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# The U.S. Army in Southeast Asia

Near-Term and Long-Term Roles

Peter Chalk

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## Preface

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The United States has indicated an active intent to recalibrate its foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific region as it draws down lengthy troop deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq. This RAND Corporation research report examines the implications of this reorientation for the U.S. Army, focusing on the roles and types of force postures likely to be called for over the near term and out to 2020.

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## Summary

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The current security environment in Southeast Asia is largely benign. There is practically no risk of a major interstate war in the region at present, and virtually every government has benefited from a high degree of internal legitimacy afforded by sustained economic growth. Just as significantly, most of the substate insurgent and terrorist challenges in Southeast Asia have been largely contained. None of the main conflict groups in this part of the world enjoys any significant degree of external backing, and none has the capacity to substantially escalate its activities on its own.

Compounding these positive facets is the lack of any meaningful external threat. Although China is certainly seeking to extend its influence into Southeast Asia, it is doing so largely through “soft diplomacy” and the consolidation of economic ties. The one exception is the South China Sea (SCS), where Beijing has steadily moved to more assertively assume its self-proclaimed sovereignty across the area. Despite pledging a commitment to resolving the issue diplomatically through bilateral negotiations with each of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries concerned, China’s more explicit forward-leaning posture has raised tensions in the region—particularly with Vietnam and the Philippines. While there is as yet no danger of an outright attack to lay claim to any of the islands in the SCS, the possibility of an accidental clash sparking wider aggression cannot be ruled out.

Within the context of this mainly positive environment, there are four major roles that the Pentagon could conceivably play in shaping the Southeast Asian security environment over the near term: supporting defense reform and restructuring, facilitating humanitarian relief operations, providing assistance to address nontraditional transnational threat contingencies, and helping to balance China’s increased influence into Southeast Asia.

Assuming a continuation of the status quo, the broad thrust of U.S. military engagement in Southeast Asia will remain largely consistent out to 2020. The emphasis will be on assisting with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), which will continue to pose a serious challenge irrespective of the broader regional security environment; building up the defense capabilities of local allies to better respond to transnational threats, as well as balance Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia; and working to promote more-cordial security relationships with Beijing.

However, should the regional strategic picture deteriorate dramatically, Washington will need to consider instituting a more involved role for the military—one that takes into account a geopolitical environment that is at once far less certain and more prone to crisis. Perhaps one of the biggest harbingers of change would be stalled or faltering economic growth as a result of a tighter global energy market. Governments that have derived legitimacy from rapid development will suffer from a loss of grassroots support, and, should they encounter difficulties in

supplying basic staples (such as fish and rice), could be subject to major food riots. A serious downturn could be exploited by radical Islamist entities in such countries as Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as outlying regions, such as Mindanao and southern Thailand, and used as a justification for violent upheaval and a return to traditional Muslim values.

State-to-state rivalries are also likely to take on greater relevance in this scenario, especially with regard to the SCS. One could expect all parties to more forcibly exert their presence in the area to secure vital untapped oil deposits. This would necessarily exacerbate attendant risks of armed clashes with China—particularly if a pluralization of Beijing’s foreign policy gives greater voice to militaristic or “netizen” elements within the government that demand offensive action to enforce sovereignty in the area.

Finally, natural disasters would take on greater security relevance in their own right. The ability of ASEAN states to deal with these events will become progressively questionable under conditions of faltering economic growth, which will both reduce the monies available for augmenting HADR preparedness and pit this (diminished) expenditure against other areas of government spending.

To meet these challenges, the United States will need to adopt and consolidate a nuanced “agile” strategy that is “thin” in physical presence but “broad” in programmatic execution. To this end, there are four specific areas in which the Army should consider focusing its efforts:

- *Enhancing the defense capacities of partner nations to meet both conventional and nonconventional dangers.* This effort could entail expanding comprehensive military-to-military programs of the sort undertaken with the Philippines to other allies in the region; helping to build a more viable multilateral security architecture that does not automatically default back to “lowest common denominator” cooperative stances; and assisting with the procurement of appropriate equipment to augment the self-defense of ASEAN member states.
- *Concluding new base agreements for hosting small, mission-oriented U.S. expeditionary forces.* Deployments of this sort would help overcome the “tyranny of distance” that has historically complicated U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia, furnishing the Army with the opportunity for a more flexible and assertive regional presence while also providing greater scope for a robust surge capacity.
- *Expanding support for HADR activities.* The United States could fund additional tabletop exercises, give ground transport and airlift assets, and help to establish comprehensive regional disaster relief coordination hubs.
- *Initiating appropriate responses to counter a more outwardly adventurist or aggressive China.* The priority here should be on putting in place defense/deterrent arrangements that are affordable and that do not unduly provoke Beijing into taking unilateral military action of the type that could threaten U.S. and allied interests or quickly escalate out of control. Augmenting the process of regional defense modernization and increasing access rights to partner nations would be one way of achieving this—providing an in-theater infrastructure that could significantly raise the potential costs to Beijing of any aggressive behavior. Washington could further finesse its strategy by stressing to China that undue provocations in Southeast Asia would raise questions about the country’s military intentions and that this would, by default, limit the prospects for bilateral collaboration to address issues of mutual concern.

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## Abbreviations

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A2AD	anti-access/area denial
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
DIRI	Defense Institute Reform Initiative
HADR	humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
MNNA	major non–North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SCS	South China Sea
SPP	State Partnership Program
TNI	Indonesian National Armed Forces



## Introduction

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On her second visit to Asia following Barack Obama's election to the presidency in 2008, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton announced, "The United States is back."<sup>1</sup> This reorientation—or as it later became known, pivot—became official policy in January 2012 with the release of new Defense Strategic Guidance that explicitly enunciated the need to re-engage the Asia-Pacific as the United States extricates itself from protracted military engagements in Southwest Asia (Afghanistan) and the Middle East (Iraq).<sup>2</sup> Two questions have since arisen as a result of Washington's recalibration. First, what is the current security environment in the Asia-Pacific, and how is this likely to evolve over the medium to long term? Second, what roles can the U.S. military play to positively shape the geostrategic outlook in this part of the world?

This RAND research report explores this issue from the standpoint of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), both now and out to 2020. It argues that, under current conditions—which are largely benign—the Army will focus mainly on supporting defense reform and modernization, helping to address nonconventional transnational threats, and instituting appropriate means to balance increased Chinese penetration into the region. Assuming that the security outlook in Southeast Asia remains favorable, these mission areas will not fundamentally change over the near term. However, should the general outlook deteriorate as a result of a severe economic slowdown in the Asia-Pacific region or other reasons, Washington would need to develop policies that take into account the region's increasing instability and proneness to crisis. Likely priorities under this scenario would include increasing the tempo and depth of interstate cooperation to counter substate and external dangers, consolidating agreements to establish permanent regional bases, and moving to more adroitly offset expanding Chinese influence.

The report first outlines the current geostrategic environment in Southeast Asia, assessing the destabilizing potential of both interstate and domestic threats, as well as the extent of

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<sup>1</sup> "Clinton: 'The United States Is Back' in Asia," *China Daily*, July 22, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> In its opening statement, the strategy explicitly states,

U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, *we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region*. Our relationships with Asian allies and key partners are critical to the future stability and growth of the region. We will emphasize our existing alliances, which provide a vital foundation for Asia-Pacific security. We will also expand our networks of cooperation with emerging partners throughout the Asia-Pacific to ensure collective capability and capacity for securing common interests. (U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, Washington, D.C., January 2012, p. 2; emphasis in the original)

collaborative endeavors taking place in this part of the world. It then examines the main near-term roles the U.S. Army could play in the ASEAN theater given the current regional outlook. It then discusses how these mission statements might change under three postulated futures to 2020. The report concludes by considering how the United States can best respond to a general downturn in regional stability and the type of force posture that should be emphasized under such circumstances.



## The Current Strategic Outlook in Southeast Asia

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The current security environment in Southeast Asia is largely benign. There is practically no risk of a major interstate war in the region at present, and virtually every government has benefited from a high degree of internal legitimacy afforded by sustained economic growth. Just as significantly, most of the substate insurgent and terrorist challenges in Southeast Asia have been largely contained. None of the main conflict groups in this part of the world enjoys any significant degree of external backing, and none has the capacity to substantially escalate its activities on its own. The most threatening situation exists in southern Thailand, where Malay Muslim separatists continue to exact a significant toll.<sup>1</sup> However, even there, the fighting has remained localized and shows no sign of spreading to other parts of the kingdom, much less metastasizing into a broader cross-border campaign of violence.

The integration of Southeast Asia has also taken on a life of its own, with once-suspicious neighbors now actively cooperating with one another. This has perhaps been most apparent with construction and energy projects in Indochina. Links between communist-ruled Laos and capitalist-oriented Thailand have grown substantially in recent years and will be further strengthened from the construction of a fourth “Freedom Bridge” across the Mekong River that is set to be inaugurated in 2013. Cambodia now receives virtually all of its electricity on the basis of accords concluded with Bangkok, which, in turn, benefits from natural gas piped in from Burma.<sup>2</sup>

On a wider level, all ten ASEAN states have committed to the establishment of a common, three-pillar economic, political/security, and socio-cultural community by 2015.<sup>3</sup> Although this bloc will by no means be a Southeast Asian equivalent of the European Union—taking on a far more organic and less legalistic character—it is still an indication of how far the association has come since first emerging as a loose five-member regional arrangement in 1967. Moreover, should plans for a projected Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) come to fruition, it would enmesh ASEAN in what would be the world’s single largest trading bloc.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2004, 4,500 people have lost their lives in fighting in southern Thailand, with nearly double that number wounded. See Zachary Abuza, *The Ongoing Insurgency in Southern Thailand: Trends in Violence, Counterinsurgency Operations, and the Impact of National Politics*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic Research, National Defense University, September 2011, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Fuller, “Wary Neighbors Turn into Partners in a Quickly Developing Southeast Asia,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> For further details, see *ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint*, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, June 2009.

<sup>4</sup> The RCEP is an initiative to integrate the ten ASEAN member states and the group’s free trade partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, and South Korea). If successful, this bloc of 16 nations would have a combined population of more

Compounding these positive facets is the lack of any meaningful external threat. Although China is certainly seeking to extend its influence into Southeast Asia, it is doing so largely through “soft diplomacy” and the consolidation of economic ties. In 2011, Beijing’s direct investment in the region stood at \$2.57 billion, and thanks to the elimination of tariffs on most (90 percent) goods, overall two-way trade with ASEAN now exceeds \$300 billion. China also actively supports Southeast Asian integration, viewing this as vital to ensuring the consolidation of a vibrant market for its exports, as well as a safe destination for its investment funds.<sup>5</sup>

The one area of tension has to do with competing claims in the South China Sea (SCS). The issue has complicated relations with the Philippines and, especially, Vietnam, which has cast Chinese attempts to extend territorial control in the region as an existential threat to its national integrity.<sup>6</sup> Disagreements over the SCS were also directly responsible for the failure of ASEAN’s foreign ministers to agree on the wording of a final communiqué following the conclusion of their annual meeting in Cambodia on July 12, 2012—the first time that this has happened in the organization’s 45-year history.<sup>7</sup> Beijing’s earlier announcement that the disputed Paracels, Spratlys, and Macclesfield Bank<sup>8</sup> had become a Chinese administrative area known as Sansha City with its own governing officials—not to mention China’s subsequent decision to send a garrison to guard those living on these island groups—did nothing to stabilize the situation and further antagonized both Hanoi and Manila.<sup>9</sup>

While there is as yet no indication that China is prepared to undertake military action to enforce its claims in the SCS, its more explicit forward-leaning posture has undoubtedly raised the risk of retaliatory action on the part of other claimants—heightening the danger of unintended clashes sparking naval skirmishes.<sup>10</sup> That said, the prospect of the SCS disputes triggering a major conflagration with large-scale casualties appears unlikely at this time.<sup>11</sup> China still clearly wishes to resolve the issue diplomatically through bilateral talks with each of the ASEAN countries concerned.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, given that the disputes involve only four other states

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than three billion people, a collective gross domestic product of around \$17 trillion, and ownership of 40 percent of world trade. Negotiations for the RCEP commenced in early 2013 and are scheduled to conclude by the end of 2015 in line with the projected formation of the ASEAN community. For further details on the initiative, see Rohit Sinha and Geethanjali Nataraj, “Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP): Issues and Way Forward,” *Diplomat*, July 30, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> “China’s Direct Investment to ASEAN Countries Reaches \$2.57 Billion,” Xinhua, March 2, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Author interviews, Hanoi, November 2011. No other claimant has portrayed the SCS disputes in such extreme terms.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Perlez, “Asian Leaders at Regional Meeting Fail to Resolve Disputes over South China Sea,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2012a; Puy Kea, “S. China Sea Row Forces ASEAN to Forgo Communiqué for 1st Time in 45 Years,” *Kyodo News*, July 13, 2012; Ernest Bower, “China Reveals Its Hand,” *Real Clear World*, July 23, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> These are respectively known in China as Xisha, Nansha, and Zhongsha.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, *South China Sea: From Bad to Worse?* Council on Foreign Relations, July 24, 2012; Jane Perlez, “China to Put Soldiers on Islands in Dispute,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2012b; and Jane Perlez, “Report Sees Rising Risk of Fighting over Asia Sea,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2012c.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, James Dobbins, David C. Gompert, David A. Shlapak, and Andrew Scobell, *Conflict with China: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-344-A, 2011, pp. 3–4; and Jane Perlez, “Japan Makes Overture to China in Effort to Help Calm a Dispute over Islands,” *New York Times*, January 24, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Storey, “Rising Tensions in the South China Sea: Southeast Asian Responses,” paper presented at the fourth East Asia Security Outlook Seminar, Brunei, February 2, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted, however, that this goes against the 2002 ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which prioritizes a multilateral (rather than bilateral) solution to the issue.

(Brunei and Malaysia also have residual claims, though both have pressed these far more passively), they are not strictly speaking a regionwide concern and, therefore, arguably do not constitute the source (at least at present) for a severe disruption of stability across Southeast Asia.

It is in the context of this mainly positive environment that the Obama administration has signaled an active intent to “recalibrate” its foreign policy toward the Asia-Pacific as it draws down troop deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. In pursuing this regional reorientation, the U.S. Army will have an important role to play, particularly in terms of security cooperation and assistance.



## The Role of the U.S. Army in Southeast Asia: Near Term

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Furthering the process of bilateral and multilateral security cooperation will be important to U.S. foreign policy objectives for several reasons. First, it will help to build effective and self-sufficient partner-nation defense capacities. Second, it will assist with the promotion of mutually beneficial, long-term U.S.-ASEAN relationships to avail regional access in times of crisis. Third, it will better equip Southeast Asian states to independently offset, or at least balance, outside influence.

To this end, there are four major roles that the Pentagon could conceivably play in shaping the Southeast Asian security environment over the near term: supporting defense reform and restructuring, facilitating humanitarian relief operations, providing assistance to address nontraditional transnational threat contingencies, and helping to balance China's increased influence into Southeast Asia.

### Defense Reform and Restructuring

At least three Southeast Asian states are presently undergoing a concerted process of military restructuring and reform. Of these, two are island archipelagoes—the Philippines and Indonesia—and one a mainland state in Indochina—Cambodia. In the Philippines, the government is looking across doctrine, force structure, and training to reduce bureaucratic and managerial inefficiencies as a means for better “stretching” the overall defense budget. This endeavor is being undertaken in conjunction with a multiyear capability upgrade program—a long-range scheme that aims to improve and maximize the army as a modern and operationally effective organization.<sup>1</sup>

In Indonesia, Jakarta has been engaged in a major effort to “professionalize” the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI)—especially with regard to respect for humanitarian law—and to depoliticize its role in the running of the country. To this end, moves have been made to strengthen democratic control over the armed forces, fully expunge all aspects of the so-called *dwi-fungsi* (dual function) doctrine that legitimated military engagement in sociopoliti-

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Chalk, Angel Rabasa, William Rosenau, and Leanne Piggott, *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia: A Net Assessment*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-846-OSD, 2009, p. 137; Renato Cruz De Castro, *Armed Forces of the Philippines: Development and Modernization*, Armed Forces Lecture Paper Series, Paper No. 2, Bandar Seri Begawan: Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, 2008, pp. 20–24.

cal affairs during the Suharto era, and divest the TNI from any law enforcement/maintenance of public order missions.<sup>2</sup>

In Cambodia, the Hun Sen administration is working to enhance civil-military relations, as well as recalibrate troop training/capacity for operations that are most germane to the national interests of the country, such as border control, disaster relief, regional peacekeeping, and remote-area infrastructure construction. Phnom Penh has also announced its intention to boost the size of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces while ensuring adequate oversight and control of serving commanders, many of whom have abused their positions for criminal purposes.<sup>3</sup> Finally, concerted moves have been made to consolidate a viable special-forces unit—the Special Detachment—as an integral feature of the National Counter Terrorism Committee that was established in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

The U.S. Army is already playing a useful role in furthering these reform efforts, directly assisting the capability upgrade program initiative in the Philippines, instructing the TNI on basic precepts of humanitarian law, and helping to promote transparency in the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, as well as augment its emerging regional peacekeeping profile. Over the near term, Washington could build on this support through the provision of additional money, training, equipment, strategic guidance, and operational/organizational input.

There are a number of security cooperation programs that could be used to facilitate partner-nation engagement of this type. One good example is the Defense Institution Reform Initiative (DIRI), the mission statement of which is squarely focused on military restructuring and modernization. Indeed, all of DIRI's priority areas—defense policy/strategy, human resource management, budgetary planning, civil-military relations, logistics/infrastructure, and professional education—are directly relevant to the reform efforts currently under way in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Cambodia.<sup>5</sup>

While these countries are logical targets for U.S. security cooperation efforts, endeavors in this direction should not be restricted to them alone. Moves could also usefully be made to deepen military-to-military ties and interoperability with existing close partner states. Thailand, which hosts the annual Cobra Gold exercises and which was accorded the status of major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally (MNNA) in 2003, is one such country.<sup>6</sup> Another is Singapore, which, despite its authoritarian and nondemocratic character, shares similar values of diversity and the rule of law. There are ample opportunities to engage the state in closer collaboration, particularly since the conclusion of a Strategic Partnership Dialogue in February 2012. This agreement will allow the two countries to come together on a regular

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Sebastian and Iisgindarsah, *Assessing 12-Year Military Reform in Indonesia: Major Strategic Gaps for the Next Stage of Reform*, Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Working Paper 227, April 6, 2011, pp. 5–7.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Buth Reaksmey Kongkea, “Government Takes Action for Military Reform,” *reaksmey*, February 4, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Author interviews, Phnom Penh, April 2011, and Sihanoukville, December 2011.

<sup>5</sup> For more on DIRI and other Defense Department security cooperation programs, see Defense Security Cooperation Agency, *Fiscal Year 2012 Budget Estimates*, February 2011.

<sup>6</sup> The annual Cobra Gold exercises have been held since 1980. In 2012, the event involved 10,000 U.S. soldiers and 3,400 Thai troops in addition to contingents from Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea. John Roberts, “The US Re-Engages with Burmese Military,” *World Socialist Web Site*, October 23, 2013.

basis and discuss security trends in the region and identify avenues of cooperation for addressing threats of mutual concern.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, Washington could seek to more directly embrace militaries that are either highly proficient or have signaled a willingness to reorient away from traditional anti-U.S. postures. Notable in this regard are Malaysia, Vietnam, and Myanmar. The first of these has one of the best-trained and best-equipped armies in ASEAN and is also a participant in the Five Powers Defense Arrangements.<sup>8</sup> However, the United States (as well as other close allies in the region, such as Australia) has yet to comprehensively embrace Kuala Lumpur on a bilateral basis, largely due to the somewhat recalcitrant attitude of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad. Now that the elder statesman has departed from office and no longer wields any decisive political influence, there is arguably greater latitude to engage Malaysia on a more concerted basis than was previously possible.

Options for Vietnam, for years a staunch enemy of the United States, have likewise widened as the country has moved to politically open to the West. In 2011, Hanoi and Washington signed a formal cooperation pact, following this in 2012 with a mutual pledge to strengthen defense ties in five key areas—three of which directly involve the Army: peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.<sup>9</sup> That same year, the United States commenced a two-year program to enhance maritime security in the Gulf of Thailand, an effort that directly involves Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> The United States should actively seek to ensure that this rapprochement continues, which will avail it with a more robust defense “footprint” in Indochina.

Opportunities with Myanmar—historically one of the most reclusive and brutal dictatorships in the world—have similarly expanded.<sup>11</sup> In March 2011, power was transferred to a nominally civilian—albeit military-backed—administration, and, since then, the government has exhibited signs of a fundamental transformation in both political and strategic direction. Under the presidency of Thein Sein,<sup>12</sup> the country has released political prisoners of conscience, opened up the economy, moved to at least partially unshackle the press, freed Suu Kyi from house arrest, and, last year, allowed political elections to proceed unhindered.<sup>13</sup> More significantly, Myanmar has signaled an active interest in fostering closer military ties with the United States. In 2012, Zaw Htay, a senior official in Thein’s office, said a near-term aim is to send army officers to participate in U.S. professional military education courses, particularly those devoted to peacekeeping human rights practices.<sup>14</sup> It is vital that Washington respond to these

<sup>7</sup> “The US-Singapore Strategic Partnership: Bilateral Relations Move Up a Weight Class,” *The Ambassadors Review*, Spring 2012; see also Tim Huxley, “Singapore and the US: Not Quite Allies,” *The Strategist*, July 2012.

<sup>8</sup> The arrangement also includes Singapore, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. All signatories to the agreement have committed to consult with one another in the event of an external act of aggression or threat of attack.

<sup>9</sup> The other two areas are maritime security and search and rescue operations. See Carlo Muñoz, “US, Vietnam Defense Chiefs Reach Deal to Strengthen Military Ties,” *The Hill*, June 4, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> This effort will involve six workshops—three at the commander level, three at the staff officer level. Vietnam hosted the first staff officer course in November 2012.

<sup>11</sup> The traditional U.S. approach to Myanmar has been one of isolation and alienation, with Washington flatly rejecting the ASEAN approach of comprehensive engagement.

<sup>12</sup> Thein Sein has been called the Mikhail Gorbachev of Myanmar.

<sup>13</sup> These elections were overwhelmingly won by the opposition and, in a dramatic turn of events, returned Suu Kyi to parliament.

<sup>14</sup> Roberts, 2013.

overtures and work with Myanmar to facilitate greater accountability and civilian control over the army as part of a wider process aimed at consolidating the country's nascent institutional democratic development.<sup>15</sup>

## Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

Support for HADR is another area that would boost U.S. credibility and engagement in Southeast Asia. This part of the world is highly susceptible to natural disasters, especially those that are weather-related; the Philippines alone suffers around 200 typhoons a year. Hurricanes, flooding, mudslides, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions are all frequent events in the region, and certain calamities have resulted in major destruction, such as the 2004 tsunami and Cyclone Nargis, which struck Burma in 2008. Major disasters—which are likely to increase in frequency and seriousness as a result of population growth and more-severe rainfall patterns associated with rising temperatures—have elevated the issue of HADR as a major priority for ASEAN.<sup>16</sup> Member states have prepared procedural and operational framework documents for responding to disasters;<sup>17</sup> created multinational teams that can be rapidly deployed to the scene of an emergency;<sup>18</sup> run six ASEAN regional disaster response simulation exercises since 2005;<sup>19</sup> and, in 2011, launched a humanitarian assistance center in Jakarta to act as a central repository detailing available HADR across the ASEAN 10.<sup>20</sup>

The U.S. Army has considerable experience in disaster assistance and is well placed to help further develop these initiatives. Washington's inclusion in meetings of the ASEAN Regional Forum affords it a useful means through which to impart emergency management concepts, such as the Incident Command System, that can be readily adapted to HADR situations. Existing disaster response workshops run or sponsored by U.S. Pacific Command offer a proven method for building cooperative working relationships between military and humanitarian communities. Equally, annual drills such as Cobra Gold (held in Thailand with the participation of 20 other countries), Balikitan (with the Philippines), and the ASEAN Disaster

<sup>15</sup> Promisingly, the United States is moving to establish closer military ties with Myanmar. There are plans to include the country in two multilateral exercises in 2013: one in Brunei dealing with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and one in Indonesia on counterterrorism. Roberts, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Author interviews, Bangkok, January 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Two primary documents have been produced: *ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response* (2009), which spells out a framework for regional cooperation against natural disasters and constitutes the world's first legally binding treaty on comprehensive disaster management, and *Standard Operating Procedure for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Operations* (2009), which outlines the procedures ASEAN states should follow when requesting assistance.

<sup>18</sup> Known as Emergency Response Assessment Teams, these fall under the ambit of ASEAN and are theoretically composed of representatives from each member state.

<sup>19</sup> The six include simulations on structural collapse (hosted by Malaysia in 2005); flood disaster (hosted by Cambodia in 2006); structural collapse (hosted by Singapore in 2007); typhoon and technological disaster (hosted by Thailand in 2008); volcanic eruption (hosted by the Philippines in 2009); and earthquake/tsunami (hosted by Indonesia in 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Author interviews, Bangkok, January 2012. See also Tan See Seng, "ASEAN Defence Sector in Building the ASEAN Community," paper presented at the fourth East Asia Security Outlook Seminar, Brunei, February 2, 2012. *ASEAN 10* refers to the ten ASEAN member states (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia).



Relief Exercise (DiREX), provide ideal settings for improving protocols and sharing best practices for dealing with natural catastrophes.

The United States could also consider predeploying assets in a permanent Southeast Asian HADR hub. The U-Tapao air base just outside Pattaya, which was used extensively to transport food, medicine, tents, and other supplies following the 2004 tsunami,<sup>21</sup> has particular relevance in this regard. The facility has the capacity to handle large transport aircraft, including C-130s and C-17s, and is colocated near a deep-sea port, which permits the effective and efficient transloading of supplies brought in by sea. U-Tapao also lies outside the busy air traffic lanes of Bangkok, meaning that inbound and departing flights are unlikely to be delayed. Finally, the base, an active international airport, has a large fuel storage capacity, numerous wide-body and narrow-body parking spots (seven and 18, respectively), and the necessary infrastructure required for command and control, maintenance, and aerial support.<sup>22</sup>

Promisingly, officials with the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs have confirmed that they are interested in hosting an HADR facility at U-Tapao and are willing to work with the United States to undertake such an initiative if all the technical details can be worked out. Just as importantly, Bangkok has confirmed that it is ready to contribute funds and does not intend the complex to be a free “handout.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, there has been no major objection from other ASEAN states to a U.S. presence at U-Tapao. There is, in short, a high degree of political will—both nationally and regionally—on which Washington can capitalize to legitimize a larger humanitarian role for the Army in Southeast Asia.

On a wider level, there may be opportunities for the United States to engage China in facilitating disaster relief in Southeast Asia. Not only does China have a huge military that is well equipped and experienced in responding to large-scale calamities; it has also broached the idea of conducting joint humanitarian operations with interested partners in the region. In addition, a huge HADR training center has been set up just outside the capital. The facility has over 300 staff, and the government has announced that it is willing to open the complex to any state that would like to use it.<sup>24</sup>

## Addressing Transnational Challenges

Although substate terrorist and insurgent challenges have greatly diminished in Southeast Asia, there is still a general concern that political violence could resurface as a significant threat to regional security. Submissions to the ASEAN Regional Forum’s *Annual Security Outlook* in 2011 universally highlighted the need for effective counterterrorist action, nationally, bilaterally, and multilaterally.<sup>25</sup> Assisting in these efforts is an obvious role for the U.S. Army and

<sup>21</sup> For further details, see U.S. Air Force Office of History, *With Compassion and Hope: The Story of Operation Unified Assistance*, Hickham Air Force Base, Hawaii, January 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Author interviews, Bangkok, January 2012. See also Air Mobility Command, *Global En-Route Strategy*, Washington, D.C., white paper, July 14, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Author interviews, Bangkok, January 2012, and Pattaya, May 2012. See also Craig Whitlock, “U.S. Eyes Return to South East Asian Bases,” *The Guardian Weekly*, June 29, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Author interviews, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Bangkok, January 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Directorate for ASEAN Political and Security Cooperation, *ASEAN Regional Forum Annual Security Outlook*, Vol. 12, 2011.

one that would naturally build off the various bi-, tri-, and multilateral initiatives and exercises that Washington has already undertaken to promote domestic and regional stability in Southeast Asia. U.S. Army Pacific is one low-cost institutional mechanism through which these endeavors could be channeled. The command undertakes a wide array of security cooperation tasks and, in the post-9/11 era, has increasingly focused on initiatives aimed at augmenting homeland defense and related areas in Asian partner countries.<sup>26</sup> Another is the State Partnership Program (SPP), which links U.S. National Guard units with designated defense forces around the world. Designed to support geographic combatant commanders, the SPP aims to enhance military capabilities, improve interoperability, and buttress principles of responsible governance.<sup>27</sup>

An immediate candidate for this type of support is Cambodia. The Special Detachment is a new and largely unproven force that, even in the opinion of its commanding officer, suffers from a number of significant shortcomings: limited intelligence-gathering capabilities to support tactical operations; insufficient skills for maintaining assets; a dearth of basic facilities and equipment, such as training ranges and ammunition; inadequate sniping capabilities; and no means for countering or responding to weapons-of-mass-destruction attacks.<sup>28</sup> The United States is well placed to help address these gaps, which, again, would give it added influence and exposure in Indochina.

Another potential recipient is Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim state and the home base of Jemaah Islamyya. Although the Yudhoyono government has made significant progress in blunting the threat posed by religious extremism, there is no guarantee that a future administration will prioritize the issue in the same manner, especially if the government is more explicitly Islamic in character. Even if this does not occur, there is certainly scope for more closely engaging the TNI's Komando Pasukan Khusus/Kopassus in counterterrorism. While not its primary mission,<sup>29</sup> the unit does retain responsibility for both anti-hijacking and special recovery missions. Admittedly, the extent of assistance the United States is able to provide continues to be limited by lingering concerns over human rights violations that have been committed by serving members in the unit.<sup>30</sup> Currently, Washington is barred from providing any combat training or other forms of lethal assistance; however, the mere fact that these worries exist arguably provides a case for directly engaging Kopassus in a more comprehensive fashion. This is the approach that Australia and the United Kingdom have adopted, both of which,

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Paul McLeary, "USARPAC No. 2 Outlines Asia Pacific Strategy," *Army Times*, October 28, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> For further details on the SPP, see Lawrence Kapp and Nina M. Serafino, *The National Guard State Partnership Program: Background, Issues and Options for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R41957, August 15, 2011. As of this writing, U.S. National Guard units had established partnerships with four Southeast Asian states: Thailand (Washington State), the Philippines (Hawaii), Indonesia (Hawaii), and Cambodia (Ohio). Author interview, the Pentagon, March 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Author interviews, Phnom Penh, April 2011.

<sup>29</sup> In Indonesia, it is the police who assume primary responsibility for counterterrorism, particularly the widely lauded Densus 88 (D-88 or Special Detachment 88).

<sup>30</sup> The United States broke off all contacts with Kopassus following the violence that accompanied East Timor's vote for independence in 1999, much of which was allegedly instigated by members of the unit. President Obama resumed engagement in 2010 after Kopassus' commander-in-chief agreed to remove all soldiers convicted of human rights abuses and committed to suspending troops suspected of engaging in such violations in the future. See David Cloud, "U.S. to Resume Aid to Kopassus, Indonesia's Controversial Military Forces," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 2010.

for several years now, have authorized the dispatch of members of the Special Air Service and Special Boat Squadron to train Kopassus in counterterrorism and other tactical techniques.<sup>31</sup>

The joint special operations task force that was established as part of the Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group to the Republic of the Philippines provides a useful model that could be applied to Indonesia and, particularly, Cambodia. Principally aimed at elite units of the the Armed Forces of the Philippines, such as the Special Forces Group, the Scout Rangers, and the Marine Battalion, as well as several army reconnaissance companies, this bilateral security cooperation program aims to build and sustain critical counterterrorism skills in Manila's armed forces. Training has focused mainly on operations intelligence fusion, unit interoperability, close-quarter combat, sniping, rapid-reaction recovery techniques, enemy infiltration, aspects of engineering and equipment, and "soft/smart" hearts-and-minds initiatives. Although U.S. forces are barred (under the Philippine constitution) from actually engaging in active hostile actions, they do participate in annual exercises with the Armed Forces of the Philippines to test and audit introduced tactics and procedures.<sup>32</sup>

Helping to address cross-border crime is another task that the U.S. Army could fulfill in Southeast Asia. A plethora of so-called gray-area phenomena exists in the region, ranging from various forms of trafficking (people, drugs, timber, diamonds) to piracy, weapon proliferation, and money laundering.<sup>33</sup> The extent to which the military is involved in dealing with these activities differs from country to country. However, there is a general consensus within ASEAN that these problems constitute concrete security concerns and that defense establishments will increasingly be involved in responding to them.<sup>34</sup>

There are various types of assistance that the U.S. military could provide to augment appropriate and effective responses to transnational crime. Assisting to establish better regimes of border security is one fundamental task—not least because the most-serious illicit activities inevitably occur and are most endemic in those areas where surveillance and interdiction capabilities are weak or absent.<sup>35</sup> Common issues that need to be addressed include insufficient assets relative to overall areas of responsibility; aging aviation, maritime, and land patrol equipment; concomitant difficulties in procuring spare parts; a lack of human resources; corruption; and inadequate information sharing.

Fostering effective domestic coordination that draws on and integrates the skills culled from a range of civil-military agencies is another important function that the U.S. DoD could facilitate.<sup>36</sup> Many Southeast Asian states have yet to develop frameworks for achieving comprehensive collaboration of this type and continue to suffer from chronic stovepiping of

<sup>31</sup> Author interview, London, February 2013. See also Matt Brown, "Kopassus Troops Train with SAS," *ABC News* (Australia), September 28, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Chalk et al., 2009, p. 176.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Directorate for Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Carlyle Thayer, "Strategic Relations in Asia: An Overview," paper presented at the fourth East Asia Security Outlook Seminar, Brunei, February 2, 2012b, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> For example, piracy (Indonesia, the Philippines); illegal fishing (Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand); gun running (Indonesia, the Philippines); drug trafficking (Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines); and human trafficking (Indonesia, Thailand).

<sup>36</sup> Peter Chalk, *Non-Military Security and Global Order*, London: Macmillan, 2000, p. 137.

intelligence, duplication of effort, and jurisdictional competition.<sup>37</sup> Washington has helped other partner nations grappling with these sorts of problems—Colombia, El Salvador, Kenya, Ghana, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan are all cases in point—and could extend the same sort of assistance in Southeast Asia.

Finally, the Army could help augment regional cooperation against illicit transnational activities by conducting regular exercises equivalent to those it runs in the field of counterterrorism and mediating to promote standard operating procedures and greater force interoperability for fighting cross-border crime. Washington's Export Control and Related Border Security Program is an additional mechanism that the military could leverage. Although primarily directed at stemming the proliferation of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons, it has obvious relevance to smuggling in general. In May 2012, the Pentagon used the program to bring together officials from Malaysia, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand to prioritize transnational threats of mutual concern;<sup>38</sup> a follow-on conference took place in Kuala Lumpur in December 2012, during which participating states worked to identify current gaps in the subregional architecture for countering these challenges and how they can best be ameliorated.

## Balancing China's Increased Influence into the Region

As noted, although China is not presently seeking to coercively expand its influence into Southeast Asia, it is certainly moving to increase its strategic weight in the region. Currently, the bulk of this effort is being pursued economically, with Beijing actively promoting enhanced trade and commercial ties between itself and the ten ASEAN member states. However, there are at least two other strands of the policy that have become progressively more evident. First has been an increasingly concerted effort to press Chinese territorial claims in the SCS, which has generated growing tension with both the Philippines and Vietnam. Second, Beijing has stepped up the development of its anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities, making significant investments in advanced combat aircraft, submarines; modern surface warships; land attack and anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles; and command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR), space, and cyber technologies.<sup>39</sup> All of these platforms are designed to enhance the ability of the People's Liberation Army to project its power into the wider Asia-Pacific while simultaneously increasing the difficulty of the United States to do the same.

In the near term, neither China's claims in the SCS nor its A2AD modernization programs will represent a direct threat to U.S. interests in Southeast Asia. The former does not amount to an outwardly aggressively expansionist ideology, and, although the risk of unintended clashes has risen, these are unlikely, by themselves, to escalate to the point at which they involve large-scale casualties or directly impinge on freedom of navigation in the region (the

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<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, Chalk et al., 2009, pp. 187–188.

<sup>38</sup> Shared concerns included illicit trafficking (contraband, humans, weapons, natural resources), poaching, and piracy/armed robbery against ships. Author observations, Pattaya, May 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Thayer, 2012b, pp. 6–9. For a good account of China's rising power and the perceived implications this holds for Southeast Asian autonomy, see Carlyle Thayer, "The Rise of China and India: Challenging or Reinforcing Southeast Asia's Autonomy," in Ashley Tellis, Travis Tanner, and Jessica Keough, eds., *Strategic Asia 2011–12: Asia Responds to Its Rising Powers: China and India*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2012a, pp. 313, 345.

maintenance of which is just as important to Beijing as to other states).<sup>40</sup> By the same token, the buildup associated with A2AD capabilities has so far been modest and has yet to provide China with the means to truly project power into Southeast Asia while concurrently holding the United States at bay.

Under these circumstances, Washington may wish to pursue efforts to balance China that are seen as “light,” avoiding force postures that are liable to generate concerns of American encirclement and/or weaken general incentives for continued constructive regional behavior. To this end, the United States should focus on furthering the process of defense modernization to consolidate the emergence of capable and reliable local allies that are more readily positioned to independently resist undue Chinese pressure. In addition, Washington should impress on Beijing that the two governments share a mutual need for cooperation to deal with an array of global security matters, including many of the transnational challenges that are manifest in Southeast Asia (natural disasters, terrorism, organized crime), and that this would be harder to effect (with deleterious consequences for both parties) in an environment of sustained regional power competition.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the Pentagon should aim to promote trust and confidence—both Sino-American and Sino-ASEAN—by sponsoring regional activities and exercises that incorporate the People’s Liberation Army and foster a sense of inclusion and joint interaction.

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<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that China has, in several instances, said that it reserves the right to bar other states from performing surveillance and/or reconnaissance missions in the SCS, which could be interpreted as a threat to hinder freedom of navigation in the region. However, this does not detract from the general point that the SCS represents a critical commercial sea-lane of communication that connects the Asia-Pacific with the Indian Ocean—the sanctity of which is of as much benefit to China as to any other state.

<sup>41</sup> In this light, it is worth noting that China and the United States at present have in place 48 mechanisms for promoting and aligning coordination and cooperation on strategic policy issues. The Obama administration has also actively sought to better manage its relations with Beijing through new arrangements, such as the Strategic and Economic Dialogue and the recently established Consultations on Asia-Pacific Affairs. See Thayer, 2012b, pp. 15–16, and Bonnie Glasser and Brittany Billingsley, “US-China Relations: Friction and Cooperation Co-Exist Uneasily,” *Comparative Connections*, September 2011.



## The Role of the U.S. Army in Southeast Asia to 2020

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Forecasting what the geostrategic situation in Southeast Asia is likely to look like in 2020 is a demanding task that is fraught with risk. However, in an attempt to bound the analysis, this report postulates three conceivable futures for the region: a continuation of the status quo that is a straight-line projection of current political, economic, and military trends; one that is characterized by a significant drop in regional stability that leads China to exhibit a substantially more aggressive pursuit of its goals; and, at the extreme, a chronic systemic breakdown.

Under the first scenario, the overall thrust of U.S. military engagement in Southeast Asia should remain largely consistent with the assessment above. The emphasis will be on building up the defense capabilities of local allies to better respond to transnational threats, as well as balance Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia; working to promote more-cordial security relationships with Beijing; and continuing to assist with HADR, which will remain a priority within ASEAN irrespective of the broader regional security environment.

But should the regional strategic picture dramatically deteriorate, yielding either future two or three, Washington will need to consider instituting a more involved role for the military—one that takes into account a geopolitical environment that is at once far less certain and more prone to crisis.

Perhaps one of the biggest harbingers of change would be stalled or faltering economic growth as a result of a tighter global energy market. Governments that have derived legitimacy from rapid development will suffer from a loss of grassroots support, and should they encounter difficulties in supplying basic staples (such as fish and rice), they could be subject to major food riots.<sup>1</sup> A serious downturn could be exploited by radical Islamist entities in several countries and used as a justification for violent upheaval and a return to traditional Muslim values. Dangers would be greatest in Indonesia, where an undercurrent of sympathy for Darul Islam—the forerunner to Jemaah Islamiyya (literally, Islamic Communities)—could translate into more concerted support for militancy, as it did following the Asian financial crisis in 1998.<sup>2</sup> Given the country's central role as the geopolitical “anchor” of ASEAN, should Jakarta fail to contain such unrest, it could have serious reverberations across the region. Such an outcome would be of particular concern to the United States, not only because of the strategic void that would emerge in Southeast Asia but also due to the potential for ensuing regional instability to limit access to important allies, such as Singapore (an important forward naval

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<sup>1</sup> The 2008 Asian rice crisis, which led to mass civil disturbances in Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, is a case in point.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Darul Islam and Jemaah Islamiyya, see Chalk et al., 2009, Chapter 5, “The Regional Dimension: Jemaah Islamiyya.”

basing for the United States), Thailand (an MNNA and potential future HADR hub), and the Philippines (another MNNA and the locus of Washington's largest security assistance/capacity building program in Southeast Asia).

Although there is unlikely to be any major shift in external backing for existing domestic terrorist-insurgent movements—with the possible exception of communist rebels in the Philippines (see below)—an economic slowdown could prompt both Manila and Bangkok to abandon their respective peripheries for the sake of consolidating control in the core. Ungoverned spaces would be the likely results of such moves, providing permissive operating spaces for rebel groups and criminal syndicates alike. As occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s, militants in Indonesia could look to these areas as favorable offshore locations for planning, preparing, and conducting pan-regional attacks. It is not apparent that collective security arrangements instituted through ASEAN would be capable of addressing such a scenario given the association's normative preference for unanimity in decisionmaking and noninterference in internal affairs.

State-to-state rivalries are also likely to take on greater relevance in this scenario, especially with regard to the SCS. One could expect all parties to more forcibly exert their presence in the area to secure vital untapped oil deposits. This would necessarily exacerbate attendant risks of armed clashes with China, particularly if a pluralization of Beijing's foreign policy gives greater voice to militaristic or “netizen” elements within the government.<sup>3</sup> Arguably the biggest danger lies with Vietnam, which has explicitly affirmed that any Chinese military effort to expand territorial control over the Spratly and Paracel island chain will be interpreted as an existential challenge to its national sovereignty. In common with substate threats, ASEAN's collective ability (or willingness) to manage a major standoff in the SCS is questionable, not least because it is not an issue that all member states (including political heavyweights, such as Indonesia) view with the same degree of gravity.

Another potential source of interstate tension could derive from Beijing's investment in regional infrastructure projects. Because these deals typically come with the condition that Chinese nationals carry out the bulk of any construction, they would be liable to generate local friction in tight job markets and could, indeed, be interpreted as thinly veiled efforts to “steal” Southeast Asian jobs by establishing overseas Sino communities in the region (a de facto “fifth column”).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, natural disasters would take on greater security relevance in their own right as their severity and frequency continue to rise as a result of climate change and population growth. The ability of ASEAN states to deal with these events will become progressively questionable under conditions of faltering economic growth, which will both reduce the monies available for augmenting HADR preparedness and pit these demands against other areas of government spending.

A protracted long-term economic decline would compound the various trends outlined above and could herald the onset of the third scenario—systemic breakdown. Southeast Asian states would experience increased difficulty in managing peripheral areas of domestic conflict, which could open opportunities for external interference. The Philippines may be especially vulnerable to such dangers. Here China may be encouraged to adopt a more “adventurous”

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<sup>3</sup> A highly militaristic stance by China with regard to its territorial claims in the SCS could also trap the government into its own rhetoric on sovereignty issues and force it to take action by default.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Andrew Jacobs, “In Singapore, Vitriol Against Chinese Newcomers,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2012.



foreign policy of support for the communist New People's Army as part of a wider effort to consolidate control over areas in the SCS that both countries claim.

In Indonesia, a repeat of the chaos that followed the Asian financial crisis could be expected; resultant upsurges in militant extremism, transnational criminal activity, and piracy would seriously threaten political, economic, and military stability, as well as generate serious centrifugal pressures that could spur secessionist moves elsewhere in the region.

The fallout from natural disasters would also rise as ASEAN member states struggle to find the financial means to underwrite effective (and expensive) HADR programs. This could have a serious self-sustaining spiral effect, with the cleanup from disasters that are not immediately met generating exorbitant costs that further reduce available investments for dealing with future calamities. Low-lying, unevenly developed countries will be the most susceptible to these dynamics—notably, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

There are several things the U.S. Army might do in response to these developments.

### **Increase the Tempo of Regional Security Cooperation**

First, Washington could substantially step up the tempo of its regional security cooperation with the aim of bolstering the internal defense capabilities of partner nations. Bilateral programs similar to Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines, which has been ongoing since 2002, could be initiated with other close allies, such as Thailand, and, possibly, new partners as they develop.<sup>5</sup>

The United States could also assist with fostering a more effective and viable multilateral security architecture in Southeast Asia. Apart from encouraging ASEAN to adopt a less ad hoc, informal approach to defense cooperation, Washington could help promote enhanced military-to-military collaboration and interoperability among its member states. In both cases, the objective would be twofold: first to alter the normative manner by which business has traditionally been conducted in ASEAN, and second to revise regional “conventional” threat perceptions and associated force postures to give added emphasis on the challenge posed by new or reemergent transnational threats.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the Army could assist with the procurement of and training on military equipment to augment the overall “forward defense” capacities of ASEAN member states. This would allow these countries to better protect their territories—including those that are in dispute—and counter, or at least offset, more concerted and aggressive Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia. Because virtually all Southeast Asian armed forces are heavily centered on the

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<sup>5</sup> Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines was initiated due to concerns that militant Islamist entities in the Philippines—notably, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Abu Sayyaf Group—were seeking to parallel their local agendas with the broader ideological tenets of al Qaeda. The program aims to build comprehensive counterterrorism and counterinsurgency capabilities within the Philippine military while also seeking to create and consolidate the conditions necessary for peace, stability, and prosperity in active or potential conflict areas. See Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines Public Affairs, “JSTOF-P Fact Sheet,” April 1, 2009, and Molly Dunnigan, Dick Hoffman, Peter Chalk, Brian Nichiporuk, and Paul Deluca, *Characterizing and Exploring the Implications of Maritime Irregular Warfare*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1127-NAVY, 2012, Chapter Three, “The Case of Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines.”

<sup>6</sup> Seng, 2012.

ground forces—as opposed to the navy or air force (Singapore being the exception)—it makes sense that most of this work would fall to the U.S. Army.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclude New Basing Agreements

Second, the United States might move to conclude new base agreements for hosting small, mission-oriented expeditionary forces. These deployments would overcome the “tyranny of distance” that has historically complicated U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia, furnishing Washington with a more flexible and assertive regional presence while also providing greater scope for a robust surge capacity. Although ASEAN member states have traditionally been somewhat resistant to sanctioning a permanent U.S. military presence on their territories, there is reason to believe that many would react favorably to such overtures under the destabilized conditions of the second and third futures, viewing it as an effective means for both countering unexpected threats and balancing the type of assertive and aggressive Chinese expansion that could arise. Besides close allies, such as Singapore, where the United States already enjoys extensive visiting rights at the Changi Naval Base, accords could be reached with the Philippines (to allow for a return to Subic Bay and Clark Air Base),<sup>8</sup> Thailand (to expand U-Tapao beyond a pure HADR hub),<sup>9</sup> and possibly even Vietnam (to access facilities at Cam Ranh Bay).<sup>10</sup>

One possible model for formulating new basing arrangements is the Strategic Defense Agreement that was concluded with Australia in late 2011. This accord allows for the forward deployment of U.S. marines to Darwin, with troops rotating in and out of the country every six months.<sup>11</sup> The agreement not only equips the United States with the means for quickly responding to contingencies that might arise in Southeast Asia (which, under less favorable conditions, could certainly include actions emanating from a more assertive China); it also sends a strong signal of commitment to a land-based facility that balances the AirSea Battle concept that has hitherto defined the U.S. strategic posture in this part of the world.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Of the ten ASEAN states, for example, the chiefs of defense in nine are army officers. The one exception is Indonesia, where, at the time of this writing, a naval commander, Admiral Agus Suharto, filled the post.

<sup>8</sup> Clark Air Base was once the largest U.S. military installation in Asia, as well as a key repair and supply hub during the Vietnam War.

<sup>9</sup> Thailand has allowed the U.S. Air Force to use U-Tapao as a stopover for troop transits to the Middle East; the base is also the center for the annual Cobra Gold exercises.

<sup>10</sup> In June 2012, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta visited Cam Ranh Bay in southeast Vietnam, becoming the highest-ranking U.S. official to tour the base since the end of the Vietnam War.

<sup>11</sup> Initially, 250 marines will be deployed to Darwin, with the number rising to 2,500 by 2015.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, William Tow, “The Eagle Returns: Resurgent US Strategy in Southeast Asia and Its Policy Implications,” Canberra, Australia: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Policy Analysis 98, February 13, 2012; Jackie Calmes, “A U.S. Marine Base for Australia Irritates China,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2011; and Richard Teare, *US Marines to Darwin, Australia: Evolution of an Idea*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 18, 2011. The Air-Sea Battle concept essentially defines any future U.S. military engagement in Southeast Asia as one that will be based on air and naval (as opposed to land) power. In this way, the agreement with Australia arguably helps to underscore a stronger, more direct U.S. commitment to the security of close allies in the region. This is important given lingering perceptions within ASEAN that Southeast Asia was somewhat overlooked during the Bush administration and was factored into Washington’s calculations only through the narrow focus on counterterrorism.

## Expand Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Initiatives

Third, the U.S. Army could expand its HADR role in Southeast Asia. Possible options include funding additional tabletop and ASEAN regional disaster response simulation exercises; gifting ground transport and airlift assets, and helping transform the existing World Food Programme (WFP) storage and distribution facility at Subang, Malaysia, into a more comprehensive coordination hub to complement U-Tapao in Thailand.

## Counter a More Adventurist China

Perhaps the biggest challenge will be initiating appropriate responses to counter a more outwardly adventurist or aggressive China. The key here will be to put in place defense/deterrent arrangements that are affordable and that do not unduly provoke China into taking unilateral military action of the type that could threaten U.S. and allied interests or quickly escalate out of control. The aforementioned security cooperation and base agreements would have relevance in this regard, solidifying a cost-effective and less outwardly offensive in-theater infrastructure that is able to support the rapid dispatch and employment of joint forces in the event of a crisis or conflict.

At the same time, the United States may look to encourage greater Sino-American security interaction to foster more risk-averse behavior on the part of Beijing. As previously alluded, one way of achieving this would be to impress on China that the two countries share a number of mutual global and regional security concerns and that these would be better dealt with if bilateral relationships in the wider Asia-Pacific region were of a nonconflictual—or at least a stable—nature.<sup>13</sup> Effectively balancing carrots (collaboration) with sticks (deterrence) obviously will be tricky and will depend in large part on the ability of Washington to quickly and appropriately respond to changes in Chinese behavior. Again, this necessarily requires an overall strategy that is both flexible and agile.

Given the above, it is unlikely that the United States would seek to actively intervene in the SCS disputes. Although Washington would probably diplomatically support the position of ASEAN claimants, in the absence of a major crisis, any large force movements into the region would almost certainly be shunned as a dangerous escalation of the standoff with China.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, assuming that Beijing continues to invest in enhancing its A2AD capabilities, moves to establish a forward operational presence in the SCS would expose U.S. forces to an increased—and arguably politically unacceptable—risk of attack.<sup>15</sup> A more sensible

<sup>13</sup> This is something that is explicitly recognized in the 2012 *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, which affirms,

Over the long term, China's emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the U.S. economy and our security in a variety of ways. Our two countries have a strong stake in peace and stability in East Asia and an interest in building a cooperative bilateral relationship. However, the growth of China's military power must be accompanied by greater clarity of its strategic intentions in order to avoid causing friction in the region. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2012, p. 2)

<sup>14</sup> In China's view, the SCS issue does not amount to an international dispute. Rather, it reflects Beijing's legitimate right to restore control over historical national claims.

<sup>15</sup> The SCS's commercial and strategic importance notwithstanding, any future U.S. administration would be hard-pressed to justify the loss of (potentially already overstretched) U.S. troops to protect atolls and islands that are mostly uninhabited and frequently lie below the waterline.

approach would be to furnish relevant Southeast Asian states with the means to credibly resist Chinese attempts to assert sovereignty in the SCS<sup>16</sup> while also seeking to resolve the issue through the enactment of a formal Code of Conduct by which all parties agree to abide.<sup>17</sup>

The only possible development that could prompt the United States to consider more forcible action is Chinese expansion into the SCS that threatens maritime freedom of navigation. However, it is hard to imagine a realistic scenario that would encourage Beijing to undertake action of this sort, not least because it directly profits from the volume of global trade that passes through this particular area.<sup>18</sup> Closing or disrupting global commercial passages in the SCS would generate significant costs that would outweigh any benefits derived from securing unilateral control of offshore resources in the region; this would, in turn, seriously dent China's ability to achieve one of its most important domestic goals—securing popular legitimacy through economic growth.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> One way of achieving this would be to assist with the development of land-based anti-ship capabilities.

<sup>17</sup> The existing declaration on conduct is, in essence, only a statement of political intent, not a binding code.

<sup>18</sup> An additional factor that would undoubtedly affect Beijing's thinking is the possibility of the United States moving to restrict China's own freedom of movement in the SCS, something that the United States arguably could do little to prevent.

<sup>19</sup> Achieving this goal would obviously take on even greater importance under conditions of stalled economic growth.

## Conclusions

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As the United States reorients its foreign and security policy toward Asia, there are numerous viable roles for the Army to fulfill within the ASEAN geopolitical space. With the exception of counterterrorism, these missions presently take the form of nonkinetic operations, reflecting the largely stable and benign nature of the region's strategic environment. The one conceivable flashpoint, competing claims to islands in the SCS, currently does not carry a significant risk of major interstate conflict (although skirmishes are certainly possible) and, at least in the short term, will likely be addressed through diplomatic channels.

Assuming a continuation of the status quo, the overall thrust of future U.S. military engagement in Southeast Asia will remain largely consistent. However, should a major systemic shock occur, such as a severe economic slowdown, Washington's role in the region will become both more multifaceted and more complex. While there are no threats that would warrant an expansion of permanently stationed land forces to prosecute large-scale offensive operations—including contingencies that might arise in the SCS—there will be a need for Washington to confront increased domestic instability within ASEAN member states, environmental dangers that Southeast Asian governments are less capable of handling on their own, and a more adventurist Chinese regional presence.

To meet these challenges, the United States will need to adopt and consolidate a nuanced agile strategy that is thin in physical presence but broad in programmatic execution. Priority areas should, accordingly, focus on enhancing the defense capacities of partner nations to meet both conventional and nonconventional dangers, concluding base agreements to host expeditionary forces, further developing HADR infrastructure and competence, equipping allies to augment their forward defense postures, and inducing more risk-averse behavior in Beijing.



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