

The Five Power Defence Arrangements: A Contemporary Assessment

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Abstract:

The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) came into being in 1971 as the third security arrangement involving Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Malaysia and Singapore. This essay will attempt to trace the evolution of the FPDA over the past forty five years. The author then examines the contemporary interests by each member state as well as potential pitfalls and opportunities in the future. He assesses whether the FPDA will survive the next forty five years.

Keywords: Evolution; Potential Pitfall; Opportunities; Survive; Agreement

INTRODUCTION

Predecessors of the FDPA: The ANZAM and AMDA

The genesis of the FPDA can be traced from the heritage of the British Commonwealth military presence during the colonial era. The Australia, New Zealand and Anglo-Malaya (ANZAM), the first of such security arrangements, saw the defence of Malaya through the period of communist insurgency often referred to as the 'Malayan Emergency (1948-1960)'.¹ With Malaya and Singapore seriously lacking indigenous defence capabilities, the presence of ANZAM provided an insurance against potential external aggression and internal security threats.

Following Malaya's independence in 1957, the *Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement* (AMDA) replaced the ANZAM as a formal treaty underpinning the alliance. The AMDA was renamed *Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement* in 1963, when Malaysia was formed from the merger between the federated states, crown colony and North Borneo. Unhappy with the formation of Malaysia, then-Indonesian President

Sukarno launched a series of low-level military confrontations against Malaysia (mainly Sarawak and Sabah) and Singapore. The period of '*Konfrontasi*' (Confrontation) lasted from 1963 to 1966 and saw the infiltration of armed Indonesian soldiers into Malaysia and Singapore to conduct skirmishes. In Singapore, multiple incidences of bomb blasts occurred, with the most serious occurring outside MacDonald House along Orchard Road. Over a hundred Commonwealth forces lost their lives for the defence of Malaysia.

Britain's 'East Of Suez' Policy

Shortly after the Confrontation, Britain's Labour Government rationalised its involvement in the Far East, and announced in January 1968 that it would withdraw its military forces from east of Suez by 1971. These took place in the backdrop of uncertainty and tensions in the region. Apart from the continued paranoia over Indonesia's desires on the region after its unsuccessful Confrontation attempts, there was tension between the newly separated Malaysia and Singapore. Not far from home, Vietnam was suspected

of harbouring ambitions on the region. While not intentional, the withdrawal of the British would create a vacuum in the region, which then-Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew believed could be “filled by Russia, China or anyone else”.² Furthermore, with the air forces and navies of both the Singapore and Malaysian armed forces in the nascent stages of development, a huge gap in air defence capabilities was imminent.³

Formalising the Five Power Defence Arrangements

A series of Five Power Talks were conducted between the members to seek the best arrangements replacing the AMDA. The new British Conservative Government which took power in 1969 merely delayed the inevitable withdrawal. When Malaysia tried to cut a separate bilateral security arrangement with Australia, then-Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew reasoned that Singapore was a small country without strategic depth, and that any attack on Malaysia would also threaten Singapore.⁴ It was later agreed that the FPDA should be predicated on the ‘indivisibility’ of defence of Malaysia and Singapore. Finally, under the terms of its founding Communiqué declared on 16th April, 1971, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (ANZUK), together with Malaysia and Singapore pledged:

“... in relation to the external defence of Malaysia and Singapore, that in the event of any form of armed attack externally organised or supported, or the threat of such attack against Malaysia or Singapore, their Governments would immediately consult together for the purpose of deciding what measures should be taken or separately in relation to such an attack or threat.”⁵

The communiqué was strategically worded to be a consultative forum. The FPDA was later formalised with a collection of bilateral Status of Forces Agreements

(SOFAs), separately established by Malaysia and Singapore with each of the ANZUK countries. This was important, as a treaty would likely have provoked negative reactions from countries in the region. Nevertheless, sceptics doubted that the arrangements would survive on a consultative nature, and dismissed it as merely a temporary transitional arrangement to allow the British to relinquish their commitments east of Suez.⁷

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FPDA GOVERNANCE AND EXERCISES

As part of the agreement, the ministers agreed to set up a Joint Consultative Council (JCC) and an Air Defence Council (ADC). The JCC would ‘provide a forum for regular consultation at the senior official level on matters relating to defence arrangements’, and was attended by Permanent Secretaries or Secretary Generals of Malaysia and Singapore and the British, New Zealand and Australian High Commissioners.⁸ The ADC comprises one senior representative from each of the signatories and is in charge of the Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) located in Butterworth, Malaysia, for the air defence of Malaysia and Singapore. In the first decade however, the FPDA only conducted a few exercises, and only four JCC meetings took place.⁹ It was only in the 1980s that the FPDA was re-invigorated, when the notion of regular FPDA exercises was raised and instituted by then-Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, with support from the other nations.



Established on 1st November, 1971, the FPDA framework covered the formation of the Integrated Air Defence System to be responsible for the air defence of Singapore and Malaysia.

The annual Air Defence Exercises (ADEXs) was gradually expanded to incorporate regular land and maritime exercises. In 1981, the FPDA's first annual land and maritime exercises, Exercise Platypus and Exercise Starfish were conducted. The FPDA continued to upgrade its regular exercises to incorporate submarine and electronic warfare elements.¹⁰ Due to Singapore's lack of training space, land exercises were alternately hosted by Australia and New Zealand. This continued till Malaysia and Singapore hosted Exercise Kris Sakti and Exercise Lion Spirit respectively, on their own grounds in 1987 and 1989. In 1990, the land exercises were renamed Exercise Suman Warrior and held in rotation between the five countries.

The 15-year absence of the Royal Air Force was vindicated with its appearance for Exercise Lima Bersatu held in 1988, where the British made its largest contribution with an aircraft carrier. In that same year, the FPDA Defence Ministers agreed that a FPDA Defence Chief Conference (FDCC) should be held every two years and a FPDA Defence Ministers Meeting (FDMM) every three years.¹¹

In 1990, the first FDMM was held in Kuala Lumpur, where the Ministers agreed to shift the focus of FPDA exercises from purely air defence to combined exercises. This resulted in the back to back conduct of the ADEXs and Exercise Starfish starting from 1991, before the exercises were combined into a single

Exercise Flying Fish in 1997. In the second FDMM in 1994, the FPDA was restructured with the merger of the JCC and ADC into the single FPDA Consultative Council (FCC). The FCC was given the mandate to set policy guidelines and provide oversight and approval for FPDA activities including the scope and range of the exercises. The third FDMM In 1997 agreed that the FDCC should play a greater role in guiding the professional development of the FPDA exercises.¹²

The fourth FDMM in 2000 laid the foundation to what was said to be the greatest transformation in the history of the FPDA: the designation of the Integrated Air Defence System to the Integrated Area Defence System (IADS), to give greater emphasis on jointness.¹³ As a result, long term plans for joint exercises were adopted and land exercises were integrated with Exercise Bersama Lima. In 2003, with the rising trend of asymmetric threats, the fifth FDMM agreed for FPDA exercises to incorporate serials to deal with terrorism, maritime security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).¹⁴ This signalled a shift of FPDA exercises towards more non-conventionalism. The sixth FDMM in 2006 gathered in the shadow of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, which signaled a need for FPDA forces to take on greater roles in building capacity and enhancing inter-operability in HADR operations.¹⁵ The inaugural Exercise Bersama Padu and Suman Warrior in that year involved maritime security and HADR elements following the Ministerial direction.

The eighth FDMM coincided with the 40th anniversary of the FPDA in 2011. A stock-take of the FPDA was conducted and the Ministers reaffirmed the key contributions by the FPDA to regional security, and committed to improve co-operation in non-conventional areas and explore capacity building in counter-proliferation.¹⁶ The Ministers also



The Defence Ministers being briefed on Exercise Bersama Lima, a major FPDA joint exercise involving air, maritime and land forces, which Singapore hosted in 2011.

reaffirmed the strong commitment of their respective nations to the Arrangements. Most recently at the 9th FDMM in 2014, the Ministers affirmed the mutual benefits and professional value of FPDA exercises and agreed to further enhance its professional value.¹⁷

CONTEMPORARY ASSESSMENTS

Outlook

Some authors have opined that the FPDA had, against all odds, survived the poor prognosis by sceptics who doubted the viability of the arrangements.¹⁸ Indeed, sceptics had dismissed the FPDA as a temporary transitional agreement to provide for the defence of Malaysia and Singapore until they are strong enough to defend themselves, and a sufficiently loose arrangement to allow the British to relinquish their responsibilities east of Suez.¹⁹ Forty five years on, the FPDA has evolved and adapted well to the new security challenges of the day. To determine whether the FPDA will remain relevant in the future, it is pertinent to examine factors for its longevity and its contemporary relevance.

Psychological Deterrence

Since its inception, the FPDA had provided Malaysia and Singapore with a certain level of psychological

deterrence.²⁰ Any potential aggressors would have to hazard a guess as to whether their attack would trigger the rest of the four nations. Besides, any attempts on Malaysia or Singapore would also likely draw the involvement of the United States (US), an ally of both Australia and the United Kingdom (UK).²¹ In the earlier days before the Malaysian Armed Forces and the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) were capable of establishing its own defence, this psychological deterrence had retrospectively appeared to be effective. Besides, while not a military alliance, the robust exercise regime of the FPDA exercises have helped to hone the interoperability of the five armed forces over time. An interoperable force was more likely to pose a greater deterrence than a make-shift coalition. Furthermore, with UK as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with veto power, maintaining ties with UK would no doubt be advantageous in any crisis.²²

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Enhancing Bilateral Relations

Besides the intended outcome of security, the five nations were able to reap both political and economic benefits from the FPDA. The enhancement of defence relations brought about by the FPDA inadvertently contributed to the warming of bilateral ties between the member states. One important outcome was

that the FPDA acted as an additional channel for confidence building between Malaysia and Singapore, two countries with fractious moments in their history.²³ The FPDA also allowed both countries to take a multi-pronged approach to their bilateral relations with the other ANZUK states. The close defence ties between the member states also facilitated military to military co-operation, as evidenced by the support rendered by FPDA armed forces during the search for the missing Malaysian Airlines MH370 in March 2014.²⁴ The FPDA had also notably provided the foundation for co-operation between member states to respond to natural disasters as well as in United Nations peacekeeping operations such as in Timor-Leste and Bamiyan, Afghanistan.²⁵

Complementing Multilateral Instruments

Many academics have also concluded that the FPDA complements multilateral instruments such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in supporting regional peace and security.²⁶ The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) focuses on confidence building, enhancing dialogue and practical co-operation between ASEAN militaries and defence establishments. The ADMM focuses on non-traditional security issues and lacks the defence component.²⁷ This is complemented by the FPDA, which retains its focus of conventional warfighting despite the inclusion of non-conventional elements.

SAFEGUARDING THE INTEGRITY OF ARRANGEMENTS

The FPDA's resistance to expansion had served to safeguard the integrity of the arrangements. Even though the issue of introducing new regional members such as Brunei or Thailand into the arrangements had been raised on various occasions, it had not been realised.²⁸ The addition of a new state into

the FPDA would invariably bring along its historical baggage and disputes with other regional states, leading to new sets of potential complications to the consultative arrangements. With the successes of the FPDA so far, the five nations are likely to adopt the 'if it ain't broke' mentality, where such potential complications were unwelcomed.²⁹ As Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said in 2004 when he was Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, the including of other countries "would mean a major departure from the concept of the FPDA ... and we are not ready for that."³⁰

EXTRACTING PROFESSIONAL VALUE

The FPDA exercises have evolved and adapted to remain relevant. In the early days, the training and professional guidance provided by the more established ANZUK forces had helped sharpen the nascent conventional capabilities of the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) and the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF).³¹ As the military capabilities of the Southeast Asian members improved, the five nations gradually exercise as contemporaries and the ANZUK forces are able to extract more considerable professional training value.³² In the current construct, the five nations continue to share their expertise in both conventional and non-conventional elements of security through regular exercises, courses and seminars. Exercises in recent years had also taken on the civil-military dimension, where the armed forces co-operate with civilian agencies such as Singapore's Immigration & Checkpoints Authority, Singapore Police Coast Guard, Maritime Port Authority, Customs, and the International Red Cross.³³ The introduction of counter-piracy, maritime security and HADR also allows the development of capacity to address non-traditional security threats that the FPDA nations face.



Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen (fourth from right) taking part in the ASEAN Wave at the opening of the 9th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting.

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STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Strategically, the five powers continue to see the importance of the FPDA. The ANZUK countries, like their Southeast Asian members, have strong interests in the freedom of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) in the region.³⁴ For the UK, the FPDA has allowed it to maintain a legitimate presence in the Southeast Asian region, where it has both political and economic interests.³⁵ Its commitment to the FPDA had recently been demonstrated by the deployment of a destroyer and six Eurofighter Typhoons halfway across the globe to participate in Exercise Bersama Lima 2014.³⁶ The UK Defence Doctrine also continues

to articulate the importance of FPDA in UK's collective security.³⁷ For Australia, the FPDA provided it with a forward presence at Butterworth Air Base where its Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) P3 Orion aircraft conduct surveillance of the maritime approaches to Australia.³⁸ It also continues to staff the appointment of Commander IADS with a two-star Air Vice Marshall from the RAAF. For New Zealand, apart from the SLOCs, the FPDA and ADMM-Plus provided multilateral exercises for the New Zealand Defence Force.³⁹ The defence white papers of both Australia (2013) and New Zealand (2010) outline that the FPDA allows their strategic presence in Southeast Asia, and is a proven security architecture which help addresses contemporary security challenges.⁴⁰

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

President Jokowi, For Or Against?

In the face of positive developments, the future of FPDA is possibly clouded by several uncertainties.

Firstly, as the FPDA was formed only shortly after the Confrontation with Indonesia, it had been viewed with varying degrees of suspicion by Indonesia. The Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusuma-Atmadja had once suggested in 1990 to 'disband' the FPDA and replace it with a new three power defence arrangement between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.⁴¹ The new President Joko Widodo has yet to make any strong statements against the FPDA; whether he would adopt a peaceful, neutral or hostile stance towards the FPDA, remains an unknown. Given Indonesia's recent actions to assert its sovereignty, coupled with Jokowi's vision to establish Indonesia as a maritime power, it remains uncertain if the FPDA, especially with the retention of a conventional angle in its exercises, would sit well with the new Indonesian administration.⁴²

Inclusion Of East Malaysia

Secondly, FPDA exercises had traditionally been held in the South China Sea near to Peninsula Malaysia and Singapore. The absence of the FPDA in East Malaysia remained apparent and it was not unconceivable that member states may start suggesting the conduct of exercises there for a fresh start. This move however, is fraught with potential complications. The IADS traditionally does not cover East Malaysia and extending FPDA exercises there would likely increase the amount of Malaysian airspace available to the other FPDA partners, something which Malaysia may not be agreeable to.⁴³ Extending the coverage to East Malaysia could also potentially implicate the FPDA in an unwanted Southeast Asian conflict should it arise.⁴⁴ The Philippines retains dormant claims over Sabah in East Malaysia, and Malaysia is also a claimant state in the Spratly Island disputes. Conducting conventional exercises in East Malaysia would invariably incur the sensitivities of Philippines, China, Indonesia (who shares the long border of Kalimantan with Malaysia) and even Brunei.

Rising Operational Costs vs Values Of Exercises

Thirdly, with all member states facing rising operational costs of exercising at large scales, FPDA exercises must continue to maintain its relevance and allow the five nations, particularly the extra-regional ANZUK countries, to derive 'value for money' for travelling the distances.⁴⁵ Should the value of exercises be depreciated due to any reasons in the future, it could become challenging for the extra-regional ANZUK armed forces to justify their continued involvement in the region. This could potentially unravel the Arrangements and undo the good works put in by the five nations over the years.

CONCLUSION

As Mr Peter Ho, Singapore's former Permanent Secretary of Defence has articulated, 'the FPDA is like a chameleon, constantly adapting to the changing environment. Its physical avatar — IADS — has transformed itself from an air defence system to an area defence system, the only standing multilateral defence system in the region. This must be a unique achievement for a loose consultative framework.⁴⁶ The Arrangements had also survived because it has been responsive to the needs of all members and not just the powerful.⁴⁷ The five nations continue to demonstrate commitment to the FPDA because they understood the strategic contribution of the Arrangements towards regional security, and also derive value from their participation. Indeed, the FPDA remains a unique security arrangement in the region that is difficult to replicate in the current context. Moving ahead, there is a quiet confidence that the 'chameleon-like' adaptability and its principles of consensus building, equity and gradualism would afford it flexibility and capacity to negotiate its way in the next forty five years ahead.⁴⁸ 🌐

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