

SEACAT2014: toward an enhanced US-ASEAN maritime security partnership by Justin Goldman and Koh Swee Lean Collin

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This year marks the 13th iteration of the *Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT)* exercise between navies of the US and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), namely Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Originally named *Southeast Asia Cooperation Against Terrorism* when first promulgated in 2002, this exercise was renamed in 2012 to reflect the complex and diverse array of maritime security issues in the region. Given the spate of tanker hijackings in the South China Sea, this expanded focus beyond counter-terrorism could not have been better timed. While there have been a number of successful hijackings in the South China Sea more recently, ASEAN navies have demonstrated the ability to share information and undertake swift and decisive action to foil some attacks. *SEACAT* information-sharing and coordinated response played a role even though ASEAN navies have long cooperated in maritime security issues.

ASEAN navies regard *SEACAT* as a valuable opportunity to foster interoperability, narrow operational differences, learn best practices, and promote confidence-building. While the May 2014 coup in Thailand forced the US Navy to cancel the *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)* exercise that was carried out bilaterally with the other five *SEACAT* participants, the Royal Thai Navy was able to take part in this multilateral training evolution, conducting both compliant and non-compliant boarding of vessels. Given the diversity among ASEAN navies' capabilities and concepts of operations, *SEACAT's* role in fostering greater interoperability cannot be underestimated. Sub-Lt. Wan Akmal Zaki, an officer on the Royal Malaysian Navy ship *KD Pahang*, which participated in *SEACAT2013*, noted that "The greatest benefit from this training is being able to apply our differences in culture, environment and communication as a training element to prepare us for the challenges of complaint boardings."

Emphasizing multilateral cooperation

During the inaugural ASEAN-US Defense Forum held in Honolulu in April this year, defense chiefs reflected on the multilateral response to the Malaysia Airline MH370 incident, which underscored the need for better information-sharing and coordinated response. This emphasis on information sharing and analysis at each step of the decision-making process was evident during *SEACAT2014*, from tracking to boarding of maritime Contacts of Interests (COIs).

Each of the six ASEAN navies executed boarding operations based on information supplied by the scenario coalition maritime domain awareness headquarters and task group. Liaison officers from all seven participating countries operated out of the Republic of Singapore Navy's Multinational Operations and Exercises Center, with the six regional countries in steady contact with their respective national headquarters. As the scenario unfolded, information was released in formats that officers standing watch in any operations center would encounter, such as Interpol notices, International Maritime Bureau reports, arrest reports, media reporting, and more.

At times, information was only sent to the liaison officer from one country. That was intended to reinforce the readiness to share information with counterparts from other countries to enhance shared maritime domain awareness. These officers then analyzed a plethora of sources – maritime patrol aircraft, surface tracking systems (including national coastal radars) and the Automatic Identification System. A decision must then be made to launch the visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) teams from each navy, focusing on the core competencies of maritime interdiction operations. The key objective of *SEACAT2014* was to work on the command and control challenge as liaison officers executed nation-to-nation hand-off of the COIs they were tracking, thereby contributing to a shared, coherent picture of maritime domain awareness.

A more holistic multi-agency approach

Even though civilian maritime law enforcement agencies such as the Singapore Police Coast Guard, have participated in the sea training component, this year the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) joined, the first involvement of a maritime law enforcement liaison officer in the command post exercise (CPX) component. This could herald the expansion of *SEACAT* iterations to include more ASEAN civilian maritime enforcement agencies. The need for a holistic, multi-agency approach to evolving maritime security challenges in Southeast Asia was emphasized by US Rear Adm. Charlie Williams, commander of the 7th Fleet's Task Force 73 and executive agent for *SEACAT2014*: "Coordination between navies, coast guards and marine police is a big part of getting after maritime security challenges, especially those that overlap with international and territorial waters."

Williams' remark was particularly noteworthy given simmering tensions in the South China Sea disputes. Civilian maritime law enforcement agencies have increasingly assumed a frontline role in maintaining law and order not only within territorial waters but also into extended maritime spaces such as Exclusive Economic Zones, which may overlap with neighboring countries' claims. In recent South China Sea flare-ups, civilian law enforcement vessels utilized various

forms of coercive actions against other coastguard-type patrols and fishermen, such as ramming of vessels and use of water cannon. The fatal shooting of a Taiwanese fisherman by Philippine Coast Guard personnel in the Balintang Channel in May 2013 demonstrated the real chance of resort to force of arms that could escalate tensions in disputed waters. In these circumstances, expanding *SEACAT* to include civilian maritime enforcement agencies helps to promote confidence-building in the geopolitically volatile region.

An enhanced ASEAN-US maritime security partnership

SEACAT2014 is also a milestone for enhanced ASEAN-US defense links under the US “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific region. The inaugural ASEAN-US Defense Forum was a notable first step, but the expanded scope of cooperation in *SEACAT* is especially timely. Not only does this signal US resolve in intensifying defense and security engagement with Southeast Asia, but it also demonstrates Washington’s desire to promote greater roles and responsibilities for ASEAN partners in tackling local maritime security challenges. This is sustaining and enhancing Washington’s position as the primary extra-regional security partner in Southeast Asia.

The Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) *USS Fort Worth* is scheduled to arrive in Singapore in late 2014, marking the start of a continuous LCS presence in the Asia-Pacific; the next LCS is expected to deploy in 2015. This vessel, whose modular mission packages could be configured for roles such as counter-piracy, is well suited to this kind of engagement with regional partners, and it should play a key role in *SEACAT2015*.

The enhanced, multilateral information-sharing and coordinated response fostered through *SEACAT* builds on wider, regional cooperation such as through the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus initiatives, which have undertaken a number of large-scale joint training and exercises, for instance the Maritime Security Field Training Exercise conducted in Sydney in October 2013. Joint training and exercises such as *SEACAT* enhance the ASEAN-US partnership, enabling it to deal with ever-evolving security challenges at sea. Such exchanges foster the interstate trust required for more effective information-sharing and a coordinated response to real-world crises in the maritime domain.

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