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SUBIC BAY: THE LAST FIVE YEARS  
HAS USCINCPAC STRATEGY CHANGED?

by

Earl K. Hampton, Jr.  
Commander, U.S. Navy

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: 

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Paper directed by Captain George W. Jackson  
Chairman, Joint Military Operations Department

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Faculty Advisor	Date
CDR Raymond H. Carlson, USN, JAGC	
Joint Military Operations Department	



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Abstract of

Subic Bay: The Last Five Years. Has USCINCPAC Strategy Changed?.

Almost five years have passed since the United States vacated its military bases at Subic Bay, Philippines. USCINCPAC not only changed its paradigm for conducting day to day operations in the Western Pacific, but was faced with reviewing its strategy in East Asia. For decades, the United States military relied on the Philippine bases for logistics support, ship and aircraft maintenance and critical training to maintain combat readiness while deployed. The loss of the bases forced USCINCPAC to look elsewhere in the region for similar support for its forward deployed forces.

The expulsion of the United States from the Philippines also raised security and regional stability concerns among East Asian countries. The presence of the United States in the Philippines provided the reassurance East Asia required to maintain the balance of power in the region. As witnessed these past five years, China has emerged as a more aggressive and dominant regional power as demonstrated by several key events.

This paper will analyze four major events since the closure of the bases and its effect on stability and security relations in the area. The paper will further analyze USCINCPAC strategy, illustrate how it supports U.S. national objectives and determine if the loss of Subic Bay has changed USCINCPAC strategy in East Asia.

## Introduction.

On November 24, 1992 the American flag was lowered for the last time in front of the headquarters at Subic Bay Naval Station, Philippines. The ceremony not only symbolized the end of nearly one hundred years of U.S. military presence but the culmination of a relationship between the United States and its strongest ally in Asia. Mixed emotions were prevalent not only with generations of Filipinos but among thousands of Americans who fought through three separate wars staged from the Philippines. Since our colonization of the islands in 1898, we had influenced every aspect of Filipino culture. Whether in government, fashion, or education, Americanization blanketed Filipino society. Likewise, Americans shared a common bond with the Philippines and its people. Sailors, soldiers, airmen and marines commonly referred to the islands as "home away from home." Some Americans never left. The U.S. Military Cemetery in Makati is the largest such cemetery outside the United States.<sup>1</sup> The United States was not simply vacating another outpost on some desolate foreign land-- it was cutting the umbilical cord to a country it gave birth.

The initial Military Bases Agreement signed on March 14, 1947 was to be effective for 99 years. Since its inception, it has been amended 45 times with the most significant change incorporated in 1966 fixing the Military Bases Agreement to 25 years.<sup>2</sup> In the year the agreement was to expire, the Philippine Senate rejected, by a vote of 12-11, the extension of the U.S. lease on Subic Bay on September 16, 1991.

With the U.S. departure from the Philippines, a fog of apprehension covered East Asia with security and regional stability concerns. Will the United States continue to provide the same vigorous presence which has been vital towards maintaining the balance of power for several decades? Who will step up and fill the U.S. role should Americans decide to give up its lead in East Asia? General Almonte, Philippine National Security Advisor, ponders East Asian sentiments, "Anxiety has been raised throughout South East Asia by the dismantling of the American military bases in the Philippines. The fear that potentially aggressive regional powers may be drawn into the power vacuum is undoubtedly real."<sup>3</sup>

The "potentially aggressive regional power" is China. In the past five years since the closure of the bases, a number of events have dominated the attention of regional leaders, as well as East Asian experts, reflecting not only on the impact of the base withdrawal but the effect on the United States' national strategy in East Asia. More specifically, how much, if any, has the loss of the bases changed the operational strategy of the United States Commander in Chief Pacific (USCINCPAC)?

Since the base closures. . .

Three significant events have occurred since the United States departed Subic Bay five years ago: the Han prosecution in the Yellow Sea on October 1994, the siege of Mischief Reef in January 1995 and the missile test firings in the Taiwan Straits in July 1995 subsequently followed on a grander scale in March 1996. These consolidated events have sent a signal to the international

community that China was stepping into the shoes which the former Soviet Union has left in East Asia's doorstep.

In October 1994, Chinese naval expansion became center stage. A S-3 Viking anti-submarine aircraft from the USS Kitty Hawk, operating in international waters in the Yellow Sea, located a Chinese Han nuclear attack submarine operating 450 miles from the ship. Subsequent S-3's continued to track the submarine visually, as well as acoustically, eventually positioning the submarine to within 21 miles of the Kitty Hawk. Although the Han did not catch the U.S. Navy by surprise, its excursion away from a traditional coastal defensive posture was of some interest. Among China's leadership, the incident created a fury with accusations of territorial violations against the U.S. Navy. The U.S. attache was told by China that it was concerned about the incident and stated, "they would take appropriate defensive reactions if there were violations of their airspace and territorial waters."<sup>4</sup> This unprecedented incident served notice to the world, but more specifically to countries in East Asia, that the Chinese Navy was no longer a "green water" coastal defense force but a future, "blue water", regional, naval power.

China, over the years, has staked a claim to the entire South China Sea region by declaring ownership of the Spratly Islands. China argues that its possession dates back to the Han dynasty 1700 years ago. The earliest confirmed presence is from a British Navy ship discovering a group of Chinese fishermen from Hainan in 1867.<sup>5</sup> In February 1972, China's National People's Congress passed a proclamation officially declaring the Spratly Islands an integral part of China. The Chinese followed by forcibly taking the Paracels

from Vietnam in January 1974. China continued its quest to fulfill its destiny in the South China Sea by clashing again with Vietnam in March 1988. The PRC Navy seized Johnson Reef by sinking three Vietnamese supply ships and killing over 70 Vietnamese sailors. In February 1995, China made an unprecedented move by stationing troops and structures on Mischief Reef, an island claimed by the Philippines. This was the first time China aggressively captured territory from a non-communist nation.

The Mischief Reef incident sent shock waves across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The apprehension felt two years earlier with the vacated Philippine bases was now reality. Would China have made such a bold move with U.S. bases still in the Philippines? It is interesting to note an observation made by Philippine Senator Anna Dominique Coseteng, prior to the Mischief Reef incident, "Although the Chinese have been around the Philippines for 3,000 years, they have not shown any signs of wanting to control government policies or interfere in our affairs."<sup>6</sup> Peter Young brings a clearer perspective, "The Philippines is the weakest, militarily, of the ASEAN nations. It had in the past relied on U.S. military might deployed from Philippine bases and U.S. radar coverage. When the Philippines required the U.S. to quit its Philippine bases, the Philippines lost its major guarantee to territorial security."<sup>7</sup> Since the incident, China has faintly succumbed to political pressure and offered the Philippines joint development of Mischief Reef. To date, no significant developments have materialized from these offers. The fact remains that China has possession of another island in the South China Sea and the Philippines has one less.

Not only were the regional states caught off guard by China's aggressive venture, but the United States remained diplomatically silent until May 1995. As Gerald Segal observed, "In effect the United States stayed on the sidelines while the security situation deteriorated. It was fully five months after the incident on Mischief Reef that the United States managed to cobble together a formal statement on the incident."<sup>8</sup> The United States' posture was not by accident. After all, there exists a Mutual Defense Treaty between Washington and Manila which obligates the U.S. to defend the Philippines in event of a foreign attack. The Philippine claims in the Spratly Islands are not covered by the treaty. As presented in a Department of State briefing on May 10, 1995, "The United States takes no position on the legal merits of the competing claims to sovereignty over the various islands, reefs, atolls, and cays in the South China Sea."<sup>9</sup> In a nutshell, since the United States does not recognize any claimant to the Spratly Islands, it has no obligation to respond under its mutual defense treaty with the Philippines.

What is a concern to the United States is the sea lines of communications (SLOCS) remaining open and uninterrupted through the South China Sea. As General Krulak explains, "Vessels carrying over half a billion tons of cargo ply the Southeast Asian sea lanes annually, many of them transiting the South China Sea. This trade is valued at about \$568 billion and comprises 15 percent of the world's cross-border trade."<sup>10</sup> The claimants of the Spratly Islands may focus on possibilities of future geological wealth. The United States, however, magnifies the value of the South China Sea as it relates to the exploding economy of East Asia and its effect on our Mutual Defense

Treaty with Japan. Seventy five percent of Japan's oil imports passes through the South China Sea.

East Asia continues to be the fastest growing economy in the world with an average 7 percent growth annually. This is anticipated to increase to more than 10 percent annually within the next five years. A Rand Corporation study projects that Japan will move more of its economy primarily to China and Southeast Asia to account for as much as 20 percent of its GNP by 2010. As the study points out, " By then, Japan will be even more dependent than today on regional stability."<sup>11</sup> With respect to the U.S., the study projects that U.S. financial markets will be more closely linked with Asia and will be more dependent on Asian policies and reactions. It is projected by 2020, eight of the world's largest economies will reside along the Pacific and Indian Ocean rims.<sup>12</sup> The South China Sea and the Spratly Islands are becoming more than just territorial squabbling for anticipated crude geological minerals. It is essentially the superhighway for East Asia's future economic growth with each reef representing a toll gate for the South China Sea turnpike.

The Japanese are quick to point out that these regional disputes are not unique to Japan or ASEAN. "The U.S. must assist Japan out of self interest," believes Professor Seizaburo Sato of the International Institute for Global Peace, "because it will always need to trade with Japan and East Asia as a whole. Overseas trade in the 1960's accounted for only 5 percent of America's GNP- now it is 20 percent."<sup>13</sup> As Professor Sato sees it, security and stability in East Asia is as much an American issue as it is an East Asian problem.

A few months after the Mischief Reef incident, the Chinese government once again demonstrated its capability to influence the region by exhibiting its military might. In July 1995, China test fired 6 M-9 medium range ballistic missiles impacting 90 miles north of Taiwan. These tests were China's signal to Taiwan and the regional states that it still strongly recognized the formerly known island of Formosa as one of its provinces. These missile firings were in response to Taiwan's President Lee Teng-Hui's visit to the United States, prefaced by similar state visits to the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. China viewed such excursions as an attempt by their renegade province to seek legitimacy with the international community. The intimidation strategy caught the attention of the world and was replicated on a much bigger scale the following year.

In March 1996, China continued with its advertisement of power projection by holding another series of missile tests in conjunction with a major naval and ground exercise during Taiwan's electoral period. The Chinese Army mobilized troops across mainland China to a region directly across the Taiwan Straits. The exercise included deployments of the PRC Navy from its North Sea Fleet which included their top of the line surface combatants and submarines. Taiwan postured for an amphibious assault as the rest of the world second guessed China's intentions. The U.S. responded by stationing two carrier battle groups in the area, forcing China to recalculate its move by how far the U.S. would carry out its obligations with respect to the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979.

Perhaps the best summary to China's actions since the base closures comes from a testimony provided before the House National Security Committee by Professor Waldron, "Internationally, China has become something of a neighborhood bully in Asia, using advanced weapons purchased with newly earned wealth to threaten and intimidate states from Japan and the Philippines to Taiwan, in an extremely crude manner."<sup>14</sup>

#### USCINCPAC Strategy.

The national security strategy in East Asia is engagement and enlargement.<sup>15</sup> The last three Commander in Chiefs in the Pacific have formulated a common strategy which bolsters the national objectives in East Asia. The basis of each of the Commander's strategy is forward presence. Admiral Macke described his approach through the effective "linkage of ends, ways and means."<sup>16</sup> He sees the end product as security in the region in order to continue to cultivate economic growth by ensuring stability. The strategy is formulated based on a strong military presence in East Asia. Without it, U.S. national objectives falter and the region's stability follows suit. The means in which the strategy meets its ends is by employing not only forces but engaging nations in the region through diplomatic and defense programs. Through forward presence, strong alliances and crisis response capabilities, the U.S. will be able to achieve its strategic ends.<sup>17</sup> Former CINCPAC Admiral Larson emphasizes, "The key to securing these common interest is maintaining regional stability through continued presence of strong U.S. forces,

international coordination in time of peace and international cooperation in time of crises.”<sup>18</sup>

At the Pacific Basin Economical Council Steering Committee meeting in Kauai late last year, Admiral Prueher, the current CINC, described the United States’ framework of a “Cooperative Engagement” policy that incorporates preventive measures as well as military responsibilities. The tools used to execute “Cooperative Engagement” are a presence of forces in the region, strong bilateral relationships with friends and allies and credible forces.<sup>19</sup>

As pointed out by Admiral Prueher and his predecessors, U.S. presence is the common foundation of USCINCPAC strategy in East Asia. In order to commit to presence in East Asia, the U.S. must rely on regional allies to provide a staging point for its armed forces. The Philippines, until November 1992, provided that requirement. Today the reliance has shifted to other East Asian nations such as Singapore and Thailand to carry the responsibility of supporting U.S. presence. Japan has been the cornerstone of USCINCPAC’s strategy with its Mutual Defense Treaty obligations. All the major U.S. installations in East Asia are now located in Japan. Forces based at Clark Air Base, Cubi Point Naval Air Station and Subic Bay Naval Station relocated to installations at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, Yokota Air Base and Yokosuka Naval Base on the main island of Honshu, Japan.

Another element of USCINCPAC strategy is the alliance of the ASEAN governments to support American presence. The United States cannot meet its objectives in East Asia alone. The burden of security in the region must be carried equally on the shoulders of all states in the area. That burden may

mean a compromise to nationalistic sentiments in order to allow a staging point for United States forces. As Admiral Larson emphatically states, “The important point is that all understand they share the responsibility for our common interest- the United States alone cannot and will not maintain the stability of this vast region.”<sup>20</sup> Ironically, even Philippine President Fidel Ramos rhetorically supports USCINCPAC strategy, “The U.S. military presence in Japan, South Korea and until 1992, the Philippines enables Washington to deter an East Asian conflict and ensure its economic presence in this part of the world.”<sup>21</sup>

In line with national objectives, the United States seeks an open and stable relationship with China. The United States understands that China is the future of Asia both economically and militarily. As Admiral Prueher describes, “It has been referred to as the relationship between the biggest developed country and the biggest developing country in the world.”<sup>22</sup> Containment of China is not the answer to a progressive and stable region. Neither is allowing China to run rampant across Southeast Asia. A fine balance needs to be struck between allowing China to grow economically and keeping its military power in check. Continued diplomatic negotiations and peaceful military engagements will promote stability, alleviate misunderstandings and lessen tension within the region. The United States must, however, remain the dominant power in the Pacific. As former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Richard Armitage frankly states, “ Our reasons for remaining a Pacific power are not merely humanitarian or altruistic, but arise out of a cold calculation of national security.”<sup>23</sup>

### The Stilts of USCINCPAC Strategy.

Without Japan, the framework for USCINCPAC's strategy would collapse. In a study conducted by the Center of Naval Analyses in August 1992, it established during the previous 15 years that Japan had been the source of about 40 percent of all Western Pacific base support. It was estimated that bases in Japan provided more than 60 percent of the support when Subic's contributions to regional base support were excluded.<sup>24</sup> Today these estimates are clearly exceeded. Although Singapore has substituted for some of Subic's services, Yokosuka has replaced Subic Bay as the center for maintaining Seventh Fleet's ships.

The study further illuminates that in terms of maintaining a regional peacetime presence in the Western Pacific, the Independence battle group homeported in Japan is equivalent to three carrier groups based on the West Coast.<sup>25</sup> Not addressed by the study is the quick reactive capability this forward deployed carrier battle group provides. Where it would nominally take up to 10 days for a United States based battle group to arrive on station in the Western Pacific, the Indy battle group is within 72 hours reach to most points in East Asia. Another benefit, which is difficult to ignore during these times of budget constraints, is the sharing of costs by the Japanese associated with basing U.S. forces. Japan helps pay for most of the facility costs associated with the U.S. presence including most of the labor costs for ship repair.<sup>26</sup>

Although the US-Japan relationship is firmly intact, recent events such as the tragic rape of a 12 year old Okinawan girl have tested its ardor.

Although the prefectural government of Okinawa staunchly opposes American presence on its island, the Diet in Tokyo understands the security implications of an East Asia without the United States. However, another similar incident could very well mean the expulsion of American forces from Japan and with it, the restructuring of USCINCPAC strategy.

#### Expanded relations with ASEAN

If there is a lesson to be drawn from the loss of the Philippine bases, it is to avoid a heavy reliance and singular line of support from any one country. As the United States presses to maintain visibility and promote its strategy in East Asia, expanded relations with ASEAN is imperative. Although most states in ASEAN are cautious in opening their doors to permanent American presence, many are pliable to short term stays. Singapore exemplifies this fresh approach to presence by extending a Fleet Support Office at the Sembawang Facility for U.S. units to resupply and conduct periodic maintenance. Additionally, Singaporean ship repair facilities, the largest in the southwest Pacific, are available for required upkeep of U.S. vessels entering or exiting the Indian Ocean.

Countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, who previously have been suspicious of U.S. presence, are increasingly more accommodating in allowing ship visits and aircraft stopovers. Since the Philippine base closures, there seems to be a rejuvenated feeling of support for the U.S. With the recent Chinese aggression, perhaps ASEAN governments are starting to understand the inference of U.S. presence. Mr. Fisher points out in his testimony to

Congress, “While the U.S. has lost bases in the Philippines it has access to ports in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. The weak spot in this network of American relationships is the Philippines. This is perhaps one good reason why China chose to challenge a Philippine claim in the Spratly group earlier this year.”<sup>27</sup> After centuries of foreign domination, the Filipino people need time to adjust to its new state of independence and nationalism. However, the Philippine government must be prompt in understanding its security posture and national objectives before it faces another Mischief Reef incident. There is a price for national and regional security in East Asia. The cost is ensuring American presence. In the meantime, the United States must continue to pursue other avenues of approach to maintain its strategy.

Admiral Prueher has led the way by courting Malaysia. After an absence of a Commander in Chief from the country for 33 years, Admiral Prueher made a four day orientation visit to Malaysia in July 1996.<sup>28</sup> However, the effort cannot start or stop at the USCINCPAC level. It is imperative that American forces deployed to these countries be adamantly sensitive to each state’s nationalism and avoid the crevasse of the “ugly American” syndrome. Certainly, any incident, no matter how minor, will have a monumental affect on U.S. relationships in the region.

United States presence is only one pillar of ensuring a stabilized region. Cooperation among each of the regional states is the foundation of East Asia’s security. As one ASEAN official put it, “China and its neighbors know that if East Asians do not hang together, they will certainly hang separately.”<sup>29</sup>

Admiral Prueher takes a more optimistic view and was confident that through the mechanisms of ASEAN and the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) tensions in these areas could be reduced and settled through diplomatic means.<sup>30</sup>

Although there are cynical views which see ARF as more than a gentlemen's golf club<sup>31</sup>, any attempt by the regional states to promote cohesion will result in a more stable East Asia.

#### "Places NOT bases" policy.

The phrase now commonly referred to by USCINCPAC in achieving its presence goals in East Asia is "places NOT bases". This policy of accessibility with the various nations in East Asia not only meets the end objective of USCINCPAC strategy but continues to foster alliances with our Pacific neighbors. As Admiral Pendley points out, "Access agreements are not gifts and there will be costs in the form of military assistance, improvements in infrastructure, regional exercises, and political engagement. These costs will be insignificant, however, when measured against maintaining the flexibility and necessary capability to project U.S. forces throughout the Asia-Pacific region and into the Persian Gulf."<sup>32</sup> A current example is a newly formed annual exercise called CARAT (Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training). Each of the ASEAN states, less Vietnam, is a participant in which a complement of US Navy ships, aircraft and Marines go door to door across Southeast Asia providing training and military assistance at each stopover. Other country specific exercises, such as Cobra Gold with Thailand, Balikataan with the Philippines and search and rescue exercises with Malaysia and Indonesia,

provide similar opportunities. With the “places not bases” policy, USCINCPAC is able to achieve its access, presence and influence programs with each of the regional states without the East Asian anxieties of long term American basing.

### Conclusions.

Since the departure of the United States Navy from the Philippines five years ago, Subic Bay has become a symbol of economic success not only for the country but the entire East Asian region. The infrastructure left behind by the U.S. Navy has been converted into factories manufacturing everything from computer components to tennis shoes. The former Naval Air Station at Cubi Point is now the Asian hub for Federal Express. Official figures have estimated more than 200 companies have invested \$1.6 billion in Subic.<sup>33</sup> With total exports rising every year, these figures will undoubtedly grow. In the first 10 months of 1996, total exports were already at \$263 million dollars.<sup>34</sup> Now, more than ever, stability and security in East Asia, particularly in the Philippines, is a major concern of regional leaders. In turn, USCINCPAC strategy in East Asia will need to continue as the bedrock which will ameliorate the economic growth for all regional states.

The loss of the Philippine bases has not changed USCINCPAC strategy. To the contrary, the events in the last five years have demonstrated that U.S. commitment in the region is firmly in place. This was exemplified in March 1996 when USCINCPAC ordered two carrier battle groups to take station in the vicinity of Taiwan during the PRC missile crisis. American forces continue to show the flag across East Asia through bilateral exercises, country assist teams

and routine port visits. The “convenience” of basing from the Philippines undoubtedly has impacted the conduct of training, logistics and maintenance support for U.S. forces. However, with the support provided by other ASEAN states and Japan, USCINCPAC has maintained its combat readiness and theater strategy in the region.

Some will argue that USCINCPAC has left a gap in its presence in Southeast Asia without the Philippine bases. Certainly, U.S. presence has predominantly been transitory in the South China Sea. With expanded USCINCPAC programs with Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, the gap is becoming less apparent. ASEAN governments fully understand the objectives USCINCPAC must meet and are progressively supportive in allowing limited access to each of their countries.

The United States cannot ignore China and the future potential of its military. The strategy of engagement and enlargement is concrete provided the U.S. remains the dominant influence in East Asia. As pointed out by a CNA study, “A hands off stance by the United States would suggest a de facto tilt toward China.”<sup>35</sup> The study further warns that “Neutrality by the United States in the case of a future seizure by China of more disputed rocks and reefs could over time convince ASEAN governments that fleet presence served U.S. purposes but had little to do with their own interests.”<sup>36</sup> The United States must continue to lean forward in embracing our East Asian allies and foster an atmosphere of reassurance.

The Philippine government must set its priorities between national security, economic growth and nationalism. Without USCINCPAC presence in

East Asia, it will be difficult for the United States to preserve the balance of power in East Asia and subsequently meet its mutual defense obligations with the Philippines. The Philippines must join in the effort to preserve stability in East Asia and once again allow access to U.S. forces. As an East Asian analyst reminds everyone, "History, furthermore, teaches that nations do not stand toe to toe on trade but shoulder to shoulder on defense."<sup>37</sup>

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