Managing the Rise of China's Security Partnerships in Southeast Asia

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Prashanth Parameswaran

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past few years, while China has continued its criticism of the U.S. alliance system in the Asia-Pacific, Beijing has in fact been developing a network of new security partnerships of its own in the region. The emergence of these security partnerships is of potentially great significance, not just for Beijing's own growing regional influence, but the alignments of other countries such as the United States and the broader regional security architecture. While there has been some attention to this broad trend, there has been comparatively less focus on the systematic development of these security partnerships and their specific components, particularly in Southeast Asia where they have thus far manifested most clearly.

This report attempts to fill this gap by examining China's ongoing efforts to develop security partnerships in Southeast Asia and their strategic implications for the region. Drawing on written Chinese and Southeast Asian accounts as well as conversations with officials on both sides, it argues that the rise of Chinese security partnerships creates both opportunities and challenges that need to be properly understood and managed by Beijing, relevant Southeast Asian states, and external actors including the United States and like-minded allies and partners.

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KEY FINDINGS

- The rise of Chinese security partnerships in Asia is not merely natural or incidental. There are key strategic drivers propelling their development, including Beijing's efforts to develop a China-centric security order and a tendency by countries to accommodate Beijing's rise.
- The outlines of Chinese security partnerships are already clear in Southeast Asia, including new dialogues and facilities. They are also becoming more complex and institutionalized.
- Both China and Southeast Asian states see value in developing these partnerships, both to address security challenges as well as to manage ties with each other and with other states.
- China's security partnerships in Southeast Asia have raised challenges for these countries at home and abroad. Some are rooted in the partnerships themselves, while others are tied to broader governance challenges in Southeast Asia and anxieties about Beijing's behavior.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Relevant Southeast Asian states must work on their own and with China to ease lingering doubts about new security partnerships where they exist. Non-governmental actors should also continue to push for greater transparency around specific components of these partnerships.
- Southeast Asian states and China should give due attention to addressing the issue of how new security partnerships fit into existing regional arrangements, including ASEAN-led institutions and U.S. alliances and partnerships.
- China should address concerns about its intentions and capabilities to increase regional receptiveness to its security partnerships. This will require more inclusive rhetoric beyond opposition to U.S. alliances, and ceasing actions perceived as destabilizing or coercive.
- Other actors in the Asia-Pacific, including the United States and like-minded allies and partners, should intensify efforts to fashion alternatives for Southeast Asian states in areas such as arms sales. They should also accelerate capacity-building measures to help Southeast Asian states and publics make informed decisions about alignments where needed.
- External partners of Southeast Asian states should also have clear and candid conversations with these countries about the impact that closer ties with China will have on their own collaboration further down the line, including interoperability.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, even as China has officially continued its criticism of the U.S. alliance system in the Asia-Pacific, Beijing has itself been incrementally developing aspects of its own security partnerships. While there has been some attention to this broad trend, there has been comparatively little focus on China's intensifying efforts to build out components of these security partnerships in Southeast Asia despite the subregion's significance and the clear emphasis Beijing has been attaching to it as part of its wider foreign and defense policy.[1] This report seeks to address this gap by providing insights into China's ongoing efforts to develop security partnerships in Southeast Asia, based on a close analysis of written Chinese and Southeast Asian accounts of these efforts as well as conversations with officials and scholars on both sides.

This report makes three main arguments. First, despite some mixed results, China has clearly been intensifying its efforts to build out aspects of these partnerships over the past few years. Second, while it is true that these partnerships are a natural outgrowth of China's broader relations with Southeast Asian countries and they have value in addressing tangible security issues, they also present broader strategic challenges not just for the states involved, but also for the wider Asian security environment and for external partners including the United States. Third and finally, fully contending with the implications of the rise of Chinese strategic partnerships in Southeast Asia requires calibrated actions on the part of not just China and participating Southeast Asian states, but also other actors given wider trends at play. The focus in this respect should not just be on responding to Chinese partnerships, but also addressing deeper issues by building the capacity of Southeast Asian states, offering alternatives to what Beijing is providing, and shaping the wider normative environment to be conducive to nations being free to make their own choices.

UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF CHINESE SECURITY PARTNERSHIPS

While the People's Republic of China's (PRC) efforts to formalize security partnerships with Southeast Asian states may be a more recent phenomenon, efforts by China to build the blocks for these relationships date back decades. They are rooted both in China's general foreign policy approach to the wider Asia-Pacific region, as well as a number of specific drivers that have propelled these alignments over the past few years.[2]

Though China was perceived as a security threat among some regional states during most of the Cold War – with suspicions about Beijing's support for communist insurgencies and influence on ethnic Chinese communities – by the 1980s, normalization of ties with Southeast Asian states began to give rise to periodic security cooperation. A case in point was Thailand's purchase of Chinese military equipment, which occurred as Bangkok sought to contend with Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia in the 1980s which preoccupied much of Southeast Asia as well.

The end of the Cold War intensified China's pursuit of these partnerships with Southeast Asian states as it made inroads in other aspects of ties and also began to introduce initiatives such as the New Security Concept.[3] Though Beijing faced some challenges in doing so, it also did achieve some successes. One notable instance of this was the inking of a China-Malaysia defense pact in 2005, which formalized collaboration in areas such as information exchange and the defense industry following years of development in

the 1990s. Another notable example was the birth of China-Vietnam joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin in 2003 following boundary delimitation. While the agreement was forged amid continued distrust by both sides, with Vietnam having been colonized by China for a millennia and both sides having fought a war in 1979, it was nonetheless significant as it marked the first time that the PLA Navy had embarked on such joint patrols with a foreign counterpart.[4]

A few key trends have led China and Southeast Asian states to significantly boost existing collaboration or explore new ones. Four principle drivers have been evident over time, and they have manifested themselves with a mix of design and circumstance: the heightening of common security challenges; China's growing integration into regional and international institutions; the increasing tendency for Southeast Asian states to accommodate Beijing's rising influence; and Chinese strategic efforts to build the outlines of a China-centric order.

The first driver is the heightening of certain common security challenges, which have then provided openings for Beijing to push for cooperation. In the Mekong subregion, for instance, a key development was a high-profile incident which saw two Chinese cargo ships hijacked and 13 sailors killed in October 2011.[5] While the law enforcement challenges that stemmed from a range of cross-border crimes along the Golden Triangle – long recognized as a notorious region for transnational crimes – had long been clear to all, the incident provided a catalyst for China to formalize security collaboration with mainland Southeast Asian states, including through the institutionalization of regularized joint patrols along the Mekong River.[6] The Mekong patrols, which are held on a near-monthly basis and consist of several aspects including anti-terrorism drills and police skills training, continue to be advanced by China as a case study of productive ASEAN-China security cooperation.[7]

A second driver has been China's growing integration into institutions, which has provided additional outlets for Beijing to expand its collaboration with Southeast Asian states as well over the years. Regionally, the framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has proven useful for Beijing to float ideas and test and replicate discrete engagements, as evidenced by the birth of the ASEAN-China Defense Ministers' Meeting in 2014 that followed other previous collaborative efforts such as the joint declaration of ASEAN-China cooperation on non-traditional issues in 2002.[8] Beyond this, China's increasing participation in international institutions has also at times generated knock on effects in its ties with Southeast Asian states. For instance, when China hosted a series of activities in 2014 as part of its rising participation in the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, including the Multilateral Maritime Exercise and the International Fleet Review, it provided Beijing with the opportunity to increase collaboration with a number of states including those from Southeast Asia. A particularly notable case was Brunei since it was the first time a Brunei vessel had ever set sail to China and the engagement became a reference point for successive efforts to forge security collaboration.[9]

A third driver is Southeast Asian states' recognition of China's rising influence in the region in general, which has given Beijing greater leverage to push for advances in the security realm in particular and has also provided ASEAN countries with a greater incentive to reciprocate. While the mix of motivations is different in each Southeast Asian case – including leaders securing gains in the economic realm to further their

own domestic goals or accommodating a rising China to some degree in recognition of Beijing's growing role – several notable cases have reinforced the importance of this driver. The most dramatic case is that of the Philippines and President Rodrigo Duterte, where a broader tilt towards China rooted largely in Beijing's rising economic heft has seen significant accompanying developments in the security realm, extending even to coast guard collaboration.[10] Malaysia's ties with China under former prime minister Najib Razak also reflected this tendency, where Beijing's rising economic influence gave way to security collaboration, including notable firsts such as military exercises and the purchase of Chinese naval vessels.[11]

A fourth and final driver is China's deepening effort to formalize and knit together existing forms of collaboration with Southeast Asian states into its own vision of a security order for the Asia-Pacific more generally. China's desire to develop new regional relationships and mechanisms that transcend alliance formulations that Beijing has long opposed is not new: such tendencies have been evident since the 1990s with the forging of the Russia-China strategic partnership and initiatives such as the New Security Concept.[12] But it is also true that China has been expressing its views more confidently and concretely in recent years in more China-centric order conceptions advanced under President Xi Jinping and in the context of rising competition with the United States. Of particular note is the white paper on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation released in January 2017, which builds on previous formulations and includes the building of such partnerships as one of six aspects of Chinese thinking and refers not just to partnerships with individual countries, but subregional and regional efforts in a strategic manner.[13] Chinese officials have also rhetorically referenced this broader vision for regional security in various fora as well, including at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia and the Xiangshan Forum which is itself part of Beijing's efforts to build out China-led security institutions in the region.[14] For instance, the 2018 iteration of the Xiangshan Forum was held under the theme of "Building a New Type of Security Partnership of Equality, Mutual Trust and Win-Win Cooperation," a clear effort by Beijing to publicly showcase its efforts in this vein.[15]

The confluence of these trends has led to an intensification by China on developing security partnerships in the region, and the increased receptivity by regional states to this to different degrees. This is certainly not new, and China has begun building out these partnerships in other regions as well.[16] But Southeast Asia is significant in its own right because it has factored heavily into Beijing's conceptions of its security partnerships in the Asia-Pacific more generally.[17] To take just one example of this increasing focus, cumulatively, in terms of PLA military interactions, one recent study pointed to the fact that within Asia, more than a fifth – 22 percent to be exact – of the list of increasing interactions of this sort dating back to the early 2000s were devoted to Southeast Asia (compared to South Asia at 9 percent, Central Asia at 5 percent, and Northeast Asia at 4.8 percent).[18]

While emerging Chinese security partnerships in Southeast Asia are still in the early stages of development, they have nonetheless already been developing to a degree that they are much more wide-ranging and institutionalized, a point that can be lost with just a focus on individual instances or facets of collaboration. They include not only discrete port calls or high-level visits, which had been seen previously, but more consequential inroads with respect

to arms sales as well as a growing array of exercises, dialogues, and other cooperative mechanisms.[19] In terms of arms sales, for instance, while this has in fact been a decades-long aspect of Chinese security links with a select few Southeast Asian states, China has been positioning itself as a key option in more ambitious areas and has proven itself capable of winning bids, as has been the case with Beijing's surprising win in the contract for Thai submarines.

The increasing focus on formalized dialogues and institutions has been another notable feature of emerging Chinese security partnerships in Southeast Asia. While some efforts are more focused or constitute a revival of previous efforts – such as the Philippines-China Annual Defense Security Talks which were frozen in 2013 and then revived in 2017 under the Duterte administration – there have been newer efforts as well. On a bilateral basis, a prominent case is the establishment China-Malaysia High-Level Committee on Defense Relations, which was unveiled by both sides after some consideration in April 2017 in a deliberate effort to institutionalize and structure ongoing collaboration. At the regional level, the most commonly cited instance of this is the ASEAN-China Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting.[20] But other attempted and actualized institutions ought to be mentioned alongside this as well, be it the proposed Treaty of Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation which has not gotten off the ground or the Center for Comprehensive Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation which has been institutionalized as part of Beijing's subregional Lancang-Mekong Cooperation initiative.[21]

Table 1: Selected Recent China-Southeast Asia Dialogues and Institutions

Country	Relationship Status	Name	Year
Laos	Comprehensive strategic partnership	China-Laos High-Level Frontier Meeting	2017
Malaysia	Comprehensive strategic partnership	China-Malaysia High-Level Committee on Defense Relations	2017
Philippines	Comprehensive strategic cooperation[22]	Philippines China Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea	2017
Mekong Subregion	Cooperation framework	Center for Comprehensive Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation	2017
ASEAN-wide	Strategic partnership	China-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting	2014

Source: Author's analysis based on open-source information

Table 2: Selected Recent China-Southeast Asia Exercises

Country	Name	Year Started	Type
Cambodia	Golden Dragon	2016	Military
Laos	Train of Peace	2017	Military Medicine
Malaysia	Peace and Friendship	2014	Military
Singapore	Maritime Cooperation	2015	Navy
Thailand	Falcon Strike	2015	Air Force
ASEAN-wide	ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise	2018	Navy
Multilateral	Southeast Asia-China Maritime Exercise 2019	2019	Navy

Source: Author's analysis based on open-source information

Exercises are yet another instance where China has been increasing its security partnerships. While Beijing continues to encounter resistance from some Southeast Asian states on this front, it has managed to conduct a few exercises over the past few years. Some are occasional and much more basic – be it passage exercises like China has conducted with Brunei or occasional drills such as the first-ever China-Myanmar naval exercise that was publicly announced in May 2017. Others have been occurring on an annual basis and have been growing in terms of both size and complexity, such as the Golden Dragon exercise Beijing has with Cambodia, the Peace and Friendship exercise series it has with Malaysia, and, most recently, Exercise Maritime Cooperation with Singapore, announced on the sidelines of the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue.[23] Efforts are also being made to network and multilateralize these exercises as well, such as the first-ever publicly announced trilateral exercise held between China, Malaysia, and Thailand, which finally took place last year after a period of consideration.[24] Another multilateral exercise also took place in April tied to the commemoration of the PLA Navy's 70th anniversary which featured six Southeast Asian states, including Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam.[25]

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

China's security partnerships with Southeast Asian states create a mix of opportunities and challenges for both the countries involved directly as well as for other interested actors. On the opportunities side such partnerships can contribute to the management of actual security challenges that occur. A case in point is the joint patrols that China has set up with countries in the Lower Mekong subregion – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand – in December 2011, which has since developed as a pathway for countries in mainland Southeast Asia to address a range of challenges that they confront in this area. Beyond just what China is doing with regional states themselves, growing Chinese participation in the management of security challenges with Southeast Asian states could also be an outlet for other external actors to engage on these fronts should they choose to do so.

Second, aspects of Chinese partnerships also offer some Southeast Asian countries an additional option for their needs given the lack of other choices available to them or perceived comparative advantages on their own terms. In the realm of military equipment, for instance, Cambodia

intensified its traditional reliance on China as a top provider amid growing international isolation as the government of Prime Minister Hun Sen tightened its grip on power, while Chinese companies have also ended up clinching deals such as for littoral mission vessels in Malaysia or battle tanks in Thailand not only because of political calculations, but also because of terms they offered on a range of counts, including price, that allowed them to be justified.[26] One can expect these instances to recur in the coming years, and perhaps even with greater frequency given trends such as the growing emergence of Chinese companies in the regional arms sales space.

Third, such security partnerships are viewed as helping promote greater confidence-building and understanding even amid lingering distrust between China and Southeast Asian states. Though the two sides are certainly aware of the challenges inherent in this approach, they nonetheless continue to pursue it for their own respective interests, with Beijing looking to soften negative perceptions of its rise and Southeast Asian states recognizing the need to enhance understanding and avert potential crises with an increasingly capable Chinese military in practice.[27] To take just one example, in pointed remarks delivered to the Xiangshan Forum in October 2018, Singapore's Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen framed developments such as the holding of the first ASEAN-China maritime exercise and South China Sea code of conduct negotiations from this perspective, noting that it was important to build military ties to serve as "institutional ballasts" to sort out difficult issues between states.[28]

But the emergence of Chinese security partnerships in the region also raises some profound challenges. The first is the lack of transparency about how some aspects of these partnerships are formed on both the part of Beijing and some Southeast Asian states. Of particular note are activities related to the Chinese use of strategic facilities, which have then sparked fears about the rise of military or dual-use outposts in Southeast Asia, with several cases in recent years from Kuantan Port in Malaysia to Kyaukpyu in Myanmar. Allegations of the shadowy nature of activities in some of these cases, such as the controversy about a Chinese military base in Cambodia, have raised questions about not just their intent, but the extent to which Chinese partnerships in general pose a threat to regional security.[29] When combined with other trends, such as intensifying U.S.-China competition, increasing scrutiny on China's Belt and Road Initiative, and broader concerns about governance in the region, the transparency challenge is clearly visible to all.

Second, the advancement of China's ties with Southeast Asian countries in the security realm has raised questions about whether this may only further increase Beijing's leverage on them which could then be used against them when tensions emerge. Though the development of Chinese strategic partnerships with Southeast Asian states is at times framed as part of a broader advancement of ties, it is also true that it can be perceived as a double-edged sword – where deepening relations in that realm also provide Beijing with additional pressure points to use against these same countries further down the line. China already has a track record of using restrictions on security engagement with Southeast Asian states to manage tensions, with publicized incidents including the cancelation of a military meeting with Vietnam over the South China Sea and the impounding of several military vehicles from Singapore, in addition to other levers of influence being used such as economic

coercion and influence operations.[30] And there are signs that fears of longer-term Chinese intentions are intensifying not just among Southeast Asian governments, but broader elite and popular perceptions as well.[31]

Third, certain manifestations of the rise of Chinese security partnerships also risk heightening the fears of countries that are already wary of Beijing's rising capabilities, with potentially adverse effects for regional security. With some influential countries in the region and beyond continuing to view the rise of Chinese security partnerships as part of Beijing's effort to build its own regional order at the expense of existing aspects of it – whether it be U.S. alliances and partnerships or ASEAN-led institutions – there is a heightened risk that this may fuel mistrust and insecurity to the detriment of regional peace and stability at the expense of all involved. We have already seen such exclusivist fears at play as these partnerships have developed, be it with the cancelation of U.S. exercises with Cambodia as it intensified collaboration with China or the official articulation of security partnerships within broader conceptions of a China-led order by Chinese officials themselves.[32]

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION

In order for the region to fully contend with the implications of the rise of Chinese strategic partnerships in Southeast Asia, policymakers from China, Southeast Asia, as well as other interested parties will have to manage the mix of opportunities and challenges that arise from them. This is especially the case given the wider trends in Asian security at play, including China's growing role, growing concerns about governance challenges in Southeast Asia itself, and uncertainties about the future of the regional security architecture including the role of ASEAN and intensifying U.S.-China competition.

First, the rise of Chinese security partnerships in Southeast Asia reinforces the need for greater transparency about these activities that occur on the part of China and Southeast Asian states. While there are certainly legitimate reasons for keeping aspects of certain government activities private, it is also true that in some cases, the lack of awareness about details and specifics has only increased the potential for misunderstanding both within some of these countries themselves as well as by outside actors. A case in point is fears about a potential Chinese base in Cambodia, which continue to be fanned amid the lack of public transparency on the part of the Cambodian government. This is only the latest in a series of related controversies.[33]

Part of the responsibility for this rests with Southeast Asian governments themselves. For instance, true transparency and accountability can only occur with advances made in areas such as inclusiveness in decision making processes before countries enter into forms of security collaboration, and integrating a range of stakeholders such as non-governmental actors to facilitate a meaningful whole of society approach far more than is the case today.[34] China, for its part, also has its own work to do on the transparency side. The reality is that the lack of transparency regarding China's military activities more generally will continue to cast a pall on the nature of its security arrangements unless Beijing accelerates efforts to address this issue.

Second, China and Southeast Asian states need to work amongst themselves and also with other interested parties to ensure that aspects of these security partnerships can be integrated into wider, existing regional arrangements to address the concern that

they are operating in an exclusive fashion to the detriment of the regional order. Irrespective of the veracity and validity of individual concerns expressed, the reality is that, without due attention paid to integration, Chinese security partnerships in Southeast Asia will face a perception challenge if they are viewed exclusively from the prism of Beijing's perceived desire to promote a China-centric order at the expense of U.S. alignments and ASEAN-led security institutions.[35]

Some of this integration work is already ongoing, whether it be the holding of informal meetings between China and Southeast Asian defense ministers on the sidelines of ASEAN meetings rather than on a separate and exclusive basis, or the conducting of a maritime exercise between China and Southeast Asian states under an ASEAN banner in 2019, rather than just with a few countries in a more divisive way. But there is more that can be done on this score. Integrating other actors occasionally in certain arrangements such as exercises would be one way to accomplish this, much like the U.S. and Southeast Asian states have done for China by integrating it into aspects of the Cobra Gold exercises which began as part of the U.S.-Thailand alliance.[36] And while rising U.S.-China competition certainly is a complicating factor to some integrative efforts, it is also worth recalling that even in such an environment, there are certain security areas, including non-traditional security issues such as battling pandemics and addressing natural disasters, on which Washington, Beijing, and the region would stand to benefit from collaboration.[37]

Third, China and Southeast Asian states should work together to address the glaring trust deficit that remains between Beijing's efforts to partner with Southeast Asian states on security issues and its assertiveness on some fronts that raise questions about its current behavior and future role as a major power. Far from being just an issue for outside actors, both Chinese and Southeast Asian officials have themselves admitted that this "trust deficit" challenge exists, and it is clear that this is frustrating China's attempts to make inroads with ASEAN states in the security realm as well.[38] Even within the broad architecture of the ASEAN-China relationship currently, despite the hype around China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Vision 2030 that both sides agreed to in November 2018, Southeast Asian states have continued to respond warily to Chinese initiatives because of this so-called trust deficit.[39]

Doing so is obviously easier said than done. It will of course partly require continued investment in efforts such as confidence-building measures in order to enhance understanding and familiarity between security institutions as part of the joint vision that China and ASEAN have charted out as part of their strategic partnership to 2030.[40] But unless these measures are accompanied by adjustments in behavior in flashpoints such as in the South China Sea on the part of Beijing in particular, it is difficult to see this trust deficit being addressed in a sustainable way, and for ASEAN and China to truly get to a point where joint initiatives in the security realm see further progress in the coming years more generally.

Fourth, turning to the role of other interested parties, the rise of these partnerships also puts the spotlight on the need for adequate capacity-building for the Southeast Asian states concerned so they can at least make effective and informed decisions as they pursue the relationships they desire in line with their own national interests. Especially in some of the lesser developed Southeast Asian countries, there is at times the lack of material resources and human capital

necessary to weigh costs and benefits inherent in security proposals as well as to debate various options to get to the best outcome. Indeed, within ASEAN-led defense institutions such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus themselves, there has already been a recognition of these capacity-related issues across several security areas, including maritime security and cybersecurity.

Some of this capacity-building work is already ongoing by various actors, whether it be general efforts addressing a range of areas such as Japan's Vientiane Vision initiative or more area-specific ones such as the United States' Maritime Security Initiative. But the vast capacity shortfalls that exist means that much more can be done by a wider range of actors and that efforts should also be made to properly direct, streamline, and coordinate these myriad initiatives.[41] More generally, capacity-building in the security realm is also a useful line of effort to be taken up jointly by the various countries involved in the intensifying conversation around a free and open Indo-Pacific.[42] After all, the focus here is not just about narrowly affecting the alignment choices of specific Southeast Asian states, but ensuring that they have the ability to make their own decisions without coercion and that the partnerships they enter into are consistent with the standards that benefit the region as a whole.

Fifth and finally, interested parties also need to ensure that they are continuing to do their best to provide Southeast Asian states with a range of options to ensure that they have adequate choices when pursuing forms of security collaboration and that they are fully aware about the costs and benefits of the various alternatives before them. As was noted previously, in some cases, countries that are pursuing forms of security cooperation with China at least partly doing so because of the lack of alternatives or the value proposition inherent in Beijing's offerings, rather than some sort of fixed ideological predisposition towards China as a country. More broadly, if we do see more cases in the coming years where Southeast Asian states are pursuing aspects of security collaboration with China, it is only logical that there would need to be a conversation between them and other external partners about what this would mean for their defense relations.

To be sure, there is already some movement on this front, with Japan gradually playing a greater security role in Southeast Asia and a number of countries, including Russia and India, attempting to be more active as well, making it much less of a U.S.-China picture than more sensationalist accounts can sometimes portray things to be. But more can be done by a wider range of actors to better tailor individual deals in ways that preserve their profitability but also better address the needs of the countries involved, especially when it comes to costs and other components such as training as part of package deals. Alongside this, countries which have concerns about China should also be upfront with Southeast Asian states about how their pursuit of specific forms of collaboration with Beijing may affect ties with them, rather than doing so after the fact or in an inconsistent manner. Just as Southeast Asian states have a right to choose their own alignments, external partners also have a right to determine whether they are comfortable working with Southeast Asian countries that make choices which they do not agree with and can adversely impact their own security and broader national interests.

CONCLUSION

A series of drivers over the past few years have led China to further develop aspects of its emerging security partnerships with Southeast Asian states or to pursue endeavors with respect to newer realms of this, and indications are that this is a trend that is likely to persist into the future. While this is not entirely new and is to be expected given China's growing role in Southeast Asia and the world more generally, it also presents opportunities and challenges to regional security that these countries as well as other interested parties need to manage by themselves and in collaboration with other entities both at home and abroad. Doing so will not be easy – it will likely require clarifying the shape of these partnerships amid uncertainties and suspicions; integrating them into other bilateral and regional activities and existing institutions; addressing outstanding trust issues between China and Southeast Asian states; and shaping a wider normative environment conducive to all nations being free to make their own choices in a fair and transparent manner.

This is not to suggest that it will be an impossible task to accomplish. There are already some conversations among Southeast Asian states about how to contend with these challenges, and this can be supplemented with other useful ideas as well from not just governments, but also other supporting research and civil society organizations as well. There are also other countries and institutions whose expertise and capabilities can be brought to bear as well to create the right conditions to support the kind of relationships, norms, and institutions that make sense for not just the countries involved, but for wider regional stability as well. After all, it is the focus on this broader perspective, rather than a narrow emphasis on what a single actor is doing, that will prove most conducive for realizing a vision for the region that is inclusive, free, and open.

Prashanth Parameswaran is a Global Fellow at the Wilson Center's Asia Program. He is also Senior Editor at The Diplomat, where he writes on Southeast Asian political and security issues, Asian defense affairs, and U.S. foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific.

Endnotes

1 Prashanth Parameswaran, *ASEAN's Role in a U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy*. Washington, D.C., Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, September 2018.

2 For a broader treatment of a comparative perspective on strategic partnerships between the United States, China, and other key regional states, see: Prashanth Parameswaran, "Explaining US Strategic Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific Region: Origins, Developments, and Prospects," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Volume 36, No. 2, August 2014, pp. 262-289.

3 Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, "China's Position Paper on the New Security Concept,". https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/xw/t27742.htm.

4 Prashanth Parameswaran, "Malaysia's Approach to a Rising China," in *Asia's Quest for Balance: China's Rise and Balancing in the Indo-Pacific* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), pp. 54-67; Xinhua, "China, Vietnam Hold Joint Navy Patrolling," April 27, 2006.

5 Xinhua, "China Launches Joint Patrols Along the Mekong River with Neighbors," December 10, 2011.

6 The Golden Triangle is a shorthand used to describe an area where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar meet that has historically been at the center of Southeast Asia's drug trade.

7 Author conversation with Chinese official, Beijing, October 2018; Prashanth Parameswaran, "ASEAN's Divided Approach to China's Rise," *The Asan Forum*, October 6, 2016.

8 Penghong Cai, "ASEAN's Defense Diplomacy and China's Military Diplomacy," *Asia Policy*, Number 22, July 2016, pp. 89-95.

9 Author conversation with Southeast Asian official, Brunei, July 2018.

10 For more, see: Philippine Coast Guard, "2nd Joint Coast Guard Committee Meeting Held in China," October 16, 2018; Prashanth Parameswaran, "What's Behind the New China-Philippines Coast Guard Exercise Chatter?" *The Diplomat*, March 15, 2017.

11 Author conversation with Southeast Asian official, Kuala Lumpur, June 2018.

12 See, for instance: Feng Zhang, "China's New Thinking on Alliances," *Survival*, Volume 54, Issue 5, pp. 129-148; October 1, 2012; and Yan Xuetong, "China Should Reconsider its Nonalignment Strategy," China.org.cn, June 5, 2011.

13 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation," January 11, 2017; Prashanth Parameswaran, "China: New White Paper, Old Asia Conundrum," *The Diplomat*, February 4, 2017.

14 Author conversation with Chinese official, Beijing, October 2017.

15 While the actual proceedings, which the author attended, were dominated by the topic of heightened U.S.-China competition, the theme nonetheless reflected China's emphasis on more publicly emphasizing efforts to construct newer forms of security collaboration beyond alliances.

16 For an instance of a more regionwide assessment of China's defense networks, see Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index, which uses defense networks as one of eight measures of national capabilities. The 2019 iteration of the report found that while Beijing's ranking on defense networks was still low at ninth place, it still rose by three places relative to the previous year.

17 See, for instance: Feng Zhang, "China's New Thinking on Alliances," *Survival*, Volume 54, Issue 5, pp. 129-148; October 1, 2012; Yan Xuetong, "China Should Reconsider its Nonalignment Strategy," China.org.cn, June 5, 2011.

18 Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, "Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications," National Defense University Press, Washington, D.C., July 2017.

19 Author conversation with Chinese official, Beijing, October 2018.

20 The evolution of the ASEAN-China Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting thus far is in fact a more complex one: China had pushed earlier on for an exclusive, separate meeting as the United States sought to intensify its own engagement with ASEAN on this score, but thus far the direction has been towards a meeting on the sidelines of ASEAN meetings. Author's conversation with Southeast Asian official, Jakarta, February 2019.

21 Ibid.

22 The designation referred to here is drawn from the language of the China-Philippines joint statement following the summit meeting last November, which refers to "comprehensive strategic cooperation" rather than a "comprehensive strategic partnership." See: Xinhua, "Full text of China-Philippines Joint Statement," November 21, 2018.

23 Prashanth Parameswaran, "What's in the New China-Singapore Deepening Military Ties Talk?" *The Diplomat*, May 30, 2019.

24 Author conversation with Southeast Asian official, Kuala Lumpur, June 2018.

25 See: Xinhua, "China Concludes Joint Naval Exercise with Southeast Asian Countries," April 27, 2019; and, Minnie Chan, "China Begins Joint Naval Drills with Six Southeast Asian Nations," *South China Morning Post*, April 26, 2019.

26 Per figures drawn from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, China is currently among the top three arms exporters for several Southeast Asian countries including Cambodia (1st); Myanmar (2nd); and Thailand (3rd). For more on the Malaysia LMS and Thailand battle tanks deals, see: Prashanth Parameswaran, "Malaysia's Approach to a Rising China," in *Asia's Quest for Balance: China's Rise and Balancing in the Indo-Pacific*, and Prashanth Parameswaran, "What's Next for China-Thailand Defense Ties," The Diplomat, June 18, 2018.

27 Xinhua, "China Military Strategy," May 27, 2015; Rory Medcalf and Raoul Heinrichs, "Crisis and Confidence: Major Powers and Maritime Security in Indo-Pacific Asia," Lowy Institute for International Policy, June 10, 2011.

28 Ng Eng Hen, "Remarks at the 2018 Xiangshan Forum," Beijing, October 25, 2018.

29 For an instance of this, see: Department of Defense, I*ndo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, June 1, 2019, pg. 13. For additional context, see: Prashanth Parameswaran, "What's in the China-Cambodia Military Base Hype?" The Diplomat, November 24, 2018.

30 Shirley Zhao, "Hong Kong Seizure of Armored Vehicles Has Taught Us A Lesson, Singapore's Defense Chief Says," *South China Morning Post*, December 30, 2016; Mike Ives, "China Cancels Military Meeting With Vietnam Over Territorial Dispute," New York Times, June 21, 2017.

31 To take just one example, a survey conducted by the Singapore-based think tank ISEAS-Yusof

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32 Agence France-Presse, "Cambodia Says China Not Behind Scrapped 'Angkor Sentinel' US Military Drill," January 17, 2017; Kristien Bergerson, "China's Efforts to Counter U.S. Forward Presence in the Asia-Pacific," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Report, March 15, 2016; Ian Storey, "China's Bilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," *Asia Security*, Volume 8, Issue 3, 2012, pp. 287-310.

33 Author interview with Southeast Asian official, Jakarta, February 2019.

34 For more on this, see: Prashanth Parameswaran, *Managing the Rise of Southeast Asia's Coast Guards*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, February 2019.

35 Conversation with US official, Washington, D.C., March 2018.

36 Indeed, when China was first integrated into the Cobra Gold exercises back in 2014, some Thai officials saw this as an effort that may help reduce mistrust between Beijing and Washington. Author conversation with Southeast Asian officials, Bangkok, December 2018.

37 For more on this, see: Abraham M. Denmark, "US Strategic Rebalancing and the Rise of China," in Minjiang Li and Kalyan M. Kemburi, *New Dynamics in US-China Relations: Contending for the Asia-Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2014).

38 See for instance: The Jakarta Post, "Beijing Admits China Lacks Trust, Vows to Try Harder," January 16, 2019; and Agnes Anya, Dian Septiari, and Rachmadea Aisyah, "China, Indonesia 'Need to Build Strategic Trust,'" The Jakarta Post, November 28, 2018.

39 ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision 2030," November 14, 2018. Thus far, despite China's promotion of the two specific initiatives, the community of common destiny language has yet to be adopted officially by ASEAN, while there has been no movement towards the signing of the treaty.

40 Guo Yanjun (ed), 2030 *Vision for ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership: Perspectives from Think Tanks* (London: World Scientific, 2018).

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42 For more on this point, see: Prashanth Parameswaran, *ASEAN's Role in a US Indo-Pacific Strategy*. Washington, D.C., Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, September 2018.