



Asia: disasters as opportunities?

by Eva Pejsova

Following the recent recovery of the remaining debris of Air Asia flight QZ8501, which crashed on its way from Indonesia's city of Surabaya to Singapore last December, the multinational Search and Locate (SAL) operation in the Java Sea can be proclaimed a success. Indonesia displayed remarkable leadership and coordination skills, acted in a fully transparent manner, shared information and cooperated closely with all participating foreign naval forces – which included parties as diverse as Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, the US, China and Russia.

This stands in stark contrast to the chaos still surrounding the search for the Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, which went missing in March last year. This operation has attracted significant criticism both inside and outside Asia, highlighting the many problems surrounding interagency and interstate coordination, communication and cooperation.

One week before the anniversary of its disappearance, Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia announced that a trial of a new air traffic control method had begun. It will allow for real-time monitoring of commercial flights through an automated, satellite-based positioning technology. Given the failure to locate MH370, this technical measure should be seen as an example of political dynamism, reactivity and good will.

Following many years of attempts by regional security bodies to promote Search and Rescue (SAR) and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)

cooperation in Southeast Asia, the success of the SAL operation in the Java Sea and the implementation of the new air tracking system is a positive development for the region's security environment.

The year of flying dangerously

The crash of the Air Asia flight on 28 December 2014 marked the end of a particularly grim year for Asian civilian aviation. In addition to the two aforementioned disasters, a second Malaysian Airlines flight, MH17, was shot down over Ukraine in July.

The fate of MH370 may forever remain an unresolved mystery, but it will certainly be remembered as an example of how SAR should *not* be conducted – at least in its initial phases. The reluctance of countries to share satellite imagery slowed down the response significantly. Moreover, the lack of coordination and communication managed to generate diplomatic tensions, as well as almost trigger a crisis in Sino-Malaysian relations.

Concerns over infringements of national sovereignty have hampered efforts to institutionalise security cooperation in the region. This can be seen both on paper, in the lack of effective legal arrangements, as well as in practice – Southeast Asian countries were, for example, notably absent in HADR operations after Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines.

Why cooperate?

Saving lives is of course the primary incentive behind SAR or HADR operations, and timely and effective responses can make the difference between life and death. In the case of fatal incidents or accidents, successfully identifying the deceased is a priority for both bereaved relatives and the governments in charge. And the recovery of debris and black boxes can also help identify the causes of a disaster, with a view to preventing other such tragedies occurring in future.

SAR and HADR operations are opportunities for governments to showcase their political, as well as military prowess. At a domestic level, the management of emergency responses tests a government's ability to meet the expectations of its citizens. In theory, it allows those in power to demonstrate the level of coordination among various national agencies, as well as their own communication skills and commitment to transparency.

Air and sea traffic incidents affect an array of international stakeholders: companies, the relatives of those involved, and the country (or countries) within whose jurisdiction the incident occurs all have an interest in discovering what exactly happened and why. SAR and HADR missions, therefore, also present opportunities for governments to boost – or tarnish – their image abroad.

Finally, SAR and HADR can also serve as trust-building exercises. While they may involve the deployment of military forces, they take place in peacetime, are fully transparent, and are therefore ideal for building capacity, confidence and a spirit of cooperation among participating countries – something which is sorely needed across Asia.

SAR as a confidence-building measure

The wide range of actors which took part in the SAR operation in the Java Sea proved that political and ideological differences can be overcome when a common interest is at stake. Cooperation in 'soft' security areas such as SAR and HADR often brings tangible benefits quickly at low political cost. At the same time, it is instrumental in creating institutional structures which promote transparency and accountability, and therefore contributes to building confidence and trust.

In recent years, SAR and HADR cooperation has made it to the top of security agendas of regional

governments and international organisations alike. The sharing of information and best practices, and the building of the capacity of law enforcement agencies have, for instance, been the main focus of the ASEAN Regional Forum Inter-Sessional Meeting (ARF ISM) on Maritime Security.

Moreover, since Malaysia took over the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2015, improving SAR cooperation is now a priority area for all ASEAN-centred regional security mechanisms – including the ARF, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting and the East Asia Summit.

The utility of disasters

Important international agreements often emerge in the aftermath of tragic events. It was the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, for example, which served as a catalyst for the first convention on the protection of the safety and life at sea (SOLAS).

The need for interoperability between maritime and air monitoring systems is outlined in the 1998 International Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue (IAMSAR) manual. In Asia, ASEAN and the ARF have been drafting a regional aeronautical and maritime SAR agreement in order to meet these international standards. Despite these efforts, however, most countries in the region still lack adequate SAR capabilities and structures.

The EU, thanks to its experience in the Mediterranean, is well aware of the need for coordination and cooperation between aeronautical and maritime, as well as civilian and military agencies in SAR operations (as is reflected in its Maritime Security Strategy). Interagency cooperation is also the theme of the next EU-ASEAN High Level Dialogue on Maritime Security Cooperation.

If anything positive is to emerge from the tragedies of the last year, it is that they will serve as a wakeup call. It is now understood that words must be translated into deeds and that international cooperation in SAR/HADR is a necessity – in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Eva Pejsova is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

