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# Impact of geopolitical and security environment in 2020 on Southeast Asian armies: Forging cooperative security

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*...and that they are determined to ensure their stability and security from external interference in any form or manner in order to preserve their national interest in accordance with the ideals and aspirations of their peoples.*

Bali Concord II<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

1. Military planners in Southeast Asia are grappling with the issue of army force structuring in light of the changing strategic environment. Recognising that force development is a long-term process, many questions have been raised on the impact of the changing strategic environment on force levels, personnel and training of Southeast Asian armies. However, the nature of future security challenges is inextricably linked to the geo-strategic context.<sup>2</sup> Force structures based on an inaccurately forecasted geo-strategic environment could render an army irrelevant in the future strategic context.<sup>3</sup> Hence, force structure of Southeast Asian armies should take into cognisance the shifting dynamics in Southeast Asia.

2. Southeast Asia has undergone seismic changes since the region was economically dampened by the ubiquitous financial crisis in 1997. Most economies have recovered from the setback and are back on the economic development track. However, the economic downturn has unleashed a wave of separatist and fundamentalist movements and governments, crippled by the lack of funds and resources, were unable to contain the spread of the malady. Some of these fundamentalist movements have eventually transformed into terrorist movements.<sup>4</sup> When juxtaposed on existing border disputes within Southeast Asian countries, transnational issues like drug and illegal trade, and intra-state ethnic tensions, Southeast Asia will continue to pose uncertainty to military planners and consequently, force structuring.

3. The aim of this paper is to analyse the nature of security challenges in 2020 in Southeast Asia and assess the impact of these challenges on Southeast Asian armies. Since the future could only be understood through the lens of present day, the first part of the paper will identify current geopolitics and security concerns in Southeast Asia. This is followed by a description of the nature of security challenges in 2020. Finally, the impact of these security challenges on Southeast Asian armies will be assessed. The basic hypothesis of this paper is that Southeast Asian armies will have to work closer together in response to the strategic uncertainty given the effects of regionalisation in Southeast Asia. In so doing, Southeast Asian armies will need to operate together, thus possibly providing ASEAN the catalyst to move beyond mere confidence building to cooperative security.

## **Current geopolitics and security concerns in ASEAN**

4. **Post-crisis economic development.** Post-crisis economic development of Southeast Asian countries will take centre stage in the near future. With the future importance of ASEAN closely linked to the members' economic fortunes,<sup>5</sup> economic recovery is the primary focus of Southeast Asian countries.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, recent developments have underscored the fact that economic, political, and security trends remain inextricably interrelated.<sup>7</sup> As seen in the 1997 financial crisis, any move to elevate weaker economies within ASEAN 10 in line with the stronger ones would make the economic landscape fragile and vulnerable to financial speculation. Exacerbated by the emergence of China as a global economic power attracting more foreign direct investments than Southeast Asia, there is a dire need to ensure that economic stability is preserved.

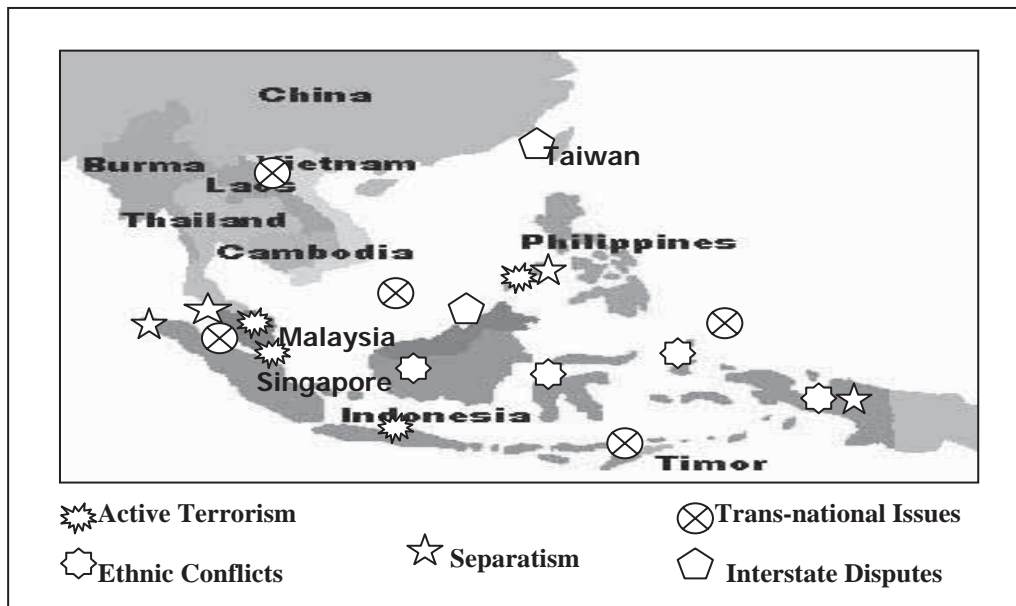
5. **Ethnic tensions.** Southeast Asia comprises a region of diverse ethnicity. With a combined population of nearly 500 million, diverse languages, religions and cultures, ethnic tension in Southeast Asia remains high<sup>8</sup> and could undermine the pluralistic societies of almost all Southeast Asian countries.<sup>9</sup> While aspects of this tension dates back to the pre-colonial period, the financial crisis has unleashed the centrifugal forces of ethnic tensions, creating security uncertainty in the region.<sup>10</sup> With limited budgets, governments in Southeast Asia had difficulties controlling the growing malcontent with joblessness and the devaluation of currencies. For instance, Indonesia witnessed the flaring up of ethnic tensions, in particular, in Kalimantan, involving indigenous Dayaks and Madurese<sup>11</sup> after the financial crisis. This could lead to a meltdown of long-standing regimes in Southeast Asia, giving credence to alternative ideologies such as religious fundamentalism.

6. **Religious extremism.** Southeast Asia has witnessed the revival of religious extremism. This has created the delineation of pluralistic societies along religious and ethnic lines. When juxtaposed on ethnic tensions, religious extremism has provided radical groups with the ideology to further political cause.<sup>12</sup> As seen in the Jakarta Marriot Hotel bombing, such religious based extremist groups will use terror tactics and violence to further their cause. While extremism had been detected in Southeast Asia since the early 1980s, the emergence of links to international networks, some terrorist in nature, has made extremism a compelling reality.<sup>13</sup> These Islamic extremist networks could act to inspire other non-Islamic radical groups in the region. While the resolution of religious extremism was previously hampered by internal problems within member states, the recent ASEAN summit in Bali has demonstrated the resolve of ASEAN members towards taking multilateral actions against ethno-religious extremism and terrorism collectively. This, however, could impinge on the ASEAN principle of 'non-interference', and how member states react to such actions, which could diminish a country's international standing, remains to be seen.<sup>14</sup>

7. **'Old' security challenges.** The new forms of security challenges have not replaced the 'old' security challenges in Southeast Asia. The potential flashpoints in Southeast Asia are shown in Figure 1. A key unresolved issue is the Spratly Islands. Though China has recently signed a non-aggression pact on this issue,<sup>15</sup> the reality is that each contending nation has armed itself relatively rapidly for this purpose, as seen in the significant development of the air and maritime capabilities of these nations. A move to establish sovereignty of these islands, such as China on Mischief Reefs in 1995, could spark a regional conflict.

8. Another key concern is the Northeast Asian region. Any conflict in North Korea and across the Taiwan Straits could possibly have spillover effects in Southeast Asia. Should Japan be intertwined into the conflict, the strategically important sea lines of communications, which sustains Southeast Asia's economic stability, could be disrupted. Coupled with the emanation of ethnic tensions and

**Figure 1: Flashpoint of Potential Conflicts in the Region**



religious extremism, these issues will pose significant challenges to military planners keen on structuring military forces in accordance with the likely environment that military forces will operate in.

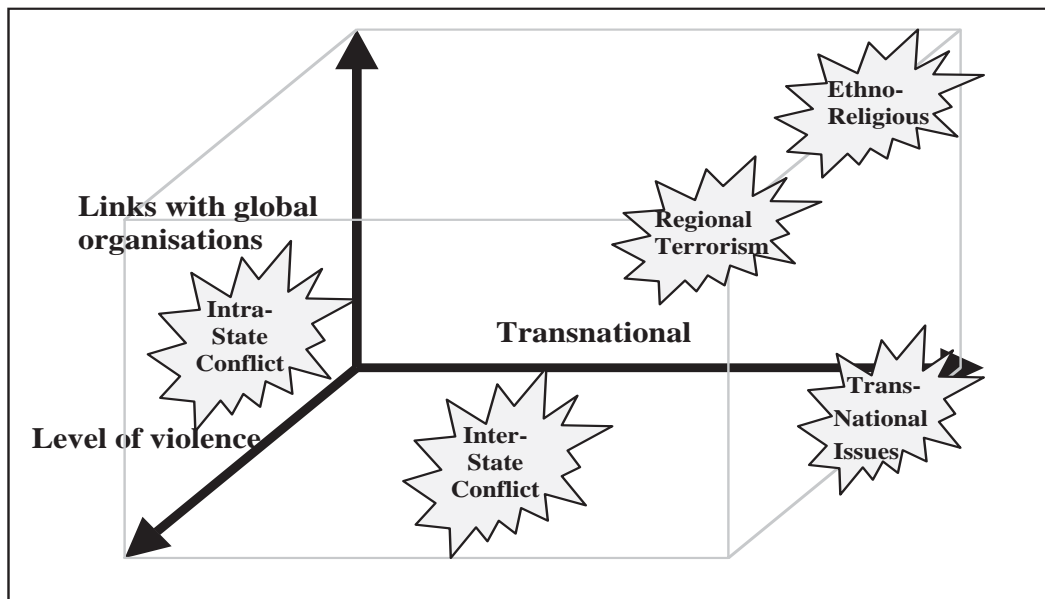
**The geopolitical and security environment in 2020**

9. **Why 2020?** 2020 will be a significant milestone in the development of Southeast Asian affairs as the ASEAN Vision 2020 aims to create a tariff-free Southeast Asian market.<sup>16</sup> With this free trade area, the economic prosperity of Southeast Asia will be regionalised with greater economic interdependence.<sup>17</sup> This economic interdependence could translate into political and security interdependence amongst Southeast Asian countries.

10. **Rise of amalgamated threats.** The security environment in 2020 will be more complicated than today. Most security challenges will increasingly take on an amalgamated veneer as one particular form of threat could amalgamate with others, manifesting itself differently.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the Islamic militant group Abu Sayyaf commits banditry, such as kidnapping, to fund its terrorist activities. Amalgamation can be conceptualised in three realms. Firstly, security threats are continuously taking on a transnational nature; security threats will no longer be bounded by geography.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, security threats are starting to have external links with other global organisations with similar political agendas, as the case of Jemaah Islamiah illustrates. Thirdly, security threats are increasingly using violent means to spread their cause. Security challenges in 2020 can be put into context in Figure 2.

11. **Decline of inter-state armed conflicts.** The possibility of inter-state armed conflict within Southeast Asia would decline.<sup>20</sup> This is because the ASEAN forum is still seen as a viable conflict resolution platform. Furthermore, nations will not jeopardise their economic recovery unless the issue infringes on the sovereignty of a particular country. Hence, armed conflict carries a heavy economic cost. Influences from global and regional powers would also contain the outbreak of armed conflicts as these would have major global implications. However, this equilibrium may be interrupted should

Figure 2: Geo-Strategic Domain in Southeast Asia



the South China Sea situation escalate into conflict. Rushing to dominate oil-rich areas in the South China Sea, belligerents would deploy strong maritime–air presence, including high-technology weaponry, in a bid to gain significant economic benefits.<sup>21</sup>

12. **Ethno–religious conflicts and separatism.** Current ethnic tensions and religious fundamentalism could lead to a rise in ethno–religious conflicts.<sup>22</sup> These conflicts are essentially based on extremist views that profess a commitment to separatism, or the establishment of states on an ethno–religious basis.<sup>23</sup> For instance, the spiritual leader behind the radical groups Kumpulan Militant Malaysia (KMM) and Jemaah Islamiah, Sheikh Abu Bakar Bashir seeks to establish an Islamic republic in South Mindanao, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. These conflicts will likely take on a transnational character and in some cases, become networked with specialised cells spread across nations. Some cells will specialise in indoctrination and others, in financial operations.<sup>24</sup> In radical groups, such conflicts could even take on the shroud of terrorism as such groups are invariably small in size. By resorting to terrorism, such groups can cause disproportionate effects on civilian populations and, in particular, gain publicity for their cause. The resolution of such conflicts will be dependent on several factors, of which economic and political stability is key. Such stability will provide governments with a firm base for starting national integration programs, emphasising moderation, good governance and visibility of the secular system.<sup>25</sup>

13. **Transnational issues.** As ASEAN moves towards greater regionalisation, transnational issues will remain a reality in the future. Three transnational issues can be foreseen in the future. Firstly, drug smuggling will be a major social and security menace, particularly in Myanmar. An unstable Myanmar could foster private armies like Khun Sa and their influence might transcend the Myanmar border. Secondly, illegal immigrants will continue to shift demographics in the developing nations in Southeast Asia, invariably causing social and political instability.<sup>26</sup> Thirdly, piracy will rise in the future as radical groups could use piracy for funding purposes. Other than economic ramifications, piracy could also impact on international relations. For instance, an increase in piracy may compel

intervention by regional and global powers, thus increasing their military presence in the region on the pretext of providing security to their shipping assets. This would exacerbate the already complicated relations within Southeast Asia.

14. **Regional terrorism.**<sup>27</sup> Circumventing regional terrorism will be a key challenge for ASEAN in 2020. Since September 11, the Bali and Jakarta Marriot Hotel bombings, views on security have changed. While previous terrorist organisations were disparate organisations fighting for separate causes, regional terrorists will fight for a common cause across national boundaries and will possess capabilities to target masses using easily-acquired advanced technology weapons or equipment, including chemical–biological weapons. The *modus operandi* of such organisations will also continually morph beyond the spectacular and will stretch the boundaries of rationality, such as the perversion of aircrafts into missiles.<sup>28</sup> These terrorist organisations would target civilians and civilian infrastructure, which are much more difficult to protect compared to military targets. Unlike the Irish Republican Army, which is a terrorist organisation that is willing to negotiate, this particular strain of terrorism would not negotiate in their demands and is inextricably linked to ethno-religious conflicts. Regional terrorist organisations could also have links to global terrorist organisations for spiritual, financial or training assistance.<sup>29</sup>

#### **Impact on Southeast Asia and its armies: Forging cooperative security**

15. The complexity of threats in the not-too-distant future raises important questions on the force structure of Southeast Asian armies. By 2020, issues predominantly of transnational nature would dominate the security climate in Southeast Asia. In such a regionalised environment, closer cooperation between governments, military forces and other security agencies would be a lynchpin in ensuring a stability that transcends national boundaries. Cooperative security could provide a framework for closer cooperation.

16. **Cooperative security defined.** Cooperative security is conceptualised as cooperation between ASEAN governments, military forces, civil and non-government organisations, focusing on the common security challenges posed by amalgamated threats. Cooperative security will harness the strengths of member states against the vulnerabilities of such threats. For instance, against militants hiding in jungles, the Malaysian Armed Forces, with their expertise in Counter Insurgency Warfare, could provide advice and assistance on operations designed to root out these militants. Hence, a pre-condition of cooperative security is the understanding of the true nature of a particular threat and appropriately applying the expertise and resources of member states.

17. **Impact on ASEAN.** Cooperative security will require the nature of ASEAN to evolve. Since the inception of ASEAN in 1967, the association was never considered to be an alliance or a collective security arrangement.<sup>30</sup> Rather, ASEAN was conceptualised as a multilateral approach to security.<sup>31</sup> Presently in ASEAN, cooperative security is somewhat limited by competing national security concerns in Southeast Asia.<sup>32</sup> Hence, ASEAN could move towards greater cooperation in regional security matters.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, some level of collaboration on security on a regional basis is essential if the wellbeing of the various states is to be assured.<sup>34</sup> However, collaborative actions could inadvertently be misconstrued as impinging on national sovereignties.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps a pre-condition for a viable cooperative security framework must rest on the acceptance by ASEAN states of ‘rules’ that relate their domestic political structures to their relations with one another,<sup>36</sup> as well as the principles required for an effective regional security mechanism.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, there have been calls to replace

the non-intervention policy with an explicit linkage between domestic government and regional security.<sup>38</sup> As Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmed Badawi stressed:

At times, it may be necessary for ASEAN member countries to be a mirror to each other and 'gentle reminders' from fellow ASEAN nations should be accepted in the spirit of maintaining unity and credibility.<sup>39</sup>

18. **Impact on Southeast Asian armies.** Cooperative security will impact on the force structure of Southeast Asian armies. Given the diverse state of development of Southeast Asian armies, closer cooperation will require interoperability between military forces and security agencies within and between Southeast Asian countries. Indeed, Southeast Asian armies will need to be tailored to the increasingly porous national borders and amalgamation of security threats.

19. **Broad-spectrum capabilities.** Southeast Asian armies will have to contend with amalgamated threats in addition to traditional ones. While conventional conflict is still a possibility, albeit low, it is necessary to develop capabilities that address the amalgamated threats without compromising conventional warfighting capabilities. Hence, Southeast Asian armies will need to develop broad-spectrum forces, capable of handling broad-spectrum threats ranging from external conventional threats to amalgamated threats, such as law enforcement and even possibly nation-building. This will require forces to be trained in both conventional and non-conventional operations, be equipped for both and be adaptable to different requirements at a relatively short notice. Hence, force development in Southeast Asian armies will continue to focus on conventional capabilities while developing doctrines that allow flexibility of employing conventional capabilities in non-conventional tasks.

20. **Adapting conventional force structures to non-conventional tasks.** Southeast Asian armies would still be combined arms forces adopting the manoeuvrist approach. The challenge is to adapt these forces to non-conventional tasks. While conventional forces have limited roles in non-conventional threat environments, several conventional capabilities could be applied in the latter environments and thus should be developed further by all Southeast Asian armies.

- a. **Civil-military relations (CMR).** In an environment with non-conventional threats, military forces will invariably have to work with civilians, civil and non-governmental organisations. The development of effective civil-military mechanisms will facilitate the planning and execution of such operations.
- b. **Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR).** Non-conventional threat environments could escalate quickly from benign to lethal ones. To safeguard the military forces in such environments, ISR assets and networks, including HUMINT and IMINT assets, could be deployed for information collection. The deployment of UAVs in Solomon Islands illustrates the utility of ISR assets in peace-support operations.
- c. **Engineering capabilities.** Field and Construction Engineers provide mobility, counter-mobility and survivability capabilities in conventional operations. In non-conventional tasks, however, such capabilities could assist in humanitarian assistance and could also be useful in civil-military relations. This could help circumvent the spread of any social-based threats and win the hearts and minds of the local populace against the perpetrators.
- d. **Combat service support (CSS) capabilities.** CSS is an integral component of conventional operations. It could also be applied in non-conventional tasks, focusing on sustaining the deployed forces and requisition of civil resources for use in the operations. When appropriately upgraded in Southeast Asian military forces, CSS could allow a degree of interoperability amongst various armies. In addition, it would also facilitate the adaptation of conventional capabilities to non-conventional tasks.

21. **Developing non-conventional capabilities.** Concurrent with the developing of conventional capabilities, several key non-conventional capabilities should be developed. Within Southeast Asia, there is a disparity in terms of non-conventional capabilities, giving impetus to the need to close the capability gaps between Southeast Asian armies.

- a. **Counter-terrorist capabilities.** Counter-terrorist capabilities allow governments to have an option of 'no negotiation' in hostage situations. If politically motivated, hostage situations could have political ramifications on governments, especially if governments start to negotiate with terrorists.
- b. **Peace-support and peacekeeping capabilities.** Peace-support and peacekeeping capabilities can be applied to areas riven with ethno-religious tensions or transnational crimes. In both types of operations, Southeast Asian countries will have to work closely together in addressing not only rules-of-engagement, legal and operational issues, but also CMR and intelligence sharing.
- c. **Chemical, biological and radiological (CBR) capabilities.** The proliferation and ease of constructing CBR weapons has fuelled the possibility of a terrorist CBR attack on civilian concentrations. With CBR response capabilities, damages caused by such attacks could be mitigated.

22. **Interoperability.** Cooperative security would require a degree of interoperability amongst Southeast Asian armies. At present, interoperability is limited by the differences in capabilities between Southeast Asian armies. While the intention to cooperate is genuine, the capability gaps between armies could pose significant challenges. Hence, it is necessary to level-up the capability gaps amongst Southeast Asian armies. This would require greater integration and coordination amongst the 'ASEAN Security Community', in particular in C4I and training issues.<sup>40</sup> Upgrading the C4I capabilities of all Southeast Asian armies is a precondition of interoperability, allowing the integration of intelligence collection efforts and information flow. The training of personnel to operate high technology systems could be achieved through bilateral channels, with technologically-capable countries providing assistance to others.

23. **Technology transfer.** Cooperative security would require the transfer of technology know-how from technologically-capable armies to lesser ones. With the security challenges in mind, technology will mitigate the effects of constraints faced by certain armies, such as the Singapore Armed Forces, which faces considerable limitations in manpower. The transfer of technology will oblige military leaders in the region to develop concepts that can exploit new technologies in accordance with the strategic challenges. It could also provide the technology base for civil industries to develop. However, harnessing technology is expensive. Hence, acquiring high-technology equipment and developing new operating concepts with this new equipment is subject to availability of defence budgets. With governments focused on economic development, the need for a stable and secure environment for foreign investments could provide the impetus for additional funding.

24. **Confidence-building.** Given the uncertainty of the security environment in the region, Southeast Asian governments should aim to reduce the response time for the deployment of military and civil agencies to the area of operations. To reduce response time, mutual understanding will be key. Hence, confidence-building within the region is critical. Defence bilateral and multilateral cooperation, including combined training and personnel exchanges, should be strengthened to maintain the understanding of differences amongst Southeast Asian armies.

## **Conclusion**

25. Southeast Asia is a region in flux. Comprising a collection of nations with diverse ethnicity, race, language and political systems, Southeast Asia has experienced the boom and bust of the Asian economic miracle, fracturing of political systems and the shifting US strategic interests amid the global war against terrorism.<sup>41</sup> When juxtaposed on inter-state border issues, intra-state ethnic tensions and the emergence of non-state actors, such as Jemaah Islamiah and Laksar Jihad, security concerns in Southeast Asia are increasingly amalgamated. Only with a secure environment can economic development take place.

26. Southeast Asian countries will need to focus on cooperative security. By working closer together to resolve issues, military forces in Southeast Asia will need to be prepared to undertake non-conventional tasks. This will coalesce member-states and hence facilitate the development of mutual understanding, transparency and communications, developing the 'ASEAN Way' further.<sup>42</sup> Hence, cooperation between military forces could be a harbinger for a more secure environment in the near future, providing opportunities for economic development and better stability.

**Endnotes**

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6. J Funston, 1999, 'Challenges Facing ASEAN in a More Complex Age', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol 21, No. 2, August, p. 212.
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13. H Soesastro, 2002, 'Southeast Asia and Global Terrorism: Implication on State Security and Human Security'. *The Indonesian Quarterly* Vol 30 No 1, pp. 31–33.
14. Radio Singapore International (RSI), 2003, *Indonesia Proposes that An ASEAN Security Community Be Formed*. Available online at <<http://www.rsi.com.sg/english/perspective/view/20030830130612/1/.html>>.
15. *The Straits Times*, 2003, 'China Signs Non-Aggression Pact', 2 Oct 03, Singapore Press Holdings.
16. *The Straits Times*, 2003, Singapore Press Holdings, 6 Oct 03.
17. *The Straits Times*, 2003, 'Along with China, North America, Europe and East Asia'
18. Funston, op. cit., p. 217.
19. The kidnapping of tourists from Sabah by the Abu Sayaaf terrorist group illustrates this point.
20. Funston, op. cit., p. 218.
21. *ibid*, p. 220.
22. Searle, op. cit., p. 1.
23. *ibid*.
24. DM Jones and ML Smith, 2002, 'From Konfrontasi to Disintegrasi: ASEAN and the Rise of Islamism in Southeast Asia', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 343, p. 347.
25. Searle, op. cit., p. 2.
26. Philippines and Indonesia, two main sources of illegal immigrants, have criticised a number of countries imposing whipping on illegal immigrants.
27. Terrorism is defined as 'the use of violence, especially murder and bombing, in order to achieve political aims or to force a government to do something', *Macquarie Dictionary*.
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29. *ibid*.

30. S Simon, 1998, 'Security Prospects in Southeast Asia: Collaborative Efforts and the ASEAN Regional Forum', *The Pacific Review*, Vol 11, No 2, 1998, pp. 195–212.
31. S Simon, 1996, 'Security, Economic Liberalism, and Democracy: Asian Elite Perceptions of post-Cold War Foreign Policy Values', *NBR Analysis, Summer 1996*: pp. 5–32.
32. S Simon, 1998, op. cit., pp. 195–212. All ASEAN states have territorial disputes with at least one other member. Thus, none could be impartial in mediating these issues. Consequently, cooperative security is limited. This is due to the fact that ASEAN members still maintain separate national security policies.
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39. ibid.
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