

Developing ASEAN's Navies and MLEAs Roles in the Indo-Pacific amidst Competition

ASEAN Member States's (AMSs) are increasing naval capabilities in order to exhibit their respective power posture among ASEAN countries in general. To put it more bluntly, AMSs military have been designed to outshine its ASEAN neighbour to uphold its sovereignty, especially in disputed territories.

Introduction

Historically, ASEAN Member States's (AMSs) military and security capabilities have been geared not to acquire state of the art weapon systems, but to develop the capability of constant presence to observe its nearby air and sea space. This perspective made by Sheldon Simon in his article, Southeast Asia's Defense Needs: Change or Continuity, rang true back in 2005, as it is now in 2023. He went on to say that AMSs are increasing naval capabilities in order to exhibit their respective power posture among ASEAN countries in general. To put it more bluntly, AMSs military have been designed to outshine its ASEAN neighbour to uphold its sovereignty, especially in disputed territories.[\[1\]](#)

Benedict Ang also wrote that the end of the Cold War gave opportunities for AMSs and its leaders to design their defence policy and military modernisation programmes while keeping in view their threat perceptions towards one another.[\[2\]](#) Such regional insecurities stem broadly from the various territorial disputes that AMSs have between one another. At certain times, tension resulting from these disputes went as close as conflict such as those we've seen between Indonesia and Malaysia over Ambalat block in 2007 and 2009.

In 2009, Kwa Chong Guan pointed out that the challenge for us in ASEAN is how to build confidence and trust for good order at sea in spite of these unresolved marine boundaries. Common sense and rational choice argue that it should be in our self-interest to put in place conventions and institutions which promote good order at sea to benefit us all. Despite that, the interest in defending national integrity and sovereignty often overrides most other concerns and interests.[\[3\]](#)

However, as substantial progress has been made between AMSs to resolve a number of its territorial disputes, particularly maritime disputes, and with an increasing expectation for ASEAN to play a more meaningful role to contribute to the maritime balance of power in the Indo Pacific, ASEAN should start to come to terms with its differences and decide on how to act upon this newfound role in the future. Is there anything beyond the usual Confidence- Building Measure (CBM) that ASEAN has enacted since time immemorial?

ASEAN Naval Exercises

CBM has been enacted between AMSs and its defence establishments for decades. Drawing the definition of CBM from Permal and Basiron in 2010, it is an initiative to lessen

tensions by increasing transparency of capabilities and intentions, and improving predictability for the parties involved, clarifying intentions about military force and political activities.^[4] In a broader term, CBM seeks to strengthen international peace and security and to help promote trust, better understanding and more stable relations among nations. As has been mentioned before, AMSs have made progress to build trust, and transparency among one another to build maritime cooperation. J.N. Mak wrote in 2008 that the lack of maritime boundary demarcation between AMSs has become a serious impediment between AMSs relations. This year Malaysia and Indonesia have reached an agreement on maritime boundary delimitation after twenty years of negotiation^[5], whilst Cambodia and Thailand resumed talks on their maritime boundaries in 2022^[6]. In December 2022, Indonesia and Vietnam concluded an agreement on their respective EEZ boundaries in the South China Sea.^[7] Such successful examples of maritime diplomacy have helped to facilitate cooperation, and enable countries to improve trust and lower uncertainty in maritime domains.

What follows suit have been a flurry of ASEAN military exercises, with an increasing focus on naval cooperation. In 2017 ASEAN initiated its

first ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise (AMNEX) in Pattaya, Thailand. Aside from celebrating the 50th anniversary of ASEAN, the exercise was designed to promote practical cooperation, build confidence, and promotion of a stable military-to-military relations.^[8] This was followed six years later in 2023 with the 2nd AMNEX in Zambales, Philippines^[9], and a possible third joint naval exercise held by Indonesia in September around the North Natuna Sea area^[10]. This unprecedented level of engagement allows a new level of cohesiveness that have yet to be seen before, and affords an equal level of development across all of ASEAN navies, a very crucial point of development with the surge of attention being put into the Indo-Pacific, and ASEAN in specific.

This is coupled with the increasing number of ASEAN and External Partners Naval Exercises that have been on going prior to the pandemic. Up until 2023, ASEAN has held naval exercises with the US, China, Russia, and most recently, India.^[11] Interests have also been voiced by other ASEAN dialogue partners such as the UK, and Canada. What this entails, is an effort by ASEAN's dialogue partners to see ASEAN at an equal foot. Expressing the confidence from these partners that ASEAN is capable in managing its own problems, and

allowing ASEAN to play a global role together with the dialogue partners. Although it might still seem down the drain, the constant exchanges and cooperation imbue by such activities may one day help to elevate ASEAN's role to more than just CBM, but perhaps on crisis management, and preventive diplomacy.

Institutionalising ASEAN Coast Guard Forum

Another area where ASEAN could develop further is to improve upon its maritime law enforcement agency capacity and capability. It's no denying that the relevancy for maritime law enforcement agency to uphold international and national maritime law has increased in the past several years. Owing to the various maritime disputes across Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea, it has become too politically sensitive (and costly) to constantly deploy naval warships on disputed waters and arresting/halting every civilian ship that violates

sovereignty/rights in the area. Hence, a number of maritime law enforcement agencies across Southeast Asia have either been established or revamped in the past couple of years.

Noting the increasing roles and responsibility of coast guards, we have seen developments by ASEAN Maritime Law Enforcement Agencies (MLEAs) to coordinate its activities, actions, and cooperation through the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum in 2022. Such forum, initiated by Indonesia's Bakamla, aims to be a gathering platform for ASEAN's MLEAs for information exchange, and maritime cooperation. The Forum would also allow MLEAs officers to exchange ideas, practices, and perspectives on maritime matters.

As far as MLEAs cooperation goes in ASEAN, it has yet to break out of the zone of CBM. But to see it take shape and grow is certainly worth the investment. With ASEAN's external partners focusing on developing maritime law enforcement capability, institutionalising the ASEAN MLEAs is certainly the right step to garner their attention. The ASEAN Coast Guard Forum could become a convening forum on its own, inviting other international coast guard agencies to discuss best practices, practical cooperation, and personnel exchanges. In addition, the rise of white hull diplomacy allows countries to project its interest with less coercive power. The way forward would be on synergising ASEAN navies development with that of the MLEAs development. Both are vital maritime stakeholders, with significant responsibilities.

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