

# US Strengthens Defense Cooperation With ASEAN to Counter CCP Influence

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Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (R) meets with U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, second right, and his delegation at the Malacanang Palace in Manila, Philippines, on Nov. 18, 2024. Gerard Carreon/AP Photo



By Antonio Graceffo

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## Commentary

The United States is ramping up its defense cooperation with Southeast Asia to counterbalance communist China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on Nov. 21 unveiled a new [Defense Vision Statement](#) for a Prosperous and Secure Southeast Asia during the 11th ASEAN [Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus](#) in Vientiane, Laos.

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This blueprint emphasizes enhanced regional collaboration in air, maritime, cyber, and information security to counter illegal intrusions and coercion, reaffirming Washington's commitment to a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific through partnerships with ASEAN nations.



Although Austin did not explicitly name China, the initiatives outlined in the Defense Vision Statement clearly reflect U.S. efforts to counter Beijing's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific. The plan focuses on enhancing domain awareness, bolstering maritime and air security, and deepening regional military cooperation to address challenges arising from the Chinese regime's assertive actions.



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Key initiatives include improving sovereign airspace monitoring, expanding maritime domain awareness through commercial technology, and strengthening cybersecurity through exercises with ASEAN's [Cybersecurity Information Center of Excellence](#). The blueprint also emphasizes multilateral military exercises and educational programs aimed at training the next generation of defense leaders.

The Defense Vision Statement underscores the longstanding U.S.–ASEAN partnership, which has included more than \$17 billion in foreign military sales, multilateral exercises, and educational initiatives. It prioritizes the continuation and expansion of joint military exercises, including a second [U.S.–ASEAN](#) maritime exercise in 2025, as well as Balikatan, Cobra Gold, and Super Garuda Shield, which have been pivotal in fostering regional security and interoperability among Indo-Pacific allies.

Balikatan, primarily involving the United States and the Philippines, focuses on humanitarian assistance, disaster response, counterterrorism, and conventional warfare. Nations like Australia, Japan, and South Korea have occasionally joined as participants or observers.

Cobra Gold, co-hosted by Thailand and the United States, is one of Asia's largest multinational military exercises. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Singapore participate in this exercise, which emphasizes amphibious assaults, disaster relief, and multilateral cooperation on regional security.

Similarly, Super Garuda Shield, co-led by Indonesia and the United States, focuses on joint operational readiness, including amphibious, airborne, and land operations, with contributions from partners such as Japan, Australia, and Singapore.

During his Southeast Asia tour last month, Austin met with Philippine President [Ferdinand Marcos Jr.](#) and Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro Jr. to discuss defense cooperation, regional security, and challenges in the South China Sea. Austin reaffirmed U.S. support for the Philippines in defending its sovereign rights against Chinese harassment, emphasizing the critical role of the U.S.–Philippines [Mutual Defense Treaty](#) (1951). This treaty obligates mutual defense in the event of an armed attack in the Pacific and has been reaffirmed to cover Philippine vessels and forces in the contested waters, reinforcing regional stability and countering Chinese aggression. The U.S. military supports [Philippine operations](#) in the South China Sea through Task Force-Ayungin, an initiative focused on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and maritime domain awareness.

Key outcomes of the visit included the signing of a General Security of Military Information Agreement to enhance intelligence sharing and the inauguration of a new Combined Coordination Center to improve joint operations. The United States also committed to bolstering the Philippines' defense capabilities with innovative technologies,

including unmanned surface vessels, to enhance maritime domain awareness and operational readiness.

Although ASEAN-member Vietnam was not on Austin's itinerary, his September meeting with Vietnamese Defense Minister Gen. [Phan Van Giang](#) at the Pentagon underscored the significance of the U.S.–Vietnam defense relationship, which had been elevated to a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) in 2023. The recent delivery of five U.S.-made T-6C trainer aircraft—the largest arms transfer between the two nations since the Vietnam War—reflects this growing partnership. Part of a total order of 12 aircraft, the deal aims to enhance Vietnam's “self-reliant defense capabilities” by improving pilot training, operational readiness, and homeland protection.

As Vietnam diversifies its defense procurement away from its historical reliance on Russian arms, it is deepening ties with the United States, South Korea, Japan, and Europe to modernize its military. Vietnam's refusal to purchase Chinese weapons, driven by territorial disputes in the South China Sea, further aligns its defense strategy with ASEAN nations and the United States.

Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun was conspicuously absent from the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus, a development linked to an ongoing anti-corruption investigation within China's military. The probe allegedly targets corruption within military procurement, including the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF). Dong's investigation is particularly notable, as he was personally appointed by Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Dong is the third consecutive Chinese defense minister to face corruption allegations, following the removal of his predecessors under similar circumstances. While China's foreign ministry dismissed these reports as speculative, Dong's exclusion from both the Central Military Commission and the State Council earlier this year further fueled uncertainty surrounding his status.

The Chinese regime's growing aggression in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea, has inadvertently paved the way for stronger U.S.–ASEAN defense ties. As Beijing's actions continue to

challenge the sovereignty and security of regional nations, many ASEAN members have sought to deepen their partnerships with the United States to counter these threats. The absence of Dong from the recent ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus in Laos only underscored the widening gap between China and its neighbors.

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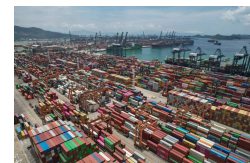
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