

The Paradox of Peace Advocacy and Arms Trade:

How could the European Union contribute to peace and stability in the South China Sea?

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Section 1: Introduction

One of the most shared values at the Indo-Pacific strategy is to ensure maritime security. In particular, a tussle over sovereignty and jurisdiction in the South China Sea among the six states - China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei - is at the center of maritime dispute in the Indian and Pacific Ocean. Approximately 40 percent of the goods entering the European continent transit through the South China Sea, and hence the security of transit routes, freedom of navigation, and the rule of law in the maritime corridor are significantly important for all member states. While having developed its own Indo-Pacific strategy since September 2021, the EU's engagement in the region has been mostly limited to "normative discourses on human rights, the rule of law and multilateralism" (Pejsova: 2018). It would be unrealistic for all member states, except France as a residential power, to project their limited naval capabilities to the region particularly after the Ukraine war. The EU's asymmetrical dependence on China also constraints its ability to make a consensus within member states and increase its military presence in the region. Considering these challenges, how could the EU coordinate its policies to ensure stability in the South China Sea? One possible approach for the EU could be arms trade with states in Southeast Asia. Traditionally, the EU has been served as a major arms-trading partner for Southeast Asian countries. This is explicitly evidenced by the five among the top ten arms suppliers to Southeast Asia between 1999 and 2018 were European countries - France (3rd), Germany (4th), the Netherlands (8th), Sweden (9th), and Spain (10th). While Russia was the top arms supplier to Southeast Asia over the period, the ongoing Ukraine war is potentially undermining the reliability of Moscow-made military equipment, ideally positioning Brussels to fill the gap left by a sanctioned Kremlin. Arms procurements from the EU allow the subregional nations to increase their defensive capabilities, including cruise capacity to ensure maritime order in the South China Sea. This will contribute to greater deterrence against China or any other potential threats without unnecessary provocations.

It is therefore increasingly significant to approach the following questions: What is the status of arms dynamics in Southeast Asia? Which countries in the region import armaments from Europe and how does that contribute to peace and stability in the South China Sea? And finally, how could the EU coordinate its strategic policies or legal frameworks for its healthy arms trades with the subregional states? This paper is designed to address these questions in two sections. The first one provides a detailed analysis of the military doctrine, defense budgets, and arms trades in

Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on Indonesia and Singapore. The other one focuses on European perspectives, including its position on disputes over the South China Sea and its role as an arms supplier to Southeast Asia. Finally, these two sections combined will encourage the EU to develop legislative requirements or systematic frameworks for arms export regulations that will enable member states to furnish military equipment of adequate quality and quantity.

Section 2: Southeast Asia

2.1. Arms Dynamics in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is one of the few regions that has experienced significant growth in both defense budgets and arms trades since the 1990s. This increase has been mainly driven by a dramatic change in its security environment. In particular, the rise of China as a military giant has contributed to the increasing tension in Southeast Asia. China's aggressive stance to seek sovereignty and jurisdiction over the South China Sea has also led external actors to increase their engagement in the region, either directly through strengthening military alliances or indirectly by providing armaments. This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the trend for defense budgets and arms trade in Southeast Asia.

2.1.1. Defense Budget

From 1987 to 1997, Southeast Asian countries increased their defense budget by 70 percent on average, far more than the global average of 30 percent. Notably, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore all experienced a double increase in their military spending during this period. Even more importantly than its monetary size, a significant shift in their arms procurement has been observed during this period. Indeed, Bilveer remarks that the military doctrines of Southeast Asian nations almost exclusively designed on safeguarding against internal factors had increasingly shifted their emphasis towards conventional national defense (1995). In consequence, the states pursued extensive modernization of military service branches with substantial investment in their air force and navy. However, the Asian financial crisis in 1997 compelled several regional states to reduce their military expenditure. For instance, Indonesia experienced a reduction of over 50% for its military spending from 1997 to 1999. Nonetheless, Richard noted that this substantial cut in defense budget of Southeast Asian states was temporary and the amount of investment in arms

purchases had already regained at the high level of the pre-Asia financial crisis at the early 21st century (2010).

Between 2009 and 2018, Southeast Asian countries increased their defense budget by 33 percent from \$30.8 billion to \$41.0 billion, signifying that the amount of arms procurements over the period was almost double as those of the previous decade (Siemon: 2019). For comparison, the growth rate in European military expenditure in the same period was about 5.5 percent. However, the increase in Southeast Asia was not distributed equally throughout the subregional states. The six of eleven states in Southeast Asia increased their defense budget during this period. For instance, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Cambodia all experienced a more than two-fold increase in their military spending during this period. Notably, Indonesia increased its defense budget by over 20 percent between 2011 and 2013, which was the most significant surge in Southeast and East Asia. On the other hand, Singapore and Malaysia experienced comparatively modest growth in absolute figures. This is explicitly illustrated by the fact that Singapore's expenditure on arms and defense increased by only 9 percent, whereas Indonesia's one increased by 150 percent.

2.1.2. Arms Trade

Arms imports by states in Southeast Asia increased significantly, accounted for over 8.0 percent of the global volume between 1999 and 2018. Between 1999 and 2007, the volume of arms imports by the subregional states accounted for just 5.8 percent of the global total but increased to almost double 10 percent in the next decade. However, Wezeman analyzes "these orders were mainly intended to replace outdated weapons and thus were not all a reaction to a worsening security environment in and around South East Asia" (2019).

A significant proportion of arms imports by states in Southeast Asia has occupied naval and air systems required for protecting maritime economic zones. That includes submarines, advanced anti-ship missiles and long-range combat aircraft, indicating a solid interest on maritime security. The primary arms suppliers to Southeast Asia are the almost same as the global trend, as seen in the top five states are Russia, USA, France, Germany, and China from 1999 to 2018. However, Sweden stands out as a notable exception, ranking 9th among arms suppliers to Southeast Asian but 12th on the global list. This is explicitly exemplified by that Sweden sold 3

submarines to Singapore in 2005, and 12 combat and 2 airborne early warning (AEW) aircraft to Thailand in 2013 (Wezeman: 2019).

The most recent data published by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reveals, arms imports by states in Southeast Asia decreased by 42 percent between 2013-17 and 2018-22, while those by states in East Asia and Oceania increased by 21 percent and 25 percent, respectively (2023). The SIPRI analyzes that the decrease is partly driven by most of arms-importing states are "still in the process of incorporating equipment delivered before 2018 into their armed forces" (2023). This is explicitly illustrated by the fact that Indonesia has ordered 42 combat aircraft from France as well as for 6 frigates from Italy and 2 from the UK from 2018 to 22. Thus, a decrease in the volume of arms imports by the subregional states would not imply that they slow the movement of increasing military capabilities.

2.2. Country-Level Analysis – Indonesia and Singapore

The previous chapter discloses a discernible trend among Southeast Asian nations to augment their defense expenditures and procure advanced military equipment. However, this picture is not uniform across all eleven nations in Southeast Asia. The countries have their own security agenda and do not always think or act unitarily in security matters. Their perception of threats significantly varies as do their expenditure and procurement patterns. Some perceived threats derive from distrust among the subregional states. China has also been recognized as a major catalyst in their decisions to boost military spending and pursue advanced equipment. Indeed, the four nations - Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines – with territorial claims in the South China Sea have demonstrated the most substantial commitments to augment their military expenditures. It is therefore crucial to address all the following questions: What are the intensions behind a military doctrine? How mature is a domestic defense industry? What armaments are imported from which countries and to what extent? To address these questions, this chapter provides a detailed analysis of Indonesia and Singapore. Both countries are the largest military giant in Southeast Asia, while having different structure of their defense industries and arms-trading policies.

2.2.1. Indonesia

Since 2005, Indonesia experienced a more than three-fold increase in its defense budget in absolute terms. This increase is primarily driven by President Joko Widodo who took initiatives to boost the military spending of GDP to 1.5 percent by 2019. Traditionally, Jakarta had not attached much values on its naval and air forces due to perceived threats primarily originating inside the nation. A radical shift in Indonesian's defense policy, however, has become imperative in light of emerging external security threats, including piracy, illegal fishing, and transnational terrorism. In particular, the escalating conflict with Beijing over fishing rights in the South China Sea has promoted the militarization of Jakarta. Indeed, Torrijos states "Indonesia has not been shy about defying China, particularly in asserting control of its exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea" (2022). His remark is explicitly exemplified by the Indonesian military announced plans to extend its military base on the Natuna Island in February 2014.

Indonesia still highly depends on foreign-made arms, while having tried to develop a domestic military industry since the 1990s. This is explicitly illustrated by Indonesia was the world's 17th largest importer of major armaments from 2016 to 2020 (SIPRI: 2022). It is particularly noted that 90 percent of arms procurement by Jakarta during the period were import. Such high dependency on foreign-made arms equipment demonstrates how low level of self-reliance is for a domestic defense industry in Indonesia, which is completely dominated by the five state-owned firms with small subcontractors - PT Pindad, PT Dirgantara Indonesia, PT PAL, PT Len Industria, and PT Dahana. Although having a limited domestic production capability and depending heavily on foreign input, the five companies all have each different specialty. For instance, PT Pindad mainly produces armoured vehicles while PT Dirgantara Indonesia manufactures aircraft. Combining the listed top 5 firms, a state-owned arms company named Defence Industry Indonesia (Defend ID) was founded in April 2022, showing its solid interest to pursue more self-reliance.

Indonesia has putted efforts to diversify its arms suppliers, as evidenced by Jakarta almost equally imported military equipments from the top five countries between 1999 and 2018 - Russia (15.7%), South Korea (15.5%), Netherlands (14.8%), UK (12.1%), and USA (12%). This is based on the lessons of the past that Indonesia encountered an embargo on arms sales imposed by the United States from late 1990s to early 2000s. Warships and aircraft were particularly among the top priorities in arms procurement by the Indonesian government, accounted for about 38 percent

and 34 percent of the total arms imports between 1999 and 2018, respectively. Most of these aircraft and warships were delivered by Russia and the United States. Given deteriorating maritime security environment, however, the Indonesian's military capability still would not be enough. This is explicitly illustrated by the Indonesian navy operate only two submarines imported in 2020 from Germany and South Korea. What is more, a significant number of the existing vessels and planes would already be aged without proper consistent maintenance. Indeed, Heiduk admits "the modernisation of Indonesia's marine and air force has to start from very low levels" (2017).

2.2.2. Singapore

The military expenditure in Singapore has been increasing over the last decade, reaching about 11 billion U.S. dollars in 2021. This is equivalent to about 3% of its GDP, which is higher than the global average of 2.2%. Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has formulated its security strategy pursuing military deterrence at the core. This makes Singapore one of the highest military spending per capita in the world, with 25% of the national budget on average. Singapore's forces are superior to neighbors in both quality and quantity. Among the Southeast Asian countries, for instance, the Republic of Singapore Navy operates some of the most capable long-range warships, including six Formidable-class frigates and four Invincible-class submarines. Despite being relatively highly equipped, Leifer claims that Singapore adheres to a strategic restraint doctrine and maintain the regional balance of power, refraining from pursuing offensive capabilities to prevent being perceived as a potential military threat to its neighboring countries (2000). In recent years, however, China's aggressive moves to challenge maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea could potentially trigger the militarization of Singapore, which conducts most of its maritime trade through the Strait of Malacca.

Singapore is the only nation in Southeast Asia with a robust defense industry capable of manufacturing certain degrees of cutting-edge weaponry of its own design, albeit often with foreign assistance. Indeed, the SIPRI reports that the majority of armored vehicles and ships procured by the Singapore government between 2016 and 20 were of domestic design with a high level of sophistication, as evidenced by the inclusion of the Hunter infantry fighting vehicle as a contender in a competition for the US military (2022). An integrated ecosystem of the country's military industry, comprised of the Ministry of Defense, the Singaporean armed forces, the

Defense Science Organization National Laboratories, and Singapore Technologies (ST) Engineering Ltd., contributes to its robust domestic manufacturing. ST Engineering, for instance, was placed 61st in the global military industry Top 100 in 2020 and 13th in the regional top 50 (Wezeman: 2019). While about 30 percent of its major arms are domestically produced, Singapore still has been dependent on foreign imports for some of key components, including engines, sensors, and armaments. This is explicitly illustrated by ST engineering with the support from a Swedish company designed Independent-Class Littoral Mission Vessel (LMV) equipped with German engines, Dutch radar, Italian guns, and French surface-to-air missiles.

Singapore, due to its limited geographical and population size, has not pursued self-sufficiency in every aspect of military capabilities. This is explicitly illustrated by the fact that Singapore was the world's 18th largest importer of major armaments from 2016 to 2020 (SIPRI: 2022). It is particularly noted that Singapore has relied on certain foreign suppliers, as seen in the top five arms providers between 1999 and 2018 were USA (54.1%), France (20.2%), Germany (7.1%), Sweden (5.5%), and Israel (5.0%). A significant portion of its elevated military expenditures has been allocated towards the naval forces, as evidenced by Singapore ordered two German-made 218SG submarines in 2013 and 2017, respectively. The Republic of Singapore Air Force has also pursued the most capable of long-range strikes in the region, as exemplified by replacement of Boeing KC-135 Stratotanker installed in 1990s to Spanish-made A330 MRTT delivered in 2018. Overall, Singapore's current armament policy are primarily designed to prioritize the replacement of obsolete weaponry systems over the procurement of novel ones.

Section 3: Europe

3.1. Europe and the South China Sea

The European Union has consistently underscored its commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea. About one-third of global shipping passes through the South China Sea, resulting in an estimated \$500 billion worth of European trade transits the ocean annually. This is equivalent to approximately 15% of Europe's total trade with Asia. However, the EU has a limited naval presence to ensure maritime security in the region, with only a small French fleet stationed in the South Pacific. Some of the European member states, notably France, Germany, and the Netherlands, are actively engaged in joint patrols over the Pacific Ocean with some regional countries, such as Japan and Australia, but to what extent this will be effective in

detering China's maritime expansion is still questionable. The EU itself does not articulate a position on territorial disputes in the South China Sea, advocating for all parties to pursue peaceful resolutions and adhere to international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Against a background of shrinking defense industry in Western countries, however, EU member states have actively sold their armaments to the majority of the regional states facing a potential challenge to their maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea. This is clearly evidenced by the volume of arms trades from Europe to Southeast Asia has more than quintupled in absolute terms between 2005 and 2014 (Heiduk: 2017). Such a double standard of advocating peaceful resolutions while providing military equipment is explicitly illustrated by the 2015 Southeast Asia paper by the European Commission briefly references disarmament and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) in a mere half-sentence without any mention of the EU's arms exports. This statement represents a clear contradiction to the EU's declared interests of refraining from any involvement in the militarization of the South China Sea.

3.2. European Arms Exports to Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia has emerged as an attractive market for European arms manufactures, who has struggled to make a profit due to the reduction in military expenditures in Western countries. Heiduk believes that most of European arms producers would be forced to reduce a substantial degree of current manufacturing capabilities in the absence of the increasing their exports to Southeast Asia (2017). Indeed, the military industries in Europe have been exerting increased efforts to generate sales in Southeast Asia, accounting for a large share of the regional arms expansion. In particular, France and Germany have shipped a large quantity of armaments to the region over the last decade. Tian et al. publish the 2021 ranking of Top 100 arms producing and military services companies - France with five firms included in the 2021 ranking has 4.9 percent share of total arms sales among the listed companies; and Germany with three firms included has 1.6 percent (2022). Wezeman et al. also indicates that France was the third world's largest arms supplier after the USA and Russia, accounting for 11 percent of the global total between 2018 and 2022 - 44 percent of the total export, notably 42 French combat aircraft to Indonesia, went to Asia and Oceania (2023). Germany was also the fifth largest arms exporters, accounting for 4.2 percent of the global total during the same period - 32 percent of the total export were toward Asia and Oceania (2023).

Arms trade between Europe and Southeast Asia has been active particularly since 2009 when China put forward its “nine-dash line” claim, asserting its sovereignty and jurisdiction over the South China Sea. This is explicitly illustrated by the volume of arms imports in Southeast Asian nations from Europe has more than quintupled in absolute terms between 2007 and 2017. Singapore imported armaments with a total of about \$8.000 billion during the period, and more than 35 percent came from the EU member states. Indonesia also procured armaments amounting to approximately \$6.000 billion, with over 45 percent of the arms trading originating from the European continent. Malaysia allocated about \$3.700 billion toward arms trading over the same period, with approximately 60 percent of the deal coming from Brussel. Thailand allocated a substantial amount of about \$1.450 billion toward the arms trading, of which approximately 50 percent went to the EU member states. The total value of arms imports by Brunei was comparatively small, amounting to \$490 million; however, over 80 percent of the commerce came from the European continent. The Philippines, despite primarily engaging in arms procurement from the United States, allocated about \$220 million toward arms trading with Brussel between 2007 and 2017, accounting for approximately 25 percent of the total share. In Southeast Asia, Vietnam stands out as the sole nation that still predominantly relies on Russia for the arms supplier, and consequently its arms trade with Brussel constituted a mere 2 percent during the same period.

The high standard of Euro-originated armaments is the primary driver behind the growing sales in Southeast Asia, where there is a pressing need to keep pace with the rapid modernization of the China's People's Liberation Army. Indeed, only a handful of European defense companies could meet the increasing demand for more advanced naval capabilities in Southeast Asia. In 2000, for instance, the French firm Direction des Constructions Navales (DCNS) made a deal with Singapore for the supply of six Formidable-class frigates. The DCNS also sold two Scorpene-class submarines at the EUR 1.2 billion and six Gowind corvettes at the USD2.1 billion to Malaysia in 2002 and 2011, respectively. Between 2007 and 2009, the Dutch shipbuilder Damen Schelde Naval Shipbuilding built four 9113 Sigma-class corvettes for the Indonesian Navy. In 2013, the German shipbuilder ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) sold two Type 218SG submarines at the USD 1.36 billion to Singapore. Not just selling or building the hull, many of the armament transactions between Europe and Southeast Asia also entails component sales and technological transfer. For instance, Thailand procured a DW-3000F frigate from South Korea in 2013, which was designed with German MTU engines and French Thales. Also, the

transaction to relocate part of the Dutch-frigate production process to Indonesia arms firms is a notable example of technological transfer. In the long run, technological transfer can enhance the autonomy of the destination countries in their defense policy, but will require a significant amount of time and resources. It is therefore expected that arms imports will remain the primary role in bolstering the military capabilities in Southeast Asia in the short and medium run.

3.3. Outlook and Recommendations

The EU member states have been directly engaged in the arms proliferation in Southeast Asia by means of exporting weapons and transferring technology. Although China's military supremacy in the South China Sea is still unparalleled, the EU has enabled a number of the subregional nations to procure asymmetric capabilities to constrain the strategic choices of perceived adversaries and to fill in any substantial gap between Beijing. In particular, a dynamic shift in the naval sector has been promoted by European arms suppliers with advanced equipment, such as submarine, frigates, naval artillery, anti-ship missiles, and radar systems. However, the active participation of Europe in the evolving military market of Southeast Asia conflicts with the commonly held belief of refraining from any engagement in the militarization of the South China Sea. Indeed, a number of European-originated frigates, submarines, and corvettes navigates in the South China Sea, albeit with local crews aboard.

Despite having sold armaments to almost all conflict parties, Brussels has not discussed enough over the possible impacts by the EU-based arms producers on arms dynamics and regional security of Southeast Asia. Heiduk analyzes one possible reason for the neglect as the fact "arms export policies are still viewed primarily from an industrial and employment perspective in many parts of Europe" (2018). Indeed, individual member states have not a coherent strategic approach to arms exports, and even compete each other over lucrative deals and at times for market access and market shares. However, arms trades are not at all merely economic in nature. The profit-driven policies in the absence of any arms control mechanisms potentially redraw the regional security map and military balance in unexpected ways. This is explicitly illustrated by advanced far-reaching conventional weapons, notably submarines, have both defensive and offensive capabilities. It would be nearly impossible for suppliers to manage the use and proliferation of their exported armaments once the technological transfer has been completed. Indeed, the proliferation of advanced military equipment in Southeast Asia with limited transparency in arms

regulation has led certain countries to be more aggressive in contrast with European belief. This is explicitly illustrated by a correlative relationship between the growing volume of arms trades in Southeast Asia and the increasing number of confrontations in the South China Sea.

It is therefore evident that no legal provision or systematic framework on arms exports exists in Brussels. Instead, there is a sort of policy guidelines, notably the EU's Common Position on arms export control, but the interpretation varies by member states. As a result, whether or not to export arms is exclusively in the hands of each individual member states. This is explicitly exemplified by the case - Germany exported more than 100 Leopard battle tanks to Indonesia in 2010s, while the Netherlands rejected Jakarta's request for the armaments due to concerns regarding the human rights situation in the country. Hence, it is imperative to initiate a strategic discourse at the European Parliament regarding the EU's security interests in enhancing the military capabilities of nations in Southeast Asia. This should include examining the correlation between the disputes in the South China Sea and the arms dynamics in Southeast Asia, as well as evaluating the contribution of European arms exports to the regional security. In the end, these discussions will incentivize the EU to formulate legal provisions or systematic framework on arms export controls allowing member states to provide military equipment with appropriate qualities and quantities.

Section 4: Conclusion

In conclusion, Southeast Asian countries have experienced a considerable growth in defense budgets and arms trades, particularly driven by China's assertiveness over sovereignty and jurisdictions in the South China Sea. Indeed, defense budget of nations in Southeast Asia was increased significantly by 70 percent between 1987 and 1997 and by 30 percent between 2009 and 2018. Arms imports by states in Southeast Asia also surged dramatically, as evidenced by the volume accounting for just 5.8 percent of the global total between 1999 and 2007 but almost doubling to 10 percent in the following decade between 2008 and 2018. This increase trend has been observed in almost all eleven Southeast Asian nations; however, the structure of their security policies, including the amount of military expenditures and the patterns of arms procurement, exhibits variations. For instance, Indonesia, despite attempting to establish a self-reliant defense industry, remains heavily dependent on foreign armaments, with a focus on diversifying its suppliers. Conversely, Singapore, though also reliant on foreign imports for key

components, boasts a robust defense industry capable of producing sophisticated weaponry, highlighting its strategic deterrence doctrine. While China's military superiority in the South China Sea remains unrivaled, the EU has allowed a number of subregional governments to acquire asymmetric weapons to cover any significant gap between Beijing. Indeed, European arms suppliers, notably France and Germany, have played a significant role in enhancing the naval capabilities of Southeast Asian countries by providing advanced equipment, including submarines, frigates, naval artillery, anti-ship missiles, and radar systems. However, Europe's active participation in Southeast Asia's defense markets contradicts the EU's declared position of advocating peaceful resolutions and refraining from any involvement in the militarization of the South China Sea. Additionally, Brussels has not sufficiently discussed the potential consequences of EU-based arms manufactures on arms dynamics and regional security of Southeast Asia, despite having supplied weaponry to practically all conflict parties. This has led individual member states to pursue lucrative deals without any arms control mechanisms, potentially redrawing the regional security landscape and military balance in an unexpected way and sometimes in contrast with their belief. Hence, it is increasingly imperative for the EU as peace advocacy to devise legal framework and strategic policies on arms trade enabling its member states to export military equipment with appropriate qualities and quantities.

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