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STRATEGIC TRENDS IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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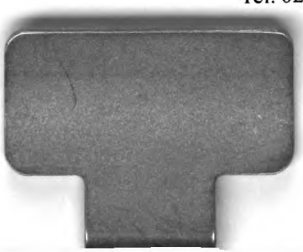

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the strategic environment of the Asia-Pacific region to 2005. It analyses the geopolitics of the region, the strategic outlook and the balance of power, and the risk of military conflict in such places as the Taiwan Strait, the Korean peninsula and the Indian subcontinent. It also examines the prospects for Indonesia's security and what that might mean for Southeast Asia as a whole. The paper concludes by analysing America's policies towards the region and whether they need improvement.

STRATEGIC TRENDS IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

Paul Dibb*

The areas of maximum danger and instability in the world today are in Asia, followed by the Middle East and parts of the former Soviet Union. The strategic situation in Asia is more uncertain and potentially threatening than anywhere in Europe. Unlike in Europe, it is possible to envisage war in Asia involving the major powers. Remnants of Cold War ideological confrontation still exist across the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean peninsula. India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles and these two countries are more confrontational than at any time since the early 1970s. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia - which is the world's fourth-largest country - faces a highly uncertain future that could lead to its breakup. The Asia-Pacific region spends more on defence (about US$150 billion a year) than any other part of the world except the United States and NATO Europe. China and Japan are amongst the top four or five global military spenders. Asia also has more nuclear powers than any other region of the world.

Asia's security is at a crossroads. Either it could go in the direction of a peaceful and cooperative region or it could slide into confrontation and military conflict. There are positive tendencies, including the resurgence of economic growth and the spread of democracy, which would suggest an optimistic view. But there are a number of negative tendencies that must be of serious concern. There are deep-seated historical, territorial, ideological and religious differences in Asia. And the region has no history of successful multilateral security cooperation or arms control. Multilateral institutions such as ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum have shown themselves to be ineffective when confronted with major regional crises.

In judging the strategic future of Asia, we should learn from previous failures of assessment and refrain from overconfident, straight-line extrapolations. After the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, there was great fear that communism would spread quickly to the rest of Southeast Asia and the 'dominoes' would fall. That did not occur. In the 1980s, we were told that the

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coming Japanese economic superpower would soon outstrip the United States. Instead, Japan has recorded barely one-third of the economic growth of the United States since 1990. Less than five years ago, it was being forecast that the so-called Asian economic miracle would inevitably lead the region to have a larger economy than the United States and Europe. That view was destroyed by the Asian economic crisis. There have also been predictions that China will be the new economic giant and that its gross national product will be bigger than that of the United States by 2010. But by most measures China's economy is only a fraction of that of the United States.[1]

This paper assesses the strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific region over the next five years, which is the period of most relevance to policy. It analyses the geopolitics of the region, the strategic outlook and the balance of power, and the risk of military conflict in such places as the Taiwan Strait, the Korean peninsula and the Indian subcontinent. It also examines the prospects for Indonesia's security and what that might mean for Southeast Asia as a whole. The paper concludes by analysing America's policies towards the region and whether they need improvement. The approach taken is that of a prudent defence planner.

The Geopolitics and Military Geography of Asia

There is a fashionable view that geography and geopolitics are no longer relevant in the post-Cold War era. That is demonstrably untrue in Asia, where there are a fierce sense of national sovereignty, enormous variations in culture and civilisation, and a struggle for power and influence among the region's great powers. There are over two dozen outstanding territorial conflicts in this part of the world: some of them - such as those between China and Taiwan, between the two Koreas, and between India and Pakistan - are potentially very dangerous. While it is the case that globalisation and the information revolution are having an increasing impact on Asia, the assertion of old-fashioned nationalism and state sovereignty undermines the argument of those who assert that the importance of the state is declining.

The strategic environment of Asia is characterised by the presence of three great continental powers in the north of the region: China, India and Russia. An arc of maritime powers, many of which are allies or friends of the United States, flanks them. Except for Japan, most of these countries are middle-sized or small powers. They include South Korea, Taiwan, the ten ASEAN countries, Australia and New Zealand, and the small island nations of the South Pacific. Almost half of the world's maritime trade passes through the confined straits and archipelagic waters of Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. The United States has traditionally been the dominant naval

power in this part of the world. Neither China nor India will have a true blue-water navy over the next five years, although they will both seek to extend their naval influence. The strategic ambitions of these two major powers will overlap in Southeast Asia. This is an area of great strategic significance for the United States and its allies - especially Japan, which transports nearly all of its oil imports through the region. China too is becoming more dependent upon sea lines of communication, as its trade increases and it needs to import more of its energy requirements.

The political make-up of Asia is highly varied and this adds to the geopolitical complexity of the region. Unlike Europe, where a broad swathe of democracies now occupies most of the continent, Asia still has four of the world's five remaining communist countries: China, North Korea, Vietnam and Laos. And while there has been an encouraging rise of democracy in recent years in South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the Philippines, authoritarian regimes are firmly in power in Pakistan and Burma and the governments in Malaysia and Singapore practise a form of 'soft authoritarianism'. It remains to be seen whether democracy will survive in Indonesia. In any case, the trend to democracy in the region - if it continues - does not necessarily imply easier relationships with the United States, as the New Zealand case demonstrates. The highly questionable proposition that democracies do not go to war with democracies, which has become an article of faith in some quarters in Washington, may be disproved one of these days in Asia. And deep-seated historical, cultural, religious, and territorial differences in Asia suggest that - irrespective of the development of democratic institutions - the dangers of armed conflict remain. There was a risk that Australia and a newly democratic Indonesia could have faced military conflict over East Timor late in 1999.

As the revolution in military affairs (RMA) spreads to Asia and introduces longer range and more accurate weapons, supported by good surveillance information, this will compress the geography of Asia. The introduction of long-range cruise missiles and the development of ballistic missiles will make smaller countries much more vulnerable if deterrence fails. The risk then will be either a retaliatory proliferation of ballistic missiles, or the acquisition from the United States of a protective ballistic missile defence, which in turn may lead to the multiplication of offensive missile systems. The ballistic missile proliferation challenge for the United States and its allies will be more acute in Asia than anywhere else. The ready availability of advanced conventional weapons will also alter the geography of the region. For instance, the proliferation of supersonic, anti-ship cruise missiles will make it more dangerous for the United States and its allies to operate

militarily in the littoral environment of many regional countries. Thus although the order of battle of regional countries may not change much over the next five years because of the long lead times in acquiring major military platforms, their capabilities in many instances will change more quickly because of the acquisition of relatively cheap, long-range and accurate tactical missiles.

The structure and doctrine of many of the region's armed forces is also changing. In particular, there is less emphasis on land forces and greater attention being given to developing small but capable navies and air forces. There is also a trend towards the development of amphibious capabilities for the protection of offshore territories and assets. Acquiring modern air forces and navies is becoming increasingly expensive as the cost of each new generation of military platforms approximately doubles (both to acquire and to operate). But in the future smaller numbers of platforms will in many instances be able to deliver more lethality and firepower. The ready availability of satellite photography with a resolution of one metre, or less, together with accurate global positioning system (GPS) information, will mean that even small powers can have a credible deterrent force. The fact will remain, however, that the gap between the military technology of the United States and other potential peer competitors in the region will, if anything, widen over the next five years. The central question for America's allies in the region will be whether they will be able to keep up with US military forces in terms of basic interoperability of communications and weapons systems.

The Balance of Power in Asia

The Asia-Pacific region has entered a particularly complex strategic situation, just as a new balance of power may be evolving. The Asian economic crisis, tension between China and the United States over Taiwan, North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, the risk of war between India and Pakistan, and the potential for Indonesia to disintegrate have all occurred suddenly, and serve to underline the basic insecurity of the region. But whether Asia remains a peaceful region will largely depend upon the struggle for power and influence between the major powers: China, Japan, India and the United States. It is not in the interests of the United States and its allies to see the region dominated by any one Asian power or concert of Asian powers.

China is a rising power that sees itself as the natural leading power in Asia. It perceives its aspirations in this regard as being thwarted by the United States' military presence in the region and the US alliance network. China is acquiring, with assistance from Russia, modern military equipment

that will enable it to prevail militarily in the South China Sea against any regional power, if it so wishes. Were China to succeed in asserting sovereignty over the South China Sea it would be able to penetrate deeply into Southeast Asia and influence events there. There are serious questions surrounding the rise of China to power. Will China be a responsible and cooperative member of the international community, abiding by its rules of non-aggression? Or will China become an expansionist power, as have other rising powers in the past?

World history has been marked by the rise of ambitious new powers seeking to displace weaker powers. China is many decades away from being a peer competitor with the dominant world power, the United States. The main danger to the region is the risk that it may be the next theatre of military confrontation, between the United States and China. David Shambaugh states that growing 'strategic competition' is likely to characterise Sino-American relations for most of the coming decade, irrespective of the new American administration that comes to office in 2001.[2] The risk may be higher than this. It is that there will be a struggle for power between the United States and China, leading to military confrontation. The greatest danger is over Taiwan. War between the United States and China in the Taiwan Strait would risk drawing in America's allies, including Australia. Washington would expect its other allies, particularly Japan and South Korea, to support it. Such expectations could seriously damage America's alliances in the region.

Short of such cataclysmic events, the main danger for the region is that regional countries will be under increasing pressure to side with either China or the United States in their struggle for influence. This could divide the region. Some countries, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, would probably 'bandwagon' with the United States. Others, such as Malaysia and Thailand, might incline towards China. Indonesia has traditionally been hostile to China. But President Abdurrahman Wahid has talked recently about a triangular relationship with China and India that would offset Indonesia's former close relationship with the United States. The future course of Indonesia's relations with China will be followed with the utmost scrutiny, not least by Australia. The purchase by Indonesia of arms from China, for instance, would raise alarm.

There is the further issue that China does not accept the rationale for the US forward military presence in Asia. It explicitly calls for the abrogation of all alliances, claiming that they are not conducive to maintaining peace and security in the post-Cold War world. Before his visit to Australia last year, President Jiang Zemin proclaimed that alliances were 'obsolete'. Chinese officials have openly called for the removal of US forces from the region.

China must accept that the United States is not going to withdraw from Asia and America's alliances are not going to disappear. China needs to understand that Asia without the United States would be a dangerous place. It would leave the region open to the potential for conflict between China and Japan.

As China's influence in Asia grows, India - which wants to be accepted as a major power - will seek to compete with China. Until recently, India's poor economic performance, it alliance with the former Soviet Union, and its preoccupation with Pakistan served to limit its interest elsewhere in Asia. But India now seems set on a path of economic reform and its economy is growing strongly. The military balance on the subcontinent now firmly favours India and with each year that passes India's superior economic performance will improve its military advantage. India, therefore, will be able to lift its strategic horizons. Southeast Asia is a natural area for India's future focus. India has long-established historical ties to the region and its territory, including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, is in close proximity to Southeast Asia. Already, India is seeking to strengthen its old relationship with Vietnam, as well as strengthening links with Japan. The United States could become a useful partner for India in its upcoming competition with China.

Japan is by far the most important power economically in Asia. Its economy accounts for 60 per cent of Asia's gross national product. But China - whose economy is less than a fifth the size of that of Japan - has a higher political profile in the region. Japan spends more on defence than any other Asian country and it has the most modern navy (both surface combatants and submarines) and air force in the region. Japan, however, continues to be deterred from using its military forces except in the most minimal of UN peacekeeping operations. Japan's inability to provide leadership in Asia commensurate with its economic power is a worry. Partly, this is to do with lingering memories of Japan's aggression in the Second World War. It also stems from Japan's preoccupation with its domestic economic problems, which have seen its economy virtually stagnant for the last decade. Moreover, as was demonstrated in the Asian economic crisis three years ago, the United States is not willing to allow Japan to become the financial leader in the region. It is important that Japan take on more of a leadership role in the region to offset the growth in China's influence. Japan will face a challenging strategic environment with the rise of China to power and the prospect of a unified Korea of over 70 million people, who see Japan as a traditional enemy.

The most crucial strategic relationship in the region will continue to be the alliance between the United States and Japan. This relationship has recently been reaffirmed and reinterpreted to provide for greater logistical support to US forces operating in the area. It remains to be seen, however, whether in fact Japan would give support to US military operations on the Korean peninsula or across the Taiwan Strait. For the rest of the region, including China, the US-Japan alliance provides an essential assurance that Japan will not rearm. Japan has the potential to double its conventional military forces within a five-year timeframe and to develop nuclear weapons. None of this will occur as long as Japan continues to have confidence in the United States and in the US military presence in Northeast Asia. Even so, there are already signs that for the first time in over 50 years Japan is beginning to develop its own strategic concepts and dedicated force structure elements such as military satellites and a defence intelligence organisation. The Japanese are also beginning to worry about the long-term US military commitment in Northeast Asia and America's tendency to 'go over its head' in the relationship with China. What must be prevented at all costs is an erosion of Japan's confidence in the United States and the rise of military confrontation (or strategic accommodation) between Japan and China.

Russia, which is the other major power, is unlikely to be a significant player in Asia for the foreseeable future. It will remain preoccupied with its internal political and economic affairs and the situation along its borders, especially in Siberia and the former Soviet Central Asia. Russia's ability to supply advanced conventional weapons to China and India is, however, a matter of concern. Arms exports are one of the few competitive products produced by the ailing Russian economy. Russia has the capacity to upset the regional military balance and it is already doing this through its arms supplies to China.

Potential Flashpoints and Troublespots

The most dangerous part of Asia at present is the Taiwan Strait. There seems to be an inevitable progression in the domestic politics of Taiwan that seeks to assert its international status as an independent state and to confront China's 'one China' policy. The situation is exacerbated by growing tensions between the United States and China over this issue, as well as distrust in Washington over China's nuclear weapons programme and in Peking over the US desire to deploy a national and theatre ballistic missile defence capability. Tension over these issues brings with it a real risk of miscalculation. China lacks the conventional military capabilities to mount an amphibious invasion of Taiwan and this will remain the case for at least the next five years. But there are other options open to China, including a naval blockade and the use

of ballistic missiles. War across the Taiwan Strait would, inevitably, bring in the United States and (as already mentioned) would involve enormously difficult choices for US allies. Hence the strong desire by US allies in the Asia-Pacific region to see the current tensions between China and the United States over Taiwan resolved by peaceful means.

The situation on the Korean peninsula remains fraught with danger, as it has been for almost 50 years. The risk of a North Korean attack on the South is ever present, but the outbreak of war is unlikely. Unlike in the early 1950s, North Korea could not now count on military support from China and Russia. It would face the bleak prospect of total defeat by the United States. Miscalculation by the North Korean regime cannot be discounted, nor can a sudden collapse of the North, which would present South Korea with the horrendous costs of creating a unified Korea.[3] The most likely scenario over the next five years is a continuation of manageable tension, with some prospect of the development of direct peace negotiations between the North and South. Should war break out, however, the United States would naturally expect its allies quickly to provide useful military contributions. If in these circumstances Japan were to refuse to give tangible military assistance, such a refusal would put at risk its relationship with the United States.

India and Pakistan have been in confrontation with each other since their creation as separate states in 1947. The possession of nuclear weapons by both these countries and their development of ballistic missiles is a situation fraught with great danger. Their religious and territorial differences and the fact that the military balance between them is moving in favour of India may result in a highly dangerous scenario in which the use of nuclear weapons is a real possibility. There is a serious lack of early warning technologies and nuclear weapon command and control arrangements in both these countries. If the world ever experiences the first exchange of nuclear weapons it may well be between India and Pakistan.

In Southeast Asia, the most crucial question is the future of Indonesia. The central issue is whether Indonesia will remain a cohesive nation-state or whether it will disintegrate. There is a better than even chance that Indonesia will muddle through and retain its basic territorial integrity, although Aceh and West Irian (West Papua) are high-risk situations. Were Indonesia to disintegrate, the implications for neighbouring countries - and especially for Singapore and Malaysia, and Papua New Guinea and Australia - would be serious. They would be faced with an unstable and violent neighbour. Relations between Indonesia and Australia have already become very strained over the East Timor issue. The potential for friction between Indonesia and Australia is now higher than it has been for many decades. There are those at

senior levels in the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) and in the foreign ministry (DEPLU) who believe that Australia's next step will be to destabilise West Papua.[4] Indonesia is in the middle of a dangerous political transition. In the most optimistic scenario it will lead over the next two-to-three years to a stable, democratically elected central government. But the transition from an authoritarian military regime to a democracy is a dangerous one. The defence minister, Juwono Sudarsono, has said that the transition to democracy will have to come gradually and could take 10 to 15 years.[5] There is no doubt that the creation of a rules-based civil society will take a very considerable time. Those in the United States who want to push Indonesia quickly in this direction need to learn more patience.

The reaction from TNI to any attempts at creating independent states in Aceh or West Papua will be intense, and may well put an end to democracy in Indonesia. The focus of the external powers, as well as major international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), must be on helping Indonesia to recover economically and build a democratic society. This will be no easy task. As the 1998 World Bank report commented: 'Indonesia is in a deep crisis. No country in recent history, let alone one the size of Indonesia, has ever suffered such a dramatic reversal of fortune'.[6] The Indonesian economy remains very vulnerable to another economic crisis and the political situation in Jakarta is highly volatile. A combination of religious fervour and strident nationalism in a failed Indonesian democracy would be of great concern to Indonesia's neighbours, especially if aggressive foreign policies were the outcome. A more extreme Islamic stance in Indonesia, occurring at the same time as similar sentiments in Malaysia and the southern Philippines, would be deeply disturbing. A unified, secular and democratic Indonesia is in the region's interests.

The other dangerous part of Southeast Asia is the South China Sea, where there are overlapping territorial claims between China (which claims all the islands and reefs), Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The United States is not a party principal to these territorial disputes, but it must make it clear to China that it will not tolerate Chinese territorial hegemony over the South China Sea. Regular demonstrations of the naval capabilities of the United States and its allies will be important reminders to China that its proper course of action is negotiations with the countries of Southeast Asia.

The South Pacific has traditionally been the most stable part of the Asia-Pacific region. But it now consists of a number of failed states. Papua New Guinea, which shares a common border with Indonesia, has a fragile economy, high levels of corruption and violence, and an active secessionist

movement in Bougainville. If Bougainville secedes, New Britain, New Ireland and regions adjoining Indonesian West Irian may also separate. The peoples of Papua New Guinea and West Irian share a common Melanesian ethnic origin and dislike of Indonesia. In the event of conflict between Indonesia and its West Irian province over independence, Papua New Guinea - which has a security treaty with Australia - would side with its Melanesian brothers.

Several of the other South Pacific islands are scarcely viable economically and have regimes noted for their corruption. In Solomon Islands there is an active insurrection between the peoples from Guadalcanal and Malaita. A multinational Commonwealth police force is seeking to keep the peace. Fiji has just experienced its third military coup since 1987. Ethnic tension in Fiji between the indigenous Fijians and the Indian community is high and may result in widespread violence and the disenfranchisement of the Indians. There is a distinct possibility now of harsh diplomatic and economic sanctions being applied against Fiji. New Zealand, which is Australia's oldest ally, is no longer a member of the ANZUS alliance and has so reduced its defence capabilities that it is capable of little other than peacekeeping operations. Australia, which is now faced with an arc of instability stretching from Indonesia and Papua New Guinea to the Solomon Islands and Fiji, will increasingly come to see New Zealand as more of a liability than a useful ally.

Uncertain US Policies[7]

US political power and military presence is the key to maintaining a peaceful balance of power in Asia over the next five years. Only America has the power, credibility and distance from the region to maintain the regional balance. Other contenders for this role would not be acceptable to the region. China is feared as a potentially dominant - and perhaps expansionist - power. Great suspicion still surrounds any ambitions for regional leadership that Japan might have. India is seen as essentially peripheral to East Asian affairs. Russia is a weak and distracted power.

US credibility is based not only on its military presence, but also on its long historical ties to the region over the last 100 years. Most countries in the region, apart from China, fear that an Asia without the United States would be a much more dangerous place. It would leave the regional balance of power open to fierce contention between China and Japan and between China and India, possibly leading to war. But the United States is much more distracted these days by domestic events and its focus on Europe. It is also much more stretched. It must react to the outbreak of regional crises across the globe, with a military force that is little more than half the size it was in the Cold War.

There must now be some doubt whether the United States can fulfil its much-vaunted East Asian strategy: that is, to handle two regional conflicts 'almost simultaneously'.[8] A failure by the United States to handle a major crisis in, for example, the Korean peninsula at the same time as it was fighting a regional crisis elsewhere, for example in the Middle East, would be disastrous for the alliance system. The United States is the only nation with the power to enforce security across the region. No reasonable ally, however, can expect the United States to be a perfect arbiter and enforcer of security and, indeed, there is a growing perception that the United States tends to carry out its military duties only after armed conflict has broken out.

This uncertainty over the speed of a US response has consequences for those countries in Asia that expect the United States to maintain regional peace and security. Many in Asia believe that the United States will not necessarily be there, except for Korea, at the moment when conflict breaks out. It may - depending on the degree of strategic interest and the nature of domestic reaction - turn up quickly, and it might ultimately restore the status quo, but this will be of little comfort for nations whose territory has been attacked in the meantime. Moreover, the manner in which the United States intervenes will be strongly shaped by domestic considerations: it will seek to respond to an armed conflict in the most domestically acceptable way; in other words, with air power. But in some of the more likely regional scenarios ground forces will be essential to restore the status quo.

Strategic inconsistency was also evident in the US response to the Asian economic crisis. Asia's multilateral institutions - the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, ASEAN, and the ASEAN Regional Forum - failed to play any role in addressing the crisis, underscoring the extent to which regional economic and strategic stability depends heavily on the policies and initiatives of the United States. This means that Asia's welfare depends critically on the depth of strategic understanding in Washington. But it appears that US policy makers still weigh strategic significance in Cold War terms: South Korea received quick and substantial economic assistance because it faced a communist North armed with nuclear weapons. But Indonesia did not because, with the Cold War over, the world's fourth-largest country is no longer important to the United States as a bastion against communism.

The United States does not appear to have developed a replacement standard by which to measure the strategic significance of countries such as Indonesia. Washington let the IMF impose dangerously destabilising measures on Jakarta. Human rights rather than geopolitics appear to dominate the US-Indonesia relationship today. While human rights have an undeniably

important place in international diplomacy, they should not dominate relations with an Indonesia struggling to maintain its social and political cohesion. For the sake of the stability of the whole of Southeast Asia, the United States needs to focus more on the critical importance of Indonesian unity and cohesion.

A decade after the Cold War ended, it is time for Washington to develop a more refined process for assessing the strategic significance of events in Asia, and hence for deciding the weight to be given in its policy responses to pivotal episodes that will determine the region's future. It should cease allocating its economic and political support on the basis of Cold War strategic values, and devise new tenets for its strategic engagement policy in Asia.

There is also growing unease in the region about America's longer term commitment to keeping 'about 100,000 troops' deployed in Northeast Asia. Open discussion in the United States about the way in which the RMA, and particularly long-range precision strike, will lessen the need for forward operating bases is adding to the sense of uncertainty. The number of US troops in South Korea and Japan, and at sea with the Seventh Fleet, is in any case now much closer to 90,000 and the figure of 100,000 is becoming increasingly less credible. Thought also needs to be given to the impact on the American presence of a future unified Korea and the implications this might have, in turn, for American bases in Japan. This is not to argue that, in the right political circumstances, there should not be a phased reduction of American forces in Northeast Asia. But the implications for the confidence of the region of any sudden and large-scale reductions suggest they need to be planned in advance, as does consultation with allies.

There is no unifying enemy to keep the United States and its allies together in the same way as when the Soviet Union existed. Yet the NATO alliance has adjusted to the lack of an enemy by rejuvenating its charter and expanding its membership. Will the United States and its allies in the Asia-Pacific region also devise a new common security concept? Or will there be a gradual weakening of the bilateral alliances with Australia, Japan, and South Korea? Rather than being threat based, the alliance emphasis in the Asia-Pacific should now be on shared interests in the maintenance of regional stability.[9]

There seems to be a growing interest in the United States, in this regard, in the idea of multilateral security. Admiral Dennis C. Blair, the Commander-in-Chief of the US Pacific Command, is promoting the idea of 'security communities'. The idea here is to encourage 'collective efforts into resolving regional points of friction; contribute armed forces and other aid to

peacekeeping and humanitarian operations to support diplomatic solutions; and plan, train, and exercise ... armed forces together for these operations'. [10] According to Admiral Blair, these security communities may be treaty alliance signatories, participants in a non-military organisation such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, or groups of nations joined by geographic considerations or common concerns. They would be committed to policy coordination, including combined military cooperation on specific regional security issues, to advance peaceful development over time without major conflict.[11] The problem with this idea is that it risks diluting the primacy of strong bilateral security alliances in the region and being seen to be aimed, eventually, at the creation of a multilateral security enterprise in Asia.

Historically, Asia has not had a good track record with multilateralism. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), which was created in 1954 and dissolved in 1977, was not an effective organisation. Unlike NATO, it never had standing forces that could be committed in the event of conflict. The ASEAN Regional Forum started off in the early 1990s with much fanfare and with the aim of progressing steadily from military confidence-building measures to preventive diplomacy and, eventually, to conflict resolution. But it has not progressed much beyond discussing basic confidence-building measures in the seven years of its existence.[12] Many of the military forces in Asia are highly secretive and they do not produce even the most basic information about their military capabilities. They are resistant towards arms-control ideas and the introduction of the kinds of transparency measures that are common in Europe. It is difficult to be optimistic about the outlook for multilateral security cooperation in Asia. American ideas in this regard need to be better thought through and they need to avoid any sense that they are aimed at containing China.

Guidelines for US Policy Makers

Strategic developments in Asia are not likely to pose fundamental challenges to US military power and influence over the next five years, as long as the United States retains a credible forward military presence and is not found wanting if there is a major military crisis involving its allies. The most important message emerging from this paper, however, is that the United States and its allies need to do more together, given the unpredictability of the strategic situation in Asia and the speed with which adverse events could unfold.

There is no doubt about the fundamental economic strength of the United States and its allies in the region and the military superiority of the US alliance system. Of much greater concern is the cohesion of America's alliances in an era where there is no common threat and when there are doubts

about the political will of our leaders to use force if confronted with real military adventurism. Any perception of a wavering or ambiguous US military commitment to the region could lead to rapidly heightened risks of destabilisation. America's allies need to do much more to provide for their own security and to develop military forces that can deal with crises in their immediate neighbourhoods (and can also offer a useful contribution to US operations further afield).

With these guidelines in mind, the following are some specific policy recommendations:

1. US security planners and their allied opposite numbers need to prepare for alternative, less benign strategic futures in Asia, rather than relying on comfortable predictions that the region will experience prolonged stability and peace. These alternative futures obviously embrace such scenarios as war between the United States and China over the Taiwan Strait and conflict on the Korean peninsula. But they should also examine what the United States should do in the event of: nuclear war between India and Pakistan; China's use of military force in the South China Sea against a friendly ASEAN country; and the emergence of a violent and xenophobic regime in Indonesia that confronts its neighbours.

2. The size of the intelligence task in the Asia-Pacific region suggests more (rather than less) in the way of intelligence cooperation. But the sheer outpouring of data from overhead collection systems threatens to overwhelm our analytical capabilities. We need to do more about training good minds who are expert on Asia and who are not afraid of challenging conventional intelligence wisdoms.

3. From a defence planning perspective, it is important to understand that potential military operations in the Asia-Pacific region will be essentially maritime in nature. Apart from the Korean peninsula, US military forces are not likely to be involved in large-scale, land force operations. The dominant *geopolitical change* in the new security environment has been the virtual elimination for military planning purposes of allied continental commitments. The emerging struggle for power in Asia will focus on political fault lines that are maritime rather than continental in aspect. The development of China's military power, and the response by India and Japan, is likely to put pressure on the chain of America's friends and allies in the long littoral extending between South Korea and Taiwan in the north of the region to the ASEAN countries and Australia in the south.

4. The new *technological challenge* in this maritime environment is the growing threat from high-speed, precise cruise missiles - both air- and sea-launched - and long-range ballistic missiles that can threaten fixed forward operating bases.[13] These technological changes mean that US and allied forces operating in the complex littoral and archipelagic waters of the region will be more vulnerable. Potential maritime battlefields in the Asia-Pacific will become more lethal. For America's allies, who will want to operate in joint task forces, there will be force structure implications concerning the affordability of such platforms as air warfare destroyers that can operate in high threat environments.

5. While no peer competitor to the United States will emerge over the next five years, the *political challenge* is that alliance relationships in the Asia-Pacific region will be less predictable, and less committed to allied war fighting, than in the Cold War. America's key allies in the region (Japan, South Korea and Australia) would be most reluctant, for example, to commit forces in a US-led coalition war with China over Taiwan. And America's aversion to casualties suggests that the United States will be most unlikely to commit forces on the ground in Southeast Asia - as was demonstrated in East Timor.

6. The United States will continue to hold the balance of power in Asia over the next five years but its policies will come under increasing scrutiny by its friends and allies alike. It is important in this context that America's policy towards China does not become one of demonising that country as the next 'evil empire'. Japan, South Korea and Australia would not be willing parties to such an ill-considered policy. Of course, America's allies must make it clear to China which side they are on and that they will not tolerate Chinese interference in alliance relationships. But the United States needs to develop much more considered policies towards China, including in such areas as ballistic missile defence.[14]

7. The commitment of the United States to forward basing in Northeast Asia and maintaining a military presence with about 100,000 troops needs careful handling over the next five years. A new administration in 2001 seems likely to review the question of US forces based overseas. Until the Korean question is settled, it would be unwise to announce any hasty withdrawals. Care also needs to be taken with any knock-on effects on the US military presence in Japan and on Japanese inclinations to building up their own military capabilities. While Japan should be encouraged to improve its defence forces over the period ahead, in order to become a more useful security partner of the United

States, this should be done gradually and with due regard for the sensitivities of other countries in the region.[15]

8. Given the greatly reduced size of the US Pacific Fleet since the end of the Cold War, and the much broader range of potential contingencies in which it could be involved, the United States should expect more of its allies. Japan and Australia in particular could add significantly to the Pacific Fleet's surface ships, submarines and maritime patrol aircraft.[16] While these platforms will not generally be of the same combat capability as those of the United States, they should be adequate for littoral operations in mid-intensity conflicts. In some instances, such as the conventional submarine forces of Japan and Australia, they will have operational advantages not possessed by the United States.

9. The United States needs to develop more coherence and predictability in its Asia-Pacific security strategy. This applies especially to its policies towards China, as already mentioned. But the United States also needs to give greater attention to Southeast Asia and especially to Indonesia. The central importance of Southeast Asia to the maritime trade of the entire Asia-Pacific, the fact that the ten ASEAN countries have a combined population of over 500 million, and the key role of Indonesia all point to the need for this part of the world to be given greater attention in Washington. The future of Indonesia will profoundly affect peace and stability in Southeast Asia. Australia cannot be left essentially on its own, with only episodic US interest and involvement, to help Indonesia emerge from its current acute political and economic difficulties.[17] Indonesia's potential to interfere with freedom of passage in the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok straits should be a matter of concern to both US and Australian defence planners.

10. Great care needs to be taken by the United States in developing such multilateral security ideas as 'strategic communities'. While the intention may be to be better prepared for peacekeeping and humanitarian relief operations, there is a growing unease that well-tried bilateral alliances will be eroded in the process. There is already a view in the region that America's key alliances are nowhere near as important in Washington as they were in the Cold War. From an alliance perspective, Washington's vital national security interests are no longer clearly defined. Instead, there seems to be an unpredictable involvement in some overseas incidents but not in others. In these circumstances, there is a risk that the alliance framework in the Asia-Pacific region will begin to fray. In the uncertain strategic future facing the Asia-Pacific region, the United States and its allies need to do more

together to shape the regional security environment to their advantage. With better coordination they are well placed to do so. But they need to develop franker habits of strategic dialogue about contentious issues.

Notes

[1] According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), China's economy is about the same size as that of Canada.

[2] David Shambaugh, 'Sino-American Strategic Relations: From Partners to Competitors', *Survival*, Vol.42, No. 1, Spring 2000, pp. 97-115.

[3] One estimate puts the cost to South Korea of reunification at one-third of its annual budget over a decade or more.

[4] Indonesia's foreign minister, Alwi Shihab, is quoted as saying that 'Indonesia's foreign policy places Australia as an external factor that endangers its national integrity, especially in Papua', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 2000, p. 11.

[5] Associated Press, 11 April 2000.

[6] *Indonesia in Crisis: A Macroeconomic Update* (World Bank, Washington DC, 1998), p.1.

[7] This section draws on Paul Dibb, 'The Strategic Environment in the Asia-Pacific Region' in Robert D.Blackwill and Paul Dibb (eds), *America's Asian Alliances* (MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2000).

[8] This is defined as the ability 'to deter and defeat nearly simultaneous large-scale, cross-border aggression in two distant theaters in overlapping timeframes, preferably in concert with regional allies'. Source: William S. Cohen, Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Department of Defense, Washington DC, 2000), p.7.

[9] See Paul Dibb, *Will America's Alliances in the Asia-Pacific Region Endure?,* Working Paper No 345 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, May 2000).

[10] See the statement of Admiral Dennis C. Blair, US Navy Commander-in-Chief, US Pacific Command, before the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, *On US Security Concerns in Asia*, Washington DC, 8 March 2000, p.12.

[11] ibid.

[12] For a balanced discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the ASEAN Regional Forum see Khoo How San (ed.), *The Future of the ARF* (Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore, 1999).

[13] See *Mobile Targets from Under the Sea*, MIT Security Studies Conference Series (Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge MA, 2000), pp. 6-16.

[14] For a comprehensive discussion of this topic, see Zalmay M. Khalilzad *et al.*, *The United States and a Rising China* (RAND, Santa Monica CA, 1999).

[15] See Robert D. Blackwill, 'An Action Agenda to Strengthen America's Alliances in the Asia-Pacific Region' in Blackwill and Dibb (eds), *America's Asian Alliances*, p. 130.

[16] Japan and Australia have: 22 submarines (PACFLT has 30 SSNs); 66 destroyers and frigates (PACFLT has 53 major surface combatants); 109 P-3 maritime patrol aircraft (PACFLT has 77). Source: *The Military Balance 1999-2000* (Oxford University Press for the IISS, Oxford, 1999).

[17] Blackwill, 'An Action Agenda to Strengthen America's Alliances in the Asia-Pacific Region', p.123.

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