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FPDA@50: Growing Relevance Amid Regional Flux

By Barry Desker

SYNOPSIS

After 50 years of defence arrangements among five powers -- Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK -- the FPDA is at a crossroads. There is little doubt that its strategic relevance has grown amid major power competition in the Asia-Pacific region.

COMMENTARY

THIS YEAR marks the 50th anniversary of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) involving Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom. Widely regarded as a temporary transitional arrangement when it was established as a consultative forum in April 1971, the FPDA has surpassed the dreams of its most enthusiastic supporters.

The warm sentiments were noticeable when I spoke at a webinar last week 11 November 2021 hosted by the National Defence University of Malaysia, which featured the Malaysian Chief of Defence Force and participants from the five FPDA countries.

Unpromising Beginnings

In 1971, I was heading the Southeast Asia section of the nascent Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Singapore after spending my first year in MFA handling the Malaysia desk. At that time, the British had announced their withdrawal east of Suez by 1971. British military expenditure accounted for almost 20 per cent of Singapore's GDP and 10 per cent of employment.

Aside from the economic impact of the decision, our concern in Singapore was that

this would leave a vacuum. Then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew believed that it would be 'filled by Russia, China and anyone else'.

We had just emerged from Indonesia's Confrontation with the newly-established Malaysia, and there were bilateral tensions between Singapore and Malaysia following Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965. The American war in Vietnam was in full swing and communist insurgencies in the region attracted considerable attention. Given today's relatively peaceful environment, it is hard to believe that Southeast Asia was then regarded as the Balkans of the East.

Singapore's view was that as a small country without strategic depth, any attack on Malaysia would threaten Singapore. The FPDA was predicated on the indivisibility of the defence of Malaysia and Singapore. Singapore and Malaysia separately subsequently concluded bilateral Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs) with Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

If the FPDA had been concluded as a treaty binding the five states, it would probably have resulted in negative reactions from the region, especially from Indonesia. In the first decade of its existence, the ministers never met, there were a few air exercises (which occurred without British participation) and four Joint Consultative Council meetings.

Transformation of FPDA & Psychological Deterrence

Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia on 25 December 1978 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on 25 Dec 1979 resulted in strategic uncertainty in the region and closer consultations among the FPDA member states. In the 1980s, regular FPDA exercises were held, including land and maritime exercises.

The first FPDA Defence Ministers Meeting occurred in 1990, following the end of the Cold War, and were held every three years thereafter. The FPDA chiefs of defence forces met more regularly, and since 2001, its meetings coincided with the annual Shangri-La Dialogue.

The most significant transformation of the FPDA occurred in 2000 with the re-designation of the Integrated Air Defence System to the Integrated Area Defence System (IADS) to emphasise jointness and combined operations. It is the only multilateral security arrangement in the region with an operational element.

HQIADS has evolved into a Joint Training Support HQ, with the Commander IADS now leading the planning and execution of combined training as directed by the member states. In 2003, following the 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacks and the implementation of the Proliferation Security Initiative, the ministers included three new priorities.

These are the building of capabilities in handling the non-conventional security threats of counter-terrorism; maritime security; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR); and subsequently incorporating the emerging cyber and information domains into FPDA activities.

The FPDA has provided psychological and political deterrence for Singapore and Malaysia. Any potential adversary had to consider the risk of triggering a response from the other four partners. As the UK and Australia were treaty allies of the United States, there was also a risk of drawing the US into any conflict.

Valued Platform & Confidence Building

Although the regional security environment has evolved and there are no imminent security threats today, the FPDA is valued by all its member states. It provides a platform for the defence ministers, chiefs of defence forces and senior defence officials of Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK to meet regularly.

The statements by the prime ministers and defence ministers at these commemorations point to the strong political commitment to the FPDA among the five partners. Minister for Defence Mr Ng Eng Hen observed at the FPDA commemoration ceremony involving the ministers of the five countries that the participating states have demonstrated the capacity to conduct “large and complex combined exercises, which can involve up to 4,000 troops, 20 ships, 50 to 60 aircraft, and even submarines, such as for Exercise Bersama Gold”.

One feature of the webinar was the shared view of the participants that the FPDA is an integral part of the regional security architecture. It is seen as a mutually beneficial security arrangement that provides important training opportunities, builds professionalism and develops inter-operability.

While the FPDA continues to focus on high-end conventional military capabilities in its exercises, the inclusion of non-conventional security threats has demonstrated the capacity of the FPDA partners to adapt to meet emerging challenges. Through the FPDA, the defence and security establishments of the five states have deepened their defence relations, expanded their defence networks and promoted dialogue and cooperation.

The FPDA has also invited non-FPDA neighbours of Singapore and Malaysia, including ASEAN defence attaches and top Indonesian defence officials to observe exercises, and has exchanged ideas and shared information on the conduct of FPDA activities.

This transparency has served as a confidence building measure and reassured neighbours that the FPDA is an inclusive, non-threatening and peaceful security arrangement. While Indonesia was critical of the FPDA in its early years, this approach has led to Indonesia taking a more welcoming approach in recent years.

3Rs: Remit, Relevance, Reassurance

The ability of the FPDA to adjust to changing circumstances underlines its continuing strategic relevance. The geo-strategic environment facing Singapore will evolve in the years ahead. This adaptability ensures that the FPDA will remain an important factor in Singapore’s strategic calculations.

As the FPDA has little visibility within Singapore, it is useful to highlight the 3Rs that underpin Singapore's commitment to the FPDA:

- *Remit*: the FPDA is for the defence of Malaysia and Singapore.
- *Relevance*: while the FPDA continues to focus on high-end conventional military capabilities in its exercises, it has evolved to include non-conventional elements such as counter-terrorism, maritime security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.
- *Reassurance*: the FPDA is defensive and transparent, and not targeted at any country.

An important takeaway from the exchanges among the participants of the five FPDA members is that the focus of the relationship will change to reflect changing times. One advantage of the longevity of the FPDA is that the decision makers involved in its processes are familiar with one another, have a shared understanding of the objectives of the FPDA and also an awareness of the limits of cooperation.

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