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

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Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School

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## NPS NRP Executive Summary

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

Report Date: 12/24/2019 Project Number (IREF ID): NPS-19-N305-A

Naval Postgraduate School, School of International Graduate Studies



# NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM

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## NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

### CHINESE SECURITY COOPERATION WITH SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. NAVAL OPERATIONS

Period of Performance: 10/15-2018-10/14/2019

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### Project Summary

This project addressed the following research question: How has China's security cooperation with Southeast Asia evolved and developed in the last five years? In answering this question, we examined the security cooperation activities (such as exercises, arms sales, and high-level defense engagements), the drivers for China's turn to a more proactive approach to security cooperation, and regional countries' responses to Chinese proposals. We employed a mixed method social scientific approach to this question, using quantitative analysis to track the activities and qualitative analysis (including research trips to China, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Singapore) to better understand the Chinese and Southeast Asian perspectives. Our main findings indicate that China has deepened its security cooperation with virtually every country in the region, and in almost all types of activities. Although countries like Thailand and Cambodia enjoy very close security cooperation with China, even countries such as Vietnam, which are more reluctant to do so and have maritime disputes with China, have also deepened cooperation. Therefore, our research has determined that the U.S. Navy must adapt and adjust to a regional security environment in which China is conducting exercises and selling arms to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, including U.S. allies, and operating together with these countries in close proximity to U.S. operations.

**Keywords:** *China, Southeast Asia, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, security cooperation, military diplomacy, arms sales, multilateral security cooperation, Xiangshan Forum, Shangri-La Dialogue, hedging*

#### Background

For the last decade, U.S. government experts and academics have been focused on China's assertive behavior in Asia, particularly aggressive actions and land reclamation projects in the South China Sea. As a result of this focus, the existing literature has missed another important development: China's proactive security cooperation with Southeast Asia. Little systematic analysis of these activities has been conducted, as most experts dismiss this cooperation as low level, or assume that countries in the region will always chose the United States over China. Although there is not much existing literature on which to draw, the study began with two hypotheses: first, China has become more active in all areas and with all countries in its attempt to deepen security cooperation and second, China be most successful in deepening security cooperation with small countries on mainland Southeast Asia, and will be least successful with U.S. allies and key partners.

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Around 2015, China became more proactive in trying to deepen all forms of security cooperation with its neighbors in Southeast Asia. Some Chinese experts argue that this new activism was a natural and gradual development, and part of the 1990s frameworks of broad comprehensive cooperation, which included a vision for deeper security cooperation. Another argument highlights Chinese frustration with the limited effectiveness of economic cooperation leading to improved security relations, and since 2010, the shock of more intense territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and U.S. effective efforts to improve security relations with countries in the region. Moreover, as territorial disputes escalated and countries perceived China as assertive, China recognized the need to use security cooperation and military diplomacy to demonstrate it wasn't a threat and its neighbors would benefit from China's rise: with its growing military capability, China now had the capability to conduct exercises and sell more advanced weapons. Lastly, Xi Jinping has been especially supportive of more proactive military engagement in the region and the PLA has supported this position, sending high-level officials to regional security meetings.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to examine a neglected topic and fill a knowledge gap regarding China's security cooperation with Southeast Asia. Understanding this security cooperation and examining the implications is important for understanding how countries perceive China, how much room exists for further cooperation with the United States, and whether or not China is pulling U.S. allies and partners towards China. This study employed a mixed methods social scientific approach, including quantitative and qualitative analysis, and included systematic exploration of English-language and Chinese-language sources, and also included research trips to China, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Since 2015, our research shows that China has dramatically deepened security cooperation with Southeast Asia through bilateral and multilateral channels, including more military exercises, arms sales, port visits, and high-level engagements, which confirms this work's initial hypothesis. For example, China has conducted bilateral exercises with Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos. Although many of these exercises remain scripted, small, and focused on non-traditional security, this has provided the foundation for future cooperation. However, contrary to our hypothesis, China's exercises are the most frequent and sophisticated with Thailand (a U.S. ally) and Singapore (a close U.S. partner). In addition, China has also held multilateral exercises, such as the first ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise, involving all members of ASEAN. China has also sold arms to Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand for many years, but recently it has expanded such arms sales to include the sale of submarines to Thailand and maritime patrol vessels to Malaysia; this also runs counter to our original hypothesis. China has also worked to deepen cooperation through multilateral regional mechanisms, even creating the Xiangshan Forum, which is attended by most senior defense officials in the region.

Although there is a wide range of cooperation with China, with Thailand and Cambodia enjoying high levels and Vietnam much lower levels, all countries in Southeast Asia express similar themes in regarding their openness to such cooperation. Although Singapore is often referred to as the exemplar, all countries want to maintain balance and stable relations with the U.S. and China to benefit from both countries.

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Cooperating with China signals that these countries are not choosing a side, and also shows the U.S. that they welcome China's positive contributions in the region; when countries participate in an exercise or engagement with the U.S., the need to maintain balance then puts pressure on them to cooperate with China as well. It is also clear that as China has become more powerful and proactive in proposing security cooperation, it has become increasingly difficult for these countries to say no to China. Lastly, experts in several countries point to uncertainty about the Trump administration's commitment to the region as yet another reason to cooperate with China.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

These findings suggest several potential areas of future research that will be valuable for the U.S. Navy and broader academic community. First, a more comprehensive study is warranted to examine the security cooperation between China and each of the ten ASEAN countries, both through bilateral and multilateral challenges. Second, even though China has only recently become more active in security cooperation, a more comprehensive picture could be drawn by comparing the levels and types of security cooperation Southeast Asia has with the United States and with China. Third, analysis that posits different degrees of Chinese success in deepening security cooperation, and examines the implications for U.S. military operations and U.S. allies and partnerships in the region would also be beneficial.

### **Acronyms**

Association of Southeast Asian Nations      ASEAN