

SHOPPING FOR WEAPONS: Malaysian soldiers check Austrian-made pistols at a Kuala Lumpur arms fair in April

MALAYSIA

Call for Arms

The military's modernization programme is back on track. The new weapons will give it an offensive capacity for the first time

By S. Jayasankaran/KUALA LUMPUR

THE MALAYSIAN MILITARY is on the roll after years of stalled modernization. The latest evidence of this resurgence should come during Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad's mid-May visit to the United States, when Boeing is expected to announce the sale of F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter/attack jets to Malaysia's air force.

Defence Minister Najib Razak, the driving force behind the renewed race to upgrade Malaysia's military capability, said late last year the government would spend between \$3 billion and \$4 billion on hi-tech arms procurement between 2002 and 2005. He is also reviving orders that were put on ice when the Asian financial crisis hit in 1997.

The new orders, which are being placed fast and furious around the developed and the developing world, will give Malaysia an offensive capability for the first time. And while officials insist the build-up is not meant to threaten anyone, some analysts reckon the Malaysian military wants to bridge the technology and firepower gap it has with Singapore. But they add that of greater strategic concern is instability in other neighbouring countries, particularly Indonesia.

Najib was the architect of the original modernization drive of the early 1990s, but his vision of transforming the military from an army-driven, counter-insurgency force to a more conventional structure with equal emphasis on all three services ran aground when he was moved to another portfolio in 1995—the plan sank after 1997. “Our defence needs have always been driven by economics and not by threat perceptions,” says defence specialist Mak Joon Nam.

With Najib back as defence minister and the economy in much healthier condition, the impetus has been restored. “It's not just the military's needs. Someone whom Mahathir

listens to has got to push for it,” says a Western diplomat.

Over the past two months, Najib's ministry has announced a rash of new purchases. These include main battle tanks from Poland, Russian and British surface-to-air missiles and mobile military bridges, Austrian Steyr assault rifles and Pakistani anti-tank missiles. Kuala Lumpur is also negotiating to buy the F/A-18s, three submarines from France and an unspecified number of Russian Sukhoi Su-30 fighter aircraft.

The submarines are likely to be based at a naval base now under construction in East Malaysia's Sabah state. The government is also reviving deals struck in the early 1990s, including the purchase from Britain of six Super Lynx helicopters and of six patrol vessels from Germany.

The decision to spread its orders around reflects Malaysia's use of arms purchases to further its foreign policy, even though the range of equipment from so many different sources creates maintenance and logistics problems. The expected order for an unspecified number of F/A-18s, for example, is a sign of the remarkable turnaround in relations between Malaysia and the U.S. since the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. “It appears the political considerations behind defence procurements are great in Malaysia's case,” says the diplomat. “And here it's being used to forge better relations.”

However, analysts say neighbours may not be happy about the procurements, especially the battle tanks, missiles, multiple-rocket-launcher systems and submarines, which will give Malaysia an attack platform for the first time.

NARROWING THE MILITARY GAP

Military analysts believe the modernization programme is certainly aimed in part at narrowing the military gap with small but rich Singapore, which has a much bigger annual defence budget. A Malaysian arms specialist asserts that Singapore has around 10 times more main battle tanks than Malaysia. “They already have four submarines and their air force is the most sophisticated in the region. Let's not kid ourselves,” he adds.

But despite the often rocky ties between the neighbours, analysts believe Malaysia does not see Singapore as a potential battlefield foe. Strategic Forecasting, a U.S.-based global intelligence provider, said in an April 17 report that the arms build-up was aimed at more long-term threats, including piracy in the Malacca Strait and Muslim insurgencies in the southern Philippines and southern Thailand.

The report said the Malaysians were worried above all at the prospect of Indonesia's collapse, which could unleash ethnic and religious unrest and trigger an avalanche of refugees. “Malaysia must be able to act pre-emptively if Jakarta loses control,” the report said. Malaysia shares a land border with Indonesia on Borneo and has consistently had problems with Indonesian illegal immigrants.

Ultimately, the arms purchases are a source of patronage. Foreign arms manufacturers, with the possible exception of the U.S., generally lobby for business through Malaysian agents with excellent political contacts. It can be a lucrative business. “The commissions are anything between 10% and 20%,” says the Western diplomat. ■