The Merits of the Five Power Defence Arrangements

Ralf Emmers
INTRODUCTION

SOUTHEAST Asia accommodates a complexity of security architectures, ranging from bilateral military arrangements (such as those with the US) to multilateral expressions of cooperative security, such as those based around the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Somewhere in between, minilateral defense coalitions – small groups intended to complement the more orthodox security formations – also play a role.

A notable example is the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), which has been part of the Southeast Asian security environment since 1971. Superseding the 1957 Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA), the FPDA membership has consisted of Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

The FPDA has sought, over the last 40 years, to complement and overlap with, rather than compete with or replace, the other forms of regional security architecture. In this sense, the merits of the FPDA are clear: although limited in role, it adds considerable flexibility and complementarity to the security framework of Southeast Asia.

THE COLD WAR AND AFTER

The FPDA emerged from Britain’s withdrawal “East of Suez” and subsequent decision to maintain some military engagement in the region. So, in April 1971, the defense ministers of the five nations met and concluded the formation of this new security grouping. Unlike AMDA, the FPDA was restricted to mere consultations: the security of the two Southeast Asian nations was simply linked to consultative defense arrangements with the other three powers. The FPDA would not provide concrete security guarantees.

Further, the original AMDA tripartite military structures were gradually denuded during the 1970s, which meant that the US presence in the region came to be seen by Singapore and Malaysia as the primary source of countervailing power to possible malign hegemonic aspirations in the region. Similarly, the organization’s structure and activities remained limited in the 1970s and 1980s; to put it simply, the FPDA remained under-institutionalized. Nonetheless, analysts have often referred to the political and psychological deterrence provided by the FPDA, while the arrangements were also expected to play a confidence-building role in Malaysian-Singaporean relations.

In the years following the end of the Cold War, however, the role of the FPDA was deepened and strengthened. Today, it constitutes a flexible and complementary form of minilateralism in Southeast Asia.

Although often overlooked as a type of regional security architecture, minilateral defense coalitions can play an important role in maintaining security.

A good example from Southeast Asia is the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) between the UK, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. Over the last 40 years, the FPDA has sought to complement and overlap with – rather than compete with or replace – other forms of regional security architecture.

Significantly, in the years following the end of the Cold War, the FPDA’s role has been deepened and strengthened. Today, it constitutes a flexible and complementary form of minilateralism in Southeast Asia.
Pacific. Yet, the fact that the ASEAN members would not pursue military cooperation made the FPDA a useful alternative.

Following the terrorist attacks in the US in September 2001 and the bombings in Bali, Indonesia, in October 2002, regional threat perceptions were transformed. These attacks increased the fear of transnational terrorism in Southeast Asia and overshadowed other sources of regional instability. The threats of piracy and maritime terrorism in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore were also further securitized.

In response to these changes, the FPDA has gradually extended its institutional structures and activities. High-level meetings have been held more regularly and a period of institutional consolidation has occurred. These changes have also been accompanied by more sophisticated military exercises.

THE FPDA TODAY

Despite this significant history, the FPDA continues to battle for relevance. Does the FPDA remain a viable security mechanism that overlaps and complements other regional security institutions or is it being overtaken by these other bodies?

Upon closer inspection, there is considerable evidence from within the Southeast Asian region that, rather than being superseded, the FPDA remains highly relevant and is a key to strengthening regional security. Three factors play a vital role in the organization’s ongoing importance.

The first concerns the significance of the FPDA in complementing the region’s bilateral security framework. While the FPDA is of a lower military intensity than the bilateral ties, such as those maintained by Malaysia and Singapore with the US for example, the arrangements still complement the US bilateral network.

In contrast to the US network, the FPDA defines the security of Malaysia and Singapore as indivisible. Pursuing the security of one nation separately, and possibly at the expense of the other, is therefore seen as counter-productive, a view that has enhanced ties between Malaysia and Singapore as well as the security relations the two nations maintain separately with Washington.

At the same time, the organization has successfully complemented the US security network by providing Singapore and Malaysia with a useful avenue to strengthen bilateral ties with other countries in the region (e.g. Australia and New Zealand).

The second factor concerns the importance of the FPDA in complementing the region’s minilateral security bodies. The military exercises undertaken by the FPDA since the early 2000s, with their maritime and non-traditional security dimensions, clearly overlap with the objectives of other minilateral organizations, such as the Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) initiative.

However, the FPDA complements the MSP in two vital
ways. First, it provides, through its combined annual exercises, a form of military collaboration still lacking in the MSP. Second, it complements the MSP at the diplomatic level: it constitutes the only cooperative instrument active in enhancing maritime security in the Strait that involves both Malaysia and external powers.

The third factor concerns the importance of the FPDA in complementing the top level of regional security institutions, particularly the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) and associated processes (ADMM+). The FPDA naturally complements the ADMM by offering a defense component still lacking in ADMM. For instance, the FPDA is well ahead of ASEAN in the areas of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Similarly, the ADMM+ process is meant to enhance regional defense cooperation among its member states. Yet it still faces a series of challenges. ASEAN’s centrality will presumably be resisted by some members, and because the ADMM+ program does include some pressing conventional issues it will continue to be problematic.

CONCLUSION

Rather than speculating on the future role of the FPDA in this ever more complex security environment or debating where it fits among the alphabet soup of emerging regional groupings, it might be best to highlight again its greatest strength and accomplishment – its characteristics of flexibility and complementarity.

Indeed, the FPDA has continued to complement and overlap with, rather than substitute or be replaced by, other bilateral, minilateral or multilateral security mechanisms. As an example of an adaptable piece of regional security architecture, the FPDA has proved remarkably successful and should therefore continue to play an important role in Southeast Asian security as long as these key characteristics are preserved.

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