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## **CHINA EMBARKS ON FIRST JOINT NAVAL DRILLS WITH ASEAN AS US TENSIONS SIMMER IN SOUTH CHINA SEA**

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South China Morning Post (23 October 2018)

The six-day China-Asean Maritime Exercise got under way in Zhanjiang in southern Chinas Guangdong province on Monday and will include personnel from all 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The drills would involve eight ships, three helicopters and more than 1,200 personnel in helicopter cross-deck landings and a joint search-and-rescue operation based on the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, China News Service reported.

Three Chinese vessels – the destroyer Guangzhou, the frigate Huangshan and the replenishment ship Junshanhu – would take part, the report.

Singapore has sent its Formidable-class frigate RSS Stalwart, while Brunei has dispatched a patrol vessel and Thailand and Vietnam have each sent a frigate. Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar sent observers.

In what is believed to be its first military drill with China after decades of strategic suspicion as well as the territorial confrontation in the Spratly Islands, the Philippines sent the logistic support vessel BRP Dagupan City, according to an earlier report by the Philippine News Agency.

Chinese Vice-Admiral Yuan Yubai, commander of the People Liberation Army Navys Southern Theatre Command, said the joint exercise was a significant move towards regional security, collaboration and confidence-building.

The drill was first proposed at the China-Asean defence ministers meeting in 2015 and comes as fears grow that Chinas tensions with the US over trade and the South China Sea could affect Southeast Asia, where four Asean member-states – Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and the Philippines – have overlapping claims with China.

Beijing claims more than 80 per cent of the South China Sea and has cemented its military presence in the region by turning some contested reefs and shoals into military outposts.

It has also sought to improve military ties with its Southeast Asian neighbours in recent years with joint drills and port calls.

But it is facing greater challenges from Washington, which has also been more assertive in recent months about its freedom of navigation rights in and over the disputed waters.

At a defence ministers meeting in Singapore on Friday, Asean and the US agreed to conduct a similar joint drills in the South China Sea next year.

Observers said this weeks joint exercise reflected the desire of regional players to improve trust with China but the event would be no more than symbolic.

Collin Koh, a research fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, said that while the drills could be seen as a milestone for PLAs defence diplomacy, it was hard to see what the next step would be.

Because of the varying levels of capabilities and capacities amongst [the participating navies], its difficult to go further than what we deem as low-hanging fruit type of joint training topics that all participants can find acceptance in, without unnecessarily impinging upon political sensitivities, Koh said.

But he also said Aseans role appears to have been magnified in the defence diplomacy of both China and the US, not least because of the pivotal position of Southeast Asia in this whole Indo-Pacific construct.

Xu Liping, a senior research fellow with the National Institute of International Strategy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said the US remained a difficult challenger to Beijings interests in the region.

Asean, with its traditional neutrality policy, will aim to balance its role between the US and China, but its [planned] joint drills with the US are more symbolic, Xu said.

Huong Le Thu, a senior analyst from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, said the drills were a signal that there is more open competition between great powers.

I think the drills and exercises with regional actors will only increase □ this will become an important component of the great power competition.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2169727/china-embarks-first-joint-naval-drills-asean-us-tensions-simmer>

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