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Security Cooperation between the U.S. and its Southeast Asian Partners

Sheldon Simon*

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Counter-terrorism has been included among U.S. concerns in Southeast Asia after September 11, 2001. However, the U.S. strategic position in the region has not changed fundamentally. The U.S. remains the dominant military power in the Asia Pacific. Bilateral exercises between the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) and its Southeast Asian partners (Singapore, Thailand and Philippines) still remain important.

American military capacity is unmatched, with a defence budget that exceeds the combined military spending of the 15 next highest countries. The U.S. has a unique capacity to project power globally, with information technology that gives it an unrivalled ability to coordinate and process battlefield information in real time. While the increasing military capacity of the U.S. is reassuring to its Southeast Asian allies, they are unable to match its capability. Furthermore, the majority of the conflicts in Southeast Asia have been internal to the state and based on the issues of ethnicity, religion and language. Hence traditional multilateral military exercises are becoming extraneous.

U.S.-Singapore

In Southeast Asia, only the Singapore Armed Forces can interact with the U.S. military effectively. Singapore's intention to partake in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program and invest US \$50 million into the aircraft's development is clear evidence of its advanced technological proficiency. Singapore's economic growth during the 1990s allowed it to increase its defense budget every year, regardless of the Asian Financial Crisis. Moreover, the deep-water capability of the Changi Naval Base allows it to berth the U.S. *Nimitz*-class aircraft carriers.

In spite of these close interactions between the armed forces of Singapore and the U.S., Singapore wants full technology release on all its procurements. In other words, Singapore wants to be able to modify the technology to suit its needs and enhance its independent military capacity. Hence, in Singapore's viewpoint, the integration of U.S. military equipment into the Singapore Armed Forces doctrine is crucial. Multilateral exercises involving Singapore and the U.S. (e.g. *Cobra Gold*) are more diplomatic than operational. As its armed forces capability is far superior to its neighbors, Singapore is reluctant to take part in multilateral exercises.

On the anti-terrorism front, Singapore is keen on sharing signals and human intelligence obtained on terrorist groups by the U.S. This arises from its concern about the impact of a

terrorist attack in the Straits of Malacca where over 1100 supertankers pass eastbound annually. Having put into practice a Strategic Goods Control law in January 2003, Singapore became the first key port to secure cargo in line with U.S. maritime cargo transportation requirements. However, to meet with increasing demands, Singapore desires additional U.S. X-ray technology.

U.S.-Thailand

The gap between the capabilities of the U.S. and Thai armed forces is very large. Thai security interests are primarily land-based and hence the Thai Army has usually dominated the armed forces budget. Nonetheless, the Thai air force and navy need U.S. assistance to secure 2300 kilometers of coastline and the supervision of the adjacent Exclusive Economic Zone. In spite of Thailand's recovery from the Asian financial crisis, the divide between technical capabilities of the Thai and U.S. military is growing enormously. U.S. state-of-the-art military capabilities are losing relevance for the Thais. With much of U.S. technology remaining classified, there is also a perception among the Thais that the U.S. gains a lot more through joint exercises.

Multilateral exercises like *Cobra Gold* include peacekeeping, anti-terrorism and drug interdiction components – all are issues that are important for Thailand. From the viewpoint of the U.S. armed forces, such multilateral exercises allow interoperability training, and the US Pacific Command would like to see up to five countries in future *Cobra Gold* field exercises. But Thailand prefers bilateral exercises because multilateral drills allow other ASEAN countries to have access to U.S. military doctrine and technology.

On the anti-terrorism front, Thailand would appreciate more technical intelligence from the U.S. but would not want high profile involvement as in the Philippines as it would be seen as an indication of political weakness. The Thai wish list includes sharing of intelligence on the region's air and naval environments, more bilateral exercises with the United States, access to currently confidential U.S. military technology as well as aerial refueling and air defense.

U.S.-Philippines

Until the early 1990s, the Philippines was dependent on U.S. forces for its security. But the economic depression in the country over the last decade has made it difficult to monitor its 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone. The Visiting Forces Agreement between the Fidel Ramos administration and the United States for joint exercises led to a five-year defence plan between the U.S. and the Philippines in 2002.

High-level talks through a new civilian Defense Policy Board led to the *Balikatan 02* training exercise where more than 1000 U.S. forces were located in Mindanao for six months. The main motivation behind this exercise was to increase interoperability between the U.S. and the Philippine military as well as to provide counter-terrorism assistance.

The maintenance of equipment provided by the U.S. military to their Philippine counterparts has been a sore point between them. But with the threat of terrorism in the southern Philippines, upgrades as well as purchases of light tanks and armed personnel carriers have been approved. However, any training provided by the U.S. military (e.g. to light infantry battalions) cannot be sustained. This has exacerbated the interoperability problems between the U.S. and the Philippine military. Moreover, budget problems within the Philippine

military as well as the barrier of classified U.S. military technology show that there is no lasting value of joint exercises between the two countries. The Philippine wish list is to get access to knowledge of U.S. armour, artillery and UAV's.

Conclusion

Three significant conclusions can be made from the above relationship between the U.S. military and its Southeast Asian partners. Firstly, all the three countries - Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines – have reservations about multilateral exercises with the United States military. Instead they prefer bilateral exercises. Secondly, interoperability problems between the U.S. and its ASEAN allies are increasing. While Singapore would like more release of classified information on military technology, Thailand and Philippines would prefer bilateral exercises at a lower level. Lastly, while Thailand and Philippines want more joint exercises with the United States military focused on internal security, Singapore would prefer more intelligence cooperation in counter-terrorism.

* Dr Sheldon Simon is Professor of Political Science at Arizona State University. This article was prepared with the assistance of S.P.Harish, Associate Research Fellow at IDSS.