



Security by Design: Beijing's Gradual Defence Pivot in Southeast Asia

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SYNOPSIS

China's expanding defence ties with Southeast Asian countries mark a strategic shift from confidence-building to more robust military engagement, including joint combat exercises and arms procurements. While initiatives like 2+2 ministerial dialogues and multilateral exercises signal [growing Chinese influence](#) in the region, lingering tensions over the South China Sea and renewed US pressure – especially under President Donald Trump's current administration – pose enduring challenges. Still, Beijing's gradual approach reflects its ambition to be seen as a credible, and potentially alternative, security partner in the region.

COMMENTARY

Over the past 15 years, China has made concerted efforts to expand its military-to-military cooperation with countries in Southeast Asia, particularly through bilateral and multilateral military exercises. While the scale of China's military exercises with these countries pales in comparison to those that the United States conducts with them, China appears to be adopting a measured approach, gradually increasing its engagement.

This development comes amid a deepening geopolitical rift between China and the United States, exacerbated by President Donald Trump's return to the White House and the [ongoing trade conflict](#) between the two powers. However, unlike the United States, China faces a [significant trust deficit](#) with most Southeast Asian states owing to the continuing South China Sea dispute.

Nonetheless, Beijing recognises the importance of peace and stability for both its own economy and that of Southeast Asia, which constitutes one of its most important trading blocs through ASEAN. Furthermore, Trump's unpredictable policies have led

Southeast Asian countries [to question Washington's commitment](#) to the region, prompting them to hedge their bets by exploring closer ties with other powers, including China.

Diplomacy in Action

In April 2025, Chinese President Xi Jinping embarked on [a five-day tour](#) of Vietnam, Malaysia and Cambodia. Xi's visit to Southeast Asia marked a significant milestone in China's efforts to consolidate its influence and strengthen relations in the region amid growing global uncertainty. Among the dozens of agreements signed between China and its Southeast Asian counterparts, defence and security cooperation emerged as a key pillar.

With Malaysia, both parties [agreed to](#) "establish the Joint Foreign and Defence Dialogue Mechanism to further expand channels ... for political security cooperation." This amounts to the creation of a "two-plus-two" mechanism (2+2), a format which was also discussed during Xi's [visit to Cambodia](#).

Although no such mechanism was agreed between [China and Vietnam](#), both parties nevertheless agreed to enhance "high-level exchanges between the two militaries". These exchanges include strengthening cooperation in the defence industry, joint exercises and training, and deepening cooperation mechanisms between the two countries' naval and coast guard forces.

Aside from the outcomes arising from the Malaysia and Cambodia visits, China has so far established a 2+2 ministerial dialogue with only one other Southeast Asian country – Indonesia – where the inaugural dialogue was held in Beijing on 21 April 2025. The outcome of this ministerial dialogue saw both sides agreeing to advance their [security and defence relationship](#) by engaging in "multi-faceted, in-depth practical cooperation", and "jointly safeguard[ing] peace and stability in the South China Sea and set[ting] an example in [maritime cooperation](#)." The establishment of the China-Indonesia 2+2 ministerial dialogue mechanism stemmed from then-President Joko Widodo's state [visit to China in 2023](#).

China's recent expansion of defence cooperation with Southeast Asian countries complements its existing defence relations with Singapore and Thailand, last formalised with the [former in 2019](#), and the [latter in 2022](#).

From Bilateral to Multilateral Exercises

The establishment of formal understandings and defence agreements with various Southeast Asian countries has paved the way for China to expand its defence cooperation, particularly in the creation and development of joint military exercises.

China's initial approach to bilateral military exercises has consistently focused on counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations. This emphasis is grounded in the understanding that these areas of cooperation are less politically sensitive and represent mutual concerns. As a result, several of China's longest-running exercises with Southeast Asian countries centre on these two

domains. Notable examples include *Exercise Cooperation* with Singapore and *Strike* series with Thailand, initiated in [2009](#) and [2005](#), respectively.

It came as no surprise, then, to see China expanding this portfolio of exercises to include several more Southeast Asian countries in recent years. Laos, one of China's closest partners in the region, has held regular bilateral military exercises with China since [2017](#). The exercise, codenamed *Peace Train*, focuses on HADR and was most recently conducted in [2024](#) in Laos.

In addition, China held a HADR-focused exercise with Indonesia in 2024. Codenamed [Exercise Heping Garuda](#), it marked the first time the two armed forces had conducted disaster relief drills together. This was China's second military exercise with Indonesia following the [cancellation](#) of *Exercise Sharp Knife* in 2014.

Beyond bilateral military cooperation, China has also sought to promote and conduct multilateral exercises with Southeast Asian countries. For instance, *Exercise Aman Youyi* was initially developed as a table-top exercise between [China and Malaysia in 2014](#). Its latest iteration, [Aman Youyi 2023](#), evolved into a 10-day land and sea exercise involving China, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

China's largest multilateral exercise with its Southeast Asian neighbours took place in October 2018, when it co-hosted the [ASEAN–China Maritime Exercise](#) in the waters off Zhanjiang, Guangdong. Navies from five ASEAN member states participated, while four others sent observers.

A New Security Partner?

More intense and robust military exercises between China and Southeast Asian countries cannot be discounted. China has already conducted exercises aimed not only at confidence-building, but also at weapons familiarisation, improving battlefield communication, and promoting interoperability.

Exercise Golden Dragon (XGD), conducted with Cambodia, serves as a prime example. In its latest iteration in 2025, both the scale and scope of the exercise [expanded beyond](#) its initial HADR focus to include command drills and live-force exercises, aimed at enhancing the joint operational capabilities of both sides.



China's initial approach to military exercises has consistently focused on counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, but cooperation may expand beyond these areas. *Image source: Wikimedia Commons.*

Such an expansion in scale and scope is to be expected as an increasing number of Southeast Asian countries look to China as a key arms supplier. Indonesia, for instance, has acquired several [Chinese CH-4 Rainbow UAVs](#) for its air force and is considering the purchase of [Chengdu J-10](#) fighter jets. Meanwhile, the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) has been acquiring Chinese-made vessels for several years. It recently commissioned the landing platform dock (LPD) [HTMS Chang](#), which is currently undergoing a refit to serve as a submarine tender. The modified vessel will most likely support the forthcoming [Matchanu-class submarines](#), RTN's Chinese-built submarines.

However, China must remain mindful that political issues – particularly the ongoing dispute in the South China Sea – will continue to cast a shadow over its expanding defence relationships with Southeast Asian countries. In addition, Washington is likely to maintain pressure on regional states regarding their ties with Beijing, especially as Trump [intensifies his pushback against China](#).

Nonetheless, China's gradual build-up of defence cooperation with Southeast Asian countries reflects Beijing's intent to position itself as a credible security partner – either to complement the region's existing defence ties with the United States or, in some cases, to serve as an alternative.

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