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Confidence-Building: ASEAN Navies Lead the Way

By Gilang Kembara

SYNOPSIS

The formation of ASEAN has brought about peace and stability to a region, which historically had been one of insecurity, disputes and tensions. In recent years, however, global contestation among the big powers has contributed to tensions and worries. Staying united and cohesive is how ASEAN can best face oncoming challenges. Confidence-building with ASEAN navies engaging and exercising among themselves and with external partners will contribute towards this.

COMMENTARY

All eyes were on Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, as ASEAN leaders met for the 42nd ASEAN Summit in May 2023 under Indonesian ASEAN Chairmanship. As the leaders enjoyed the sunset on board a quaint phinisi boat on 10 May, another ASEAN delegation also took to the sea to observe the ASEAN Fleet Review (AFR), a sail-past of warships from ASEAN navies in Subic Bay, Philippines, on 11 May.

The AFR was followed by the 2nd ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise (AMNEX) hosted by the Philippine Navy in Zambales from 12-15 May 2023. Prior to that, the heads of the ASEAN navies participated in the 17th ASEAN Navy Chiefs Meeting (ANCM) in Taguig City on 10 May 2023.

Going by these events alone, May 2023 had been a very busy month for the navies of the ASEAN member states. And they weren't all that took place that month.

Naval Engagements with External Partners

It began in Singapore with the [13th International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference Asia](#) (IMDEX Asia) held from 3-5 May 2023. This 13th edition of IMDEX

Asia attracted global leaders in naval and maritime affairs along with defence professionals, defence companies, and other key stakeholders. It was an opportunity for the heads of navies to meet, formally or informally, on the side lines of IMDEX Asia, as well as for stakeholders to hear out and discuss important issues during the International Maritime Security Conference (IMSC), which was held in conjunction with IMDEX Asia.

IMDEX Asia also brought together 22 warships from 13 countries (including the US and China) for public display at Singapore's Changi Naval Base for the duration of the event. This display included tours of each other's ships, which helped to build confidence and camaraderie among the navies.

Following closely on the heels of IMDEX Asia, ASEAN navies embarked on a multilateral naval exercise with India, which was the first ever held. The [ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise \(AIME\)](#) was jointly hosted by the Republic of Singapore Navy and the Indian Navy from 2-8 May 2023. It involved a total of nine ships, six aircraft, and over 1,800 personnel from ASEAN member states and India. The six-day exercise began with a shore phase at Changi Naval Base, followed by a naval phase, which was conducted in international waters leading towards the Philippines where the ASEAN navies took part in AMNEX.

The openness of ASEAN member states to naval exercises with external partners underlines their inclusive attitudes towards global parties. Despite the heightened tensions in the Indo-Pacific region, exacerbated by the US-China rivalry, ASEAN keeps its doors open for dialogue, negotiations, and informal conversations with global leaders.

AIME was not the first multilateral naval exercise ASEAN had with external partners. Such exercises include the ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise in 2018, Japan's Indo-Pacific Deployment in 2019, ASEAN-US Naval Exercise in 2019, and ASEAN-Russia Naval Exercise in 2021.

In addition to these exercises, ASEAN navies have also participated in military exercises conducted by ASEAN's external partners, such as in Australia's Kakadu, US' RIMPAC, and India's MILAN.

ASEAN Unity Conducive to Naval Interactions

Besides inclusivity, ASEAN also places a premium on cohesiveness as grounded in the concept of ASEAN unity. It is therefore common to see ASEAN navies participating in each other's maritime exercises, such as in Indonesia's Komodo or Singapore's SEACAT. Participation in bilateral or multilateral military exercises help to build personal rapport among the officers and crews involved. It also helps in building confidence among the parties and hence reduce the possibility of a misunderstanding from escalating, which is important considering the porous nature of the maritime borders.

The increased interactions between the ASEAN navies have helped to pave the way for the approval of the Guidelines for Maritime Interaction (GMI), as well as the ANCM Roadmap 2024-2032, during the [17th ANCM](#). The GMI complements existing ASEAN

political-security confidence-building measures such as the Guidelines for Air Military Encounters (GAME), and ASEAN Direct Communications Infrastructure (ADI), which was last declared at the [16th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting](#) (ADMM) held in June 2022 in Cambodia.

Following the ANCM, a naval fleet comprising ships from various ASEAN member states was reviewed by ASEAN heads of navies from the deck of the *Davao Del Sur*, the Philippine Navy's Tarlac-class LPD constructed by PT PAL of Indonesia. To top it off, the [2nd AMNEX](#) was held immediately afterwards with the participation of nine warships from the navies of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, and observers from Cambodia, and Laos. This second edition of AMNEX had been long awaited ever since the success of the [inaugural AMNEX](#) held in Thailand in November 2017.

Strengthening ASEAN Multilateralism

With ASEAN multilateralism presently perceived to be under great strain, the association should continue to demonstrate to the world that this is being addressed through regular exchanges, interactions, and military exercises, not just between ASEAN member states, but also with its external partners. In this respect, it should be noted that the Indonesian Navy very recently hosted the fourth edition of the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) from 5-8 June in Makassar, Indonesia. The exercise involved over 40 ships from more than 30 countries, including China and the United States.

ASEAN's naval establishments have led the way in showing that dialogue, close quarters interactions and cordial discussions are possible despite the prevailing global uncertainties. Defence diplomacy could continue to serve as a tool for confidence-building among ASEAN member states, with the ASEAN navies leading the way.

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