

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1451
May 10, 2007

The Trap of China-ASEAN Military Cooperation

Walter Lohman

In a speech last week in Washington, D.C., marking the 40th anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong, urged, “We do not want to see the growing cooperation among the Asian countries lead to rival blocs that split the Pacific down the middle.” A proposed ASEAN-China military partnership has the potential to do just that, aligning the democracies of America, Japan, and Australia on one side, and China and ASEAN on the other.

Regional economic integration is a good thing. It is a product of globalization and the drive to create efficient commercial supply chains. ASEAN is situated in a hyper-competitive neighborhood and is comprised of mostly small countries, measured by size or national income. Regional economic integration and outreach are vital to these countries’ economic advancement.

As it develops economic partnerships, ASEAN routinely plays partners off one another. In conversations with American officials and businesses and in speeches and remarks to the press, ASEAN leaders take pains to note that ASEAN has options other than the U.S. This tactic has historically been an effective one. In the current Asia-Pacific context, as long as it is applied in the economic and business spheres, it is difficult to find fault with it. When this tactic is used in military affairs, however, it is an entirely different matter.

There have been several press reports this year of Chinese proposals for joint military exercises with ASEAN and ASEAN’s receptivity to these proposals.

Today, a newspaper article quoted the commander of the U.S. Marine forces in the Pacific, characterizing China’s military bid as a “positive overture,” leading one to conclude that these reports must be more than good copy or the exercise of journalistic license.

ASEAN is in a difficult position. China has very effectively engaged it since reaching a temporary political understanding on the South China Sea several years ago. The “ASEAN-way” is consensus-based and accommodating. This works against rejecting an overture from an increasingly close partner like China. China’s charm offensive in Southeast Asia has essentially put ASEAN in a box.

But as difficult as it may be, ASEAN must draw a line at joint military exercises.

The U.S. has two treaty allies in ASEAN—Thailand and the Philippines—and it has a very close security partner in Singapore. Joint China-ASEAN military exercises raise serious concerns about the transfer of U.S. military doctrine, technology, and techniques. Confidence-building “workshops,” as discussed by ASEAN and China in January of this year, are one thing, but any cooperation that has the potential to make the PLA a better fighting force is a major problem for the U.S.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1451.cfm

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Beyond security and the operational concerns associated with joint exercises, there is the much bigger symbolism involved, the significance of which is not likely lost on the Chinese. It will also not go missed by observers in Washington.

American policymakers have a general affinity for democracies. The deepening of the U.S. alliances with Japan and Australia is a natural response to concerns about the emergence of China as a real threat to regional stability and democratic values.

By contrast, particularly on Capitol Hill, the verdict on ASEAN is still out. Its members run the gamut of political systems. On the one side of the spectrum is democratic Indonesia. On the other end is Burma, a constant thorn in ASEAN's side and an impediment to ASEAN's relationships with the rest of the world. Thanks to its 2006 coup, Thailand and its military government have joined anti-democratic Burma as ASEAN's most visible representative country.

ASEAN has had a tough time attracting attention from official Washington. If attention is what

ASEAN is after, then moving the balancing game into the security sphere will finally get it. The attention, however, will not come from their friends among the economic literati. It will not come from business people. And it will not result in a redoubling of positive U.S. engagement. The newfound focus on ASEAN will come from policymakers in Washington whose sole concern, both short-term and long-term, is the security of the United States and whose principal concern in the Asia-Pacific region is China. Their attention will not be positive.

China's rise is the defining foreign policy challenge of the era. ASEAN's reaching out to China to build its market appeal threatens no one. But aligning itself with the truly threatening aspect of this challenge—the modernization of the Chinese military and, by association, its aggressive foreign policy—will ultimately put ASEAN on the other side of a divided Pacific.

—Walter Lohman is Director of the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.

