

# Managing Maritime Power Projections in Southeast Asia: Suggestions for Improving the Region's Collective Response

*This commentary reviews the strategies used by Southeast Asian States to deal with different categories maritime power projection in Southeast Asia to date and provide some suggestions on how they could improve their collective power to manage maritime power projection by external countries in the region.*

## Introduction

Maritime power projection could be understood as power projection in and from the maritime environment;<sup>[i]</sup> and power projection is commonly defined as the capacity of a state to deploy and sustain forces outside of its territory.<sup>[ii]</sup> Power project can serve as a diplomatic tool, to influence decision-making processes, and act as a potential deterrent to the actions of other states.<sup>[iii]</sup> Traditional power projection focuses on hard power assets such as the deployment of weapons, military assets, personnel but with the development of soft power, power projection does not necessarily have to involve the active use of military forces in combat.<sup>[iv]</sup> Nine different categories of power projection could be distinguished based on political goal and level force. Five of these are considered hard projection projection and four, soft power project. The hard power projection includes showing the flag, compulsion/deterrence, punishment, armed intervention, and conquest. Soft power projection includes securing sea lanes of communication, non-combatant evacuation operations, humanitarian response, and peace-keeping.<sup>[v]</sup>

Southeast Asia has always been an area for maritime projection of different naval powers in the world. One of the earliest foreign visits to the region was the expedition by the Ming dynasty's armada led by Admiral Zheng Hua with 317 ships and some 27.800 men in 15<sup>th</sup> century to what are now Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>[vi]</sup> Throughout its history until today, other maritime powers such as Japan, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Portugal, Holland, Russia, the United States and China have deployed their navies to the region's maritime domain. Many of these deployments have been linked to or

part of efforts of colonization, conquests, domination and conflicts in the region, leaving deep scars in the mind of Southeast Asian countries.

Recently, naval activities by China, United States and other maritime powers (such as United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia) have once again intensified in the Southeast Asian, in particular in the South China Sea. These take the forms of sending warships patrolling at sea, building and improving military basis, joint military exercises, improving long-range naval capabilities. Southeast Asian countries have expressed different levels of concerns relating to specific activities. For instance, the militarization of features under China's occupation in the Spratlys have caused concerns to Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam. The patrol of warships either from China or the United States have caused particular concerns to Malaysia. The development of nuclear submarines by Australia have provided anxiety in Indonesia, Malaysia and Cambodia. There has been also worries that these developments will lead to the undermining of the centrality and independence of ASEAN.

This commentary reviews the strategies used by Southeast Asian States to deal with maritime power projection in Southeast Asia to date and provide some suggestions on how they could improve their collective power to manage maritime power projection by external countries in the region.

## **1. Southeast Asia Strategy to Manage Maritime Power Projections in Southeast Asia to Date**

To date, Southeast Asian countries has used a two-prong strategy to deal with power projection in general and maritime power project in particular in Southeast Asia: first, promoting the respect of principles and rules for peace and security in the region and second, establishing regular engagement mechanisms with world powers which want to establish a presence in Southeast As

### ***i) Promoting the Respect of Universally Recognised Principles and Rules for Peace and Security in the Region***

Southeast Asian countries has reaffirmed universally recognized

principles and rules for peace and security in Southeast Asia and tried to have external countries, and especially big powers, to commit to those principles and rules. Examples of these endeavours include:

- *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), 1976*:[\[vii\]](#) The TAC was originally signed by the five founding members of ASEAN (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) to promote peace, amity and cooperation in Southeast Asia.[\[viii\]](#) The Treaty provides six fundamental principles for relations between States which are: mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity; the right to lead its national existence free from external, interference, subversion or coercion; non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means; renunciation of the threat or use of force; and effective cooperation.[\[ix\]](#) TAC was then expanded for accession by Southeast Asian States and also States outside of Southeast Asia.[\[x\]](#) Nowadays, TAC has 51 Member States including many external countries such as Australia, China, United States, India, Japan, the EU, United Kingdom, and Russia.

- *Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ Treaty), 1995*:[\[xi\]](#) The SEANWFZ Treaty was signed by ASEAN Member States as a commitment to preserve the Southeast Asian region as a region free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction.[\[xii\]](#) Pursuant to the Treaty, each State Party undertakes to not to, inside or outside the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone: develop, manufacture or otherwise acquire, possess or have control over nuclear weapons; station or transport nuclear weapons by any means; test or use nuclear weapons; station or transport nuclear weapons by any means; or test or use nuclear weapons.[\[xiii\]](#) The Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone includes territories, continental shelves, and EEZ of the States Parties.[\[xiv\]](#)

In addition to the SEANWFZ Treaty, a Protocol was also developed to be signed by the five Nuclear Weapon States which are the United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom and France. Pursuant to the Protocol, Signatories undertake to respect the Treaty and not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against any of its State Party to the Treaty nor to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons within the

Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone.[\[xv\]](#) So far, ASEAN has continued to hold consultations with Nuclear Weapon States for them to accede to the Protocol.[\[xvi\]](#)

- *The Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (COC)*: The COC has been negotiated between China and ASEAN Member States since 2000 to provide rules of behaviors of relevant Parties in the South China Sea with the objective to achieve a peaceful, friendly and harmonious environment in the South China Sea between ASEAN and China.[\[xvii\]](#) In spite of the fact that the negotiations has been completed yet, a number of important principles have been recognized in the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002.[\[xviii\]](#) These include commitment to the UN Charter, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and other universally recognized principles of international law which shall serve as the basic norms governing state-to-state relations; respect for and commitment to the freedom of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea; and undertaking to resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force, through friendly consultations and negotiations by sovereign states directly concerned, in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law.[\[xix\]](#)

So, it could be seen that one of the strategies used by Southeast Asian nations to manage power projection in Southeast Asia is to consecrate universally recognised principles and rules to ensure peace and security in regional texts and requests outside powers to sign to these texts if they want to operate in the region.

## **ii) Establishing Mechanisms to Regularly Engage with External Powers**

Southeast Asian nations have established a myriad of engagement mechanisms with almost any external country which wants to develop relations with the region, which is called ASEAN Dialogue Partners. These include bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral mechanisms; comprehensive and sectoral mechanisms; and mechanisms at different levels (from working group to leader levels). These mechanisms have helped ASEAN to strengthen dialogues and exchanges with external

countries, including maritime powers, and thus, contributing to mutual understanding, conflict prevention, and improving cooperation.

Most important ASEAN's engagement mechanisms with external countries which could help managing their maritime power projection in Southeast Asia includes:

- [The East Asia Summit \(EAS\)](#): EAS is a forum between Leaders of 18 countries of the Asia-Pacific region formed to further the objectives of regional peace, security and prosperity. EAS Membership includes 10 ASEAN Member States, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States.[\[xx\]](#) The first EAS was held on 14 December 2005 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia with the participation of Heads of States of ASEAN, Australia, China, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, New Zealand.[\[xxi\]](#) United States and Russia formally become members at the 6<sup>th</sup> EAS in 2011.[\[xxii\]](#) So far, 17 EAS have been held with the latest one being the 17<sup>th</sup> EAS in Cambodia, 2022.[\[xxiii\]](#)

- [ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus \(ADMM Plus\)](#): The objectives of ADMM-Plus are to benefit ASEAN member countries in building capacity to address shared security challenges, while cognisant of the differing capacities of various ASEAN countries; to promote mutual trust and confidence between defence establishments through greater dialogue and transparency; to enhance regional peace and stability through cooperation in defence and security, in view of the transnational security challenges the region faces; to contribute to the realization of an ASEAN Security Community.[\[xxiv\]](#) Participants of ADMM Plus are Ministers of Defence from the ten ASEAN Member States and eight ASEAN Dialogue Partners, namely Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, and the United States. So far, 9 ADMM Plus have been organised with the latest one being the 9<sup>th</sup> ADMM in Cambodia, 2022.[\[xxv\]](#)

- [ASEAN Regional Forum \(ARF\)](#): The objectives of ARF are to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern and to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region. Participants of the ARF comprise the ASEAN member states, the observers, and consultative and dialogue partners

of ASEAN. The first ARF was held in 1994 in Bangkok, Thailand. So far, 30 ARF have been held with the latest one being the 30<sup>th</sup> ARF in Indonesia, 2023.<sup>[xxvi]</sup>

- [Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum \(EAMF\)](#): EAMF was initiated in response to the statement of EAS Leaders in Bali, Indonesia in November 2011, which “encouraged a dialogue involving EAS participating countries to utilize opportunities and address common challenges on maritime issues building upon the existing ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF)” and “noted positively the proposal of convening an expanded AMR, back-to-back with the future meetings of the AMF, to include countries in the wider East Asia region.”<sup>[xxvii]</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> EAMF was held on 5 October 2012 in Manila, Philippines with the attendance of government and non-government delegates from EAS participating countries. During the meeting, discussions were focused on the relevance of UNCLOS in today’s context, maritime connectivity and capacity building, infrastructure and equipment upgrading, seafarers’ training, protecting the marine environment, promoting eco-tourism and fishery regime in East Asia and identifying best practices of cooperation.<sup>[xxviii]</sup> So far, 10 EAMF have been held with the latest one being the 10<sup>th</sup> EAMF in Philippines, 2022.<sup>[xxix]</sup>

- *Bilateral ASEAN+1 Summits*: ASEAN has maintained regular bilateral Summit-level meetings with a number of Dialogue Partners, such as Australia, China, Republic of Korea, Japan, India and the United States.

- [The ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference \(PMC\) 10+1](#): PMC 10+1 is the meeting between Ministers of Foreign Affairs of ASEAN and ASEAN Dialogue Partners. It is hosted after AMM meeting, where the title of “Post Ministerial”. Various issues can be discussed at PMCs including security, politics, economy, counter-terrorism and transnational crimes.<sup>[xxx]</sup>

Through these regular engagement between ASEAN and third countries, Southeast Asian Nations can promote exchange and dialogues with outside powers to help build trust, enhance mutual understanding, and most importantly, prevent conflicts. Furthermore, ASEAN Member States host and chair most of the region’s major diplomatic meetings and use their role to socialise their priorities with

counterparts around the region. Regular chairing privileges give members unusual influence over the terms on which great powers engage the region, and language on contentious issues first developed in ASEAN negotiations often goes on to become consensus phrasing. [\[xxxii\]](#)

### **iii) Promoting the Implementing of the Principle of ASEAN Centrality**

Pursuant to the ASEAN Charter, one of the objectives of ASEAN is to “maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive”. [\[xxxiii\]](#) This is called the principle of ASEAN Centrality. It means that ASEAN wants to be the leader, driver, architect, institutional hub, vanguard, nucleus or fulcrum of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. The origin of the principle of ASEAN Centrality is believed to appear in the middle of 1990s with the creation of ARF, ASEAN+3, and EAS. [\[xxxiv\]](#) It is stated that this principle derives from ASEAN negative experience in the late 1980s with the establishment of the rival Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. [\[xxxv\]](#) ASEAN frequently reaffirms ASEAN centrality in the interactions with its Dialogue Partners, requesting them to respect this principle in joint statements and declarations. This could help ASEAN and Southeast Asian nations to be relevant in regional affairs and as such, increasing their importance in the eyes of outside powers. Consequently, it also helps Southeast Asia to have better influence in managing power projection in the region.

The ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific, adopted in 2019, states that it envisages ASEAN Centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN-led mechanisms as platforms for dialogue and implementation of the Indo-Pacific cooperation. [\[xxxvi\]](#) It means ASEAN does not only want to be the central force of Southeast Asia but also the Indo-Pacific Region.

The implementation of the above-mentioned strategies to manage power projection in general and maritime power projection in particular in Southeast Asia has met with a number of important challenges. First, the hard power, both military and economic, of the ASEAN as a group

and of ASEAN Member States is still relatively weak to counter-balance power projection by external powers in the region. Second, the ASEAN unity is not high enough to develop a strong common approach in dealing with this matter. Finally, as stated in the Introduction, ASEAN Member States still have divergences in evaluating and expressing concerns with regards to specific moves to project maritime powers by external countries in Southeast Asia.

The next part of the paper provides suggestions to strengthen Southeast Asia power to manage maritime projection in the region.

## **2. Suggestions for Strengthening Southeast Asia Collective Power to Manage Maritime Power Projection in the Region**

This Section provides a number of suggestions to strengthen ASEAN and ASEAN Member States power to manage maritime power projection from external countries into Southeast Asia, which are: i) adopting a rule-based approach for ASEAN in reactions to maritime power projection; ii) having a commonly agreed ASEAN positions in addition to the one of individual ASEAN Member States; iii) improving compliance for the respect of existing principles and rules; iv) developing a Code of Conduct for Maritime Engagements in Southeast Asia; v) strengthening Southeast Asia collective naval power.

### ***i. Adopting a Rule-Based Approach for ASEAN in Reactions to Maritime Power Projection***

As was explained earlier, external powers have always tried to maintain their naval presence in Southeast Asia.<sup>[xxxvii]</sup> Southeast Asian countries do not have enough capacities nor intention of close Southeast Asia to external countries. However, ASEAN could legitimately ask any external country to respect international law while engaging with the region. This should also be the common interest not only of all ASEAN Member States but also the international community.

Thus, every time an external country adopted any act to project its maritime power in Southeast Asia, ASEAN could evaluate whether such a move violates or not international law. If it does, ASEAN can decide to trigger its reaction mechanism. Probably, it would start by issuing an ASEAN statement on this issue, requesting the relevant country to respect international law. Then, ASEAN could try to organise a meeting between all ASEAN Member States on one side and the relevant



country on the other side for explanation and consultations. If such a bilateral meeting cannot resolve the issue, it will probably be brought to one of ASEAN's multilateral for a such as the EAMF, ARF or EAS. For now, it is all what ASEAN can do. While it does not sound strong enough to force external countries to stop their behaviour in question, it certainly offers some collective pressure to the country in question.

### ***ii. Having A Commonly Agreed ASEAN Positions in Addition to the One of Individual ASEAN Member States***

This is a logical consequence of the first suggestion. While ASEAN Member State could have different national interests which are different or even opposite from each other, ASEAN itself has its position based on international law which should be the common interest of all ASEAN Member States. Thus, the position adopted by ASEAN as a whole could be different from the one adopted by a particular ASEAN Member State. From this perspective, whenever there is an act of maritime power projection from an external country in Southeast Asia, there may be two types of position: first, the position adopted by each ASEAN Member State in accordance with its national interest; but then, all ASEAN Member States should agree to adopt a common ASEAN position on whether or not the maritime power project act of the external country violates international law. It is OK to have a national position different from the one of ASEAN (it is also in compliance with the principle of non-interference); however, one should not use its national interest to impede ASEAN common position.

### ***iii. Improving Compliance for the Respect of Existing Principles and Rules***

While Southeast Asian countries have tried with some success to develop principles and rules for the maintenance of peace and security in the region and to have external powers to commit to them,<sup>[xxxvii]</sup> many of them lack a compliance mechanism to check on their respect. For instance, the TAC, the most important instrument that many external countries acceded to before becoming ASEAN Dialogue Partners, does not have a mechanism to ensure the respect of its stipulations. Without a compliance mechanism, the TAC will have the

same weakness as the DOC: everyone can blame anyone for violation without having to worry about their own action. For this reason, ASEAN could consider adding a compliance mechanism into TAC. Example of compliance provisions under the SEANWFZ Treaty could be used with the possibility to establish a fact-finding mission to clarify and resolve a situation which may be considered ambiguous, or which may give rise to doubts about compliance with the Treaty.<sup>[xxxviii]</sup> In addition to TAC, future instruments relating to peace and security developed by Southeast Asian States should have a strong compliance mechanism to ensure the respect of their provisions by all Signatories.

#### ***iv. Developing a Code of Conduct for Maritime Engagements in Southeast Asia***

As stated earlier, a Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea are being negotiated between China and all ASEAN Member States to achieve a peaceful, friendly and harmonious environment in the South China Sea.<sup>[xxxix]</sup> This approach could be expanded both ways: first, it could cover not only the South China Sea but all maritime domain surrounding Southeast Asia and second, it could be open to all other States who want to use these waters. It is obvious that Southeast Asian States do not only have interest in peace and security in the South China Sea but also in peace and security in all regions of seas and oceans surrounding them. Besides, many principles enshrined in the DOC which will most probably be reaffirmed in the COC are of universal value, namely: respect for and commitment to the freedom of navigation in and overflight and resolution of territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force. In terms of parties, such a Code of Conduct for Maritime Engagements in Southeast Asia could be developed in parallel with the COC following the same approach as the TAC. It means Southeast Asian States will first negotiate the Code and then opening it for accession by all other countries who want to operate in Southeast Asian waters.

#### ***v. Strengthening Southeast Asia Collective Naval Power***

No single Southeast Asian country has a navy with capacity and strength which could be considered a maritime power. However,

together, the ten ASEAN Member States navies could have a stronger collective power. So far, there has been no plan to increase the interoperability between navies of ASEAN Member States. From this perspective, the proposal by Indonesia to organise the first common drill between ASEAN navies could be a good sign for future cooperation.<sup>[xi]</sup> If better collaboration at sea between ASEAN navies and perhaps also the coast guard could be developed, it will increase the effectiveness of the region in dealing with many common threats such as piracy, maritime terrorism and other maritime transnational crimes at sea, natural disasters, search and rescue and marine environmental pollution. To avoid sensitivities,<sup>[xli]</sup> it is critical that ASEAN make it clear that first, the increased cooperation between ASEAN Member States Navies are just a natural move by ASEAN to strengthen its unity and centrality and second, this cooperation is totally peaceful and not aiming at any country.

## Conclusion

As Southeast Asia has been a target for frequent naval deployment by external powers, Southeast Asian countries have developed collective strategies to manage these deployments. These strategies are: first, establishing principles and rules for preserving peace and security in the region and making external powers to commit to them; second, developing engagement mechanisms with external powers who want to establish a presence in the region; and third, promoting ASEAN centrality. A number of measures could be implemented to strengthen ASEAN power to manage maritime power projection in the Southeast Asia, namely: i) adopting a rule-based approach for ASEAN in reactions to maritime power projection; ii) having a commonly agreed ASEAN positions in addition to the one of individual ASEAN Member States; iii) improving compliance for the respect of existing principles and rules; iv) developing a Code of Conduct for Maritime Engagements in Southeast Asia; v) strengthening Southeast Asia collective naval power.

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