Indonesia and post-tsunami security in the Strait of Malacca

Sumathy Permal
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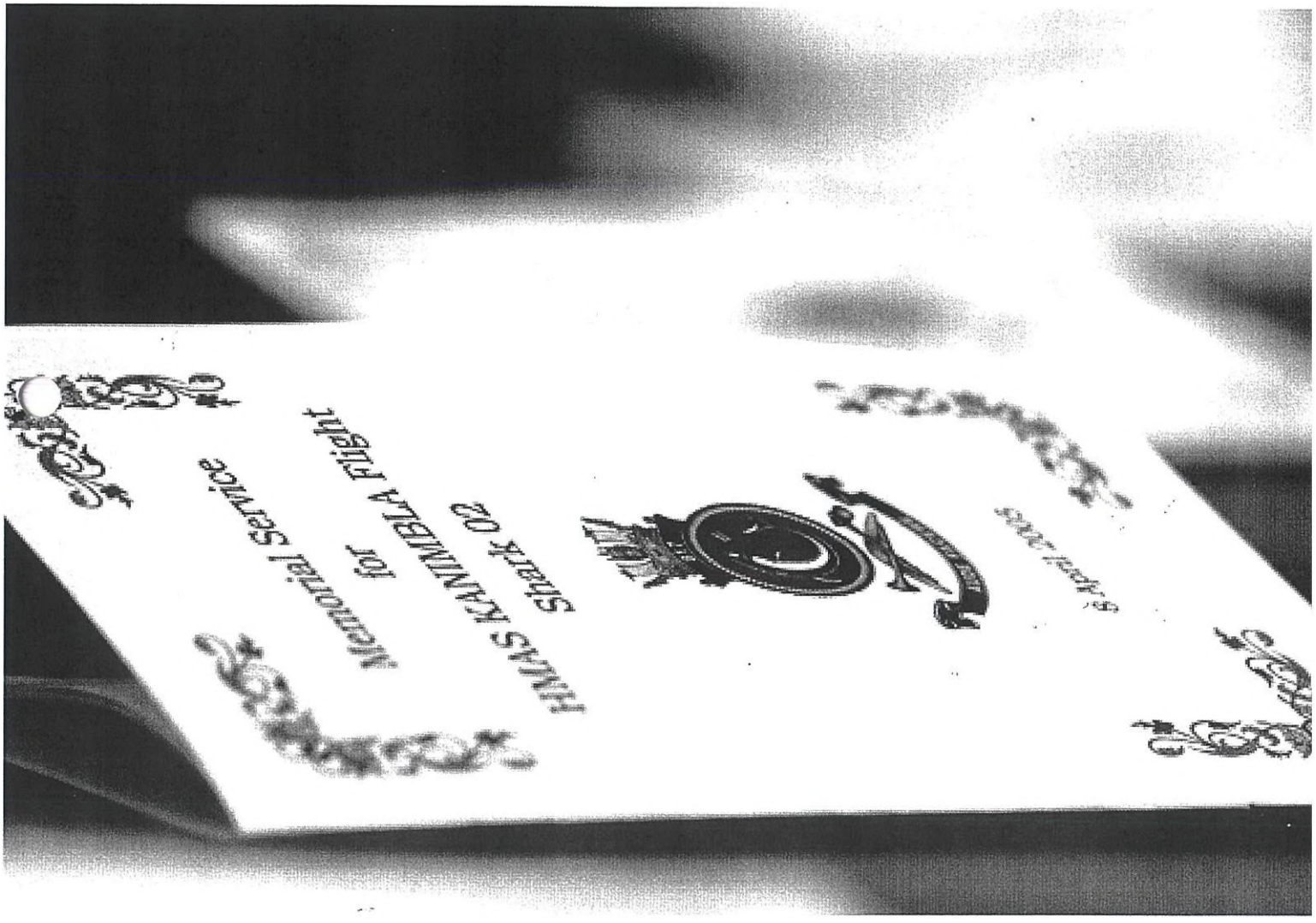

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Front Cover: Memorial Service for HMAS *Kanimbla* Flight (Shark 02), Tom Smith Oval, HMAS *Albatross* (**RAN**)
Back Cover: The *Fremantle* class patrol boat HMAS *Cessnock* searching bays in northern Australia for illegal fishing boats (**RAN**)

Indonesia and post-tsunami security in the Strait of Malacca

Sumathy Permal*

Security in the Strait of Malacca has become a burning issue because of the US proposal to intervene in the Strait through its Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI). The US is concerned over the movement of cargo relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) through the Strait and the possible threat from terrorists to international shipping. The RMSI is part of the US Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) in its global war on terrorism.

The littoral states of the Strait of Malacca are Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, situated between the coastline of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore to the East and the Indonesian island of Sumatra to the West, the Strait extends 600 miles (900km) from its widest point (about 350km between Northern Sumatra and Thailand) to its narrowest (less than 3km wide between southern Sumatra and Singapore). At its shallowest, it has a reported depth of just 25 meters. According to the International Maritime Organization, at least 50,000 ships sail through this strait every year. About 30% of the world's trade goods and 80% of Japan's oil needs are transported through this busy waterway. Thus, the Strait of Malacca remains one of the most important shipping lanes in the world.

Admiral Thomas Fargo, head of US forces in the Asia-Pacific had suggested that US troops might assist in patrolling the Strait of Malacca to deter terrorists who might target shipping in these waters. This suggestion has been rejected both by Malaysia and Indonesia. In an international conference on Asia in Singapore in the first week of June 2004, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in his speech at the conference stated that '*...the US was very cautious in suggesting on the involvement of U.S troops in securing the straits, while nevertheless making it very clear that the country has strategic interest in the channel*'. While Admiral Fargo never really outlined a totally unilateral US military initiative, he did say '*...we are looking at things like high-speed vessels, putting special operation forces on high speed vessels, putting potentially marines on high speed vessels to conduct effective interdiction*'. Admiral Fargo may have been quoted out of context, but many are still suspicious regarding US intentions.

Malaysia feels there is no need for the presence of an extra-regional force for the purpose of securing the Strait and that such presence will impinge on the sovereignty of the country. The Malaysian Foreign Minister Dato Syed Hamid Albar had a meeting with his Indonesian counterpart on May 7, in Jakarta, to discuss the US proposal. Meanwhile, Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, announced in Parliament on 14 June, 2004, that Malaysia will have its own version of the US Coast Guard to patrol and safeguard security along the Straits of Malacca. This new enforcement agency will begin operations in March 2005. It will be equipped with vessels and aircraft capable of operating around the clock.

Indonesia has also announced that it will set up a joint special task force to safeguard the Strait of Malacca. Admiral Bernard Kent Sondakh, Chief of the Indonesian Navy, said he would hold talks with the Malaysian authorities. He is also reported to have said '*Indonesia deems it not necessary to include troops from outside countries including the United States – to be involved in safeguarding the strategic waterway*' (The Jakarta Post, June 17, 2004). According to the Admiral, what was needed from the US was exchange of intelligence information, equipment and training assistance. Indonesia regards US intentions and the presence of foreign forces as an affront to Indonesian sovereignty and equivalent to foreign intervention in domestic affairs. Indonesia has also proposed the formation of an ASEAN maritime security cooperation forum at the conference held in Singapore in June 2004.

Indonesia's initiative to safeguard the Strait of Malacca has been questioned by some quarters in view of the issue of its weak credibility and capability in combating seafaring crimes. Mak Joon Num, Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South–East Asian Studies Singapore, said that for Indonesia, the Straits of Malacca is

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only one of several sea-lanes it uses for international navigation. Indeed, the Strait of Malacca is relatively unimportant to Indonesia since it serves only the eastern coast of Sumatra, which is relatively undeveloped and has no major port along the waterway.

Those representing this view have argued that Indonesia has to have convincing evidence that it is capable of securing the waterway, along with the other two littoral states. It has even been suggested that Indonesia is currently not only unable to combat rampant piracy and robbery in its part of the Strait, but that it has also become a source of security threats in the Strait and the region as a whole. However, other analysts at the recent conference in Kuala Lumpur on the theme, *The Strait of Malacca and the Challenges Ahead* observed that the incidence of piracy in the Strait of Malacca is exaggerated by the inclusion of petty crime in the piracy data. The Indonesian Navy has for years complained that it desperately needs more equipment and money to combat piracy in the Strait of Malacca.

Indonesia's domestic dilemma

The Republic of Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous and largest Muslim-majority state, is undergoing a profound political transformation. Governmental instability, a fragile economy, secessionist movements, and ethnic and religious conflicts threaten the country's existing democracy. A successful democratic transition would allow Indonesia to serve as a capable partner in maintaining regional security and stability in Southeast Asia while reducing opportunities for potential hegemony by extra-regional powers. Conversely, political deterioration, the rise of Islamic radicalism or, in the worst-case scenario, the country's violent disintegration, would likely contribute to a more chaotic and unstable future for the region. One such worst-case scenario view is that of Kevin Evans of ANZ Securities in Jakarta who argues, '*....that the crisis in Indonesia is more than krismon (monetary crisis), the usual expression for the crisis on Indonesia. It is kristal (total crisis)'* (Quoted in Geoff Forrester in *Post Suharto Renewal or Chaos)*

Indonesia has a long post-colonial history of uncertainty and unsettled domestic problems. In May 1998, the Indonesian regime led by Suhatro was shaken by demonstrations and riots that began in February 1998. The violence worsened and spread from Jakarta to Yogyakarta, Bandung and Surabaya. Throughout the year students had been demonstrating and demanding an end to the regime's corruption, collusion with multi-national corporations and cronyism, overhauling the political system and lowering prices of basic necessities. The threat was captured in the cries of 'reformasi', which meant to reform the political system by removing the incumbent regime and its leader, Suharto. In the violence, more than five thousand buildings were burned and over one thousand people killed. After it became evident that Suharto had lost the support of the military and following the call for his resignation by the chairman of his PDIP party, Suharto resigned from his office after over thirty years as Indonesia's president.

Political instability in Indonesia is a longstanding issue, which overshadows the country's standing in the international arena. The political transition that began with the first parliamentary election of the post-Suharto era in 1999, and the indirect election of Abdurrahman Wahid as President, marked a milestone in Indonesia's movement toward a democratic political system. However, this transition has been difficult and uncertain. Wahid's government failed to effectively address the country's pressing problems and emerged from its first year in office with a narrowing political base and under imminent threat of removal. Megawati Sukarnoputri, who took over the presidency after Wahid's dismissal, has achieved some success in improving political stability. But she failed to make any lasting progress in the fight against corruption, and has remained largely silent on her efforts to combat terrorism and regional militancy, for which she was criticised in the aftermath of the Bali bomb attacks in 2002. Rampant corruption, soaring unemployment and the increasing threat from Islamic militants did little to endear her to the Indonesian public.

The economic crisis of 1997-98 devastated Indonesia's then fast-growing economy and exposed its economic vulnerability. During the Suharto regime, the concentration of power in the executive coincided with improvement in the Indonesian economy. From 1965-88, per capita GDP rose by an average of 4.3% per year and grew by almost 7% from 1988. These figures however disguised an uneven economic prosperity in Indonesia. Economic development was concentrated in the central island of Java and was in the hands of the Indonesian Chinese community. Resentment over Indonesia's uneven economic development was seen in Medan in April 1994, when factory workers protesting over pay and the right to organise a union outside the SPSI flared into riots and attacks against ethnic Chinese. The economic disparity between central Java and the outer islands and its peripheral