Extra-regional powers’ roles in Southeast Asia’s security are presently characterised by an equilibrium or at least coexistence between the influence of China and the United States. However, this equilibrium is fragile and will not necessarily endure beyond the short-term. The roles of the second-tier powers – Australia, India and Japan – are constrained by a variety of factors and they are unlikely to play significant autonomous roles in Southeast Asian security, except in the long-term.

**China and Southeast Asia**

Since the Cold War there has existed a spectrum of views in Southeast Asia regarding China’s regional role. Customarily, Singapore and Thailand were least alarmed over China’s growing power and assertiveness, while concern was greater in ASEAN members with stakes in the South China Sea or where there were long-standing apprehensions over Chinese interference (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam). Within each ASEAN member, there were differences of view between components of state apparatus (e.g. defence establishments and foreign affairs ministries, the latter tending to be less alarmist).

Since late 1990s, China’s more sophisticated and nuanced diplomacy (epitomised by Beijing’s New Security Policy and new-found enthusiasm for multilateralism), geo-strategic patience (marked by Beijing’s less assertive posture in relation to claims in the Spratlys) and, increasingly, economic leverage (demonstrated in Beijing’s non-devaluation at the time of the 1997/98 crisis, and subsequently by its rapidly growing trade with Southeast Asia) have substantially overcome ASEAN members’ earlier concerns. This applies particularly in mainland Southeast Asia, where the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand have entered into extremely close political and economic relations with Beijing. Further south, Malaysian and Vietnamese qualms over China’s role in the South China Sea have apparently lessened considerably, while even Indonesia and the Philippines have become increasingly interested in fostering closer economic relations with Beijing. The new, increasingly economically-centred relationship between China and the ASEAN states found expression in the November 2002 Framework Agreement on Economic Cooperation (which most importantly established the target of establishing an ASEAN-China Free Trade Area by 2010 for the six core members of ASEAN). This objective has recently been boosted with the Agreements on Trade in Goods and Dispute Settlement signed at the ASEAN-China summit in Vientiane last month.
Tightening economic relations between China and Southeast Asia have been accompanied by a tentative security entente, encapsulated in the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Security, agreed in October 2003, which was followed by agreement on a detailed ‘Plan of Action’ this November. The Strategic Partnership subsumes various other agreements, including those relating to ‘non-traditional security’ signed in November 2002 and January this year. While providing for various forms of dialogue, the Strategic Partnership also provides tentative reassurance for the ASEAN states regarding China’s regional role. Most importantly, it includes the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, under which China and the ASEAN states agreed in 2002 ‘to resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means’ without ‘resorting to the threat or use of force’.

China’s intensifying engagement with ASEAN is just part of Beijing’s broader strategy of multilateralism in Asia as a whole, apparently aimed at leveraging its growing economic and diplomatic clout to heighten the legitimacy of its role in regional security while minimizing or excluding that of the United States. As well as promoting the ASEAN Plus Three initiative, China has become increasingly enthusiastic with regard to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and has taken the lead in establishing the ARF’s Security Policy Conference – effectively an alternative to the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ Asia Security Conference (usually referred to as the Shangri-La Dialogue, SLD). While the SLD has proved highly successful since 2002 in bringing together defence ministers, military and intelligence chiefs, and top-ranking defence officials from virtually all stakeholders in Asian security, the prominent role of the US (culminating in Defense Secretary Rumsfeld’s attendance in 2004) has apparently rankled with Beijing.

The United States and Southeast Asia
But are the ASEAN states simply acquiescing in China’s ‘peaceful rise’? No, the evidence suggests that they are continuing to hedge, primarily by accepting the need for a role for the United States in their sub-region’s security. In effect, the continuing US security interest, including a substantial military presence in the vicinity of Southeast Asia, relieves Southeast Asian governments of the need for immediate concern over China’s increasing activity. The US is playing a vital role as a ‘regional balancer’, in other words. Its military profile in the region is likely to increase as a result of the Pentagon’s Global Posture Review, announced in September. The US naval presence may become more prominent (with an additional carrier strike group likely to based in Hawaii) and more use being made of facilities in Southeast Asia, which will probably be expanded and upgraded.

For ASEAN members, the US security role in Southeast Asia overshadows that of China which, despite its growing military spending and expanding power projection capabilities, has no military presence in the sub-region beyond occasional naval port calls. And since the post-9/11 rapprochement between Washington and Beijing the ASEAN states have not needed to be as concerned over Sino-US competition in Southeast Asia as they were during the early months of the Bush administration in 2001.
when it seemed that the US emphasis on cultivating ‘allies and friends’ in Asia was aimed at encircling and containing the rising power of China, now seen in Washington in quite stark terms as an incipient ‘peer competitor’ (in contrast to the Clinton administration’s view of Beijing as a ‘strategic partner’).

Even before the onset of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) there were, of course, wide variations in the quality of the various ASEAN members’ political and security relations with the United States. At one end of the spectrum, Thailand and the Philippines remained formal allies of the US, while Singapore had effectively become a quasi-ally. US security relations with Indonesia had been largely suspended since the late 1990s, owing to Congressional concerns over human rights abuses. Security links with Malaysia remained low-key, largely because of the Mahathir administration’s innate reservations over US foreign policy and its wariness of alienating the domestic Islamic constituency. US security relations with the post-1995 ASEAN members (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) were practically non-existent, though tentative moves were made to establish links with Vietnam’s military establishment.

From the Bush administration’s viewpoint, Southeast Asia is the ‘second front’ in the GWOT, which has become the prism through which the US views its security relations with allies and associates. However, Washington’s primary security focus on counter-terrorism over the last three years has accentuated the divergences amongst ASEAN members with respect to their US security links. US security relations with the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand have intensified. In late 2003, Manila and Bangkok were accorded the status of Major Non-NATO Allies and granted substantial aid packages, Singapore announced that it would be negotiating a Framework Agreement on security cooperation with Washington, and has been rewarded (implicitly) with a bilateral Free Trade Agreement. Cooperation between the US armed forces and the militaries of all three of these states has been stepped up. US troops have become closely involved with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in their campaign against the Abu Sayyaf Group, and hover on the edges of the AFP's stand-off with the much larger MILF, which reputedly provides shelter to elements of the pan-Southeast Asian terrorist network, Jemaah Islamiah (JI). A counter-terrorist element has been injected into the annual US-Thai-Singapore 'Cobra Gold' exercise, Southeast Asia's largest military manoeuvres, and US and Thai special forces have intensified their joint training. Singapore-US military cooperation is broad-ranging, reflecting Washington's view that - semantics aside - the city-state is now effectively an ally. Singapore has identified with Washington’s view that JI is closely allied with Al-Qaeda, and has been the leading Southeast Asian supporter of US initiatives such as the CSI, PSI and RMSI. The Philippines, Singapore and Thailand have all committed forces to the US-led coalition occupying Iraq. However, it must be said that there is little popular support in the Philippines or Thailand for US policies, and popular pressure led Manila to withdraw its military contingent from Iraq following the kidnapping of a Filipino.

Though Indonesia and Malaysia have both have taken measures against domestic terrorists, US relations with these Muslim-majority states have been complicated and strained by the GWOT. In both cases, there is evidently a growing Islamic basis in
addition to the existing nationalist rationale for resenting the United States’ regional role, as the governments in Jakarta and KL seek to appease their domestic Islamic constituencies. In these circumstances, the predisposition of Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur to seek ‘regional solutions to regional problems’ has been accentuated. This was evident earlier in 2004, when both Indonesia and Malaysia objected to US proposals for a Regional Maritime Security initiative, which they readily misconstrued as potentially involving the deployment of US counter-terrorist forces in the Malacca Strait. This regionalist impulse – which seeks to institutionalize regional states’ self-management of security in the face of the increasing intrusiveness of not just the US-led GWOT but also the actual or potential security roles of China, Japan, India and Australia – has found expression in Jakarta’s proposal for an ASEAN Security Community (ASC).

The United States’ security role in Southeast Asia is now more powerful than it has been since the end of the Cold War, if defined in ‘hard’, military terms. At the same time, the US remains Southeast Asia’s most important trading partner. Nevertheless, there is a sense throughout the region that while China’s influence in Southeast Asia is growing, that of the US is declining. As proposed in an Asia Foundation report last week, a more coordinated US strategy for Southeast Asia might include a greater use of the United States’ ‘soft power’, for example through annual US-ASEAN summit meetings, a US-ASEAN FTA, and a major initiative to engage Southeast Asian Muslims. However, the idea that Washington should accede to ASEAN’S Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia is almost certainly unrealistic, given the premium that the US places on maintaining its military freedom of action.

The second-tier powers
The roles of Japan, Australia and India in regional security are significant, but they are still limited compared to those of China and the United States. In the first place, there are significant constraints on the diplomatic and military capacity of these powers in relation to Southeast Asia. At least in relative terms, Japan’s economic role and diplomatic influence in the sub-region declined during the 1990s. Tokyo is becoming more assertive militarily, and this trend has been accelerated since 9/11. However, for historical, political and constitutional reasons, Japan is highly likely to integrate its expanding capacity for power projection into its US alliance, rather than pursuing the option of becoming an autonomous military power. Nevertheless, some Southeast Asian states – primarily the Philippines – remain uneasy about the prospect of Japan’s increasing military reach.

Other Southeast Asian states – Indonesia and Malaysia - harbour concerns over Australia’s emerging role as the United States’ ‘deputy sheriff’ in the sub-region. Nevertheless, Malaysia paradoxically facilitates Australia’s role through the Five Power Defence Arrangements, and the small Australian contingent at Butterworth in Penang remains one of only two long-term deployments of extra-regional combat forces in Southeast Asia (the other being the UK garrison in Brunei). Jakarta’s objections to Australia’s role are more thoroughgoing, and date essentially from the time of Canberra’s leading role in the East Timor intervention in 1999, yet Indonesia continues to cooperate with Australia militarily (notably in maritime air patrol), and since the Bali bombing in
2002 there has been extraordinarily close collaboration between the two states’ police and intelligence services. But Australia’s most significant security cooperation in Southeast Asia is with Singapore, reflecting the two states’ closely similar outlooks and complementary interests in the security sphere. There is also growing Australian involvement in supporting the Philippine armed forces. However, Australia’s capacity for power projection is likely to remain small and the country is likely to remain incapable of significant military intervention on an autonomous, national basis.

Southeast Asian states have no significant objections to India playing a greater role in their sub-region’s security, which could in a small way help to balance China’s growing assertiveness. Indeed, some ASEAN members – notably Singapore – have encouraged such a role, which has also received a fillip from the Indo-US rapprochement over the last three years. Indo-US security cooperation has extended into Southeast Asia, with Indian naval vessels protecting US logistic ships at the northern end of the Malacca Strait during Operation Enduring Freedom. Yet, overall India’s ‘Look East’ relationship – which has been propounded in one form or another for the last 20 years - with Southeast Asia remains underdeveloped, in both economic and security terms. The one exception may be in relation to Myanmar, where India’s increasing economic and security ties have given the SPDC regime an alternative to complete reliance on China.

Conclusion
Since late 2001, Southeast Asian states have been able to benefit from the detente between Washington and Beijing, which has for the time being at least deferred the threat of overt competition between them for influence in East Asia. As long as relations between Washington and Beijing remain on an even keel, the major power equilibrium in Southeast Asia will probably endure. This suits ASEAN members, which are mainly keen to enjoy positive relations with both China and the US. This is seen most clearly in the examples of Thailand and Singapore, both of which enjoy close relations with each of the two major extra-regional powers. Above all, Southeast Asian governments want to avoid having to choose between siding with either the Chinese or the Americans. It is quite possible, though, that such a choice could be forced on those ASEAN members maintaining close security and defence ties with the US in the event of a Sino-US confrontation over Taiwan. The potential for such a confrontation is known to worry Singapore in particular – with good reason.