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Strategic Workouts: The Rationale for Southeast Asian States' Military Exercises with China

By Ian Seow Cheng Wei

SYNOPSIS

Conventional arguments of deterrence and the balance of power do not satisfactorily explain Southeast Asian states' joint military exercises with China. Instead, the more likely reasons are the use of these drills by some Southeast Asian states to signal their neutrality in the US-China geopolitical competition and to deflect US criticism of their governance and human rights record.

COMMENTARY

At the 2024 Shangri-la Dialogue, Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun spoke about the importance of [joint military exercises \(JMEs\)](#) in contributing to regional security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, particularly Southeast Asia.

Indeed, China has been conducting bilateral JMEs as part of what it refers to as “periphery diplomacy” to foster closer relations with regional states, and to tackle non-traditional security threats such as piracy, terrorism, and drug-trafficking.

In 2005, China conducted its first [JME in Southeast Asia](#) codenamed *Exercise Strike*, which involved 60 special forces units from the Royal Thai Army and China's People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Since then, China's JMEs in Southeast Asia have increased in scope and frequency. In the [first nine months of 2023](#), the PLA conducted 11 JMEs in Southeast Asia, which are more than China's military exercises with other regions of the world.

While the reasons for [China's JMEs in Southeast Asia are relatively well explored](#), less has been said about the motivations why Southeast Asian states conduct these exercises with China.

This is surprising given that a recent State of Southeast Asia survey suggests that [73 per cent](#) of the states in Southeast Asia were concerned about China's growing strategic and political influence in the region arising from its territorial disputes in the South China Sea, its rapid military modernisation, and tensions over Taiwan.

Conventional arguments about deterrence and balance of power are insufficient to explain convincingly why Southeast Asian states conduct JMEs with China. The more likely reasons why some Southeast Asian states would want to exercise with China are to signal neutrality amid the Sino-US competition and to deflect US criticism of their governance and human rights record.

Signalling Neutrality

JMEs are high profile events in international politics, and they often signal a state's foreign and defence priorities as well as its alignment posture.

One of the main geopolitical challenges confronting Southeast Asian states in recent years is the pressure to choose sides amid the intensifying Sino-US competition. In response, many Southeast Asian states have used JMEs with the US and China as a means to signal their neutrality in the competition while maintaining good defence relations with both.

For instance, since 2006, Vietnam had conducted [34 joint counterpiracy exercises and Search and Rescue drills](#) in the Gulf of Tonkin with China. These exercises were meant to signal to the US that despite their improved military relations, Vietnam could not afford to provoke China given the latter's sensitivity to any US military presence in its immediate neighbourhood.

Thus, Vietnam's military exercises with China demonstrated to the US its ["Four Nos" defence policy](#): no alliances, no siding with one country against another, no foreign military bases, and no using of Vietnamese territory to oppose other states.

Similarly, Singapore has conducted regular JMEs with the PLA since 2009 under the Singapore-China [Agreement](#) on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation (ADESC) despite being a close defence partner of the US. This is predicated on Singapore's foreign policy principle of being a "friend to all and an enemy to none". The biennial [Exercise Cooperation](#) between the two countries features counterterrorism and urban operations, while [Exercise Maritime Cooperation](#) focuses on counterpiracy drills.

In 2019, Singapore and China agreed to extend the JMEs by signing the [Enhanced Agreement](#) on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation, with a commitment to "regularise and scale up bilateral exercises". This agreement was reached at the same time Singapore and the US renewed their 2019 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Regarding the United States' Use of Facilities in Singapore.

Deflecting Pressure from the US

Another reason why Southeast Asian states conduct JMEs with China is to deflect pressure from the US, especially on issues pertaining to human rights and liberal

democracy. As the US increasingly needs the support of its friends to counter China's growing influence in the region, Southeast Asian states could use their JMEs with China to extract concessions or deflect pressure from the US. For example, the US [scaled down](#) military interactions with Thailand following the 2014 coup but this encouraged Thailand to intensify its military drills with China.

Between 2007 and 2014, Thailand's [Exercise Blue Strike](#) with China involved between 60 and 200 troops with limited naval assets and aircraft. However, after 2014, the China-Thailand [Blue Strike Exercises](#) involved nearly 500 troops with naval assets and attack helicopters. The [2023 edition of Exercise Blue Strike](#) featured 400 troops from both states, missile corvettes from the PLA Navy and attack helicopters. In response to these developments, the US [reinstated](#) to its original scale the *Cobra Gold* exercise series with Thailand, and resumed the provision of military aid and equipment.

Likewise, in 2016, Cambodia [suspended](#) the *Angkor Sentinel* exercises with the US over the latter's condemnation of its [crackdown on dissidents](#). At the same time, Cambodia and China conducted their first bilateral [Dragon Gold](#) counterterrorism and counternarcotics exercise involving nearly 2,000 troops, naval vessels and a variety of armoured vehicles.

Cambodia has used the *Dragon Gold* exercise to demonstrate its close bilateral relations with China, while deflecting US criticisms of its human rights abuses. The US has responded to these developments by expressing its willingness to [resume military cooperation](#) with the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces on unexploded ordnance and enhanced Cambodian participation in military training events.

Conclusion

This brief analysis suggests that Southeast Asian states have agency in deciding what they want out of their JMEs with China, and this is often driven by considerations not necessarily related to the usual deterrence and balance of power. It is thus likely that the JMEs some of the Southeast Asian states have with China will be sustained in the coming years.

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