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The 2010 US Quadrennial Defence Review: Implications for Southeast Asia

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The recently-issued US Quadrennial Defence Review emphasises the need for the Pentagon to revitalise defence relations with Southeast Asia. Closer Southeast Asia-US cooperation will preserve American access to the global commons — sea, airspace, and cyberspace — as they relate to this region.

THE OBAMA administration released its Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) on 1 February 2010. Detailing the Pentagon's priorities, force structure, and budget plans, the document is the product of the Defence Department's Congress-mandated four-yearly assessment of US defence policy. As the QDR sets the overall tone and direction of US defence policy, its findings and recommendations bear careful scrutiny. The 2010 review — the fourth in the series that commenced in 1997 — certainly has its "same old, same olds". But it also bears the new Democratic administration's imprimatur. Advancing the Obama government's activism in Asia and seeking to preserve US access to the global commons, the 2010 QDR has stressed the need for the Pentagon to continue nurturing its defence relations with states in Southeast Asia.

Broad Principles and Considerations

If the preceding 2006 QDR stressed the idea of the "Long War" against terrorist networks, the 2010 QDR has been more focused on the US prevailing in ongoing conflicts. It maintains, nevertheless, that the US should develop the capacity to deter and thwart a broad range of security threats. These include adversarial states and terrorist groups. To confront them, the QDR has established a framework for American defence strategy: "prevail in today's wars, prevent and deter conflict, prepare to defeat adversaries and succeed in a wide range of contingencies, and preserve and enhance the All-Volunteer Force."

While those pronouncements reflect Washington's plans to maintain a militarily muscular approach in dealing with threats to its physical security, they also expose its recognition that resources are limited.

Other approaches are therefore necessary to advance US interests. Indeed, besides advocating the development of a more versatile force to fight a broad spectrum of conflicts, the QDR further stresses the import of “revitalising defence relationships with allies and partners in key regions”. The logic of that emphasis is plain. To relieve the stress on US resources, discourage free-riding, balance rising powers, and preserve American access to the global commons, enhancing relations with allies and partners is vital. Such calculations underscore the American intention to firm up US defence relations with a specific group of Southeast Asian states.

Southeast Asia in the Mix

While the 2006 QDR made references to unnamed Southeast Asian states as potential security partners, the 2010 review has been more explicit in identifying them. Broadly, they comprise three groups: formal allies, strategic partners, and prospective strategic partners. The first comprises Washington’s treaty allies: the Philippines and Thailand; the second, Singapore; and the third, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. The QDR states that the US intends to “enhance” its alliance relations with Manila and Bangkok, “deepen” its cooperation with Singapore, and “develop new strategic relationships” with Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Hanoi.

Specifically, the areas where cooperation will be developed involve “counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and support to humanitarian assistance operations in the region”. Mentioned too is the Pentagon’s plan for US forces to be more “forward-deployed” in the area, where their presence “supports increased multilateral cooperation on maritime security and enhanced capabilities for assured access to the sea, air, space, and cyberspace”.

How the US will advance those initiatives with its extant allies and strategic partner is discernible. The US Pacific Command (USPACOM), whose area of operations covers Southeast Asia, has developed strong military-to-military relations with the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore. War games and military manoeuvres are conducted annually between USPACOM forces and these states in exercises like Cobra Gold. Bilaterally, USPACOM units have been deployed for counterterrorism action in the Philippines. Other American units also engage Singapore in map planning exercises. Such activities help enhance defence cooperation between the US and the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore.

With Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, the Americans have made similar attempts to nurture relations. Indonesia has been participating in Cobra Gold, and Exercise Garuda Shield brings together American and Indonesian soldiers for peace support exercises. Malaysian and US air forces exchange combat tactics in Exercise Cope Taufan. And, since 2008, Vietnamese and American officers have met annually for dialogues on security issues and defence cooperation.

Yet, despite these interactions, what bears watching is the effort that will be expended to bring US defence relations with these states to the next level. A possible restoration of American assistance to Indonesia’s Special Forces unit — suspended in the early 1990s because of the unit’s alleged links to human rights abuses in East Timor — will need to be addressed. Perhaps greater American resources will be deployed to increase Malaysia-US cooperation on maritime matters. Finally, if a basing agreement enabling American access to Cam Ranh Bay can be obtained, it will mark a significant milestone in Vietnam-US relations since the Vietnam War. In all, the Pentagon is expected to take measures in the years ahead to broaden its defence cooperation with the three states.

Implications

The military architecture in Southeast Asia, then, looks solidly underpinned by a strong US presence — for now. China has yet to extend its military reach into this Asian subregion in the same manner as has the US. If the 2010 QDR has anything to say about this, it is that Washington intends to keep it that way. Building sturdy defence relations and maintaining basing agreements in the subregion will

enable Washington to prevent potential adversaries from denying the US access to the global commons as they relate to Southeast Asia. Yet, with the economy and the Afghanistan war dominating the White House's agenda, the challenge for the Obama administration will be to sustain the momentum in engaging Southeast Asia militarily, diplomatically, and economically.

For Southeast Asian states, insofar as they seek to hedge against any aggressive Chinese behaviour, they will welcome Washington providing a strategic counterweight to Beijing. At the same time, Southeast Asian governments will continue to engage China in bilateral and multilateral exchanges in order to enhance regional cooperation and balance US influence. None in Southeast Asia wants to be put in a position where they have to choose between the two powers. If the regional military balance obtains and diplomatic interactions remain robust, they will not have to.

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