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The U.S. Army in Southeast Asia

Near-Term and Long-Term Roles

Peter Chalk

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Summary

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.