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ASEAN Solidarity Exercise and Regional Maritime Cooperation

By John Bradford

SYNOPSIS

Most commentary of the recently concluded maritime-based ASEAN Solidarity Exercise has evaluated it as making minor progress towards strengthening security cooperation within ASEAN. A closer look shows that this rare assembly of maritime assets from ASEAN member states could have achieved a higher level of coordination and collaboration for regional good if it had not been for the competitive dynamics of geopolitics.

COMMENTARY

Despite the word “solidarity” being in its name, last month’s ASEAN Solidarity Exercise (ASEX23) marks an inflection point towards decreasing prospects for maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia. Without any doubt, we can see that progress that was fairly rapid earlier in the century has slowed considerably, and things might be even worse if not for some deft diplomatic moves.

ASEX23 may mark a new phase where existing cooperative activities begin to unravel. The source of the change hinges on the challenges associated with maintaining positive relations with external powers. Whereas those powers once saw common benefit in improving the security of Southeast Asia’s sea lanes, today’s geopolitical environment means that they weigh every change against their relative power and influence over the respective ASEAN member states.

From the general perspective, ASEX23 could be counted alongside the [ASEAN Maritime Outlook](#) (AMO) as [an achievement](#) marking the [maritime dimensions of Indonesia’s leadership](#) during its ASEAN chairmanship (in calendar year 2023). After all, this event was billed as the first-ever ASEAN joint military exercise. However, one does not have to dig far below the surface to see a missed opportunity from the drama

connected with the exercise planning, the details of its eventual execution, and the history of what happened previously.

Southeast Asia has been Expanding its Maritime Security Cooperation

In 2005, I published an article in the *Naval War College Review* titled, "[The Growing Prospects for Maritime Security Cooperation in Southeast Asia](#)". It discussed how Southeast Asian states were expanding their maritime security cooperation as they were becoming more open to sharing sensitive information, growing less absolute in the guardianship of their respective sovereign rights, benefiting from an alignment of interests among extra-regional partners and increasingly alarmed by the common challenges posed by mutual threats in the maritime domain. The article's predictions largely bore out and since 2005 maritime security cooperation has vastly expanded in Southeast Asia.

The AMO issued in August of this year uses 77 pages to take stock of these activities and still falls short of documenting absolutely everything that is going on.

Much of this maritime security cooperation is bilateral, involving two ASEAN member states or an ASEAN member state and an extra-regional partner. Other activities — such as the coordinated patrols in the Strait of Malacca and the Trilateral Cooperation Agreement that optimises surveillance in the Sulu and Celebes Seas — are minilateral in nature. Additional activities are sponsored by ASEAN and involve all ten member states. Still others also connect all of ASEAN with extra-regional partners such as Australia, China, the European Union, India, Japan, Russia and the United States. In total, these cooperative arrangements have become too many to count.

Focusing in on the historic progression of maritime exercises in Southeast Asia allows a clearer picture of how much growth has taken place. Ever since the end of the Second World War, Southeast Asian militaries have regularly drilled in the South China Sea. These exercises have been undertaken unilaterally and with international partners. At the start of the twenty-first century, ASEAN-linked organisations, most prominently the ASEAN Regional Forum, started sponsoring multilateral military events, many of them focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster response.

Things picked up steam when the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus (formed in 2010) began sponsoring Field Training Exercises (FTX). In 2016, a precedent-setting [ADMM-Plus FTX](#) including 18 naval ships, 25 aircraft, and special forces from ASEAN member states and their dialogue partners, conducted gunnery exercises, boarding events and other training in the South China Sea. As a [combined maritime security/counter-terrorism](#) exercise, it involved joint military forces sortieing from Brunei, interdicting simulated terrorists at sea and then bringing the detainees to Singapore for justice. Since then, ASEAN navies have [exercised](#) in the South China Sea with China (2018), the United States (2019), Russia (2020) and India (2021).

An event without partners external to ASEAN, the inaugural [ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise](#) (AMNEX), was hosted by Thailand in 2017 with forces training in the Gulf of Thailand. The [second AMNEX](#) was hosted by the Philippines in May 2023. In that exercise, ASEAN military forces operating from Subic Bay sailed into the South China Sea to practice interoperability against non-traditional security threats like sea piracy,

transnational crimes, and terrorism. Given all of this history, an ASEAN-only joint military exercise should have been a very low-hanging fruit.

Small Steps with Big implications

In June 2023, Admiral Yudo Margono, Indonesia's military chief announced that the first-ever joint military exercise would be hosted by Indonesia in the North Natuna Sea (the Indonesian name for a southerly section of the South China Sea) in September 2023. However, the plan quickly unraveled. General Vong Pisen, Cambodia's military chief, [quickly released a statement](#) saying that Cambodia had heard Margono's proposal but was among "several other countries" that had not yet agreed.

Indonesia stepped up and showed leadership to salvage what it could. By the [end of June](#), consensus was reached to hold the exercise, but the location had been shifted from the waters north of Natuna to an area further south that is well within the Indonesian archipelagic baselines. Instead of sailing from Natuna island in the South China Sea, the forces would hub out of Batam on the Singapore Strait.

The ASEX23 training agenda included joint maritime patrol operations, search and rescue operations, and humanitarian and disaster relief, all skillsets that have been [exercised repeatedly](#) and regularly bring nations together for real-world operations in Southeast Asia. ASEAN is not a military alliance and ASEAN states will never fight as a unified force, but [multilateral military responses](#) to complex maritime events – such as transportation disasters, typhoons, and seismic destruction – are frequent and almost always include support from forces deployed by extra-regional partners.

Despite the headlines, branding, and hot takes, the ASEX23 was never going to be the first ASEAN military exercise in the South China Sea nor the first all-ASEAN/ASEAN-only exercise to involve joint military forces. The [baby-step precedents](#) that Indonesia had originally aimed to achieve were far more minute and more nuanced. In fact, when one looks at the historical record, it takes some very careful analytical parsing to see exactly what would have been new and original except for the name. Yet, these very modest objectives — to replicate past activities under a new banner — proved a bridge too far.

China and Regional Maritime Security Cooperation

Chinese claims of exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and its territorial disputes with certain ASEAN member states in the South China Sea have had an impact on ASEAN cooperation in maritime security. An example came in 2012 when China acted out of concern that an ASEAN statement might reference Chinese actions around Scarborough Shoal. That would have been quite a step for ASEAN and the subsequent deadlock resulted in the non-issuance of a joint statement under Cambodian chairmanship.

Now, China seems to be going further. The ASEAN Solidarity Exercise should have been "business-as-usual" but was deemed too provocative and too disruptive. More specifically, Chinese sensitivities have forced an ASEAN activity to retreat from the South China Sea. Ironically, this ground is being given just after many Southeast Asian

nations showed unusual [resolve pushing back](#) diplomatically against China's new map of the South China Sea.

The decreasing prospects for maritime security cooperation are exceptionally dangerous because ASEAN cooperation is essential to addressing a wide range of maritime security challenges. Many of these have little to do with competition between extra-regional powers or the contested claims in the South China Sea. Climate change, marine pollution and debris, transnational organised crime, IUU fishing, depletion of fish stocks, cyberattacks against ships and port facilities, piracy and armed robbery at sea, and irregular movement of persons are among the areas highlighted in the AMO, but that document comes up short in terms of the practical steps needed to address those issues.

Great power competition has become a grim reality of the Southeast Asian landscape. As a result, the states concerned must adjust their calculations to make the decisions most suitable to their national interests. Yet, the challenges need not overwhelm all progress. Moving a mostly-symbolic military exercise to a new area is a relatively small thing in and of itself, but small things can mark big changes and Southeast Asia cannot afford to reverse course on its long-standing maritime security cooperative agenda.

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