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Inaugural ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise: What To Expect

By Koh Swee Lean Collin

Synopsis

While largely symbolic, the inaugural ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise serves as a first step forward in promoting practical measures for confidence-building and maritime safety despite ongoing disputes in the South China Sea.

Commentary

THIS WEEK, Singapore is hosting the table-top exercise (TTX) for the inaugural ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise, which took place from 2 to 3 August 2018. The exercise is a follow-up to the ASEAN-China Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting in February this year, where the defence ministers agreed to conduct the ASEAN-China maritime exercise in 2018.

ASEAN and China will use the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), which was first promulgated at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in April 2014, as a basis to develop plans for responding to maritime incidents, including search and rescue (SAR) and medical evacuation procedures. The initiative is also part of Singapore's efforts as ASEAN Chair and ASEAN-China Country Coordinator to promote confidence-building measures and CUES.

Foundational Documents

As such exercises typically encompass both shore and sea phases, this TTX will lead up to the field-training exercise (FTX) later this year. Proposal for this inaugural exercise was first mooted in May 2016 at the China-ASEAN Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting, by then Chinese Defence Minister General Chang Wanquan.

But the idea was then in its infancy, especially since it was barely a month before the

announcement of the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on the South China Sea legal challenge lodged by Manila back in 2013, and tensions were at all-time high.

Fortuitously, the fateful release of the arbitral award on 12 July 2016 did not result in untoward events in the disputed waters. Both ASEAN and China worked feverishly to tamp down tensions. At the 19th China-ASEAN Summit held in Vientiane in September the same year, the 11 countries jointly reviewed and approved the *Guidelines for Hotline Communications among Senior Officials of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of China and ASEAN Member States in Response to Maritime Emergencies*.

It is noteworthy that “maritime emergency” in that document was defined as “an incident in the South China Sea that requires immediate policy-level intervention in relation to the full and effective implementation of the DOC”, referring to the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea which was inked in November 2002. Such contingencies would logically span beyond standoffs between rival maritime forces, to include other forms of aeronautical and maritime emergencies.

Putting CUES into Force

Further, *at the same meeting, the Joint Statement on the Application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea in the South China Sea* was also adopted. To be sure, CUES has already been practised in daily operations, set in various bilateral or much broader formats since 2014.

The joint statement thus reinforces the utility of this mechanism in preventing or mitigating close-proximity encounters between navies. Moreover, its incorporation in this inaugural ASEAN-China exercise is a re-emphasis of its importance in promoting regional maritime stability.

In October 2017, on the side-lines of the 4th ADMM-Plus, Singapore and China discussed “further practical initiatives to advance ASEAN-China relations”, which included planning for the inaugural maritime exercise.

Not Something New

Multilateral maritime exercises, as a traditional form of cooperative naval diplomacy, are not a new thing in the region; and not least between ASEAN and China. Such drills have been conducted before under various formats, including bilateral ones between individual ASEAN navies and their Chinese counterpart. But these tend to cater to less complex and less controversial types of training itinerary, say, Search and Rescue (SAR) and ship-to-ship radio communications exchanges.

A noteworthy example is the ADMM-Plus Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism Exercise in May 2016, involving all ten ASEAN countries as well as the eight dialogue partners, totaling 3,500 personnel, 18 naval vessels, 25 aircraft and 40 special forces teams.

There were also smaller-scale multilateral maritime exercises, which did not involve all ASEAN member states. In October 2017, China and some ASEAN member states

– Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand – conducted a “Human Life Rescue and Win-Win Cooperation-themed” maritime search and rescue drill off Zhanjiang, involving about 1000 personnel, 20 vessels and three helicopters. The drill, touted as largest of its kind between China and ASEAN members, simulated a collision between a Chinese passenger ship and a Cambodian bulk cargo vessel.

Giving Naval Diplomacy a Go

For keen watchers of the South China Sea issues, this event may inevitably create starkly different expectations. Sceptics may dismiss this as yet another “showpiece”, symbolic development that does not necessarily address the pertinent problems, in particular militarisation efforts in the disputed waters.

Proponents however will hail this exercise as yet another shining example of the ability of ASEAN and China to work together to promote peace and stability in the waters, thereby facilitating eventual settlement of the disputes.

Clearly of course, there is still a long way to go for dispute settlement. The proposed Code of Conduct (CoC) would take time to materialise, despite some level of optimism around ASEAN. Referring to the CoC, Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Alan Cayetano recently said “the hope is that by November when our leaders meet, we will have it,” though he also called for everyone to “slightly mitigate your expectations”.

It is safe to assume that eventual promulgation of the CoC will at best be an uncertain prospect. Yet it is also clear that navies continue to prowl the South China Sea waters. Any maritime emergency will require swift collective action, and that is where existing confidence-building measures such as CUES become all the more crucial.

This inaugural, CUES-based ASEAN-China maritime exercise, if seen more from the humanitarian than geopolitical perspective, will kickstart new practical measures ASEAN and Chinese navies can adopt to build confidence and promote maritime safety in the South China Sea.

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