

Friendship and peace on the waterway

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China and Malaysia's first-ever joint military exercise is an important strategic move

By SUMATHY PERMAL

MALAYSIA is in a pivotal position, located midway between two key oceans – the Indian and Pacific. The Strait of Malacca (SOM) is the front yard of Malaysia's security and is a vital maritime security artery for the country, especially for the movement of naval vessels from the Royal Malaysian Navy's principal base in Lumut to other parts of the country.

The National Defence Policy of Malaysia 2010 demarcates the strait, including its entrance and exit, as geographical areas of Malaysia's vital interests.

The Strait of Malacca features as a strategic sea lane of communication and sea-borne commerce for China. It has always been a priority area for China as more than 80% of her energy imports pass through it and 90% of her trade passes through adjoining regional waters.

As such, China has a vital stake in keeping the strait secure and free. Heavy dependence on the SOM for energy transportation has made China and Malaysia jointly secure the area from non-traditional threats, especially from piracy and natural disasters.

Malaysia's Armed Forces and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted a five-day exercise on Managing Non-Traditional Threats and Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) from Sept 17 to 22. Codenamed "Peace and Friendship 2015", it was the first-ever big scale bilateral exercise between all three branches of the military forces of both countries.

Based on scenario planning of a tsunami triggered by an earthquake in the Indian Ocean, the exercise focused on tactical manoeuvres on how China could respond to provide assistance to coastal areas such as in the Strait of Malacca.

Both sides of the military forces held exercises to handle heavy casualties from strong typhoons, in a serious natural disaster and epidemic infectious disease resulting from the disaster.

The exercise also addressed other scenarios such as pirates taking advantage of the disaster and attempting to hijack passing merchant vessels in the critical sea lane. Basically, the bilateral exercise tested China's readiness and responses to international relief efforts.

For the exercise, China sent a combined task force to Malaysia to carry out humanitarian and disaster relief operations, conduct armed escort for passing merchant vessels, and provide help in fighting pirates, so as to ensure the safety of the international shipping lane.

The locations of the exercise were in the airspace and waters of the northern part of the Strait of Malacca as well as land areas in the vicinity of Port Klang.

Assets dispatched by Malaysia included patrol aircraft, transport helicopter, ship-borne helicopter, frigate and destroyer class ships, New Generation Patrol Vessels, multi-purpose vessels, and a team of special forces, medical team and engineers.

The Chinese side dispatched transport planes, a destroyer class ship, a hospital ship "Peace Ark", ship-borne helicopters, about 270 members of a special force, engineers, and a medical team. The Chinese military exchanged its experiences and existing mechanisms, based on their participation in HADR operations in other areas such as the Haiti earthquake in 2010 and Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, with their Malaysian counterparts.

China-Malaysia strategic relations have generally grown from a low level to more noticeable cooperation. The first Security Defence and Strategic Consultation was held on Sept 10, 2012, in Kuala Lumpur, in which both countries agreed to further strengthen military cooperation in their effort to maintain peace and stability in the region.

This was illustrated through the exchange of high level visits by the deputy chief of the general staff of the PLA and Malaysia's Defence Minister. Following the state visit of China's President Xi Jinping to Malaysia in October 2013, Malaysia and China further operationalised their defence cooperation.

They agreed to engage in joint military exercises involving land, sea and air forces beginning 2014, further strengthening the memorandum of understanding on bilateral defence cooperation.

China and Malaysia's first-ever joint military exercise is indeed an important strategic move, despite their overlapping claims to the South China Sea.

The bilateral exercise provided platforms for their forces to develop military-to-military relations in less sensitive areas such as in the Strait of Malacca.

It also raises the profile of the strait as a critical and strategic waterway in the global trading system and a vital component of international sea lanes of communications in the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean and, as such, will be inevitably factored in for any strategic thinking.

It also provides a clearer understanding of the Chinese approach to maintaining and promoting diplomatic links with several South-East Asian states that are based on long-term strategic considerations.