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The FPDA and Malaysia's Geopolitical Considerations

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A Royal Malaysian Air Force honour guard ready to greet Malaysia's foreign defence partners at Butterworth. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

SYNOPSIS

The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) remains useful for Malaysia and other member states as they face new strategic challenges in the region.

COMMENTARY

This year, 2021, marks the 50th anniversary of the Five Power Defence Arrangements. It is Asia's oldest multilateral military partnership and despite its low profile in the

public domain, the FPDA's value and relevance are well understood by officials and military professionals of its member countries.

The FPDA was formed in 1971 for the defence of Malaysia and Singapore. If an attack on either of the Southeast Asian states occurs, member countries (Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Singapore and Malaysia) are obliged to consult one another. The pact is defensive and is not bound to act against any specific state; i.e., the countries have no common enemy state.

For Malaysia, the FPDA is an important and functional block in its multipronged, multilayered approach to its security and strategic interests. Its 2019 defence white paper notes the value of the FPDA exercises in improving "the knowledge, skills, and professionalism of the military personnel" and enhancing the "defence capability and preparedness" of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF).

On 21 October, Malaysia hosted the FPDA Defence Ministers' Meeting in which member countries [reaffirmed](#) their continued commitment to the FPDA and underlined the FPDA's strategic relevance for the future — one where the regional security environment is heading towards increasing complexity and intensifying great power rivalry.

How then is one to understand Malaysia's continued support of and participation in the Arrangements, within the broader context of its position on the role of extra-regional powers in Southeast Asia and growing US-China competition?

FPDA Benefits Malaysia's Defence Efforts

Malaysia endeavours to build credible partnerships with external partners to enhance its defence readiness for meeting its security needs, at the same time promoting itself as a dependable partner. The FPDA provides an avenue to cultivate and strengthen bilateral and regional defence relationships. In his keynote speech at the commemoration of the FPDA's 50th anniversary, Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein acknowledged the FPDA's contribution towards developing the MAF's capabilities.

The MAF too continues to benefit from the multifaceted FPDA military exercises. Currently, Exercise Suman Warrior, which focuses on the planning of land-based operations, for example, strengthens army-to-army interoperability. Others such as Exercise Bersama Shield held annually and hosted at the Headquarters Integrated Area Defence System (HQIADS) in Malaysia, aid the MAF in preparing for combined joint operations in multiple threat scenarios.

Exercise Bersama Lima, a large-scale field training FPDA exercise, involves all three services of the MAF. To commemorate the golden jubilee, it was renamed Exercise Bersama Gold this year and [conducted](#) with Covid-19 safety measures in place, with 2,600 personnel, 10 ships, at least 34 aircraft, and 1 submarine, from all member countries.

Apart from holding large-scale military exercises, the FPDA provides a longstanding forum for successive cohorts of military professionals and officials from member states to interact regularly.

Malaysia's Ties with Australia, New Zealand and the UK

Malaysia shares longstanding defence links with Australia, New Zealand and the UK, dating back to the fight against communist terrorists throughout the Malayan Emergency and beyond. These defence partnerships have been sustained bilaterally and also through the FPDA. The defence ministers meet formally at the triennial FPDA Defence Ministers' Meeting, while the chiefs of defence forces meet annually at the FPDA Defence Chiefs' Conference. Regular interactions at FPDA exercises and meetings are an important way for members to understand one another's strategic concerns and develop personal ties that help build confidence for cooperation in other areas.

Malaysia enjoys especially close defence ties with Australia. They have a reciprocal Status of Forces Agreement that allows for the stationing of military personnel in either country. The Malaysia-Australia Joint Defence Program provides a structured framework for bilateral defence activities from high-level policy talks to detailed administration of individual training programmes. Tangibly, the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) presence at the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) Base in Butterworth, Penang contributes to Australia's capacity to conduct maritime surveillance activities in the region, as well as a means to train Australian soldiers in jungle warfare. Such cooperation serves to promote Malaysia as a steadfast defence partner.

MAF officers, too, have been on long-term postings to various ADF sites throughout Australia. The two militaries regularly participate in bilateral army and naval exercises. Malaysia has also engaged the Australian defence industry in procuring a range of defence products and services. Recently, the Malaysian government has been reported to have sought ["partnerships with Australian defence companies to build their maritime and aerospace capabilities."](#)

Malaysia-Singapore Relations

While Malaysia's and Singapore's air defences are no longer perceived to be "inextricably linked" as they were at the birth of the FPDA, the Arrangements provide both countries with a unique platform to engage each other through the natural ups and downs of relations between close neighbours. There have been phases of warm cooperation, and tensions over issues ranging from sand exports and water supply to maritime disputes and use of air space.

For example, even while Malaysia withdrew from the FPDA's annual STARDEX exercise in 1998 due to reasons stemming from the Asian financial crisis and worsening relations with Singapore, it resumed its participation the following year. Sustained and combined exercises have given rise to better understanding of each other's capabilities, built personal relationships, and maintained channels of communication between the armed forces of both countries.

Peter Ho, former Permanent Secretary of Defence of Singapore, said that the FPDA provided a "platform for the two defence establishments of the two countries to keep channels of communication open and to maintain a level of contact not possible in a bilateral setting."

Put together, Malaysia's ties with its FPDA partners buttress its bilateral and multilateral defence and strategic goals.

Malaysia's Security Challenges

Malaysia's defence white paper outlines three key security challenges, namely, "uncertain big power relations, [a] complex Southeast Asian neighbourhood, [and an] increasing [number of] non-traditional security threats."

Shifts in global economic and military power have led to a fractious US-China relationship. The recently announced trilateral security pact between the US, UK and Australia (AUKUS) is seen to be part of America's strategy to contain China. A post-Brexit UK is looking to increase military engagement in the Asia-Pacific while Australia's precipitating China-wary policy might necessitate military access to the South China Sea.

Predictably, AUKUS has elicited expressions of concern from Malaysia. Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob cautioned against a nuclear arms race while reminding his Australian counterpart that Malaysia upholds the principle of preserving ASEAN as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality. Responding to a parliamentary question about the link between the new security pact and the FPDA, Defence Minister [Hishammuddin Hussein said](#) that Malaysia's "position will not change despite our position in FPDA which has shown that we will continue with the advantages that we have when facing the geopolitical super powers in the region, especially in the South China Sea."

Notably, Hishammuddin had earlier said that Malaysia would "[need to get the views](#)" of AUKUS held by China's leadership. Malaysian political leaders are keen to cultivate good relations with China, given that it is an important source of trade, investment and technology transfer. Malaysia hopes to be able to continue extracting hydrocarbon resources from the South China Sea and avoid any disruptions arising from untoward security incidents. There are, however, limits to this approach given [repeated encroachments](#) by Chinese vessels in waters claimed by Malaysia.

Conclusion

Significantly, Malaysia has continued with its bilateral defence exercises with Australia. It has displayed strong commitment to the FPDA even as it sustains its vocal expressions of concern on AUKUS, most recently at the [East Asia Summit](#) and [ASEAN Summit](#).

This multilayered positioning is the hallmark of Malaysia's approach on regional geopolitics: a declared non-alignment despite an apparent tilt towards China's position diplomatically; scepticism towards the regional role of the US and its allies; and simultaneously, the building of low-profile substantive defence ties with them and investment in regional institutions like the ASEAN and FPDA that support each member's autonomy and flourishing.

Malaysia's defence establishment will continue to seek to strengthen its capacity and cultivate a broad range of bilateral and multilateral defence relations, including those under the auspices of the FPDA. It will, as Hishammuddin put it, "continue with the

advantages” that FPDA provides even as they navigate simmering great power rivalry in the region.

The upshot for all the FPDA signatories, then, is the continued necessity to keep the FPDA going even after 50 years. It serves a specific purpose for each of its member states, who have endeavoured to keep it relevant and useful. It will continue its role in confidence building, information sharing and interoperability. In the prevailing competitive geopolitical dynamics, the pact’s long history allows for its uncontroversial continuation, as a tool in each member state’s toolbox to strengthen their security and address evolving future challenges.

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