

DEFENCE

Singapore and China conduct counter-terrorism exercise

From 17-18 November the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted a joint military exercise focussed on urban counter-terrorism (CT) operations.¹ "Exercise Cooperation-2024" was conducted at a training facility in Henan Province, China, and is the latest in a series aimed at enhancing mutual trust and cooperation between the two countries' armed forces.^{2,3} The exercise featured a battalion-level Command Post and Field Training Exercise, as well as professional exchanges on CT operations in support of a rescue scenario.⁴ Participating troops from the SAF's 3rd Singapore Division and 1st Commando Battalion and the PLA's Central Theatre Command-Army's 81st Army Group engaged in tactical drills, small-arms live firing, and cohesion activities in mixed teams.^{5,6,7}

In its reporting, the *Global Times* quoted a PLA commander as saying that the joint exercise is expected to "boost combat capability, enhance exchanges, boost traditional friendship and play a positive role in promoting the development of bilateral relations". The article also quoted retired Chinese military and equipment expert from the PLA Air Force, Fu Qianshao, who asserted that consecutive joint exercises on the ground and at sea – a reference to joint maritime exercises in Zhanjiang in September – are a manifestation of the two countries' high level of mutual trust and military cooperation.⁸ Meanwhile, in the official Ministry of Defence of Singapore (MINDEF) press release, defence relations between Singapore and China were described as 'warm and friendly', with reference made to the defence establishments' regular interactions through high-level engagements, mutual visits, cross-attendance of courses, and academic exchanges.⁹

Adarga Analysis: Exercise Cooperation-2024 marks the sixth in a series of joint drills between the PLA and the SAF. Focussed on counter-terrorism operations in urban environments, the exercise demonstrates the countries' intent to address non-traditional security threats collaboratively. Furthermore, the inclusion of live-fire drills and mixed teams throughout demonstrates a level of interoperability between the two militaries, requiring a high degree of coordination in terms of communication systems, tactical alignment, and mutual understanding of each other's operational procedures.

From a Chinese perspective, these exercises likely are a means to project soft power within Southeast Asia. By fostering military collaboration with Singapore, a key regional player, China can reinforce its narrative as a security partner that contributes to regional stability. This also aligns with Beijing's broader strategy of countering US influence in Southeast Asia, particularly as the US continues to expand its defence relationships in the region, such as with the Philippines and Vietnam.^{10,11} In this sense, the timing of the exercise is also noteworthy. It coincides with heightened US military activity in the Indo-Pacific, including joint exercises with regional allies like Japan and South Korea.^{12,13} From a Chinese perspective, China-Singapore drills likely serve as a counter-narrative, showcasing Beijing's ability to build partnerships with US allies and partners.

However, Singapore's participation should not be misinterpreted as a shift toward China. Rather, it reflects Singapore's nuanced approach to managing its ties with major powers. As previously discussed in *Briefly Issue 5*, Singapore is not a formal ally of the US, although it is a close partner as evidenced by it being one of only three countries in Asia, and the only ASEAN member state, to be allowed to buy F-35 aircraft. The island state is also home to a UK naval facility and is a signatory of the Five Power Defence Arrangements alongside Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and the UK.

Economically, Singapore has strong dependencies on China. This is likely to be a contributing factor – along with China being an increasingly major military power in the Indo-Pacific – to why it continues to have 'warm and friendly' defence relations with Beijing. For Singapore, participating in these exercises underscores its pragmatic foreign policy of maintaining balanced ties with 'Great Powers'. While Singapore is a longstanding security partner of the US, its willingness to engage in advanced military cooperation with China signals its intent to diversify its security partnerships.

In the MINDEF press release, the exercise is described as 'part of the SAF's efforts to conduct bilateral and multilateral exercises with foreign armed forces to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation with a range of international partners'.¹⁴ It is highly likely this is part of a deliberate hedging strategy that allows Singapore to ensure its autonomy and stability in a region increasingly shaped by US-China rivalry. Consequently, these events not only underscore the growing military cooperation between the two countries but also reflect Singapore's calibrated foreign policy in navigating sensitive regional dynamics.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

President Xi attends APEC and G20 Summit

Between 16-17 November, President Xi Jinping attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting in Lima, Peru.¹⁵ According to the Chinese formal read-out, in his remarks President Xi emphasised that APEC has been "instrumental in leading Asia and the Pacific to great success in development, prosperity and connectivity, making the region the most dynamic economy and primary engine of global economic growth", as well as reaffirming China's commitment to fostering regional cooperation and unity.¹⁶ He also announced that China would host the 2026 APEC summit, aiming to enhance collaboration among Asia-Pacific countries while addressing pressing global challenges.^{17,18}

On 17 November, President Xi arrived in Rio de Janeiro for the G20 Summit and a state visit scheduled until 21 November. As his plane landed at the Galeao Air Force Base, Xi issued written remarks characterising China and Brazil as "like-minded good friends" and "good partners" that also make great contributions to world peace and development by sending a "just voice" for Global South countries internationally.¹⁹ Between 18-19 November President Xi participated in the 19th G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At the summit, Xi proposed eight initiatives aimed at supporting the Global South, including enhancements to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and calls for the reform of global governance structures.²⁰ He highlighted the importance of fostering a cooperative global environment to tackle challenges related to energy security and technological development.^{21,22} A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson reiterated Xi's emphasis on building a multilateral framework that includes developing countries, ensuring their voices are amplified in international affairs.^{23,24,25}

The summit also marked a notable engagement between the UK and China, as UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer held a bilateral meeting with Xi, the first such meeting since 2018.²⁶ The official UK read-out of the meeting underscored the desire for improved bilateral relations, as well as 'a shared responsibility to work together in pursuit of global stability, economic cooperation and the clean energy transition', while simultaneously acknowledging areas of differing perspectives, such as human rights and regional conflicts.^{27,28} The two leaders also agreed that the UK Chancellor would visit Beijing next year to further explore economic collaboration with her counterpart, Vice Premier He Lifeng.²⁹

Adarga Analysis: President Xi's messaging at both multilateral forums illustrates China's efforts to consolidate its influence in the Global South, strengthen regional cooperation in Asia-Pacific, and enhance bilateral ties with key international players like Brazil and the UK.

In terms of Xi's remarks at the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, by labelling APEC as a driver of global growth, Xi is likely seeking to reinforce China's narrative of broader developmental ambitions for Asia-Pacific countries. Moreover, by reaffirming regional unity and collaboration, he is also likely attempting to strategically position China's development initiatives such as the BRI, which has faced mounting scepticism in recent years, as reaffirming regional unity and collaboration, in order to counter some of the negative narratives of dependency and exploitation often associated with its investments.

Meanwhile, Xi's comments at the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro underscored China's focus on fostering a multipolar world order. President Xi's eight initiatives "aimed at supporting the Global South" almost certainly reflect Beijing's ambition to position itself as the leading voice for developing countries. This aligns with its long-standing criticism of Western-dominated global governance systems, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and its advocacy for reforms that grant more representation to emerging economies.

In this sense, the summit also provided a platform to showcase China's intent to address global challenges through collective action, leveraging its role in multilateral forums to shape global narratives. President Xi's call for reforms in global governance institutions further reinforced China's critique of US dominance, while appealing to a broader coalition of countries seeking greater representation in international decision-making.

Again, the emphasis on enhancing the BRI within these initiatives highlights China's intent to integrate the Global South more deeply into its economic framework. Xi's proposals to address energy security and technological development resonate strongly with the challenges faced by developing countries, likely offering China an avenue to expand its soft power while furthering its technological and infrastructure exports, as well as the opportunity to export its own technical standards to developing countries.

From a bilateral perspective, Xi's remarks in Brazil about China and Brazil being "like-minded good friends" and "good partners" underscore the strategic importance of China-Brazil relations. As discussed in previous issues of *Briefly*, as the largest economy in South America and a key founding member of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), Brazil is central to China's Global South agenda.

In contrast, the bilateral meeting between President Xi and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer marked a cautious thaw in Sino-British relations, which have been strained since 2018. The meeting is noteworthy for its dual focus: fostering economic cooperation while acknowledging areas of disagreement. The UK's emphasis on global stability and clean energy aligns with China's agenda to lead in renewable technologies and climate initiatives, presenting opportunities for collaboration. However, the inclusion of contentious issues such as human rights and regional conflicts – which led to Chinese journalists being ushered out while Starmer was still speaking – reflects the delicate balance the UK is attempting to strike between engagement and criticism.

As discussed in our recent special edition of *Briefly*, which focussed on Chinese coverage of the US presidential election, we can also interpret these events through the lens of broader recent developments. It is likely China is seeking to exploit opportunities provided by President-elect Donald Trump's campaign rhetoric to portray itself as a more stable and reasonable global partner to third countries. Trump's frequent criticism of US alliances, his isolationist tendencies, and his calls for reducing US commitments abroad have created an opening for China to position itself as a consistent and cooperative force in international affairs. Across both summits, Xi's emphasis was on regional 'success' and characterisation of China as a supporter of economic globalisation. In so doing he subtly critiques protectionist policies and positions China as the more reasonable party in China-US relations, advancing its narrative and vision of a sustainable and inclusive development model. Through this, Beijing seeks to contrast itself with the unpredictability of Trump's 'America First' approach, particularly in regions like Southeast Asia and the Global South where stability is a critical priority.

ABOUT

Briefly - China in the Changing World Order

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