



First Association of Southeast Asian Nations Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus at National Convention Center, Hanoi, Vietnam

U.S. Air Force (Jerry Morrison)

# U.S. STRATEGY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA POWER BROKER, NOT HEGEMON

By DAVID J. GREENE

**T**he narrative of a U.S.-China rivalry for influence in Southeast Asia already dominates popular and academic commentary on the region, suggesting that efforts to enhance U.S. engagement there have been effective in signaling that the United States will continue to play a significant role in countering aggressive behavior by the People's Republic of China. However, with both China and the United States taking forceful stances on issues in recent months, the continuing media emphasis on rivalry risks both inflaming Chinese nationalism, potentially complicating

the Chinese leadership's ability to make smart choices, and alienating regional actors with whom we want to strengthen ties—for they fear anything that smacks of choosing sides between the United States and China.

China is expanding its presence in Southeast Asia through investments, development assistance, security cooperation, and diplomatic engagement, while asserting control over aspects of the Southeast Asian environment (literally, in some instances, as with its dams on the Mekong River and unilateral fishing bans in the South China Sea). However, China's rise in itself poses only one

regional strategic threat to the United States: a possible challenge to freedom of navigation. With regard to other U.S. strategic interests in Southeast Asia—essentially counterterrorism, trade, and potentially (in the case of Burma) nuclear nonproliferation—the mere fact of expanding Chinese influence is not in itself a threat. Thus, it is hard to argue that power relations in Southeast Asia will be definitive in the broader question of how the United States should approach a rising China.

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Instead, other factors—including China’s military modernization, conduct in global institutions, and role in the global economy—will determine larger U.S. strategy.

Therefore, the United States must carefully calibrate its approach in Southeast Asia. In the South China Sea and other areas where the Chinese challenge freedom of navigation, the United States—as guarantor of the “global commons” of the sea lanes—will need to use a variety of means to assert said freedom, including potentially high-visibility acts such as sailing gray-hulled vessels through sensitive areas. However, the overall U.S. approach should reflect continuity with its current course:

- strengthen bilateral ties in ways that are not threatening to China
- invest in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and related organizations that integrate the United States into the region and provide opportunities for engagement

■ encourage critical regional (Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand) and extraregional (Japan, India, Korea, Australia) actors to strengthen mutual ties.

Many countries in Southeast Asia are displaying hedging behavior as China’s expanding sphere of influence rubs up against their vital interests. By strengthening its engagement without directly challenging China, the United States can position itself as a power broker without spooking allies who wish to avoid choosing between the United States and the rising regional power.

In addition, Washington must avoid unnecessarily strengthening Chinese paranoia about American intentions in order to minimize the chances of inadvertently contributing to a growing security dilemma. Elements within the Chinese policy community, and within its increasingly nationalistic population, believe that the United States is already pursuing “containment” and that China’s only option is to arm itself and challenge the United States.

## China’s Increasing Influence and Provocations

China’s impact on Southeast Asia will only grow as its economy and consequent drive for energy, raw materials, and markets expand. However, it is precisely this behavior that is challenging the various countries of Southeast Asia to anxiously debate their China policies, and causing several to cast about for regional and extraregional allies in a classic example of hedging behavior.

Examples of Chinese actions that cause anxiety include:

- reassertion of the “nine-dashed line” and challenges to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea
- increasingly aggressive actions regarding the resources around and under the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos
- unilateral actions in the Upper Mekong Basin that threaten the economies, food security, and sovereignty of downstream neighbors
- cheap exports that undermine local production.

The countries of Southeast Asia have a variety of often conflicting reactions. Vietnam, for example, is threatened by China’s

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Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan expresses appreciation to U.S. and Japanese forces at Camp Sendai, Japan, for their joint relief efforts during Operation *Tomodachi* after 9.0-magnitude earthquake and ensuing tsunami

U.S. Army (Tiffany Dusterhoft)

Mekong dam cascade and smarts over Chinese proto-imperialism in the South China Sea, and thus is among the most aggressive in its hedging, seeking closer ties with the United States, Japan, and Australia. Laos, by contrast, welcomes China's help in developing its own hydropower sector, while Thailand anticipates buying power from Chinese-built Laotian dams. Indonesia's economic growth may be imperiled by cheap Chinese exports, but it welcomes Chinese investment. Burma-China ties have expanded considerably in recent years, with China seeking Burmese resources and a path to the sea for Southwest China, and Burma's reliance on China's United Nations Security Council veto to dodge any consequences for its repressive governance. Yet India's concern about Chinese encroachment to its east may well lead to increasing Indo-Chinese competition in Burma.

In addition to issue-specific anxieties, the Southeast Asian nations are well aware of the larger, looming issue: Chinese regional hegemony. The debate has been public, ranging from journal articles speculating on China's prospects for dominance, to Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's intervention at the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi, when he stated that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact."

### An American Safety Net?

The countries of the region are in effect playing on multiple chess boards simultaneously, with each move considered for its bearing on relationships with China, the United States, and other regional actors, both in the here-and-now and for the future. This provides the United States room for subtle and patient maneuvering. ASEAN states inclined to side with the United States are uncomfortable doing so; this could be perceived as an overt tilt away from China—



U.S. Air Force F-16 and Royal Australian Air Force F/A-18 prepare for takeoff at Williamtown Royal Australian Air Force Base during exercise Sentry Down Under

U.S. Air Force (Linda E. Kephart)

(such as the Lower Mekong Initiative) bases where there are areas of mutual interest. These approaches would be complemented by a quiet continuation of recent efforts to deepen ties with ASEAN and other regional fora (such as the East Asian Summit) so as to ensure that U.S. presence is palpable, positive, and organically integrated into the region. (The United States can even point to Chinese endorsement of such an approach, given that the final communiqué from the January 2011 Obama-Hu summit in Washington stated, "China welcomes the United States as an Asia-Pacific nation that contributes to peace, stability, and prosperity in the region.")

There are likely to be occasions when the United States must confront China over challenges to its strategic interest in freedom of navigation throughout Asia's international waters—as with the incident involving Chinese harassment of USNS *Impeccable* in 2009. The United States will be best positioned to do so if, first, such Chinese challenges are seen as acts of unilateral Chinese aggression (not a reaction to an aggressive American policy of containment), and second, the United States has diplomatic backing from other regional actors and institutions. Such backing will be more likely

and in a region where there are few vital security interests for the United States, it is largely doable with existing resources. The 2009 U.S. accession to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and the establishment of a diplomatic mission to ASEAN, laid the foundation for enhanced cooperation. Similarly, President Barack Obama's recent visit to Indonesia, rapidly expanding U.S.-Vietnam military-to-military ties, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's and Defense Secretary Robert Gates's reaffirmation of the Australian relationship in November 2010 exemplify the kind of diplomatic measures that strengthen the U.S. position.

Striving to stay neck-and-neck with China in Southeast Asia, or launching an attempt at containing China in that region, is likely to backfire on the United States as it expends resources while alienating potential allies who are uncomfortable at being forced to choose. Instead, Washington should foster the growing multipolarity of the region, with the United States—along with other key extra-regional players such as India, Japan, and Australia—gently balancing China and offering a welcoming hedge for ASEAN nations. China's dominance may appear inevitable, but Beijing will nonetheless have to consider the concerns of rising economies such as Vietnam and Indonesia to maintain positive relations, expand markets, and allay fears of its rise (seemingly a priority, based on the Chinese Foreign Ministry's December 2010 pronouncement that "We Must Stick to the Path of Peaceful Development"). Thus, the United States can best protect its limited interests in Southeast Asia as a power broker, not a hegemon. JFQ

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which, after all, is their immediate and enormous neighbor and can offer considerable benefits in terms of investment and trade. What is called for is a set of country-specific strategies to deepen U.S. ties with the states of the region on bilateral and minilateral

if the United States underplays its hand and works deliberately for better ties in the region without seeming to be mounting a coordinated pushback on China.

Another virtue of a low-key strategy is that, in an era of constrained resources



# STRATEGIC LANDPOWER

## *Essay Contest*

2012

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For more information contact: **Dr. Michael R. Matheny**, U.S. Army War College, Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA 17013-5242 — (717) 245-3459, DSN 242-3459, michael.matheny@us.army.mil

### **STRATEGIC LANDPOWER** Essay Contest Rules:

1. Essays must be original, not to exceed 5,000 words, and must not have been previously published. An exact word count must appear on the title page.
2. All entries should be directed to: Dr. Michael R. Matheny, USAWC Strategic Landpower Essay Contest, U.S. Army War College, Department of Military Strategy, Planning and Operations, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA 17013-5242.
3. Essays must be postmarked on or before February 17, 2012.
4. The name of the author shall not appear on the essay. Each author will assign a codename in addition to a title to the essay. This codename shall appear: (a) on the title page of the essay, with the title in lieu of the author's name, and (b) by itself on the outside of an accompanying sealed envelope. This sealed envelope should contain a type sheet giving the name, rank/title, branch of service (if applicable), biographical sketch, address, and office and home phone numbers (if available) of the essayist, along with the title of the essay and the codename. This envelope will not be opened until after the final selections are made and the identity of the essayist will not be known by the selection committee.
5. All essays must be typewritten, double-spaced, on paper approximately 8 ½ x 11. Submit two complete copies.
6. The award winners will be notified in early Spring 2012. Letters notifying all other entrants will be mailed by April 1, 2012.