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ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise 2019: Maintaining ASEAN Neutrality

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SYNOPSIS

The ASEAN-US maritime security exercise took place on 2-6 September 2019 — following a similar exercise ASEAN held with China in October last year. While this signified growing Sino-US competition in Southeast Asia, it is also an ASEAN attempt to adapt and maintain its relative neutrality amid intensifying great power play.

COMMENTARY

2 SEPTEMBER 2019 marked the beginning of the inaugural ASEAN-US maritime exercise. To be sure, many of the association's members have extensive bilateral (like Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training, or CARAT) or minilateral (like Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training, or SEACAT) maritime security and naval exercises with the United States.

The scope of those bilateral exercises ranges from simple confidence-building exercises to high-end multidomain naval engagements, depending on the competence and comfort level of each participant. The ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise, or AUMX 2019, represented the first time ever that the ten Southeast Asian countries exercised with the US as a single grouping.

Cooperation Amid Big Power Play

The AUMX set off at Thailand's Sattahip Naval Base, in the Gulf of Thailand, and concluded five days later in Singapore. The exercise involved a total of 1,260 personnel, eight ships and four maritime patrol aircraft. Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Philippines, and Myanmar took part in the sea phase of the exercise. Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and Indonesia sent observers to the exercise.

As expected, the 11 countries engaged in less sensitive training, including exercises on visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) tactics and procedures, maritime domain awareness, division tactics, and maritime tracking. The exercise helped improve friendship and interoperability between participants, while also improving actors' practical skills in addressing common maritime security challenges.

The AUMX2019 follows a similar drill ASEAN staged with China in October last year and comes as big power competition and tensions run high in the South China Sea. China has continued its ocean floor exploration in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) against Hanoi's warnings and harass Filipino fishermen within the country's EEZ.

The US, along with its European allies, particularly Britain and France, have sought to uphold the principles of freedom of navigation more firmly, including in the South China Sea.

ASEAN Balancing Act?

The exercise comes as competition for influence in Southeast Asia grows and pressure for ASEAN members to choose sides between the United States and China intensifies.

In the security realm, ASEAN tries to demonstrate the organisation's relative neutrality amid growing major power competition by striking a careful balance between the bigger powers. With limited power to balance between the two great powers — the US and China — ASEAN utilises the few viable methods at its disposal; inclusive engagement of major powers and avoidance of signalling favouring one major power over the other. The AUMX2019 helped demonstrate those traits.

The ASEAN+1 maritime exercise had been a long time coming. China proposed an ASEAN-China maritime security exercise already at the ASEAN-China Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting (ACDMIM), in 2015, which at the time received a less enthusiastic response. After continued negotiations, at ACDMIM 2018, ministers of defence of China and the association's member states reached agreement to stage an ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise off Zhanjiang, China, in October 2018.

The exercise represented an important showcase piece of China's military diplomacy and demonstrating Beijing's growing influence in the region. The exercise itself focused on low-key issues, such as maritime safety, the practice of the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea (or CUES), and trust building. The intent of the exercise was to increase mutual trust and accommodate China's grown presence and influence in Southeast Asia, and not least in the South China Sea.

Adapting to Heightened Big Power Competition

Learning about the ASEAN-China exercise, the US was quick to approach Southeast Asian defence ministers for a similar ASEAN-US maritime security exercise to be held on a future date. The AUMX was first proposed in 2017 and agreed on at the 12th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in October 2018. The familiarity among

most ASEAN countries' navies and their US counterpart simplified the process significantly.

ASEAN defence engagement with both the US and China — and indeed not engaging one in an exclusive arrangement without an equal treatment of the other — demonstrates the grouping's ability to adapt to the heightened major power competition and ability to signal the association's relative neutrality.

Despite the individual ASEAN member states' strategic leanings and constraints therein, ASEAN provides its members a critical inclusive setting to engage all relevant major powers in constructive defence diplomacy interaction.

The exercises underscore ASEAN attempt to manage great power competition in Southeast Asia. Singapore's Minister of Defence, Ng Eng Hen commented on the first ASEAN-China maritime exercise that "if you exercise, you at least build understanding and trust". Majority of ASEAN leaders views conform to this position.

Signalling ASEAN Neutrality

True to its inclusiveness, one of the core principles of ASEAN, the grouping voiced its openness to similar naval interaction with other major powers in the ASEAN+1 format. The equal treatment of both China and the US demonstrates, on the one hand, ASEAN agency in adapting to and managing of the tense security environment. This is characterised by the heightened Sino-US competition and, on the other hand, ASEAN attempt to maintain its relative neutrality.

The ASEAN member states' ability to utilise ASEAN as a platform for inclusive defence engagement help them in maintaining the grouping's relative strategic space between the two great powers. To manage the strategic space and signal relative neutrality, ASEAN can engage other willing parties in a similar fashion.

In fact, others, including Japan and France have already voiced their interest for a similar exercise. India's trilateral exercise with Singapore and Thailand in mid-September 2019, too, holds hopes for broader India-ASEAN maritime security engagement.

These examples demonstrate bigger powers' increasing interest to 'knock the door' in Southeast Asia for enhanced security engagement. Besides the obvious dangers of increasingly contested space in the South China Sea and fear of getting side-lined, ASEAN's inclusive engagement of several bigger powers simultaneously can also help the association in maintaining its centrality at the geostrategic pivot point in the Sino-US competition.

As long as ASEAN will be able to hold on to its core principle of strategic inclusiveness, maintaining the grouping's relative neutrality between the two great powers will help the smaller actors and the association alike to maintain agency and level of strategic flexibility.

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