlinked in order to create a regional network.

The establishment of an information network among ASEAN states will benefit them in a number of ways. It will give ASEAN states a sense of community thereby inducing greater cooperation and interdependence<sup>7</sup> among them. In the area of defense, this could lead to an increase in the sharing of information concerning defense policies and potentially enhance mutual confidence and promote regional peace and stability. At the moment, this is done through exchanges of defense white papers, the production of which is difficult to undertake. In fact, only Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia have defense white papers. The Philippines has yet to produce one.

However, along with the advantages such an information network might bring are potential drawbacks. Instead of giving ASEAN states a feeling of community, the information network might give them a feeling of detachment from each other. For example, if the Philippines learns that Vietnam has policies and activities which might endanger the former's national security, then the Philippines might hesitate to cooperate with Vietnam. There is also the question of how transparent a country should be when it comes to divulging national security-related information. To what extent should nation A share information with nation B? Will the culture of secrecy that permeates defense establishments be changed? These are some of the problems and questions that nations should address if they are to harness the potential of an information network in promoting security within the region.

In spite of these foreseeable problems, information exchange among states can induce them to greater cooperation. It increases their capability to meet challenges, assess threats particular to an individual state or common to the states in the region, and respond to them effectively. These threats may include conventional ones such as arms modernization of individual states in the region and non-conventional ones such as terrorism, piracy and drug-trafficking.

With the end of the Cold War and subsequent reduction of U.S. forces in the region, ASEAN states have realized the need to develop self-reliant armed forces to meet the challenges to their security.<sup>8</sup> Thus, they have embarked on modernization schemes for their armed forces. As part of their modernization programs, states have acquired high-tech weapons. For example, Indonesia has purchased the bulk of former East Germany's warships. It has set up a "US\$ 1.1 billion package for refitting and fabrication of warships and support vessels."<sup>9</sup> It has also built Asia's most modern facility for the manufacture and assembly of military aircraft.<sup>10</sup> Malaysia is said to have been buying MiGs from Russia and large naval patrol crafts from Australia.<sup>11</sup> The Philippines has also embarked on a 15-year AFP Modernization Program for the development of air, naval and ground defense including the enhancement of general headquarters command and control capability.<sup>12</sup>

There is a notion that the acquisition of modern weaponry may lead to the build-up of military capability more than what is needed for defense and external security.<sup>13</sup> Without a mechanism for exchanging information on defense policies, arms acquisition and the like, states cannot ascertain what is really taking place within the borders of their neighbors. Even with the availability of figures on weapons acquisition from various reports that get circulated, still states cannot verify the accuracy of these reports. Hence, they begin to speculate on the possible military intention of states acquiring arms. Such speculations lead to instability within the region, among states and even among their peoples.

Therefore, the sharing of information in weapons acquisition and production among ASEAN states will help them to monitor the extent of these activities and thus, to identify which state is going beyond what is needed for mere defense postures. The availability of this mechanism will serve to reassure states of their neighbors' military capability and intentions. This sharing of information may be pursued in a region-wide Southeast Asian Register of Conventional and Military Expenditures.<sup>14</sup> The regional



information network among the ASEAN states will facilitate the establishment of an ASEAN arms registry. This will also help verify the accuracy of the figures other states have declared and thus, prevent speculations, diffuse tensions and even build confidence among neighbors.

Furthermore, the establishment of an information network among the ASEAN states will allow them to monitor potential threats to their security stemming from states outside of the Southeast Asian region such as China, Japan, Russia and India.

Several countries, for instance, have become apprehensive of the security posture China might adopt in the light of its high growth rate.<sup>15</sup> It is reported that China has been developing its own intercontinental ballistic missiles including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; improving its frigates, destroyers and naval aircraft; and is considering developing an aircraft carrier.<sup>16</sup> China is also one of only two countries which have been conducting nuclear tests since a moratorium on such tests have been agreed upon by the nuclear powers.<sup>17</sup> These moves by China will enable her to have the largest and most effective military force in Asia.<sup>18</sup> More importantly, there is the perception that China intends to make Southeast Asia as its sphere of influence especially with its declaration of sovereignty over the South China Sea.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, there are apprehensions that Japan, the second largest economy and the most technologically advanced country in the world, will become a military power.<sup>20</sup> With the reduction of U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific region and in order to strengthen its economic position, Japan may re-arm itself.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Japan's very modern naval force has already involved itself in maritime operations which reach as far as the Philippines.<sup>22</sup> It is even said that there are attempts to modify Japan's security treaty with the United States and Article 9 of its constitution.<sup>23</sup> Article 9 of the constitution forbids Japan to maintain land, air, sea and other war potential. The U.S.-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty, for its part, guarantees military protection for Japan but prevents Japan from remilitarizing.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, apprehensions arise over Russia's control of the "nuclear key" though the Soviet nuclear arsenal has been dispersed among the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). There have also been reports that Russia has sold high-tech military hardware to China and India.<sup>25</sup>

India, for its part, gives the impression that it has the ability to dominate the "sea approaches between the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf."<sup>26</sup> Anxieties also arise over the possible Indian projection of force in Southeast Asia.<sup>27</sup> Reportedly, India is planning to procure an additional aircraft carrier, more surface combatants, and more long range maritime patrol aircraft.<sup>28</sup> Since India is a foremost Chinese concern, its projection of force in Southeast Asia may result in a Sino-Indian competition that could have negative effects on the stability of the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>29</sup>

Considering the presence of these potential threats, an information network that facilitates intelligence data gathering becomes indispensable. It will allow ASEAN states to monitor relevant developments and act decisively and appropriately. This, in turn, will enable these states to individually or collectively face the potential challenges to their security.

Aside from these conventional forms of threat, there is also the threat posed by terrorism, piracy and drug-trafficking. Terrorism is usually associated with violent acts which include highjacking, bombing and shooting.<sup>30</sup> An analyst considers terrorism to have increased in magnitude and frequency that it has probably become the deadliest issue in the region.<sup>31</sup>

Among the Southeast Asian nations, the problem of terrorism affects the Philippines most. Terrorism, often associated with Islamic fundamentalism in the Philippines, have international connections. However, the scope of terrorist activities may soon spill over to other countries in the region as alleged terrorists expand their areas of activities and the magnitude of their capabilities.

The problem of piracy has plagued ASEAN waters and continues to be a big problem for ASEAN states. For example, it is said that 76 out of the 106 reported cases of piracy worldwide in 1992 occurred in ASEAN waters.<sup>32</sup> Analysts project that piracy in the years ahead will become "well-financed, well armed and well-equipped".<sup>33</sup>

Drug-trafficking, too, is a major problem of ASEAN states especially since activities of drug-traffickers has become transregional. Drug-traffickers in one state have linkages with drug-traffickers in other states. For example, it said that drug syndicates in the Philippines have connections in Hongkong, Taiwan and other Asian countries. In terms of production, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar have been identified as the principal opium



cultivation zones with Myanmar considered the largest cultivator of opium and heroin for the whole world.<sup>34</sup> Worse, both producers and traffickers have acquired powerful weapons to protect themselves and their activities. Drug-trafficking indeed poses problems to Southeast Asian nations individually and collectively as members of the ASEAN because of the transregional character of this activity.

An information network will provide the ASEAN the needed communication link and database sharing that will enable it to deal with these non-conventional sources of threat. It will enable the ASEAN states to monitor the nature and scope of the activities of the terrorists, pirates and drug-traffickers on a region-wide basis. It will help policy-makers and law enforcers of the states to come up with more effective policies and mechanisms that can curb these activities. The states either individually or collectively can adopt measures to combat these activities.

To end, in spite of the problems that might arise from the establishment of an information network for ASEAN, still each of the member-states must put up a national information system to be linked into a functional regional information network. This becomes imperative for ASEAN states in order for them to survive the challenges of the next century as well as to foster greater cooperation, transparency and certainty and, therefore, confidence among themselves. It will also allow them to approximate, monitor and confront challenges to their security either stemming from undertakings within the region or outside Southeast Asia. It will lead to the enhancement of ASEAN regional security, which, in turn, will lead to the states' and their people's security. ●

### Notes

- 1 Estrella D. Solidum, *The Small State: Security and World Peace* (Manila: Kalikasan Press, 1991), p. 26.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 4 *Understanding National Security* (Manila: National Security Council Secretariat, 1993), p. 2.
- 5 For a comparison of ASEAN states' policies in the preparation of their populace for information technology, see Vivien M. Talisayon, *Preparing ASEAN for the Information Century* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1990).
- 6 *Asiaweek*, 22 September 1995.
- 7 Interdependence refers to the mutual dependence or a condition of interconnectedness among the member-states. Actions by one state significantly affects the others. The number and scale of interaction in the form of "meetings, dialogues, joint projects, movements of factors of production like capital, goods and services" across the states



- serve as indicators of interdependence. See Carolina G. Hernandez, *Track Two Diplomacy, Philippine Foreign Policy and Regional Politics* (Quezon City: Center for Integrative and Development Studies, 1994), p. 6.
- 8 Office of Strategic and Special Studies, "The ASEAN Arms Register: A Mechanism for Transparency," *Digest*, 4 August 1994, p. 7.
- 9 Romulo Peralta, "Overview of the Geopolitical Situation in the Asia-Pacific" in Vivian de Lima and Carmencita Karagdag (eds.) *Peace, Disarmament and Symbiosis in the Asia-Pacific* (Quezon City: Solidaridad Foundation, 1995), p. 90.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 This program has five components: (1) force restructuring and organizational development, (2) capability, material and technology development, (3) human resource development, (4) base and support system development, (5) doctrines development. For a thorough discussion of these components, see Orlando S. Mercado, "AFP Modernization Towards Deterrence and Development," *Policy Review II* (1) : 41-51.
- 13 "The ASEAN Arms Register: A Mechanism for Transparency," p. 8.
- 14 This program was proposed by the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) during the ASEAN Special Official Meeting (SOM) in March 1994.
- 15 Thomas W. Robinson, "Trends in the Post-Cold War Balance in the Asia-Pacific Region," in Bunn Nagara and K.S. Balakrishnan (eds.) *The Making of a Security Community in the Asia-Pacific* (Malaysia: Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 1994), pp. 103-104.
- 16 Kay Moiler, "Multilateral Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific: A European View," in Vivian de Lima and Carmencita Karagdag (eds.) *Peace, Disarmament and Symbiosis in the Asia-Pacific* (Quezon City: Solidaridad Foundation, 1995), p. 66.
- 17 *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 7 September 1995, p. 1.
- 18 Robinson, p. 104.
- 19 Herman Joseph S. Kraft and Renato C. De Castro, *U.S. Military Presence in Southeast Asia: Forward Deployment in the Post-Bases Era*, (Manila: Foreign Service Institute, 1994), p. 24.
- 20 Joseph P. Keddell, Jr. *The Politics of Defense in Japan* (New York: M.E. Sharpe), p. 3.
- 21 Peralta, pp. 89-90.
- 22 Andrew Mack and Desmond Ball, *The Military Build-up in the Asia-Pacific Region: Scope, Causes, and Implications for Security* (Canberra: Strategic and Defense Studies Center, 1992), p. 4.
- 23 Robinson, p. 107.
- 24 Kraft and De Castro, p. 28.
- 25 Robinson, p. 109.
- 26 Kraft and De Castro, p. 29.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Mack and Ball, p. 5.
- 29 Kraft and De Castro, p. 29.
- 30 More precisely, terrorism refers to acts politically perpetrated by groups within a country so as to influence a political audience. See Mertiza M. Makinano, "The New Asia-Pacific Security Environment and the Philippine Military," *Kasarinlan*, 4th Quarter 1994, p. 94-95.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 Gina Rivas Pattugalan, *Managing Regional Security: The Role of ASEAN in Southeast Asia*, (Quezon City: Office of Strategic and Special Studies, Armed Forces of the Philippines, 1995), p.34.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Makinano, p. 93.