

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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**CHANGING SECURITY DYNAMICS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA:
THE PACOM THEATER ENGAGEMENT PLAN MISSING THE MARK**

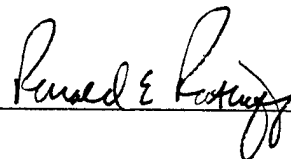
by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department.

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.

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The United States and CINCPAC have long considered themselves to be the final arbitrator of security in the South China Sea. In the past, Asian nations have conceded the dominant role to the U.S. and its military, but the prerogatives once enjoyed by the world's sole super power are disappearing in a changing Asia. America's Asian dominance is being openly challenged by China and quietly questioned by Southeast Asian nations who are now demanding a larger role in the security of East Asia and the South China Sea.

With the apparent demise of Communism that once induced Asian governments to support American positions, most Asian states no longer feel compelled to follow obediently behind the American lead. Instead, they are now looking to resolve the disputes that have long plagued their region using regional mechanisms. They are, however, "Pragmatists not eager to throw out the existing system in the hope that something better will turn up...[but] throughout Asia the search for new regional organizing principles is palpable."¹ And it is here that the U.S. and USCINCPAC are failing to meet their obligations to Southeast Asia. While casting about to find policies that engage China while protecting U.S. interests, the U.S. has failed to persuade the regional community to embrace any sort of collective security framework to insure the region's future stability, has sent mixed signals to our friends, allies and potential foes alike, and, finally, has generally ignored one of America's most important strategic interests, the sea lanes that run through the area.

The compendium of multi-faceted problems that afflict the South China sea not only defy resolution, but, in many cases, clear definition. Contentious issues that plague this region include: territorial disputes that are an intertwined mess of sovereignty, security and economic considerations; the emergence of a rising power (China) and regional accommodation of that growing presence; and regional reconciliation of a US presence predicated on policies that assure continued U.S. economic dominance, expand democracy and protect human rights. These issues strike at the heart of regional sensitivities about national sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs.

They also have immense security implications for the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), which is charged with executing a Theater Engagement Plan in support of American strategy.

This paper will first review the U.S. role in Asian security and its policies towards China and the Association of Southeastern Asian Nations (ASEAN). Next, it will examine China's and ASEAN's view of international and regional security and the role that the South China Sea, with its unique territorial and sovereignty issues, plays in their security calculus. China's claims to the South China Sea will receive particular attention in an effort to better appreciate her intransigence in pursuing apparent excessive and unreasonable claims. Finally, the paper will address the implications for the United States and CINCPAC of the changing and dynamic South China Sea security environment and recommend changes to U.S. policy and the PACOM TEP to better accomplish America's security objectives in Asia.

The National Security Strategy: No Domestic Consensus & Uncertainty Abroad

In January 2000, the President promulgated the nation's security strategy entitled, 'A National Security Strategy For a New Century'. It reaffirmed that U.S. strategy was founded on continued engagement and leadership abroad and that the U.S. "must be prepared and willing to use all appropriate instruments of national power to influence the actions of other states..." It also reaffirmed the three core objectives of U.S. strategy: enhancing American security; bolstering *our* economic prosperity; and *promoting democracy and human rights abroad*.

There is, however, no domestic consensus on that vision of America's international role. Critics rightly charge that the U.S. has yet to articulate a post Cold War doctrine that clearly defines its strategic interests and vision for the future. Doyle McManus of the L.A. Times summarized the "core questions" that American foreign policy has yet to address adequately:²

- Under what circumstances should America use its military power?
- How should the U.S. deal with the rising power China and still powerful Russia?
- What is the biggest threat to American security and how should the U.S respond?
- When should the U.S. act unilaterally and when should it seek international support?

In absence of an articulated policy that answers those basic questions, the world and Asia, in particular, are left to draw their own conclusions about American will and the methods it will use in pursuit of its goals. Not surprisingly, one of the greatest concerns is America's seeming reliance on military power. In the eyes of one foreign observer, "America's heavy reliance on military power has fostered three largely contradictory perceptions:"³

a. The U.S. *overemphasizes the use of military force*, a perception reinforced by its recent propensity to do so unilaterally. Thus, regardless of the purpose of American military action, many nations are left with "a sense that this unmandated armed action against a sovereign state could become their own fate". U.S. unilateral military action during the past fifteen years lays in stark contrast to the Asian precept of non-interference in domestic affairs of sovereign states.

b. Absent a clear vision of its international goals, the U.S. *is unreliable* and "like the proverbial policeman, never there when you need him." Or, that the U.S. is more "fickle rather than reluctant." As a result, nations are reassessing their need to become more "self-reliant and strategically independent". Such sentiments must certainly shade the strategic calculus of those nations disputing the territorial issues in the South China Sea.

c. America is *not willing to take risk abroad* unless it is for vital national interests and, as a consequence, "it is impossible for the US to rise to sustained and painful challenges". America's defeat in Vietnam and the concern that America might abandon Asia in favor of the Americas or Europe is never far from the minds of Asian nations when assessing their strategic alignments.

U.S. Role in Asian Security

America sees its role as a stabilizing force in 'a more integrated' Asia Pacific region. The 1998 Dept. of Defense East Asia Security Review sees American commitment to regional stability through, "*a policy of robust engagement*, overseas presence and strengthened alliances, [and] taking actions that *shape the strategic environment* to sustain the peace and prevent conflict over

time.”⁴ To assure Asian stability and U.S. interests, 100,000 U.S. military personnel are assigned to the region, a presence that is bolstered by a web of bilateral security alliances. The U.S.-Japan security alliance underpins America’s other security agreements with South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia. Those alliances are further buttressed through close relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The U.S. characterizes its Asian security construct as, “not directed at any third power but to serve the interests of all who benefit from regional stability and security.”⁵ Few observers, however, accept such an obvious public relations “spin” on a security system that traces a distinct line along the entire eastern border of China, an alignment that looks a lot more like Chinese containment than engagement.

Lost in the ongoing debate about China containment or engagement, is a clear articulation of America’s most vital strategic interest in Asia, free use of the high seas and protection of the sea lanes of communication. Surprisingly, it has received almost no articulation in the past few national security strategy statements about the Asia Pacific.”⁶ American policy statements avoid identifying specific vital interests and perceived threats to those interests and rely instead on omnibus statements about the need for a peaceful and stable region. Regrettably, the purposeful ambiguity of American policy leaves precipitous gaps in defining to Asia genuine U.S. strategic interests and bolstering confidence in Asia that America has a long-term commitment to the region.

U.S. China Policy. The NSS describes American policy towards China as “ both principled and pragmatic, expanding our areas of cooperation while dealing forthrightly with our differences”. Among the key security objectives for China listed by the NSS are: sustaining a strategic dialogue; peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues; strengthening China's adherence to international nonproliferation norms; achieving greater transparency in China's military and security planning; and encouraging a constructive PRC role in international affairs. More simply put, lasting security in the Asia-Pacific region is not possible without a constructive role played by China. In effect, the

U.S. understands, "China wields the power to undermine U.S. objectives in the region and while its potential to dominate the region in the foreseeable future is unlikely, its ability to thwart a U.S. dominated regional order will grow as its economic and military power increase." ⁷

For its part, China has a far different view of American policies towards Asia. In a state visit to Thailand in September 1999, President Jiang Zemin described U.S. Asian policy as one of "gunboat diplomacy" and "economic colonialism" that threatened international security.⁸ Jiang has repeated that viewpoint in numerous subsequent state visits throughout the world. In a notable twist to the current regional security status quo, a Chinese foreign policy analyst has called for China to pursue its own regional alliances to "defuse U.S. international hegemonism...Fostering ties with Southeast Asia should be Beijing's priority as its 'national interests cannot be separated economically, militarily or politically from the interests of other Asian countries.'" ⁹

U.S. ASEAN Policy. The NSS describes U.S. strategic interests in Southeast Asia as centered on the development of regional and bilateral security and economic relationships that promote conflict prevention and resolution and *expand U.S. participation in the region's economies.* U.S. policy also is to encourage the emergence of a strong, cohesive ASEAN *capable of enhancing regional security* and prosperity. From a practical standpoint, this means pursuing *open support* for continued U.S. military presence in the region through port access agreements, military training and education programs, and other bilateral and multilateral security-related frameworks that complement U.S. overseas presence. The U.S. strongly desires a multi-lateral security mechanism for Southeast Asia and is looking to the ASEAN Regional Forum as a security mechanism to balance China's growing power. ASEAN, however, has yet to embrace such a proactive role.

Asian Views of Regional Security

A recurring theme in Asian thinking about US regional security policy recently noted was: "There is general consensus in East Asia that the United States is a benign hegemon, but not

necessarily a reliable one. In the absence of a specific adversary, U.S. security policy is frequently at the mercy of special interests and the pulling and hauling of domestic politics...”¹⁰

China’s Perspective. In its White Paper, “The International Security Situation,” the People’s Republic of China (PRC) assessed the Asia-Pacific region as ‘relatively stable’ and trending toward multi-polarity. The PRC believe, however, the U.S. system of security alliances is the main threat to the region’s stability.¹¹ In China’s view, the U.S. needs to abandon its ‘cold war mentality’ and base regional security on the Chinese ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; *non-interference in each other’s internal affairs*; equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence. It strongly holds that, “no country should interfere in the internal affairs of any other country in any way or under any pretext”.¹² China also places great emphasis on the sanctity of territorial sovereignty, flatly stating, “Every sovereign state has the right to use all means it thinks necessary, including military means, to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity.”¹³

The Deputy Director of China’s National Defense University International Relations Department has identified four factors that threaten China’s security environment in the 21st century.¹⁴ First is the international economy, where China sees the U.S. and western developed nations taking advantage of Asian nations weakened by the 1997-98 financial crisis and increasing their economic control over the region. Second, China sees the U.S. taking advantage of its economic power to exercise undue influence in an effort to restrain genuine multi-polarity, particularly in Asia. Third, China sees the US encouraging ‘National Separatism’ by the precedent it set in Kosovo where “human rights transcend sovereignty”. In China’s view, this has emboldened separatist movements worldwide including Taiwan. Fourth, is military security, an area where China feels particularly vulnerable given the current huge U.S. technological advantage, a gap that

is unlikely to diminish as the U.S. "intensifies its efforts to build a global military system to establish a monopolar world at the expense of developing countries."¹⁵

While US observers may want to dismiss such thinking as paranoid or overstating US intentions or capability, they must remember that "Chinese elites carry the baggage of history...the 'Century of Shame', a period of foreign intrusion and exploitation, [which] has left today's Chinese with a sense of indignation, humiliation, and vulnerability to harm by foreigners, plus a determination never to be mistreated again."¹⁶ According to the Beijing Review, the PRC is particularly fearful of a U.S. that "surpasses the traditional security and economic spheres in defining its national interest...stress[ing] use of its military forces to safeguard democracy, human rights and the national interest of other countries."¹⁷

China and her Asian Neighbors. "The most important priority in China's foreign policy objectives in Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea, is to ensure a stable external environment conducive to China's economic modernization and growth."¹⁸ As a consequence, China views the ASEAN strategy of maintaining a balanced relationship among the US, China, and Japan as being in China's best interests. In effect, it sees ASEAN's multilateral approach as a means to weaken US Asian dominance thereby increasing Chinese power and influence in the region.¹⁹ This is particularly apparent on the issue of Human Rights where ASEAN has aligned with China to oppose the Western position on the basis on of non-interference in internal affairs of sovereign states. China has also exploited its contributions to Southeast Asian countries during the 1997-98 financial crisis (it did not devalue its currency) at the expense of the U.S. and Japan who are considered by Asian nations as having attempted to take advantage of their misfortune.²⁰

ASEAN's Perspective. The relationship between the ASEAN and the U.S. is becoming increasingly complex. While most nations consider American presence essential for regional stability, they have become less willing to accede completely to U.S. leadership in regional security

interests, particularly when it comes to dealing with China. This stance reflects the region's recognition that it must accommodate a China that is already a major regional power. It also reinforces a new and recurring theme in Asia: Asians should solve Asian problems without interference from foreign powers, especially in matters of domestic affairs. Therein lies a dilemma for the future of the U.S. and ASEAN:

“There remains an ASEAN ambivalence towards American military presence that reflects several considerations: on the positive side, a belief that the U.S. military presence is both necessary and benign but, on the negative, a concern over heavy handed American interference in the region's domestic politics.”²¹

So as the U.S. looks at ASEAN as a foundation on which to balance the growing power of China, it must realize the inherent reluctance of ASEAN to align fully with the U.S. China expert, Denny Roy contends that Southeast Asian states are unlikely to form any strong alliance to counter balance China short of outright military aggression. In his view, even though they have the collective economic and military strength to defy China, ASEAN has generally acquiesced to Chinese regional policy under the premise that “any attempt to restrict Chinese power will only aggravate Chinese insecurity and lead to greater Chinese intransigence.”²² In lieu of total reliance on U.S. military presence, ASEAN has attempted to engage China through non-binding discussions and other confidence-building measures. One critic has termed this strategy as ‘Constraint Through Engagement’ as ASEAN “seeks to stop China from exercising its primacy in East Asia through a process of consultation that hopefully ties China into a web of interdependence.”²³ The Chinese have exploited ASEAN's reluctance to confront it to fetter the formation of any cohesive or strong alliance that might limit Chinese regional power.²⁴

Thus ASEAN is a reluctant ‘ally’ forced to practice realpolitik by balancing its current support for U.S. military presence with longer term concerns about a growing China. In achieving the right balance, ASEAN is plagued with several uncertainties including: the U.S. ‘will’ to involve itself in regional conflict if its perceived vital interests are not at stake; the ‘intent’ of the steadfast

U.S. neutral stance on sovereignty issues in the South China Sea, the arena where ASEAN is most often in conflict with China; and finally, how to avoid committing to U.S overtures to develop a security framework (formal or otherwise) to assure a regional balance of power.²⁵

Chronic Sovereignty Issues in the South China Sea

“The dispute concerning sovereignty over the Spratly Islands and maritime jurisdiction in the SCS remains the most volatile, dangerous, and intractable issue in ocean affairs today.”²⁶

China's Sovereignty Claims in the South China Sea. The PRC has based its claims to the entire South China Sea and the Spratly Islands on historical endeavors from some two thousand years ago. It claims to have discovered the South China Sea and its islands and was the first to name, map and use the islands and surrounding sea areas. China argues that according to the norms of the times, her claims to the entirety of the South China Sea and the Spratly Islands are justified.²⁷ Both Taiwan and Vietnam make similar historical claims backed up with additional reference to more modern agreements with former colonial powers ceding their rights to various Spratly 'islands'. Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines base their claims on modern 'discoveries' and other instruments of ownership transfer. All of which are considered null and void by China, which claims all waters and islands in the South China Sea.²⁸

The Nexus of China's Maritime Interests. China possesses one of the largest coastlines of any nation in the world and by far the largest in the Asia-Pacific. Hence it is natural for her to look to the seas for a variety of reasons, all of which have regional and global consequences. Essentially her maritime interests are threefold:

Resources (Energy and Foodstuffs): Despite being the world's sixth largest producer of oil, since 1993 China has been a net importer of oil with as much as 17 per cent of its requirements coming from external sources.²⁹ China's dependence on foreign oil will continue to climb as its economy grows. By China's own estimates, the continental shelf and the areas around the Spratly Islands have the potential to provide 25 billion cubic meters of natural gas and 105 billion barrels of

oil.³⁰ While the South China Sea has yet to provide the energy resources anticipated, it is a proven source of fish. China's population is set to exceed one billion inhabitants in the next few years and the demand for foodstuffs will cause it to look increasingly to the seas.

Security (Sea Lanes of Communications and Maritime Defense): China is greatly dependent on the sea for international trade. Her need to import strategic resources (energy and food) requires China to place a high priority on ensuring the security of her sea lanes and to support her international commerce. The South China Sea is also a critical element of China's mainland security thinking. "China sees it as its sacred duty to defend its islands and its ocean territory...the defence of their archipelagos and related maritime rights has been an inalienable dimension of China's security...In the past hundred years, China was invaded seven times by foreign troops from the sea. Most of these first entered the South China Sea and then proceeded northwards..."³¹

Sovereignty (Territorial and EEZ): China sees the South China Sea as part of its sovereign territory. As one Chinese academic noted, "Beijing has always maintained that its sovereignty over the South China Sea is indisputable and it's an issue on which the China will not compromise."³² Further, the U.S. must always keep in mind the historical context of China's intransigence on sovereignty issues. The "Rectification of the 'Century of Shame' will not be complete and China's dignity not fully restored until the territories lost during that period are recovered. Taiwan remains a symbol of both of its incomplete Civil War victory and continuing attempts by foreigners to divide China...The Spratly Islands dispute falls into the same context..."³³

Thus, China's claims in the South China Sea truly may be less about resources and security considerations and more about reclaiming lost territory. The significance being that while China may not be willing to use force to guarantee resources or achieve a desirable balance of power, it may consider issues of sovereignty worth fighting for.³⁴

Confusing Sovereignty Issues. One of the great vagaries in the South China Sea is that there aren't very many real "islands" in the Spratly Islands chain. Ian Townsend-Gault cites two recent hydrographic studies that have identified anywhere from 80 to 135 "features" in the Spratly group, but only 25 to 35 of these features actually qualify as "islands" under the definition codified by the UNCLOS. To be an island, the feature must be above water at high tide and be capable of sustaining human habitation. Notably, one of the most recognizable Spratly features, Mischief Reef, is not an island under the UNCLOS definition. Thus is not entitled to a territorial sea, EEZ or maritime rights conferred by the convention. Mischief Reef, not unlike several other similar "features", however, has been transformed into an 'artificial island' by adding a structure that does remain above water at high tide. While UNCLOS is very specific in rejecting such modified features as islands, the claimants have been undeterred by those rules in advancing their claims. And herein lies much of the controversy in the South China Sea.³⁵

China Holds the Key. The reality of the South China Sea is that the security situation is largely dictated by the PRC. While China has publicly acknowledged its responsibilities under the UNCLOS and agreed to ASEAN and other initiatives to forego the use of force in resolving its sovereignty disputes with other claimants, it continues to develop its military and power projection capabilities to do just that. China has continued to strengthen its presence in and around the Spratly islands by occupying more reefs, modernizing its other outposts and maintaining a robust military, commercial and scientific presence in the area. With regard to the security implications of increasing Chinese strength in the South China Sea, John Garfano goes to the heart of the matter by writing, "It is pointless to argue that China's navy would be vulnerable to the air and naval forces of several Southeast Asian states should it attempt serious military action around the Spratly islets... more relevant would be an answer to the question, who would oppose China, and how?"³⁶

The question on everyone's mind in the South China Sea is whether China will revert to force to resolve its sovereignty claims. History has shown that China will use force if certain conditions are present: when its basic national interests are threatened; when China perceives that its sovereignty and internal security are threatened and finally, if its adversaries fail to take its warnings seriously.³⁷

Preventive Diplomacy and a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea

In 1997, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) began to explore a concept termed "Preventive Diplomacy" to help resolve the serious security issues that affect the Asia-Pacific region. Preventive Diplomacy (PD) is actually part two of the ARF three-stage process that is preceded by "Promotion of Confidence-Building Measures" and is to be followed by the "Development of Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms"³⁸ The ARF envisioned PD as an alternative to 'coercive diplomacy' with its implied use of force to prevent regional disputes from escalating into armed conflict. The ARF sees PD comprised of "negotiation, enquiry, mediation and conciliation... employed early in a dispute before violence has resulted."³⁹ One of the manifestations of PD has been the development of a code of conduct for the disputants in the South China Sea.

In May 1999, the Philippines drafted a 'Code of Conduct for the South China Sea' in an attempt to restrain the actions of claimants to disputed islands and bind signatory countries to peaceful settlement of the disputes. It proposed a multilateral approach to resolve the contentious issues, a moratorium on the occupation of new maritime features and exchanges among military officials to explore confidence-building and conflict-prevention measures. Although unstated, the focus of the Code was clearly on China.⁴⁰ China initially dismissed the proposal, saying in part, "China is not in favor of discussing this issue in any multilateral forum...[or] the involvement of any country which has nothing to do with this issue... the dispute in the South China Sea should be resolved through bilateral negotiations between the countries concerned in peaceful means."⁴¹

In March 2000, China reversed its position and agreed to frame a common "Code of Conduct" with ASEAN for the South China Sea. The chances that a common code can be developed are limited by the significantly differing positions of ASEAN and China. China insists that the disputes be resolved by the states "directly concerned" through "bilateral consultations". The Chinese version also calls for signatories to "refrain from conducting any military exercises directed against other countries in the Nansha Islands and their adjacent waters" and to restrict military patrol activities in the area". The ASEAN version calls for a multilateral approach to resolving the SCS disputes. It also calls for the Parties to "refrain from inhabiting or erecting structures in presently uninhabited features in the disputed areas."⁴² So while China has agreed to frame a common Code of Conduct, it is clear from the wide divergence in positions that while it may accept a common Code, that agreement will be on its terms.

Implications for the United States and USCinCPac

U.S. needs and wants are not synonymous with those of our security partners in Southeast Asia. As discussed in detail above, their strategic interests and theater objectives, while similar in many cases, are not the same as those of the U.S. Those differences are not adequately accounted for in the PACOM TEP. The TEP's principal shortfall is that it focuses too heavily (in terms of resources and planning) on military exercises that concentrate on combat operations. The reality of our bilateral and multilateral exercise program in SE Asia is that it seeks to fill the U.S. need for training opportunities that will slow the atrophy of combat skills of forward deployed forces. The air forces seek low-level bombing ranges and Air Combat Maneuvering opportunities against modern non-US aircraft, land forces seek live-fire and mechanized maneuver opportunities, and maritime forces look for suitable 'littorals' to practice 'Forward...from the Sea'. While the countries of Southeast Asia 'accommodate' the training sought by US forces, their needs are much more modest. Their needs reflect their strategic situation: Rather than an external military threat

that might invade their homelands, they are concerned about protecting their EEZs, stemming illegal immigration and smuggling, combating piracy, disaster relief and, not least, assuring current ruling regime security.

While there can be no substitute for assuring U.S. military readiness in theater, the truth of the matter is that very little *lasting* impact is made on the host nation's or U.S.'s combat capability. Yes, exercises do identify interoperability problems such as significant gaps in command and control (equipment and doctrine), conflicting or antiquated tactics, techniques and procedures (TT&P), and serious material/weapons limitations. But military doctrine and TT&P, ours or theirs, rarely are changed, and seldom, if ever, are equipment and material acquisition decisions influenced by these exercises. Further, these interoperability problems are the principal reason the U.S. finds it so difficult (if not impossible) to generate interest in multi-lateral exercises. Although, countries are willing to expose their weaknesses and deficiencies to the U.S., for reasons of security and "face" or professional embarrassment, they're not willing to expose themselves to their neighbors.

So, rhetorically, 'what is the value of these exercises?' The answer, of course, is they are tangible demonstrations of American regional engagement and they provide the *perception* to onlookers (domestic and foreign) that they increase readiness and raise the level of combat capability among the participants. But in combat, 'perception is not reality'. Combat capability is developed through a combination of modern equipment, effective doctrine/TT&P and unit/group training. Bilateral and multi-lateral exercises are tests of, not substitutes for, the elements of combat capability. And it is here that the PACOM TEP misses the mark by not properly delineating between the 'Needs and Wants' of the U.S. military and the Southeast Asian countries we are engaging. To address those problems the following specific recommendations are made to USCINCPAC. On the theater-strategic level:

a. Work with national authorities to better define U.S. interests in the Southeast Asia region. As Sheldon Simon noted, freedom of the SLOCs, arguably the most important U.S. strategic interest in the region, is only obliquely addressed (some would say not at all) in the National Security Strategy. That oversight is continued in the 1998 DoD East Asia Security Review, and while USCINCPAC's Asia Pacific strategy statement recognizes sea lanes as a vital national interest, it is not identified as one of the six elements for ensuring regional security.

b. Work with national authorities to decouple the PRC-Taiwan sovereignty issue from the fractious territorial disputes in the South China Sea. These are two entirely different problems and for the PRC's own reasons, they have allowed that debate to obfuscate the territorial disputes in the SCS. It will take the weight of the U.S. to make those distinctions clear, because ASEAN has neither the collective power nor political will to challenge China on sovereignty issues.

c. Inherent in this decoupling process is the need for the U.S. to shed its stance of absolute neutrality (some would say 'head in the sand') concerning the legal issues that pervade the territorial disputes in the SCS. Without taking sides on any particular issue, the U.S. can help bring order to the technical and legal morass that permeate the disputed claims. The one constant in the SCS territorial disputes is the *inconsistent* application of international law and historical conventions by the disputants. To remain silent risks being presented with a resolution that is contrary to legitimate U.S. interests in a vital international sea.

d. The U.S. should use the breadth of its national power to 'coerce' China to abdicate its insistence on using only bilateral negotiations to resolve the territorial disputes in the SCS. Allowing China to pursue this strategy, abandons the other claimants to the mercy of a much more powerful adversary. In allowing China to pursue a bilateral course abdicates US responsibility as a great power to be an advocate for its 'friends' against another great power. Further, the SCS

territorial disputes are not bilateral issues, but are multifaceted and complex issues that effect the entire international community not just the region.

Recommendations On the theater-operational level:

a. Demonstrate U.S. interest by exercising U.S. naval and air forces more frequently and more visibly in the vicinity of the disputed claims. This would accomplish at least three objectives: it would demonstrate to the claimants that the U.S. has legitimate vital interests in the SCS; show our intention to exercise our rights in the international waters of the SCS; and clearly signal to China that our neutral stance on sovereignty issues in the disputed areas does not mean that we're not prepared to act forcibly and unilaterally to counter military aggression in the region.

b. Help provide greater military transparency to the region. The lack of quality intelligence shrouds the SCS and Spratly Islands in uncertainty and dangerous ambiguity. By sharing basic data and information (such as photos and satellite imagery, not necessarily U.S. assessments) the protagonists would have a common set of references on which to draw their own conclusions. Such data would also probably serve as a natural inhibitor to actions that agitate the claimants.

c. Adjust the scope and magnitude of military exercises in Southeast Asia, while maintaining a small core of important exercises (Cobra Gold for example). Reassess the type of military training being conducted and refocus much of it on those areas that have the greatest relevance to the countries in Southeast Asia. This would almost certainly entail the employment of U.S. Coast Guard assets to provide the training 'needed' by most Southeast Asian countries.

d. Address interoperability issues aggressively. Most problems of interoperability are related to the transfer of information between nations. The lack of common voice, hardcopy message and electronic data systems prevents effective integration of forces. The U.S. needs to develop and field 'loanable' equipment that can be provided to friends and allies to facilitate easier and more rapid dissemination of tactical command and control information.

Conclusion

The security environment in Southeast Asia and its adjacent waters is rapidly evolving. China's rising economic, political and military power are forcing Southeast Asian nations to employ a difficult and intricate 'balance of power' strategy of using American military presence to offset unknown Chinese intentions. While the nations of Southeast Asia would prefer to deal with China in a multilateral forum free from American or other outside influence, they have neither the power or collective will to compel China to treat them as equals. Dr. Tim Huxley, Director of the English Institute of Pacific Asia Studies succinctly describes the situation in Southeast Asia, saying,

“In the absence of direct and substantial U.S. strategic involvement in the region, it seems virtually inconceivable that other East Asian states would be willing or able to attempt to balance China's increasing power... a regional coalition against China seems to be a virtually unworkable proposition. If forced to make a choice, many—perhaps most—would accept a Chinese hegemon rather than attempt to contain or balance China. But the present consensus is that the necessity of making such a choice should be deferred indefinitely by relying on the U.S.”⁴³

Boiled to its essence, it is U.S. military presence that Southeast Asia wants, not a 'grand alliance', to counter-balance China. An American strategy that focuses on building 'stronger' security relationships in Southeast Asia runs counter to the prevailing desire of the region to emphasize non-military means to assure the area's peace and stability. The challenge for the U.S. and USCINCPAC is to develop a strategy and Theater Engagement Plan that reflects this dilemma for Southeast Asia. The current system of "engagement" does a poor job of recognizing the political limitations that inhibit Southeast Asia and the region's proclivity to defer to China. This paper has attempted to identify specific actions that the U.S. and USCINCPAC should consider to better align U.S. policy with the strategic realities faced by the nations in Southeast Asia while protecting U.S. interests and managing the peaceful emergence of China's growing power. Asia is changing and U.S. security strategy must adapt to the new realities imposed by those changes. To do otherwise risks becoming an impediment vice an architect of the new Asian security construct.

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