

## **First ASEAN-Russia Naval Drill Takes Place Amid Growing Tensions in Asia-Pacific: What Does It Mean for Southeast Asia's Future Cooperation with Russia?**

On December 2, 2021, the **Indonesian Navy** announced the first joint maritime exercises between the **Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)** and the **Russian Federation**, developed in the Indonesian territorial waters, in the vicinity of Weh Island, along the Malacca Strait, one of the most important shipping lanes in Asia Pacific. The drill occurred in times of **amassing tensions in the Asia-Pacific**, particularly in the South China Sea (or East Sea, as referred to by some Southeast Asian countries), where Russian oil companies Rosneft and Lukoil were reportedly prevented from drilling in the disputed waters in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone.

Clearly, the **US efforts** to maintain a "free and open Indo-Pacific" along with its allies and partners, including the **Quad** with **Australia, India** and **Japan**, as well as the **AUKUS** security agreement with **Australia** and the **UK**, showcase growing tensions with **China**, which has been accused of "trying to disrupt the status quo by force". As **China** explicitly warned against the danger that Asia-Pacific may "relapse into the confrontation and division of the Cold War era", one may not doubt the **effervescences the region is facing at the moment**. In an **environment of rising geopolitical risk**, countries in the Asia-Pacific region seem to attempt a **cautious balance between maintaining security ties with the US and securing their trade with China**, while **ASEAN-level joint military drills have become an instrument of showcasing the ASEAN Centrality in Southeast Asia**.

Themed "Joint Action to Ensure the Safety of Maritime Economic Activity and Civil Navigation", the ASEAN-Russia Naval Exercise 2021 (ARNEX-21) lasted for three days, involving maritime warships and aircrafts from **Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar and Brunei**, while the **Philippines** has decided to participate as a virtual observer. The **Russian Federation** participated with a destroyer and a helicopter.

According to media reports in Southeast Asia, the exercise has been proposed by Russia in 2020, a time when Indonesia was the coordinating country for ASEAN-Russia relations. In December 2021, the Russian Defence Ministry presented the plan during the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and, following its consensual approval, the proposition has been implemented. Similar joint ASEAN naval drills were held with China (2018) and the United States (2019). Additionally, the United States-led Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) are held annually to include the navies of 21 countries in the region. Recently, Russia also held joint military exercises with countries in the region, namely Vietnam, Laos and Brunei.

Several other countries, such as the European Union and some of its member states, along with Japan, Australia and India have iterated their perspectives and views on the region, stressing on the ASEAN Centrality in the regional architecture.

Following a statement issued by First Adm. Julius Widjodjono, Indonesian Navy spokesman, "The 2021 ARNEX joint exercise is aimed at maintaining friendly relations between Indonesia, ASEAN countries and Russia and

*improving the professionalism of the navy servicemen of the participating countries".* According to the Indonesian official, the drills are *"focused on maritime security cooperation, tactical cooperation between elements of surface ships and aircraft."* In a similar key, Indonesian First Fleet (*Koarmada I*) Commander, Admiral (*Laksamana Muda*) Arsyad Abdullah stated that the exercise would *"enhance the interoperability and understanding between the Russian and Asean militaries"*.

ARNEX-21 launching ceremony was also attended by Russian Ambassador to ASEAN, Alexander Ivanov, and Russian Ambassador to Indonesia, Lyudmila Vorobyeva. According to Ambassador Ivanov, *"Those exercises are about peace, stability, and prosperity in the region. (...) We are opening a new page in our strategic partnership."* Aleksei Bolotnikov, Commander of the Russian warship which participated in the exercise, reportedly manifested his hope that the next drill could take place in Vladivostok, a Far East Russian city in the vicinity of North Korea and China's Jilin province.

During the official speeches, no references have been reportedly made to *"free and open Indo-Pacific"*, an umbrella phrase coined by the US and Japan and later used extensively by other countries with specific strategies in the region, whose interests may collide with China's unilateral and unrecognised claims in the South China Sea.

As ASEAN and Russia celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their diplomatic relations this year, the joint exercise reflects the remarks made in October 2021 by Russian President Vladimir Putin during the Russia-ASEAN Summit, according to which *"strengthening ties with ASEAN and its member states has always been and remains one of Russia's foreign policy priorities."* On this occasion, the two parties have signed the 103 points ASEAN-Russia Comprehensive Plan of Action 2021-2025, thus broadening their scope of cooperation.

**From an ASEAN perspective, the joint exercise reaffirms the association's principle of non-alignment, especially in the light of the existing tensions in the Asia-Pacific. In this regard, the recent exercise needs to be regarded as an ASEAN self-balancing act among the growingly adverse spheres of power in Asia-Pacific. One could argue that such a resolute manifestation of non-alignment through multiple joint naval drills with various external partners, showcasing the joint military force of the ASEAN member states, has become a mean to gain momentum in promoting the regional association's interests and strategies in the greater regional architecture of Asia-Pacific. ASEAN's geostrategic priorities in the Asia-Pacific security landscape have become undoubtedly vivid in the recent years, if compared with the previous multifaceted development of the regional organisation. One could argue that, in the light of the current tensions in the region, the economic cooperation and further socio-cultural integration efforts have become a complement to ASEAN's Political-Security Community, yet without being neglected and trying to be secured from the great power rivalry consequences.**

Clearly, the measure of **ASEAN's success resides in its consensualism, resilience and resolute will to tackle challenges together.** Considering that the first step toward the current exercise has been made during Indonesia's chairmanship of the ASEAN-Russia's relations, as well as the country's decision to host the military drills in its own territorial waters, it becomes certain that **Indonesia's role as the driving force of the 10-states regional organisation has been reaffirmed and confirmed by its dialogue partners.**

**An ASEAN Dialogue Partner (since 1991) and a signatory party of the ASEAN-initiated Treaty of Amity**

**and Cooperation in Southeast Asia – TAC (since 2004), Russia has built a gradual yet consistent relation with the Southeast Asian organisation.** In 2021, during the ASEAN-Russia Summit, the Russian Federation has formally agreed to “ensure maritime security and safety, freedom of navigation and overflight and unimpeded commerce” and to “promote self-restraint, non-use of force or the threat to use force and the resolution of dispute through peaceful means in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including as stated in the United Nations Charter, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)” The document similarly reflects the parties’ intention to increase maritime connectivity and develop sustainable and resilient infrastructure logistics, port management and navigation cooperation to the end of promoting joint economic growth.

While benefiting of a solid regional cooperation, especially in Central Asia, **Russia may regard ASEAN as a bridge between its bilateral cooperation in the region (particularly with Myanmar and Laos) and its regional cooperation in Southeast Asia, where it recognises the ASEAN Centrality.** One may argue that such an approach could be of **capital importance for Russia’s Asia-Pacific power projection strategy.** One may also argue that such power projection efforts could also be inferred from the recent military-technical cooperation agreement signed between India – one of the most influential actors in the Asia-Pacific – and Russia, on December 6, 2021.

**Clearly, the impact of the recent joint exercise would go far beyond the military scope, producing positive results at the nexus of political, security and people to people relations between ASEAN and Russia.** It is not unexpected that such regional cooperation activities could be continued with concrete projects in the ASEAN Community building process, people mobility, goods and services, based on mutual interest and ASEAN Centrality.

**At a time when maintaining peace and stability in the region has become a most arduous desire, ASEAN’s extensive cooperation and interaction with external powers seems to have turned into a *sine qua non* self-balancing act prioritizing the association’s Centrality in the security architecture of the region, showcasing ASEAN as a truly independent, non-aligned regional organisation and a consolidated, highly-relevant, yet neutral actor in the multilateral global community. It is though of utmost importance for ASEAN to maintain and consolidate its unity.**

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*The opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy, position or view of IRSEA.*