

# Japan's role in Asian security

BY HIDEAKI KANEDA

SOUTH-EAST Asia's return to prosperity since the financial crisis of 1997 has brought a region-wide splurge on new weapons.

Most South-east Asian countries are, indeed, now busily modernising their armed forces. So far, most have done so without compromising their autonomy in security matters. But, with China's military build-up causing nervousness everywhere, many governments in the region are starting to work with outside powers.

Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has perhaps been the most assertive. In addition to becoming more active in world diplomacy, it is believed that Dr Yudhoyono will meet Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow to discuss buying the country's newest fighter jets. Indonesia is seeking to form an air defence squadron of 12 jets, with eight Russian fighters to complement the two Russian SU-27SKs and SU-30MKMs that it has already bought.

Elsewhere in the region, Singapore has apparently opted to buy 12 new F-15SG fighter aircraft from the United States.

Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra met Mr Putin late last year and tentatively agreed to purchase 12 SU-30MKMs.

Malaysia has agreed to buy 18 SU-30MKMs over the next two years while Vietnam has purchased 36 SU-27SKs, 12 of which are already in service.

With the exception of Singapore, it seems that Russian fighter attack aircraft are the region's weapon of choice at the moment. Russia's growing slice of the regional arms market worries the US, the world's biggest weapons sup-

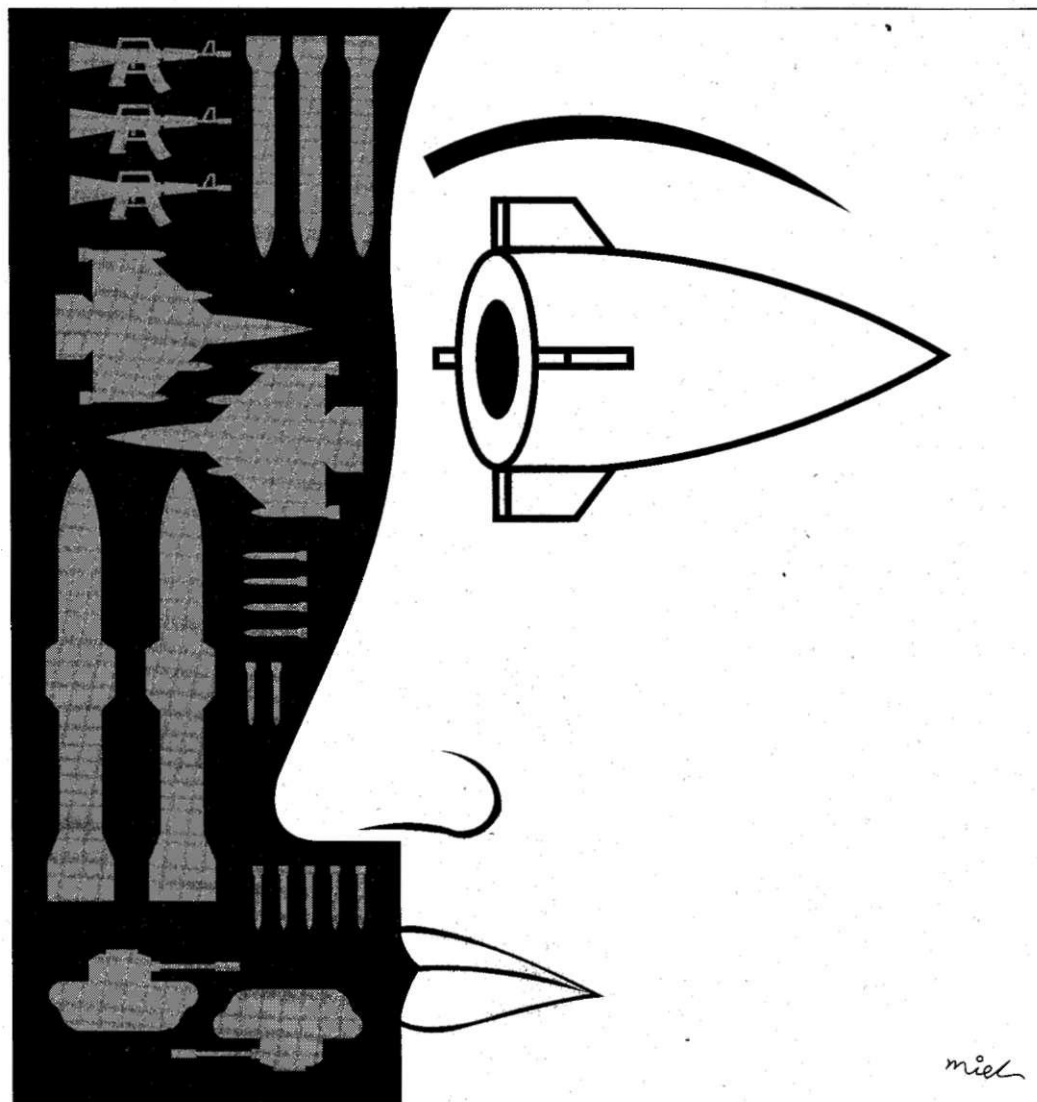
plier and still Asia's greatest military power. Thus, for example, last November, the US lifted its six-year embargo on military sales to Indonesia, imposed in 1999 in response to human rights abuses in the former East Timor. Indonesia immediately expressed its intention to buy C-130 transport aircraft, as well as fast patrol boats for "anti-terrorism and anti-piracy measures".

Yet Indonesia is also trying to align itself with Asia's rising power, China, by seeking greater defence and security cooperation. As a result of improved ties, Indonesia has received Chinese short-range missile technology.

The possibility that South-east Asia's governments might begin to play the US and China off against each other is one of the concerns that most animates the latest US quadrennial defence review, which is intended to "focus on the Pacific Ocean" in awareness of China's growing naval power. Undoubtedly, Washington will try to build closer ties with Jakarta through greater military cooperation, because Indonesia borders the region's key sea lines of communications.

In particular, Indonesia will inevitably become involved in the tug of war between the US and China for influence over the vitally important Malacca Strait. Because China must import vast quantities of oil through the Malacca Strait, that sea lane has become a central element in the country's security strategy. For this reason, China is attempting to use economic and military aid as leverage to improve relations even with countries with which it has had military confrontations with in the past, most prominently Vietnam and the Philippines.

India, too, is now joining the military build-up. It has actively led regional multilat-



eral joint exercises, such as the naval joint exercise that India's navy hosted in the Andaman Sea earlier this year. Nine Asian-Pacific countries took part, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

India and China are also seeking greater influence over the strategically important country of Myanmar. For example, after Myanmar signed an agreement with China last year to supply natural gas, India responded by cutting its own gas deal with Myanmar.

South Korea, too, has joined the scramble. President Roh Moo Hyun visited Malaysia and agreed to expand mutual economic cooperation mainly in information technology, biotechnology and energy. Mr Roh reportedly also discussed exporting defence materials worth US\$2.3 billion (S\$3.7 billion), including training aircraft, destroyers and armed vehicles.

Moreover, in January, Ko-

rean Defence Minister Yoon agreed with the Philippines to deliver two used patrol boats to the country.

In this crowded power play, only Japan is left out, choosing for the most part to remain aloof and cultivate its relations with the US. But, despite deep historical animosity over World War II, there are increasing calls in the region for Japan to expand its influence to counterbalance China. In reality, Japan is not ready for this, because it still strongly adheres to "self-imposed restraints" against "influence over other countries in security and defence".

In the 1960s, as its economic takeoff was proceeding, Japan initiated a serious dialogue with regional players, aiming to build stronger relations with countries that it had once conquered and occupied. It is no overstatement to say that those efforts, which boosted trade and investment in the region, formed the

foundation of Japan's national power today. But now Japan's political and economic influence in South-east Asia is gradually declining, owing in part to its failure to exert influence over security and defence matters.

For those Asian countries that recall Japan's moderate and sensible advancement of regional policies since the 1960s, there is a growing expectation that Tokyo should re-think its stance.

At a time of regional uncertainty about Chinese policies — including the looming prospect of China's first aircraft carrier — Japan's participation in the evolving Asian security framework is fundamental to stability. The time when Japan could remain on the sidelines is over.

**The writer, a retired vice-admiral of Japan's Self-Defence Forces, is director of the Okazaki Institute in Tokyo.**

**Copyright: Project Syndicate**