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Demographics and Security in Maritime Southeast Asia

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With a population of about 325 million, Maritime Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore—is an area of significant economic and security interests for the United States. These interests are four fold. First, the United States seeks to maintain open sea lanes through the region, especially through the Straits of Malacca, through which much Persian Gulf oil is shipped to East Asia. Second, the moderate Islam practiced in the region can help offset radical Islamist movements elsewhere. Third, Washington seeks to prevent terrorist infrastructure from developing in the dense jungles of the region. And fourth, the United States needs to build strong strategic relationships in the region to assure access for American air and naval forces. This article analyzes how demographic factors are affecting the security environment of Southeast Asia and examines the resulting security implications for the United States.

The current annual population growth rate of the region (1.38 percent) exceeds that for the rest of the world (1.17 percent).¹ The region is also home to one of the largest Muslim populations in the world, nearly 200 million, with 177 million in Indonesia alone and a Muslim majority in Malaysia as well.

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Muslims are a minority in the Philippines and Singapore; however, the Muslim population is also growing faster than the total populations in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia.²

The prominence of the Muslim population in the region makes the relationship between Islam and the state an important part of regional politics. This relationship has recently been marred by violence such as the terrorist bombings in Bali and Jakarta in recent years as well as the growth of radical Islamist organizations and parties, the emergence of extremist and terrorist groups, and separatist movements in Mindanao and Aceh in Indonesia. Such insurgency represents the greatest threat to security in a region where there is currently little risk of conflict between states.

While the religious characteristics are perhaps the most distinctive demographic features of the region, other demographic characteristics merit consideration as well. Demographic trends such as urbanization, migration, and population growth affect security issues confronting the region. These trends also shape available responses to security issues.

Urbanization and population dispersion can affect the nature and conduct of conflict by influencing its environment

(or other powers). Demographic variables such as population age structure, particularly the number of persons of military age, can affect the nature of power in a state. Demographic changes such as migration affect the sources of conflict by increasing tensions between states or altering the domestic policies of a given state so that it becomes a security problem for its neighbors.

Urbanization: Shifting the Locus of Politics and Conflict.

Like the rest of the world, Maritime Southeast Asia is becoming more urban. In 1980 just over one in four persons in the region lived in urban areas; in 2000 nearly half did.³ Jakarta and Manila are among the largest metropolitan areas in the world. Increasing urban populations mean the cities of the region will become even more important economic, political, and social centers.

As a result of urbanization, there has been a political shift in the region from traditional rural leadership to new types of urban leadership. In Malaysia, for example, Malay political organizations have been based in rural areas where Malays were more numerous, and ethnic Chinese have been more prevalent in urban politics, reflecting traditional dif-

As rural Malays have moved to urban areas and traditional family and village bonds have weakened, Islam has grown as a source of political identity.

(e.g., creating new areas of conflict) or instruments (e.g., diasporas seeking to advance the interests of their home states

ferences in the distribution of the population. As rural Malays have moved to urban areas and traditional family and

village bonds have weakened, Islam has grown as a source of political identity.

Urban areas with ease of communications and concentrations of peoples with shared political experiences can facilitate revolutionary movements. The People Power movements of 1986 and 2001 in the Philippines as well as the Indonesian anti-government demonstrations of 1998 were all urban-based movements. Urban areas, particularly those with universities, can be fertile grounds for new political movements in proselytizing, recruiting, and developing new leadership. In Indonesia the most dynamic Islamist political forces have been increasingly based in urban and university communities.⁴ The Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), a university-based organization, provided much of the leadership and ideology for the Pan-Malay Islamic Party.⁵ The small but dynamic Prosperous Justice Party in Indonesia, led by graduates of Indonesian and Western universities, originated in Islamic study circles at Indonesian universities.⁶

Operationally, the infrastructure of urban areas can provide cover and greater ease of communication for armed clandestine militants. Because cities have substantive and symbolically important targets and because news media are more concentrated and less likely to be restricted by government there, operations in urban settings can have a greater impact than those in rural areas.

Ethnic Diasporas: Transmitting Conflict?

Diasporas to and from a region can also affect the nature of conflict. In recent decades, diasporas have increased in size, visibility, and influence.⁷ More rapid and widespread long-range transportation has permitted larger

migratory flows. Improvements in communications and information technology allow leaders of these communities greater means to call attention to issues of interest in their home countries or to help their home countries or territories achieve political or military objectives.

Both Indonesia and the Philippines have a substantial number of nationals overseas and relatively high net emigration in recent years.⁸ In addition, there are more than one million Filipinos who work abroad—nearly all as contract workers—and return to the Philippines; more than one in four of whom work in Saudi Arabia.⁹ Remittances from overseas workers—estimated in recent years to be 0.6 percent of the Filipino GDP and 0.2 percent of the Indonesian GDP—constitute small but noticeable portions of the Filipino and Indonesian economies.¹⁰ Of particular interest for analysis of demographics and security, especially that relevant to U.S. interest in promoting moderate social and political movements in the Muslim world, is how diasporas may help transmit Islamic militancy to Southeast Asia. For example, Filipino workers returning from the Persian Gulf could, conceivably, bring Wahhabist beliefs and doctrines with them.

Beyond these returning workers, there are also longstanding Arab communities in the region, but the variety of influences on the Muslim community have led some to label it the least “Arabized” of leading Muslim communities.¹¹ Individuals of Arab origin are, for the most part, well integrated into local societies. For example, the Hadrami (Yemeni) diaspora, numbering about five million in the region, includes a community whose wealth is among the greatest in the region, as well as persons who have served as foreign ministers in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Still, the local Arab diaspora, particularly its newer elements, may serve as either a liaison or camouflage for Middle Eastern terrorists. Islamic radicals of Arab background in the region include the founders of Jemaah Islamiyah across the region and the leaders of Laskar Jihad and of the Front Pembela Islam (Islam Defenders Front) in Indonesia. The Yemeni diaspora could serve as a demographic "beachhead" for the radical Middle Eastern and South Asian Islamists seeking to infuse Malay ethnicity with Salafism and Wahhabism.

Population Dispersion: A Challenge to Weak Central Authorities.

Wide population distribution and varying population density can have security implications. Population density across Indonesia's more than 17,000 islands is 109 persons per km², but varies from 6 in Papua, the site of a separatist movement in extreme eastern Indonesia, to more than 12,000 in Jakarta.¹² Population density across the more geographically compact Philippines is 255 persons per km², ranging from 24 in Apayao province of the Cordillera Administrative Region to more than 88,000 in Navotas province in the National Capital Region.¹³

Such widely dispersed populations may facilitate campaigns of "ethnic cleansing" on sparsely populated islands far removed from central military authorities. Both the Indonesian and Filipino archipelagos have islands with ethnically mixed populations. If provincial political and security arrangements were to crack, ethnic cleansing campaigns by local radicals might succeed for two reasons. First, low population densities would prevent the target ethnic group from concentrating its self-defense capabilities in any meaningful way. Second,

long distances between such islands and major military concentrations would mean any government response to such campaigns would likely be slow. No Southeast Asian military has sufficient long-range capability to transfer its military forces rapidly by sea or air. The Indonesian Air Force, for example, has only 18 C-130 aircraft, a single Boeing 707, and a smattering of Cessnas for troop support, while the Filipino Army has only 2 squadrons of aging transport helicopters.¹⁴ Such equipment is clearly not sufficient for rapid transport of large numbers of troops to outlying islands. The December 2004 tsunami illustrated how poor strategic mobility and geographically dispersed populations can hamper indigenous military responses.

Indonesian Kalimantan provides a recent example of how population dispersion and weak central government authority can facilitate ethnic cleansing. Transmigration (discussed further below) to Kalimantan, including a half million Madurese migrants to West Kalimantan, first stirred conflict by displacing the indigenous Dayak population that depends on hunting and slash-and-burn agriculture. Periodic violence since 1996 has led to the deaths of hundreds and displacement of thousands of Madurese. Settlement patterns also contributed to this violence. Though less densely populated than other areas of Indonesia, Kalimantan has ethnically mixed settlement patterns that prevented the Madurese from consolidating themselves into a few defensible enclaves, making them vulnerable to attacks by the majority Dayaks. Perhaps even more importantly, the approximately 500 kilometers separating Kalimantan from the main Indonesian military garrisons on Java prevented rapid military intervention that could

have halted the violence. The situation was further exacerbated in 2001 by the fact that Indonesian military and security forces were overstretched fighting ethnic and separatist conflicts elsewhere, including those between Muslims and Christians in Maluku and the ethnic Acehese uprising in northern Sumatra.

Migration: Igniting Conflict from Longstanding Divisions.

The communal violence in Kalimantan, as noted, has its origins in Indonesian transmigration programs. Much of the communal conflict in eastern Indonesia and the southern Philippines has occurred where the demographic balance has been altered by government-induced internal migration.

Internal migration in Indonesia has occurred spontaneously and as part of government transmigration policies pursued by both Dutch colonial administrators and the independent government. The transmigration policy sought to

resistance by indigenous peoples to Jakarta's integrationist policies.

Migration in the Philippines to Mindanao has likewise stirred conflict between ethnic groups. The population of Mindanao was 50 percent Muslim in the early 20th century before migration—driven by colonial and independent government policies for greater cultural, economic, and political integration of the island with the rest of the archipelago—helped reduce it to 18 percent today.¹⁶ Although there was little armed conflict between Muslims and Christians before the mid-1970s, when the National Moro Liberation Front launched the secessionist struggle, these government policies fuelled Muslim perceptions that their community was endangered and thereby secession sentiment. In recent decades, a more Islamist insurgency movement, represented by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), has mobilized an estimated 18,000 fighters. Large-scale government offensives in

The local Arab diaspora, particularly its newer elements, may serve as either a liaison or camouflage for Middle Eastern terrorists.

transfer population from overcrowded islands such as Java and Madura to less populated ones, as well as to assimilate indigenous populations into the national mainstream. During its peak in the 1980s and 1990s, transmigration involved more than five million persons.¹⁵ In Kalimantan, Dayak animosity toward the newcomers was fuelled by the economic and social marginalization of the Dayak people under the Suharto regime. Such violence can be understood as a continuation and accentuation of

early 2003, and what appears to be a more pragmatic approach by new MILF leadership, have led to the resumption of settlement talks.

While the communal struggle in eastern Indonesia and the separatist insurgency in the Muslim areas of the Philippines have local roots, external parties have sought to promote a broader Islamist struggle. Al Qaeda has sought a role in Southeast Asia since the early 1990s by helping to establish the Abu Sayyaf Group and finance the MILF. Al

Qaeda's ability to infiltrate the region was facilitated by participation of several hundred Southeast Asian volunteers in the Afghan War. Al Qaeda and its associated Southeast Asian group, the Jemaah Islamiyah, also placed a large number of instructors in training camps in Indonesia and the Philippines.¹⁷

Population Age Structure: Shaping the Available Responses.

How are demographic variables affecting the resources Southeast Asian states have to confront security challenges? Traditionally, quantity has counted for a lot in security and military issues, leading nations to raise large conscript armies and reserve forces to battle over extended fronts. Military-age male youth cohorts (i.e., 15-24) are projected to increase in each of these nations in coming years. In Indonesia and the Philippines, these cohorts far exceed the number of persons in the current armed forces, who in turn account for less than 0.5 percent of the total labor force (compared to just over 1.0 percent in the United States).

Today, many militaries may face a tradeoff between investing in more personnel or technology in order to main-

tic wartime defense duties while an elite group handles more complicated operations of warfare or counterinsurgency.

The greater challenge for Indonesia and the Philippines may be developing the capital-intensive forces required to face extensive near- and far-term threats. This conflict is highlighted by the July 2002 admission from the Indonesian chief of naval staff that no vessels were combat ready and only a few ships were less than ten years old. This leaves Indonesia unable to patrol its territorial waters and subject to the highest number of pirate attacks in the world.¹⁸ Funding shortages have also prevented the Filipino military from developing the air mobility needed to conduct effective counterinsurgency operations. Per capita military expenditures in both these nations are only a fraction of the global level. Population growth among youth populations and concomitant demands for social spending, particularly on education and health programs, could also limit funds for military investment.

Demographics pose several unique constraints to the power of Singapore. A nation of more than four million persons on a landmass about three times the

It is only a matter of time before there is a convergence between those with hostile intent and those with techno-savvy—where the real bad guys exploit the real good stuff.

tain their power. Developing states facing conflicting demands of domestic politics and military investment may create bifurcated forces dominated by low-quality infantry units for internal policing or sta-

size of Washington, D.C., has, of course, no strategic depth. Through heavy use of conscripts—including nearly two-thirds of its military personnel—Singapore has built a military that is quite large in rela-

tion to its population, but one that may not be able to grow much further. Active and reserve forces comprise about three-fourths of the population of male citizens 20-to-39 years of age (the ages of obligatory military service or annual reserve training). Immigration, which has boosted Singaporean population growth, could, theoretically, boost the numbers on which Singapore may base some of its power. Immigration may also, however, present its own challenges. Immigration has led to more rapid growth in the foreign population than in the native population (though foreign population growth has slowed recently).¹⁹ Among permanent Singapore residents, population growth and fertility rates are now lowest for the Chinese majority.²⁰ (Singapore is the only nation in the region to have fertility levels below those needed for population replacement.) Such trends, should they continue, may limit the ability of Singapore to maintain a large well-integrated military.

Conclusions and Implications for the U.S. The impact of demographic variables on security in Maritime Southeast Asia poses several policy implications for the region and the United States. The continuing urbanization of the region means urban areas are likely to become more frequent sites of armed conflict. Urban areas that are home to many recent migrants may in particular prove to be fertile ground for radical and revolutionary groups. U.S. military forces that might be asked to undertake counterterrorism missions in Maritime Southeast Asia must therefore be fully trained in urban warfare. The Department of Defense should consider establishing a training complex in the region devoted exclusively to military operations

on urban terrain.

Though the region is urbanizing, Indonesia, the Philippines, and perhaps even Malaysia will still face security challenges in rural areas. The Indonesian and Filipino militaries already struggle to meet existing security challenges throughout their territory. The United States may wish to boost security in the region by providing sealift and airlift equipment and support. In particular, the United States should consider reorienting its arms sales in the region to emphasize air and sealift platforms for internal security forces and to deemphasize sophisticated systems (e.g., advanced fighter aircraft) that might provoke tensions between states. Transport ships and planes would help government forces squelch violence in distant provinces more rapidly.

More generally, maintaining the viability of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), securing regional borders, and perhaps providing more development aid can help maintain and improve regional security. Washington should work hard to maintain ASEAN as a viable diplomatic organization and "firewall" against interstate conflicts in Southeast Asia. This would allow regional states to focus more on counterterrorism.

Improving customs and border control services may help reduce the movement of insurrectionists from elsewhere, particularly those seeking to take advantage of demographic tensions. The United States should therefore increase support to regional border control authorities. Southeast Asian border control agencies could benefit from training by the U.S. Border Patrol. The United States could also provide advanced border surveillance technolo-

gies and database software programs allowing for rapid identification of international travelers in the region.

Development aid could help reduce tensions resulting from demographic changes, although the United States, if offering such aid, should consider several questions in targeting and selecting partners for aid programs. For example, given urbanization in the region, should development programs help nations alleviate poverty in increasingly isolated rural areas or should they address problems of urbanization? In dealing with the Muslim majority of the region, what further information is needed to identify appropriate partners for development programs?

Most of the implications and policy prescriptions above apply to the three larger nations of Maritime Southeast Asia, but others for Singapore merit attention as well. As the only urban state of the region and the only one whose population may not be able to yield its desired number of military personnel, Singapore has three options to maintain its military prowess: expand the population of persons eligible for military service, invest more in military hardware, or seek other security guarantees. Of course, the imperative for defense modernization in Singapore depends upon threats it perceives from its neighbors. The options proposed here assume Singapore will continue to need a hedge

against the latent military power of Malaysia and Indonesia. Over the long term, low fertility in Singapore may limit how much the country can modernize its own armed forces. American policymakers need to consider how to address Singapore's potential security concerns without unduly provoking Indonesia or Malaysia. Should Singapore seek continuing investments in military technology rather than personnel, it might pursue such investments as more F-16 fighters, guided missile frigates, and diesel submarines, though such acquisitions could threaten and thereby increase tensions with Malaysia.

In addition, the relationship between demographic variables and tensions involving the ethnic Chinese community bears further study. There is evidence that the presence of minority ethnic Chinese populations in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines and reactions to them can pose security challenges. The economic power of these communities can help ensure the economic stability of Maritime Southeast Asia. Accordingly, the United States may wish to encourage Southeast Asian governments to ensure the security of ethnic Chinese communities, as their continued presence will also support political secularism in Southeast Asia, thereby weakening the momentum of fundamentalist Islamic movements in the region.

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