

The eagle returns: resurgent US strategy in Southeast Asia and its policy implications

by William Tow

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After decades of relative neglect, the US is once again prioritising Southeast Asia in its global strategy. This development has potentially significant benefits for that region's security and prosperity. If not managed properly, however, the resurrected American strategic involvement there could lead to greater instability. The key task for US policymakers is to achieve a prudent balance between honouring and sustaining its diplomatic and security commitments in Southeast Asia while still engaging effectively with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and with other great powers entertaining major interests there. How well the US meets that challenge will largely shape Southeast Asia's and the broader Asian region's ability to minimise tensions and avoid conflict escalation. As a key US regional ally, Australia has an immense stake in Washington's 'getting the balance right'.

Two developments in late 2011 illustrated the Obama administration's heightened posture in Southeast Asia. In a definitive article written for the journal *Foreign Policy* and appearing mid-October, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that as the US military commitments to Iraq and Afghanistan wound down, American statecraft and resources would increasingly 'pivot' towards the economically dynamic and geopolitically crucial Asia-Pacific region. She explicitly used the term 'pivot point' when delivering a subsequent address to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Honolulu at the end of that month, describing US plans to shift its attention and resources away from long wars of attrition in Iraq and Afghanistan and towards the Asia-Pacific, a region she characterised as 'the world's strategic and economic center of gravity...from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas.'¹ In Southeast Asia, according to Clinton, that pivot translates to safeguarding '(t)he stretch of sea from the Indian Ocean through the Strait of Malacca to the Pacific [which] contains the world's most vibrant trade and energy routes'.²

In November, President Obama visited Australia on his way to the sixth East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali. While in Canberra, he announced that US Marines would begin six-month rotations near Darwin in 2012. Although relatively small numbers of US forces would be involved (250 in 2012 and up to 2,500 by 2016), this initiative—along with a commensurate announcement that US military aircraft rotations would increase in northern Australia—sent a powerful signal to other Asia-Pacific countries that Washington would sustain its strategic commitments in the region even as the overall US defence budget is to be reduced due to the ongoing global economic crisis. The Marines

deployment and increased US air presence would strengthen US capability to intervene quickly in future regional crises and to contribute to increasingly common non-combat missions, such as disaster relief. Obama's announcement of the US force posture initiative was balanced, however, by the White House characterising his attendance at the EAS as symbolising 'the Administration's commitment to deepening engagement in the Asia-Pacific region and playing a leadership role in its emerging institutions'.³ This dual track approach reflects the balancing requirement between strategic commitment and regional engagement inherent in current US strategy in Southeast Asia. It was specifically designed to modify the apprehensions of some regional powers, such as China and Indonesia, that the US may be pursuing a containment strategy by stealth directed against Beijing.

Key US security interests in Southeast Asia

Contemporary US interests in Southeast Asia encompass a far more complex array of factors than the relatively stark Cold War motivations that led to the US's unsuccessful intervention in Indochina during the 1960s and 1970s and its subsequent estrangement from Southeast Asia. The 10 member-states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have a combined population of over 600 million and a combined US\$1.8 trillion gross national product. Notwithstanding the US's relative lack of trading and investment in the region compared to the PRC, ASEAN still constitutes the US's fourth largest overseas market. It accounts for one-third more in US investments (US\$165 billion) than what the US invests in China. As a recent and authoritative study sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and led by former US Secretary of Defense William S Cohen concluded, '(t)he economic, political, security and people-to-people ties between the United States and ASEAN are fundamental to US economic growth and security.'⁴

ASEAN constitutes a major test case for the implementation of the American vision of a predominantly liberal democratic Southeast Asian community. Its legacy of promoting institutional approaches to regional security via the EAS, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus is regarded by US policy analysts as an important catalyst for regional engagement. ASEAN's member-states, however, are coming under increased Chinese pressure to pull away from the West, to adopt more distinct 'Asian values' approaches to regional development and to avoid contesting China's territorial, economic and strategic interests. Engaging with China geopolitically is therefore becoming increasingly difficult for ASEAN, the US and other regional actors with the recent intensification of Sino-American differences in the South China Sea, Washington's preservation of its formal alliance network in Southeast Asia and Chinese efforts to project offshore power towards distant 'island chains'. It's clear, however, that the US must play a greater role in shaping a Southeast Asian economic order so that it can gradually bring the PRC into compliance with US standards and objectives and to 'integrate [it] into American supply chains.'⁵ This approach dovetails with ASEAN's own desire for the US to balance China.

Perceiving American policy in Southeast Asia as a pure 'zero-sum' game of power politics between China and the US, however, would be misguided. Apart from the desire to tap into the region's growing prosperity and support its democratic evolution, Southeast Asia's geography by itself is a major component of international security. The Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea are two of the world's most important sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), where impeded access would have dire ramifications for the US and world economies. The Malacca Strait is the world's second busiest shipping channel (after the Strait of Hormuz), and the South China Sea is rapidly becoming a key natural resource area with abundant supplies of oil and natural gas. After years of relative neglect, Washington again sees formal US alliances with the Philippines and Thailand as critical to American offshore balancing efforts to safeguard international traffic in these

waterways and to prevent ASEAN from becoming divided into separate 'continental' and maritime spheres of influence that could precipitate great power conflict. Defence-related memorandums of understanding with Singapore are also gaining increased importance in this context.

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Islamic population and constitutes a seminal experiment in the coexistence of that faith with secular state authority. Only a few years ago, much of Southeast Asia was viewed by US policymakers as a 'second front' for hosting international terrorism, but recent trends are modifying such concerns.

Due to the increased wealth of many ASEAN states and ASEAN's abundant natural resources (in addition to oil, it possesses substantial quantities of timber, rice, palm oil, coffee and other commodities), its member-states have developed increasingly sophisticated service sector economies and have evolved substantial levels of conventional arms development and acquisition. ASEAN states' strengthening of their defence forces presents an opportunity for the US Pacific Command to tap into intra-regional burden-sharing capabilities in its long-standing mission to guarantee the freedom and safety of Asia-Pacific SLOCs. However, without careful policy management, this trend may just as easily lead to an intensification of regional security dilemmas and future crisis escalation in the South China Sea or other regional flashpoints. Recent US diplomatic inroads achieved with Burma may be a model of how Washington can contribute to the defusing of such prospects.

Recent US policy trends: coherent strategy or aimless response?

Throughout his administration, President Obama and his advisers have emphasised that the US is 'back in Asia to stay'.⁶ Some independent American analysts are sceptical about the usefulness of such pronouncements. Arguing that the US has always been a Pacific nation, they worry that speculating about when the US 'left' or when it might 'return' sends counterproductive signals to regional friends and rivals.⁷ However, each US administration wishes to shape and claim ownership of its own distinct strategic approach to the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, until Obama assumed office, Southeast Asian observers were justified in expressing concerns about how relevant their own part of the world was to overall American policy designs. They have understandably questioned whether, whatever those policy designs may be, Washington considers ASEAN only as an 'afterthought'.⁸ Yet, over the past two or three years, American behaviour towards Southeast Asia has become visibly more coherent, both strategically and diplomatically.

Several developments support this observation. The US demonstrated its commitment to and support of ASEAN by signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in July 2009, by appointing a resident American ambassador to that organisation and by having President Obama host three annual US-ASEAN summits. It's specifically highlighted Southeast Asia's importance to US strategy in the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* issued by the US Defense Department, in President Obama's National Security Strategy statements and, most recently, in a Strategic Guidance Review (released in early January 2012). That review stated that the US would 'rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region' despite a US\$450 billion reduction in US defence spending. It posited that the US would expand its 'networks of cooperation with emerging partners throughout the Asia-Pacific to ensure collective capability and capacity for securing common interests.'⁹ The US has also moved to strengthen its traditional bilateral alliances even as it's become more involved in multilateral regional security politics. It's joined the EAS, participated in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, and adopted a comprehensive 2011-2015 Plan of Action with ASEAN to collaborate on maritime security, nuclear nonproliferation, counterterrorism and other major security issues. All those measures reflect what one analyst has characterised as a growing realisation in Washington that 'the tension between the US security approach

centered on its bilateral alliances and the emergence of multilateral principles and institutions might be further reduced.¹⁰

The US's recent efforts to strengthen its bilateral security ties with traditional Asia–Pacific security partners have been highly visible. This has underscored the Obama administration's resolve for the US to remain the key player in the region's evolving balance of power. However, some important caveats must be factored in to understand the risks and limitations of this strategy as well as its benefits. Concerns include the extent of allied capacity to facilitate this US policy initiative, the substantive—as opposed to the merely symbolic—relevance of American resolve, and the management of third-party perceptions of the strengthening of these bilateral arrangements.

As an example, celebrating the 60th year of the US–Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, Hillary Clinton visited Manila in November 2011. She declared from the bow of the destroyer *USS Fitzgerald* that the US would provide upgraded support to the Philippines' efforts to defend its maritime approaches and to withstand efforts by other (unnamed) parties to intimidate that country over territorial issues. Less clear was precisely how that vision would be implemented and sustained. The US recently transferred two relatively old cutters to the Philippines, but these vessels only begin to supplement a navy that mostly deploys World War II vessels. US officials remain frustrated, however, by the Aquino government's difficulties in generating proposals for where US military aircraft and warships could be positioned in the Philippines. Such positioning is required to supplement US Marine rotational deployments in northern Australia and combat ships in Singapore, while still observing the Philippines' constitutional restraints on the permanent stationing of foreign forces on its soil. Talks in Washington between US and Philippines security officials in late January 2012 reportedly produced little progress. It is unlikely that this temporary impasse will impede the two allies' efforts to shape longer term rotational arrangements. Such arrangements could involve US special forces deploying for long stretches in Mindanao to facilitate Manila's counterinsurgency operations and greater joint patrolling of the vast natural gas reserves in the Palawan region (claimed by both the Philippines and China). The US and the Philippines must find new and creative solutions for overcoming Philippines anti-basing and nationalist factions.

Thailand is the US's other formal treaty ally in Southeast Asia but, like the Philippines, has had a mixed record on US security collaboration over the past decade. Instability in Thai domestic politics (highlighted by a military coup in September 2006 to remove a populist but highly controversial prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra) and Thailand's relatively close relationship with China complicate its bilateral alliance with the US. So too does Washington's recent solidification of security cooperation with Indonesia. This has reduced the centrality of US–Thai security ties within the overall American approach to ASEAN security. Thai–US differences over how to manage relations with Burma's military junta have been longstanding and severe. Thailand prefers 'constructive engagement' with the Burmese rather than the sanctions-based posture favoured by Washington. The evident and ongoing thawing in US–Burma ties should, however, work to reduce Thai–US tensions on this issue.

Notwithstanding those differences, Thailand remains a valued ally of the US. It sent more than a hundred military personnel to Afghanistan to assist in runway construction, medical services and other logistical tasks. It also contributed to reconstruction efforts in Iraq. It's participated in Western-led naval operations against pirates in Somalia, contributed to peacekeeping missions in Darfur and assisted US counterterrorism efforts with intelligence and logistical support. It continues to conduct over 40 joint military exercises annually with the US—the most significant being the huge *Cobra Gold* manoeuvre (involving more than 13,000 troops from 24 countries, including 7,300 US military personnel in the

February 2011 version). Thai naval forces undertake joint patrolling with the US Seventh Fleet in Southeast Asian littorals and coordinate patrolling with Thailand's maritime neighbours as part of the Malacca Strait Patrol group. US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, recently speculated that as part of its pivot strategy the US may also step up the periodic deployment of aircraft such as the P-8A Poseidon—which is being developed to track submarines—to both Thailand and the Philippines.¹¹ By comparison, recent low-key bilateral military exercises between Thailand and China appear more symbolic than substantive, but consistent with Thailand's historical tendencies to hedge its relations with all great powers in the region.

The US–Singapore Strategic Framework Agreement—signed in 2005—underscores what's perhaps the most 'mature' bilateral security relationship the US enjoys in the Southeast Asian region outside a formal alliance framework. A key US naval logistics command office has been operating in the city-state since 1992. Rotational US combat aircraft deployments regularly access Changi air base and those arrangements will soon be supplemented by the future stationing of US littoral combat ships. Singapore's own air force regularly utilizes US (and Australian) air bases for much of its own forces' combat air training. However, Singapore's inherent lack of space and strategic depth, combined with its intermittently tense relations with Malaysia and Indonesia, imposes geopolitical limits on just how intimate US–Singapore defence ties can become.

The Pentagon's Strategic Guidance Review's emphasis on cultivating ties with established allies and expanding relations with 'emerging partners' in the Asia–Pacific is demonstrated by intensifying security collaboration between the US and Indonesia. During his November 2011 visit to Bali to attend the EAS, President Obama announced that the US would 'donate' 24 F-16 combat aircraft to Indonesia with Jakarta paying only for refurbishment costs. Strengthening Indonesian air defence capabilities supplements US offshore power projection in the Strait of Malacca. It's a logical follow-up to the US–Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership and the Defense Framework Arrangement signed in June 2010. This intensified bilateral maritime security cooperation is supplemented by enhanced US–Indonesia disaster relief coordination planning. It's a de facto linkage between US naval activities in greater maritime Southeast Asia and the US Pacific Command's already extensive relationship with Singapore.

The recent warming of US security relations with Vietnam relates to China's more assertive postures on territorial issues in the South China Sea. American military leaders now meet with their Vietnamese counterparts in a senior leaders' dialogue. A memorandum of understanding for defence cooperation has been signed, with cooperation in the area of military medicine specifically designated for priority attention. The US aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* traversed Vietnamese waters near Da Nang first in August 2010 and then again in July 2011. Week-long low-key joint naval activities emphasising navigation, damage control and salvage training (but without the live firing that typifies normal naval exercises) also commenced in July 2011. The Obama administration ventured further than its predecessors in articulating a clear American stance on freedom of access to, and continuity of, international commerce within the South China Sea and on resolving territorial disputes there through peaceful means. That position coincides with Vietnam's interests. However, concerns about Vietnam's human rights practices, and lingering concerns by Vietnamese political conservatives that the US is still too prone to 'democratise' Vietnam's political system, impose limits on how far US–Vietnamese security relations can develop, notwithstanding Washington's and Hanoi's mutual concern about the rise of China.

The most surprising development in US–ASEAN relations during President Obama's first term in office was the relatively sudden thawing during the past year of Washington's previously strained relations with Burma. Following Burma's

National Assembly elections in November 2010, its ruling military junta proved willing to extend at least qualified tolerance for political opposition, as evidenced by allowing Burma's most famous political dissident, Aung San Suu Kyi, to once more become politically active. There have also been limited releases of political prisoners, the commencement of more substantive negotiations with the country's ethnic minorities and the establishment of a national human rights commission to investigate abuses. These events led Hillary Clinton to visit Burma in December 2011—the first high-ranking US official to visit that country for more than half a century. It remains unclear to what extent Burmese President Thein Sein and other civilian officials in Naypyidaw will ultimately prevail over the intractable military leadership to liberalise politics at home and shift its profile abroad, perhaps prompting a removal of US sanctions as Burmese go to the polls to elect their national parliament in April 2012. There's been a strong and (from the US vantage point) favourable signal that Burma may be ending its previously high level of economic and strategic dependence on China. This occurred in January 2012 when the Burmese Government cancelled the \$3.6 billion Myitsone Dam project, which was to be built by Chinese companies on the Irrawaddy River. Naypyidaw, however, remains committed to the building of an oil and natural gas pipeline reaching from the Bay of Bengal through Burmese territory into southwestern China. The pipeline, if completed, would reduce China's dependence on the Malacca Strait as an energy lifeline—and, consequently, the need for the US Seventh Fleet to safeguard it.¹²

Conclusions

US policy under the Obama administration or a Republican successor will be best served in Southeast Asia by generating credible strategies of *reassurance* to ASEAN—that the US will sustain the resolve to engage with them economically and geopolitically—and of *calibration* to carefully integrate bilateral and multilateral security approaches towards the region. How well those approaches to reassurance and calibration are applied will determine the extent to which US interests are realised in Southeast Asia and the degree to which allies such as Australia will enjoy the long-term stability that's marked Southeast Asia's international relations outlook during the post-Cold War era.

Washington's formal allies and 'emerging partners' in Southeast Asia—like other US allies globally—understandably worry about the credibility and durability of American engagement and security commitments given the US's ongoing financial challenges at home and its strategic retrenchment from Iraq and Afghanistan. The US can reassure ASEAN members most effectively by demonstrating through transparent negotiations and organisational design that such initiatives as the Trans-Pacific Partnership will allow them to become valued collaborators with Washington and other Asia-Pacific countries in achieving regional prosperity. This directly challenges more exclusivist models favoured by Beijing (and, until recently, by some ASEAN states) and embodied in ASEAN+3. Those models envisioned prioritising 'Asia for East Asians' and tended to exclude the 'Pacific' component when thinking about and ordering this part of the world. Current trends are encouraging in this regard, as the EAS continues to evolve along increasingly 'inclusive' lines of membership (ASEAN plus all key Asia-Pacific states are now members)—a model previously advanced in Australia's Asia-Pacific Community initiative and now embraced by the EAS. Washington must take care, however, to avoid taking exclusivist-oriented postures of its own. Hillary Clinton's policy statements overtly linked US participation in regional multilateral institutions to the precondition that 'consequential security, political, and economic issues are being discussed, and if they involve our interests'.¹³ Those statements might be interpreted by ASEAN policymakers as too elitist and as giving the US wiggle room for future retrenchment from Southeast Asia as opposed to locking it into a balanced and enduring relationship.

This leads to the second precondition for successful US strategy in Southeast Asia—the successful calibration of US bilateral and multilateral security politics. Southeast Asians support a robust American strategic presence in their region to hedge against growing Chinese power there. Recent US initiatives to resuscitate the US–Philippines bilateral alliance, the shifting of US naval and air support assets to the Pacific (most US fast-attack submarines are now deployed in that theatre of operations) and the development of an ‘air–sea battle’ doctrine to counter Chinese anti-access and island-chain strategies of offshore power projection are cases in point of the US response to such concerns. American policy-planners, however, must do more than show the proverbial flag. The *Cobra Gold* military exercise shows how a predominantly bilateral alliance relationship (between the US and Thailand) has morphed to become an extensive multilateral step in regional confidence-building, largely devoid of intra-regional threat-centric imputations. Low-key US activities linking this type of operational engagement with support for ASEAN preventive diplomacy politics in the South China Sea, for example, could evidence a constructive pattern of multilateral security politics. Given sufficient time and effort, the characteristics of patience and finesse which often characterise the ‘ASEAN Way’ of managing regional security diplomacy could blend with the US’s legalistic, results-oriented, foreign policy style to maintain a stable and prosperous Asia–Pacific. If that outcome emerges, Washington, its regional allies, its emerging security partners and even its potential rivals would be mutual beneficiaries.

Notes

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