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CHINA-THREAT PERCEPTIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: PROBLEM OF BILATERAL INTERACTIONS

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini berusaha menjawab pertanyaan mengapa persepsi ancaman terhadap Cina masih bertahan di Asia Tenggara meskipun Cina telah meningkatkan kerjasamanya dengan negara-negara di kawasan tersebut. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa minimnya jumlah kerjasama pertahanan bilateral antara Cina dan negara-negara Asia Tenggara adalah penyebab masih bertahannya persepsi ancaman Cina di kawasan tersebut. Struktur tulisan ini terbagi ke dalam tiga bagian. Bagian pertama membahas mengenai modernisasi militer Cina. Bagian kedua menjelaskan persepsi ancaman Cina di Asia Tenggara. Sementara bagian ketiga menjelaskan penyebab persepsi ancaman Cina masih bertahan di Asia tenggara.

Kata Kunci

Cina, Asia Tenggara, Asia-Pasifik, Persepsi Ancaman Cina

Introduction

Since two decades ago China has been trying to improve its relations with Southeast Asia. There are, at least, four ways how China improving its relations with Southeast Asia, namely: (1) developing strategic partnership and working with regional organization, (2) expanding bilateral relations, (3) increasing economic ties, and (4) removing distrust and anxiety in security sphere.ⁱ

Related to the latter, there are also four ways China has been done: (1) establishing bilateral governmental “security dialogue” with China’s neighbors, (2) developing official military-military exchanges, (3) enhancing China’s participation in ASEAN Regional Forum, and, (4) increasing its military transparency regularly.ⁱⁱ However, despite the long endeavor to remove distrust, it still remains until now. That problem brings out question: *why does China threat perception still exist in Southeast Asia even though China has improved its relations with the region?*

To answer that question, this paper focuses on analyzing China’s bilateral defense cooperation with Southeast Asia. It sees the number of bilateral defense cooperation between China and Southeast Asian countries as the influential factor to remove perception of China threat among Southeast Asian countries. Bilateral cooperation is an important factor to improve states relations and remove threat perception between them, because mutual understanding among states would be easier to reach through bilateral cooperation.

This paper is divided into three parts. It starts by discussing PLA modernization through explanation of the phases of China's military forces modernization, ambitions of modernization and military budgets. The second part explains the situation of China-threat perception in Southeast Asia. Finally, the third observes the cause of China threat perception in Southeast Asia region.

PLA Modernization

The Phases of China Force Modernization

Since the early 1950s, PLA has passed modernization in several phases. The first phase was started in 1950s and 1960s by purchasing weapons through Soviet military aid and assistances. In the early 1950s, reorganization of PLA was decided by China's political elites who then chose to use Soviet-style military organization as military reform guidance. In 1951, the Soviet's large scale military aid and assistance started to help China reforming PLA organization and equipments. In this phase, China established the National Defense Council, Ministry of National Defense, and 13 military regions. It also built its defense industry, purchased weapons and adopted soviet strategy and tactics. Additionally, China adopted completely Soviet-style uniforms, ranks, and emblem, conscription and reserve system, and new rules of discipline.ⁱⁱⁱ

The second phase was in the mid-1970s. To increase PLA's weaknesses in facing China's enemy, particularly Soviet Union, Chinese leaders decided to modernize the PLA. This program was done through 2 steps. First, in 1975 Chinese leader made a decision to fill the empty key positions in the military structure and the party Central Military Commission. However, Deng Xiaoping did not choose military officer to fill this position. He appointed civilian. His reason was to guarantee party control over the PLA. Second, in 1975 Premier Zhou Enlai proclaimed Four Modernization as a way to withdraw the military from politics and to focus on military functions.^{iv}

The third phase was in 1980s. In 1980s, China had new military modernization objectives. The new objectives were to reduce the size of and reorganize the PLA in order to reach mobile readiness capability to overcome threats beyond China's borders and coasts. Nan Li explained that this orientation was influenced by the change of China's military discourse in 1985.^v Before 1985 the military discourse in China was dominated by Maoist discourse that focused on intense domestic class struggle and active support of radical movements in foreign countries. In the post-1985 the military discourse emphasized on China's national identity and

national security threats. Nan Li named the transformation as shifting from a radical, revolutionary internationalism to a post-Maoist conservative nationalism.^{vi}

The transformation of the discourse has shifted the China's way to assess its security threats. There are three categories of China's new threats.^{vii} First, threats will come from competitive international system. Chinese military discourse believes interstate relations system is conflictual. The nature of interstate relations is anarchical and dominated by state as the central actors. In this kind of system, some countries enjoy prosperity and humanity, while other countries suffer from poverty and mercilessness. The world faces together beneficial development and understanding, and, also, conflicts and friction among countries. Consequently, the interstate relations is fragile and unstable with accelerated global economic and technological change.

Second, ocean is a potential source of conflict in future. Population growth and economic development encourage country to find new resources to support its population and economic necessity and ocean is a new place to find that resources. Then, this situation can increase possibility of inter-state conflict in struggles over natural resources to be occurred in an ocean.

Third, territorial integrity is important for China's national interest. There are two important issues related to China's territorial integrity, namely Taiwan and border threats. To neutralize all this threats China uses three means. Those are national unity, military force and border consolidation.

The fourth phase was in the late 1990s. On 1998, China released 1998 Divestment Act and since that time its military budget started to increase annually for supporting its military modernization.^{viii} And the last phase was on May 2006, when it announced a plan to develop its own high technology "new-generation" weapons. The plan said China would develop a "mechanized and information-based army" in the next 15 years. Weapons for the space industry, aviation, ship and marine engineering, nuclear energy and fuel, and information technology were the focus of this development.^{ix}

China's Ambitions to modernize its Military

Dennis J. Blasko explains that Chinese force modernization includes four services in PLA, but the priority has given to PLA Navy (PLAN), the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), and also, the strategic missile force or known as the Second Artillery.^x Ashton B. Carter and Jennifer C. Bulkeley say there are three steps of China's current military modernization. First step is to downsize the PLA and develop China's defense R&D system and military industry more efficient. China has ambition to raise the readiness of selected PLA units and train them

intensively and perform realistic exercises. The second step is to bring the PLA into the C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligent, surveillance and reconnaissance) system. The third is China plans to maintain strategic nuclear deterrence and challenge U.S. dominance wherever possible.^{xi}

To fill such ambitions, China, then, launches several programs of modernization:^{xii}

- *Reduction in force size.*
- *Changes in force structure.*
- *Reform of the structure and missions of the reserves and militia.*
- *Changes in the personnel system.*
- *An influx of new equipments.*
- *Doctrinal revision to prepare the PLA to fight and win Local Wars under Modern High-Technology Conditions or Local Wars Under Informationalization Conditions.*
- *Improvements in the frequency, content, and methods of military training, with emphasis on joint operations.*
- *Transformation of the PLA logistics system.*
- *Enhancement of all soldiers' standard of living, pay, and lifestyle.*
- *Modification of the professional military education system.*

Furthermore, some experts also note that China has ambition to build its sea power capability or, even power projection capability. Richard D. Fisher Jr. mentions in his book that on December 2006, before the Tenth Congress of Commissars of the PLAN, Hu Jintao, CCP Secretary General and Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman, said “we should strive to build a powerful navy that adapts to the needs of our military’s historical mission in this new century and at this new stage... We should make sound preparations for military struggles and ensure that the forces can effectively carry out mission at any time”. Then, he explained mission meant to “up hold our maritime rights and interest”.^{xiii}

Regarding the power projection capability, in its 2006 defense white paper, China noted its ambition to grab power projection capability for PLA.^{xiv} And, this ambition appeared more clearly when, on August 9-17, 2007, China and SCO member countries performed Peace Mission 2007 exercises on Xinjiang, China and Chelyabinsk, Russia. In this exercise China and Russia practiced long distance deployment for airborne, light mechanized armor, and air support elements which included many first-time foreign deployments for the PLA.^{xv}

According to Peter Howarth, recently China is the only East Asian that has big number of submarines.^{xvi} It has also been noted by many experts that China has acquired and built new submarines to fill its ambitions to have sea power or power projection capability. Today china has eight new 636 Kilo-class submarines bought from Russia. Furthermore, China also

modernizes and expands its Song-class submarines with new technology. In July 2004, the, China launched its new generation of conventional diesel-electric submarines, named Yuan-class.^{xvii} This confirms China’s ambition to have sea power or power projection capability.

Military Budgets

Military modernization always needs budgets to maintain its programs. Hence, to support its military modernization, China always increases its military budget significantly in every year.

According to SIPRI, in 2000, China increased the military budget up to US\$33.4 billion. China's defense budget continued to grow in 2003 and reached US\$41.1 billion. In 2004, it was announced that China's military budget rose again to US\$57.5 billion. In 2005, PLA again enjoyed its increasing military budget. The budget was up to US\$64.7 billion. In 2007, China’s military budget still increased and reached the point US\$58.3 billion. Then, in 2011, the budget rose to US\$129.2 billion (see table 1 below).

Table 1 China’s Military Budget from 2000 to 2011 (RMB and US\$)

Currency	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
RMB* (billion)	184	227	262	288	331	379	452	546	638	764	820	923
US\$* (million)	33,496	41,176	47,829	51,955	57,542	64,726	76,065	87,730	96,663	116,666	121,064	129,272
As percentage of GDP*	1.9	2.1	2.2	2.1	2.1	2	2	2.1	2	2.1	2.2	-

Source: SIPRI, <http://milexdata.sipri.org/result.php4>. *SIPRI Estimate

Moreover, in its 2008 defense report, China detailed its 2007 allocation of defense budget. In this report, China informed that its 2007 total military budget was RMB355.491 billion and the budget was used to cover the expenses of the personnel (RMB120.015 billion or 33.76%), training and maintenance (RMB121.042 billion or 34.05%) and equipments (RMB114.434 billion or 32.19%).^{xviii} Most of the budget here was used by PLA for training and maintenance, in which one of the allocations was for “construction and maintenance of various undertakings” or developing new weapons for China. This, again, indicates that China, now, is under modernizing its military forces.

China-Threat Perception in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is an important region for China. In this region China has some strategic interests. Those are: (1) to secure China's String of Pearl that extends from South China Sea to Indian Ocean and to Arabian Gulf,^{xix} (2) to boost China's influence in Southeast Asia to prevent "containment" of China from the United States and its allies, (3) to secure China's maritime claims in South China Sea, and, (4) to secure economic ties with Southeast Asian countries that supporting China's economic modernization and regime stability.

One of the China's instruments to secure its strategic interests is China's military power, especially the PLAN. It is why China has big ambition in developing sea power or power projection capability for its navy. Unfortunately, this ambition will also increase China's ability to threaten all navies operating in Asia-Pacific region.^{xx} This situation makes countries in Pacific basin, including Southeast Asia, give big attentions to PLA modernization. As a result, it has generated anxiety and uncertainty in Asia-Pacific region^{xxi} and has motivated countries in the region to take actions to respond PLA modernization.

Herbert Yee and Ian Storey explain there are five factors that contribute to the rise of China-threat perception. The first factor is the belief that China's rapid economic growth will bring China into a powerful competitor of the United States and convert its economic power into military power. The second factor is derived from the belief of democratic peace theory: democracies never fight each other. So, the authoritarian China is believed will bring war to the world. The third is China increasing military power is believed will give negative impact to regional security. The fourth factor is the belief that China will collapse and cause territorial fragmentation, civil war and problems of refugee for China's neighbors. The last factor is the rise of Chinese nationalism, especially the rise of anti-American feeling. International community worries that the Chinese decision makers will take advantage from it to improve their legitimacy.^{xxii}

In Southeast Asia, china-threat perception among Southeast Asian countries can be seen from their reasons to modernize their military capability toward air and naval capability, such as purchasing new air fighters (Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam), warships (Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam) and, even, submarines (Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia). The China factor in this military modernization can be explained as follow.

The rise of China that followed with the withdrawal of the U.S. presence from its bases in the Philippines is believed has increased the anxiety of Southeast Asian countries over the future of Asia-Pacific region. These countries see the withdrawal of U.S presence and

capabilities in the region will generate competition toward arms race between China and Japan that both enhancing their military power.^{xxiii}

Another reason is regional maritime conflicts in South China Sea, particularly conflicts in Spratly and Paracel Islands that involve China, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan.^{xxiv} Regarding the involvement of China in this conflict, Southeast Asian countries see there is a possibility that China will use its forces to solve the dispute because China has been active and engaged its military force in the conflict area. Additionally, tensions have frequently happened between China and others countries that also claim Spratly Islands as part of their territory.^{xxv} In 1998 former the Philippines Defense Secretary Orlando S. Mercado described the Chinese occupation and enlargement some structures in the Mischief Reef, Spratly Island as a strong indication of China's "creeping invasion" of the "disputed South China Sea chain."^{xxvi} Consequently, these all situations highlight Southeast Asian countries to give more attention over PLA's modernization and see it as a potential threat for security in Southeast Asia.

However, to some extent Southeast Asia also sees China as an opportunity, especially in economic dimension. For example, from an economic standpoint, Rodolfo Severino, former Secretary General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), candidly describes China and ASEAN as "partners in competition".^{xxvii} Further, there is also a widespread perception in Southeast Asia that "China will be the new engine of growth for the entire region." In a report submitted by the ASEAN-China Expert Group on Economic Cooperation in October 2001, Southeast Asia optimistically views China as an economic opportunity.^{xxviii}

Unfortunately, even though Southeast Asian countries are presently more optimistic about their economic relations with China, in other dimensions of the relations the feel of anxiety about China still exists. For example is in security dimension that has previously described.

The Cause of China Threat Perception still Remain

Threat perception can be reduced by several instruments of confidence building measures (CBM). CBM can be military, diplomatic, cultural, or political. However, military and diplomatic measures are the most commonly used in building confidence among parties involved in protracted conflict. In the short term, CBMs aims to alter the parties' inaccurate perceptions of each other's motives and to avoid misunderstandings about military actions and policies that might otherwise provoke violent conflict. Over time, CBMs can pave the way for

more stable political and diplomatic relations, transform the parties' ideas about their need for security, and even encourage moves to identify shared security needs

CBM has some characteristics or requirements: 1) CBMs dealing with troop movements and exercises, 2) CBMs dealing with exchanges of information, 3) CBMs dealing with exchanges of personnel, and 4) CBMs dealing with actions which might be interpreted as provocative. Additionally, the instruments that can be used by countries to develop CBM are publishing defense white paper gradually, doing military officer education exchange, doing joint military exercise, and developing multilateral security cooperation. As previously mentioned, China has done this CBM instrument to improved its relations with Southeast Asia.

China has tried to remove this threat perception by doing CBM activities that can be classified into three categories: unilateral, multilateral and bilateral activities.

Unilaterally, China offers new security concept that emphasizes economic integration and diplomatic mechanism as the pillars of Chinese security policy. Moreover the new concept also declares the mentality of Cold War as outdated. Besides, China is regularly increasing its military transparency as well.

Multilaterally, China has already engaged with ASEAN^{xxix} and signed important agreements with ASEAN countries, namely Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea 2002. In 1995 China began holding annual meeting with ASEAN's senior officials.^{xxx} Furthermore, China enhanced its participation in ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as well.

Chinese participation in various multilateral activities has made Southeast Asia more optimistic about China's international behavior. Southeast Asia is also pleased to see China actively involving itself in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) program. Southeast Asia also uses these multilateral mechanisms to establish closer relations with China.^{xxxi}

Table 2
China's Joint Military Exercises from 2003 to 2008

Date	Place	Name	Partner of Exercises
Aug. 6-12, 2003	Border area of Kazakhstan and China	Multilateral joint counter-terrorism exercise of the armed forces of the SCO (<i>Shanghai Cooperation Organization</i>) member states	SCO members
Oct. 21, 2003	Shanghai	Sino-Pakistani joint maritime search-and-rescue exercise	Pakistan

Nov. 14, 2003	Shanghai	Sino-Indian joint maritime search-and-rescue exercise	India
Mar. 16, 2004	Qingdao	Sino-French joint maritime search-and-rescue exercise	France
Jun. 20, 2004	Qingdao	Sino-U.K. joint maritime search and rescue exercise	UK
Aug. 6, 2004	Xinjiang	Sino-Pakistani joint counter-terrorism exercise	Pakistan
Oct. 10, 2004	Qingdao	Sino-Australian joint maritime search-and-rescue exercise	Australia
Aug. 17-25, 2005	Vladivostok, Russia and Shandong Peninsula, China	China-Russia Joint Military Exercise	Russia
Nov. 24, 2005	Sea area adjacent to the Port of Karachi, Pakistan	China-Pakistan Joint Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise	Pakistan
Dec. 1, 2005	Sea area adjacent to the Port of Cochin, India	China-India Joint Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise	India
Dec. 13, 2005	Sea area adjacent to the Port of Sattahip, Thailand	China-Thailand Joint Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise	Thailand
Sept. 20, 2006	Sea area adjacent to the Port of San Diego, USA	China-US Joint Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise (Phase I)	U.S.
Sept. 22-23, 2006	Hatlon Prefecture, Tajikistan	China-Tajikistan Joint Counter-Terrorism Military Exercise	Tajikistan
Nov. 18-19, 2006	South China Sea, China	China-US Joint Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise (Phase II)	U.S.
Dec. 11-18, 2006	Abbottabad, Pakistan	China-Pakistan Joint Counter-Terrorism Military Exercise	Pakistan
Mar. 6-13, 2007	The Arabian Gulf	“Aman 2007” Joint Maritime Military Exercise	Not clear
May 11-23, 2007	Waters off Singapore	Second Multilateral Maritime Exercise of WPNS (<i>Western Pacific Naval Symposium</i>)	WPNS members
Jul. 15-31, 2007	Guangzhou, China	“Strike 2007” China-Thailand Joint Army Training in Special Operations	Thailand
Aug. 9-17, 2007	Xinjiang, China; Chelyabinsk, Russia	“Peace Mission 2007” Joint Military Anti-terrorism Exercise by Members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization	SCO members
Oct. 2-3, 2007	High seas between Australia and New Zealand	Joint Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise among China, Australia and New Zealand	Australia and New Zealand
Dec. 19-27, 2007	Kunming, China	“Hand-in-Hand 2007” China-India Joint Counter-terrorism Training	India

Jul. 9-31, 2008	Chiang Mai, Thailand	“Strike 2008” China-Thailand Joint Army Training in Special Operations	Thailand
Dec.5-14, 2008	Belgaum, India	“Hand-in-Hand 2008” China-India Joint Counter-terrorism Training	India

Source: China Defense White Paper 2004, 2006, 2008.

Bilaterally, China establishes bilateral governmental security dialogue with China’s neighbors and official military-to-military exchanges. However, the number of China’s bilateral defense cooperation with Southeast Asian countries is still small. In Southeast Asia, excluding Burma, China improved its bilateral defense cooperation with Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam,^{xxxii} and Indonesia. Among them, Thailand is the country that has most interaction with China.^{xxxiii}

Moreover, according to China’s defense white papers Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country that has bilateral military drill with China (see table 2 and 3). Another Southeast Asian country that has military exercise with China is Singapore. However, China’s military exercise with Singapore was done within the framework of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS).^{xxxiv}

In 2007 China developed its first military exercise with Indonesia.^{xxxv} It is a good progress, but still not enough to erase China-threat perception in Southeast Asia. China needs to do more. In comparison with the U.S., it has five partners of military exercise in Southeast Asia and two military partners in Northeast Asian Countries. Moreover, U.S does joint military exercises with each country regularly (see table 4).

Table 3 Number of China’s Joint Military Exercises and Partners per Each Region from 2003 to 2008

Region	Partner of Exercise	Number of Exercise	Number of Partner
Northeast and Southeast Asia	Thailand	3	1
South Asia	Pakistan	4	2
	India	4	
Central Asia and Russia	SCO members	2	3
	Russia	1	
	Tajikistan	1	
Pacific	U.S.	2	4
	Australia	1	
	New Zealand	1	
	WPNS members	1	
Europe	UK	1	2

	France	1	
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Source: China Defense White Paper 2004, 2006, 2008.

Table 4 U.S. Joint Military Exercises with East Asian Countries

Malaysia	Singapore	Thailand	Indonesia
1. CARAT	1. CARAT	1. CARAT	1. CARAT
2. MEKAR	2. EODEX	2. EODEX	2. MINEX
3. PENYU	3. MERLINX	3. COBRA GOLD	3. PASIR PUTIH
TRIDENT	4. MERGATE	4. UNDERSEAL	4. INDUSA
4. PASKAL	5. VALIANT MARK	5. SEA SURVEX	5. ASEM
5. MINEX	6. TRICRAB	6. MINEX	BAGUS
6. EODEX	7. MERCUB	7. SALVEX	6. SALVEX
	8. MERLION	8. SEA EAGLE	7. RECONEX
	9. MERCURY	9. LINKEX	8. EODEX
Philippines	Japan	South Korea	
1. CARAT	1. ASWEX	1. SALVEX	
2. PALAH	2. COLD WX TRNG	2. SEALEX	
3. EDDEX	3. ANNUALEX	3. RSO&I	
4. BALIKATAN	4. COPE NORTH	4. RIMPAC (C3F)	
5. SALVEX	5. DIESELEX	5. SUBEX	
6. MAESURVEX	6. KEEN SWORD	6. SHAREM	
	7. MCMEX	7. UFL	
	8. MINEX	8. FOAL EAGLE	
	9. RIMPAC (C3F)	9. ANTI-SQFEX	
	10. SHIN KAME	10. VALIANT USHER	
	11. SUBCOMP	11. VBSS.EX	
	12. KEEN EDGE	12. ASWEX	
	13. EODEX	13. EODEX	
	14. TOWER	14. MCMEX	
	TRAINING	15. MINEX	
		16. FREEDOM BANNER	
		17. LINKEX	

Source: Various Sources

This U.S. joint military exercise has made mutual security understanding between countries in Southeast Asia and the U.S., and has made Southeast Asian countries to feel safe and comfortable with the presence of U.S. in this region. Even, all these countries see the U.S. as a security umbrella that gives guarantee for regional stability. So, China need to learn from what U.S. has done in this region. China has to expand and to strengthen its defense interaction

in Southeast Asia. For example, China has to extend its joint military drills with Southeast Asian countries and regularly do the drills with them.

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