

**THE AIR POWER DIMENSION OF MALAYSIA–AUSTRALIA
DEFENCE AND SECURITY COOPERATION, 1971-2020**

WONG CHOOI YE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a regional security complex study of Malaysia–Australia defence and security cooperation between 1971 and 2020, positioning air power as its geostrategic element. Given the paradox that, despite the RMAF Butterworth Airbase’s critical geostrategic importance in the region, the air power dimension of the Malaysia–Australia collaboration has nevertheless often been overlooked, the primary purpose of this thesis is to assess the interplay between air power and the securitisation of threats: that is, why and how has the air power dimension influenced defence and security cooperation between Malaysia and Australia in the ever-evolving strategic environment. To locate the answer, this thesis utilises the regional security complex framework of securitisation mechanism to study the relationship between air power and cooperation on defence and security. This study finds that it was the global, regional or interregional and domestic complexities spanning the Indo–Pacific, focusing on the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea connected through the Straits of Malacca to the Indian Ocean, which place the Butterworth Airbase as the linchpin of the convergence of air power. This study further finds that the long-standing bilateral defence relationship is rooted in the development of defence policy and air power, the most heightened Indo–Pacific security, perceptions of threats, reciprocal military engagement and economic/political imperatives. It also finds that the regional security complex theory has been able to accommodate a variety of conventional and unconventional security issues within the two nations’ maritime proximities that could be addressed through air power. At the conventional front, the security concerns were associated with interstate disputes and encroachments, including national security, unmanned combat aerial system, and the proliferation of missiles as through air threats. The unconventional issues are associated with the marine environment, economic development, human security as in unconventional maritime security, as well as cyber security. To date, this is the only study to examine the air power dimension of Malaysia–Australia defence and security cooperation through the prism of regional security complex theory. This thesis posits that the RMAF Butterworth Airbase demonstrates significant geo-strategic impacts via the air power dimension in the defence and security cooperation between both nations. With the existence of a “triangle of power competition”, both nations seek to address the security concerns through securitisation to which Malaysia’s defence policy is in-line with its foreign policy of neutrality and equidistance. This study suggests three avenues for future research: the air power dimension to constructively manage China via Malaysia-Australia security cooperation, further evaluations of the geostrategic significance demonstrated by the RMAF Butterworth Airbase via the lenses of military doctrine and the historical perspectives. Finally, this study strongly recommends that the Malaysian government to preserve the RMAF Butterworth Airbase in view of a self-reliant posture and precautionary measure for possible Australia’s withdrawal from this region. To achieve this, greater revolution in the hard and soft air power is crucial.

ABSTRAK

Tesis ini mengkaji dan menganalisa kerjasama pertahanan dan keselamatan di antara Malaysia dan Australia dari 1971 hingga 2020 di mana kuasa udara merupakan elemen geostrategik dalam konteks ini. Walaupun Pangkalan Udara Butterworth memainkan peranan yang penting di rantau ini, tetapi jurang penyelidikan mengenai kerjasama dua-hala dari segi kuasa udara masih kelihatan. Matlamat utama tesis ini adalah menyelidik dan membuka perspektif yang mendalam terhadap hubungkait dimensi kuasa udara dan sekuritisasi (*securitisation*) ancaman-ancaman keselamatan yang dikenalpastikan oleh kedua-dua negara, serta faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhinya. Demi menjawab persoalan ini, kaedah penyelidikan kualitatif dan teori kompleks keselamatan serantau digunakan untuk menganalisa dan menjelaskan fenomena kerjasama pertahanan dan keselamatan Malaysia dan Australia di rantau ini dan rantau Indo-Pasifik. Hasil penyelidikan menunjukkan bahawa kompleksiti di peringkat dunia, serantau, dan domestik, khususnya dari Lautan Pasifik dan Laut China Selatan merentasi ke Selat Melaka dan Lautan India menyebabkan Butterworth timbul sebagai lokasi yang strategik lagi penting. Butterworth juga dikatakan merupakan satu faktor penyambung dalam hubungan kerjasama dua-hala ini. Hubungan pertahanan dua-hala yang erat ini bermula dari sejarah dan perkembangan polisi pertahanan dan keselamatan, serta dipengaruhi oleh persaingan kuasa di Indo-Pasifik dan tanggapan terhadap ancaman-ancaman negara. Kerjasama dua-hala dan faktor sosial-ekonomi juga memainkan peranan penting. Teori kompleks keselamatan serantau menjelaskan fenomena sekuritisasi ancaman-ancaman negara dan ianya dapat diatasi dengan peranan kuasa udara. Dua aspek isu telah dikenalpastikan, iaitu ancaman keselamatan traditional dan bukan traditional yang melibatkan isu-isu maritim. Justeru, tesis ini adalah penting bagi mengkaji elemen kuasa udara dalam kerjasama dua hala di antara Malaysia dan Australia melalui teori kompleks keselamatan serantau. Dengan wujudnya sebuah “segitiga persaingan kuasa” yang merangkumi Lautan Pasifik, Laut China Selatan, dan Lautan India, kedua-dua negara Malaysia dan Australia berganding bahu untuk menangani isu-isu keselamatan yang timbul melalui proses sekuritisasi. Dalam pada itu, polisi pertahanan Malaysia dilaksanakan berdasarkan dasar luar negara yang menekankan prinsip-prinsip berkecualian dengan tidak mencampuri urusan negara lain, dan kewujudan bersama secara harmoni di samping melindungi kedaulatan dan kepentingan negara. Pengaji mengemukakan tiga cadangan kajian akan datang bertujuan untuk mengembangkan lagi pengetahuan terhadap kerjasama dua hala di antara kedua-dua negara ini, iaitu, mengendalikan negara China melalui kerjasama keselamatan di antara Malaysia and Australia dari perspektif kuasa udara, menganalisa dengan lebih mendalam atas kepentingan geostrategik sepertimana yang dipamerkan oleh Pangkalan Udara Butterworth dari segi dokumentasi ketenteraan, dan juga dari sudut sejarah pada zaman Perang Dingin. Dari segi polisi, kajian ini turut mencadangkan bahawa kerajaan Malaysia seharusnya mengekalkan dan mengembangkan Pangkalan Udara Butterworth. Ini adalah satu langkah berdikari dan pendekatan berwaspada demi memastikan persediaan yang mantap sekiranya Australia tarik diri dari rantau ini. Untuk mencapainya tujuan ini, revolusi modenisasi ketenteraan harus dipertingkatkan lagi secara sistematik di mana kuasa keras (*hard power*) dan kuasa lembut (*soft power*) adalah kritikal.

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APPROVAL

The Examination Committee has met on **17 FEBRUARY 2021** to conduct the final examination of Wong Chooi Ye on her degree thesis entitled '**The Air Power Dimension of Malaysia-Australia Defence and Security Cooperation, 1971-2020**'

The committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy (Strategic and International Relations).

Members of the Examination Committee were as follows.

Professor Emeritus Dato' Dr. Wan Hashim bin Wan Teh
Faculty of Defence Studies and Management
Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia
(Chairman)

Colonel (Retired) Associate Professor Dr. Mohd Zaini bin Salleh
Faculty of Defence Studies and Management
Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

Professor Dr. Vivian Louis Forbes
School of Social Sciences
University of Western Australia (UWA)
(External Examiner)

Associate Professor Dr. D. Ravichandran K. Dhakshinamoorthy
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
National University of Malaysia (UKM)
(External Examiner)

APPROVAL

This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Strategic and International Relations).

The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows.

Associate Professor Dr. Adam Leong Kok Wey
Faculty of Defence Studies and Management
Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia
(Main Supervisor)

Dr. Tharishini Krishnan
Faculty of Defence Studies and Management
Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia
(Co-Supervisor)

UNIVERSITI PERTAHANAN NASIONAL MALAYSIA

DECLARATION OF THESIS

Student's full name : WONG CHOOI YE
Date of birth : 13 March 1978
Title : The Air Power Dimension of Malaysia–Australia
Defence and Security Cooperation, 1971-2020
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AANZFTA	ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand Free Trade Agreement
ADF	Australia Defence Force
ADIZ	Air-Defence Identification Zone
ADMM-Plus	ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus
ADOC	Air Defence Operation Centre
ADWP	Australia Defence White Paper
AMBC	Australia Malaysia Business Council
AMDA	Anglo-Malaya Defence Agreement
ANZUS	Australia–New Zealand–United States Security Treaty
APEC	The Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia–Europe Meeting
BRI	Belt and Road Initiatives
CNII	Critical National Information Infrastructures
CSCAP	The Council for Security Cooperation in The Asia Pacific
CSP	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Initiative
DACT	Dissimilar Air Combat Tactics
DCA	Department of Civil Aviation
DFAT	Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EA	Electronic Attack
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
ESSCom	Eastern Sabah Security Command
ESSZone	Eastern Sabah Security Zone
FLIR	Forward-Looking Infrared
FOIP	Free and Open Indo–Pacific
FON	Freedom of Navigation
FPDA	Five Power Defence Arrangements
GBAD	Ground-based Air Defence

GWOT	Global War on Terror
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
HALE	High Altitude Long Endurance
HGV	Hypersonic Glide Vehicle
HQIADS	Headquarter Integrated Area Defence System
IORA	The Indian Ocean Rim Association
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
ISTAR	Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance
JMAPTI	Joint Malaysia Australia Peacekeeping Training Initiative
LIC	Low-Intensity Conflict
LLAD	Low-Level Air Defence
MABC	Malaysia Australia Business Council
M-ADAA	Malaysia–Australia Defence Alumni Association
MAF	Malaysian Armed Forces
MAFTA	Malaysia–Australia Free Trade Agreement
MAJDP	Malaysia–Australia Joint Defence Programme
MDA	Maritime domain awareness
MDWP	Malaysia Defence White Paper
MMEA	Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency
MOOTW	Military Operations Other Than War
MRCA	Multirole Combat Aircraft
MSI	Maritime Surveillance Initiative
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NEC	Network-Enabled Capability
OCA	Offensive Counter Air Operations
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RADOC	The Regional Air Defence Operation Centre
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAM	Rocket, Artillery and Mortar

RCEP	The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RMAF	Royal Malaysian Air Force
RMN	Royal Malaysia Navy
RNZAF	Royal New Zealand Air Force
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory
SAR	Search and Rescue
SAS	Special Air Service Regiment
SEATO	The Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation
SLOCs	Sea Lanes of Communication
SRBM	Short-range ballistic missile
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
UAS	Unmanned Aerial Systems
UAs	Unmanned Aircraft
UAVs	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UCAS	Unmanned Combat Air Systems
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on The Law of The Sea
USINDOPACOM	United States Indo-Pacific Command
WMDs	Weapons of Mass Destructions
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of Study

This study explores the air power dimension of the defence and security cooperation between Malaysia and Australia from geostrategic perspectives. By adhering to the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as a theoretical framework (see Section 1.9), the focus of the study is placed on addressing defence and security cooperation in aerial domain of the two nations in the Southeast Asian subcomplex where the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) Butterworth Airbase is of great significance for both states. It has resulted from the securitisation process of conventional and unconventional concerns. This introductory chapter comprises research background, background of the issues and research problems, problem statement, research questions, research objectives, significance of research, as well as the scope and limitation of the research. Further, this chapter lays out RSCT which is the principal theoretical framework as the analytical tool for this study. This chapter also defines the key concepts on air power, securitisation, and geostrategy which are of relevant with RSCT. This qualitative research explains the phenomena of the air power dimension of Malaysia–Australia defence and security cooperation through the

micro prism of the RMAF Butterworth Airbase. The primary data mainly is obtained through in-depth interviews and governmental documents. The analysis has shown that maritime air power stands out in securitising fundamentally the maritime security threats. This study argues that while Malaysia's stock is rising, Butterworth is likely to become part of Australia's burgeoning Southeast Asia further traversing to the Indo-Pacific strategic profile with specific reference to the Straits of Malacca, Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. In addition to this, Australia would enhance strategic depth for Malaysia in the air power dimension in a pattern of a 'low-key security regime'.

1.2 Background of Research

Malaysia and Australia are two natural partners in the world, sharing many similarities in the international system, *inter alia*, Indo-Pacific states, multiracial society, shared security concerns in the Indo-Pacific, open trading borders, democracy, constitutional monarchy, a Westminster parliamentary system, common law, British military influence and many traditions. Although rarely discussed, the shared history of both nations is reflected in their shared interests, which are threefold: rule-based order, international law and open markets (Goledzinowski, 2018). As Najib Razak, Malaysia's former prime minister, highlighted in a book-launching event in 2015 in conjunction with the 60th anniversary of Australia's presence in Malaysia, 'Relations between Malaysia and Australia is on a very strong footing and there's a lot of opportunity for us to deepen and enhance that relationship which has been a very important relationship over the years' (Razak, 2015).

In light of these good bilateral relations, the Morrison administration has made Malaysia the focus country of its annual major public diplomacy programme, *Australia Now*. With Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan and Germany as precedents in previous years, the programme indicates further enhancement of Australia's already-cordial bilateral relations with Malaysia. As Deputy High Commissioner of Australia in Kuala Lumpur, HE Michael Growder observes that 'the relationship between Australia and Malaysia has never been better. Educational relationships, migration, tourism, business and trade are areas which have been underpinning the relationship for a long time' (Chang, 2020). In this sense, Malaysia–Australia bilateral relations have been long-standing and cordial in nature and have to a large extent resulted in institutional ties, economic cooperation, defence and security links, and people-to-people connections (through education, tourism and the diaspora).

This long-standing relationship is based on a shared historical connection that predated Malaysia's independence. In World War I, Australian armed forces were deployed to the Peninsula of British Malaya to counterstrike German attacks in the Battle of Penang. In World War II, Australian forces first defended Malaya in Operation Matador before the Japanese forces attacked allied forces on Malayan soil. Later, they extensively defended Malaya, fighting the Japanese Imperial Forces in the Malayan Campaign until the fall of the British Singapore fortress. Upon Japan's capitulation, the 1945 Sandakan Death Marches in Sabah and the recapture of Sabah and Sarawak laid the foundation for later military cooperation (for a historical discussion of this development, see Chapter 5).

This defence and security relationship endured throughout Malaya's post-independence era. New security concerns emerged as the consequences of the Cold War became intricately interwoven with the withdrawal of British military commitment from the Southeast Asian region and the decolonisation process. Anticipating tremendous uncertainties, the first Malaysian prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, adopted a pro-Western defence and security policy in securing the new state.

On the other hand, two fundamental factors, among others, influenced Australia's relationship with Malaysia during this era: Australia's preoccupation with security and its perception that communism, particularly as disseminated from the Soviet Union and China, was a threat. In this pursuit of defence, Australia continued to play a vital role as a 'security provider' for Malaya/Malaysia along with the British and New Zealand armed forces. This was part of Australia's forward defence policy. The closeness of the two countries' defence and security relations was reflected in Australia's counter-insurgency years, during which Malaysia was described as Australia's 'closest regional ally' (Funston, 2013), as manifested in the Malayan Emergency and Indonesia's Confrontation. Due to Malaysia's strategic importance in deterring communism, former Australian Minister for External Affairs Percy Spender perceived Malaya as 'of vital concern to Australia'.

Despite the threats of communism during the Cold War era, the Anglo-Malaya Defence Agreement (AMDA)—later designated the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) in 1971 under the premiership of Tun Abdul Razak—was established to provide further military protection and air defence to Malaysia and

Singapore in the peninsula. Prior to these strategic changes, the formation of FPDA assumed the British withdrawal from the 'East of Suez' and the United States' Guam Doctrine by the 1970s. Subsequently, both Malaysia and Australia were compelled to be responsible for their own security. The region was toppled by the international security complexity created by the Communist Bloc in the Indo-China region and the lessons learnt from the Fall of Singapore. As enduring allies of the West, Australia and New Zealand anticipated the security of the peninsula as a 'stabiliser' of their own national security. In this respect, Australia-Malaysia relations in this era were reflected in the statement of former Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies (1955) that 'If Malaya is vital to our defence, more vital, properly understood, than some point on the Australian coast, then we must make Malayan defence in a real sense our business' (Evans & Grant, 1991).

In fact, the FPDA was an imminent factor in building security for the new Malaysia via regional cooperation under the umbrella of Commonwealth nations as arrangements pronounced that

In the event of any form of armed attack externally organised or supported or the threat of such attack against Malaysia or Singapore, their Governments would immediately consult together for the purpose of deciding what measures should be taken jointly or separately in relation to such attack or threat. (Communiqué issued at the conclusion of the Five Power Ministerial Meeting on the External Defence of Malaysia and Singapore, 1971)

Under such strategic circumstances, Australia took part in shaping Malaysia's security as a force with a self-reliant posture through training, exercises and assistance. This was in line with Prime Minister Whitlam's view that Southeast Asian states would not serve as buffer states for Australia, instead consolidating regional peace

and stability based on their shared common interests (Whitlam, 1973). This was reflected during the early years of the Royal Malaysia Navy (RMN), to which Australians were appointed as chiefs. Meanwhile, Malaysia's Air Defence Artillery was established in 1963 after receiving 12 Bofors 40mm L/60 guns from the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in order to enhance the Malaysian air defence system (Informant MY-09, personal communication, 25 September 2019).

Despite the anti-Australia rhetoric that emerged during Mahathir's previous administration of 1981 to 2003, a strong sense of military cooperation between the two nations has never faded (Leong, 2016). The FPDA continues to be the 'springboard' for the defence and security cooperation of Malaysia and Australia in the post-Cold War era, together with the three other nations involved in the non-binding military pact: New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom. The FPDA supports the professionalism of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), as reflected in the *National Defence Policy*: 'Although it remains untested at war or conflict, the FPDA is an effective conflict management tool and has contributed towards MAF's development and enhancement of its professionalism'. In its inaugural Defence White Paper, the FPDA consistently contributes to Malaysia in terms of 'improving the knowledge, skills and professionalism of the military personnel,...and enhanc[ing] the MAF's defence capability and preparedness' (p. 72). From Australia's perspective, the FPDA is a platform for greater regional engagement in the defence and security realms. Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper highlights that it is the

only multilateral security agreement focused on practical cooperation of its kind in the South East Asian region. Since 1971, the FPDA has been an enduring and important feature of Australia's efforts to advance its interests by working with partners to promote security in South East Asia. (Australia's Defence White Paper, 2016, p. 129)

In this sense, the FPDA provides a formal mechanism for the member states to network through military collaboration (Tan, 2008). At present, the FPDA is still an active regional military arrangement, where military exercises are conducted on a regular basis, but its roles have further expanded to address unconventional security threats over time. It is durable due to its flexible and transformative features, particularly in the post-11th September 2000 era (hereinafter, “the 9/11 incidents”). (Ahmad, 2011; Emmers, 2012; Tan, 2008). The 9/11 incidents were the infamous aircraft hijackings and crashes into the New York World Trade Centre and the Pentagon building in Washington committed by the al-Qaeda extremism regime in 2001. The FPDA plays a significant role as the only security arrangement in the Southeast Asian region. It is also the first formal cooperation directly involving Malaysia and Australia. Within the FPDA framework, Malaysia and Singapore can take a multi-pronged approach to their bilateral and multilateral relations with Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Pek, 2016).

Within this framework, defence and security cooperation between Malaysia and Australia has been the most significant driver of the level of ‘partnership’; Funston (1996) observes that, in this partnership, Australia has been playing a critical role as security ‘provider’, and Malaysia is the ‘recipient’ (Camilleri, 2001, p. 39). This study also confirms that Australia feels obligated to support Malaysia, while both states have maintained a tacit understanding that smaller states receive security protection from their ‘big brother’ states.¹ This is particularly appropriate given the reality that Malaysia’s air power is less advanced than, but nonetheless formidable among, the five member states.

¹ Personal communication with Informants MY-13 and AU-12.

Under the FPDA mechanism, the Headquarters of the Integrated Air Defence System (HQIADS) was established in 1971 and upgraded to the Headquarters of Integrated Area Defence System in 2001. Since then, HQIADS has been the permanent operational element of FPDA housed at the RMAF Butterworth Airbase (*Malaysia Defence White Paper, 2020*). It is the main instrument coordinating the air defence of the Malaysian peninsula and Singapore that allows integration among the member states (Air Power Development Centre, 2011a). Further to this, HQIADS also contributes to regional security. Among the five member states, Australia assumes the leading role in FPDA operations, as indicated by its contribution of considerable resources and the position of an RAAF Air Vice-Marshal as commander of the HQIADS and infantry company at Butterworth (Lax, 2020; Li, 2019).

The RMAF Butterworth Airbase has been the ‘central hub’ of the air power dimension of Malaysia–Australia defence and security cooperation. It is also Australia’s only permanent overseas airbase. RAAF inherited the airbase from the British in 1958 as part of the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve, with the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) as collective contributors to regional security. In the following years, the airbase served as a critical instrument to deter the security threats posed to Malaysia by the Communist Bloc at the peak of the Cold War. By end of the Cold War era, the airbase has evolved into a strategic forward base for Australia’s maritime surveillance operation, Operation Gateway. For the purposes of this study, the significance of the Butterworth Airbase and Operation Gateway will be further discussed in Chapter 4.