CHAPTER II

INTRA-GROUP CONFLICTS IN ASEAN: NATURE, MAGNITUDE AND INTENSITY

As indicated, ASEAN was launched amidst deep-seated mistrust and numerous interrelated domestic and inter-state conflicts among the member-states. These were rooted in the colonial past as well as the dynamics of post-colonial socio-economic and politico-cultural development of the region. To be more specific, a complex web of factors that bedevilled inter-state relations between or among ASEAN member-states are: historical antagonism, irredentism, unresolved land and maritime boundaries, cross-border affiliation of ethnic and religious groups, conflict of economic interests, sharing of common natural resources and a turbulent process of nation building accompanied by numerous intra-state conflicts and their cross-border implications.

Intra-ASEAN conflicts that have beset the bilateral relations between almost any two of its member states were originated well before the establishment of ASEAN. The list of such conflicts would be too long. For the specific purpose of this study, particularly for the convenience of our analysis, these conflicts are divided into three main categories. These are:

i. Divergent politico-security perceptions and priorities;
ii. Territorial disputes, and unresolved land and maritime boundaries;
iii. Intra-state conflicts involving ethno-religious groups and their cross-border reverberation;

These are designed to embrace most of the conflicts, particularly those, which served as considerable obstacles to the process of regional co-operation within the framework of ASEAN.
2.1 Divergent Politico-Security Perceptions and Priorities

Notwithstanding their common preoccupation with facing the communist challenge, the security perceptions and priorities of ASEAN countries continued to diverge considerably following the formation of the grouping. One of the most crucial factors contributing to this was historical antagonism. In certain occasions, historical antagonism also revived in politically relevant forms strengthening suspicions and hostilities. More important, their efforts aimed at mitigating differences so as to create an environment of stable relationship and mutually beneficial co-operation were also confronted by a host of contemporary factors of economic, geopolitical and ethno-religious nature. This implies particularly to the countries of ‘the Malay Archipelago security complex’ comprising Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Indonesia.¹ The issue primarily formed two structural characteristics.² First is the huge disparity in physical endowment clearly favouring Indonesia vis-à-vis the other three and Malaysia vis-à-vis Singapore and Brunei. The smallness of Singapore and Brunei is compounded by their vulnerable location. Such a natural pre-eminence of Indonesia generated the conviction in Indonesian mind that it was entitled or even destined to play a leading role in the management of regional order. To a lesser extent, this also implied to Malaysia. It created considerable apprehensions in the smaller countries, particularly when attempts were made to transform the natural pre-eminence into imposed predominance.

Second is the “trans-national communal linkages” among these countries resulting from differences as well as commonality in ethnicity and religion and consequential security concerns.³ This applies particularly, though not exclusively, to the smaller countries. In this regard, the

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² Ibid., p.17.

predicaments faced by Singapore are the most precarious. Singapore – a very small but economically highly prosperous predominantly Chinese society – is surrounded by its relatively much less prosperous two large Malay-Muslim neighbours. To these is added the fact that the country also includes a significant Malay-Muslim minority. These, coupled with the acrimonious separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 and its aftermath as well as the bitter memories of its relations with Indonesia generated deep-seated mistrust in Singapore towards its large neighbours.

Being virtually surrounded by Malaysia and having commonalties in ethnicity and religion with it, Brunei came to consider its large neighbour as a potential threat to its security. The threat as viewed by Brunei is two-dimensional. First, the on-going process of democratisation in Malaysia may generate popular demand for political participation posing a threat to the absolute monarchy in Brunei with or without Malaysian involvement. Second, the ethno-religious commonalties may pose threat to the state and national identity. Such suspicions are sustained and even reinforced by the ever-increasing wealth of Brunei and its substantial deposit of oil and natural gas that attracts the envy of its much less prosperous neighbour.

All these created a complex security dynamic generating considerable divergence in the perceptions and priorities of the countries under discussion. The whole gamut of issues that stems from the above may be discussed under two broad themes: i. Indonesia’s regional ambitions and apprehensions of its smaller neighbours; and ii. the survival concerns of Singapore and Brunei. Malaysia’s double role – as a small power vis-à-vis Indonesia and as a big power vis-à-vis Singapore and Brunei – could be discussed under both the themes.

2.1.1 Indonesia’s Regional Ambitions: Apprehensions of its Smaller Neighbours

Indonesia’s aspiration to a predominant role in the region is deeply rooted in the historical and psychological factors, along with the huge disparity in physical endowment clearly favouring

Indonesia vis-à-vis its neighbours. It was Sukarno who gave a concrete shape to Indonesia’s long-standing regional ambitions. As viewed by him, the central conflict of his time was between the ‘newly emerging forces that were striving for freedom and justice’ and ‘the reactionary and old established forces’, and not between the opposing ideological camps in the ongoing Cold War. In an attempt to stake out a leadership role for himself and his country, Sukarno targeted the overthrow of the ‘neo-colonial and neoimperial forces’ as the crucial task for the newly emerging forces.\(^5\)

In practice, this grandiose international vision came down to a ‘crush’ Malaysia campaign as the proposed formation of the Federation of Malaysia, which included Singapore as well, was viewed by Indonesia as a neo-colonial plot aimed at endangering the stability and security of Indonesia.\(^6\) The policy came to be known as *Konfrontasi* or confrontation of Malaysia. Indonesia not only vehemently opposed but also did almost everything at its disposal short of a direct military intervention to thwart the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia.\(^7\) Even after Malaysia became a reality, Indonesia has taken a rather long time to free its mind from the nostalgia for the concept of Great Indonesia, which included also what are now Malaysia and Singapore. The gloomy experiences of the era of *Konfrontasi* left a deep imprint on Malaysian and Singaporean perceptions of Indonesia’s regional ambitions and periodically affected Jakarta’s relations with both of its smaller neighbours.

The policy of *Konfrontasi* formally ended only after the political demise of Sukarno and the ascendance of the ‘New Order’ Government under Suharto. While the grandiose world vision of Sukarno was dropped, Indonesia under the ‘New Order’ Government continued to envision a regional leadership

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role for itself which to-date remains one of the core concerns in its regional policy. However, the nationalist romanticism of Sukarno era was replaced by hardheaded calculation of the long-standing national interests. In this regard, Indonesia employed substantial efforts with a view to attenuating the distrust and suspicion of Malaysia and Singapore towards her and displayed considerable preparedness to accommodate the aspirations of its two smaller neighbours, while not sacrificing its core concerns.

The formation of ASEAN was followed by further deterioration in relations between Indonesia and Singapore. Even the positive developments in Indonesia-Malaysia relations were viewed by Singapore with apprehension as it was developing a sense of being marginalised by the Malay world. Perceiving Indonesia as the single most important threat to its security, Singapore decided to execute two Indonesian marines held for espionage. The decision was implemented in October 1968, despite Suharto's request for postponement. This brought the relations between the two countries to a nadir further fomenting anti-Singaporean and anti-Chinese feelings in Indonesia that were already high.

2.1.2 Singapore and Brunei: The Survival Concerns

A host of factors pertaining to Singapore's history, geography and ethno-religious composition coupled with its turbulent and conflict-prone bilateral relations with Indonesia and Malaysia created a siege mentality in that state. This remains the single-most important factor in determining Singapore's security perceptions, particularly the long-standing ones. In view of its inherent constraints to face militarily any of its large neighbours, Singapore opted for a two-pronged security policy. On the one hand, in an attempt to attenuate undue suspicion of her large neighbours, Singapore tended to accept the pre-eminence of Indonesia and Malaysia in regional security matters. On the other hand, it maintained a persistent policy of strengthening its defence capabilities through national efforts.

side by side with cultivating extra-regional security linkages. Perceiving itself under siege from the Malay world, Singapore even did not hesitate to build up its defence capability along the model of Israel employing Israeli advisers. The forward defence strategy of Singapore generated considerable suspicions in Malaysia regarding its political and military intentions. This is particularly in view of the fact that in the changed geo-political metrics, Malaysia has replaced Indonesia as the principal source of threat to the security of Singapore. This was not lost in Malaysia. A number of influential circles in Malaysia expressed grievances that Singapore has, over the years, viewed Malaysia as a threat to its security. There is widespread resentment in Malaysia that Singapore’s defence strategy is incompatible with the bonds of history and geography.

Brunei’s security policies are motivated by the ‘security complex’ of a microstate. The two decades preceding the independence of Brunei have witnessed attempts to absorb the territory, to nourish rebellion, to gain influence, and to bolster its self-defence capabilities in a tri-polar tug of war involving Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. During 1962-63, Malaysia made overtures aimed at including Brunei into the proposed Federation of Malaysia that were rejected by Brunei and opposed by Indonesia. However, a revolt aimed at toppling the monarchy in Brunei in 1962 enjoyed the blessings of both Malaysia and Indonesia. Following its failure, its leader Azahary found sanctuary in Indonesia. Again in 1973, Malaysia offered political asylum to some ten members of the revolt following their escape from prison. Thus, Brunei found itself under

permanent siege from both of its large neighbours with whom it shares common ethno-linguistic and religious bondage.

2.2 Territorial Disputes and Unresolved Maritime Boundaries

Territorial disputes and unresolved maritime boundaries have always been and continue to remain the most crucial issue of bilateral discords in intra-ASEAN relations. The present state boundaries of ASEAN countries were mostly inherited from their colonial past. In most cases, these boundaries were imposed by the colonial powers arbitrarily and were often ill-defined, not demarcated, or poorly demarcated. Hence, this inheritance has not been uniformly well received by the successor states. On a number of occasions, post-colonial boundaries have been challenged in the form of irredentist claims. Such claims and counter-claims remain the single-most dominant source of territorial conflicts among ASEAN countries.

From strictly legal point of view, a territorial dispute occurs when a state lays claim to areas under the sovereignty of another state. Judging from this perspective, the list of territorial disputes in ASEAN would be too long. All these disputes, however, are not of the same nature and intensity, nor of the same degree of gravity and sensitivity in terms of their impact on the relations between or among the states of the region. Therefore, we would rather concentrate our attention primarily, though not exclusively, on those disputes that proved to be too difficult to resolve and remain as serious bones of contention within the ASEAN.

Everywhere, territorial disputes serve as a crucial factor contributing to sustained hostility between or among states. Because, they challenge the jealously guarded right to sovereignty and appeal directly to the forces of nationalism. Often their emergence or persistence is considered to be challenging the very essence of statehood. For the same reason, resolving such disputes remains a highly difficult undertaking. ASEAN is no exception. Territorial disputes served as one of the most disruptive factors in intra-ASEAN relations. While proceeding to the discussion of intra-ASEAN territorial disputes, it is worthwhile to mention the fact that Malaysia has got
territorial dispute with all the ASEAN countries. It makes the intra-ASEAN territorial disputes rather Malaysia-centric.

2.2.1 The Dispute between Malaysia and The Philippines over Sabah

The dispute between the Philippines and Malaysia over Sabah, now a state within the Malaysian Federation and claimed by the Philippines, is a long-standing and the most sensitive one in the context of ASEAN. Both the sides justify their claims on different interpretation of a treaty signed in 1878 between the Sultan of Sulu and the British syndicate of Dent Brothers wherein the former leased the Sabah territory to the later. Subsequently, the territory became a part of the British colony. The Philippines presented the first official claim to Sabah to the British Government in 1962. Thus, Malaysia inherited the dispute along with the territory when it was formed in 1963. Since then, the Philippines and Malaysia, on several occasions, slipped towards the brink of war on Sabah issue.

2.2.2 The Dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia over the Sipadan and Ligitan Islands

The dispute is over the ownership of the Sipadan and Ligitan islands in the Sulawesi Sea near the Sabah-Kalimantan border. Malaysia and Indonesia cite maps produced under the Dutch and the British colonial administrations respectively to press their claim to sovereignty. In June 1991, alleged attempts by Malaysia to develop tourist facilities on the islands sparked off protest from Indonesia. A 1992 accord calls for maintaining the status quo on the islands. Subsequently, both the sides have agreed to let a joint committee resolve the dispute. A final
settlement, however, continued to remain as far-fetched as ever. And the dispute still haunts the relations between the two countries.

2.2.3 The Dispute between Malaysia and Singapore over the Pedra Branca Island

Singapore, which operates a British-built lighthouse – the Horsburgh Lighthouse – on the Pedra Branca island, claims it on the basis of control exercised since the 1840s, while Malaysia claims that the island belongs to the state of Johor. An understanding between the two countries in December 1981 stipulated that the dispute should be resolved through an exchange of documents. Accordingly documents were exchanged between the two sides, but it did not lead to the settlement of the dispute. Meanwhile, the construction of a helicopter pad on the island and action by the Singapore Navy in chasing away Malaysian fishermen have increased tensions, and the two countries have on occasions put their forces on alert over such incidents. The importance of the island lies in the fact that anyone who owns it can stake a claim on a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) out into the South China Sea.

Besides a number of territorial disputes like, one between Malaysia and Brunei over the Limbak territory in Sarawak and another between Indonesia and Philippines over the island of Miangas remains unresolved. Similarly, the dispute between Malaysia and Thailand over the border crossing rights yet to be resolved. Here, Malaysia is seeking the review of a 1922 treaty, which allowed the Thai military personnel to conduct cross border operations. Malaysia accused Thailand of abusing the provisions of the treaty for frequent intrusion.

In terms of disputes over maritime boundaries as well, Malaysia remains at the centre of conflict scenario. According to the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Co-ordinating Centre, of the 15 maritime boundaries in the South China Sea (excluding the Gulf of Thailand), 12 are disputed, two have been agreed (one partially) and one resolved through a joint exploration agreement. Of these 12 maritime boundary disputes, six are

between the ASEAN countries, with Malaysia involved in disputes with every other ASEAN country.  

2.3 Intra-State Conflicts Involving Diverse Ethno-Religious Groups and their Cross-Border Reverberations

From the very onset of de-colonisation Southeast Asia was beset with a host of intra-state conflicts involving diverse ethno-religious groups. Owing to the colonial legacy as well as the prevailing ethnographic circumstances, successor states in Southeast Asia included within their boundaries territorially based minorities. Suffice it to mention that the region is home to about 32 ethno-linguistic groups and all the world’s major belief systems. Southeast Asia is also distinguished by immense cultural diversity that is made up, in part, of overseas minorities. With the establishment of Singapore in 1965 with its predominant Chinese identity, a new dimension was added to this. In the circumstances, Southeast Asian states inherited a number of severe intra-state cleavages from the colonial past. These were further aggravated due to the post colonial process of nation building which resulted in the uneven socio-economic and politico-cultural development of different ethno-religious groups within the same state. In most of the cases, minorities have been unwilling to reconcile themselves to political dominance from culturally alien majorities. In certain cases, they have organised armed campaigns against the state structure. A number of ASEAN countries have suffered and are still suffering from violent intra-state conflicts with varying degrees of intensity.

One of the most significant aspects of intra-state violence over ethnic, linguistic and religious issues in ASEAN countries is that it often assumes inter-state character with cross-border implications. It is primarily due to the trans-border communal linkages. While the trans-border movement of refugees, dissidents and arms have already become a rarity, such problems in one country often creates instant repercussions in another. Thus, intra-state conflicts and their cross-border implications still remains one of the significant factors

16. Ibid., p.32.
hampering the process of regional co-operation within the framework of ASEAN. In this regard, Muslim separatist movements in southern Thailand and southern Philippines are the most illustrious cases.

Thai treatment of its Muslim minorities and the armed struggle led by the Muslim separatist movement, Pattani United Liberation Organisation, in southern Thailand continue to remain as a bone of contention in relations between Thailand and Malaysia. Thailand believes that the separatist movement can not survive without support from Malaysia and some Middle Eastern countries. While, officially, Malaysia persistently denies such accusations, popular sympathy for the Thai Muslim separatists in certain segments in Malaysia, particularly in its predominantly Muslim southern states, are unmistakable. Moreover, the opposition parties in these regions have provided sanctuary and material support to the Thai Muslim separatists. These coupled with Malaysian refusal to accede to Thai request to co-operate in suppressing the separatist movements serve as a constant irritant in their bilateral relations. 17

Similarly, the Philippines believes that Malaysia provide the Muslim separatist movements, the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, active in Mindanao province with sanctuary and material support. While Malaysian government may not provide support for Moro separatists, such support indeed came from the Malaysian state of Sabah, when it was ruled by the predominantly Muslim United Sabah National Organisation (UNSO). Muslim separatist movements in the Philippines are far more active and pose a much greater threat to the central authority than those in Thailand. As a result, its impact on the relations between the Philippines and Malaysia is also significantly greater. Furthermore, the problem has become intertwined with other problems between the two countries, particularly the Philippines claim to Sabah and the conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea.

The treatment of Chinese population in Malaysia and Indonesia and the Malay population in Singapore remains a constant bone of contention in latter’s relations with its two large Malay-Muslim neighbours. In the past, Chinese

population in both Indonesia and Malaysia has been subject to severe persecution. While overt persecution of overseas Chinese is no longer practised within any ASEAN country, they remain far from being integrated to the national mainstream, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. In both the countries anti-Chinese sentiments are quite strong, importantly at the grass-root level. And this keeps the prospects for inter-communal violence alive.

Both the countries, but more rigorously Malaysia, are pursuing a host of racially discriminating economic policies designed to favour the indigenous business interests. Furthermore, the policy is also aimed at redistributing wealth from the overseas Chinese to the Bumiputras (indigenous Malay-Muslim population). For understandable reasons, the treatment of the overseas Chinese in these countries generate considerable misgivings in Singapore and significantly influence its approach towards Malaysia and Indonesia, though, constrained by limitations, it refrains from pursuing an activist policy on the issue.

On the other hand, the lack of trust as displayed by the authorities in Singapore in relation to its Malay minority and consequential overt discrimination, particularly in respect to services in the armed forces and the civil bureaucracy, also create resentments in Malaysia. Inter-ethnic tensions between Malay and Chinese communities in Malaysia and Singapore, and certain aspects of government policy of the management of inter-ethnic relations continue to create difficulties in their bilateral relations with occasional emotional outburst. However, both the sides were cautious enough not to allow these difficulties to thwart the process of mutually beneficial cooperation between them.

19. The study was finalised before the new wave of the persecution of overseas Chinese in Indonesia.