

Why Asean should hold more maritime drills with China and US

Robert Beckmann

The first joint maritime exercise between China and the 10 Asean member states was successfully carried out last week in China off the southern city of Zhanjiang, the home of the South Sea Fleet of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy.

The exercise was co-organised by the Republic of Singapore Navy and PLA Navy, with participation from all nine other Asean member states and more than 1,000 personnel.

The agreement to conduct this exercise arose from the Asean-China defence ministers' informal meeting held in Singapore in February. Table-top exercises between Asean and China were held in Singapore in August to prepare for the joint maritime exercise.

The aim of the joint maritime exercise was to enhance trust, confidence and friendship among the navies of the Asean member states and China. The focus of the exercise was on practical cooperation in areas such as search and rescue operations and medical evacuations.

The navies of the Asean member states and China have previously exercised together with each other and other states under the framework known as Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), but this was the first maritime exercise solely between China and the Asean member states.

The joint maritime exercise took place at a time of increased tension in the South China Sea, and not long after a recent near-miss encounter between a warship of the United States and a warship of China.

Given the current political climate, some observers are likely to view the China-Asean joint maritime exercise as part of an effort by China to undermine the strategic partnerships of the US in the region, or even as an attempt to exclude the US and other outside powers from the region.

This would be an overreaction. It is in the interest of the Asean member states to have good relations with all major maritime states with an interest in the South China Sea, including China, the US, Japan, Australia and India.

Also, it is expected that in the near future there will be a similar exercise between the Asean member states and the US.

Maritime exercises are generally regarded as a very effective confidence-building measure. When navies work together to plan and carry out maritime exercises over several months, they must overcome language and cultural barriers and learn how their counterparts from other countries operate.

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Chinese sailors watching as a Republic of Singapore Navy ship arrives at a military port in Zhanjiang, in China's Guangdong province, on Oct 21. The joint Asean-China maritime exercise took place at a time of increased tension in the South China Sea. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

of persons in distress. In the process, they learn from each other and friendships are developed. This lays the foundation for establishing trust and confidence between the defence establishments of the participating countries.

One of the most important goals of the 2002 Asean-China Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) was to promote confidence-building measures. The declaration states that:

Pending the peaceful settlement of territorial and jurisdictional disputes, the parties concerned undertake to intensify efforts to seek ways, in the spirit of cooperation and understanding, to build trust and confidence between and among them, including (a) holding dialogues and exchange of views as appropriate between their defence and military officials; ... and (c) notifying, on a voluntary basis, other parties concerned of any impending joint/combined military exercise.

The Asean defence ministers have gone beyond the language in the 2002 DOC by promoting cooperation and carrying out joint maritime exercises. They have increased cooperation among the themselves and with other states through ADMM and ADMM-Plus. These efforts have enhanced

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understanding, trust and confidence among the states concerned.

The fact that this joint maritime exercise was held between the Asean member states and China should not be seen as a signal that Asean is moving to recognise that maritime security in the South China Sea should be handled solely

by the states bordering the South China Sea, or solely by China and Asean member states.

Under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos), ships of all states, including warships, enjoy high-seas freedoms in waters outside the territorial sea limit of any state, as well as the right of innocent passage through the territorial sea of every state. Unfortunately, there are differences of opinion between China and the US and other maritime powers on how the relevant provisions in Unclos should be interpreted.

During the past year, the US, France and the United Kingdom have exercised passage rights and high-seas freedoms in the South China Sea in accordance with their understanding of Unclos, but China has viewed such actions as a threat to its sovereignty and security. Consequently, the risk of unplanned encounters in the South China Sea has increased.

This problem was not unanticipated. To address it, a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (Cues) was established by the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in 2014 in Qingdao, China. Cues was later adopted jointly by Asean and China in September 2016 at the 19th Asean-China Summit in Vientiane, Laos, to commemorate

the 25th Anniversary of Asean-China Dialogue Relations.

Given the risk of unintended consequences resulting from unplanned encounters at sea, Asean defence ministers should consider organising maritime exercises with both China and the US which involve unplanned encounters by warships. Such maritime exercises are likely to promote common understandings on how Cues applies in practice to unplanned encounters.

The Asean defence ministers have taken the lead in addressing threats to maritime security that are not clearly dealt with in Unclos. They have also taken the lead in developing procedures that will address these gaps, and in building trust and confidence between Asean member states and other states with rights and interests in the South China Sea. They should be commended for their efforts, and encouraged to continue them.

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