

Conclusion

As approaches to security in Southeast Asia evolve, Australia needs to be aware of the strategic perceptions of regional nations if it is to participate in a security community 'based on a sense of shared security interests'. The perceptions of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are of special significance, given the strategic importance of this triangle of Southeast Asian nations for Australia.

This study has not sought to examine the fundamental basis for Australia's current security policies, merely to look at how the strategic perceptions of our neighbours might influence these policies. It has shown that Australia's approach to the promotion of regional cohesion is largely consistent with the factors that Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore see as important for regional stability. Australia's emphasis on bilateral military cooperation and personal contact between military leaders fits well with the approach of these countries, as does the priority Australia gives to economic development and cooperation. Australia recognises the contribution of ASEAN to regional stability, the need for the Indo-China states to move into the mainstream of regional economic and political affairs, and the major influence that China and Indonesia itself have on the stability and security of Southeast Asia. On the other hand, there has been insufficient awareness in Australia of the role of personal contact between national leaders in maintaining and enhancing regional stability. Prime Minister Hawke's failure to develop personal links with President Suharto of

Indonesia meant Australia lost an opportunity to capitalise on the success of its other regional security policies.

Australia also needs to appreciate the importance for Indonesia of good relations with Papua New Guinea for regional stability, and hence the need to maintain dialogue with Indonesia on PNG issues.

The study also revealed the complexity of attitudes in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore towards Australia's military ally, the United States. The chapter showed that Australia should not assume automatic support from these three nations for United States' actions or policies, including in the security field. For reasons of economic and regional stability, the national leaders of these countries support a continued United States security presence in Southeast Asia. Even in Singapore's case, however, this support is not underwritten by the type of cultural and ideological affinity that exists between the United States and Australia. Events in the Middle East strongly influence the attitude of the Islamic community in Southeast Asia towards the United States. Together with nationalism and various bilateral difficulties, this constrains the level and type of security cooperation with the United States that Indonesia and Malaysia are willing to agree to. This in turn sets parameters for Singapore's security links with the United States. In this context, Australia's should consult or at least inform regional nations before cooperating with the United States in major international security actions such as the Gulf War. Australia should also explain that its US alliance complements its security cooperation with regional nations, and take

regional attitudes into account in considering any proposals for an additional United States security presence on its territory. In assessing regional perceptions, Australia should note that senior officials in defence and military circles in Indonesia and Malaysia have a more positive attitude towards the United States than other elements of government and society.

As far as perceptions of Australia itself are concerned, the study has shown that Prime Minister Keating's nationalist rhetoric and regional visits have contributed to a more positive perception of the Australian Government, but that negative images of the wider Australian community - especially the media - persist. These negative perceptions remain an obstacle to Australia's key regional security aim of comprehensive engagement with Southeast Asia. By late 1992, Australia's approach on the question of broader regional security initiatives had converged with that of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. There was a positive view of Australia's bilateral defence cooperation in all three countries, although in the case of Indonesia and perhaps also in Malaysia, negative general perceptions of Australia will constrain the pace at which this cooperation can be developed. The varying perceptions of the Five Power Defence Arrangements in the three nations suggest that the arrangements should be maintained largely in their current form, with neither a downgrading nor a significant expansion.

The study showed that some Australian and Indonesian commentators saw Australia's policy of defence self-reliance as the basis for a more confident, outward looking Australia,

and as part of Australia's contribution to future regional stability. However, the fact that important elements of government and society in Indonesia did not see Australia's new military posture in this light means a wider explanation and better presentation of Australia's defence approach is needed. The belief outside Indonesian Defence Ministry/ABRI circles that Australia's defence approach is overly aggressive also reinforces the perception that Australians see Indonesia as a military threat. Whilst Australia's military posture is not a pressing issue in Jakarta, such a perception complicates the relationship between the two countries, and hinders Australia's aim of closer engagement with the region. Australia should ensure that its major defence equipment purchases, as well as its military presence and exercises in and around northern Australia, are understood by a wider audience in Indonesia.

Based on the strategic perceptions of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, therefore, to improve its prospects of being seen as a natural participant in a regional security community, Australia needs to strengthen personal links with regional heads of government, recognise the widely differing views in Indonesia and Malaysia about its United States ally, encourage a better perception in all three countries of the general Australian community, and promote a wider understanding in Indonesia of Australia's policy of defence self-reliance.

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