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The Pentagon's Strategy Toward Southeast Asia: Bolstering the States along the Seams

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THE Pentagon has a new strategic map and Southeast Asia is in it. While the region slipped off the American radar following the end of the Vietnam War and the subsequent withdrawal of United States forces from the Philippines, it has reappeared on the Pentagon's strategic screen after September 11, 2001. Increased levels of military cooperation between the US and Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand have eventuated. American and Vietnamese security officials have made exchange visits. The chill in Indonesia-US defence relations is lifting after years of restrictions on American training and education assistance for Indonesia's military.

At first glance, these initiatives appear to be part of the US Defence Department's plan to marshal the local know-how of regional governments in prosecuting the tactical war on terrorism. From another lofty vantage point, however, they may be American endeavours to consolidate an alliance of prospective associates against what some US planners regard as their upcoming strategic challenger — China. Less appreciated but perhaps closer to the Pentagon's intentions is that these military initiatives are the products of a strategy based on the principle of 'connectedness'.

Connectedness

A US Naval War College professor, whom *Esquire* recently named as one of the 40-odd 'best and brightest' people who will revolutionise the world, has forcefully propounded the strategy. Thomas Barnett, whose ideas have been published in *The Pentagon's New Map*, has actively contributed to US grand strategic policymaking as an adviser to the Pentagon. There is strong anecdotal evidence from the number of briefings Barnett has given (estimated to be in the hundreds) to suggest that his views are making headway in the upper-echelons of the US military.

The strategy is based on the fundamental premise that 'disconnectedness defines danger'. To be disconnected is to be disengaged from the globalising world and all its attendant values, norms, and interdependence. The disconnecteds tend toward internal volatility. They are, and have people who are, inclined toward external hostility against each other and against the globalised world. They are failed and failing states with lush recruiting and training grounds for new ranks of wild-eyed terrorists. They are alienated populations within repressive states who see no hope for a better life except the after-life. And they are, it is claimed, the real threats to US security. Sceptics need only recall 9/11.

Built on this premise, the American strategy is to sustain connectedness in regions that are connected; fix the disconnectedness in areas that are disconnected; and help hold the fort for those connected who are living along the borders of the disconnected or those who are straddling the line — the so-called ‘seam states’. This entails, respectively, a comprehensive policy of enhancing the institutional and psychological capacity of the connected to absorb, respond to, and rebound from the initial shock of future 9/11s; of building effective governance, democratic regimes, and connectedness among disconnected states via economic, military, and political means; and of bolstering the seam states’ ability to hold the line through diplomatic, economic, and military support.

Significantly for this analysis, to the Pentagon has been handed the task of advancing the military aspects of that strategy. And notably for this region, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia have been explicitly identified as the classic seam states, with Singapore and Vietnam implicated by geographical proximity and circumstances. The former four states have been specifically singled out for attention on the ostensible basis that they—some more than others—face daunting challenges managing cohesively fragile societies, separatism, and economic difficulties, and policing remote interiors and extensive maritime borders. The significance of the recent US military activism in this region should be viewed against this backdrop.

The Pentagon’s Mission

Tactically, to be sure, in an anti-terrorism campaign reliant on having access to local knowledge and useful intelligence, improved defence relations will help the American cause in Southeast Asia. Joint local-US military manoeuvres and routine communication at the levels of command and operations will build interoperability, effective intelligence networks, and trust. These will enable the Pentagon to be engaged in the seam states to stem the migration of terrorist activities to the continental United States.

Ultimately, however, underlying the Pentagon’s approach is the belief that promoting military-to-military ties will help sustain Southeast Asia in the confidence of its relative peace and in the appreciation that a major inter-state war is unthinkable. This will encourage regional governments to devote less attention to military budgets and more on the economic sector. Regional investment, business, and trade links can then be bolstered.

More momentum will also be injected into regional and global trade liberalisation. These efforts will preserve the region’s connectedness to the globalised world, give its people a stake in upholding global norms and interdependence, and help keep a lid on nasty things from happening in the region and on that nastiness from being exported to the US in the form of terrorism.

The Pentagon’s strategy does not, of course, contain a cookie-cutter economic formula that states in Southeast Asia can adopt to enable them to be instant successes at the game of global competition. Nor does the Defence Department aspire to formulate one as economic questions will come under the purview of the Treasury and State Departments or the World Bank. But by exporting security, the Pentagon’s hope is that regional states will be stable enough and be thus inclined to be plugged into the global system to have a go at the game.

Potential Pitfalls

Yet, in pursuing its strategy, the Pentagon will do well to avoid two potential pitfalls. The first is to abandon its ‘places, not bases’ policy, and embark on extensive base-building activities in the region. Better to maintain skeletal installations and give space to local governments to determine the hosting arrangements as they will be more in tune with local sentiments regarding the presence of foreign troops on their soils. The military transformation occurring in the US has anyway rendered large permanent bases overseas redundant for the increasingly more nimble American combat forces. There is every reason, then, to stay the course for places, not bases.

The second pitfall is to be an impatient and overbearing power. Rather than getting directly involved in the region’s internal affairs as was typical of US entanglement in the Third World during the Cold War, the Pentagon will do well to shoulder its rifle and ride off into the sunset should it outstay its welcome. History is awash with examples of the counterproductive outputs generated by policies of intrigue and interference. Better to leave less-wanted than to leave a mess.

Conclusion

In all, one can superficially view the Pentagon’s strategy a rather queer American business. Indeed, it will be easy enough to suggest that solving the Israeli-Palestinian issue will do more to resolve the terrorism question than creating and maintaining connectedness. Likewise, it will not be difficult to assert that states that possess limited institutional and economic capacity to deal with global flows of information and capital may find being connected to the global system a socially and economically disruptive experience. But for now, at least, whether or not one regards the Pentagon’s policy to be misguided or profound is less important than the fact that one should recognise it is being seriously pursued in this region. One will recall Tommy Koh’s recent query in *PacNet* on whether the US has an ASEAN strategy. The Pentagon has shown us one aspect of that strategy; we can now debate its potential hazards and merits.

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