

Sang Kancil and the Eagle: *Cultivating Malaysia's Defense Capabilities*



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14. ABSTRACT Malaysia has longstanding ties with China, including subsidized infrastructure projects through China's Belt and Road Initiative, a 5G network with Huawei, and renewed a defense Memorandum of Understanding in 2016. But some have argued the Sino-Malaysian defense relationship has evolved slowly and is not as stable as it seems. Malaysia's 2019 Defense White Paper highlights several requirements to develop its armed forces, including an amphibious capability. The fusion of these factors presents an opportunity for the US to counter China's influence and broader ambitions in the South China Sea. USINDOPACOM must strengthen the American-Malaysian defense relationship by establishing a personnel exchange program and targeting billets to cultivate Malaysia's defense capabilities and boost their capacity. This approach has proven successful in countries like Colombia and the United Kingdom and can improve Malaysia's military standing in the region. While military exercises with Malaysia are beneficial, they are limited in time and do not create an enduring instructional environment that is key to producing the required advancements. Furthermore, a personnel exchange program would generate opportunities to augment Malaysia's capacity through recruitment, retention, and initial officer training. Seeds of Chinese distrust exist in Malaysia and building their armed forces will permit them to defend their sovereignty and territorial integrity against China's aggressions.				
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The Challenge

Norizal, a Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) Captain, scanned the satellite photos. They showed a Chinese survey ship, *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, and a handful of China Coast Guard (CCG) and Chinese militia escorts inside Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), surveying portions of their recent continental shelf claim.¹ The surface group had irritated Norizal's political leaders, challenging Malaysia's sovereignty. Some were not broadcasting their automatic identification systems, complicating the matter.² This scenario, he thought, was an example of the "incursions by foreign government vessels" they were referring to when they were drafting Malaysia's Defense White Paper, released in December of 2019.³ The incident started in early 2020 when a Petronas contracted drillship began surveying several oil and gas fields in their EEZ.⁴ The *Haiyang Dizhi 8* and its shadowy escorts showed up shortly after that. His leadership deployed several RMN corvettes to monitor the group and defend Malaysia's sovereign claims around Luconia Shoals. But the attempt to deter China had quickly escalated. One corvette sank after it was rammed by a CCG vessel more than five times its size, and another incurred severe damage during a "shouldering" maneuver.⁵ Chinese state media was spinning the situation into a case of self-defense brought on by an aggressive RMN incursion into their legal territory as defined by the nine-dash line.⁶ The coincidental power and internet blackouts in Kuala Lumpur had obstructed Malaysia's attempt to set the record straight. Malaysia's intelligence on the event was lacking, but indications were the CCG vessels had the upper hand from the start, including the deployment of both surveillance and communication drones overhead. It was evident that Malaysia's wanting maritime capabilities had contributed to their corvettes' demise.

In the years leading up to the incident, Captain Norizal's political leadership trusted the renewed defense Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China would improve their

relations. Still, China did not provide any meaningful security cooperation and focused more on their Belt and Road Initiative. However, Norizal hoped Malaysia's current plan to shore-up its armed forces would change the calculus, but it would be a difficult road without assistance. A graduate of the U.S. Naval War College, Captain Norizal reflected on his seminar discussions and wondered, how could USINDOPACOM help Malaysia and effectively counter China in the South China Sea (SCS)? Could the United States assist the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) by cultivating their defense capabilities?

Introduction

China and Malaysia have longstanding ties that span the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic spectrum. Malaysia was the first member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to recognize China in 1974.⁷ Additionally, Malaysia has actively funded numerous infrastructure projects through China's Belt and Road Initiative, agreed to roll out a 5G network with China's Huawei communications company, and renewed a 2005 defense MoU with China in 2016.⁸ Making matters worse, the key U.S. policies in the Middle East conflict with Malaysian diplomatic views. Specifically, Malaysia has never formally recognized Israel and opposes U.S. sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁹ The current political landscape makes it challenging to win over the leadership of this majority Muslim nation.

Although Malaysia's connection with China looks strong, Bing has argued that the Sino-Malaysian defense relationship has evolved slowly and is not as stable as it seems.¹⁰ Furthermore, Malaysia's 2019 Defense White Paper highlights a desire to develop its defense capabilities and increase its capacity.¹¹ The fusion of these factors presents a unique opportunity for the United States. To counter China's influence with Malaysia and its broader ambitions in

the SCS, USINDOPACOM needs to strengthen the American-Malaysian defense relationship. First, USINDOPACOM must exploit the interstice by establishing a personnel exchange program and additional training prospects for Malaysia. Then utilize these new connections to cultivate Malaysia's defense capabilities and capacity. This approach will build Malaysia's potency as a regional military power and draw them away from China.

Plant the Seeds: Creating a Personnel Exchange Program and Training Opportunities

USINDOPACOM must ameliorate the MAF to help counter China in the SCS. Malaysia currently lacks the defense capabilities and capacity to deter Chinese aggression, like illegal survey operations in its EEZ.¹² But Malaysia's 2019 defense strategy lays out a comprehensive list of requirements to reform its military into one capable of protecting its "territorial integrity and sovereignty."¹³ Furthermore, the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy articulates that collaborating with partners and allies offers "the greatest possible strength for the long-term advancement of [the United States'] interests, maintaining favorable balances of power that deter aggression and support the stability that generates economic growth."¹⁴ Given that China's aggressive behavior is destabilizing the SCS region and the strategic landscape, it is in the United States' interest to help Malaysia bolster its armed forces.

Current U.S. and allied exercises limit the opportunities to advance the MAF's capabilities in any sizeable manner. The United States and Malaysia have a lengthy history of bilateral and multilateral engagements, including the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training exercise series since 1995 and counter-terrorism operations since 1985.¹⁵ Additionally, Malaysia's annual exercises with allies in the Five Powers Defense Arrangement (FPDA) stretch back to the 1970s.¹⁶ But the FPDA allies have only incorporated threats such as protecting EEZs

and illegal fishing into their drills since 2005.¹⁷ While the exercises provide the MAF an opportunity to enhance their skills with access to operational doctrine, advanced platforms, and equipment, they are limited in number.¹⁸ Consequently, they yield an inadequate amount of time for the United States and allies to appreciably pass along the required experience and professional knowledge to mature Malaysia's defense capabilities.

To ensure the MAF do not pose a challenge, China purposefully limits the scope of its military support to marginalize their capabilities. When juxtaposed with other Southeast Asian countries and the current American-Malaysian affiliation, the Sino-Malaysian defense relationship has evolved slowly, and it is not as healthy as it seems.¹⁹ Malaysia and China conducted their first military table-top exercise together in 2014 and have continued annually since then.²⁰ Although the renewed 2016 defense MoU touted an increase in security cooperation, most of China's assistance has been in the form of advancing Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief skillsets vice any military tactical training or intelligence sharing.²¹ Thus China's restrained military aid appears to be more of a vie for regional influence rather than any concerted effort to build Malaysia's armed forces.

Expanding Malaysia's defense capabilities clashes with China's security interests because of its desire to become a regional hegemon. China's nine-dash line denotes an aggressive claim of Chinese sovereignty that "does not accord with the international law of the sea."²² This claim directly impacts twelve Spratly Islands claimed by Malaysia and their surrounding body of water.²³ China's ongoing operations in the SCS harden its stance and are crucial to asserting a claim of sovereignty "under theories of historic title, customary international law, and [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea]."²⁴ Furthermore, Malaysia's inability to militarily challenge China over the assertions could legally benefit

China's argument.²⁵ According to Malaysia's Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah, "naval ships under the Royal Malaysian Navy are smaller than the Coast Guard vessels from China," which persistently operate around Malaysia's claims, and would be challenged in a contest with them.²⁶ Therefore boosting Malaysia's defense capabilities would counter China's objectives in the SCS and challenge its hegemonic aspirations.

Malaysia will work with the United States to expand its defense capabilities and capacity. Recognizing its armed forces are imperative to defending its territory and sovereignty from external threats, Malaysia knows it needs to enhance its naval capabilities due to rising tensions and the potential for conflagration in the SCS.²⁷ Furthermore, Malaysia likens itself to the "courageous and quick-witted" fable character known as "Sang Kancil," a mousedeer whose "spirit is exemplary for its smart and adroit [maneuvers] to survive."²⁸ This characterization underscores Malaysia's desire to seek opportunities and advance its interests, particularly when the U.S.-China power dynamics present favorable circumstances to influence its behavior.²⁹ Although Malaysia's democratic leaders continue to make policies and retorts against U.S. political positions, they continue "to quietly cooperate with the United States in defense and security."³⁰ Consequently, Malaysia will show a willingness to partner with the United States and fortify the competence of its armed forces.

Establishing a Malaysian personnel exchange program and additional training prospects can strengthen the MAF's defense capabilities and build their capacity. The U.S. Defense Personnel Exchange Program authorizes each Secretary of the Military Departments to manage a service-specific program but requires an international legal agreement to document each assignment.³¹ These Personnel Exchange Program assignments, or PEP tours, permit service members to assimilate into a host organization and "share the experience, professional

knowledge, and doctrine of the respective Services to the maximum extent permissible within existing laws and policies.”³² Thus USINDOPACOM can foster the MAF’s capabilities and capacities by focusing these tours and opportunities on Malaysia’s capability requirements.

The hindered Sino-Malaysian defense relationship offers a unique opportunity for the United States to counter China’s influence by expanding defense relations with Malaysia. USINDOPACOM must strengthen the MAF to help counter China in the SCS by constituting a Malaysian personnel exchange program and additional training prospects. Current U.S. and allied exercises are limited in their ability to develop Malaysia’s armed forces. Additionally, China’s engagements will not offer significant enhancements to their capabilities because they would clash with China’s security interests. Although their political leadership will continue to challenge U.S. policies, Malaysia will be willing to work with USINDOPACOM to create a program. However, the vital link will be tailoring these prospects to target the MAF’s exigent requirements.

Water the Garden: Maturing Malaysia’s Defense Capabilities and Capacity

Malaysia’s capability requirements are critical to deterring China’s SCS ambitions. Malaysia’s Defense White Paper identified ten capability requirements (see table below) that enable its forces to assume a defensive posture through detection, deterrence, and denial.³³ This list includes maritime strike, maritime sustainment, and amphibious operations, which are pivotal to deterring China’s objectives in the SCS. China has established a “near 24-hour presence” in Malaysia’s EEZ and extended continental shelf claim.³⁴ As stated previously, China’s continued operations in these areas harden its legal stance and are consequential to asserting a sovereignty claim. Consequently, Malaysia’s capability requirements are essential to challenge China’s

assertions militarily and deny them a legal foothold. Fortunately, the United States has experience forging allied and partner nations' capabilities and can effectively use this path to shape Malaysia's defensive stance in the region.

Malaysia's Defense Capability Requirements
Strengthening the MAF's defense intelligence
Developing Cyber Electromagnetic Activities (CEMA) capability
Enhancing Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) capability
Building Network Centric Operation (NCO)
Building Satellite Communication (SATCOM) for enhanced Joint Command and Control capability
Sustaining and enhancing the MAF Special Forces capability and operational tempo
Maritime Domain – Enhancing Maritime Strike and Maritime Sustainment capability
Air Domain – Enhancing Air Defense and Air Strike capability
Land Domain – Enhancing firepower, mobility, communications, logistic capability
Developing amphibious capability

Source: Malaysia's 2019 Defense White Paper³⁵

The United States has successfully used PEP tours and training to build allied and partner nation capabilities. Recently the British Royal Navy trained sailors aboard U.S. Navy aircraft carriers to reedify its expertise when the United Kingdom (UK) built its new *HMS Queen Elizabeth* class carrier.³⁶ Although large conventional-catapult and arrested-landing carriers were historically a central platform in the Royal Navy, they decommissioned their last one in 1979, losing resident expertise during the subsequent hiatus.³⁷ The Royal Navy signed a statement of intent with the U.S. Navy in January 2012, laying the groundwork for PEP tours that rapidly rebuilt the Royal Navy's tactical and operational flattop knowledge in preparation for operations in 2021.³⁸ This program has given the UK a jump-start in developing a strategic maritime power projection capability.

Additionally, the U.S. Army and U.S. Southern Command successfully used this approach to build key counter-insurgency capabilities within Colombia's army, as part of an effort known as Plan Colombia that ran from 1999 to 2015.³⁹ Under this plan, the U.S. Army

posted a noncommissioned officer on the Center of Military Education staff (the Colombian Sergeants Major Academy) to rotate between courses, assist with doctrine improvement and refine Colombian military capabilities.⁴⁰ Additionally, the U.S. Army posted an instructor and subject matter expert at the Lancero School, Colombia's special operations training center analogous to the U.S. Army Ranger School, to mature and refine doctrine, course objectives, training, tactics, and procedures. Furthermore, both instructors had Colombian counterparts stationed back in the United States.⁴¹ These efforts were crucial to building the special operations capabilities required to defeat the narcotics trafficking and terrorism forces within Colombia that threatened its democratic institutions. This program was so successful in maturing the Colombian army that it started to disseminate its training to other regional partners.⁴²

As seen through the UK and Colombian examples, USINDOPACOM must align PEP tours and training opportunities to Malaysia's capability requirements to accelerate their fruition. Several of Malaysia's requirements already align with existing U.S. exchange tours created with other partner nations, including maritime sustainment, logistics, air defense, and amphibious operations.⁴³ For example, Malaysia wants to inaugurate a Marine Corps and acquire an amphibious capability.⁴⁴ While Malaysia already participates in amphibious exercises with the U.S. Marine Corps, creating PEP tours is the logical next step to enhancing their forces. These opportunities already exist for other partner nations, such as Argentina, Peru, and the Netherlands.⁴⁵ A mature amphibious force would permit Malaysia to project power and "operate across air, land, and sea" while defending its littoral regions and archipelagos from potential antagonists like China.⁴⁶ Hence this approach can forge a Malaysian Marine Corps or capability

requirements in the other domains, abetting Malaysia's defensive posture and deterring China's aggressive behavior in the region.

Further opportunities exist to mature Malaysia's defense capacity. Assisting Malaysia's armed forces does not have to rest solely on their stated requirements. Malaysia's Defense White Paper discusses objectives to improve their "recruitment, career development and retention of personnel" in conjunction with its other requisites.⁴⁷ These aims align well with the tenets of the U.S. Navy's Sailor 2025 office.⁴⁸ USINDOPACOM could exploit this potential prospect to institute a liaison position with the U.S. Navy, exchanging best practices to build Malaysia's defense forces.

Additionally, Malaysia is reviewing and optimizing its Reserve Officer Training Unit (ROTU) to "increase the number of commissioned ROTU officers serving the Volunteer Forces."⁴⁹ USINDOPACOM could use this opportunity to leverage experience in DoD's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs. The US could expand its ROTC programs to incorporate Malaysian cadets for studies in U.S. universities and earn a commission in their respective armed service. Similar billets already exist for Malaysian cadets across the U.S. service academies.⁵⁰ Not only would this possibility increase Malaysia's volunteer forces, but it would augment its defensive posture and readiness against China.

Given the United States' successful history with PEP tours and training of military partners, USINDOPACOM could structure an exchange program to target and cultivate Malaysia's capability requirements and build capacity within its armed forces. This program would significantly strengthen the American-Malaysian defense relationship and deter China's ambitions in the SCS. Furthermore, this could have a secondary effect of driving a wedge between the Sino-Malaysian connection.

Harvest the Fruit: *Drifting Away from China*

Amending Malaysia's military will embolden its resolve against Chinese aggression in the SCS. Ever since Malaysia became a recipient of China's Belt and Road Initiative to fund its infrastructure projects, it has been less openly critical of China's actions in the SCS.⁵¹ At the same time, China's forays into Malaysia's EEZs and surrounding claims have not stopped, accounting for 89 of the 238 incursions between 2016 and 2019.⁵² Malaysia recognizes its armed forces are crucial to defending its sovereignty from external threats, and they are currently not in a position to stand up to China.⁵³ With the increased security cooperation, Malaysia's military will deter illegal activities and challenges to their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Accordingly, the bolstering of Malaysia's forces will give them confidence and encouragement to take a stronger stance against China's international law violations.

Malaysia's history makes it less likely to align itself with a major power. Since the independence of Malaya in 1957 and its official creation in 1963, Malaysia affixed its national security to an alliance with the UK under the Anglo-Malaya/Malaysian Defense Agreement (AMDA).⁵⁴ But the UK's 1967 verdict to remove its forces east of the Suez Canal and subsequent 1971 decision to officially terminate the AMDA and create the FPDA changed the dynamic.⁵⁵ Consequently, Malaysia rethought its security strategy and "started to embrace non-alignment and the [ASEAN] regionalism in its external outlook."⁵⁶ This stance has been central to Malaysia's policy longer than its official recognition of China. Moreover, the principle of "activist neutrality" is one of five core philosophies in its defense strategy.⁵⁷ Given Malaysia's history as a pawn in the era of colonialism, this principle demonstrates its intent to play the

midfield between the big powers without permanently alienating either side. While Malaysia's political leadership maintains a delicate balancing act, its military takes a much stronger stance.

Malaysia's military inherently does not trust China. "Uncertain big power relations" rank as the first of three national security challenges in their Defense White Paper.⁵⁸ Furthermore, despite Pew polls showing high popular support for China, Malaysia's military planners do not trust them according to diplomatic documents divulged on Wikileaks.⁵⁹ China's overtures toward Malaysia and its ASEAN neighbors send mixed signals and do not match up. On the one hand, China wants to increase defense security cooperation with ASEAN members through exercises and military sales. But on the other hand, it is slow to act on these promises and challenges ASEAN members' claims in the SCS through military force.⁶⁰ This dichotomy does not sit well with military planners tasked with defending their nation and sows distrust in their circles.

Malaysia will continue to embrace multilateral institutions over bilateral agreements. Before its independence, Malaysia was either occupied or under colonial-rule since the early 1500s by various European and Asian big powers.⁶¹ The transitory nature of these big powers throughout its history influences Malaysia's thinking concerning bilateral relations. Soon after the UK terminated the AMDA, Malaysia began to focus on multilateral institutions, adopting ASEAN as a cornerstone of its defense and pursuing "non-aligned and inter-regional potentials" while equally contributing to the global society.⁶² This attitude has been steadfast in Malaysia for nearly five decades, demonstrating it will not solicit bilateral alliances for fear of alienating the international community as a whole and, consequently, it will shy away from such agreements.

On the Contrary: *Charting a New Course*

Some may argue that, despite U.S. efforts, Malaysia will continue to be drawn closer toward China and seek their assistance. Given the close economic ties between both countries and China's broad support in the Malaysian populace, China will continue to deepen its relationship. Malaysia has a strong economic dependence on China through its Belt and Road Initiative, funding several projects throughout the country, including the Melaka Gateway, Kuantan Industrial Park, and Malaysian East Coast Rail Line.⁶³ Furthermore, Malaysians continue to demonstrate robust popular support for China in recent Pew polls.⁶⁴ These factors indicate the relationship between the two countries runs deep, and they will continue to draw closer together regardless of any U.S. efforts.

However, this argument fails to consider the strengthening of Malaysia's armed forces and its rising support for the United States. Growing the MAF's capabilities and capacity will alter the Sino-Malaysian power dynamic while vitalizing the U.S. relationship. Micheaux argues that Malaysia's economic intertwining with China as "sovereignty sold off on the cheap" was one of the key points that led to Mahathir Mohamad's party's election in 2018 and his subsequent appointment as Prime Minister.⁶⁵ Malaysians take pride in their independence and do not want to become one of China's puppets. A more robust defense will not only give Malaysia the ability to deter China's aggressive measures against its maritime claims, but it will provide them a firmer bargaining position in any future economic negotiations. Also, China's widespread support in the Pew polls fails to acknowledge the United States' increased popular support over the same window of time, which has doubled since 2007.⁶⁶ USINDOPACOM's

effort to boost the MAF will be seen as a positive by the democratic state and contribute to a further increase in U.S. popular support. This endeavor will fortify the American-Malaysian defense relationship to build Malaysia's potency as a regional military power, counter China's influence, and draw them away from China.

Conclusion

China's ambitions in the South China Sea and its sway over Malaysia can be countered by broadening the American-Malaysian defense affiliation. The hindered Sino-Malaysian defense relationship and Malaysia's publication of its defense capability requirements not only gives USINDOPACOM a window of opportunity but a roadmap to launch the growth journey with the Malaysian Armed Forces. The fusion of these factors presents a unique opportunity for the United States. The creation of personnel exchange programs and further training prospects with allies and partners have proven successful in countries like Colombia and the United Kingdom and can effectively boost Malaysia's key capabilities. While military exercises are useful in sharing doctrinal knowledge, they are limited in time and do not create an enduring instructional environment that is key to making the required advancements.

Furthermore, a program would open other opportunities to help Malaysia augment capacity through recruitment, retention, and initial officer training, something exercises cannot achieve. Lastly, given Malaysia's history, the United States cannot expect it to come fully into its corner. However, the seeds of Chinese distrust exist in Malaysia, and the United States can cultivate them to counter China's influence. The time is right to enhance the American-Malaysian defense relationship and the time to act is now.

Notes

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