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SOME REFLECTIONS ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE SEARCH FOR MH370

Given heightened tensions between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and legacy issues, their common deployment of military aircraft from the same Australian Air Force base in the search for debris from flight MH370 was a very welcome development. It is to be hoped that this shared humanitarian endeavour might lead to dialogue on the major issues in that relationship. Another very welcome development has been the number of countries, with New Zealand prominent among them, that have joined the search for the Malaysian Airlines aircraft.

That's the good news. Unfortunately, this operation has also been notable for the significant gaps in international cooperation. Most surprising given that the ASEAN countries have had decades of experience in working together, has been the lack of a joint effort by ASEAN. The ASEAN countries some years ago set up an ASEAN emergency response team mechanism, known as ERAT, for activation in emergencies. There are regular courses for ASEAN personnel that provide collective training for emergencies. Yet this mechanism was not activated.

For an organisation that prides itself on conducting more than a thousand meetings a year across a wide spectrum of activities, this lack of action on such an important issue seems odd indeed. Moreover, given similar criticisms over the lack of a concerted ASEAN response following the devastation wrought by typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines last year, it suggests that ASEAN still has considerable work to do if its much-vaunted goal of achieving an effective political and security community with all that entails is to be fully realised.

Not only, however, was a collective ASEAN response absent, some dirty linen was very publically washed highlighted by the exchange between Vietnam's

deputy Transport Minister Pham Quy Tieu and his Malaysian counterpart. Minister Pham stated that “five days after the plane went missing, Vietnamese authorities only exchanged information with a Malaysian military official, who refused to provide any information about the search mission carried out by the Malaysian authorities”. Malaysia’s Minister of Defence who is also their acting Transport Minister, Hishammuddin Hussein, responded that the information was “too sensitive”. Add to this claims that Thailand may initially have withheld information from Malaysia.

National sensitivities will always be an issue in relation to sharing information especially if that information could expose important capabilities or capability gaps, knowledge of which by others could be considered detrimental to a country’s security. But, such concerns should be balanced by the need to be able to respond to an emergency in a manner that gives those affected a degree of comfort that everything possible is being done to achieve a resolution that will either save lives or at least bring a degree of closure.

The apparent unwillingness of some of the ASEAN’s to share information could have wider consequences. Dylan Loh Ming Hui noted in a S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Commentary on 20 March, that from a Chinese perspective ASEAN’s misstep “presents the perfect opportunity to assert itself over the South China Sea”. Loh added that given ASEAN’s lack of ownership, China could make a case to be the regional leader, “there would be no better time than now for it to impose an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea under a veneer of legitimacy ensuring civil aircraft safety, safeguarding disaster relief, search and rescue efforts and protecting its citizens”. It is hard to argue with that logic.

What can be done? Perhaps the question of sharing of information in times of emergency could be taken up by the ASEAN Defence Ministers plus forum. The forum’s maritime security expert working group co-chaired by New Zealand and Brunei, is a possible vehicle to take up this challenge. It would provide a leadership role for New Zealand on an issue of importance to all international travellers.

Turning to China, its major commitment to the search in the Indian Ocean has been well documented. Much less attention has been given to a significant development that took place in Beijing shortly after MH 370 went

missing. The Chinese government quickly established a high-level Joint Ministerial Conference on the Security Protection of Chinese Overseas.

For several years, China has been active in evacuating Chinese citizens from regional trouble-spots or assisting in the search for survivors following natural disasters. In 2006 a Chinese aircraft flew to Honiara to embark Chinese who had been the victims of anti-government riots in Solomon Islands despite the latter's recognising Taiwan rather than China. More recently, there was a major evacuation of Chinese from Libya after the demise of President Gaddafi. Much closer to home, the swift arrival of a Chinese urban search team in the wake of the Christchurch earthquake signalled that Beijing would do whatever was deemed necessary to look after the interests of its citizens. I recall talking to a senior PLA officer a few months after the tragic events in Christchurch. He commented that the earthquake had claimed more Chinese lives than any other single overseas event up to that time. He added that China's citizens now expected their government to respond whenever Chinese were considered to be in danger.

It is likely that China's newly established Joint Ministerial Conference will become a permanent fixture to be activated as the need arises. That suggests that the region should be prepared for future Chinese interventions on behalf of its citizens even if those interventions have not been sought. It also suggests that regional countries should factor such interventions into their planning of exercises designed to enhance cooperation in responding to humanitarian disasters and invite China to take part.

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