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E-NOTES

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THE IMPERATIVE FOR AN AMERICAN STRATEGY FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA

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THE SETTING

Southeast Asia came into strategic focus for the U.S. for the first time in World War II as Allied forces fought to roll back Japan's military occupation. As the post-war era took shape, communist insurgencies bid for power throughout the region. In Southeast Asia the "Cold War" was hot – culminating in the Vietnam War and an American investment of 58,000 lives based on the proposition that the region was of vital strategic importance. But with the end of that war in 1975, U.S. strategic attention turned away from Southeast Asia as rapidly and completely as it had turned toward it 15 years earlier. The final shoe dropped in 1991 when the U.S. and the Philippines agreed (acrimoniously) to end the lease that authorized U.S. military bases in the Philippines. Southeast effectively fell off Washington's security map; it became instead a place of high interest to U.S. corporations and banks as the region enjoyed explosive economic growth.

In geopolitical terms, Southeast Asia in the post-Vietnam War period has enjoyed remarkable regional stability. The sources of this strategic quiescence have been multiple and interesting.

First, the entire region has shared a consensus that the overriding task facing governments was economic development and societal modernization. The results have been striking; regional growth rates that have transformed a largely rural, poor, and pre-modern region into the great economic success story of the post-colonial Third World. In 1993 the World Bank produced a major report, *The Asian Miracle*, which sought to capture the lessons from Southeast Asia's successful transformation so they could be applied elsewhere.

Second, Japan played a major economic role as investor, trader and banker to the region – but Tokyo never translated its economic prowess into strategic influence.

Third, beginning with the formation of ASEAN in 1967, Southeast Asia has produced a noteworthy architecture of regional institutions fostering economic, diplomatic, cultural, political, technical, and even security linkages among the ASEAN states and between them and the wider Asia-Pacific. Along the way ASEAN has become what the late political scientist, Karl Deutsch, termed a "security community" – a collectivity of states that have effectively foresworn warfare as a means of dispute settlement among them.

Fourth, Beijing joined the development consensus relatively late (following the death of Mao) but join it did. China became an integral, dynamic part of the overall regional growth formula; a potentially potent destabilizing factor became a constructive partner. China's support for communist revolutions in Southeast Asia in the 1950s, 1960s and even 1970s had not been forgotten. But under paramount leader Deng Xiaoping that policy was abandoned wholesale. China's disquieting view that the entire South China Sea (with areas and islets claimed by multiple Southeast Asian states) was rightfully part of China's sovereign territory was carefully obscured and downplayed by Beijing. Deng often cited an ancient Chinese maxim that translates as: "Bide your time and conceal your capabilities until you are ready to act." For most of the last three decades Chinese authorities have adhered to that advice. At the same time Beijing mounted a very skilled diplomatic/public affairs campaign to convey an image to Southeast Asia of a good neighbor that shared the aspirations of the region. The rhetoric was given tangible effect by a series of Free Trade Agreements and other arrangements between China and Southeast Asia bolstered by massive infrastructure projects (roadways, rail lines, IT networks, energy grids, riverine transport systems, and airline connections) linking China with Southeast Asia.

Fifth, the U.S. played a key role in these bucolic circumstances. Despite strategic indifference from Washington, the U.S. Pacific Command continued to maintain a substantial naval and air presence in the region that included regular deployments through the South China Sea and Straits of Malacca into the Indian Ocean. The net effect was to retain the U.S. position as the strongest military power in the region – one with no territorial ambitions and primary interests in regional peace, prosperity and stability. These interests were coincident with those of the ASEAN governments and America, in effect, became the village cop who threatened no-one and reassured everyone.

For post-Mao China, Southeast Asia held/holds a number of obvious attractions including geographic accessibility, long historical contact, resident ethnic Chinese populations, economic opportunity, and strategic vulnerability – plus the world's busiest sea lanes that carry China's increasingly vital oil imports. ASEAN trade with China, starting from almost nothing twenty years ago, exceeded \$400 billion last year while Chinese investment in ASEAN exceeded \$100 billion. In the process China has become the leading trade partner for each of the ASEAN countries and ASEAN collectively is projected to become China's largest trade partner by 2015. All of this is part of a larger integration of both Southeast Asia and China into an increasingly globalized economy – and growing U.S. economic ties with both Southeast Asia and China. For its part, Beijing retains its rhetorical commitment to "peaceful rise" and a positive relationship with its neighbors to the south.

However, Beijing has over the last three years presented another face to the region including:

- A rapidly growing military, including the buildup of naval, air and missile forces designed to project power offshore, and the increasingly intimidating behavior of Chinese maritime enforcement units toward Southeast Asian vessels;
- An increasingly strident insistence that it has "indisputable sovereignty" over the entire South China Sea and its refusal to sign a binding "code of conduct" banning coercive behavior toward other claimants;
- Dam building on the upper Mekong giving it the historically unprecedented capacity to alter, and even suspend, the flow of the river with potentially catastrophic consequences for the downstream states;
- Growing evidence that the voice of the PLA (and Maritime Enforcement agencies) within Chinese decision making has been gaining influence and the expense of the Foreign Ministry and even the central party leadership.

All this has been occurring against a background of growing nationalism in the broader Chinese public. There are recent indications that the Chinese economy may be beginning a long term slowdown. As economic performance erodes, there is reason to expect the regime to adopt a more assertive nationalistic posture in foreign affairs to bolster its legitimacy at home.

POLICY WITHOUT STRATEGY

For the U.S. armed forces in and around Southeast Asia the post-Vietnam War period, until very recently, can be

characterized as an era of “policy without strategy.” Pacific Command was active throughout the region: naval patrols, air deployments, port visits, joint exercises and training with local militaries, military education, VIP exchanges, military sales, and natural disaster response. The list was a long one and it kept thousands of sailors and airmen occupied. Moreover, the formal defense obligations that attended U.S. treaties with Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia remained operative.

It all had strategic implications but it was not animated or guided by an overall strategy. This, in turn, was reflected in a lack of attention to the region at the highest levels of U.S. policymaking – the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council, the 7th Floor of the State Department, and the White House. The ways that Secretaries of State have chosen to allocate their time and travel is illustrative. In the Clinton Administration Secretary Christopher chose to devote his time heavily to the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. His successor, Madeleine Albright, was consumed by the post-communist transformation of Central Europe. George W. Bush’s Secretary, Condoleezza Rice, received annual entreaties to attend ASEAN ministerial conclaves but was a reliable no-show.

There were limited exceptions to this picture of a strategy-free zone. Admiral Charles Larson, the Commander of U.S. Pacific Forces (1991-4) responded to the loss of bases in the Philippines with a strategic concept he labeled “places not bases.” It envisioned U.S. forces present in Southeast Asia with a smaller more diversified footprint. It was designed to preserve U.S. combat capabilities while placing a lighter political burden on host governments in the region. It was a creative, thoughtful construct but there was little evidence it ever generated serious attention or interest at the top levels in Washington.

In 1990 Congress actually tried to compel the Pentagon to think strategically about Southeast Asia by requiring a report (with State Department input) entitled the East Asia Strategy Review (EASR). That study, and a follow-up in 1992 emphasized unimpeded freedom of navigation through the major sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) as a critical U.S. security interest. But a subsequent iteration released in 1995 omitted all references to U.S. interests vis-à-vis the SLOCs. With Chinese naval power growing and the contemporaneous Chinese seizure of Mischief Reef (within the Philippines EEZ) the U.S. was effectively sending a signal it was less likely to stand in the way of China’s ambitions in the South China Sea. It was no accident that some years later U.S. officials visiting China encountered an insistent message that U.S. power was on its way out of the region.

Until quite recently, Southeast Asian governments strongly inclined to accept China’s declarations of benign intent toward the region at face value. But serious doubts have surfaced in reaction to China’s military buildup, Beijing’s refusal to accept binding restrictions on the use of coercion, and the outright seizure of territory (notably Scarborough Shoal) in the South China Sea.

In 2009-10 the first signs of an American geostrategic reaction to China became evident. A new U.S. President (and Secretary of State) evinced much greater interest in Southeast Asia than had his immediate predecessors. The decision to draw down forces in Iraq and Afghanistan freed up air and naval assets for redeployment. Southeast Asian uneasiness, even fear, regarding developments in the South China Sea was growing. Chinese dam building on the upper Mekong gave China dramatic and disquieting leverage over downstream states. American officials countered with a U.S. “pivot” and a “rebalance” of strategic attention and military assets toward Southeast Asia.

The U.S. pivot is, in effect, a declaration of intent to contest China’s ambitions for effective primacy in Southeast Asia. If that declaration is to become actionable, it will require a robust strategy. Southeast Asia’s inherent complexity and dynamism, China’s rapid emergence as a great power and aspirant superpower, plus Beijing’s overt “talk and take” strategy in the South China Sea combines to provide Washington with a first order strategic challenge. With U.S. and Chinese forces increasingly deployed in the same maritime space, the situation is on the verge of becoming genuinely dangerous. There are myriad potential scenarios even in the very short term that could trigger military hostilities. The need for an intelligent, multifaceted U.S. strategy is acute. What we have today are operational initiatives, diplomatic interactions, and declarations of intent – but not a strategy.

THE CHALLENGE

For any country, the formulation of a security strategy begins with an understanding of relevant national interests. For purposes of this analysis U.S. interests are not confined to Southeast Asia, itself, but include China as well.

China is far too large a factor in the Southeast Asian equation, economically, diplomatically and militarily, to be anything but a central element in U.S. strategic thinking. Ideally, from an American standpoint, U.S. interests regarding Southeast Asia and China should be compatible. A strong and healthy U.S.-China bilateral relationship should be nothing but beneficial to Southeast Asia. But that depends on China's view of the region and its relationship with it. If China sees Southeast Asia as properly subordinate and compliant to Chinese direction and the South China Sea, not as international waters but as China's sovereign space – and the U.S. is not willing to acquiesce to this ambition -- then the task facing American strategists becomes more demanding by several orders of magnitude.

American national interests regarding Southeast Asia are consistent with those that have animated U.S. policy elsewhere in the world. Fundamentally, the U.S. wants Southeast Asia's autonomy and self-determination to be preserved. The basic strategic rationale for the American involvement in World War I and II was to prevent Europe and East Asia from being subordinated to the imperial ambitions of Germany and Japan. A similar strategic concern animated U.S. resistance to Soviet ambitions during the Cold War. Regarding Southeast Asia, the U.S. is a status quo power; it views the current configuration of independent states and regional institutions as well as the international status of the South China Sea as fully consonant with U.S. interests. Those interests include economic, diplomatic/political, and security access to the region. U.S. companies are free to trade and invest subject to local laws and international agreements. The American armed forces can establish collaborative relationships with receptive regional governments. A related U.S. interest is the universal acceptance of the major sea-lanes through the region (notably the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea) as international waterways open to global commerce and innocent passage of military forces as a matter of right. Integral to this paradigm is an acceptance of the legal provisions and norms of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) regarding the definition and extent of territorial seas and Exclusive Economic Zones. All of this, from an American standpoint, will preserve the region as accessible and autonomous – a full participant in global commerce and politics and secure from external threat and intimidation.

As for China, the U.S. strategic interest lies in establishing a cooperative partnership with a country that Washington is fully prepared to recognize as a regional great power and prospective superpower. From an American standpoint, the two countries have no inherent conflict of vital interests. In fact, they are hugely interdependent economically – and as China's economy grows so does its interest in fostering international stability and globalization. This is all very different than the security landscape that confronted the architects of a strategy to contain the Soviet Union in the 1950s. For most of the last three decades the prevailing assumptions animating U.S. policy have embraced this vision of a cooperative U.S.-China relationship. U.S. security agencies including the Pentagon and the CIA have invested considerable sustained effort to implement this goal. The language surrounding the recent California summit between Presidents Obama and Xi regarding a “new type of great power relationship” reflects a continuing conviction that a genuine partnership is not only possible but necessary. But very recently, within the last two to three years, there has been a dawning realization in Washington that U.S.-China relations are to some significant degree hostage to China's relationship with the regions to its south.

An effective U.S. counter to Chinese ambitions will require a strategy of considerable sophistication.

- 1) It should explore in depth how the region's complexity can be harnessed for U.S. interests. As a theoretical proposition, systemic complexity with multiple diverse actors is, other things being equal, a source of stability. In Southeast Asia the most effective brake on Chinese ambitions will be the presence of multiple actors all defending their own interests. For a Chinese strategist, a binary face-off between China and the U.S. in the South China Sea is far more promising than one that also involves several ASEAN countries and non-Southeast Asian regional actors. The more numerous the players and the more complex and dense the interactions the less China will be able to determine outcomes. A central task of U.S. strategy will be to cultivate and utilize that complexity.
- 2) The SLOCs should be clearly identified as a vital or “core” U.S. interest – one shared by every major maritime state as well as the Southeast Asian littoral states. The U.S. insistence that the SLOCs are a “global commons” should be embedded in that broader array of interested parties.
- 3) A U.S. strategy should identify itself closely with UNCLOS. This too is an important potential constraint on Chinese actions – particularly since Beijing is a signatory to the convention. The recent initiative by the Philippines to enlist the UNCLOS adjudication process to pass judgment on the legal validity of Chinese claims is both

interesting and important in this regard.

4) ASEAN and the “ASEAN-plus” mechanisms provide an additional and important element of complexity and constraint in the regional strategic context. China has blown hot and cold on whether Southeast Asia’s multilateral processes are an asset or an obstacle for Chinese strategy. For the U.S. they are an unambiguous asset. A strategy must address ways these institutions can become *sotto voce* partners of U.S. strategy.

5) U.S. military assets under PACOM are obviously a critical component of any U.S. strategy – particularly given the rapid buildup and deployment of Chinese naval and maritime enforcement capabilities. At the end of the day, the only real constraint on a Chinese decision to seize additional territory in the South China Sea is the U.S. Navy and Air Force. But these forces have a far larger role than that. In the nearly four decades since the conclusion of the Vietnam War the U.S. Pacific Command has never engaged in actual military hostilities. The crucial questions concern how U.S. forces can be utilized to provide presence, reassurance, and assistance to buttress American influence and leverage. This is not new. PACOM has been doing it for decades and doing it well. But in a more superheated regional security environment, these (“nonkinetic”) activities will become more important and demanding.

6) A successful strategy will have to be built on a close understanding with regional governments. This will require substantive strategic exchanges at many levels with ASEAN counterparts (defense, foreign ministry, intelligence, and think tanks) and with other Asian governments (Australia, India etc.) The Pentagon has already initiated several “strategic dialogues” in the region (Vietnam, Malaysia etc.) It is a worthy beginning, but will require substantial elaboration and development. A critical objective of such exchanges will be a shared (or mutually understood) view of China and its strategic intentions. This would include an agreement regarding where Chinese interests and ambitions should be accommodated (e.g., Chinese naval ship visits and patrols, joint development with Chinese enterprises of seabed resources) and where they cannot (e.g., SLOCs as global commons, the seizure by force of disputed maritime land features). Finally, and critically, there should be detailed shared planning regarding possible confrontations and contingencies in the South China Sea with an eye to avoiding inadvertent military conflict.

All this will have the effect of providing substance to the declaratory rhetoric surrounding the “pivot.”

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