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Anchoring trust: Malaysia and Australia's strategic partnership beyond seven decades — Phar Kim Beng and Luthfy Hamzah



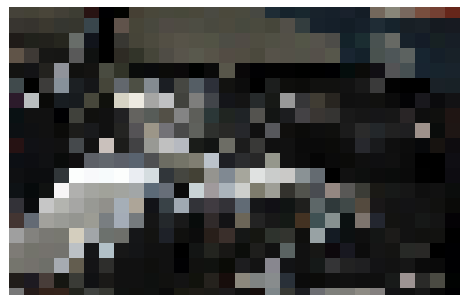
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AUGUST 26 — When Australian troops first set foot in Malaya during the Emergency in 1948, few could have foreseen that this relationship would blossom into one of the most durable security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. Seven decades later, Malaysia

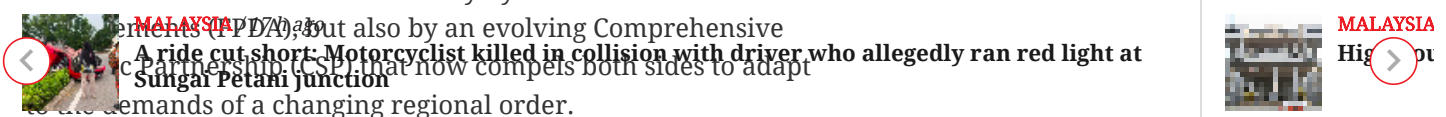
ia remain bound not only by the Five Power Defence
lements (FPDA), but also by an evolving Comprehensive
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to the demands of a changing regional order.

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The recent Philippine-Australian joint exercises, which simulated the retaking of an island, have drawn headlines. Yet, Malaysia need not replicate Manila's approach. Instead, Kuala Lumpur and Canberra should seize this moment to localise their joint training around Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR), counter-piracy, and maritime security in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. In so doing, they can strengthen both FPDA resilience and Asean's credibility as a security community.

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Defence Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin (right) holds a bilateral meeting with Australian Deputy Minister and Minister of Defence Richard Marles during the 5th Malaysia - Australia High Level Committee (HLC) Meeting at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Kuala Lumpur August 21, 2025. —Picture by Yusof Isa

A seven-decade bond

Malaysia and Australia's security ties are not an invention of the post-Cold War era. From the Malayan Emergency to Confrontation with Indonesia in the 1960s, Australian forces stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Malayan and later Malaysian

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The establishment of the FPDA in 1971 institutionalised this bond. Alongside the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Singapore, Malaysia and Australia forged a unique arrangement that was neither a formal alliance nor a loose consultation mechanism. The FPDA's secret sauce was its flexibility. It did not bind members to automatic intervention, but it ensured regular exercises, intelligence sharing, and interoperability. For Malaysia, this was a guarantee of continuing external interest in its defence at a time when Cold War uncertainties loomed large.

Today, the FPDA remains one of the longest-standing multilateral defence arrangements in Asia, and Australia is pivotal to its vitality. Canberra's defence technology, training, and operational experience bring value to Malaysia's forces, which still grapple with capability gaps. The recent CSP has added economic, political, and educational pillars, broadening a relationship once defined narrowly by defence.

Localising cooperation: HADR and counter-piracy

Yet, the future of Malaysia-Australia cooperation should not merely rehearse Cold War templates or mimic Philippine-Australian war-fighting drills. Malaysia's strategic environment is distinct. The doubling of piracy cases in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, particularly near Batam island, highlights the urgency of maritime security. This is a chokepoint through which one-quarter of the world's traded goods pass; its vulnerability to piracy and trafficking is not merely a Malaysian concern but a global one.

Here, joint exercises with HADR and counter-piracy dimensions are vital. Such drills would not only enhance maritime situational awareness but also strengthen the readiness of both nations to respond to natural disasters. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami revealed how Asean states and their partners could collaborate effectively in delivering aid. Malaysia and Australia can build on that legacy by designing exercises that prepare forces to deploy rapidly, secure sea lanes, and provide humanitarian relief.

This approach is both pragmatic and politically sustainable.

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power rivalries. Localised exercises send a message that the

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partnership is tailored to Malaysia's realities rather than externally imposed agendas.

FPDA in a time of flux

The FPDA faces questions of relevance as power shifts reshape the Indo-Pacific. China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, North Korea's missile testing, and the United States' unpredictable tariff diplomacy under Donald Trump all create new uncertainties. Against this backdrop, Malaysia and Australia's defence cooperation must evolve.

By integrating HADR and counter-piracy into FPDA exercises such as Bersama Shield or Bersama Lima, both countries can demonstrate the arrangement's adaptability. Humanitarian dimensions temper the perception of provocation while enhancing the legitimacy of joint activities in the eyes of Asean neighbours. Counter-piracy drills, meanwhile, ensure that FPDA is seen not merely as a relic of colonial-era alignments but as a living framework responding to twenty-first-century security demands.

Such localisation does not weaken FPDA. On the contrary, it revitalises the arrangement by aligning it with the everyday security needs of member states, especially Malaysia. Australia's willingness to engage on these terms underscores the maturity of the partnership.

Asean and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Beyond FPDA, Malaysia and Australia's CSP provides another layer of cooperation. Signed in 2021, the CSP encompasses trade, education, climate change, and digital economy collaboration. But security remains the foundation upon which trust is built. For Asean, the CSP is a model of how external partners can engage the region without overwhelming it.

Asean centrality depends on its ability to balance major powers while enhancing its own resilience. Malaysia, as a founding member, must show that bilateral partnerships like the one with Australia can be localised, constructive, and non-escalatory. Canberra, in turn, benefits from demonstrating that it can work with South-east Asian partners in ways that strengthen rather than bypass Asean.

By focusing on piracy, disaster relief, and maritime security, Malaysia and Australia anchor their CSP in issues that matter most to South-east Asians. This complements Asean-led mechanisms such as the Asean Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, where broader geopolitical tensions are debated.

The next decade: Anchoring trust in a turbulent sea

As globalisation and climate change intensifies natural disasters, Malaysia and Australia's joint response will be tested. The partnership will not be in dramatic amphibious of their partnership will not be in dramatic amphibious. A ride cut short: Motorcyclist killed in collision with driver who allegedly ran red light at Sungai Petani junction



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drills but in the quiet efficiency of securing shipping lanes, rescuing stranded communities, and coordinating relief flights.

Seven decades of partnership have built trust. The next decade will determine whether that trust can be localised to meet contemporary challenges. Malaysia and Australia must show that their security cooperation is not only about deterring adversaries but also about protecting livelihoods. By doing so, they reaffirm the FPDA's relevance, strengthen Asean's resilience, and project a model of pragmatic cooperation in a region too often pulled by geopolitical currents.

The Philippines and Australia may rehearse retaking islands. Malaysia and Australia must rehearse saving lives. That is how true strategic partners endure.

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**** This is the personal opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of *Malay Mail*.**

FURTHER QUESTIONS?

- How did the Malayan Emergency shape Malaysia-Australia security ties?
- Why did the FPDA avoid automatic intervention yet stay relevant?
- How does the 2021 CSP broaden Malaysia-Australia cooperation beyond defence?

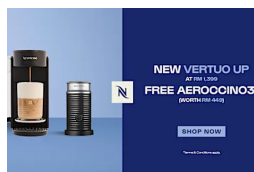
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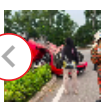
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