



Inside Southeast Asia

Internal Political Challenges, Inter-State Conflicts and Regional Security

Southeast Asia has been one of the most vibrant regions in recent years. This resilient and dynamic region is one of the major hubs at the heart of Asia and is likely to play a significant role in the rising Asia. It can help shape and evolve the larger regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific region.

Inside Southeast Asia, the internal political and social systems and the interaction between the two have created an interesting mix of hope, challenges and threats at the national, bilateral and regional levels. Besides, with the ongoing economic integration and political and security cooperation with regional powers, the regional organization-ASEAN seeks to balance these relations with the proliferation of new powers.

The Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies (IPCS), as an independent research institute and a leading think-tank, explores what is happening in Southeast Asia today.

The Southeast Asia Research Programme (SEARP) at the Institute monitors these internal issues in the region on a regular basis and further intends to convert the process into an annual meet to understand the dynamics of the current issues, challenges and problems in Southeast Asia.

Three themes have been identified in the region which need immediate attention- Internal political challenges, inter-state conflicts and ASEAN and regional security.

Theme-I

Internal Political Challenges

The primary security concerns confronting Southeast Asia have always been internal in nature. Many security problems in this region have stemmed from its internal strife, posing the greatest obstacle to Southeast Asian integration and development.

With political and social diversity, internal conflicts continue to afflict the region and pose a serious challenge not only to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states but also to regional stability. The patterns of internal conflict in this region have been in the form of armed insurgencies, ethnically-motivated communal violence, conflict among political forces, political uprising, secessionism and civil conflicts. Also, in recent years, due to the growing challenges posed by religious radicalism and terrorism, the dimensions of internal conflicts have become more complex.

Political Transition

Internal political challenges have been one of the persistent problems in Southeast Asia; most of these conflicts have taken the form of armed struggles between the ethnic nationalist groups against the government for independence and attainment of autonomy.

Today, the political systems of Southeast Asian

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countries have become unstable, more complex and volatile with regime change, protests and violence by non-state actors and civil unrest. The political uncertainties and changes in a number of Southeast Asian countries are not only affecting the internal stability in these countries but also regional security and the balance between ASEAN and external powers. IPCS intends to investigate and understand the current political situation in these countries, for instance the political instability in Myanmar, emergence of a new generation of politicians in Singapore, whether Thailand will succeed in restoring political stability after its recent elections, the social and political tensions in Malaysia as they are heading towards elections and the future political situation in Indonesia and Philippines.

Ethnic Violence

Most of the major nationalist and ethnic conflicts identified in Southeast Asia have been legacies of European colonization and decolonization. However, the most striking challenges of these conflicts are the enormity of the challenges they have posed to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the countries in the region.

What are the sources of these conflicts and how can such conflicts be managed? The current situation in Myanmar with simmering conflict between the ethnic groups and Myanmar's central government has created political instability in the region. The current government in Myanmar is struggling to integrate various ethnic groups in its border regions. Northern Myanmar has become one of the most unstable regions in Southeast Asia due to these frequent violent clashes. The continued ethnic violence has posed serious limitations to the government's transition to democracy and could escalate into civil war if not resolved immediately.

Theme-II **Inter-State Conflicts / Territorial Disputes**

With the problems and challenges posed by internal conflicts in the region, multiple inter-state clashes and territorial disputes prevail that occasionally escalate. Territorial disputes and other forms of inter-state rivalry continue to hinder progress towards greater regional integration and development.

Thai-Cambodian Border dispute

Most recently the violent armed clashes in the Thai-Cambodian border over the Preah Vihear Temple rekindled the contestation of the temple and its nearby border, escalating it into a military standoff. Both ASEAN and the international community failed to mediate and bring a peaceful settlement between the two countries. Moreover, the strained domestic politics and the uncertainty of Thai politics along with Cambodia's internal issues have hampered further negotiations and have driven the conflict towards uncertainties.

Myanmarese refugees and Thailand

The violent ethnic clashes between the Myanmarese military troops and ethnic groups of Myanmar have emerged as a great security challenge for both Myanmar and its neighbouring countries like Thailand and India. Thailand's government very recently announced their intention to close down nine border camps and repatriate over 140,000 Myanmarese refugees to Thailand. The increased refugee inflow into the neighbouring states of Myanmar and the consequent problems of illegal trade, drugs and human-trafficking and diseases will have a major impact on bilateral relations accentuating security concerns within Myanmar as well in its neighbouring state-Thailand.

Dispute over Ambalat block between Indonesia and Malaysia

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The territorial dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia over the Ambalat block of the Celebes Sea seabed, which is believed to be rich in mineral resources, continues. There has been several facing-off incidents between naval ships of these two countries. The water boundary between the two countries is still in a 'grey area'. No agreements have been signed between them and no talks have been held since 2008 over this disputed territory .

Water conflict between Singapore and Malaysia

Water supply is a contentious issue between Singapore and Malaysia. Although the level of conflict is low there is a threat that the situation might be exaggerated. Due to the difficulty to meet the water demands, Singapore has been importing water from Malaysia for a long time. But differences have occurred on issues-increase in price rates, threat of cutting off water supplies and dispute over the legal precedings, which is yet to be resolved. Singapore has adopted various plans to minimize its proportion of water imports from Malaysia. But with growing demand for freshwater, and ongoing conflict with Malaysia, it will be a major challenge for Singapore to provide freshwater to its citizens.

Mekong Crisis

Environmentalists and scientists have raised concerns over the wide-ranging threats posed by unsustainable hydropower projects on the Mekong River. Lack of transparency and access to data, and the uncoordinated and overlapping regional organizations driven mostly by economic and political interests rather than environmental concerns have made the situation much worse. A sustainable development of the economic potential of the river and the economic corridors of the region is essential. The most essential one is hydropower developments and opportunities needs to be evaluated under the framework of potential risks to the environment and people's livelihoods.

The South China Sea Dispute

The claims of sovereignty of overlapping regions in the South China Sea, which is contested by Southeast Asian countries-Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia as well as by

China and Taiwan has become a major problem affecting international stability. In recent years there has been multiple and counter claims over the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. Disunity among the ASEAN members has weakened the organization and its talks with Beijing.

Theme-III **ASEAN and Regional Security**

The regional structure ASEAN has been tasked to ensure security along with promotion of democracy and human rights in the region, while simultaneously reinventing itself as a model of Asian regionalism.

ASEAN has seen progress in terms of its economic trading block, but continues to face challenges in terms of reaching a consensus on political and security issues. As the organization operates on the basis of a consensus mechanism and non-intervention policy there is no enforcement mechanism for implementing its policies.

ASEAN's credibility is at stake on the Thai-Cambodian border question and political instability in Myanmar. There has been serious concern that the failure to mitigate these disputes will challenge ASEAN's credibility as a regional organization to settle future disputes and also the prospects of achieving an integrated ASEAN community—politically, economically and culturally—by 2015.

Both as an economic and political organization, a mutual understanding and cooperation is needed among the ASEAN member states in order to settle its internal disputes and adapt to the need of new conditions marking the change in regionalism.

Background Papers

IPCS will organize a one day discussion based on these three themes, in collaboration with the India International Center (IIC) on 25 November 2011.

Background Papers

Young scholars are invited to write background papers on the above three themes. Papers accepted for publication will be circulated during the conference as IPCS Special Reports.

A Special Report will be published on the discussion proceedings by December 2011. The Institute will also collectively publish the background papers.

For more information, contact-
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Southeast Asia Research Programme (SEARP)

The SEARP programme at the Institute aims to promote research on Southeast Asia in India, and provide a platform for greater deliberation among policy-makers and academics and to generate a pool of well researched knowledge on various policies concerning current issues in Southeast Asia along with bilateral issues concerned to India and Southeast Asia, through organizing events and publishing reports.

SEARP is supported by the SAEA Group, Singapore.



Inside Southeast Asia

One day Conference

25 November 2011

in collaboration with the India International Center (IIC)

Venue: Conference Room-II, IIC

Tentative Programme

1000 hrs: Introduction

1010-1030 hrs:

Keynote address

1030-1100 hrs: Discussion

1100-1115 hrs: Coffee

1115-1300 hrs: Session-I

Internal Political Challenges

1300-1400 hrs: Lunch

1400-1530 hrs: Session-II

Inter-State Conflicts

1530-1545 hrs: Coffee

1545-1715 hrs: Session-III

ASEAN and Regional Security

1715-1730 hrs: Concluding Session

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