

## **SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGE IN US MILITARY PRESENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

### **I. Introduction**

During the Cold War, ASEAN had a pivotal role in protecting this region – an important trade route – from confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Member states developed rapidly, both economically and politically, and ASEAN became Asia's most important regional organization and an asset to US interests.

Geographically, the region straddles sealanes that connect not only the Indian and Pacific Oceans but also north-south routes linking Australia and New Zealand to the countries of northeast Asia. Also, because of the littoral nature of most ASEAN nations and the relative lack of land-based transport, much intraregional trade depends on these waterways. This fact led the US to imbue this region with strategic relevance for international security and commerce. From a military perspective, these sealanes are critical to the movement of US forces from the western pacific to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

ASEAN has eclipsed the importance of several traditional US trading partners. ASEAN is a large market for American goods and services as well as an increasingly important US investment destination and source of imports. Despite the Asian economic crisis, ASEAN remains an important US trading partner. In 1999, the US merchandise exports to ASEAN reached about \$40 billion, while imports totaled \$78 billion. ASEAN is the US' fourth largest trading partner (after Canada, Japan and Mexico). There is potential for further growth in trade between the US and the ASEAN in view of the on-going structural changes in the region's economies. ASEAN is also a major destination for American foreign investment. From 1990 to 1997, US foreign direct investment in the region climbed from \$11.8 billion to \$37.5 billion, surpassing Japan, Brazil, China and Hongkong.

### **II. Changes in US Military Presence in the Region**

#### **A. Cold War Presence**

The US has maintained a military presence in the region since the beginning of the Cold War in the closing days of World War II. This presence peaked during the Vietnam War with the US stationing some 500,000 US troops at its highest in the region. Subic Bay served as the main naval base of the US 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet. Cam Ranh Bay in South Vietnam likewise served as the other 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet base apart from the military facilities in Thailand with which the US has maintained a closer military partnership.

US intervention in Vietnam heralded the deep involvement of its military forces in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. However, the US military defeat in that country left the US stretched to the limit politically, militarily, financially and emotionally. The fiasco led succeeding US governments to think twice before committing ground troops in succeeding conflicts around the globe.

After the end of the Vietnam War, the US continued to deploy a significant number of its forces primarily to contain the soviet strategic designs in the region and also as a deterrent to North Korean adventurism.

## **B. Post Cold War Presence**

The US withdrawal from Vietnam signaled the formal decline of its military presence in Southeast Asia. This was subsequently followed by the conclusion of its bases lease agreement with the Philippines for Subic Naval Base and Clark Airforce Base in 1992.

With the end of the Cold War and the non-renewal of its base lease agreement with the Philippines, US military presence in Southeast Asia considerably waned, but a substantial number of US troops remained in Northeast Asia.

As early as 1990, the US began to consider changing its military strategy and structure in the Asia-Pacific Region in response to the end of the Cold War. However, in its third East Asian Strategy Report (EASR) published in 1995, the US noted that continuous areas of uncertainty and tension required a reaffirmation of US security commitments to the Asia-Pacific. Where the 1990 and 1992 EASR anticipated reductions in US forward deployed forces, the 1995 report confirmed Washington's intention to maintain approximately 100,000 troops in the region and strengthen bilateral relationships. More recently, the fourth EASR in 1998 underscored that US priorities in the Asia-Pacific Region remained constant, and that it is always ready to promote fresh approaches to security in response to changes in the regional environment.

## **III. Current US Military Policy/Posture in the Region**

During the latter part of the last decade, the US realized the need to bolster its presence in Asia-Pacific Region and has turned its sights on Southeast Asia to regain its foothold.

Maintaining overseas military presence remains a cornerstone of US National Security Strategy and a key element of its military policy. Thus, it has committed to station 47,000 troops in Japan and 37,000 in South Korea owing to the vulnerability of the region to the North Korean threat.

In Asia, US force presence plays a particularly key role in promoting peace and security in regional affairs. US strategic interests in Southeast Asia center on developing regional and bilateral security and economic relationships that assist in conflict prevention and resolution and expand US participation in the region's economies.

The importance of keeping its military influence in Asia was highlighted in the Pentagon's so-called "joint vision 2020". Aside from projecting a presence in Korea even if North Korean threat disappears, this key defense document envisioned Asia instead of Europe as the prime focus of US military in the coming decades; identifies China as a "peer competitor"; and sees even closer military coordination with Japan.

Along with the new posturing in the region, the US has formulated the following security objectives in the region:

- to maintain security alliances with Australia, Thailand and the Philippines;
- to sustain security access arrangements with Singapore and other ASEAN countries; and
- to encourage the emergence of a strong cohesive ASEAN capable of enhancing regional security and prosperity.

US policy combines two approaches. First, the US maintains a productive relationship with ASEAN and enhances security dialogues under the Asean Regional Forum (ARF). Second, the US pursues bilateral initiatives with individual ASEAN states.

Among those bilateral initiatives include the following:

- Signing of the visiting forces agreement with the Philippines in January 1998;
- Singapore's offer of the use of the new and enlarged Changi Naval Station to US naval combatants. the facility includes a pier which can accommodate a US aircraft carrier;
- After the closure of its base facilities in the Philippines in 1992, the US entered into a series of access agreements with countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei.

The recent terrorist attacks in its territory heralded a new thrust in the US military involvement in the region. During the recent APEC Summit in Shanghai, China, President George W BUSH called on the support of Asian leaders in his global campaign against terrorism. BUSH made clear his intention to elicit the backing of his economic allies to bolster his multi-pronged campaign against terrorism sparked by the September 11 attacks.

#### **IV. Implications of Change in Military Presence in the Region**

Changes in US military presence have their profound effects and underscored in the following realities:

##### **A. Smaller Presence in Southeast Asia**

As a result of current realities after the end of the Cold War and the impact of the Vietnam War, succeeding US governments deemed it necessary to significantly reduce troop presence in Asia/Pacific and concomitantly in Southeast Asia where relative stability was perceived existing with the end of the US-Soviet rivalry. US troop involvement were necessarily channeled to crisis-ridden regions like Europe where disintegration of states have become prevalent.

Southeast Asia, faced with this stark reality, grew politically, but has been bugged with nagging uncertainty. To reduce uncertainty, US remained active politically, economically, socially and commercially in the region.

##### **B. Focus on Critical Areas**

The disengagement in Southeast Asia led the US to focus on more critical areas in the region like Northeast Asia where the threat of North Korea is perceived to be real.

Continuing uncertainty demanded the greater role of allies in ensuring stability in the region. Thus, the US expected Australia, Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Thailand to contribute in the maintenance of peace and share in the burden of ensuring security where critical areas are at stake. A US study envisions a coalition of US Asian allies, including Australia and the Philippines, acting jointly to quell any regional conflict.

It is in America's interest to maintain the balance of power in Asia, to act as the pivot for a security structure that includes Japan and South Korea, and to provide leadership to encourage stable and profitable democracies to develop. Southeast Asia, particularly through the association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has played an increasingly important role in regional security. The nations of ASEAN have grown more confident and assertive in the years following the end of the cold war, an appropriate posture for countries that have undergone a generation of considerable struggle, accomplishment and development. Despite the financial crisis that has shaken the area's leading developing economies, these countries continued to be important US security partners.

### **C. Emerging Powers**

The withdrawal of the superpowers in the region at the end of the Cold War left a political vacuum that was waiting to be filled up by emergent nations. China's rapidly rising economic power, meanwhile, has been accompanied by more aggressive military-political policies in the region, posing a current focal point of regional security concern. Beijing has reinforced Chinese nationalistic sensitivity over disputed territorial claims in the South China Sea, complicating efforts to manage the dispute without undermining regional stability. A strong evidence that points to china's efforts is its occupation of mischief reef and the strengthening of its occupied islands.

ASEAN members are seriously concerned with china's rise but remain pragmatic in dealing with the situation. As such, ASEAN encourages the US and other outside powers to support it in efforts to persuade and press China to preserve regional stability. The ASEAN expects the US to formulate an appropriate stance towards China's increasingly assertive role in Asian regional affairs, which may include military actions in the South China Sea and near Taiwan. The US is also expected to formulate a policy that will carefully balance US policy with regard to the territorial issues. That no country will capitalize from the political vacuum in the region is a key point in the US effort to bolster a stronger ASEAN and ensuring political and economic stability among the countries in the region. The US seeks to promote a balance of power so that none emerges as a dominant country or that the countries gang up with others against itself in the future.

### **D. Military/Defense Build-up**

One common view that seems to be shared by all regional states is that the US security commitment is the indispensable anchor for East Asian security. Insofar as it is conducive to peace and security as well as a hindrance to a so-called arms race in the region, an abrupt and large-scale US withdrawal would leave a power vacuum no other power would be able to fill without profoundly destabilizing consequences. Without an alternative security mechanism in place, the US presence is pivotal to maintaining stability in a time of rapid power redistribution. For countries with bilateral arrangements with the US, a continuing US military presence strengthens their own national security. For countries without direct security ties with the US, the US security arrangement puts a lid on potentially destabilizing forces in the region.

Almost all countries are, in varying degrees, engaged in military modernization. Thanks to growing economic power and the availability of advanced weapons at bargain prices in the international arms markets. As the history of international relations shows, a country's efforts at arms acquisitions to enhance its own security often inadvertently heighten the insecurity of its

neighbors, who could be tempted to engage in a reactive arms build-up. The lack of an accelerated arms build-up in East Asia is due to a large extent to the stabilizing role of the US.

## **E. Tensions Remain**

The absence of actual war has not diminished the uncertainty of prevailing new threat scenarios. Unlike the Cold War, every major challenge to peace and stability today exists in Asia. In the new security landscape, traditional and new threat actors have complicated the security make-up of Southeast Asia. The emergence of new security issues eventually impinged on the countries in the region. Among these sources of security concerns are the following:

### **1. Global Terrorism**

The recent terrorist attack in the US has brought far-reaching implications not just for the US but for the region as well. Old and bitter rivalries have been set aside in favor of new realignments and renewed friendships for the common universal role of combating terrorism. Complicating the threat is the capability of terrorist groups to obtain weapons of mass destruction.

Terrorism will remain a major transnational problem, driven by continued ethnic, religious, nationalist, separatist, political and economic motivations. One worrying trend is the rise of terrorist groups that are multinational in scale of operation and less responsive to domestic or external influences.

### **2. Transnational Crimes**

The global terrorist threat has also brought to the fore the growing threat of transnational crimes such as piracy, drugs and firearms trafficking and other syndicated activities. Piracy remains a nagging concern in the region threatening regional maritime trade and freedom of navigation particularly in the Malacca and Singapore Straits, South China Sea and Indonesia where piracy is at an all-time high.

The region also remains a convenient and ideal ground for drug and firearms trafficking and other highly-syndicated activities via the seaborne route. The fact that terrorist organizations derive their financial resources from these illegal activities emphasized the gravity of the threat.

The international drug trade is becoming more complex as new areas of drug cultivation and transit continue to emerge and international criminal syndicates take advantage of the rapid advancements in global communications, transportation and finance to mask their illicit operations.

### **3. Maritime Dispute/Conflict**

The South China Sea is a vast area of water between mainland and maritime Asia. It is located along the littoral states of China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Cambodia. The South China Sea provides an abundant source of food and oil and is a vital commercial sealane.

Among the disputed islands in the South China Sea, the Spratly Island Group is the most contentious because of the number of claimants involved in the sovereignty issue and their defense posturings in the area. Six (6) states lay claim over the area. Their claims are reinforced by physically occupying several islands, reefs and shoals. All claimants remain firm in their sovereignty claims over the Spratlys. They have fortified their defense facilities and structures and expanded their troops in occupied islands, reefs and shoals. Among the claimant countries, China is perceived to be the most aggressive.

### **4. Environmental Degradation**

The rich marine and aquatic resources in the South China Sea particularly in the RP-claimed Kalayaan Island Group in the Spratly and Scarborough Shoal has made the areas a likely target for maritime exploitation by both local and foreign fishing vessels.

For the last few years, foreign fishermen, especially Chinese, have been engaging in illegal fishing activities and gathering of corals and other endangered marine species in these parts of the West Philippine Sea. Illegal fishing activities usually entails the use of dynamite and cyanide, thus essentially damaging the ecological balance in the area. For this matter, environmental degradation will remain to be a main source of threat for the region.

### **V. Imperatives and Realities**

The Pentagon has been constructing the diplomatic and political framework for the US military “reentry in Southeast Asia”. The revamped US military relationship with the Philippines represented by the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) may be a model for Southeast Asia. Instead of building and maintaining bases, it would be more prudent for US forces to conduct frequent joint exercises to train American and Southeast Asian troops to operate together in everything from disaster relief to full-scale combat.

Part of these efforts is the need for the US to help in the diffusion of nagging tensions in the South China Sea. The US is expected to exhort competing states to implement confidence building measures and assist in the diffusion of tensions in the area. Realizing the importance of the area as a vital sealane of communication, the US is also expected to call on its traditional allies

such as Japan to share the burden of mitigating differences among claimant states through multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

This also holds true for the growing threat of piracy, drug trafficking, human smuggling and other maritime concerns that can easily disrupt the freedom of navigation and undermine the region's security and stability. There are signs that these illegal maritime activities will parallel the regionalization and globalization of legitimate activities. In this light, the US is expected to participate in regional efforts in combating these threats in terms of joint maritime patrols, joint training exercises and information exchanges with its Asian allies.

As far as military relationship and cooperation is concerned, the US CINCPAC has expanded the scope of its cooperation through continuous conduct of bilateral and multilateral exercises that aim to improve interoperability, coordination and deeper relationships among forces of countries in the region. It also aims to enhance specialization and proficiency and in aspects that the US feels lacking in the region.

Cobra Gold is the largest training opportunity in Southeast Asia and the centerpiece of an impressive exercise program that provides training opportunities and enhances interoperability. To the US, Cobra Gold provides an important opportunity to communicate through action, its continued commitment to the security and well-being of its treaty allies, and demonstrate how serious it is about remaining engaged in the Asia-Pacific Region. The US plans to merge four bilateral exercises in the Asia-Pacific into a larger regional one to be called team challenge starting from 2001. The US has maintained its close military ties with Thailand, and has forged an agreement with Brunei for small-scale military exercises using the sultanate's jungle survival training facility.

In 1999, the US, in partnership with the member nations of ASEAN, opened the international law enforcement academy in Bangkok, Thailand. Officials of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), US customs service, FBI and other agencies provide high-caliber training in areas such as drug trafficking, alien smuggling, cyber crime, and other transnational threats. The International Law Enforcement Academy also promotes cooperation and information sharing, as well as significantly improving regional counterdrug capabilities.

In the light of the profound threat of global terrorism, the US and the Philippines are renegotiating their Mutual Defense Treaty. A proposed RP-US Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) is being considered that would provide the American military access to Philippine ports for repairs and supplies. The so-called MLSA, earlier called the acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA), was revived because of the Philippines support to the US-led International Counter-Terrorist Coalition (ICTC).

Likewise, the US and Thailand have agreed to redesign their annual joint military exercise – the Cobra Gold – to train soldiers in addressing the threat of terrorism. Hence, succeeding Cobra Gold exercises will be geared towards training to meet small-scale terrorist threats in the region, such as those posed by separatist groups in the Philippines. The US also urged Thailand to step up efforts to fight terrorism through combatting drugs, the sharing of intelligence information between their military and police forces and anti-money laundering efforts.

As part of its comprehensive engagement in the region, the US has increased economic involvement in the region through increased trade and investments. Washington is set to sign a landmark trade agreement with Vietnam which is expected to boost the latter's economy amid the current global recession.

US forces were also instrumental in helping douse wildfires in Indonesia that threatened the health and safety of nations in the region. Further, the US has assisted the region in the efforts against fisheries depletion, deforestation and in attaining sustainable growth during the onslaught of the 1997 regional financial crisis.

Indeed, the passage of time has not diminished the importance of Southeast Asia to US global politico-economic and security interests. The region has been always an important US major trading partner and also served as a counterfoil to emerging powers in Asia. As such, the US will remain to be a main contender in the equation to maintain peace and security, preserve balance of power, and thwart any contingencies that may threaten its wide-ranging interests in the region.

#### **References:**

***A New US Strategy for a Changing Asia***, Rand Corporation

BELLO, Walden. ***Towards a Just, Comprehensive, and Sustainable Peace in the Asia-Pacific Region***. speech delivered at the Okinawa International Forum on People's Security, Okinawa, Japan, 2000

BEREUTER, Rep. Doug. Chairman, House International Relations Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, ***Congressional Priorities in Asia***

BREMMER, Brian; DAWSON, Chester; CROCK, Stan; KRIPALANI, Manjeet; IHLWAN, Moon; ROBERTS, Dexter; STAROBIN, Paul; and ENGARDIO, Paul, ***Asia: The New US Strategy***, internet

BROOKS, Donovan, **Study: US Should Shift Focus in Asia Closer to Potential Hotspots**, 16 March 2001

CAMPBELL, Kurt. **Components of a US Strategy for the Future**. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS),

CAMPBELL, Kurt, **Ensuring Security in the Asia-Pacific Region**, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS),

CAMPBELL, Kurt. **Geopolitical Shifts in Asia Challenge for US Policy**. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 27 April, 2001,

CORBIN, Marcus. **Whither the Next National Military Strategy?**, The Defense Monitor, Volume xxix, No. 9, 2000

CORDESMAN, Anthony H, **The Quadrennial Defense Review: the American Threat to the United States**, Middle East Studies Program, 24 February 1997

DILLON, Dana R. **Priorities for Southeast Asian Policy**, Asian Studies Center at the Heritage Foundation

DILLON, Dana R; PASICOLAN, Paolo, **Southeast Asia and the War Against Terrorism**, The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, Oct 24, 2001

ENG, Peter, **Transforming ASEAN**. Washington Quarterly v22, n1 (Winter, 1999)

FRIEDMAN, George, **US Must Strike Back-But at Whom?**, Strategic Forecasting (STRATFOR), 11 September 2001

GERSHMAN, John, **We Have Seen the Enemy, and it is China**, Foreign Policy in Focus, Interhemispheric Resource Center

HUGHES, Lt. Gen. Patrick M, USA, **Global Threats and Challenges to the United States and its Interests Abroad**, Statement delivered at the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 05-06 February 1997

**Prospects of the US Role in the Asia-Pacific Under the BUSH Administration**, J2, AFP

JOFFE, Josef. **Asymmetric Warfare**. Viewpoint, Time, 24 September 2001

KISSINGER, Henry, **Heading for a Collision Course in Asia**, Los Angeles Times Syndicate, 26 July 1995

KOLKO, Gabriel. **Anatomy of a War: Vietnam and the Modern Historical Experience.** New York: The New Press, 1985.

KORB, Lawrence J. **US National Defense Policy in the Post-Cold War World,** Council on Foreign Relations, 14 June 2000

**US Pacific Command Webpage**

LORD, Winston. **Southeast Asia Regional Security Issues: Opportunities for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity.** Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Statement before the House International Relations Committee, Asia and Pacific Subcommittee, May 30, 1996.

McDEVITT, Michael. **The Quadrennial Defense Review and East Asia.** Pacnet Newsletter #43, Pacific Forum, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26 October 2001

**Piracy and Robbery Against Ships,** International Maritime Bureau-Regional Piracy Center (IMB-RPC) Annual Report 2000

POLO, Jaime B., **What is Behind Terrorism**

United States DoD. **The United States Security Strategy For The East Asia-Pacific Region 1998.** Updated: 25 Nov 1998

VAN KLINKEN, GERRY, **Policy Recommendations for Indonesia: They Look Good,** Inside Indonesia Magazine

WORTZEL, Larry M. **Planning for the Future: The Role of US Forces in Northeast Asian Security.** Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS); 26 July, 2000; internet

WORTZEL, Larry M, **Joining Forces Against Terrorism: Japan's New Law Commits More Than Words to U.S. Effort,** The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, Nov 5, 2001

The White House. **A National Security Strategy for a New Century.** December 1999.

TKACIK, John J; DILLON Dana R; HWANG, Balbina; and FITZGERALD, Sara J, **Preparing for the APEC Summit: Mobilizing Asian Allies for War,** The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, Oct 04, 2001

**Transnational Criminal Activity,** Canadian Intelligence Security Service, 1998

WU Xinbo. **U.S. Security Policy in Asia: Implications for China-U.S. Relations.** Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, September 2000