

5th Berlin Conference on Asian Security (BCAS)

Berlin, September 30 – October 1, 2010

A conference jointly organised by Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, Federal Ministry of Defence, Berlin, and Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Jakarta

Discussion Paper

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Session III: The US Military Presence and the Future of Security Partnerships

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The US Military Presence and Future Security Partnerships in the Asia Pacific — Challenges and Prospects

Overview of US' Engagement with Asia Pacific and East Asia Region

(a) US treaty allies and relations with strategic countries in East Asia

At the end of the Indochina war in March/April 1975, due to domestic pressure Thailand wanted the US military forces to withdraw from the country in view of the aggressive and hostile Vietnamese posture. As a SEATO ally, Thailand had earlier allowed the US to use U-Tapao airbase and Sattahip naval base together with a chain of Thai airbases in Northeast Thailand including in Korat, Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Thani, to prosecute its war in Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia). The US military forces withdrew from Thailand shortly after the end of the Indochina war. In the meantime, despite the Thai hostility to communist insurgency activities in the country, the Thai government decided to establish diplomatic relations with China in July 1975 to counter balance the Vietnamese threat.

The Philippines which was another SEATO ally, had also participated in the Indochina war and had allowed the US to use the Clark airbase and Subic naval base. However, as the Philippines was some distant away, and did not face domestic pressure like in Thailand, the US military presence continued. In 1991, the Philippine government declined to renew the lease for the Clark and Subic bases and the US military presence in the Philippines came to an end in 1992.

The US had treaty alliances with Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the base facilities there, were most important to the US' forward defence in the Western Pacific as part of the US' "hub and spokes" policy. The ANZUS alliance which included the US, Australia, and New Zealand, were important to US strategic defence in the southern part of the Western Pacific Ocean.

The US also needed to establish military relations with friendly countries in the Southeast Asia region to ensure the movement of its Pacific Command naval fleet and military aircraft from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. Hence, the importance of the "first island chain" which stretches from Japan to Taiwan and the Philippines. The US has always been keen to establish stronger military relations with Indonesia and other littoral states of the Malacca and Singapore Straits. Thus in 1990, the US and Singapore signed a MOU and related addendums which allowed US military aircraft and naval ships access to military facilities in Singapore including the Changi Naval Base which became available in 2000. The MOU also provided for US-Singapore training in joint military exercises. In 2005, the US and Singapore signed the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) on broad

defence cooperation over a wide range of areas including policy engagement, military cooperation and in technology. The US-Singapore Strategic Dialogue at the US under Secretary of Defence and Permanent Secretary (Defence) level was concluded in April 2010.

Further westward, the US was keen to establish a strategic partnership with India to ensure passage of US military aircraft and naval vessels through the Indian Ocean to West Asia and Africa. India will not become an ally of the US even though a strategic partnership was established in 2009. India will pursue its own national and foreign policy interests. While India will be supportive of US military transits through the Indian Ocean and joint military exercises, it will adopt its own policy stance in line with its foreign policy interests. For instance, India will not want to be a counter balance to China as it seeks to have good relations with China and tries to avoid border conflict with China. India's main interests and preoccupations are its relations with Afghanistan and West Asian countries and with Pakistan which has many bilateral contentious problems with India including Kashmir, terrorist attacks against India, and nuclear competition and threat in the event of a conflict. Despite US sanctions against Myanmar, India for its own interests, proceeded to receive a visit by the Myanmar President to India in July 2010 to strengthen bilateral relations.

During the Bush Administration, the US maintained good relations with Asean as a group and with its members on a bilateral basis especially with maritime Asean countries. The US viewed the Asean region as being politically and economically stable. The US has substantial relations with Asean in the political, economic and security areas especially with maritime Asean countries while maintaining cordial relations with mainland Asean countries. The passage of US naval vessels and the over flight and transits of military aircraft through the Asean region proceeded smoothly as Asean countries generally welcomed the US presence as contributing to regional security and stability. The Asean region has been peaceful and the Asean countries have welcomed US presence, and bilaterally they have enjoyed good economic and trade relations with the US. However, the US had at times given the impression of taking Asean for granted as then US Secretary of State Rice had skipped some important Asean meetings. The US has substantial relations with Asean through the Asean dialogue relationship and other regional forums like the ARF.

The Bush Administration had focused on developing its strategic economic dialogue with China and had made significant progress in strengthening their bilateral relations. Though the US then had concerns about the growing Chinese military power, it did not seem to view China as posing a serious military threat or challenging the US presence in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. The US became the sole super power with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

(b) China's rise and its relations with Asean, Japan and the ROK

As China rises and has made significant economic progress in the last 30 years, it has also strengthened its relations with Asean and its members, and with Japan and the ROK. China's cooperation with Asean, has been through the Asean+1, Asean +3, EAS and the ARF, and the conclusion of the Asean-China FTA, and China's support for and assistance to the Mekong sub-regional countries. All these had contributed to a substantial relationship between China and Asean as a whole in political, economic and social relations. Japan and the ROK had also strengthened their economic relations with China. When the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) under then Prime Minister Yoko Hatoyama came to power in 2008, Japan shifted policy to focus on improving relations with China and Southeast Asia. At the same time, DPJ's intention to have a more equal relationship with the US in the US-Japan alliance, and to move US base facilities out of Okinawa, had become a contentious issue for their bilateral relations. This was a shift from the hitherto pro-US policy of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The change in ROK President had seen a shift to a more pro-US policy stance.

At the same time, the three Northeast Asian countries which used to meet informally at the sidelines of the ARF, had started to have a formal trilateral meeting since the last two years. In August 2010, Japan apologised to ROK over its colonial past and now wanted to strengthen bilateral relations. Asean is not too concerned about this development even though Asean could be wary that closer cooperation among the Northeast Asian countries could sideline their cooperation with Asean. The US could view this development differently as a more cohesive Northeast Asian group could pose a challenge to US security interests.

(c) President Obama's New Foreign Policy Orientation towards Asia

With the change of US President and Administration in December 2008, President Barack Obama signaled a change of US foreign and defence policies from that of former President George Bush in regard to the Middle East issues including the Israel-Palestine problem, enhancing US engagement with East Asia through an announcement that the US was back in Asia and a shift in US policy stance towards China, Japan and ROK. The US' engagement with India which started during the Bush Presidency will continue but US' engagement with Pakistan was now linked to US' military engagement with Afghanistan. President Obama attended the APEC Leaders meeting in Singapore in mid November 2009. President Obama also attended the inaugural Asean-US Leaders Meeting held at the time of the APEC Leaders Meeting in Singapore.

In his initial visit to China after the APEC meeting, President Obama did not raise controversial issues including in the economic field and human rights.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also took a similar line. But this posture has changed since early 2010, possibly for domestic reasons, to a more confrontational approach with the perception that the rise of China in particular its growing economic and military power were seen as threatening US' interests. The new US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue as compared to the former US-China Strategic Economic Dialogue, had greatly widened the scope of topics for discussions which included major bilateral, regional and global issues as well as departmental level discussions on energy security, climate change, UN Peace keeping, counter terrorism and law enforcement, and other issues. Such wide ranging discussions would raise agreements and disagreements that highlighted differences in a number of issues that have an impact on their bilateral relations.

The financial and economic crisis which started in 2008 in the US, had adversely affected the US economy. The domestic sector in the US was concerned that China's economic rise coupled with the alleged low Yuan exchange rate and cheaper production of goods in China, were perceived to be costing jobs in the US and causing the growing imbalance in bilateral trade that is in China's favour. There was also growing complaints by Goggle and some American companies on internet restrictions and alleged hacking of websites to alleged Chinese pressure on US companies to transfer technology. All these have also contributed to the strained bilateral relations.

Since late 2009, US military leaders especially from their Pacific Command, in their testimonies to the US Congress and in public statements, had been alleging that the growth of China's military power especially the PLA air force and navy, were threatening US freedom of movement and action in the Asia Pacific region. This was manifested in the heated exchange between Defence Secretary Robert Gates and Gen Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of General Staff, PLA, at the Shangrila Dialogue in early June 2010 in Singapore. The recent US-ROK joint military exercises in the Yellow Sea with the presence of the aircraft carrier USS George Washington had attracted critical reaction from China. The subsequent presence of the US aircraft carrier USS George Washington in the South China Sea (SCS) and its joint exercises with the Vietnamese navy, have attracted a strong response from China which responded by conducting similar exercises in the two areas. Hopefully there will be no miscalculations and accidental incident that may result in a conflict or confrontation between the US and China that would have serious consequences for the region. In any case these developments have raised tension between the two powers and in the East Asia region.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's suggestion of US involvement in resolving the South China Sea territorial disputes, at the recent ARF meeting in Hanoi in July 2010, attracted a strong reaction from China which opposed external interference and multi-lateralisation of the territorial disputes that were considered by China as bilateral issues. The subsequent presence of the US aircraft carrier

USS George Washington in the South China Sea, and a guided missile destroyer USS John S MacCain on 11 August in Danang for a week long joint naval exercises with the Vietnamese navy, was viewed by the Chinese as a US show of force to assert its presence there. The US' joint naval exercises with the Vietnamese navy as well as earlier visit by a group of Vietnamese generals to the US aircraft carrier, attracted strong opposition from China as Vietnam was the most aggressive opponent of China's claims in the South China Sea. Though Vietnam and a few Asean claimants responded somewhat in favour of Clinton's suggestion, the other Asean members did not. These developments have a negative impact on Asean cohesion and solidarity as only a few Asean countries have territorial claims. So far, Asean and China have depended on the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and UN Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to resolve the disputes through bilateral negotiations. Any external interference and any attempt to internationalise the South China Sea disputes would have a negative impact on Asean and will raise tension and increase the possibility of conflict in the South China Sea, which will affect the prevailing peace and stability existing in the Southeast Asia region.

Clinton's sudden request for the US to join the East Asia Summit, would affect East Asia regional economic integration and cooperation. If the US and Russia are admitted to the EAS, it would affect the complexion of the EAS and affect ongoing economic integration and cooperation in East Asia. It could open the way for other Asean dialogue partners and other countries and regional groups like the EU, that have signed the TAC, to request to join the EAS. In such an event the EAS would become like the ARF, where other regional interests and concerns would surface, thus disrupting the focus on EAS' economic cooperation and regional economic integration in East Asia. It will also affect Asean's centrality in regional institutions and regional architecture. Asean has to consider carefully the implications of the request for membership of EAS and should find a feasible modality that could be used to engage the US and Russia. The Asean Council of Ministers will consider the issue of expansion of the EAS including the kind of modality to engage the new members as this development has implications for Asean cohesion and solidarity and Asean's centrality in regional architecture.

The tension between the US and China is likely to increase in the near future as long as the US perceives the rise of China as a challenge or a threat to US' primacy, politically, economically and security wise. If the US continues to hold military exercises close to the Chinese coasts whether in the East Sea, Yellow Sea or SCS, to assert its presence, the Chinese will respond by having similar show of its military power. Hopefully there will be no miscalculation or unintended incident.

Most Asean countries would be concerned about the US-China rivalry in the SCS. While the Asean countries have good relations with the US and welcome its

presence in the region, Asean also has to deal with a rising China with which Asean has substantial relations especially in the economic field.

The political, economic and security dynamics in the region have somewhat changed in recent times. For instance, Asean would not want its ongoing economic integration to be disrupted by the sudden expansion of the EAS. For Asean, it will be important to preserve the centrality of Asean in regional institutions and architecture in the region. This arrangement has been recognised by the ASEAN+3 and the EAS as being important for regional peace and stability, and for economic cooperation and progress.

For the foreseeable future, the US will remain the dominant global power including in this region. The US will maintain close ties with the Asean countries. There will be some uncertainty in Northeast Asia given the sentiments of the DPJ, and the ROK's foreign policy seems to depend on the political posture of the ROK President in power. China's rise will continue and unless there is some accommodation of China's interests including in the maritime sector, there would be tension. It seems unlikely that China would be able to pose a serious challenge to US' dominant influence in the East Asia region for a long time to come but China would desire some accommodation of its interests in the maritime and core national interest areas. Asean will remain a relevant neutral platform for the major powers to meet and this should be maintained.

Changing Global Strategic Landscape

In recent years, there are significant changes in the global strategic landscape. The main changes are the rise of China and India, the US' re-assertion of its presence in Asia following the election of President Barack Obama, Japan asserting its right as a "normal" state and its desire to be on equal status with the US in the US-Japan security alliance, the financial and economic crisis in 2008/2009 which seriously affected the US and Europe, the US-India strategic partnership, China-US strategic partnership, and President Obama's new policy approaches to Middle East issues as well as Russia re-asserting its role and influence .

At the regional level, the Asean Charter which will enhance Asean as a more rules-based organisation, would enhance Asean's role as a bridge for the two rising Asian powers. Asean will continue to be recognised as a significant stable regional organisation which the major powers could engaged with and interact with each other in the context of the Asean Dialogue Partnerships, the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), the Asean+3 and the East Asian Summit (EAS).

The recent financial crisis in Western Europe involving Greece and Spain, has adversely affected the Euro and aggravated the effects of the financial crisis of 2008/2009. The extent of the impact of the financial problem is not certain and whether there would be any spill over effects to other regions. A 10 June 2010

New Straits Times report based on a Reuters report from Singapore, quoted IMF Deputy Managing Director Naoyuki Shinohara, as saying that Europe's debt crisis could disrupt global trade, hurting demand for Asian exports and sending "hot money" into the region if policy makers failed to act swiftly. Although Asia has limited financial links to Euro zone economies, its stronger growth prospects could attract capital flows into the region and lead to "asset bubbles". Presently it would appear that Asia is relatively less adversely affected by the financial crisis than the West and Asian countries seem to have recovered from the financial crisis and their economies are growing again.

All these new developments have resulted in a shift in political and economic influence to Asia. The Obama Administration announced a change in the US' approach to Iraq and Afghanistan. The US has made progress in disengaging from Iraq. However, the US withdrawal from Iraq has left behind a country that is still divided and this could open the way for Iran to increase its influence not only in Iraq but also in that region. The US' increased military engagement in Afghanistan coupled with the linking of Afghanistan to Pakistan in dealing with the Taliban, seemed to have made the situation more complicated and no solution is in sight. The US' attention continues to focus on and is pre-occupied with the Middle East particularly the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Iran nuclear issue, as well as urgent domestic issues.

Emerging Political and Security Trends in East Asia

(a) Emerging Trends in East Asia

The modernisation of the militaries of the East Asian regional countries, in particular the growing Chinese military power especially their navy and air force as well as Japan's increased military capabilities and the deployment of their naval forces to the region and beyond for military exercises, visits or counter-piracy operations in the east coast of Africa, have given the impression of assertion of their military capabilities and competition for influence by these two countries. In view of the rise of China, the US felt the need to re-assert its presence and influence in the Asia region due to the strategic significance of East Asia to US military presence and interests stretching from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. All these developments would have significant impact on and affect the new power balance emerging in the Asia Pacific region in particular in East Asia.

While the previous Bush Administration had paid lesser attention to Southeast Asia, the Obama Administration has re-affirmed that the US was back in Asia, indicating that it would continue to assert its presence and role in the region. The US is engaging China, and also Japan and the ROK which are its strategic allies.

Being the global superpower, the US has substantial political, economic and security interests in East Asia. Though the US has been weakened by the recent financial and economic crisis, it nevertheless remains, in relative terms, the predominant global power in the foreseeable future despite recent perceptions that the US is in decline.

The US' long held "hub and spokes" policy will continue to be important to its strategic and security interests in the Asia Pacific region as well as westwards to India and the Indian Ocean. Its security alliance relationships with Japan and the ROK will be maintained despite former Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama's new posture of engaging China, developing closer relations with Southeast Asia and desiring for Japan to have a more equal status in regard to the US-Japan security alliance. There was a change of Prime Minister in Japan in early June 2010. New Prime Minister Naoto Kan has intention to improve relations with the US over the base facilities in Okinawa, but the sentiments of his DJP for a more equal status in the US-Japan security alliance may still remain. At the same time, PM Kan will continue to strengthen ties with China. The US will strengthen its relations with its allies like the Philippines and Thailand, and supportive countries like Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam and with India, to ensure its presence in East Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Japan will also want to re-assert its engagement with, and strengthen its presence and influence in Southeast Asia and will not leave the region to China's domination. Japan is also enhancing its engagement with India.

Though India is now a strategic partner of the US, it will not become a US ally in view of its independent foreign policy and its desire to improve relations with China. Although India is a rising power, its engagement with Southeast Asia has been gradual and at a low level and will unlikely pose any serious challenge to China's, US' or Japan's influence in the region in the foreseeable future. India's pre-occupation has been with South Asia and its relations with Pakistan, Afghanistan and West Asia besides relations with China and the strategic partnership agreement with the US.

The rise of China is the most significant development in view of its remarkable growth and economic strength. China possesses influence regionally and globally through its trade and investments, economic and technical assistance programmes. Even more remarkable is China's quest for natural and other resources in many countries including Southeast Asia, Africa, South America and Australia and its substantial trade with the US. China's military modernisation and its growing military power particularly its navy and air force, has raised some concerns as to whether China will become hegemonic. Some political analysts believe that the Chinese navy will remain a regional one for a long time to come as it will take time for the Chinese navy to build their aircraft carriers.

(b) Growing Chinese Naval Power

In recent times, the Japanese Government has expressed concern about China's growing military strength. Asia News of 14 May 2010 reported that Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada had said that although he would not use the word "threat", he felt that Japan should watch carefully the nuclear arsenal and naval capabilities of China. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal on 13 May 2010, the Japanese Foreign Ministry said that "it is because of this that, all the more, the Japan-US alliance would be important". According to an Asia News report in early May, the Japanese Foreign Ministry filed a formal protest to Beijing after a Chinese ship chased a Japanese Coast Guard vessel that Tokyo said was conducting marine surveys within the Japanese zone. In April 2010, the Japanese government protested that a Chinese helicopter participating in military exercises near Japanese waters, buzzed a Japanese naval vessel. Japanese Foreign Ministry viewed these encounters as a sign of growing capabilities of the Chinese military. However the Chinese had responded that they had behaved appropriately and in the April incident they blamed the Japanese vessels for following the Chinese flotilla.

The Singapore Straits report of 19 April 2010 carried a report entitled "War Games show PLA Navy's strength". It quoted the South China Morning Post of 18 April 2010 as saying that the Chinese Navy ships had been conducting war games unprecedented in their reach and scope. Over that weekend, the Chinese East Sea Fleet with its destroyers, frigates, and submarines, was exercising in the Southeast of Japan's strategic offshore islands. The Fleet steamed through the so-called "First Island Chain" which is considered as the US dominated strong-hold that linked Japan to Taiwan and the Philippines, to practise anti-submarine warfare manoeuvres.

The Chinese flotilla moved through the Miyako Strait just days after a Chinese North Fleet flotilla, sailed in the other direction on its return from an exercise deep in the disputed South China Sea. This flotilla comprised destroyers, frigates and auxiliary ships and with air cover, sailed for 19 days and covered 6000 nautical miles including through the Bashi Strait between the Philippines and Taiwan. They earlier stopped at a Chinese base and early warning radar station at the Spratly Islands' Fiery Cross Reef", which was the site of a past sea battle between Chinese and Vietnamese naval ships.

The South China Morning Post reported that recently the Nanjing and Guangzhou military regions had been conducting extensive long range exercises with command planes, bombers and attack aircraft in the South China Sea. The Vietnamese were concerned about these exercises. The Vietnamese had in recent years also purchased six Russian kilo-class submarines, fighter aircraft and patrol boats. The London based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in early May 2010 published a detailed report of the military exercises of the Chinese

flotillas as well as a standoff between Chinese and Vietnamese ships in the South China Sea.

In recent years, there have been some confrontation and minor conflicts between China and Vietnam over their fishermen in the disputed areas but no serious conflict has arisen. So far their adherence to the Asean-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and maintenance of the status quo, have avoid open conflicts. As Chinese naval power grows, the Vietnamese have increased their military assets and had asserted their territorial claims in the Spratlys with a visit by the Vietnamese President to a disputed island in the Spratlys earlier this year. These developments have raised tension. However both countries are aware that any conflict in the South China Sea would have serious consequences for international shipping through this strategic region and would pose a threat to regional peace and security. So far there have been restraints by all parties concerned.

However, tension was raised when the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the ARF meeting in July 2010 in Hanoi, proposed US intervention in the SCSC territorial disputes which will result in inter-nationalising this issue. This has angered China. China has favoured resolving these disputes bilaterally with the Asean claimants in the context of the Asean-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS and international law. Clinton's statement that the US considered the freedom of navigation in the SCS as US "national interest", was apparently in response to alleged Chinese claim of "core national interest" in the SCS. This coupled with the recent visit of the USS George Washington and the missile destroyer USS John S MacCain to the SCS and the US' conduct of joint naval exercises with Vietnam, has aggravated the situation and further raised tension in US-China relations.

The recent counter-piracy efforts have enabled China to gain some presence in the India Ocean and the east coast of Africa. Some political analysts have speculated as to whether China would in the future establish overseas base facilities to support its naval activities in the Indian Ocean. China is unlikely to be able to rival the US in any serious manner in the foreseeable future particularly in Southeast Asia, but the US will have to take into account China's interests in the region where China has developed substantive relations with the regional countries. China will be against any US' attempt to contain China or hinder its growth. Presently China's interest has been to ensure that its neighbouring border regions are peaceful, stable, and friendly to China. This interest is reflected in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Asean +1, Asean+3 and EAS where China has built friendly relations with Southeast Asia, East Asia and Central Asia. China also wants to ensure the security of its energy and trade through Southeast Asia and hence its desire to ensure good relations with Southeast Asian countries in particular Asean. So far there has been no outbreak of major conflict in the SCS.

China wants to assert its naval presence in this region and is unlikely to challenge the US prevailing presence in the Southeast Asia region. The US appears unwilling to accept the increasing Chinese military strength and their naval presence in the Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia regions in particular the South China Sea, Yellow Sea and East Sea.

Unease in US-China relations

(a) Shangrila Dialogue

According to Straits Times reports of 6 and 7 June 2010, the verbal exchanges between Robert Gates, US Defence Secretary and Gen Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of General Staff, PLA, China, at the Shangrila Dialogue in Singapore on 5 June 2010 over strained US-China military ties, US arms sales to Taiwan and US' (and Japanese) concerns over increased assertion of Chinese naval presence and influence in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, reflected the growing differences in view points of the US and China in the changing global and regional situations.

The US had also complained about the lack of transparency in the Chinese military including their budget. Robert Gates insisted that the US arms sales to Taiwan were nothing new and that this had been a reality for decades and spanned multiple American administrations. However Ma Xiaotian responded that the US arms sales to Taiwan were, in China's view, not something normal and had been interfering in US-China relations for 30 years. Although Gates said that the US adhered to its policy of not supporting independence for Taiwan, Ma Xiaotian was not convinced saying that he hoped it was not lip service and that the US should take concrete actions to show its goodwill to the people across the Taiwan Strait. On Gates' allegation that China had broken off interactions between their two militaries because of the US arms sales to Taiwan, Ma responded that the China-US military ties had not been suspended but only the exchange of high level visits. Reflecting the uneasy atmosphere, even before Gates arrived in Singapore, he accused China of impeding relations in refusing his offer to visit Beijing after the Shangrila Dialogue. Maj Gen Zhu Chenghu, of China's National Defense University, criticised the US arms sales to Taiwan saying that while the Chinese were taking the Americans as partners, the latter were taking the Chinese as an enemy.

On the issue of access by energy companies to the resources in the South China Sea, Gates said it was essential that stability and freedom of navigation, and free and unhindered economic development should be maintained. While the US would not take sides on any competing sovereignty claims, it opposed the use of force and actions that would hinder the freedom of navigation. Ma responded that in

terms of obstacles to military to military ties, there were many. One was the reconnaissance missions in the South China Sea and East China Sea by US aircraft and navy ships.

Political analysts viewed these developments as the widening gap between the US' and Chinese militaries. The comments of two Chinese academics shed some light on the Chinese view points and how they were viewing the present world situation. Professor Wang Xiangsui of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics believed that the fundamental problem of military to military relations between the two sides went beyond the Taiwan issue or American reconnaissance activities off China's coast. He opined that the US military had kept its cold war mentality and sole superpower attitude. The US had not adopted global cooperation and defence cooperation, and the building of equal relationships with other countries as its way of thinking. Because of this mindset, when they "damaged" the security interests of others, they did not view it a problem.

Gates had maintained that the arms sales to Taiwan were defensive ones which would help to maintain stability in the Taiwan Strait. Former senior US officials tended to share Gates' view. Beijing University's Prof Jia Qingguo, a Chinese expert on US-China relations, voiced a more nuanced view saying that what was new was that China's view of itself had changed as now China knew that it had grown in power and its international status and influence had increased. As China had sought to cooperate with the US in security and economic issues, the Chinese had expected that the unfair treatment of the past, would change. The robust airing of views indicated that the dynamics of Sino-US relations have changed and the Chinese have expected the US to accommodate their interests in the current situation.

Similarly the tension in the Korean Peninsula involving US efforts to de-nuclearise North Korea and to resume the 6-Parties talks as well as the recent Cheonan incident, would not be easy to resolve or manage in view of the Cold War atmospherics. At a recent Asia Pacific Roundtable in early June in Kuala Lumpur, the Chinese and Russians were lined up with North Korea while the US with the ROK over the Cheonan incident.

(b)Asean Regional Forum (ARF)

At the Asean Regional Forum held in Hanoi on 24 July 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton raised two issues. One was on inter-nationalising the disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) between China and some Asean states. The other was on the US wanting to play a more pro-active role in helping to implement confidence building measures since China and the Asean claimant states have failed to reach agreement on resolving their disputes since the signing of the China-Asean Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC)

in 2002. Clinton described the SCS as being “pivotal” to regional security and freedom of navigation there as a US “national interest” to indicate a change in US policy. Clinton also said that resolving the disputes in the SCS was “a leading diplomatic priority” of the US. This could be Clinton’s response to the Chinese claim that the South China Sea was a “core national interest”. There has been no public Chinese confirmation of this claim. However a Washington Post report of 31 July 2010 by John Promfret claimed that in conversation between Clinton and Dai Bingguo, China’s State Counsellor in charge of foreign policy, in May this year, the latter reportedly told Clinton that China viewed its claim in the SCS as a “core national interest”.

In response to Clinton’s remarks, Chinese Defence Ministry Spokesman Sr Col Geng Yansheng told reporters on 24 July that China had “indisputable sovereignty” over the SCS and had sufficient historical and legal backing to support its claim. However, in accordance with international law, China respected freedom of passage of ships and aircraft through the SCS. Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi characterised Clinton’s comments as “an attack on China”

In the past, the US has taken a hands-off approach to the dispute. While the US had in the past declared that it had vital interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the SCS, it did not take sides on the competing sovereignty claims in the Paracel Islands and Spratly islands. The US had supported peaceful resolution of the disputes in accordance with international law.

These recent developments could have led to this shift in US policy. First, the US believed that China has in recent years built up its military capabilities especially its air and naval power since late last year. Several senior US officials have expressed their concern over the Chinese military capabilities. In a Congressional Testimony earlier this year, new Commander of US Pacific Command Admiral Robert Willard noting China’s “unabated” military build-up, concluded that it appeared to be designed to challenge US’ freedom of action in the Asia Pacific region. Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said in July 2010 said that he had “moved from being curious” about what China was doing to “being concerned about what they are doing”. New Pacific Fleet commander Patrick Walsh said that China was putting the South China Sea’s vital trade routes “at risk” over various territorial claims. Other US military officers apparently shared this perception and felt that China was being too assertive in recent times. Some examples cited were, first, China’s extensive claims in the SCS, its alleged seizure of Philippine and Vietnamese islands and skirmishes with the fishing boats off the coast of Vietnam and Indonesia (WSJA 12 August 2010)

Second, at the Shangrila Dialogue in early June 2010 in Singapore, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates described the disputes in the SCS as an “area of growing concern” for America. He added that Washington would oppose “any (Chinese)

efforts to intimidate American corporations or those of other nations engaged in legitimate economic activities” This was probably a reference to Chinese pressure on Exxon Mobil to suspend its development projects off Vietnam’s coast in waters claimed by China. Third, the US seemed to be dissatisfied with China’s positions in regard to the Cheonan sinking and further US sanctions against Iran. The UNSC statement on the Cheosan incident was viewed as a set back for the US and the ROK as there was no condemnation of the DPRK. The US and the ROK probably were unhappy with China’s stance and viewed it as being not helpful to them. Russia also questioned the outcome of the investigation into the Cheonan sinking. Some Japanese media reports said that the UNSC statement was a victory for the DPRK as it did not refer to any DPRK’s involvement in the sinking of the Cheonan. This probably angered the US and hence the US-ROK joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea in a show of force and to warn the DPRK not to repeat such an incident. The Chinese reacted strongly to the US-ROK joint exercises in the Yellow Sea with the presence of the aircraft carrier USS George Washington, saying that it was a threat to China’s security. The Chinese responded by conducting their own exercises both in the South China Sea and in the Yellow Sea.

Fourth, the US probably felt that there was a perception that the US presence was in decline in East Asia in recent years and hence it needed to re-assert its presence especially with President Obama’s new policy of “the US back in Asia”.

Fifth, Vietnam as Chairman of Asean, had raised the issue of SCS at the ARF and placed this issue on the ARF agenda. In the past, China had managed to keep the disputes in the SCS off the ARF agenda. At the recent ARF meeting, Vietnam and the US led the criticism of China over the territorial disputes in the SCS. Apparently 12 of the 27 ARF members including the Asean claimants raised this issue. Vietnam which has the largest number of claims, was keen to raise this issue at the ARF to internationalise it. The Vietnamese and the US for reasons of their own, shared the same interest to raise this issue at the ARF, to criticise China’s territorial claims and to internationalise this issue to pressure China. The Vietnamese who had been trying to internationalise this issue since last year when they organised a maritime security conference in November last year in Hanoi to try and achieve this objective of internationalising the SCS disputes but failed. The Vietnamese made similar attempts at other subsequent conferences including at the Track Two meeting of the Asean Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) in April 2010 to gather Asean support but did not succeed. The Vietnamese needed the support of the US to pursue its interest and the ARF meeting was an opportunity to do so. The Chinese CCTV 9 Dialogue programme following the ARF meeting, projected the line that China was “ambushed” in Hanoi and they hinted that this was a Vietnamese attempt which coincided with US interest, to raise this issue of territorial disputes in the SCS.

Some Asean countries especially the claimants particularly Vietnam, welcomed greater US involvement on this issue but China which has all along opposed the internationalisation of the SCS disputes. This was reflected in the strong Chinese reaction. This would add on to the list of contentious issues in Sino-US relations. Some Asean countries are concerned that any US direct involvement in regional issues especially the SCS territorial disputes, could adversely affect Asean solidarity and cohesion because of differences among Asean countries over this US approach. Asean is wary that big power rivalry resulting from US intervention in disputes in the SCS, would raise tension in the Southeast Asia region. In the event of any unintended conflict arising, it would disrupt the peaceful environment that has prevailed in the Asean region since the establishment of Asean. Asean has substantial political and economic cooperation with China and with the other two Northeast Asian states of Japan and the ROK, in the Asean +3 and EAS where an agreement on economic integration in East Asia is being finalised. The recent unexpected US decision to request for membership of the EAS could disrupt the focus of EAS cooperation as the US' interest was for priority in political and security discussions. Although the US is interested in East Asia, it is not in the East Asia geographical zone. The US-China rivalry could spill over to the newly established ADMM Plus 8 and the expanded EAS.

New Proposals for Regional Cooperation and Architecture

Due to the changes in the global strategic landscape, new proposals for regional architecture like former Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama's East Asia Community proposal and former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Asia Pacific Community (APc) proposal had emerged.

Hatoyama's proposal was unclear in its scope and membership and its idea of an EU type of community for East Asia, would likely be unacceptable to most regional countries in particular Asean, in view of the need to take into account the sensitivities and diversity in ethnicities, cultures, religions and systems of governments. The idea of a supranational organisation would not be acceptable to the regional countries due to the dominance of the larger powers in the region and the sidelining of Asean's central role.

The APc has not been clear on its purpose, geographical scope and membership. If the APc's intention is to confine its scope to the Pacific, and for East Asia, if it would involve only the so-called "G8" which included the Northeast Asian countries, Indonesia and India, it would have sidelined Asean. The APc appears to be an organisation to engage the Pacific countries from the US to those in the Western Pacific rim. Such an architecture may not be acceptable to the US in the light of the recent US officials' cautious statements. The APc would not be acceptable to Asean.

Asean has been the most successful regional grouping in the Third World. It is the driving force of three regional mechanisms or institutions for regional cooperation like the Asean+3, EAS and the ARF. The Asean Dialogue Partnerships have also enhanced the importance and centrality of Asean in regional cooperation. Thus it will be important to maintain the centrality of Asean's role and as a driving force in any new mechanism for regional cooperation or architecture, as envisaged in the Asean Charter.

Asean should consider which emerging regional institution or architecture that would serve its interests in the new economic, political and security environment in the region. In recent times, the challenges to Asean and the East Asia region have been not only traditional security issues but also a wide range of non-traditional security (NTS) issues that have adversely affected the countries in the region. These NTS issues including natural disasters, pose a serious challenge to the regional countries including the role of the militaries and the manner in which they would have to be re-organised and be prepared to meet these security challenges which are transnational in nature and hence would require close cooperation and co-ordination among the regional countries and even with external countries. Asean would have to consider how it could engage the external countries like the Asean dialogue partners, to assist in dealing with those challenges that require the support and expertise from these countries. The few emerging proposals for regional architecture and cooperation mentioned earlier, do not serve Asean's purpose and interests. Asean would have to initiate proposals for new regional institutions or architecture that can serve Asean's interests and preserve its centrality and role. In this regard, Asean has been considering a few ideas which included whether the EAS should be expanded, the ideas of ADMM Plus and Asean Plus, for Asean to better engage the Asean dialogue partners and friends to enhance Asean's cooperation with them to strengthen economic, political and security cooperation including improving its capacity and resources to deal with the non-traditional security issues.

Asean to Consider an Expanded EAS

The 16th Asean Summit held in April 2010, considered the two ideas of the EAS+2 and the Asean Plus 8 for regional architecture for Asean to initially engage the major powers in particular the US and Russia. The Asean Summit did not decide whether it would be through an expanded EAS+2 or the Asean Plus 8. The Asean Coordinating Council comprising the Asean Foreign Ministers has been tasked by the Asean Summit to consider this issue in greater detail.

At the recent Asean Foreign Ministers Meeting held in Hanoi in July 2010, the US unexpectedly informed Asean of its interest to join the EAS. According to the Joint Communique of the Asean Foreign Ministers Meeting, the Asean Foreign

Ministers welcomed the expressed interest of Russia and the US to join the EAS and agreed to recommend to the Asean Leaders Meeting at the 17th Asean Summit in Hanoi in October 2010 to formally make a decision on inviting Russia and the US to join the EAS with appropriate arrangements and timing. Such arrangements should be based on the promotion of existing EAS agenda and priorities. In this connection, the Asean Foreign Ministers reaffirmed Asean centrality as well as the established objectives and principles of the EAS as a Leaders forum.

In considering the topic of Asean centrality in an evolving regional architecture, the Asean Foreign Ministers stressed the importance to maintain Asean centrality in the evolving regional architecture. To this end, the Asean Foreign Ministers agreed to intensify their efforts to accelerate Asean's integration and community building while pro-actively broadening and deepening Asean's external relations and strengthening Asean's role as the primary driving force in the existing regional mechanisms. They reaffirmed their Leaders' guiding principles that any new regional framework or process should be complementary to and build upon existing regional mechanisms and principle of Asean centrality. They also emphasised the need to develop Asean's common strategies and stance vis-à-vis important partners and important regional and global issues.

In view of the implications of the US and Russia joining the EAS itself, the Asean Foreign Ministers will have to consider the modalities to deal with such an expanded EAS so that Asean centrality could be preserved and the ongoing economic integration would not be disrupted. The US has indicated that it would engage the EAS in political and security discussions. The recent contentious exchanges between the US and China on territorial claims in the South China Sea and their different approaches to resolve these issues had raised tension in the region. If the rivalry between China and the US persists in the expanded EAS and possibly even in the ADMM Plus 8, it could adversely affect peace and security that has prevailed in the region and could also affect Asean cohesion and solidarity. These could distract the focus of the EAS on economic integration and other economic and financial cooperation among the Asean+6. Given this concern and giving due consideration to the views of the Asean Summit and the Asean Foreign Ministers Meeting on Asean's engagement with external powers and Asean centrality, one idea Asean could consider would be a two-tier approach to the EAS meeting. The core EAS (Asean+6) could first discuss economic integration, financial and functional cooperation in the EAS, to be followed by an EAS+2 or Asean Plus 8 meeting to discuss political and security issues at the strategic level. This modality would ensure Asean centrality in an expanded EAS +2 or Asean Plus 8.

Future of US Presence and Security Partnerships

Recent developments have indicated the US' keen interest to engage East Asia more actively for its own political and strategic interests. First, the US is still keen to maintain its primacy as the sole super power. For strategic reasons, the US wants to maintain its military presence in East Asia for its Pacific Command to have free passage through Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean. Second, in recent times, the US views the growing Chinese military capabilities particularly its air force and navy, as a challenge to US' presence and influence in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Recently Admiral Robert Willard, Commander of US Pacific Command, said in Tokyo that China's anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) known as the "carrier killer" was close to being operational. But the US would not be deterred from deploying its naval vessels to this region. (Straits Times 28 Aug 2010). Third, the US may be concerned about the growing close ties and reconciliation between China and Taiwan through the China-Taiwan Economic Framework Agreement (Ecfa) and China promoting closer ties with the Kuomintang regime. The US' recent arms sale to Taiwan has strained US-China relations but it has not been able to derail the conclusion of China-Taiwan Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (Ecfa) and the increasing economic, cultural and tourism exchanges between them.

The US is probably concerned about the DPJ's political posture of wanting a more equal relationship in the US-Japan security alliance as well as the DPJ's desire for closer political and economic relations with China and Southeast Asia. But Japan will at the same time wants to rival China for influence in the Southeast Asia region and beyond. This is evident in a recent Japanese Government Experts Panel Study which recommended that Japan should revise the exclusively defensive policy adopted after its defeat in World War II, relax an arms export ban and to consider lifting a prohibition on aiding allies under attack. The Panel also voiced concern about China's military build-up and urged the Japanese government to improve its ability to cope with multiple threats. The report further said that China has become a major country that affects the global economy and has played a certain role in the international community. However there are some issues that have caused Japan and the region concern like China's rapid modernisation of its military since the 1990s. Therefore the Panel recommended that "with the role of the military becoming diversified, the "Basic Defence Force" concept, which has limited Japan's capabilities to only the purpose of rejecting external invasion, is no longer valid. It is time for Japan... to achieve necessary and in-depth reform of its defence posture so that it can adequately respond to complex contingencies." The Panel urged the Japanese government to have closer cooperation with US allies like the ROK and Australia, and stresses the importance of the US-Japan security alliance. (Straits Times report 28 Aug 2010). Beijing will be concerned if Japan embarks on an active military build up to

project its military capability. Such a Japanese posture will also likely be of concern to the US.

The ROK has in recent years also developed close political and economic ties with China but the change of President to Lee Myung-bak, has somewhat changed this trend to a more pro-US stance. For the US, the security alliances with Japan and the ROK are of great importance to its Western Pacific forward defence and hence the US would ensure that these security alliances would be maintained.

The US will also maintain its relations with its other treaty allies like the Philippines, to ensure that its strategic “First Island Chain” stretching from Japan to Taiwan and the Philippines will be maintained.

As for the Korean Peninsula, tension will remain as the Cold War has not ended there. For strategic reasons, China will maintain close ties with and support for the DPRK. Russia will also remain supportive of the DPRK. Political analysts believe that the 6-Party talks will unlikely result in anything concrete in the foreseeable future and so is ROK’s reconciliation efforts with the DPRK.

The US will maintain good relations with the Asean countries particularly its allies Thailand and the Philippines, However, for historical reasons and domestic sentiments, the US will not be able to regain the use of their base facilities. The US will strengthen military cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Vietnam. The US regards Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore as being of strategic importance to its Pacific Command as these are littoral states of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore and Indonesia has many choke points from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. Due to the rising nationalism in Indonesia and its growing political and economic ties with China, how close US-Indonesia relations could become, is uncertain. The US would continue to use Singapore’s military facilities under the US-Singapore Strategic Framework Agreement as they are important for the transits of US military aircraft and naval ships from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean.

The US is keen to cultivate close military ties with Vietnam in view of US’ interest to counter China’s naval presence in the SCS and the region. Vietnam cooperated with the US at the ARF meeting in Hanoi in July 2010, to try to internationalise the territorial disputes in the SCS. However, China’s strong reaction to Clinton’s statement on US involvement in disputes in the SCS, had later caused some concern to the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese Vice Defence Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh subsequently visited Beijing and made a public statement that Vietnam would never become an ally of any country. He denied that Vietnam was trying to establish a “triangle relationships” between China and the US. The Vietnamese Deputy Defence Attache in Beijing also made a similar statement. This showed that Vietnam has to take into account China’s reaction to Clinton’s statement. Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia will likely bandwagon with China. The other Asean countries are likely to take a balance of

powers approach by maintaining good relations with the US and China. While the Asean countries will continue to welcome US presence in the Southeast Asia region, they will also be mindful of the rise of China with which Asean has substantial relations both at the bilateral level and Asean as a whole.

Clinton's recent statements on the SCS and the recent sudden US announcement of its interest to join the EAS, have been divisive for Asean. Even before the Asean Foreign Ministers have completed their consideration on the modalities to engage the US and Russia, the US made the sudden announcement at the ARF meeting in July 2010.

A report by AFP and Bloomberg from Washington said that President Obama will meet Asean leaders on 24 September 2010 at the time of the UN General Assembly. At the US-Asean leaders meeting in Singapore in November in 2009, they agreed to deeper cooperation in areas such as trade and investment, food, energy and regional security. The report quoted a US White House statement issued on 2 September 2010 which said that "The President looks forward to working with (Asean) leaders to assess progress on these issues, identify future efforts to strengthen US-Asean relations, and discuss multi-lateral approaches for greater regional cooperation." The report suggested that President Obama is seeking closer ties with Asean members to counter China's growing clout in the region. Hopefully the multi-lateral approach for greater regional cooperation is not on the SCS that has already cause division within Asean following Clinton's statement at the ARF.

So far Asean's engagement with the major powers have been through the Asean Dialogue Partnerships and the major powers have accepted Asean's centrality and Asean as the driving force in regional institutions and regional architecture in East Asia. Asean will strive to maintain the Asean centrality principle in the emerging new layers of regional architecture like ADMM+8, EAS+2 and Asean+8. As mentioned earlier, the prevailing architecture has been the Asean+3 and the EAS which have resulted in substantial economic cooperation, functional cooperation in a number of fields from finance to environment and the ongoing negotiations for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia (CEPEA) for economic integration. The EAS has to manage carefully the inclusion of the US and Russia as this could affect these ongoing cooperation in the EAS.

Date 16 September 2010

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