

## THE ANTI-SUBMARINE WARFARE (ASW) IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Since the early 2000s, the presence of submarine forces grew significantly in Southeast Asia. The geographic area is subject to numerous cultural, language and religious divisions and is a strategic crossroads for major maritime flows that feed the world economy. As the proliferation of submarines increases, so does the risk of naval incidents in the area as various means of ASW are gradually developed by the states of Southeast Asia.

### A COMPLEX GEOSTRATEGIC CONTEXT

The insular portion of Southeast Asia includes a multitude of islands (17 000 in Indonesia, 7 000 in the Philippines) through which the major shipping routes pass, mostly through straits where traffic is particularly dense. The water transportation roads of raw materials, iron, coal, soybeans, oil and natural gas converge there to supply the economies of Southeast Asia and beyond (Japan, South Korea and China.) On the return, manufactured products pass from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. The Straits of Malacca and Singapore see more than 70 000 ships crossing every year, carrying 41% of the global flows of containers, 50% of iron and over 20% of the world hydrocarbons. While steel production and oil consumption in Western countries and Japan are stagnant or decreasing, in China they are growing rapidly, making its economic development very dependent on these waterways. The South China Sea is both the Eastern zone of the Straits and the location for large reserves of oil and also very important fishery resources. China claims a large part of the area for historical reasons. Incidents with neighboring countries (Vietnam, Philippines ...) have mushroomed since the 1970s, always in favor of China, because of its navy strength and its five other state fleets.

### CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT OF ACTION UNDER THE SEA

The maritime power of China is growing rapidly, both to support its economy and to contain its main adversary, the US Navy (there to guard the independence of Taiwan and slow its expansion in the China Sea.) Beijing has a large fleet of submarines, whose main mission, together with the other parts of the Chinese navy, is to defend against the carrier battle groups or enemy surface forces. This rise in power is a major concern for neighboring coastal countries and results in the creation or development of submarine forces by those who can afford it. These fleets are composed of units ordered from Sweden, France, Germany, South Korea and Russia. They have capacity to fight under the sea and will soon become an increasing threat to their potential adversary. The significance of those submarines is increased given the relative weakness of the Chinese navy in ASW (submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, surface ships, helicopters).



The countries of Southeast Asia use their submarine fleets in a strategy of denial of access not unlike what China implements further north, in the Formosa Strait, against the US Navy. Singapore has operated submarines for over twelve years, including two recently acquired ones from Sweden with air-independent propulsion system (AIP), which makes them very difficult to detect. Malaysians purchased two bigger *Scorpene*, but without AIP. Indonesia decided to replace its two former *U-209* German submarines with three *U 209/1400* built in South Korea. Vietnam ordered six *Kilo* from Russia. All of these submarines are difficult to detect in these seas where the environment is very noisy because of the important maritime traffic, winds, streams and intense biological activity.

For France, this region is important because of the freight to our country passing through them, the high number of French people who live there, and the partnerships with countries in the region who are also our customers. The closest French territory is New Caledonia. In this complex environment, in case of conflict, France would need to operate its full range of capabilities: maritime patrol aircraft, submarines, nuclear attack, ASW frigates and their helicopters along with its allies. The highly volatile situation in this region, similar to the one of the Hormuz Strait, shows the need to renew our means of control under the sea, as has already started last year with the commissioning of the *Aquitaine* and the *Caïman*.