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Chinese Security Cooperation with Southeast Asian Countries: Implications for U.S. Naval Operations

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Research Question and Main Findings

- Question: How has China's security cooperation with Southeast Asia evolved and developed in the last five years?
- China has deepened its security cooperation with virtually every country in the region, and in almost all types of activities
- Although security cooperation is deepest with countries like Thailand and Cambodia, even countries such as Vietnam, which are more reluctant and have maritime disputes with China, have also deepened cooperation
- China has also deepened cooperation with U.S. allies such as Thailand and U.S. partners such as Singapore and Malaysia
- U.S. Navy must adapt and adjust to a regional security environment in which China is conducting exercises and selling arms to countries in Southeast Asia



ASEAN-China Defense Ministers' Meeting (2018)



1st ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise (2018)

Drivers for China's Proactive Approach to Security Cooperation with Southeast Asia

- Gradual and natural expansion from relations that were focused on economic and political cooperation
- Recognition that focus on economic engagement was only providing limited spillover into security affairs
- Territorial disputes and improving security cooperation as part of U.S. pivot/rebalance showed China how far behind it was in regional security cooperation
- Xi Jinping support for proactive military diplomacy and security cooperation
- Perception of opportunity with weaker U.S. regional commitment under Trump administration

Major Areas of Deeper Security Cooperation

- Military exercises with most countries in the region
 - Most sophisticated exercises with Thailand and Singapore
 - 1st ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise held in 2018
- Increasing arms sales, including submarines to Thailand and maritime patrol vessels to Malaysia
- More port visits throughout region
- Annual Defense Ministers Meeting with ASEAN and annual bilateral defense dialogues with all ASEAN countries
- More active participation in regional security forums and hosting Xiangshan Forum



Chinese Defense Minister
Wei Fenghe at Shangri-
La Dialogue in Singapore

Explaining SEA Openness to Cooperation

- Desire to balance and maintain security ties with both China and the U.S.
- Cooperation with U.S. makes it difficult to say no to requests for cooperation with China
- Uncertainty about U.S. commitment to region makes cooperation with China more appealing

Areas for Further Research

- Comprehensive study of China's security cooperation with all 10 ASEAN members
- Comparison of U.S. and Chinese security cooperation with Southeast Asia
- Future analysis on implications for US Navy for different degrees of China's success in deepening security cooperation



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