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Building a Regional Disaster Response Mechanism for a Secure ASEAN Community

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A series of recent humanitarian crises in Southeast Asia have signalled a new impetus to re-think the nature of security cooperation in the region. The outbreak of pandemics, the devastating impact of the Asian tsunami and the latest earthquake to have struck the Indonesian province of Yogyakarta, all point to the need for greater preparedness and coordination among the states in the region to cope with natural disasters.

It is not surprising therefore that at the recent Asian security summit conference held in Singapore in early June 2006 (known as the Shangri-la Dialogue), the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Najib Tun Razak proposed the idea of a disaster relief centre for the region. Similar ideas and suggestions have been made by other states and Track-II institutes in the region for a regional mechanism that could facilitate an effective response system for regional disasters. For example, at the inaugural ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting held in Kuala Lumpur on 9 May 2006, disaster relief cooperation has been identified as one of the main areas of cooperation that the defence officials would focus on. South Korea had earlier announced that it was planning to establish a comprehensive cooperative system response system for regional and international disasters by “setting up a channel for information sharing and coordination” of personnel, supplies and equipment. Japan has also proposed to develop strategies and procedures to facilitate a fast response by armed forces in the region in times of natural disasters.

Given the interest being shown by many actors in disaster relief operations, the task at hand is to draw up a mechanism able to coordinate all these initiatives into a more coherent system for a more effective regional response.

Rationale for a Regional Mechanism

There are already a number of countries within and outside ASEAN that are able to provide immediate assistance in times of natural disasters. The rescue and medical teams from Singapore and Malaysia, for example, were among the first to come to the aid of the earthquake victims in Yogyakarta last month. Similarly, the American and European armies joined their Australian, Japanese and other Asian counterparts in providing humanitarian assistance to the injured and internally displaced in Aceh in the aftermath of the Asian tsunami in December 2004. What is missing however in all these ad hoc arrangements is a regional coordinated response that could anticipate many of the problems and security challenges that could arise in large-scale humanitarian assistance efforts.

Large-scale disasters of this nature generate complex emergencies that require urgent and coordinated responses from a broad range of state and non-state actors. The experience of the Asian tsunami was instructive in this regard. Many rescue teams were caught unprepared to deal with the massive recovery and relief missions involved in coping with the devastation and loss caused by the disaster. Even the military teams in the disaster-affected countries were unable to cope with the huge task of recovery and relief, and providing emergency aid and medical assistance to the injured and the internally displaced persons. These problems therefore highlight the need for disaster preparedness and capability, involving training and coordination in order to have greater coordination in relief efforts among a wide range of civilian and military actors.

Crafting the Modalities of a Regional Disaster Coordinating Centre

One of the immediate challenges in taking this agenda forward is to identify ways to build on existing national and bilateral arrangements for disaster relief operations and examine regional capabilities. At the Shangri-la Dialogue, the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister had suggested that ASEAN could probably start the project first, and the other countries like the US, Australia and Japan could be invited to join later. Hence, if ASEAN, in partnership with East Asian and Pacific nations such as the Japan, US, Australia, South Korea, China, India and Canada were to initiate and design a regional mechanism for this purpose, it may wish to look at similar arrangements in other regions and, in particular, examine the experience of their European counterparts in building up their disaster response capability.

The Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) has served as the focal point of coordinating disaster relief efforts in Europe. Established in 1998, it comprises 46 member countries, representing NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). The EADRCC has been designed to be a regional coordination mechanism that supports and complements the United Nations in its efforts to provide immediate assistance and relief to disaster affected countries within the EAPC area. Operated from the NATO headquarters in Brussels, the EADRCC has since been active in coordinating not only regional responses for natural disasters and but has also extended its remit to technological disasters and complex emergencies. The EADRCC is therefore geared to build regional disaster response capability through regular exchange, training and cooperation in several areas of disaster relief assistance operations in areas such as disaster assessment, preparations for deployment, coordination of movements, deployment and withdrawal.

An essential component of the European disaster response capability is also the establishment of a Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Unit (EADRU). It is a non-standing, multi-national mix of national civil and military personnel – including rescue teams, medical units, transport and equipment teams – which are volunteered by member countries of the EAPC. In other words, the EADRU is comprised of national units which are under national control and will only be deployed on disaster relief missions upon request by the disaster stricken country. During relief missions, the EADRU works within and is coordinated by the UN mission.

Towards an ASEAN Disaster Relief Unit (ADRU)?

The EADRCC and EADRU have demonstrated a remarkable improvement in effecting rapid regional disaster responses in number of natural disaster within and outside Europe. More importantly, their experience has shown that disaster relief operations and humanitarian assistance missions benefit from advanced planning, coordination, training and preparedness.

If ASEAN is intent in taking this idea forward, it can certainly explore practical modalities that have worked elsewhere and examine how its own regional mechanism can be designed based on regional needs and capabilities.

To be sure, the region needs bold and innovative ideas to protect its citizens from new and emerging security challenges. The ASEAN Security Community (ASC) is certainly a step in the right direction but this needs to be reinforced by concrete ideas on how to respond to a host of security challenges confronting the region. While the ASC blueprint is being developed under the ASEAN 2004 Vientiane Plan of Action which identified a number of regional mechanisms that needed to be created to build regional capacity to address emerging security threats, it is important to include a regional mechanism for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. In fact, among the regional mechanisms being proposed under the ASC (i.e. regional peacekeeping force, dispute settlement mechanism, etc), one could suggest that an ASEAN disaster relief unit may be a more acceptable idea and one that could be jump-started given the compelling need to respond to humanitarian crises caused by disasters without being encumbered by issues of sovereignty and intervention. And, now that the ASEAN's defence officials have finally convened their own meeting, this is certainly an area that they could immediately focus on given that the region's military are at the forefront of most disaster relief and humanitarian missions.

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