



ASIA DIALOGUE POLICY BRIEF

Military Exercises and Security Multialignment in Asia amid US-China Competition

MAY 2026

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This essay is published as a part of APLN's Asia Dialogue on China-US Relations, supported by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members, board, or funders.

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Cover Photo: US and Royal Thai Armed Forces executed a high-intensity counter-landing demonstration during Exercise Cobra Gold 2026 at Hat Yao Beach, Rayong province, Thailand, February 28, 2026.

Source: FaceBook/Sgt. Briana Vera.

MILITARY EXERCISES AND SECURITY MULTIALIGNMENT IN ASIA AMID US-CHINA COMPETITION

Prashanth Parameswaran

INTRODUCTION

Military exercise proliferation has been intensifying in Asia amid growing strategic competition. The United States has tried to further solidify its leading position in this space with allies and partners amid new inroads by China. Meanwhile states in subregions like the Indian Ocean, Northeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands are struggling to manage alignment and resource constraints. They are also engaging with a more diversified group of partners extending out to regions such as Europe. The dynamics that military exercises produce are critical to Asia's regional security. The exercise mix in the coming years will help shape norms and the balance of power in areas of importance across the region as a whole as well as in its core subregions.

This policy brief explores the ongoing military exercise proliferation in Asia's security environment and the opportunities and challenges it creates. It is informed by conversations with exercise planners, policymakers and experts across key regional capitals, including multiple field research trips. The paper makes three main arguments. First, military exercise proliferation in Asia over the past few years is evident across four key metrics: countries, services, issue areas, and geographies. Second, this proliferation impacts the evolving dynamics in Asia's security landscape across five components – capacity, inclusivity, value, efficiency, and transparency. Third, regional actors can take concrete steps to help shape the direction of this military exercise proliferation in ways that maximise the benefits and minimise the risks across the four areas of the acronym DIME – diplomatic, informational, military and economic.

MILITARY EXERCISE PROLIFERATION IN PERSPECTIVE

While military exercises are only one of the more headline-grabbing aspects of complex security dynamics that can be traced back for centuries, they have featured as a key outlet through which strategic competition has manifested within Asia's contemporary security environment. In the twentieth century, military exercises featured as a component of shifting major power dynamics, with cases in point including drills leading up to the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and the Five Power Defence Arrangements exercise program (FPDA) established in 1971 amid Britain's military withdrawal from Southeast Asia.¹ More generally, regional states and a more diverse

¹ On examples of interpretations regarding these historical episodes, see for instance: Emily M. Hill (ed), *Chiang Kai-shek's Critical Years, 1935-50* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2025); and

array of partners from regions such as Europe and the Americas have utilised exercises to enhance readiness for broad spectrum of challenges that have only multiplied during the post-Cold War period, including non-traditional security threats such as disaster relief. Over the past few years, military exercises have increasingly intersected with intensifying major power competition including but not limited to US-China competition, reinforcing the need for more thinking around the benefits of these drills and their impacts on regional security.² Notable cases in point, in just the last year alone, have included India having to explain its non-participation in a BRICS+ exercise following the group's expansion and Cambodia moving to resume drills with the United States having previously suspended them and kickstarting new ones with China.³

More generally, beyond the prism of major power competition, military exercises are situated within the contemporary context of a dynamic of security multialignments in the Indo-Pacific region and subregions like Southeast Asia. In these regions, states cultivate links with multiple actors simultaneously – in relation to their alignments with neighbours, regional and global partners as well as key powers. This may be described as an “I5” perspective around “Mandalas of Multialignment” across five layers – intrastate, interagency, interstate, interregional, and intercontinental (these correspond to actions taken at the subnational, national, subregional, regional and global levels).⁴ One illustrative example is Thailand's hosting of iterations of the multinational Cobra Gold exercises – known as the largest annual multinational military exercise in mainland Asia. In their planning, Thai policymakers need to take into account multiple facets, actors, tracks and levels in its alignments including but not limited to: 1) concerns of local communities affected by the drills; 2) governing legitimacy of the Thai government in power and ties to various parts of the state including the military; 3) the state of Thailand's broader security environment with its neighbours in mainland Southeast Asia and also with China in the context of intensifying competition; 4) the

Headquarters Integrated Area Defense System, “History,” Five Power Defense Arrangements Website, 2026, <https://www.fivepowerdefencearrangements.org/history>.

² On accounts that highlight these dynamics, see, for example: Prashanth Parameswaran, “U.S.-China Competition in Southeast Asia,” *GIS Report*, April 10, 2025: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/rivalry-southeast-asia/>; and Manpreet Sethi, Joel Petersson-Ivve and Frank O'Donnell, “Regional End-States and Beyond: Asia-Pacific Views on the China-US Relationship and Regional Stability,” *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network*, September 19, 2024, <https://www.apln.network/analysis/special-report/regional-end-states-and-beyond-asia-pacific-views-on-the-china-us-relationship-and-regional-stability>.

³ Ministry of External Affairs, “Official Spokesperson's response to media queries regarding comments relating to India's non-participation in a so-called BRICS Naval Exercise,” January 17, 2026, <https://www.mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/40595>; and Ben Sokhean, “US, Cambodia Agree to Resume Joint Military Exercise,” *Khmer Times*, November 4, 2025: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501784272/us-cambodia-agree-to-resume-joint-military-exercise/>.

⁴ Prashanth Parameswaran, *Mandalas of Multialignment: Hedging Bets in Southeast Asia Grand Strategy Spheres, Foreign and Security Policy Webs, and Global Geopolitics and Geoeconomics* (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2026).

exercise's expanding membership across and beyond the Indo-Pacific; 5) how the exercise puts Thailand on the global map in terms of its international image.⁵

In terms of its manifestations, military exercise proliferation today is visible across key players as well as the exercise types (for instance, field training exercise [FTX] or live-fire exercise [LFX]) and across various metrics including participating countries, services, domains and geographies (as seen in Table 1). The United States remains a leader in this space, with officials privately acknowledging that exercise reach under the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) has extended to over 100 joint and service drills, with recent inroads like Japan-ROK-US trilateral exercises or multinationalised US-Indonesia Garuda-Shield drills.⁶ China is also experimenting with expansion efforts building from a lower and narrower base, with Beijing seeking to diversify its portfolio traditionally dominated by a few partners like Pakistan and Russia and with subregions like Southeast Asia as a focus.⁷ This trend extends well beyond the United States and China; nations both within and outside the region are expanding these activities. For instance, the internationalization of Australia's *Talisman Sabre* exercise, with Papua New Guinea hosting elements of this exercise in 2025, and France has broadened its La Perouse exercise to include more Indo-Pacific states.⁸ More drills have also been carried out by minilateral and multilateral groupings including under the banner of the

⁵ On an example of a discussion on some of these considerations in the context of Thailand's foreign relations, see for instance: Prashanth Parameswaran, "Exclusive: Managing the Strained US-Thailand Alliance," *The Diplomat*, December 16, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/exclusive-managing-the-strained-us-thailand-alliance/>.

⁶ Indo-Pacific Command, "Trilateral Statement; First Execution of Multi-Domain Japan-ROK-U.S. Exercise FREEDOM EDGE," June 27, 2024, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3819224/trilateral-statement-first-execution-of-multi-domain-japan-rok-us-exercise-free/>; and U.S. Embassy Jakarta, "Super Garuda Shield 2022 Showcases Multinational Partnership and Joint Interoperability," August 3, 2022, <https://id.usembassy.gov/super-garuda-shield-2022-showcases-multinational-partnership-and-joint-interoperability/>.

⁷ Raina Nelson, Matt Kulman and Phillip Saunders, "Visualizing China's Military Diplomacy," National Defense University, August 5, 2025, <https://inss.ndu.edu/news/Article/4265626/visualizing-chinas-military-diplomacy/>; and China Power, "How Deep are China-Russia Military Ties?" October 28, 2025, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-military-cooperation-arms-sales-exercises/>; On examples from Southeast Asia, see for instance: Rahman Yaakob and Jack Sato, "Southeast Asia's Preferred Military Exercise Partner," *The Interpreter*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/southeast-asia-s-preferred-military-exercise-partner>; and Jun Yan Chang and Evan A. Laksmana, "Joint Military Exercises and Security Ordering in Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 46, Issue 4 (October 2025), 703-720, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13523260.2025.2569763>.

⁸ Australia High Commission Papua New Guinea, "Papua New Guinea plays host to Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025," July 29, 2025, <https://png.embassy.gov.au/pmsb/1415.html>; and French Embassy Singapore, "Defense Cooperation," December 12, 2025, <https://sg.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/node/10/defense-cooperation>.

Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), although institutional labels can often conceal challenges in other aspects of engagement.⁹

Table 1: Select Exercise Proliferation Metrics, Pathways and Examples

SELECT METRICS	EXERCISE PROLIFERATION PATHWAYS	NOTABLE REGIONAL EXAMPLES
Countries	Including additional countries as participants of the exercise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China widening Southeast Asia coverage of Aman-Youyi exercise (starting in 2018) • Canada adding Mexico in its premier Pacific-based naval exercise Trident Fury (2025)
Services	Broadening of exercises to include more defence services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kickstarting of first-of-its-kind UK-India tri-service exercise Konkan Shakti (2021); • Addition of U.S. Space Force into Cobra Gold exercise as the largest drills in mainland Asia (2026)
Geographies	Expanding the geographic coverage of the drills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australia’s internationalisation of Talisman Sabre exercise with Papua New Guinea hosting elements the exercise (2025) • Japan adding Pacific Islands in annual Indo-Pacific deployment (2021)
Issue Areas	Widening the range of issues areas covered by the exercise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding of ASEAN combined field training exercise covering three ADMM working groups – cyber military medicine and HADR (2026) • Pakistan adding broader geopolitical and economic policy dialogue to its AMAN multinational naval exercise (2025)

⁹ Prashanth Parameswaran, “Assessing ASEAN’s New Military Drill: How the 2023 Solidarity Exercise in Natuna Matters,” *ASEAN Wonk*, September 24, 2023, <https://www.aseanwonk.com/p/assessing-aseans-new-military-drill-indonesia>; and Government of India Ministry of External Affairs, “Quad Concludes Field Training Exercise to Advance Indo-Pacific Logistics Network,” December 19, 2025, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/40551/Quad-Concludes-Field-Training-Exercise-to-Advance-Indo-Pacific-Logistics-Network>.

EVOLVING STRATEGIC DYNAMICS

Growing military exercise proliferation contributes to several strategic dynamics that affect regional actors. Dynamics are especially notable across five areas – capacity, inclusivity, value, efficiency, and transparency, which add up to the acronym CIVET.

The first is around capacity. Military exercise proliferation can increase the pressure for participation by regional states which can stretch their limited resources. While these dynamics are often discussed privately and are not the only variable involved in assessing exercise participation, they have at times been publicly disclosed as well. One key actor in this regard is the Philippines given its role as an active claimant in the South China Sea disputes and a member of newer minilateral security relationships across the region such as the US-Japan-Philippines trilateral. In conversations conducted by the author in Manila, security officials directly noted that resource allocation is a primary concern. The Philippines has sought to build up its capacity to protect its interests in the South China Sea, while also intensifying maritime drills (including what are labeled “Multilateral Maritime Cooperation Activities” or MMCAs) with partners including Australia, France, India, Japan and the United States.¹⁰

The second is around inclusivity. The intersection of exercise proliferation and strategic competition has increased the spotlight around inclusivity and exclusivity, thereby increasing the pressures on regional governments to clarify their rationales for participation amid major power scrutiny. One notable recent example was India’s External Affairs Ministry addressing speculations over media reports of New Delhi’s absence from South Africa-hosted “BRICS Plus Naval Exercise.” Against the background of the grouping’s expansion and wariness from Washington, the exercise featured assets from China, Iran, Russia and South Africa.¹¹ In that instance, New Delhi issued a statement that characterised the drills as “entirely a South African initiative” as opposed to “institutionalised BRICS activity” or other drills it had conducted in smaller formats such as those with Brazil and South Africa under the IBSAMAR exercise banner.¹²

The third dynamic is around value. In an era of exercise proliferation and strategic competition, governments are being forced to clearly define the value and evaluation mechanisms of these exercises. Even though exercise planners privately note that the benefits of the exercises go beyond what is publicly articulated – such as concept

¹⁰ Priam Nepomuceno, “More interoperability drills seen for PH, Australia, Japan, US,” *Philippine News Agency*, March 5, 2026, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1270363>; and author conversations with Philippine officials in Manila, May 2025.

¹¹ Sun Gangzheng and Du Jiangfan, “Joint Maritime Exercise “Will for Peace 2026 Kicks Off,” China Military Online, January 12, 2026, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/2025xb/N/JE/16437077.html>.

¹² Ministry of External Affairs, “Official Spokesperson’s response to media queries regarding comments relating to India’s non-participation in a so-called BRICS Naval Exercise,” January 17, 2026, <https://www.mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/40595>.

validation, best practices, lessons learned, deterrence, capabilities, interoperability, relationships, and access – their true value cannot be framed by a narrow cost-benefit calculation. One illustration is how military officials have reinforced the importance of South Korea-US exercises, even amid speculations of its cancellation in the first and second Trump administrations, beyond more general conversations around “model alliances,” and including more concrete measures like readiness for future scenarios related to North Korea¹³

The fourth is around efficiency. The combination of exercise proliferation and strategic competition can exacerbate cumbersome processes to organise drills. One case in point is ASEAN, which remains the default convening hub for Asia-wide diplomatic engagement. Diplomats privately conceded to the author that competing efforts by China and the United States to organise standalone engagements with the grouping, including exercises, have affected scheduling and managing ASEAN’s engagements with other powers.¹⁴ This was evidenced by the first-ever maritime exercises held with Russia in 2021 and India in 2023 being held after firsts with Beijing and Washington in 2018 and 2019 respectively.¹⁵ These so-called “Plus One” engagements are more complicated relative to regularly rotating exercise cycles within groupings like the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) that take place across its seven working groups – counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, military medicine, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian mine action, and cybersecurity.¹⁶

The fifth dynamic is around transparency. Asia currently lacks regional interstate transparency mechanisms as those in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), where exercises above certain thresholds need to be notified.¹⁷ There are increased calls, however, by some stakeholders for more transparency to manage dynamics around military exercises. Some local governments and communities are calling for more input into exercise conduct. For instance, some stakeholders in Mongolia reportedly called for more government transparency on the entry of equipment for Russian military exercises into the country following Kremlin state

¹³ Yoojin Lee, “Military Exercises With US Will Proceed As Usual, Says South Korea’s Defense Minister,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 8, 2026, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/2026-01-08/south-korea-joint-exercises-20338612.html; and U.S. Department of Defense, “Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the Sejong Institute in South Korea (As Delivered),” January 26, 2026: <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4389207/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-sejong-insti/>.

¹⁴ Author conversations with diplomats in Jakarta, March 2025.

¹⁵ Prashanth Parameswaran, “China US Drills, Underwater Vision Top ASEAN Defense Meets,” *ASEAN Wonk*, November 2, 2025, <https://www.aseanwonk.com/p/us-china-asean-exercise-critical-underwater-admm>.

¹⁶ ASEAN Secretariat, “About the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus,” January 1, 2026, <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html>.

¹⁷ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Vienna Document 2011 On Confidence and Security Building Measures,” November 30, 2011, <https://www.osce.org/fsc/86597>

media reports of the Russian-Mongolian joint military exercise.¹⁸ This issue has even strayed into speculation over Russian training of Mongolian personnel extending to using US fighter jets seized following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.¹⁹ Such developments are consequential given the Mongolian government’s calibration of its traditional so-called “third neighbour” approach to diversify ties with countries such as the United States beyond its two immediate neighbours – China and Russia. Mongolian officials have also recounted cases where exercise dynamics have had to be calibrated to account for hosting of drills with both Russia and the United States during periods of tensions between the two powers, and with past incidents of simultaneous drills with Moscow and Washington attracting more scrutiny than intended.²⁰

Table 2: Select Exercise Proliferation Policy Dynamics, Concerns and Examples

Strategic Policy Components	Select Concerns at Play	Notable Past Examples
Capacity	Intensified stressing of resourcing and limited policy bandwidth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philippines withdrawing from Australia’s Exercise Kakadu citing capacity constraints
Inclusivity	More contestation around dynamics related to exercise inclusion and participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • India’s handling of non-participation in China-led and South Africa-supported BRICS+ military exercise
Value	Greater demands on defining value proposition and evaluation mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military officials reinforcing importance of South Korea-US exercises amid cancellation speculation
Efficiency	Rising pressures on already cumbersome process around planning and organizing drills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN facing challenges in organising “Plus One” drills with dialogue partners including China and the US
Transparency	Increasing spotlight around disclosures (and lack thereof) on new and existing military exercises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mongolian government’s management of Russia joint exercise disclosure following Ukraine invasion

¹⁸ IntelliNews, “Mongolian Ministers Under Fire For Failing To Quickly Explain Appearance Of Russian Armed Forces On City Streets,” July 28, 2022, <https://www.intellinews.com/mongolian-ministers-under-fire-for-failing-to-quickly-explain-appearance-of-russian-armed-forces-on-city-streets-251769/>; and TASS, “Russia-Mongolia Defense Cooperation Includes Weapons Supplies, Troop Training — Official,” September 3, 2024, <https://tass.com/defense/1837375>.

¹⁹ TASS, “Russia-Mongolia Defense Cooperation.”

²⁰ Joshua Kucera, “Mongolia: Ulaanbaatar Performs Juggling Act with US, Russian Military Maneuvers,” *Eurasianet*, August 25, 2009, <https://eurasianet.org/mongolia-ulaanbaatar-performs-strategic-juggling-act-with-us-russian-military-maneuvers>.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Adjusting to the combination of intensifying strategic competition and exercise proliferation will require actions from a range of actors in the coming years. This is critical because exercise proliferation will occur in a multi-actor context that hinges not just on individual actions undertaken by China or the United States, but also on how regional states themselves can manage dynamics in a way that maximises the benefits of these engagements while minimising their risks in a resource-constrained and competitive strategic environment. This will require policymakers to undertake steps across all four domains of statecraft inherent in DIME to comprehensively navigate shifting dynamics and forge closer ties in the years to come.

1. **Accelerating capacity building:** States should accelerate capacity-building given growing concerns around resourcing and bandwidth concerns. Multiple exercise planners from developing countries in regions like the Pacific Islands and Southeast Asia directly conveyed to the author that fuller exercise schedules were already creating a dynamic where limited personnel were essentially going from one drill to another, contrary to rhetoric around the need to make time for “lessons learned” within exercise cycles.²¹ One area of focus is leveraging artificial intelligence for designing exercise scenario so that human planners can focus on other higher-value work like learning outcomes. This benefit of this system would be contingent upon how militaries and governments proceed around governance in this domain.²²
2. **Enhancing complexity management:** Governments should enhance the focus on complexity management in an exercise context to better represent the growing linkages between the various challenges faced. The emphasis should be on drills that approximate more integrated concepts such as combined-joint all domain operations or CJADO, in addition to already ongoing efforts to include components that address domains like space and cyber. Regional groupings like ASEAN should also accelerate efforts to promote exercises that move past potential silos around pillars or working groups, with one notable precedent being the first combined field training exercise in the ADMM-Plus that goes

²¹ Author conversations with exercise planners in engagements across various Indo-Pacific capitals, August 2024 – November 2025. Due to sensitivities tied to location of conversations and their own positions, planners agreed to deep background rules of attribution that would allow for insights to be generally shared but strictly no identification of location of conversations or their positions.

²² On one example of a practitioner-based perspective, see: Major Joshua Corson and Major Paul Kuemmerlein, “Artificial Intelligence: The New Force Multiplier in Training Exercises,” *Special Warfare Journal*, February 5, 2026, <https://www.lineofdeparture.army.mil/Journals/Special-Warfare/Special-Warfare-Archive/2026-E-Edition/Artificial-Intelligence/>.

beyond the traditional expert-working group model by integrating three groups around cyber, military medicine and HADR.²³

3. **Institutionalising flexible membership:** Countries should institutionalise flexible membership approaches for military exercises that calibrate tradeoffs with respect to variables such as diversity and complexity while also leaving space for organic evolution within the spectrum of “open” and “closed” architectures. Some of the best practices for larger multinational exercises to signal tiered-participation approaches include the creation of a designated observer program and building out diversified exercise components – including training, exercise types of varying complexities and humanitarian projects for local communities. Exclusions should also be communicated ahead of time, with a case in point being the US disinvitation of China from the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise which included a direct explanation linked to China’s South China Sea behavior.²⁴
4. **Advancing transparency:** Countries should actively advance transparency in the absence of specific confidence-building measures such as thresholds for notification and observation as seen in other contexts such as the Vienna Document adopted by the OSCE.²⁵ Individual governments should consider making relevant data available publicly, given that some concerning but not illegal activities may persist (for instance, the recent unannounced exercises by a Chinese naval task force in the waters between Australia and New Zealand were not illegal but caused flight disruptions and exposed the risk of sudden and aggressive incidents of this type by what is now the world’s largest navy in terms of number of fleets²⁶). Cases in point include reports on foreign military activity within air defense identification zones (ADIZ) published by the defense ministries of Japan and Taiwan.²⁷ Within their own borders, national governments should ensure full coordination is in place with local authorities and affected communities in areas of exercises conducted by domestic forces and foreign militaries to minimise intrastate transparency fallout. In terms of

²³ MINDEF Singapore, “Armies of ASEAN Member States Deepen Camaraderie and Strengthen Coordination for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief,” November 26, 2025, <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/26nov25-nr/>.

²⁴ Megan Eckstein, “China Disinvited from Participating in 2018 RIMPAC Exercise,” *USNI News*, May 23, 2018, <https://news.usni.org/2018/05/23/china-disinvited-participating-2018-rimpac-exercise>.

²⁵ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Vienna Document 2011 On Confidence and Security Building Measures,” November 30, 2011, <https://www.osce.org/fsc/86597>.

²⁶ New York Times, “Chinese Warships’ Plan for Live Fire Drills Unnerves Australia and New Zealand,” February 21, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/21/world/australia/chinese-warships-drills-new-zealand.html>.

²⁷ Japan Ministry of Defense, “Quarterly Report on JASDF Fighters Scramble,” January 21, 2026: https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2026/p20260121_01e.pdf; and Ministry of National Defense R.O.C. (Taiwan), “PLA Activities in the Waters and Airspace Around Taiwan,” April 9, 2026: https://air.mnd.gov.tw/EN/News/News_Detail.aspx?CID=214&ID=58854.

interstate behavior, exercise planners note that affirmative efforts by countries to demonstrate transparency in practice are likely to prove more effective than negative rhetoric directed at the conduct of others.²⁸

5. **Investing in more comprehensive cost-benefit analysis:** Exercise planners, growing government and public scrutiny around this area, should invest in and share best practices to assess the benefits of exercises beyond narrow lenses such as aggregate costs. The focus should be on simple cost-benefit frameworks that incorporate measurable outcomes not only in areas like cost of constructing the exercise, but also on more intangible metrics such as relationship-building. This can be done through existing joint training exercise, evaluation programs and other training mechanisms that track readiness and interoperability. There should be granular attention to perceived benefits like interoperability, which practitioners have rightly noted can be measured differently across technical, procedural and human components.²⁹ Cost-benefit analysis should also fully integrate effects on local governments and communities – including health, safety and the environment – on the frontend rather than as an afterthought, which will facilitate the calibration and management of exercises ahead of time. These should also integrate considerations for gender under frameworks such as women, peace and security (WPS) which address a range of metrics including participation and safety.³⁰
6. **Countering disinformation:** Countries should strengthen their domestic policy ecosystems to better handle disinformation and misinformation. One critical priority is managing the information environment around maritime exercises in or adjacent to disputes waters. These areas are frequent targets of “maritime disinformation” a tactic which falls in the domain of cognitive warfare.³¹ Efforts should focus partly on enhancing government-related strategic communications, including coordinating interagency efforts and supercharging fact-checking mechanisms and digital literacy. Beyond this, policymakers should also integrate non-government stakeholders in areas like facilitating independent journalism, with a case in point being the Philippine government facilitating independent

²⁸ Jim Garamone, “Pentagon, NATO Demonstrate Transparency Officials Want Russia to Emulate,” U.S. Department of Defense, May 13, 2021, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2606488/pentagon-nato-demonstrate-transparency-officials-want-russia-to-emulate/>.

²⁹ For an elaboration on this point, see for example: John R. Deni et al, “Measuring Interoperability Within NATO: Adapted Off-the-Shelf or Bespoke Solution,” *Parameters*, Vol. 55, Issue 1 (Spring 2025), 52-71, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol55/iss1/6/>.

³⁰ UN Women, “Governance, Peace and Security,” 2026, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2026/03/when-women-lead-peace-follows-25-years-of-the-women-peace-and-security-agenda-at-the-united-nations>.

³¹ Mimi Fabe and Prashanth Parameswaran, “Countering Disinformation in the South China Sea,” *Stratsea*, August 22, 2025, <https://stratsea.com/2025/08/22/countering-disinformation-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

reporting by embedding journalists in military engagements related to the South China Sea amid disputes with China.³²

To be sure, adopting these measures will not be easy and some will come with their own share of complexities. Yet a comprehensive approach presents the most likely pathway to sufficiently adjusting to the shifting landscape confronting regional states in this space.

³² Regine Cabato, "How Filipino Journalists Are Reporting On Their Country's Maritime Dispute With China," *Reuters Institute*, February 27, 2026, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/how-filipino-journalists-are-reporting-their-countrys-maritime-dispute-china>.

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