

# Policy Bulletin

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This Policy Bulletin  
summarizes the primary  
findings of the conference as  
interpreted by the co-chairs  
and rapporteur. Participants  
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## US Security Relations With Southeast Asia: A Dual Challenge

Southeast Asia in the Twenty-First Century:  
Issues and Options for US Policy

Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States has given more attention to Southeast Asia than in the preceding 25 years. This greater emphasis is generally positive for US relations with Southeast Asia, but its primary focus on counterterrorism may be too narrow. It can cause policymakers to gloss over attitudinal changes in Southeast Asian militaries and underestimate underlying shifts in security dynamics in the region. Moreover, problems with the US image in Southeast Asia can complicate cooperation in sensitive policy areas.

Reexamination of US security policy in Southeast Asia is part of a broader need for a fresh look at US relations in the region. To this end, the Stanley Foundation has inaugurated an 18-month project on "Southeast Asia in the Twenty-First Century: Issues and Options for US Policy." The first activity in this project was a roundtable on US-Southeast Asian security relations held in Washington, DC, in March 2004. American and Southeast Asian participants identified emerging problems in US relations with the region and offered recommendations for changes in both emphasis and action.

### The Multidimensional Problem of Extremism

The Muslim community in Southeast Asia is a dynamic force that has undergone several changes in recent

### Recommendations

#### Keeping a Focus but Broadening the Agenda

1. **Unpack counterterrorism policy and give greater emphasis on shoring up weak areas.** The temptation for both the United States and Southeast Asian governments is to rely upon well-worn grooves of cooperation with established allies in more conventional areas of cooperation. The United States should rethink a military approach to counterterrorism in Southeast Asia in favor of greater cooperation on law enforcement and intelligence-sharing. Particular areas of weakness, such as the judiciary, should be targeted to close the loop. Finally, the United States needs to understand that investing more in multilateralism could reap rewards in stronger cooperation among Southeast Asian states. This would support US bilateral policies and strengthen overall security in the region.
2. **For counterterrorism purposes and broader security, increase cooperation on maritime security.** Only two Southeast Asian countries, Singapore and Malaysia,

decades, and US counterterrorism policy in the region needs to be cognizant of trends that complicate cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. Not surprisingly, the primary focus in US counterterrorism policy is on the increasing influence of broad networks—both global and regional—that seek to promulgate radical, anti-Western policies in the region. Al Qaeda and the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) are the main concerns in this regard. However, several other dynamics should be taken into account as well. These include:

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Separatist insurgencies of an Islamic or partly Islamic nature in the southern Philippines, southern Thailand, and Aceh. Some of these are rooted in economic disparities between Islamic areas and other parts of the country or longstanding tensions between provinces and the central government. Almost all, however, have seen some degree of ex post facto Islamization of these movements.

- The underlying growth of Muslim fundamentalism in Indonesia and Malaysia and of groups that espouse Islamist policies. These groups may or may not resort to violence and may be self-contained or have links to external extremist groups.
- A growing Islamic consciousness throughout the Muslim world that influences moderate Muslim opinion in Southeast Asia. Increasingly, US policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, in Afghanistan, and in Iraq figures into US relations with Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia.

These extra dimensions require that US policymakers coordinate antiterrorism measures in Southeast Asia with economic and social policies in the region. Moreover, they require particular attention to America's "soft power" (or its lack of it) in the region and the need for a strong public

have coast guards. Greater attention to maritime security is needed in the Philippines and Indonesia in particular. A quarter of all the piracy attacks in the world take place in Indonesian waters, and two-thirds of all attacks are in Southeast Asia. Maritime security is inherently a regional problem and, from the beginning, the United States should emphasize a multilateral approach. The Regional Maritime Security Initiative recently proposed by the US Pacific Command should be given serious consideration.

3. **Reexamine the principle of interoperability between US and Southeast Asian defense forces.** Interoperability may be a polite fiction in US security policy in Southeast Asia, but it can also create resentment in regional militaries and impair useful planning. Broader discussion on this is needed in the US defense community and between the United States and Southeast Asian governments. A plan that emphasizes a division of labor may be more effective and more politically tolerable.
4. **Make a greater effort to incorporate the views and needs of Southeast Asian armed forces into joint exercises and other forms of cooperation.** As in US allied relations with Japan and South Korea, support for continuation of the alliance cannot be taken for granted in the younger generation of Southeast Asian militaries. Greater consultation on the purpose, agenda, and activities of joint exercises is needed. Beyond cooperation with allies, these exercises are a showcase for the benefits of cooperation with the United States for observer countries as well.

diplomacy program. In recent months, some US embassies in the region have moved away from broadcasting American views and values to a “listening program,” which quietly reaches out to different elements of the Muslim community. Policymakers should take note of this and tailor statements and programs in Washington accordingly. At bottom, however, Southeast Asian Muslim attitudes toward the United States may not change until US policy in other regions, particularly the Middle East, is reexamined.

### **Assessing Counterterrorism Cooperation**

Since 9/11 the governments of the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia have formulated strong antiterrorist policies, although implementation varies. In Indonesia, the region’s (and the world’s) largest Muslim-majority country, the response has been more complex. Overall, however, counterterrorism cooperation is stronger with the United States and other Southeast Asian governments. The United States has had success in working with several countries on intelligence-sharing, law enforcement, and other aspects of police work. Inter-ASEAN cooperation is generally weaker and more spotty. There is fairly strong cooperation between Singapore and Malaysia on police work and intelligence-sharing, but not between the Philippines and Indonesia. As a result of the latter, the Sulawesi-Mindanao corridor has become a “black hole” for regional terrorism.

The Sulawesi-Mindanao problem underscores the fungible nature of terrorism. Unless and until Jakarta is willing to tackle the problem of JI operations in the province, Mindanao will also be vulnerable. A ceasefire between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) will not resolve the problem as long as the JI continues to

5. **Work with regional partners to mitigate the effects of isolation on some Southeast Asian militaries.** At present, it is unlikely that the political relations between the United States and Burma, or between the United States and the Indonesian armed forces, will experience a dramatic shift. However, the United States should work with other regional powers—notably Australia and Japan—as well as with ASEAN states, to find acceptable ways to stem the damage that is done to regional security by isolating these militaries.
6. **Consider triangular cooperation—among Southeast Asia, China, and the United States—on nontraditional security issues.** Increasingly, Southeast Asians view security as a matter of internal threats and/or transnational contagions. In this regard, the United States may be tacitly ceding a great deal of space in Southeast Asian security to China by focusing on counterterrorism and conventional defense issues. Greater cooperation with Southeast Asia on a host of non-traditional security issues—small arms smuggling, narcotics, HIV/AIDS, human trafficking—will help to close that gap. It could be useful to bring China into this cooperation whenever possible. China itself is a source of, or exacerbates, many of these transnational threats. Including China in cooperation on human security may help reduce the threat it poses to the region as well as avoid duplication of efforts between two external powers.
7. **In US policy toward Southeast Asia, forge a stronger link between economic growth and stability on the one hand and security on the other.**

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funnel manpower, arms, and money from Sulawesi to the southern Philippine province. The problem must be addressed on both ends through greater Philippine-Indonesian cooperation. Until it is, US bilateral efforts with each government will be of limited effectiveness.

Another issue for US policy is a military vs. a law enforcement approach to counterterrorism in the region. The greater successes in counterterrorism, such as the arrest of JI-operative Hambali last year, have been in law enforcement rather than military efforts. Post-9/11, the FBI has found a new role in Southeast Asia and Director Robert Mueller has made several trips to the region. In contrast, the success of the Balikatan (shoulder-to-shoulder) joint military exercises in the Philippines has been limited. The 2002 Balikatan was well received—primarily because of its civic action component—but the 2003 exercises were curtailed because of political opposition to joint exercises in Jolo and intimations that US forces would assume combat roles. However, serious gaps are evident even on the law enforcement side. For example, the weakness of many Southeast Asian judiciaries mitigates the growing effectiveness of law enforcement.

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### **Bilateral or Multilateral?**

Adjacent to these problems in cooperation is the broader issue of a bilateral vs. multi-lateral approach for the United States in security policy with Southeast Asia. This pertains to both counterterrorism and more traditional defense issues. The traditional hub-and-spokes configuration of US security policy in the Asia-Pacific region still holds, and there is evidence that many Southeast Asians welcome it and continue to rely upon it. Many observers agree that there is broad recognition of the United States as the preeminent power in the

In many senses, Southeast Asia is still recovering from the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98. That crisis was instrumental in changing many Southeast Asian attitudes toward both the United States and China. Washington's insistence on adhering to the International Monetary Fund requirements for bailout packages to crisis-stricken countries such as Thailand, rather than offering bilateral assistance, alienated many Southeast Asians. China, on the other hand, was able to make gains by offering bilateral loans. Southeast Asia's fastest-growing trade is with China, and many in the region increasingly find their economic stability tied to China.

At the present time, the Chinese approach to Southeast Asia is more long term and strategic than that of the United States. Although US power is still predominant in Southeast Asia, it will erode steadily if US policy does not take fundamental concerns in the region into account. In this instance, a separation between security policy and economic and social policy is a false dichotomy, one that could damage US relations with Southeast Asia in the long run.

region. This is sometimes seen in reaction to US policy in other regions as well. During the lead-up to the Iraq war and its immediate aftermath, despite some clear and qualified disagreements with the United States, the response in Southeast Asia was more positive than in Europe.

However, many Southeast Asians complain that the United States does not approach the region collectively and that bilateralism still dominates the US approach to Southeast Asia. Political problems in US relations with

some countries—Burma, Cambodia, as well as with the Indonesian military—limit the ability of the United States to forge a truly multilateral policy. Even if these problems were not a factor, it is doubtful that Washington would make a dramatic shift.

There are obvious advantages to bilateralism for short-term policy. For example, it allows a quicker response to crises. Moreover, the United States tends to distrust multilateral fora that take a least common denominator approach, because they can hold cooperation hostage to one or two dissenting countries or link it to grievances that have little to do with the issue at hand. However, a tepid multilateral policy makes it more difficult for the United States to encourage greater cooperation among the ASEAN states, which is an obvious handicap for counterterrorism policy.

At the same time, Southeast Asians have also demonstrated difficulties working multilaterally. For example, many ASEAN governments are reluctant to share intelligence on a multilateral basis, and are more comfortable cooperating on sensitive issues through proven bilateral channels.

### **The China Factor**

Another reason to reexamine the US bilateral emphasis in Southeast Asia is China's growing role in the region and the contrast in styles between Washington and Beijing. In its charm offensive in the region, China approaches the region as a whole in addition to its own network of bilateral relations. In the past two years, Beijing has negotiated agreements in principle to establish an ASEAN-China Free Trade Area and an ASEAN-China "Strategic Partnership." It pays particular attention to economic issues; for example, China has made "early harvest" payments to the four poorest ASEAN countries under the FTA framework.

Beijing has also sought to take a comprehensive approach to nontraditional security issues in its relations with ASEAN. All of these resonate in Southeast Asia and strike some in the region as evidence that China cares more about the lives of everyday citizens than does the United States.

In contrast, the United States appears to be more aloof and concerned primarily with security. This impression is reinforced by the fact that since 9/11 the United States has focused more economic assistance on its allies in the war against terrorism—specifically, Indonesia and the Philippines—while it has increasingly applied or threatened sanctions on Burma, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

This is not a major issue in the US defense community at this time, in part because China's intentions in Southeast Asia are not clear and because some Chinese policies appear to be benign. However, some participants cautioned that it is unwise to extrapolate Chinese policy in Southeast Asia from the past few years. For example, China took the Paracel Islands in 1974 and then entered into a quiescent period from 1974 to 1988, only to become more aggressive in the Spratlys in 1988 when it was clear that Russia would not come to Vietnam's aid. Another fallow period followed until the mid-1990s when, after the US withdrew its bases from the Philippines, China took Mischief Reef in the South China Sea.

### **Military Cooperation**

Within US military-to-military policies with Southeast Asia, whether they focus on counterterrorism or conventional defense, four problems in particular are emerging. First, growing US defense capabilities have widened the gaps between US forces and their counterparts in Southeast Asia. US defense policy with allied militaries is

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based on the assumption (or the goal) of interoperability. This is an unlikely goal for Southeast Asian militaries, particularly after their defense sectors suffered major economic blows during the Asian economic crisis. Some participants argued that with the exception of the British armed forces, interoperability is beyond the capability of European forces as well.

A second issue is the focus and goal of joint exercises between US and Southeast Asian armed forces. These have grown in recent years with the new emphasis on counterterrorism, and some bilateral exercises have been expanded to include new participants and observers. The Cobra Gold exercises in Thailand are an example of expanded cooperation. At the same time, Southeast Asian militaries question their worth and point out that their primary purpose seems to be to enable US forces to become familiar with Southeast Asian terrain. This perception of unilateral purpose is underscored by generational shifts in Southeast Asian militaries. Older Cold War generations in the armed forces of US allies are retiring, and younger forces do not have the same fraternal relationship with the US military that their elders did.

A third problem is that of isolated militaries in Southeast Asia—particularly in Indonesia and Burma—and the effect their isolation has on security cooperation in the region. Asians and Americans alike caution that more than a decade of US sanctions against the Indonesian military (TNI) have weakened cooperation not only between the United States and Indonesia but also between Indonesian armed forces and those with other Southeast Asian states. They report that the TNI increasingly does not share the same concepts with defense and that Indonesian equipment is less compatible with that of other Southeast

Asian militaries. Problems integrating Burma into regional security initiatives are even more deeply rooted and may take decades to alleviate.

Lastly, many emerging security threats in the region lie in the realm of maritime security. Weak and underpaid Southeast Asian navies and lax port facilities are causing many in US and regional defense sectors to worry that terrorists may begin targeting the Straits of Malacca and generally turn to piracy. US security cooperation with Southeast Asia has traditionally focused on armies, which have been far more important politically in the region than navies. ■

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