

Arms purchases fuel fears of clashes

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Military analysts are warning that China's increased regional power has caused its south-east Asian neighbours to step up their own defence purchases, raising the prospect that territorial disputes in the South China Sea could turn violent.

Siemon Wezeman, a senior fellow at the arms transfers programme at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri), said that several south-east Asian countries had "dramatically" stepped up their purchases of submarines, fighter aircraft, and long-range missiles in recent years.

"While south-east Asian governments . . . still don't openly voice concerns over China, they think about it, and they are making a statement with what they are buying," he said. "Fifteen years ago, there were the same conflicting claims in the South China Sea but the countries didn't have the means to enforce their claims. Now, the moment somebody hits oil there, things might look very dangerous."

Many of south-east Asia's militaries are trying to catch up on purchases they deferred several years earlier as their countries were reeling from the Asian financial crisis.

They are driven by a mix of domestic, subregional and larger strategic considerations, and most governments have yet directly to name China as a concern.

However, the Chinese navy has recently built a submarine base on Hainan Island, at the top of the disputed waters of the South China Sea, where it has a territorial dispute with the surrounding littoral states – Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam – over the potentially resource-rich Spratly and Paracel archipelagos.

According to data to be released by Sipri on Monday, Indonesia's arms imports between 2005 and 2009 grew 84 per cent compared with the preceding five years, Singapore's increased by 146 per cent, and Malaysia's rocketed by 722 per cent.

Singapore added six frigates and 32 fighter aircraft over the past five years and ordered two submarines and 12 more fighters. Malaysia took delivery of two submarines, six frigates and 26 fighter aircraft. Indonesia imported four frigates and four fighter aircraft and ordered three more.

"Vietnam and Thailand are lagging behind, but both have placed orders recently to be delivered in the coming years," Mr Wezeman said. This includes six fighter aircraft and one early-warning aircraft for Thailand and six submarines, two frigates and eight fighter aircraft for Vietnam.

Singapore's concern is over the impact of the shift in the balance of power in the region, said Tim Huxley of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore. "The real problem is the huge discrepancy in power between China and the south-east Asian nations."

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