

India–Malaysia Defence Relations

Issues and Challenges

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This article aims to analyse the bilateral defence relations between India and Malaysia in the context of ongoing geo-political and strategic issues confronting the Indo-Pacific region. Writings on defence partnerships between India and Malaysia are very few and when seen in the context of India's new 'Act East Policy', this article attains significance. The article analyses these relations in a descriptive and analytical manner by first looking into the historical relations and thereafter by highlighting, in brief, the developments during the Cold War era. This is followed by an analysis of the post-Cold War strategic scenario and finally by an understanding of the defence tie-ups and their challenges, if any, with concluding remarks.

Keywords: *Defence, Bilateral relations, Diplomacy, Strategic Partnerships, Defence Agreements*

INTRODUCTION

India's renewed look at Southeast Asia in general and Malaysia¹ in particular is a marked departure from that of the pre-1990 era when the region was largely ignored in Indian foreign and defence policy dynamics.

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India was then occupied with its own immediate neighbourhood, dealing with Pakistan and China over territorial confrontations in the north and North-East. Other reasons include the Cold War dynamics that pulled India and Southeast Asia in different directions, contributing to the general neglect of the region in Indian foreign policy circles. However, the end of the Cold War and the changes that occurred as a result in the international political scenario compelled India to take new policy initiatives that focused on this strategically important region. And today alongside the avowed 'neighbourhood first' policy by the current government in power, India's foreign policy priorities have shown increased vigour in constructing and developing strategic partnerships with countries of Southeast Asia. In other words, a marked shift can be seen in India's policy aimed at both solidifying its relationship with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) as well as strengthening defence partnerships and cooperative relationships with individual ASEAN countries, thereby providing scope for defence diplomacy to play a big role in bilateral relations. Although India has developed strategic partnership agreements with individual ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore, this article unravels this dynamism with Malaysia in particular, analysing thereby the reasons thereof and issues and challenges, if any, that confront such policy measures. There have been very few writings on defence partnerships between India and Malaysia although much has been happening in this area of bilateral relationships. Hence, the topic acquires even more significance if one looks at the larger gamut of India's approach towards ASEAN countries and its new 'Act East Policy', as promulgated by the current government in New Delhi.

THE FRAMEWORK

Contemporary interaction between states has not only become complex but challenging as well, especially for those responsible for the making of foreign policy. It is a general agreement that the foreign policy of all states irrespective of size and power position is an expression of its national interests. And national interests vary according to the power position anchored on the geo-political and geo-strategic location of states. It can be economic, for example, for those states that are deprived of economic development and strength, whereas for others it could be the protection of territorial security and sovereignty and regional and sub-regional security and for some it could be ideological, political domination and the like. All these are reflections exhibited in the South Asian scenario where

one can observe such dynamism coming into play in the foreign policy postures of South Asian states. Irrespective of power capabilities, therefore, all states' interests basically revolve around the preservation of sovereignty, independence of action and achieving socio-economic development.

International relations is replete with examples of all of these components being the core interests of states at one point or the other. In fact, it is true of contemporary times as well where one can note these aspects being pursued relentlessly by many states. In that sense, security and sovereignty have been a continuous and perennial issue determining both the course of international relations for long and how states behave with each other. But what has changed now is the rise of new powers, which has challenged the way states are now forced to interact.

The contemporary era is therefore a challenging one due to the active role that states of the Global South are playing in international politics in tune with their varied national interests. The rise in power of states such as China and India, for example, produces a different set of interests aimed at an increased role in international affairs commensurate with their rising status. In the past, rising powers have sought new role-play of status-seeking strategies or to even attain global leadership roles, producing in the process conflicts.² To put this in perspective, the new perception with which rising powers view their world produces a new set of priorities and goals. Therefore, states today operate in a different international strategic environment that comprises two inter-related sets of issues: (1) inequality in power structures with different power capabilities and national interests, and (2) the compelling strategic choices that states are forced to take to meet their national interests.

Inequality in power structure has always been an essential feature of the international system as all states, big or small, are endowed with a natural limitation of power resources with which they are defined as stronger or weaker. This brings to light the measures that states are compelled to take to achieve economic development that is bereft of security threats.

Interestingly, in the process of realising their avowed national interests, it becomes compelling for states to make certain strategic choices, thus producing intense competition and rivalry that is often exhibited as the threat of the use of force, which, in turn, produces security issues. This article underscores the need to build strong diplomatic relations that focus on defence tie-ups as a matter of strategic choice, providing a valuable basis for achieving national interests.

HISTORICAL RELATIONS

Behind the strong political and economic relations between India and Malaysia today is their historic past, which owing to trade and cultural linkages has translated into even stronger relationships. In fact, bilateral cultural and trade relations existed even before the advent of British colonial rule in these countries. It is interesting to note that in places where this presence is strong, the bond of close ties becomes a lot easier to establish and be dependable. Besides, geographic location reinforces trade and cultural exchanges between nations of the world as is evidenced in the case of India and Malaysia too where not only were trade and religious-cultural ties promoted but also enabled permanent Indian settlements.

For India and Malaysia, one can trace this as early as the days of the later Chola period, which was a flourishing kingdom in southern India sometime during the 8th century AD and was an imperial power known for its maritime prowess. The Chola expeditions against Sri Vijaya empire in Sumatra, Indonesia, have been the highlight of ancient Tamil history. Subsequently, contacts forged due to this event enabled continuity in relationships with Southeast Asian countries including Malaysia³ with even more vigour in the post-independence years. This tells us, in other words, that Malaysia is not an unknown country to India, rather it's a country that it has known for ages with close cultural and people-to-people contacts, which has been an enabling factor to establish common ground today.⁴

India–Malaysia defence relations are equally unique in the sense that it is not just a post-independence phenomenon; rather it can be traced to the colonial era when both countries came first under the influence of the British East India Company and later directly under British colonial rule. Writings of scholars⁵ mention that native Indian army personnel⁶ were taken to serve the British East India Company, which helped to extend their colonial empire into Southeast Asia beginning with Penang, Malacca and Singapore, which were called as Straits Settlements in the 19th century. These soldiers were given the task of maintaining law and order in the settlements and to build batteries for defence.⁷ Thereafter many more Indians were brought in to work in the newly established tea and rubber plantations. Meanwhile Malaya itself had slowly turned into a British protectorate by the end of the 19th century. According to Sandhu, migration to Malaya was predominantly by Dravidian south Indians who worked as cheap labour to support the British plantation economy⁸ and later settled there permanently.

It is important to note that the British East India Company had to conduct trade smoothly without threats from the Dutch, Portuguese or French who were by then vying for colonial possessions in the region. Therefore, competition to protect its trade routes and its colonial possessions—particularly India—pushed Britain to defend its interests via its military presence for which native Indian soldiers were recruited, trained and made to serve.⁹ As is known, the Southeast Asian region is a region of widely dispersed islands and land with several straits and cutting points in the Indian Ocean. Hence protecting key strategic points such as the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea to ensure smooth trade was vital. And so British naval dominance ensured both the protection of its colonial possessions as well as the impetus to extend its empire into Southeast Asia. A parallel could be drawn to this behaviour for of late India too has felt the need to defend its maritime interests and hence has taken new policy postures and initiatives, albeit minus the imperial attitude.

During the Second World War, literature reveals the participation of Indian soldiers alongside the British in defence against the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Singapore.¹⁰ Besides, mention is also made of military officers from the Federated Malay States who underwent training at Indian Military Academy (IMA) at Dehradun, India. Prominent individuals include Tun Hussein Onn who later joined politics and became the Prime Minister of Malaysia in late 1970s and Tun Ibrahim Ismail who rose to become the Chief of Defence Forces between 1971 and 1977.¹¹ The British policy to protect its national security interests with the help of native Indian sepoys in fact provided an opportunity for not only enabling close defence relations but also for Indians to settle in Malaysia.

DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE COLD WAR

At the outset, it should be noted that both India and Malaysia emerged as independent countries within a decade of each other after being subjugated and exploited by colonial powers. They are maritime neighbours with the Bay of Bengal separating them. India being a peninsular country has a long coastline of about 7,500 km. The location of Andaman and Nicobar Islands mid-way in the ocean cuts the distance between India and Malaysia by half. In fact, the distance is much shorter from these islands to Malaysia. On the map of Southeast Asia, Malaysia is the natural focus of the region as it is the only country that is part of both mainland Southeast Asia and the archipelago that stretches westward from the Philippines to the Indonesian island of

Sumatra. It is strategically located as a gateway between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.¹² Malaysia too has a long coastline and is dependent on the sea for many economic activities.

Despite their strategic location, bilateral defence relations were not that significant as they were hampered by the Cold War security pre-occupations. For Malaysia, notable security problems included China's support of the Communist insurgent movement,¹³ the Indonesian Confrontation (popularly known as *Konfrontasi*)¹⁴ and the Philippines' claim of Sabah.¹⁵ Besides, Malaysia also lay claim to some of the South China Sea islands, which is being disputed by China and other countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Taiwan.¹⁶ That apart, one could also refer to the involvement of regional and extra-regional countries that brought rivalry, affecting peace in the region. This came in the form of US and Chinese intervention in the Indo-China region as part of what was called the Second Indo-China War and later after the unification of Vietnam in the Third Indo-China War when the Chinese supported the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime.¹⁷

Even though the Cold War years lured countries into their respective sphere of influence, Malaysia was keen on not joining defence alliances such as Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) for, as rightly noted by Hari Singh, joining SEATO would invite opposition from India as well as Indonesia, which were then spearheading the non-alignment movement.¹⁸ Instead as a measure to overcome the communist insurgency, Malaysia only signed defence agreements with Britain: the Anglo-Malaya Defence Agreement (AMDA) in 1957 and the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) in 1971.¹⁹

As in the case of Malaysia where the communist insurgency events gave a fillip to stronger defence forces so too was the case for India where the 1962 border conflict with China vitalised the need to augment its defence forces, including developing a nuclear weapon programme and opening arms imports from the Soviet Union were felt necessary. Chandran Jeshrun quoting Tun Abdul Razak writes that Malaysia needs enough defence forces firstly 'to maintain law and order and secondly to look after the close defence of our country'.²⁰

In fact, the formation of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 with Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines as founding members itself was aimed against the spread of communism in the region.²¹ It has now expanded to include all 10 countries of Southeast Asia. Therefore, it is not surprising that both India and Malaysia pursued an anti-communist foreign policy as China was perceived to be their

real threat. In the Southeast Asian scenario, Malaysia went on to declare Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) fearful of further deterioration of peace in the region.²² And when the Third Indo-China War broke out, India supported the Vietnam-led Heng Samarin government in Cambodia, which did not augur well with ASEAN countries.²³ All this was a hindrance to strong India–Malaysia political and defence relations.

In sum, strategic considerations dominated their foreign policy behaviour and Malaysia did not want to antagonise India as it was showing considerable empathy with Malayan aspirations. Also, the threat of China was the defining factor for both countries and is perceived to continue until this day, providing scope for strong bilateral defence relationships.

POST-COLD WAR STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The focus of the post-Cold War years shifted to what is today called as the Indo-Pacific region²⁴ encompassing both the Indian and Pacific oceans and the countries that adjoin them—from the western shores of the US to the east of Africa. Two developments are worthy of note here: (a) a change in foreign policy strategy with India articulating a ‘Look East Policy’²⁵ (now Act East Policy) and simultaneously liberalising its economy, allowing for greater investment and economic development to happen²⁶ and (b) the rise of China.

India’s Look East Policy framework²⁷ was supported by Prime Minister (PM) Narasimha Rao’s economic liberalisation policies and it ushered in positive dividends as the country’s economic growth began to accelerate, even if the motivation, according to Raja Mohan, was to catch up with Southeast Asia’s economic miracle.²⁸ This together with the nuclear weapon detonation in May 1998—a declaration of being a nuclear weapon country—and the attainment of military technological sophistication thereafter lifted India to major power status, and it accordingly attracted a greater role in Southeast Asian affairs.²⁹ For China, the modernisation programme enunciated in the late 1970s by Premier Deng Xiaoping and its continuation thereafter under President Xi Jinping provided dividends, lifting China to the second-largest economic position in the world today.

Both developments have complicated the geo-political and security situation even further as is exemplified by the increasing competition in maritime space between India and China for unhindered trade and energy supplies through the waters of the Indian Ocean. It is estimated that more than

40 per cent of the global seaborne trade passes through the Strait of Malacca; around 15.5 million barrels of global oil trade passes through the Gulf of Hormuz; and 11 million barrels of oil pass through Malacca and Singapore straits.³⁰ Hence, not only the fastest economic growth has taken place in the Indo-Pacific region, the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has been perceived as vital to all regional and extra-regional countries, including China, India, the US, Australia and Japan. In addition, the naval capabilities and military expenditures of these countries have also increased.

For Malaysia too SLOCs are vital in both economic and security terms. Economically the Indian Ocean Rim states are vital trade partners for Malaysia. And India happens to be Malaysia's largest consumer of palm oil exports—a compelling enough factor to reconcile domestic religious schisms between India and Malaysia.³¹ Besides, oil and natural gas are vital trade commodities for Malaysia and securing them has been considered equally important. Kogila Balakrishnan notes that Malaysia's strategic interests lie in three different areas: 'the immediate vicinity, including land territories, territorial waters, exclusive economic zones, the Straits of Malacca and the Straits of Singapore; regional interests including South East Asia, the Andaman Islands and the South China Sea; and Malaysia's growing interest beyond the region due to its growing trade links and increasing foreign direct investment'.³²

Security wise, apart from the South China Sea issue,³³ internal threat in the form of Islamic extremism exists. The attack on Malaysia's eastern coast of Sabah by Islamic militants is a stark reminder of such potential internal security threats arising.³⁴ Other non-traditional security threats include piracy, maritime terrorism and natural disasters, which the Malaysian Armed Forces should be well equipped to tackle effectively.

Another aspect that impinges on Malaysian security is the Strait of Malacca which connects three major waterways—the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea—and where all major shipping passes through. Hence, the economies of the region including that of Malaysia are heavily dependent on the free functioning of the Strait of Malacca and it being a region bereft of power rivalry. The defence policy of Malaysia notes that:

The Strait of Malacca...also hosts Malaysia's major ports and business centres and is the transportation route for eighty per cent of Malaysia's exports and imports. Malaysia explicitly regards any encroachment into the Strait of Malacca as a threat to its national interests, defence and sovereignty.

Moreover the control of the Straits of Malacca by an external power would adversely affect the economic prosperity of most countries including major powers.³⁵

Reiterating this, Malaysian Defence Minister Haji Mohamad Sabu outlined three categories of security order in the Asia–Pacific region: instability due to uncertainty in US–China relations; overlapping border claims and the possibility of violent extremism; and the issue of non-traditional security threats such as maritime terrorism, piracy and cyber terrorism.³⁶

It is in view of this importance of the Strait of Malacca that Malaysia, being one of the littoral states of the strait along with Indonesia and Singapore, has taken proactive measures by way of establishing the Malacca Straits Security Initiative in July 2004.³⁷ Given the above it is but imperative that Malaysia has felt the need to revitalise and modernise its armed forces.³⁸

The strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region can also be seen in terms of the several initiatives taken by regional and extra-regional powers. Examples include the U.S.-centric mini-lateral and multi-laterals such as the QUAD, AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF); the China-centric initiatives such as ‘One Belt One Road’ (OBOR), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the China–Pacific Islands Economic Development and Cooperation Forum; India’s Act East Policy³⁹ and the annual Shangri La Dialogue of high-level defence ministers and leaders of the Asia–Pacific region.⁴⁰ In addition, there are the ASEAN-initiated ones such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asian Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus frameworks. These initiatives indicate the intensity of the security situation in the region and the geo-political rivalry between countries. Inevitably, therefore, the security challenges seem enormous, given the strategic interests with which countries have started focussing on this region.

India’s role in the region is of particular concern for us. This is aptly captured by Jaishankar who correctly points out the interconnected nature of the Indo-Pacific region by firstly saying what occurs in one will have implications on the other. The interpretation one can make from this is that the militarisation of the South China Sea by China, which is sending more warships and making artificial islands, directly affects India and other regional states as well. Secondly, this also implies that the geo-political competition in the broader region will be primarily in the maritime domain and thirdly, it is impossible to consider the region without considering any role for India.⁴¹

Jaishankar's idea is akin to what KM Panikkar put forward as early as during the Second World War when Indian troops were helping the British. He wrote that in any future security arrangement towards establishing a collective security system in Southeast Asia, India's role would be an 'essential pre-requisite' for the success of it with a caveat that the government in India should be 'conscious of its responsibilities and capable of playing its part in Southeast Asia'.⁴² He asserted that India is the only power that can actually defend these areas' for which a 'strong and stable government' is required.⁴³ His prophecy has come true today as India perceives Southeast Asia with even more importance, which is also reciprocated by them.

The above depiction is not without basis as we can see that China's territorial claims and its assertive military posture have been ongoing for some time now. It has managed to grab a few islands in the South China Sea⁴⁴ while laying claims to also Senkaku islands in the East. This has resulted in intense reaction, suspicion and indignation from scores of smaller and weaker nations as well as among the stronger and bigger powers such as the U.S., Japan, Australia and India, who are all feeling the heat from an expansionist and economically and militarily stronger China. The Straits Times quoting the U.S. Intelligence Chief Daniel R. Coats' report to the U.S. Senate Committee writes that China's 'military capabilities and reach will continue to grow...to extend its foot print and complement its broadening political and economic influence'.⁴⁵ This report is indicative of great power rivalry in the region.

Besides working to push its borders into international waters by building artificial islands in the South China Sea and equipping them with military bases, China has also been acquiring naval bases in Djibouti in Africa, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan. All this makes it clear that China views all other nations as subservient to its economic interests and to its perception of leadership in the hierarchy of international order, especially in Asia. Its intent of primacy is spearheaded by the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) and its infamous 'Debt Diplomacy',⁴⁶ and this throws up new challenges for the thus far established order and to Western superiority.

In sum, what the above tells us is that: (1) the post-Cold War era has created a strategic space for rising powers such as India and China to compete with each other, (2) there's an increase in big power rivalry in Southeast Asia and in the entire region, (3) need for Malaysia to strengthen and modernise its defence forces in order to secure its maritime boundaries and therefore, (4) diplomacy has gained momentum with bilateral defence partnerships as the most sought-after option for regional players such as Malaysia.

BILATERAL DEFENCE RELATIONS

India today has certainly elevated itself to a new position of playing a constructive role both in economic terms as well as in defence in the security dynamics of Southeast Asia in general and Malaysia in particular. The modernisation of the Indian military accompanied by new policies such as the Make in India initiative and foreign direct investments along with new technological prowess etc., have elevated its military strength to new heights. For example, India has the third largest armed forces with a robust defence industry capable of producing indigenous weapon systems such as long-range missile capability such as ICBMs, IRBMs, SAMs and anti-ship and anti-submarine missiles. Additionally, it has a formidable navy with an aircraft carrier, indigenously built nuclear submarines and a wide array of other naval ships and weaponry.⁴⁷ The point is that not only does India possess a forceful military to reckon with but its military power progress' trajectory is indicative of its far improved capability and ambition to project its military power beyond its shores.

In comparison, the stakes for Malaysia are high both in terms of security challenges and the appropriate defence preparedness to safeguard itself from such challenges. Therefore, even though Malaysia is governed by the institutional collective security framework which ASEAN has committed to its member states, individual member states' efforts at enhancing their security through bilateral cooperative mechanisms cannot be disregarded altogether. In this sense, national interests are above regional interests. Malaysia's armed forces comprises the three wings: the army, navy and air force. In addition to its defence allocation seeing a consistent increase over many years,⁴⁸ it has been augmenting its defence forces through equipment purchases from friendly countries. Additionally, bilateral defence cooperation with countries such as India has also been sought.

Seen in this context, India–Malaysia bilateral defence relations have progressed from what used to be training programmes for Malaysian officers at various Indian military establishments,⁴⁹ which continue even today, to exchanges at high-level visits, forging joint projects, holding joint military exercises, conducting security dialogues and many other programmes that provide scope for even stronger partnerships. What is more, securing unhindered freedom of navigation in the maritime realm has become the highlight now for which military preparedness combined with diplomatic mechanisms have assumed highest priority.

The Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) that Malaysia signed with India in February 1993⁵⁰ was the first concrete bilateral defence agreement between the two countries in the post-Cold War era. It signifies a new beginning in bilateral relations commensurate with the Act East Policy framework put in place by India then. The MOU stated among other things exchanges between high officials and defence establishments, cooperation in defence training and education including defence supplies, technological assistance and joint ventures along with cooperation in international terrorism, maritime security and disaster management.⁵¹ Starting from then on progress has been made in several areas to which we now turn.

Following the MOU, defence cooperation accelerated with the setting up of Malaysia–India Defence Cooperation Committee (MIDCOM) in the same year in 1993 and thereafter meeting regularly to discuss issues related to training and exchange of defence personnel including navy visits to each other's ports. Important among the various activities is the participation of the Malaysian Navy in the multilateral naval exercise called Milan, a biennial exercise since 1995, which is organised under the aegis of the Andaman and Nicobar Command.⁵² Milan's significance lies in the fact that it aims at promoting cooperation at the multilateral level on maritime security and Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR).⁵³ A notable joint naval exercise was the one conducted using live fire in the Strait of Malacca way back in 2008, marking 50 years of the establishment of diplomatic relations.⁵⁴

As far as warship visits are concerned, the Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet has been regularly visiting Malaysia. In 2017, Indian Naval ships Shivalik and Jyoti were deployed on a port visit to Kuantan in Malaysia and in 2018 the INS Eastern Fleet commanded by Rear Admiral Ajendra Bahadur Singh visited Kuantan naval base in Malaysia. These visits were aimed at enhancing capacity building and interoperability in communication and search and rescue operations with the Royal Malaysian Navy ships.⁵⁵ In fact, Suseela Chandran says that the number of Indian Navy ships visiting Malaysia has steadily increased over the years.⁵⁶ This shows the extent of Navy-to-Navy cooperation.

Besides, one can also note participation by the Indian Navy and Air Force at the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) on a regular basis. So far 15 such editions have been held, and in the 15th edition which took place in March 2019, the Indian Navy's frontline Stealth Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) corvette INS Kadmat participated in a week-long programme that included fleet review, maritime demonstration and sea exercises.⁵⁷ That's not all, India's indigenously built supersonic fighter

aircraft Tejas took part for the first time in an international military exercise.. The possibility of the purchase of defence equipment from India including the much-touted supersonic Brahmos missiles is also being contemplated.⁵⁸

Needless to mention are the several bilateral visits by prime ministers and defence ministers of both countries at various points in time. Notable examples would include PM Manmohan Singh's visit to Malaysia in 2010 when cooperation in counter-terrorism was agreed upon⁵⁹ and thereafter PM Modi's visit in 2015 and 2018.⁶⁰ The visit by PM Modi to participate in the East Asia Summit meeting in November 2015 raised the strategic partnership to the 'enhanced strategic partnership' level with a number of agreements to strengthen defence cooperation, including a training programme for SU 30 pilots, joint collaboration in defence equipment and industry and augmentation in defence exchanges through regular dialogues at various levels.⁶¹ The visits to each other's capitals by the respective Navy Chiefs have made a significant mark. For example, the Chief of Royal Malaysian Navy visited India in 2004 and the Chief of Naval Staff of Indian Navy Admiral Sunil Lanba went on a goodwill visit to Malaysia in March 2017 during which several programmes were conducted.⁶² These visits cannot be taken in a lighter vein as they contributed to the building of trust along with growing defence ties. Trust is an essential element in any bilateral relationship.

Military training and joint military exercise is another area of defence cooperation and diplomacy witnessed. Since the signing of the MOU, India has helped train several Malaysian air force pilots to operate MiG 29 Russian fighter aircraft and Sukhoi fighter jets.⁶³ Malaysia has been strengthening its military weapon systems to be ready to protect its maritime security interests. Military officers from both sides have taken part in educational training at their respective staff colleges. As far as joint military exercises are concerned, the first joint exercise 'Harimau Shakthi' was conducted in 2012, which included training in counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism activities.⁶⁴ A recent such exercise took place in November 2022 in Malaysia in which Indian Garhwal Rifles and Malay Army regiments participated to train interoperability in jungle terrain, thereby aiming to enhance defence relations.⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

The above analysis brings to light the progress made in bilateral defence relations between India and Malaysia. From what was seen as incompatible a few decades ago, the relationship has moved to compatibility and further

to the level of strategic partnership today. Several factors have contributed towards this trend. The historic dimension coupled with the large presence of the Indian diaspora is one factor that has helped revive the connection between both countries. Despite the security scenario of the Cold War era that negatively affected bilateral relations, progress in defence relations has been phenomenal in the post-Cold War years to the extent that from what was restricted to military education and training in the initial years defence tie-ups have moved ahead to conducting joint military exercises and frequent high-level visits, contributing to building mutual trust in their relationships. This development, when seen in terms of the security vulnerabilities that both countries have faced in their respective neighbourhood, is amazing. India as a big and hugely populated country has been facing enormous economic and security challenges both within the country as well as from its immediate neighbourhood. Hence, it seems that there has been a realisation on the part of Indian policymakers that balancing domestic economic constraints and security imperatives and sustaining a modernised military that is formidable enough is equally important. Besides, the expectations of a rising country like India to play a larger role beyond its immediate neighbourhood have also been gaining momentum and therefore propelled India to augment its military capabilities for the purpose of building bridges of friendship with neighbouring and distant countries and securing its own political and economic interests. Malaysia as a small maritime country and as an important player in ASEAN regional organisation has also been undergoing similar challenges in its domestic and external realms. The common problem faced by both countries domestically and externally is terrorism and the need to secure their maritime zone free of threats, particularly freedom of navigation. Achieving this would require cooperation, which Malaysia has been gradually increasing with India. And today the net result of this realisation is the accommodative role that has been given to India in building a successful bilateral defence partnership. The challenge then is to get this translated into some kind of security guarantee mechanism. Will India be able to provide such security guarantees be it against China or any other extra-regional actor or can Malaysia or ASEAN as a whole permit such a role for India in the future is something that remains to be seen.

NOTES

1. Malaysia refers to the nine Malay states and two non-Malay states of Penang and Malacca. The terms Malaya and Malaysia are used interchangeably where necessary.

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