

The Implications of the Recent Joint Military Exercises Between China and Foreign Militaries

Shiau-Shyang Liou
Associate Research Fellow

Division of National Security Research

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1. News Highlights

Starting in late February 2023, China has frequently conducted joint military exercises with its allies. China held the “Mosi” joint naval exercise with Russia and South Africa from February 20 to 27 in the sea and airspace between Durban and east of Richards Bay in South Africa. It then held the “Security Bond-2023” joint naval exercise with Russia and Iran in the Gulf of Oman in the Middle East from March 15 to 19. Finally, the “Golden Dragon-2023” joint exercise was held between China and Cambodia from March 20th to April 8 in Cambodia.

The three joint exercises not only overlap in participating countries and time but also cross the Indo-Pacific region geographically. The high frequency of the PLA’s military exercises during this

period has been rare since the outbreak of COVID-19. This article will explore their implications and subsequent impacts.

2. Security Implications

2-1. China is strengthening its Indo-Pacific strategic fulcrums through military diplomacy

The recent joint military exercises conducted by China, from the eastern sea and airspace of South Africa to the Oman Gulf in the Middle East and then to Cambodia in Southeast Asia, overlap significantly with China’s “String of Pearls” strategy map that the outside world has accused, as well as the continuously promoted “Maritime Silk Road”. Bangladesh’s BNS Sheikh Hasina submarine base, newly built and put into

service on March 20, 2023, is yet another being constructed by a Chinese-funded enterprise. Given the close military cooperation between Bangladesh and China, PLA Navy vessels carrying out future missions in the Gulf of Aden may also visit this base, and there is even the possibility of China sharing the base with Bangladesh. All these give the impression that China intends to expand its presence in the Indian Ocean.

Joint exercise is a part of China's military diplomacy and a form of military exchange and cooperation.¹ According to the purpose of "military diplomacy serving overall national diplomacy" revealed in the "2000 National Defense of China" white paper,² and under the circumstances that "promoting the construction of 'One Belt, One Road'" has been written into the Constitution of Communist Party of China at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017, thus the failure of 'One Belt, One Road' will not be tolerated and China's military diplomacy will bear greater

responsibilities in promoting and ensuring the construction of the "One Belt, One Road". Joint exercise is a core element of China's military diplomacy. By holding such exercises in the Indo-Pacific region, China cannot only enhance its military presence and demonstrate its strength but also root its strategic fulcrums in the area and influence the decision-making of relevant countries. For example, the "Mosi" joint naval exercise can help China establish its power in the Indian Ocean. It also coincides with the South African military's lack of funding and the need to cooperate with foreign countries to protect its fishing industry and combat pirates. This allows China to deepen military cooperation on the East African coast and even an opportunity to establish another overseas base. Moreover, immediately after Iran and Saudi Arabia resumed diplomatic relations on March 10th with its mediation, China further deliberately conducted joint exercises with Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman to demonstrate its influence in the region.

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1. "China's National Defense in the Year 2008," *Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China*, January 20, 2009, http://big5.www.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/zhengce/2009-01/20/content_2615769.htm.
 2. "China's National Defense in the Year 2000," *The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China*, May 26, 2005, http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2005-05/26/content_1224.htm.

2-2. The PLA strengthens its combat and coordination capabilities through joint exercises

Joint military exercises between the PLA and its allied militaries not only contribute to the development of mutual understanding but also enhance its own combat strength through training on different mission types. In the “Mosi” joint maritime exercise, China dispatched the Type 052D destroyer, *Huainan*, which had just completed its mission in the 42nd escort formation, in the Gulf of Aden, the Type 054A frigate, *Rizhao* and the Type 903A replenishment ship, *Kekexili* Lake to participate, allowing its offshore fleet to conduct mission conversion training and demonstrate military strength for the maintenance of its overseas interests. Another participating vessel in the “Security Bond-2023” joint exercise was the Type 052D destroyer, *Nanning*, which had already participated in the “Peace-23” multinational naval exercise in the vicinity of Karachi, Pakistan, between February 9 to 14, 2023. It then went on to participate in the Abu Dhabi International Naval Defense and Maritime Security Exhibition (NACDEX) in the United Arab Emirates from February 17 to 25. After the exercise, the *Nanning* continued its 43rd

escort mission, demonstrating its ability to switch missions quickly.

In the “Golden Dragon-2023” exercise, the PLA mobilized troops and equipment from the Navy, Ground Forces, and Joint Logistic Support Force of the Southern Theater and departed for Cambodia on the Type 071 amphibious transport dock ship, *Jinggangshan* from Zhanjiang, Guangdong to conduct high-efficiency loading training to achieve the goal of “loading means fixing, fixing means deployment”. Expedition delivery missions are not unfamiliar to the *Jinggangshan*, but seamless loading integration and fast completion of combat-level missions were unprecedented.

2-3. China supports Russia through joint military exercises

China claims that the “Mosi” joint exercise will help promote defense and security cooperation in the BRICS countries and enhance the ability of all participating parties to maintain maritime security collaboratively. The timing of the exercise coincides with the anniversary of the Russo-Ukrainian War, and the Russian military has announced that it will test the 3M22 “Tsirkon” hypersonic missile for the first time in the exercise. So

even though China insists on remaining neutral in the war, the outside world still sees this joint exercise as its support for Russia. The joint exercise taking place at this moment demonstrates that despite the intense fighting between Russia and Ukraine, Russia still has the capability to showcase its strength in the distance, and it still has the support of its allies, highlighting that the current sanctions are merely the West's opposition to Russia.

3. Trend Observation

3-1. China will strengthen its Southeast Asia layout in response to the US' s "Indo-Pacific Strategy"

The "Golden Dragon-2023" joint exercise may have only involved areas of lower sensitivity, such as security cooperation, humanitarian work, and cultural exchange, but it still holds significant symbolic importance. There have been many joint exercises between China and Southeast Asian countries, but they have been put on hold for a long

time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the joint exercise between China and Cambodia helps reopen the post-pandemic military and security level communications between China and Southeast Asian countries. Furthermore, the restarted "Golden Dragon" joint exercise further strengthened the military relationship between China and Cambodia. During the preparation work discussions for the exercise, Vong Pisen, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, expressed gratitude to China for supporting the reforms and capability upgrades of the Cambodian forces during his meeting with the Chinese Joint Staff Representative delegation on February 23.³ The close military cooperation between China and Cambodia undoubtedly contributes to China's strategic layout in Southeast Asia.

As China lacks the strength to build a protection system covering its global overseas interests, acquiring strategic fulcrums is crucial to its overseas interests. Strategic fulcrums can be actual countries or established overseas bases

3. Ry Sochan, "Cambodia, China to Resume 'Golden Dragon' Military Exercises in March," *Phnom Penh Post*, February 25, 2023, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodia-china-resume-golden-dragon-military-exercises-march>.

taking advantage of important ports. The PLA's research also indicates that military diplomacy helps to alleviate strategic concerns from countries hosting strategic fulcrums or overseas fulcrums towards China.⁴ In the foreseeable future, China is expected to more actively utilize joint military exercises and even less sensitive military diplomacy means to cover up its ambition to gain strategic fulcrums in the Southeast Asia and Indian Ocean regions.

The intention behind China's strengthening of its Southeast Asia layout is most likely to counteract the possible NATO expansion into this region in the future or the emergence of an Asian version of NATO. Although these countries are not necessarily forming a military alliance with China, China hopes, at the very least, that they remain friendly and resist the US's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" together. Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand are China's follow-up targets.

3-2. Acquiring overseas bases in Southeast Asia is urgent for China

Using overseas commercial facilities to support military operations has always been China's common practice. With the intensification of security competition between the US and China, constructing secret overseas military bases to seize the advantage while building overseas strategic fulcrums is likely to be a focus of China's future operations. The US Department of Defense's "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021" warns that China may establish overseas military bases in countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, and Tajikistan in the future.⁵ RAND Corporation, a US-based think tank, also stated in 2022 that Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar are the most likely countries for the bases to appear.⁶

4. Lin Liu, "The Strategic Fulcrums and Military Diplomacy Construction of the 'One Belt One Road' Routes," *World Affairs*, Issue 15, July 2017, pp. 62-63.

5. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021 (Washington DC: DOD, 2021), p. 132.

6. Cristina L. Garafola, Timothy R. Heath, Christian Curriden, Meagan L. Smith, Derek Grossman, Nathan Chandler, Stephen Watts, "The People's Liberation Army's Search for Overseas Basing and Access. "A Framework to Assess Potential Host Nations," *RAND*, 2022, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1496-2.html.

It is not surprising for China to secretly build overseas bases. The Djibouti base, activated in 2017, and the Khalifa Port, which was exposed by the US in the spring of 2021 and subsequently forced to halt construction, serve as evidence of this. The Ream Naval Base, under construction but has been repeatedly denied by China and Cambodia, is highly likely to be China's second overseas military base after Djibouti.

Southeast Asian countries mostly practice the hedging policy between the US and China, but promoting military diplomacy with ASEAN countries such as Cambodia is a necessary move for China. Compared to the strategy of breaking through the possible blockage of the fourth and fifth island chains by making its presence in the Indian Ocean, China's strategic fulcrums and military bases in Southeast Asia are evidently more urgent than those in the Indian Ocean. Cambodia's Ream and Myanmar's Kyaukpyu are highly possible to become China's focus of the next stage. This is

not only China's countermeasure against the US's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" but also an important link in China's peripheral diplomacy.

3-3. China's moves could indirectly affect Taiwan's regional security

As the outside world highly regards its acquisition of overseas military bases, China has always been low-key in response to external doubts about its acquisition of overseas military base. China has denied it until it becomes a reality or when conditions are ripe to acknowledge it. Even if it admits involvement, China glosses over it. For example, Chinese Ambassador to Cambodia Wentian Wang stated in June 2022 that China's support for the upgrade and renovation of the Cambodian Ream Naval Base complies with the domestic laws, relevant international laws, and international practices of both countries and is not directed against any third party.⁷ Coincidentally, the Ream Naval Base has recently attracted attention again.

7. "China begins the Upgrading and Reconstruction of the Ream Naval Base in Cambodia with Its Aid," *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Cambodia*, June 8, 2022, http://kh.china-embassy.gov.cn/dssghd/202206/t20220608_10700245.htm.

The Ream Naval Base is located in the city of Sihanoukville, southwestern Cambodia, facing the Gulf of Thailand and near the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's major shipping routes. It allows China to establish a fulcrum in Southeast Asia and create a "pinching" situation. It also helps the PLA maintain the maritime channels connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. As early as 2019, The Wall Street Journal revealed that China had signed a secret agreement with Cambodia to upgrade the Ream Naval Base, and construction began in June 2022. At the end of March 2023, the Cambodian authorities announced another expansion plan for the Ream Naval Base, which includes a new air defense center and expanded radar systems that will strengthen its airspace monitoring capabilities in the future. Moreover, it's reported that since 2021 there have been dredging ships operating in the surrounding waters of the Ream Naval Base to make it a deep-water port. It's believed that all the upgrades will increase the strategic value of Ream Naval Base to China.

It will still take some time for the Ream Naval Base to become an operational military strategic fulcrum of

the PLA Navy, and it's quite far from the Taiwan Strait. However, there may still be indirect impacts on the security of Taiwan's surrounding areas. The PLA can use the base to perform "anti-access/area denial" (A2/AD) tactics against the US or its first island chain allies to hinder their possible support actions towards Taiwan.

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