

ASEAN SOLIDARITY EXERCISE 2023 (ASEX 2023) IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Image source: CNN.¹

Introduction

From 5-7 September 2023, Indonesia hosted the 43rd Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Jakarta,² and just after a fortnight i.e., from September 19-23 Indonesia hosted the first-ever ASEAN Joint Military Exercise, conducted in the South Natuna Sea.³ This is the southernmost area of the South China Sea and lies well within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Indonesia and has strategic importance due to its close proximity with the vital Strait of Malacca. The exercise was codenamed as ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 (ASEX 2023).⁴ Previously, the Indonesian military spokesperson Julius Widjojono announced that the exercise will not involve any training related to naval combat operations and

1 "ASEAN to Hold First Joint Military Exercise in the South China Sea," CNN, June 8, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/08/asia/asean-military-exercises-south-china-sea-indonesia-intl-hnk/index.html>.

2 The U.S. and China will also take part in the ASEAN Summit as ASEAN Dialogue Partner. Please see: "Indonesia ASEAN Chairmanship 2023," ASEAN Indonesia 2023, 2023, <https://asean2023.id/en>.

3 Devianti Faridz, "ASEAN Planning First Joint Military Drills With Eye on China," Voice of America, June 22, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/asean-planning-first-joint-military-drills-with-eye-on-china/7149478.html>.

4 Rahman Yaacob, "ASEAN's First Joint Military Exercise," Lowy Institute, September 26, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/asean-s-first-joint-military-exercise>.

said that “This exercise is focused not on combat;”⁵ instead, it will focus on preparing ASEAN members for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR). It was also mentioned that the main purpose of the exercise will be to strengthen ASEAN centrality and unity. However, in June, the Indonesian Navy announced a slight change regarding the location of the drills, and said that the exercise will take place in South Natuna Sea, away from China’s nine-dash-line or its historic maritime boundary.⁶

ASEAN-China Bilateral Trade

It is noteworthy that both ASEAN and China are close partners and maintain a bilateral trade of almost 507.9 billion USD till 2019 – a total of 18 percent of ASEAN’s total trade, making China the single largest trading partner of ASEAN.⁷ Despite their mutual concerns in the South China Sea, the ASEAN members and China are also engaged in the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) since November 2002.⁸ Alternatively, it can be well argued that ASEAN and China have a complex interdependence and mutual interests. Any naval exercise in the South China Sea could not be interpreted as the precursor or indicator of a military alliance.

ASEAN and Maritime Exercises

It is worthy to mention here that previously China has conducted military exercises with some ASEAN countries such as Malaysia since 2014 called *Aman Youyi* (Peace and Friendship). China conducted maritime exercises with Thailand as well and a trilateral exercise including China, Malaysia, and Thailand was held in 2018.⁹ On the other hand, the ASEAN held a joint maritime exercise with the U.S. Navy in September 2019 known as ASEAN-U.S. Maritime Exercise (AUMX).¹⁰

⁵ “Indonesia Moves Site of ASEAN Military Drills Away from South China Sea,” Reuters, June 22, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-moves-site-asean-military-drills-away-south-china-sea-2023-06-22/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “ASEAN-China Economic Relation,” The ASEAN Secretariat, 2020, <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-china-economic-relation/>.

⁸ “China FTA Network,” Ministry of Commerce, People’s Republic of China, 2023, <http://fta.mofcom.gov.cn/topic/chinaasean.shtml>.

⁹ Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan, “China to Join Expanded Military Drills with SE Asian Countries,” Global Times, May 28, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1291521.shtml>.

¹⁰ “First ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise Successfully Concludes,” Commander, U.S. 7th Fleet, September 6, 2019, <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/1954403/first-asean-us-maritime-exercise-successfully-concludes/http%3A%2F%2Fwww.c7f.navy.mil%2FMedia%2FNews%2FDisplay%2FArticle%2F1954403%2Ffirst-asean-us-maritime-exercise-successfully-concludes>.

The ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise (ACMEX) was held in October 2018 and it was the result of ASEAN-China Defence Ministers' "informal meeting" held in February earlier that year.¹¹ It is noteworthy that previously ASEAN and China conducted exercises together and also invited other navies under the framework of ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus).

Analysis and Examination

The South Natuna Sea as well as North Natuna Sea are very important waters, especially for the seaborne trade and being part and parcel of Indonesia's territorial waters. Also, the Strait of Malacca is located close to these waters. The ASEAN countries aim to prepare their navies and coast guards to have interoperability and better synergy to avoid accidents and unintended consequences. To achieve such peaceful objectives, the navies need to train together so they could fight better.¹²

According to the Commercial Crime Services (CCS) and International Maritime Bureau (IMB), the Strait of Malacca, South China Sea, South Natuna Sea, and North Natuna Sea are "piracy and armed robbery prone areas" (Figure 1).¹³ Such areas being hotspots of seaborne piracy are a direct danger to the international trade. The pirates could hijack slow-moving large vessels and their attacks could lead to undesired confrontation among nations. These circumstances require the ASEAN navies to have better communications and interoperability to mitigate such unconventional threats. ASEAN member states Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore are part of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and have taken part in the Combined Task Force 150 and Combined Task Force 151 to ensure maritime security and counter piracy in the high seas.¹⁴

¹¹ "Why ASEAN Should Hold More Maritime Drills with China and US," Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore., 2018, <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/publication/why-asean-should-hold-more-maritime-drills-with-china-and-us/>.

¹² It was argued that the more armed forces train, the better they could fight. Please see: Major Ben McLennan, "Train Better, Fight Best," Australian Army Journal IX, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 55–74.

¹³ "IMB Piracy & Armed Robbery Map 2023," Commercial Crime Services, 2023, <https://www.icc-ccs.org/index.php/piracy-reporting-centre/live-piracy-map/>.

¹⁴ "Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) – A 38-Nation Naval Partnership," Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), 2023, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/>.

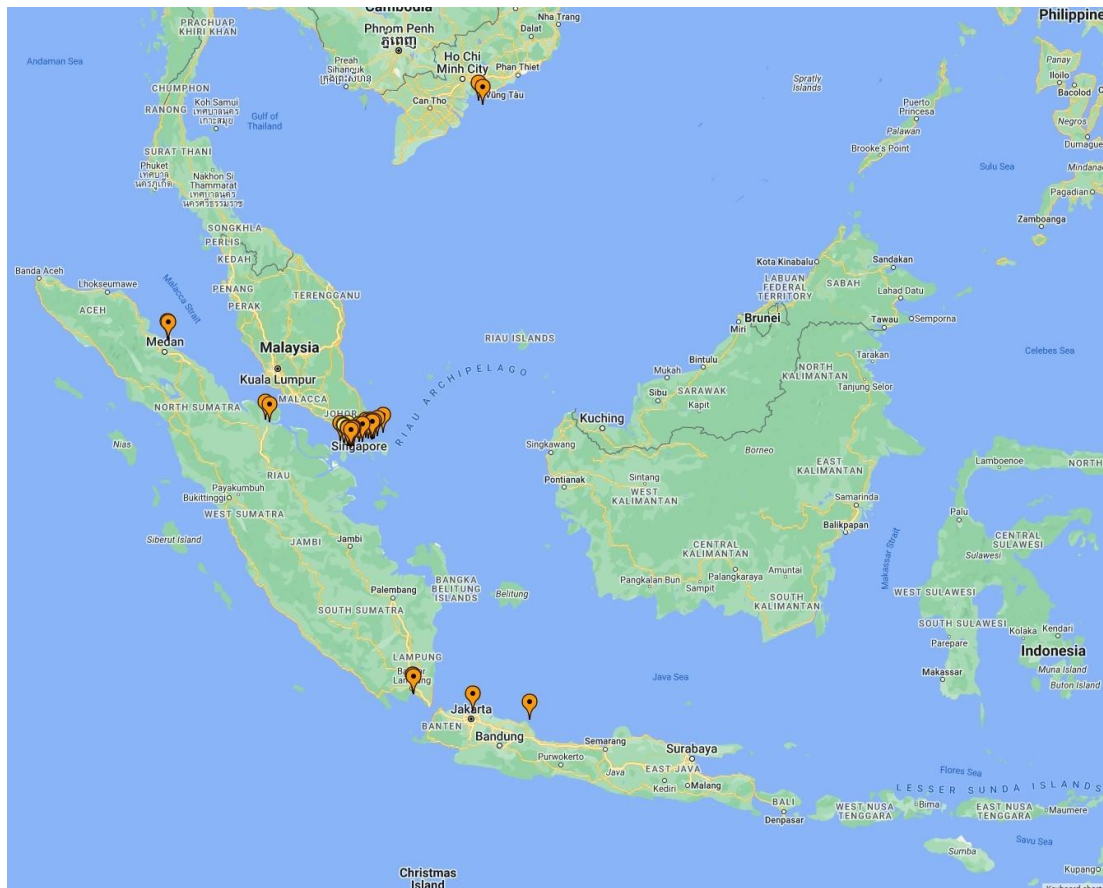


Figure 1: The sea piracy-related incidents during the year 2023, in the vicinity of ASEAN members.¹⁵

Conclusions

In hindsight, the ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 (ASEX 2023) is a welcome step towards building confidence among nations, avoiding accidents at sea, mitigating untoward situations, and to prepare for countering piracy operations. Understandably, maritime exercises have played and continue to play an important role in bringing nations together. It is pivotal to understand that such exercises are conducted for peaceful purposes and are helpful in fostering fruitful collaboration among nations. Interpreting such exercises as indicators of a growing military alliance against a nation or a group of nations could be misleading and should be discouraged.

¹⁵ "IMB Piracy & Armed Robbery Map 2023."