Chapter Seven

THE BALANCING ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES AND
THE TAIWAN QUESTION

The ASEAN states rely in varying degrees on the U.S. military presence as a deterrent to Chinese military adventurism, but many in the area doubt the reliability of the United States as a security partner. As Southeast Asians often note, the United States could leave the region at any time, but they will always have to live with China. There are other political and diplomatic considerations that color the attitude of the ASEAN states toward military cooperation with the United States. In the case of several countries, notably Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, nationalist sentiment and lingering anticolonialist feelings have complicated the atmosphere for closer military relations with the United States. In addition, Indonesia and Malaysia fear that more visible military cooperation with the United States would tarnish their standing in the Non-Aligned Movement, and both are uneasy with the political burdens that accompany closer security ties with the United States. More fundamentally, however, many of the ASEAN governments, with the notable exception of Singapore and possibly Vietnam, worry that overly close military association with the United States would not only antagonize China but inflame domestic public opinion and exacerbate internal threats to political stability.1

Additionally, successful cooperation would have to overcome the gap in the perception of the proper roles and missions of the military in

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In most ASEAN states, the military has a much broader sphere of responsibilities than in the United States and Western Europe. Since independence, for instance, the Indonesian armed forces have had an institutionalized role in governance—the sociopolitical function—which is only now beginning to change with the post-Suharto transformation of civil-military relations and the publication of a new political and military doctrine. In Thailand, the military for a long time played the role of political arbiter within a formally democratic political system. Cooperation with militaries that play a major political role raises difficult policy questions for the United States and other countries with a Western tradition of civil-military relations.

One important question in considering the future of U.S. military cooperation with the ASEAN states is whether any of those states would be prepared to increase peacetime military cooperation with the United States in response to Chinese military efforts to intimidate Taiwan. A related question is whether any Southeast Asian state would have a role to play in supporting U.S. defense of Taiwan against a Chinese attack or assisting the United States in patrolling and safeguarding the shipping lanes in a Taiwan conflict scenario.

A key factor will be the circumstances that trigger a PRC attack on Taiwan. If the immediate cause of the conflict is a Taiwanese declaration of independence, most if not all ASEAN countries will be reluctant to support Taiwan. If the attack is not perceived as provoked by Taiwan, however, the use of Chinese military force to intimidate Taiwan is likely to increase ASEAN fears of China and may make them more amenable to increased military cooperation with the United States. As a noted Southeast Asia security expert commented, China’s bluster is tolerated by ASEAN as a sort of Chinese opera with much banging of gongs, but if a military blow is actually struck, ASEAN states will look to Washington while reevaluating their policies.\(^2\) That said, it is unlikely that they would risk getting directly involved in a conflict with China by providing direct military assistance to Taiwan.

\(^2\)Dr. Karl Jackson’s comments to authors, February 2000.
Primarily for geopolitical reasons—e.g., the desire to maintain the United States as a counterweight to China—Singapore is likely to honor its bilateral agreements with the United States and provide logistical support to U.S. naval forces transiting from the Indian Ocean to the Taiwan Strait. It is unlikely, however, that Singapore or other ASEAN states would permit the United States to stage combat or combat support operations from their territory. Their unwillingness for direct involvement would stem from several factors. First, none would wish to make their country a target of possible Chinese military retaliation. Second, they would fear the long-term political, diplomatic, and economic repercussions of actions that China would consider an act of war. Third, many would face domestic opposition, especially from business interests, to allowing the United States to pull their country into what many perceive as an internal Chinese matter. Finally, because of geographic constraints, most of the ASEAN states would likely judge that their military support would have little impact on the outcome of a Taiwan conflict, while buying trouble with Beijing and at home.

The one possible exception to this outlook is the Philippines. Manila is likely to have fewer reservations than its ASEAN partners about tilting toward Taiwan, mainly because of its confrontation with China over the Spratly Islands and the lack of extensive economic and trade relations with China. Nonetheless, there would be substantial political costs to Manila in granting the United States use of its facilities to oppose Chinese military actions against Taiwan. Therefore, in any dialogue on renewed U.S. access to Philippine bases for use in a Taiwan contingency, Manila would probably seek compensation for the risks associated with such an agreement. Compensation could include requests for security assistance or overt U.S. backing of the Philippines in its own territorial disputes with China. From a U.S. standpoint, these commitments would raise potentially serious problems, including budgetary constraints on new foreign aid commitments and congressional opposition to extending the scope of the U.S. security commitment in the South China Sea. In addition, the Philippine government would have to deal with negative domestic and regional reactions as well as China’s wrath. In light of these pitfalls, while U.S. use of Philippine facilities in a Taiwan contingency cannot be ruled out, securing the use of these
facilities would require the expenditure of substantial diplomatic and political capital.

To say that the ASEAN states are likely to react with caution to a U.S.-Chinese conflict over Taiwan is not to argue that they would be indifferent to how the United States would respond. Indeed, for all the ASEAN states the U.S. willingness to use force to defend Taiwan would be a test of the credibility of U.S. security commitments and U.S. ability to maintain the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. The other side of that coin is that, as a Singaporean political analyst noted, the United States would be right to question the value of its defense arrangements with ASEAN countries if it were denied the use of military facilities for the defense of vital U.S. security interests.3

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3Discussion with panel of defense experts at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore, February 2000.