



**OCTOBER**  
2013

## **Resident Power**

*Building a Politically Sustainable U.S. Military Presence in Southeast Asia and Australia*

By Ely Ratner



Center for a  
New American  
Security

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many people who contributed their time and expertise to help bring this report to fruition. I am grateful to the Asia team at CNAS for their valuable insights and travel companionship: Dr. Patrick Cronin, Zachary Hosford and Alexander Sullivan. Shawn Brimley also provided exceptional substantive contributions from the derivation to the conclusion of the project. Many of his ideas are contained herein. I am further indebted to Michèle Flourney and Dr. Janine Davidson for leading workshops associated with the project. I also could not have produced this study without the media and publication expertise of Liz Fontaine and Kay King.

Outside of CNAS, I thank two U.S. government officials for providing excellent feedback on the draft report. Special thanks are also due to Dr. Charles Glaser and the Institute for Security and Conflict Studies at the Elliott School of International Affairs for hosting a seminar on the draft report at the George Washington University.

I would also like to thank the dozens of current and former U.S. officials who met with me over the course of the project to share their perspectives. U.S. Embassy officials in Australia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam were particularly gracious in lending their time and insights. The project also relied heavily on overseas engagements with numerous foreign officials, local politicians, scholars, industry representatives and members of the media.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the support of the Smith Richardson Foundation. The author retained full editorial control over this report and is solely responsible for any error of fact, analysis or omission.

### Cover Image

On February 22, 2013, an MH-60R Seahawk assigned to Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron 73 flies in front of the littoral combat ship *USS Freedom* (LCS 1). Freedom, the lead ship of the Freedom variant of LCS, deployed to Singapore in March 2013.

(MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 1ST CLASS JAMES R. EVANS/U.S. Navy)

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## *About the Author*

**Dr. Ely Ratner** is the Deputy Director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security.





# RESIDENT POWER: BUILDING A POLITICALLY SUSTAINABLE U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND AUSTRALIA

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By Ely Ratner

The United States faces a strategic window of opportunity to enhance its military presence in Southeast Asia and Australia, strengthen its alliances and partnerships and reinforce U.S. leadership in the region.

Current U.S. policy aims to achieve a more geographically distributed force posture in Asia as a response to the evolving regional security environment, the rising geopolitical importance of Southeast Asia and the drawdowns from a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. This goal of diversifying the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region has included efforts to develop new presence and access arrangements in Australia, the Philippines and Singapore, as well as new opportunities for training and access in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and elsewhere.

This will be no small task. Although threat dynamics open doors for the United States to deepen security ties with allies and partners, the ability of the U.S. military to establish new arrangements, deepen them over time and sustain them over the long term will hinge on conducive political environments in partner countries. Likewise, fundamental fissures in political support would cause agreements to be terminated, scaled back or forced into burdensome and sensitive realignments at enormous political, economic and strategic cost to the United States.

Although policymakers and analysts in the U.S. government and research community have devoted substantial resources to understanding the operational requirements for force posture revisions in Asia, less attention has been paid to devising strategies for political sustainability within the region. This imbalance must be corrected. At this nascent stage of developing arrangements in Southeast Asia and Australia, operational considerations cannot crowd out the fundamentally important task of ensuring enduring political support, without which U.S. force posture objectives in the region cannot be achieved. The United States must play the long game of developing strong partnerships throughout the region.

This report provides the first comprehensive strategy for building a politically sustainable force posture in Southeast Asia and Australia. Taken as a whole, the strategy aims to develop an affirmative rationale for enhanced U.S. military presence while proposing policies to insulate this presence from potential political challenges.

There is no perfect recipe for guaranteeing that the U.S. overseas military presence will be politically sustainable, but the actions recommended in this report can minimize the risk that political factors will lead to significant disruptions in the development of U.S. security relationships. Also embedded in this report is a word of caution that force posture arrangements should not be pursued if they cannot meet the litmus test of political sustainability.

The United States can most effectively achieve a politically sustainable military presence in Southeast Asia and Australia by integrating initiatives within three broad objectives for U.S. defense and national security strategy in Asia: strengthening bilateral military and defense partnerships; building comprehensive bilateral relationships, including diplomatic and economic ties; and advancing U.S. regional strategy and multilateral cooperation (See Table 1).

This report offers recommendations for translating these principles into policy. The White House can play its part by issuing an official strategy on the U.S. rebalancing to Asia and by ensuring a robust interagency approach to the formulation and implementation of force posture efforts, including commensurate communications strategies.

The State and Defense Departments should coordinate closely in joint political-military dialogues with their counterparts in partner governments to devise explicit strategic visions for bilateral security partnerships with specific benchmarks. State and DOD officials should also work together to ensure robust and high-level U.S. engagement in partner countries.

The U.S. military will ultimately be responsible for developing and implementing security cooperation plans based on political guidance derived from the U.S. government and bilateral strategic initiatives. Security cooperation should stress the importance of an evolutionary approach that provides assets and engagements designed to enhance partnerships and multilateral institutions. Engagement plans should include sufficient resources for region-wide activities led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), while exploring options to work with China in trilateral and multilateral settings.

Partner countries have a vital role to play as the primary communicators to their own citizens, as well as to other governments in the region, about the content and purpose of enhanced security cooperation with the United States. U.S. partners should also proactively convene trilateral and multilateral activities that bring U.S. forward-deployed troops together with counterparts from other regional powers, including China.

The development of a more robust U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia and Australia harbors the potential to make significant contributions to U.S. interests and to reinforce regional peace and prosperity. The ability of the United States to actualize and maintain such a presence will rest in large part on the political sustainability of present and future efforts.



**TABLE1: HOW THE UNITED STATES CAN MOST EFFECTIVELY ACHIEVE A POLITICALLY SUSTAINABLE MILITARY PRESENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND AUSTRALIA**

OBJECTIVE	KEY PRINCIPLES
<b>Strengthening bilateral military and defense partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Require that new force posture initiatives directly support an explicit shared vision for the future of the bilateral security relationship</li> <li>• Ensure that new force posture initiatives address the interests of partner countries and contribute to official and public perceptions of a mutually beneficial partnership</li> <li>• Pursue an evolutionary approach that takes incremental steps, avoiding rapid and large-scale initiatives even if they are viable at particular times</li> </ul>
<b>Building comprehensive bilateral relationships, including diplomatic and economic ties</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that U.S. policymaking, negotiations and engagement on posture issues occur within the broader context of alliance management, active diplomacy and official White House guidance</li> <li>• Take an inclusive and transparent approach to engaging partners on force posture issues across a broad spectrum of political actors, including lawmakers, opposition figures and local communities</li> <li>• Maintain robust and reliable high-level U.S. engagement with regional states and institutions, and couple force posture announcements and activities with investment, trade and development initiatives</li> </ul>
<b>Advancing U.S. regional strategy and multilateral cooperation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that force posture initiatives contribute directly to region-wide activities, using multilateral mechanisms to engage China and manage U.S.-China competition</li> <li>• Take measures to reduce the likelihood that crises involving U.S. allies and partners occur because of accidents, incidents and miscalculation</li> <li>• Develop a coordinated communications strategy for audiences in partner countries and the region</li> </ul>

## II. INTRODUCTION: THE STRATEGIC RATIONALE FOR ENHANCING U.S. MILITARY ACCESS AND PRESENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND AUSTRALIA

The maintenance of peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region is critical to advancing U.S. national interests in the 21st century. In recent decades, wealth and influence have been steadily shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific and Indian Oceans.<sup>1</sup> DOD's January 2012 strategic guidance argued that "U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia."<sup>2</sup> The United States has responded to these trends by adjusting its national security policies to rebalance U.S. attention and resources to Asia, a process accelerated by the Obama administration and likely to continue in the years and decades ahead.<sup>3</sup> Current policy seeks to address the full range of U.S. priorities in the region, including maintaining peace and security, advancing economic development and trade, supporting human rights and democracy, and deepening cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

The forward-deployed U.S. military presence in the region plays a central role in this agenda.<sup>4</sup> A leading priority for the United States is the prevention of regional and great-power conflict. Asia contains multiple countries with historical animosities and large and technologically advancing militaries in close proximity to one another, making the outbreak of armed conflict both plausible and potentially devastating, including for the United States. U.S. force posture in Asia therefore aims to deter potential adversaries and reassure allies and partners.<sup>5</sup> The military presence supports and enhances the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments, the absence of which could destabilize the region as countries could respond to heightened insecurity, instability and uncertainty by expanding their conventional

military power and possibly developing or acquiring nuclear weapons.

Should deterrence fail, U.S. military access and presence enhances the ability of the United States to defeat potential adversaries in East Asia. Existing U.S. bases in Northeast Asia would feature prominently in large-scale contingencies throughout the region. These points of access – along with forward-deployed forces, prepositioned equipment, global strike forces and worldwide logistics capabilities – combine to provide the U.S. military with substantial force projection capabilities into the Asia-Pacific theater.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to providing unilateral power projection, U.S. presence also creates opportunities for building partner capacity and enhancing interoperability with allies and partners that can be called on to supplement, or in some instances replace, operational roles of the U.S. military.<sup>7</sup>

Commensurate with the shift of economic prosperity to the Asia-Pacific region, the United States has a substantial interest in protecting increasingly important sea lanes, which serve as the lifeblood of global commerce. In support of this interest, American forward-deployed naval forces help to ensure that potential chokepoints, notably the Straits of Malacca and critical sea lanes in the East and South China Seas, remain open to maritime traffic. The U.S. military presence throughout the Indo-Pacific region continues to make substantial contributions to the maintenance of stability, free trade and open access to the global commons.

Because terrorist groups have shown the ability to strike U.S. interests and allies from afar, the United States also seeks to weaken extremist forces in the region, including preventing and defeating piracy in Indo-Pacific waters and assisting allies like the Philippines and partners like Indonesia in stabilizing their countries against insurgents.

### Debating U.S. Strategy in Asia

Facing a period of constrained resources, U.S. policymakers are again confronted with long-standing questions about the appropriate role of the United States in the world. The goal of this report is not to adjudicate grand strategic debates in U.S. foreign policy. Instead, the report reflects current U.S. policy and starts from the idea that an affirmative agenda for U.S. foreign policy in Asia should be to support a peaceful and prosperous regional order undergirded by norms, rules and institutions. Such support should be provided through a combination of U.S. power and leadership, capable allies and partners and effective regional organizations.

Some scholars and analysts disagree with the proposition that the United States has an important role to play in Asia. They do not see enduring U.S. interests at stake, would prefer that U.S. tax dollars are spent at home or believe that the United States can achieve its objectives by letting others carry the financial, political and military burden of ensuring continued peace and stability in Asia. People harboring such views are not the primary audience for this report, as they oppose the underlying goal of building a politically sustainable U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia.

Moreover, through contributions to noncombat operations, the U.S. military presence in Asia can respond to humanitarian missions and enhance the basic security of people throughout the region. Given the size and scale of potential human and natural disasters, the U.S. military is often the organization with the most capacity to respond, as witnessed following the December 2004 tsunami in Indonesia and the March 2011 disasters in Japan. Having assets in the region allows the United States to provide rapid assistance in ways that augment U.S. leadership and legitimacy in Asia. The U.S. presence can also

help to combat other nontraditional security threats, including illegal fishing, the narcotics trade and trafficking in persons.

The U.S. military has been advancing American interests in Asia for decades through a combination of permanent bases, joint exercises, ship visits, capacity building and exchange programs. However, these interests and objectives, as well as the particular roles and missions of the U.S. military presence, need to be carefully weighed as the United States responds to a changing regional security landscape.

In revising its force posture in Asia, the United States can leverage several overlapping trends and opportunities. The winding down of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan should permit the United States to concentrate more on peacetime activities and transfer substantial resources to Asia. Meanwhile, the growing wealth of most Asian countries will make them increasingly able to invest in security and build deeper and more sophisticated security relationships with the United States.

At the same time, U.S. force posture initiatives will have to account for rapidly evolving security dynamics in Asia, including the effects of China's military modernization. U.S. strategists are increasingly concerned about the ability of potential adversaries to disrupt the projection of U.S. military power by adopting an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) approach to warfare that can "interfere with the U.S. military's ability to deploy to or operate within overseas theaters of operation."<sup>8</sup> The ability of China's People's Liberation Army to disrupt regional airfields, bases and logistic nodes, as well as naval surface and carrier operations, could exacerbate the geographic challenges of power projection by forcing the United States to operate farther from the theater of conflict.

Although countries such as North Korea, Pakistan, Iran and Syria possess some A2/AD capabilities, the People's Republic of China stands out as the country most capable of challenging the U.S. military's ability to deploy and operate globally.<sup>9</sup> Chinese A2/AD capabilities include advanced and extended-range air defense, air-to-air and precision strike capabilities, as well as C4ISR<sup>10</sup> and force projection enablers, such as aerial refueling, airlift and logistics capabilities.<sup>11</sup>

China's burgeoning A2/AD capabilities are compelling the United States to develop new strategic approaches in the region and to continue to develop and field advanced capabilities. DOD's latest strategic guidance specifically cites the importance of "sustaining our undersea capabilities, developing a new stealth bomber, improving missile defenses and continuing efforts to enhance the resiliency and effectiveness of critical space-based capabilities."<sup>12</sup> The military is also working on new operational concepts, such as Air-Sea Battle, to penetrate anti-access capabilities with stealth, joint operations, dispersal and long-range attack.<sup>13</sup>

The enhancement of U.S. force posture stands as a critical pillar of America's response to the changing strategic environment in Asia.<sup>14</sup> While U.S. major operating bases in Northeast Asia will remain central to defense strategy in the region, the United States must also develop a more dispersed and geographically distributed presence in Asia. This will help to reduce U.S. over-reliance on major operating bases in Japan and South Korea.

Greater dispersal of U.S. forces would also provide wider reach into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, regions that are emerging as convergence points in 21st-century geopolitics and international economics.<sup>15</sup> With the South China Sea remaining a dangerous flashpoint in the region, new arrangements for U.S. access and presence would permit the United States to respond more rapidly to

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*The United States must develop a more dispersed and geographically distributed presence in Asia. This will help to reduce U.S. over-reliance on major operating bases in Japan and South Korea.*

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possible crises and conflicts over disputed territories and resource exploitation. Such arrangements could also provide more frequent and better quality intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations in the South China Sea, through which the United States could improve its situational awareness, as well as that of its allies and partners.

A more dispersed presence could also provide greater opportunities for joint training with host countries and others in the region. Forward-deployed troops play a key role in this process and help to deepen trust between militaries. Building capacity is a important goal for the United States as it encourages its partners to contribute more to regional security.

A geographically distributed posture provides important strategic advantages as well. As both a deterrent in peacetime and a means of escalation control in the event of crisis or war, the ability of the United States to operate out of multiple locations throughout Southeast Asia would further complicate the decision-making of potential adversaries, who would be wary of attacking U.S. forces at the expense of galvanizing a U.S.-led multinational coalition. Additional transit points for naval combatant vessels and U.S. bomber and fighter aircraft would also augment the ability of the United States to amplify the signaling and deterrent power



of its military presence in the region and to disperse in the event that the risk of operating out of major operating bases in Northeast Asia becomes too high.

U.S. policymakers have begun to implement this strategy by pursuing opportunities to expand options in Southeast Asia and Australia.<sup>16</sup> To date, the United States has made headway in Australia, the Philippines and Singapore and continues to explore opportunities for enhanced training and access in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and elsewhere.

Yet the reality is that the United States cannot unilaterally pick and choose an ideal force posture in Asia. Instead, operational and planning considerations must ultimately be squared with political realities in the region. Fundamentally, regardless of the precise laydown of forces, the ability of the United States to establish a force posture capable of supporting its strategic objectives in Asia will rest in large part on the political sustainability of America's forward-deployed presence; it will hinge on the art of the politically possible.

Thus, the nature of America's military presence in Asia must be based on viable and enduring political arrangements and conducted in ways that contribute to (or at least do not undermine) vital political support in host countries. Strategic dynamics create opportunities for the United States to deepen military relations overseas, but politics in partner countries will ultimately determine the sustainability of U.S. partnerships – necessary for long-term U.S. leadership in Asia.

### III. THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL SUSTAINABILITY

Robust and sustained political support in partner countries will be critical in establishing a more geographically distributed U.S. military presence in Asia. Such support is necessary to seize opportunities for new arrangements, sustain those efforts over time and avoid political pitfalls and other potential disruptions.

Threat dynamics, in and of themselves, are often insufficient to sustain political support for security cooperation with the United States. In relatively open societies, U.S. military activities must garner the support of significant swaths of the social fabric, including ruling and opposition parties, the military, nongovernment elites, the media and the public at large.

Time and again, other nations' domestic politics have both challenged and emboldened the ability of foreign leaders to support military engagement with the United States.<sup>17</sup> This is particularly true on issues of military presence and basing, where the stationing and access of foreign troops and military assets are highly politicized acts that evoke deeply rooted nationalist sentiments associated with sovereignty, independence and, in some cases, colonialism and occupation. Multiple dimensions of U.S. military presence affect the lives of ordinary citizens in host countries: the high politics of war and peace; local issues associated with the economy, noise and crime; and issues of identity and a country's relationship with the United States and American power.

In navigating this politically perilous terrain, partner governments must publicly defend their decisions to allow foreign troops on their soil. Even in enduring alliances that regularly receive strong public support (for instance, the U.S. alliances with Australia and Japan), politicians tread cautiously on potentially volatile issues related to their countries' sovereignty and independence.

#### Political Sustainability in the United States

The future of the U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia is, of course, not entirely dependent on domestic politics in the region. Another central factor will be the ability of the United States to maintain the necessary political will at home backed by sufficient resources. U.S. political challenges to overseas military activities include deep and across-the-board defense cuts, strategic questions about the appropriate role of the United States in the world, a public with war fatigue and a Congress more focused on domestic politics than foreign policy. This study at several points confronted the difficulties and implications associated with questions about how politically sustainable Washington's Asia policy will be in the United States. This remains a critical topic for future research.

It is in the national interest of the United States to continue encouraging political liberalization and democratization in Asia. In this context, strong political support in partner countries is essential. Powerful political will at the outset enables partner governments to offer new opportunities, or deepen existing arrangements, with the U.S. military. Domestic support helps to ensure that partners continue to offer the United States access during crises and contingencies, when the national security and foreign policy implications of doing so are substantial. Domestic political support is equally important during peacetime to secure financial contributions for various efforts involved in partnering with the U.S. military.

Partner governments also need strong political support to weather the inevitable challenges to, and protestations over, high levels of security cooperation with the United States. Nationalism, political turnover and an evolving international security environment can produce political opposition to U.S. military presence. But fundamental fissures

**TABLE 2: SOURCES OF POLITICAL FISSURES OVER ACCESS AND PRESENCE ARRANGEMENTS**

PRECIPITATING FACTOR	KEY EXAMPLE
Political liberalization, particularly away from a U.S.-backed regime	Philippines, 1992
Changes in political party	Japan, 2009
Accidents, incidents and crime associated with the presence of U.S. forces	South Korea, 2002
Low strategic interdependence and weak rationale for U.S. presence, particularly in the face of external pressure	Uzbekistan, 2005

in political support can cause presence and access arrangements to be terminated, scaled back or forced into burdensome and sensitive realignments – at enormous political, economic and strategic cost to the United States (See Table 2).

Leadership changes in host countries can serve as occasions to question the utility of close security ties with the United States. Breakdowns in political support can occur during periods of regime change, particularly when democratically elected leaders take the reins from U.S.-supported authoritarian regimes.<sup>18</sup> U.S. bases in Greece, the Philippines and Spain have all been closed following political liberalizations in which popularly chosen leaders sought to move away from the previous regime's close relationship with the United States.

Similar trends have also occurred in consolidated democracies, often in the wake of elections where more leftist and populist regimes have both ideological and political motivations to distance themselves from the United States by proposing revisions to treaties and agreements that undergird the bilateral security relationship.<sup>19</sup> This occurred when, after decades in opposition, the Democratic Party of Japan gained control in 2009 on a platform that included scaling back the U.S.

Marine presence in Okinawa. Today, both U.S. and Philippine officials are similarly concerned that the post-Aquino government in Manila in 2016 might be less supportive of an enhanced rotational U.S. presence in the Philippines.

Politics can threaten U.S. access and presence arrangements outside of election cycles as well, for instance in the event of accidents and incidents associated with the U.S. military. Prominent examples in Asia in recent decades include the 1995 rape of a 12-year old Japanese girl by three U.S. Marines, the 2002 accident in which two South Korean school girls were killed by a U.S. Army vehicle and the 2004 crash of a U.S. military helicopter on a university campus in Okinawa. Each of these incidents, among others, have compelled negotiations that reshaped the nature and terms of the U.S. military presence. The effects of these events are particularly acute during periods of relatively divergent threat perceptions between the United States and its partners, as was the case with South Korea in the early 2000s.<sup>20</sup>

U.S. military presence and access arrangements are also brittle when they are driven by short-term needs that do not reflect mutual strategic interests, as has been the case at times in Central Asia during the war in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

The eviction of the U.S. military from Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in 2005 came on the heels of U.S. support for international efforts to investigate human rights abuses in Uzbekistan. Tashkent's close ties with Russia and alternative sources of external financial and military support further facilitated this decision.<sup>22</sup> Similar dynamics occurred with the U.S. transit center at Manas in Kyrgyzstan, where the parliament voted in June 2013 to end the U.S. lease on the air base. Kyrgyzstan – with little to lose strategically – had repeatedly threatened to shut down the base and, in doing so, compelled the United States to more than triple its payments.<sup>23</sup>

The potential for shocks or disruptions to political support for a U.S. military presence are amplified by the growing pluralization of foreign policymaking in Asia. With a number of countries having experienced democratic transitions – or at least some degree of political liberalization – domestic politics matter more than ever in host country security policy, with more stakeholders, voices and opinion makers. Rather than being the sole purview of national security bureaucrats, policymaking is increasingly susceptible to domestic politics, public influence and interest groups.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the proliferation of information, news media and social networking has heightened the degree to which Asian governments are compelled to be more responsive to citizens' interests. The result is an unprecedented degree of politicization in defense policymaking in Asia.<sup>25</sup>

These changes in domestic politics are combined with an increasingly complex regional security environment that defies a clear organizing principle like that of the Cold War.<sup>26</sup> Countries in the region continue to rely on the stabilizing presence of the U.S. military but are wary of being drawn into a security competition between the United States and China. Concerns also persist about the intentions and durability of the U.S. rebalancing to Asia. As a result, any decision to host the U.S.

military must be weighed against the potential for diplomatic and economic blowback from Beijing.

The net effect of these trends is that the political sustainability of any overseas U.S. military presence is growing more critical.

The U.S. government has explicitly identified the need to address issues associated with domestic politics when making force posture decisions in Asia. Most often, however, this has been limited to ameliorating local issues associated with U.S. bases. Substantial realignments in Japan and South Korea, some starting as early as the mid-1990s, were driven in part by the desire to return land from U.S. bases and remove U.S. troops from urban centers.

Similarly, the 2004 Global Posture Review recommended further air base consolidation in Japan to reduce aggravations in the political relationship by addressing noise and safety issues associated with U.S. bases in Okinawa. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told Congress that U.S. troops “should be located in places where they are wanted, where they are welcomed and where they are needed,” adding that, “in some cases, the presence and activities of our forces grate on local populations and have become an irritant for host governments.”<sup>27</sup>

This recognition of the need to address the political element of forward-deployed U.S. forces in Asia was further underscored by the Obama administration. The current policy, as articulated by President Obama and former Secretaries Clinton and Gates, is to develop a military posture in Asia that is “geographically distributed, operationally resilient and *politically sustainable*.”<sup>28</sup> This emphasis on political sustainability was evident in continuing efforts to relocate U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam, as well as in frequent and explicit assurances that new U.S. presence arrangements in Australia and





Protesters hold a sign, on November 8, 2009, at a mass anti-U.S. base rally in Ginowan on Japan's southwestern island of Okinawa, which hosts about half the 47,000 U.S. military personnel in Japan.

(KIM KYUNG-HOON/Reuters)

Singapore would be rotational, in partnership with local forces and not supported by permanent American-only bases. The January 2012 strategic guidance noted that the United States will seek to “develop innovative, low-cost and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives, relying on exercises, rotational presence, and advisory capabilities.”<sup>29</sup>

Yet, although the need for political sustainability has been recognized by U.S. policymakers, neither the U.S. government nor outside analysts have articulated a comprehensive strategy for building a politically sustainable forward-deployed presence in Southeast Asia. As the U.S. government builds a more robust and geographically distributed military presence in Southeast Asia and Australia, political sustainability will need to weigh heavily

on the full range of decisions, including the selection of locations and assets, activities and exercises, and engagements with regional organizations, allies, emerging partners and potential adversaries.

This report provides a framework for policymakers to develop and sustain nascent access and presence arrangements in Southeast Asia and Australia. The recommendations herein will need to be adapted to local circumstances. The goal is not to provide a snapshot in time of specific political dynamics in particular countries – that is a job for country teams and intelligence analysts. Nor does this report seek to offer recommendations for operational requirements. Instead, the recommendations aim to increase political sustainability over time and across the range of current and future U.S. allies and partners in Southeast Asia and Australia.

#### IV. FRAMEWORK FOR BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A POLITICALLY SUSTAINABLE MILITARY PRESENCE

U.S. military presence and access arrangements are politically sustainable when they are supported by the broadest possible set of key stakeholders in the domestic politics of partner countries. This will vary from country to country but is likely to include some combination of political officials in ruling and opposition parties, bureaucrats in foreign policy and defense agencies, the military, the public, the media, business leaders and other elite opinion makers. Although local issues are important and refract throughout society, this definition goes far beyond the previously emphasized goals of ameliorating local concerns, avoiding urban populations and pursuing only nonpermanent rotational arrangements.

Strong political support manifests itself in the ability of the United States to achieve desired force postures while minimizing and managing political pressures and opposition to partnering with the U.S. military. When there is a powerful consensus on the importance of security relations with the United States, it becomes difficult for political opponents or social movements to meaningfully impede the deepening of security ties.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, a weak “security consensus” opens a political window to reduce or eliminate military arrangements with the United States.<sup>31</sup>

A strategy for political sustainability therefore seeks to create an affirmative rationale for U.S. military presence and to insulate that presence from potential challenges associated with political liberalization and turnover, external pressure from regional states, accidents and incidents, and changes in the regional security environment.

There is no perfect recipe for guaranteeing a politically sustainable overseas military presence, but the actions recommended in this report can

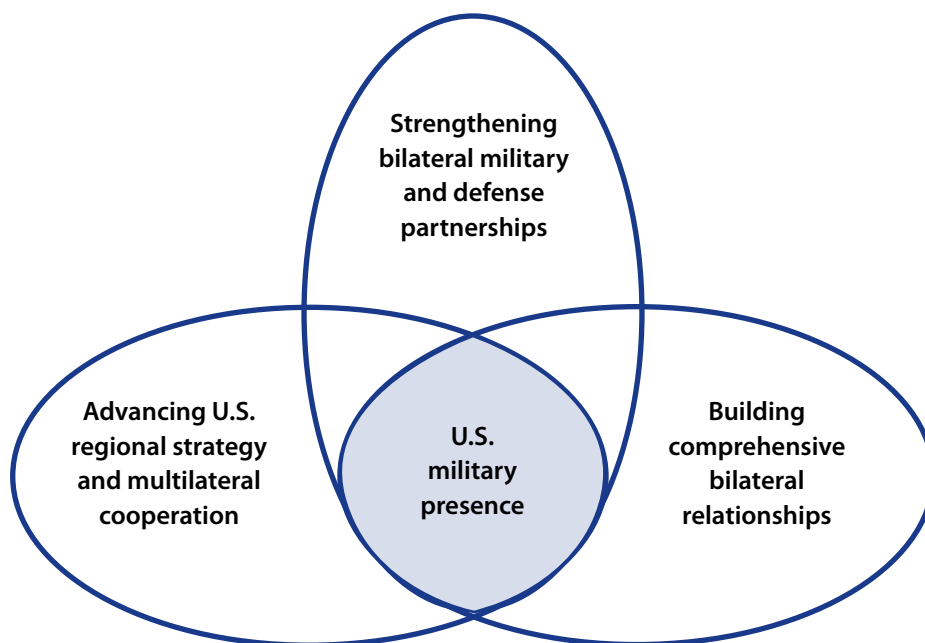
minimize the risk that political factors will lead to significant disruptions in the development of U.S. security relationships. Also embedded in this report is a word of caution that force posture arrangements should not be pursued if they cannot meet the litmus test of political sustainability.

The following analysis is derived from dozens of meetings with current and former U.S. policymakers and practitioners central to U.S. force posture decisions; workshops in Washington with leading academics, analysts and private-sector representatives; and interviews with government and military officials, members of the media, academics and other leading opinion makers in Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam.

This research repeatedly underscored the point that the United States can most effectively achieve a politically sustainable military presence in Southeast Asia and Australia by ensuring that initiatives advance a broader set of U.S. foreign policy objectives, rather than serving as independent and isolated military capabilities. Specifically, the development and implementation of presence and access arrangements should be integrated with and support three larger goals in U.S. defense and national security strategy in Asia: strengthening bilateral military and defense partnerships; building comprehensive bilateral relationships, including diplomatic and economic ties; and advancing U.S. regional strategy and multilateral cooperation (See Figure 1).

Nesting new initiatives for overseas U.S. military presence within these broader features of U.S. foreign policy increases the buy-in from key stakeholders throughout partner countries and strengthens bureaucratic and strategic linkages between discrete military activities, U.S. bilateral relations and U.S. regional policy. The following sections articulate this framework by offering principles for enhancing political sustainability.

FIGURE 1: INTEGRATING U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN BROADER FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES



### Strengthening Bilateral Military and Defense Partnerships

*Require that new force posture initiatives directly support an explicit shared vision for the future of the bilateral security relationship.*

New U.S. military arrangements in Southeast Asia and Australia must reinforce bilateral security relationships rather than being treated as isolated or independent military capabilities. A shared perception of security challenges provides a critical foundation for healthy and sustained alliance cooperation. In making force posture considerations, the development of a shared vision of the purpose and future of the relationship is a top priority that must precede tactical decisions.

Determinations about the role of the alliance or partnership should lead to common notions of bilateral mission sets and potential contributions to regional security. Only then is it appropriate to ask how posture arrangements can support these goals and to explore specific initiatives.

U.S. policymakers should not assume that this kind of forward-looking strategy is already in place between the United States and its Asian allies and partners. This is true even where countries have a shared history and common values with the United States, and even where public support for the alliance is strong.

Asian officials and strategists interviewed for this study often reported that their countries' primary incentives for partnering with the United States were to receive U.S. intelligence, obtain U.S. technologies and training and receive security assurances, sometimes in the shape of formal extended deterrence guarantees. In general, U.S. policy and strategy are not well understood in the region, and partners do not always share a common view with the United States about their own role in both the bilateral security relationship and the region at large.

Without a shared vision, differences will emerge in the agendas of the U.S. government and partner governments that complicate and delay the

eventual reaching and implementation of agreements. This calls for the shelving of tactical discussions until a relative consensus exists on the strategic purpose of the security partnership. High-level officials from both the United States and the Philippines noted that explicit efforts in 2011 to step back and engage on bigger issues about where the alliance was headed were critical in advancing discussions on a possible U.S. rotational presence.

Once this mutual understanding is reached, formal articulations of concrete next steps can be particularly useful for locking in future cooperation and providing top-down instructions on both sides. With Vietnam, although security cooperation is moving forward, critics have noted that the nations have failed to articulate a clear “plan of action” or similar roadmap with an accompanying high-level mechanism for implementation.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, the United States must spend the time and resources to develop shared perceptions about the purpose of the security relationship prior to launching any new force posture arrangements. Political-military dialogues can then produce an articulation of specific short- and long-term goals, going beyond basic principles associated with maintaining peace and stability. New access and presence arrangements should go forward only if they support these common aims.

***Ensure that new force posture initiatives address the interests of partner countries and contribute to official and public perceptions of a mutually beneficial partnership.***

In articulating U.S. goals in the region, U.S. policymakers will have to demonstrate flexibility and willingness to address key security concerns of allies and partners. This should include specific external and internal security threats, as well as nontraditional security challenges that include narcotics, trafficking in persons, natural disasters, pandemics and terrorism. A number of Asian

officials and scholars emphasized that U.S. presence and access arrangements should actively demonstrate that they are filling key capability gaps in these areas, rather than being seen as primarily addressing geopolitics and unilateral war planning.

Reinforcing official and public perceptions of partnership is critical. By highlighting the importance of bilateral activities and shared facilities, the United States can signal that it aspires to a new paradigm of partnership that eschews the “big brother” approach of previous decades.

Observers in the region still complain that U.S. officials sometimes parachute in with agreements and plans that were unilaterally drafted in Washington. On issues of sovereignty, such as Status of Forces Agreements, it is particularly important that partner governments can credibly report to their publics that their concerns were adequately addressed in negotiations with the United States.

U.S. officials should remember that military partners need to sell new presence arrangements to their own leadership and, in some instances, to their legislatures.<sup>33</sup> This requires being able to articulate tangible benefits for host nations, rather than focusing primarily on the strategic advantages for the United States. At the same time, partner governments need to emphasize their own roles in advancing the interests of the United States, such that neither side views the arrangement as a one-way street.

Clearly supporting host country interests is also important because foreign leaders can face substantial pressure from other countries in the region. Multiple Asian officials asserted privately that they can most effectively handle this external pressure when they can credibly claim that the U.S. military presence is working in their own national interest rather than simply serving U.S. strategic aims.



This calls for a regional military strategy in Southeast Asia that privileges priorities beyond near-term planning for major power war. U.S. officials admit that there remain voices within the U.S. defense establishment who continue to view the need for a more robust and dispersed U.S. military presence in Asia as primarily providing forward operating locations for unilateral U.S. military operations. This is not an acceptable long-term approach, and maximizing the flexibility and independence of U.S. forces cannot come at the cost of U.S. commitment to its partners' security interests.<sup>34</sup> Doing so places too much focus on preparing for hegemonic war (most likely against China) and runs the risk of undermining U.S. partnerships with countries that perceive themselves as facing different and more immediate security threats.<sup>35</sup>

The United States should instead play the long game of developing strong bilateral security relationships, rather than pursuing access agreements that afford a short-term military capability. At times, this will mean diverting resources away from immediate warfighting requirements and toward building politically sustainable partnerships. Assuming more risk in the near term will be necessary to maximize the likelihood that the United States will have the strongest possible access and presence arrangements to support the demanding security environment should crises arise in the future. Simply put, focusing on building partnerships today is the smartest way to maximize deterrence and warfighting power in the years and decades ahead.

This does not mean that U.S. military presence is purely a diplomatic tool. The ideal type of security cooperation exists where U.S. interests intersect with partners' interests and where U.S. military activities are politically and diplomatically sound as well as operationally relevant. Policymakers should appreciate the degree to which security cooperation contributes to U.S. interests, rather

than seeing zero-sum tradeoffs between combat readiness and building partner capacity.<sup>36</sup> With respect to the U.S. Marines, for instance, Asian militaries are interested in training in key warfighting competencies, including amphibious landings, combined arms engagements and small unit tactics.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, when contingencies do occur, more capable partners that train regularly in multinational exercises can work with the U.S. military to achieve shared strategic objectives and assume greater risk and responsibility because of the enhanced interoperability in shared tactics and synchronized communications technology.

In some cases, partners will be sufficiently weak in certain areas where the United States will need to fill key gaps for purposes of deterrence while the partners build up to a minimum credible defense. In these instances, as is the case in the Philippines in the maritime domain, enhancing U.S. warfighting capacity to deter adversaries is appropriate as long as both sides are clear that this is a temporary arrangement until the partner becomes more capable. The long-term goal for the United States should be to help build strong and independent partners.

***Pursue an evolutionary approach that takes incremental steps, avoiding rapid and large-scale initiatives even if they are viable at particular times.***

U.S. officials should take an evolutionary approach to deepening overseas military access and presence arrangements.<sup>38</sup> A long-term strategy for the United States requires patiently building relationships and partnerships that can be called on as required by the regional security environment. Rather than rushing to make big opportunistic moves, U.S. policymakers should pursue gradual and incremental steps that can be scaled up over time, such that a series of "baby steps" will accrue to provide strategic advantage in the long term.



Philippine (left) and U.S. (right) troops walk to their base after conducting a squad live fire exercise as part of the annual joint Philippine-U.S. military exercise at Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija province, north of Manila on April 11, 2013.

(TED ALJIBE/AFP/Getty Images)

The United States should ensure that new arrangements are easily digestible politically, remaining cognizant of the critical importance of how initial activities are perceived by a range of audiences in the host country. A positive initial impression can produce “demonstration effects” that open doors to additional and more ambitious agreements down the road.<sup>39</sup> This has been the case since the late 1990s in the Philippines, where despite high sensitivities about the presence of U.S. forces, U.S.-assisted operations against Abu Sayyaf in Mindanao were well received by local officials and populations and led the way for subsequent discussions about further deepening U.S.-Philippines security cooperation on counterterrorism and other operations.

This demonstration effect is important not only within the host country but also for other governments in the region that are considering the possibility of enhancing security ties with the United States. With the arrival of two littoral combat ships to be ported on a rotational basis in Changi Naval Base, Singapore is serving as a potential model for non-treaty allies interested in partnering with the United States. Singaporean officials have reported being asked by regional counterparts about how to partner effectively with the United States.

U.S. policymakers should remember that the United States is still in the process of rebuilding trust and confidence in Southeast Asia. The

region carries scars related to the Vietnam War and relative U.S. neglect toward the region during the 2000s (with the exception of counterterrorism operations). The United States thus needs to move slowly, without speed and swagger, and be attentive to the comfort levels of partner governments. Trying to make big, fundamental moves at the outset – like home porting a U.S. carrier in Perth or deploying an Army Stryker Brigade in the Philippines – are antithetical to this strategy. This evolutionary approach, which DOD officials describe as “crawl, walk, run,” ensures that military activities will not outpace the political and diplomatic foundations required to support them.<sup>40</sup>

This step-by-step approach also applies to the specific partner capabilities that the United States seeks to enhance. Rather than diving into ambitious initiatives, both sides should address key bottlenecks to more sophisticated security cooperation. These will often involve personnel and institutional issues, rather than just equipment shortages. Examples include weak information security in the Philippines and limited English capacity in the Vietnamese military, both of which must be part of any long-term partnership to build maritime domain awareness and other capabilities associated with maritime security.

### **Building Comprehensive Bilateral Relationships, Including Diplomatic and Economic Ties**

*Ensure that U.S. policymaking, negotiations and engagement on posture issues occur within the broader context of alliance management, active diplomacy and official White House guidance.*

The deepening of security ties is closely connected to broader political relationships in that it both stems from and feeds back into the overall health of bilateral ties. Posture decisions therefore cannot be viewed in strictly military terms; they should be made within the context of active diplomacy and alliance management.<sup>41</sup> Minor operational benefits

are clearly a net negative if they lead to political rifts that harm the long-term development of more robust security ties.

Force posture decisions should be informed by an active understanding of the political sensitivities and opportunities in partner countries. This underscores the vital role of State Department officials both in Washington and in U.S. embassies in Southeast Asia and Australia. Although some officials at the Pentagon reject the characterization, a number of officials in DOD, the State Department, the White House and U.S. embassies overseas readily admit that DOD officials have often been in the lead on posture negotiations in ways that ultimately privilege military and operational priorities over diplomatic and political considerations.<sup>42</sup>

Part of this is the result of DOD’s predominance of personnel and resources, but State Department officials report that they are often brought in too late in the planning process for regional engagement strategies and are primarily given reactive supporting roles, rather than proactively making policy.

Bilateral force posture negotiations must be moved out of the narrow military-to-military realm. Joint bilateral dialogues with officials from the State and Defense Departments drive policy coordination in Washington and ensure that both military and political interests of partner countries are represented. Such “2+2” dialogues also promote important buy-in from country teams at relevant embassies. U.S. officials reported that the establishment of a 2+2 mechanism with the Philippines, for instance, has helped to improve the quality of bilateral discussions around force posture issues and led to breakthroughs on the potential for shared facilities.

This interagency cooperation should be replicated wherever the United States is seeking new military access and presence arrangements. U.S. diplomats in the region can facilitate these institutional



linkages by actively reporting on the political dimensions of military partnerships with the United States.

The State Department can also boost its role by maximizing its use of the limited planning assets it does possess. The Policy Planning Office should be a key player in articulating long-term strategic visions with allies and partners. It is unacceptable that policy planning dialogues the State Department has led with counterparts in potential partner nations like Vietnam have atrophied because the U.S. side has focused on direct support and operational tasks, such as speechwriting and preparing for high-level meetings.

Meanwhile, official White House guidance is sorely needed to ensure that military and operational planning is appropriately in sync with diplomatic and political goals. Decisions about U.S. access, presence and activities should be made in the context of an official and formal White House strategy for the rebalancing to Asia that can harness all elements of national power and guide the diplomatic and military agencies responsible for implementing the policy.

Many of the people interviewed for this report noted the need for formal strategic guidance to help implement, monitor and assess the political goals associated with U.S. security cooperation in Asia. Members of Congress made this same point to incoming National Security Adviser Susan Rice.<sup>43</sup> There is widespread agreement among U.S. officials that the lack of formal guidance from the White House has at times limited the efficiency and effectiveness of U.S. military engagement. The lack of an explicit national strategy means that DOD and military officials are left to infer guidance from high-level speeches and articles, which U.S. officials admit can lead to both misinterpretation and “cherry picking.” The 2012 DOD strategic guidance is an important document but is not specific enough to help policymakers and practitioners

prioritize competing interests.<sup>44</sup> The result is that U.S. officials on the ground in partner countries and in DOD report a piecemeal, rather than strategic, approach to U.S. security cooperation.

U.S. policymakers should also be cognizant of the manner in which U.S. foreign policy elsewhere in the world will shape the ease with which foreign leaders can readily partner with the United States. In the years ahead, a number of countries in the region will continue to associate the U.S. military with costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; this is particularly true for nations like Australia that were leading contributors to those wars.

The U.S. government should explore ways to help partner countries deal with the opportunities and challenges associated with reintegrating veterans into society and other domestic issues associated with the end of more than a decade of war. Officials from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs should consider joining State Department and DOD dialogues with partners in Asia to discuss issues, such as mental health care, where the United States has developed significant experience and expertise in veterans’ care and reintegration.

Finally, U.S. officials will at times need a thick skin when issues related to the U.S. presence become overly and sometimes unfairly politicized. The U.S. government should expect a process of “two steps forward, one step back” while partner governments figure out how to manage the politics of deepening ties with the United States. Such behaviors will be particularly likely during election seasons, as was the case when the Philippine government antagonized U.S. officials by being highly critical after the *USS Guardian* accidentally ran aground on a reef off the central coast of the Philippines. Similarly, countries will continue to balance their relations with China, sometimes by canceling or delaying agreed-upon activities with the United States. In general, this type of backsliding should be taken with a diplomatic grain of salt and not viewed as an overall



statement about how much foreign governments value their partnerships with the United States.

*Take an inclusive and transparent approach to engaging partners on force posture issues across a broad spectrum of political actors, including lawmakers, opposition figures and local communities.*

The incorporation of political actors into discussions on force posture decisions and U.S. military strategy in Asia should go beyond partner militaries and ruling governments. Lawmakers and future leaders should also be involved. This is particularly true where legislatures appropriate funds for force posture initiatives and approve the legal arrangements that govern the U.S. military presence.

U.S. officials should also engage members of leading opposition parties who work on foreign policy and defense issues. This policy of “political hedging” strengthens the ability of bilateral security cooperation to endure through significant changes in the political landscapes of partner countries.<sup>45</sup> This is particularly important because knowledge of defense and alliance issues is relatively limited in Southeast Asia, especially in political parties without recent experience as the ruling party.

Sustained engagement with outside political actors over time can create a better understanding of the purpose and benefits of partnering with the United States and potentially prevent the type of foreign policy realignment that occurred, for instance, when the Democratic Party of Japan finally led the Japanese government in 2009. This process should begin early, rather than waiting for political turnover to occur. This is the case even in countries such as Singapore where security cooperation with the United States is not a hot-bottom domestic political issue and many regard opposition rule as unlikely in the near term.

A more inclusive political approach should also include engagement with the local communities that are most directly affected by U.S. military

presence. U.S. officials are well aware of the need to minimize the noise, traffic, environmental problems and other issues associated with the presence of foreign troops. As former Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Japan James Kelly said of the actions of individual U.S. troops in Japan, “behavior is a strategic issue, and that poor conduct can have a significant and lasting effect on the alliance and our continued presence here.”<sup>46</sup> Incidents and accidents can quickly infect bilateral political relations and often create disputes between local and national governments.

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The United States has found it useful to provide institutionalized roles for local officials to raise concerns with political and military officials from the U.S. and host governments.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, problems have arisen when civil society actors lack formal channels and instead turn to protests, the media and collective action to apply pressure and influence decisions.<sup>48</sup>

Transparency and public education are critical to garnering local support and acceptance of U.S. military presence.<sup>49</sup> Much of this should be done by partner governments, particularly on sensitive issues related to sovereignty and local jurisdiction. Interviews with politicians, the media and other opinion makers revealed significant misunderstanding and concern about the legal agreements governing the rights of U.S. troops in host countries, as defined by Visiting Forces Agreements and Status of Forces Agreements. This confusion often fuels conspiracy theories and hostility toward the potential for greater U.S. military access.

U.S. military personnel in partner countries can help to build support and alleviate concerns about their presence by proactively engaging in community outreach. Local officials in Darwin, Australia, have been impressed by the effort and time devoted by U.S. Marines to community service and local activities. U.S. officials on the ground can also highlight the economic benefits accrued to localities that host U.S. forces. Because this cannot be choreographed from Washington or Hawaii, the quality of personnel on the frontlines of local engagement is critical.

The United States should avoid involvement in contentious political issues in host countries that pit key constituencies against each other and risk politicizing the security relationship with the United States. For example, Australian diplomats described the maritime dimension of dealing with asylum seekers as a “third rail” that the United States would be wise to avoid. New U.S. military activities in the region should occur primarily on issues that are likely to survive the normal turnover of ruling parties.

Eschewing politicization also requires avoiding – as much as possible – arrangements that could unnecessarily ignite sovereignty and consent issues. This includes showing flexibility on the level of knowledge and concurrence about U.S. military

activities afforded to partners. For example, Australian interlocutors, official and unofficial, warned of eventual political backlash if the United States toes a hard line on the rules governing the potential deployment of strategic bombers to Royal Australian Air Force Base Tindal.

***Maintain robust and reliable high-level U.S. engagement with regional states and institutions and couple force posture announcements and activities with investment, trade and development initiatives.***

The United States will need to continue reassuring Southeast Asia that its commitment to the region is strong and enduring. Amid perceptions of U.S. retrenchment, defense cuts, political partisanship and war fatigue, Asian allies and partners are voicing concerns about whether the United States can continue its role as a principal guarantor of regional security.

In this context, the importance of consistent engagement cannot be overstated. Many people in Southeast Asia view U.S. attention to their region as waxing and waning over time, creating harmful impressions of a self-interested and opportunistic United States.

These concerns were recently reinforced by what many in the region viewed as insufficient U.S. support for the Philippines during the Scarborough Reef crisis, particularly as compared to much stronger expressions of U.S. power during previous crises that involved Chinese challenges to Japan and Taiwan. Some officials also worry that the region’s strategic value to the United States will diminish if Washington and Beijing work out a new bilateral framework for great power relations.

Amid these concerns, U.S. officials will have to commit to a consistent and reliable engagement calendar if they expect partner governments to make costly – and at times politically risky – decisions to deepen security cooperation with the United States. DOD

officials should articulate a baseline set of activities in the region in which the United States will participate at appropriate levels regardless of political parties and election cycles in the United States. This could include, for instance, attendance by the U.S. secretary of defense at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore and the biennial ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+).

The manner in which the United States supports and engages regional institutions is also critical. High-level U.S. officials must consistently participate in what the region considers to be essential multilateral gatherings, including the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit.

Participation in these regional forums provides excellent opportunities for U.S. officials to explain U.S. policy and intentions in public and private settings. The United States should further explore opportunities for ASEAN leaders to engage with U.S. officials outside of the administration and military, including members of Congress, governors and mayors.<sup>50</sup>

Outside the realm of defense policy, force posture initiatives should be developed in concert with a broader engagement strategy that includes robust economic initiatives. Asian diplomats wondered aloud why the U.S. treasury secretary and U.S. trade representative were far less visible in Asia than their counterparts from the State Department and Pentagon. Long-term sustainability of the U.S. presence in the region requires taking actions that undermine the oft-heard dichotomy of the United States as the regional security provider and China as the leading economic partner. This dichotomy heightens the degree to which countries, even allies like Australia and South Korea, see a contradiction between their security cooperation with the United States and their broader economic interests.

Marrying force posture initiatives with economic endeavors would help to alleviate these concerns

and instead build an alternative narrative that security and economics are complementary. Maximizing political sustainability ultimately requires genuine partnerships across economic, political and military arenas. Both the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Lower Mekong Initiative provide excellent avenues for the United States to demonstrate its commitment to regional economic growth and development.

### **Advancing U.S. Regional Strategy and Multilateral Cooperation**

*Ensure that force posture initiatives contribute directly to ASEAN-centered and other region-wide activities, using multilateral mechanisms to engage China and manage U.S.-China competition.*

Consistent with broader U.S. goals in Asia, the forward-deployed U.S. military presence can help to shape the regional environment in ways that both contribute to U.S. interests and increase political support in the region for U.S. leadership.<sup>51</sup> U.S. cooperation with allies and partners to build a more robust regional order also presents a vital opportunity to build an affirmative agenda for security ties rather than basing relationships on shifting and sometimes controversial threat dynamics.

The political sustainability of the U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia and Australia will hinge in part on the contribution of U.S. forces to region-wide and multilateral initiatives. This requires looking at force posture decisions in contexts beyond the deepening of bilateral ties with partner countries. Governments in the region that face internal and external pressure over developing closer partnerships with the United States can more effectively explain and defend their decisions if they can argue that U.S. forces are having a positive effect on regional peace and prosperity and are helping to build a regional security architecture based on rules-based institutions and regional norms of behavior.



President Barack Obama stands hand in hand with ASEAN leaders during the ASEAN-U.S. leaders' meeting at the Peace Palace in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, November 19, 2012.

(CAROLYN KASTER/Associated Press)

The current demand for region-wide security cooperation in Southeast Asia is strong. This is largely due to an evolving regional security environment shadowed by concerns about the rise of China, questions about the staying power of the United States and broader recognition that the region faces a variety of transnational threats that require collective approaches. At the same time, the modernization of most militaries throughout the region is highlighting the need for rules of the road to govern increasingly crowded and contentious air and maritime domains.

These forces create opportunities for the United States to build stronger support for its military presence in the region by assisting the development

of ASEAN and ASEAN-centered institutions.

Although U.S. officials are sometimes frustrated with the pace and scope of ASEAN activities, the maturation of the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ADMM+ mechanism are providing unprecedented forms of regional security cooperation.

Multilateral activities also provide opportunities for Asian countries to work more closely with one another; overall, this benefits the United States by strengthening deterrence and interoperability in the region.<sup>52</sup>

The five expert working groups of the ADMM+ (humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, military medicine, peacekeeping, counterterrorism



and maritime security) are areas where the United States has significant expertise and capabilities. Asian diplomats underscored that these functional areas also represent issues where nations are most comfortable working with the United States. Multilateral institutions provide safe diplomatic platforms for governments to engage the United States when they might be reluctant to participate in similar activities on a purely bilateral basis. The United States should leverage these opportunities and ensure that every new force posture initiative in Southeast Asia and Australia can contribute directly to ASEAN-sponsored activities.

Some regional states are wary of participating in military exercises with the United States outside of the ASEAN context. One possible workaround is to add humanitarian assistance and disaster relief elements to existing exercises, so that states can participate without the appearance of joining a U.S.-led warfighting exercise. This has already occurred at Exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand and should be considered for future Balikatan exercises in the Philippines.

In addition, multilateral institutions offer vital mechanisms to more effectively manage both the risks and opportunities associated with the rise of China. Countries are clearly worried about being subjected to China's economic, political and military pressure, and Beijing's treatment of Tokyo, Manila and others in recent years has offered clear indication of China's willingness to use coercive measures to achieve political aims.

Regional states are well aware that they can best retain their bargaining power as a collective entity, rather than being picked off individually. This philosophy has undergirded ASEAN's approach of developing an internal consensus on a code of conduct for the South China Sea before entering into negotiations with China. Although ASEAN lacks enforcement mechanisms, regional countries

tend to share the view that the institution still performs a restraining function on the unilateral use of force.

In addition to providing a forum for regional states to bind together, regional institutions can work to prevent and manage disputes by moving burgeoning crises – over maritime or territorial rights, for instance – from the military domain to one of legal and diplomatic wrangling. Officials in Southeast Asia therefore almost uniformly support U.S. military activities that strengthen the capacity and legitimacy of regional institutions.

These institutions also provide venues to manage U.S.-China competition. Nearly every country in the region is quick to assert that it does not want to have to choose between Washington and Beijing. Hostile relations between these great powers would undermine the relative peace and prosperity that has reigned for decades. By creating a diplomatic cushion between the United States and China, regional institutions can attract both sides to accept and engage in discussions and activities that might be more difficult if one capital or the other were perceived as being the primary leader or beneficiary of the effort.

Multilateral institutions also create avenues for weaving China more closely into the regional security architecture, building habits of cooperation and reinforcing norms of behavior. The inclusiveness of the ASEAN Regional Forum and ADMM+ send important signals that the door is open for a China that is willing to support a rules-based system. If U.S. forces are supporting these regional initiatives, it will weaken the effectiveness of accusations from Beijing that the United States is seeking to contain China and that countries should therefore limit their security cooperation with the United States.

In addition to playing a role in managing relations with China, U.S. military engagement with

regional institutions can help to dampen concerns about how the presence of U.S. forces will affect other sensitive regional dynamics, such as those between Australia and Indonesia or Singapore and Malaysia.

While participating in multilateral discussions and activities, the United States should continue contributing to areas clearly outside the domain of geopolitics. Most regional states will grow wary of U.S. engagement if they perceive it as focused primarily on sensitive and contentious issues like the South China Sea.

Supporting a more varied set of security issues in regional forums will also have positive ancillary effects on the ability of U.S. officials to defend ongoing engagement with ASEAN. U.S. officials and their Asian counterparts have rightly expressed concerns that U.S. participation in regional efforts is predicated on the idea that these mechanisms will grow more robust and tackle tougher issues over time. This can run counter to the slow and sometimes overly sensitive ASEAN way. A compromise solution here is for the United States to push progress on multiple issues, some less sensitive than others, so that U.S. diplomats and policymakers can credibly argue that they are making incremental progress on advancing the region's security architecture rather than pushing too hard and futilely trying to outpace the appetite for regional cooperation on highly contested issues.

Finally, as U.S. military forces in Asia contribute to the construction of a rules-based regional order, it is incumbent on allies and partners to participate in, and at times lead, this process. Partners like Singapore and allies like Australia have regional influence that extends well beyond the size of their population or their military power. The ability to strengthen norms and institutions is far more about political will and legitimacy than defense budgets and military forces.

Regional states can leverage U.S. military presence to convene multilateral meetings and exercises to build stronger and more inclusive partnerships. The deployment of U.S. Marines in Darwin, Australia, provides an excellent platform for Australia to host exercises or dialogues with the United States and others, including China, Indonesia and Singapore. Similarly, Vietnam's announcement in July 2013 that it would begin participating in U.N. peacekeeping operations opens the door for Hanoi to host a training exercise on peacekeeping operations with the United States and China. U.S. officials can underscore that proactive participation from regional states is likely to prevent the kind of overly competitive regional security environment that all nations are trying to avoid.

***Take measures to reduce the likelihood that crises involving U.S. allies and partners occur because of accidents, incidents and miscalculation.***

As the U.S. military diversifies its forward-deployed presence in the region, U.S. policymakers should ensure that enhanced U.S. presence does not increase the likelihood of being drawn into an unintended regional conflict.

Minimizing the probability of entrapment puts a priority on risk reduction mechanisms in the region. U.S. forces, in collaboration with U.S. diplomats, can contribute to the development of multilateral confidence-building measures, such as crisis hotlines, as well as measures to enhance maritime safety, such as incidents-at-sea agreements. Current piecemeal bilateral agreements – for instance, between the Philippines and Vietnam and the Philippines and Taiwan – could be built upon or used as templates with additional partners. At the same time, the United States should continue to support the development of an ASEAN-China Code of Conduct for the South China Sea.

New U.S. posture initiatives should also contribute to stronger maritime domain awareness in the region. More public and private information about activities at sea can have the stabilizing effect of deterring assertiveness and helping to manage crises once they occur.

Better situational awareness would allow states to better manage their actions at sea. For instance, the 2012 standoff at Scarborough Reef between the Philippines and China occurred in part because Manila sent a military vessel to arrest Chinese fishermen without the knowledge that there were Chinese Maritime Surveillance ships nearby. Had the Philippines been able to see China's activity around the reef, it might have recalibrated its efforts to deal with the illegal fisherman.

Maritime-domain awareness, however, will require a level of information security and secure communications that currently does not exist in most U.S. allies and partners in Southeast Asia. This underscores the importance of starting with critical personnel and institutional bottlenecks before rushing to provide advanced capabilities.

Finally, enhanced security ties call for in-depth strategic dialogues about intentions and expectations. U.S. alliance management should continue to deter adventurous behavior by emphasizing that augmented U.S. access and presence does not alter the nature of U.S. security guarantees or signal a greater desire to see partners challenge China or other countries. Public rebukes of partners if they engage in overly assertive actions can reinforce the notion that the U.S. presence in Asia is designed to enhance stability, not provoke or enable conflict.

***Develop a coordinated communications strategy for audiences in partner countries and the region.***

Although U.S. actions on force posture decisions will speak louder than words, the United States, both alone and in concert with allies and partners, must also develop coordinated

communications and messaging strategies.<sup>53</sup> U.S. military presence in the region is the most visible manifestation of U.S. power and has received prominent media attention as part of the U.S. rebalancing to Asia.<sup>54</sup> New force posture initiatives, like those being launched in Southeast Asia and Australia, provide unique opportunities to build an affirmative narrative about the purpose and role of the U.S. military in the region. This is particularly important given persistent complaints that U.S. policy in Asia is overly focused on military issues.

Appropriate messaging should be designed for the rollout of any particular initiative, cognizant of the political sensitivities in the host government and in the region. U.S. officials admitted that both they and their Australian counterparts underestimated the reactions from countries like Indonesia and China to the announcement of the Marine deployment in Darwin. The same officials suggested the U.S. government could do a better job explaining the intent of U.S. force posture revisions to third-party countries. Bilateral plans that outline who calls foreign capitals, and in what order, before force posture announcements are not a sufficient communications strategy.

The demand for big “deliverables” for high-level visits should not trump the generally more important priority of not overemphasizing the novelty or significance of particular force posture agreements. New initiatives are best explained in the context of the broader security relationship and described as regular activities that are occurring elsewhere in the country or with other partners in the region.

The development of stronger bilateral intra-Asian security ties also creates a diplomatic cushion for allies and partners to deepen security ties with the United States. U.S. officials have noted that stronger ties between the Philippines and regional partners – including a Visiting Forces Agreement

### Review of Key Principles for Enhancing Political Sustainability

#### Strengthening bilateral military and defense partnerships

- Require that new force posture initiatives directly support an explicit shared vision for the future of the bilateral security relationship
- Ensure that new force posture initiatives address the interests of partner countries and contribute to official and public perceptions of a mutually beneficial partnership
- Pursue an evolutionary approach that takes incremental steps, avoiding rapid and large-scale initiatives even if viable at particular moments in time

#### Building comprehensive bilateral relationships, including diplomatic and economic ties

- Ensure that U.S. policymaking, negotiations and engagement on posture issues occur within the broader context of alliance management, active diplomacy and official White House guidance
- Take an inclusive and transparent approach to engaging partners on force posture issues across a broad spectrum of political actors, including lawmakers, opposition figures and local communities
- Maintain robust and reliable high-level U.S. engagement with regional states and institutions, and couple force posture announcements and activities with investment, trade and development initiatives

#### Advancing U.S. regional strategy and multilateral cooperation

- Ensure that force posture initiatives contribute directly to ASEAN-centered and other region-wide activities, using multilateral mechanisms to engage China and manage U.S.-China competition.
- Take measures to reduce the likelihood that crises involving U.S. allies and partners occur because of accidents, incidents and miscalculation
- Develop a coordinated communications strategy for audiences in partner countries and the region

with Australia and discussions of a rotational Japanese presence – assist in blunting regional and domestic criticism of Manila about ties with the United States. Vietnamese cooperation with Japan and the Philippines can be similarly helpful in setting the context for strengthening ties with the United States. U.S. communication strategies should highlight how increased U.S. access and presence are part of this broader regional trend of enhanced security cooperation.

Obama administration officials have been wise to underscore the rotational nature of new arrangements in Australia and Singapore and to explain that the United States is not seeking new permanent bases in the region.

Attention to strategic communications by country teams and U.S. officials in the region must be sustained beyond the rollout. In conjunction with force posture announcements, officials at the deputy assistant secretary level in the Defense and State Departments should consider doing a joint “road show” in partner countries to speak directly with key officials and nongovernmental opinion makers in partner countries.



## V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The United States can enhance the political sustainability of its military force posture initiatives in Southeast Asia and Australia by ensuring that the development and implementation of presence and access arrangements are integrated with, and contribute to: strengthening U.S. bilateral military and defense partnerships; building comprehensive bilateral relationships, including diplomatic and economic ties; and advancing U.S. regional strategy and multilateral cooperation.”

Those steps will require a long-term evolutionary approach that emphasizes building mutually beneficial partnerships, addressing partners’ interests and supporting a shared vision of the direction of the security relationships. They will also necessitate an integrated approach in which U.S. engagement on posture issues includes strong diplomatic elements and occurs in the context of robust U.S. engagement on military, economic and political issues. Finally, U.S. posture initiatives should directly support ASEAN-centered and other multilateral efforts while contributing to the development of risk-reduction and confidence-building measures that decrease the likelihood of inadvertent conflict.

The **White House** has a central role to play in enhancing the political sustainability of the U.S. military presence in Asia because it carries the authority of the president and is the locus of interagency coordination. The National Security Staff (NSS) should prepare a formal strategy for the U.S. rebalancing to Asia, signed by the president, to provide a single official source on U.S. interests, strategy and priorities in the region. The document should serve as the primary guidance for diplomats, policymakers and military officials tackling various efforts to strengthen and diversify U.S. security partnerships in the region.

U.S. policy should be multifaceted in both development and implementation. The NSS should convene interagency working groups on force posture initiatives in Southeast Asia and Australia to ensure that the relevant U.S. agencies are working in sync on what are invariably sensitive political and regional issues. White House-led interagency coordination and articulation of a high-level vision could provide direction for the agencies that carry out the strategy. This interagency coordination should ensure that force posture initiatives are developed and announced alongside parallel efforts in bilateral trade, investment and economic development.

The NSS should develop interagency communications strategies to ensure that audiences in partner countries and throughout the region understand the context, content and intentions associated with enhancing the U.S. military presence in the region. Communications strategies should be comprehensive in articulating the rotational nature of U.S. initiatives, describing the mutually beneficial nature of the partnerships (with explicit descriptions of interests served) and underscoring the degree to which security cooperation already exists between the partner country and the United States, as well as between the United States and other countries in the region.

Finally, the NSS should take the lead on tempering the degree to which force posture announcements and initiatives are used to feed the demand for deliverables associated with high-level visits – particularly if there are few additional initiatives of note outside the military realm.

The **State and Defense Departments** have a shared responsibility to ensure that U.S. engagement on force posture issues has a truly political-military dimension. An effective bureaucratic forcing function to achieve this has been the establishment of 2+2 strategic dialogues between key members from each department and their counterparts in

partner countries. The United States should create or sustain such mechanisms at the assistant secretary level or higher with each country in which it seeks to increase the U.S. military presence. These arrangements should be institutionalized and made routine, rather being part of an ad hoc or event-based approach.

Working-level preparations for these strategic dialogues should build toward a shared vision of the purpose of the security partnership for each side individually and bilaterally. That vision should then serve as a launching point for developing clear short-, medium- and long-term goals for bilateral security cooperation. Force posture initiatives should go forward only if they comport with those strategic and temporal objectives.

Coordination between the State Department and DOD should continue on the ground in partner countries, engaging opposition figures, lawmakers and local community representatives. DOD and military officials visiting from Washington should engage beyond official military-to-military discussions. U.S. embassies can play a key role in convening appropriate and diverse roundtables for visiting U.S. officials.

The State Department, given its relative disadvantage in resources, will need to ensure that the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs and the Office of Policy Planning are actively engaged on posture issues with DOD counterparts and with relevant U.S. embassy officials and foreign diplomats. Political officers in embassies can actively use cables to highlight the political dimensions of potential military initiatives. With a view on the broader political relationship, State Department officials can also recommend to DOD and NSS staff when and how representatives from USAID, the Department of Energy, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative and the Treasury can play positive roles in bringing policy tools to bear.

Meanwhile, DOD officials should take the lead on risk-reduction and confidence-building measures to ensure that enhanced U.S. presence and U.S. contributions to building partner capacity do not lead to unintended conflict as a result of accidents, incidents or miscalculation.

**The U.S. military**, and specifically those responsible for developing the Theater Security Cooperation Plan, play a leading role in setting the context and tone of the U.S. presence in the region. Going forward, as articulated above, official White House strategy and dialogues led by the State and Defense Departments should offer more specific guidance than has been provided to date to inform U.S. plans for military engagement and cooperation. With that guidance, Pacific Command can better prioritize key partnerships and the specific objectives within them.

Theater engagement plans should also underscore the importance of an evolutionary approach that avoids big muscle movements. Pacific Command can further help to identify the appropriate capabilities for security engagement and endorse efforts to ensure adequate resources for multilateral engagements.

Security cooperation plans will also have to ensure that sufficient resources are devoted to region-wide ASEAN-led activities, while exploring options to engage China in trilateral and multilateral settings.

Similarly, **partner countries** play a vital role across several aspects of the political sustainability question. In many instances, partner governments are far better suited than the United States to be the primary communicators to their publics and to other governments in the region about the extent and purpose of any enhanced cooperation with the United States. U.S. security partners can also convene trilateral and multilateral activities that bring U.S. forward-deployed troops together with their counterparts from other regional powers, including China.

### **Do These Recommendations Apply Elsewhere?**

Compared with other regions in which the United States has an overseas military presence, Southeast Asia has several defining characteristics: a predominance of democracies, a small to nonexistent U.S. military footprint, a major rising power in the region and burgeoning regional institutions. Further study would be required to assess whether the recommendations herein are directly applicable to political sustainability outside the Southeast Asian context.

In addition, partners may be better suited than the United States to take pro-active roles in developing multilateral risk-reduction and confidence-building measures in the region. U.S. officials should make clear that they expect security partners to assume greater leadership and responsibilities in managing the political and regional security issues associated with enhanced U.S. military presence.

### **Conclusion**

The nascent nature of U.S. force posture initiatives in Southeast Asia and Australia provides the United States with a strategic window in the coming decade to shape the prevailing narrative about the purpose and consequence of American power in the region.

Ultimately, the ability of the U.S. military to reach its desired end state in Asia will rest in large part on the politics of partner countries and the region as a whole. At this initial stage of establishing new arrangements for U.S. military access and presence, it is critical that U.S. policymakers weigh heavily how particular actions will affect political support for developing and deepening security cooperation with the United States.

Doors will continue to open if the U.S. military presence is perceived as building partner capacity,

contributing to shared challenges and strengthening regional institutions. This requires clear guidance from Washington, as well as a mutual understanding with partners about how the U.S. military contributes to common security goals and broader bilateral relationships. Another necessity is robust and reliable high-level U.S. engagement in the region that integrates defense, diplomacy and economics.

Alternatively, the United States will make less progress over time if the U.S. military presence is coupled with episodic engagement and is seen primarily as a self-interested effort to enhance U.S. warfighting capacity. Given dynamics in the region today, countries will balk at, if not reverse, deeper security ties with the United States if the U.S. military presence exacerbates rivalry and competition in ways that do not comport with the partner countries' economic and foreign policy interests.

U.S. power and leadership – in concert with capable partners and strong regional institutions – will be critical to perpetuating peace and prosperity in Asia. The forward-deployed U.S. military presence is a vital component of U.S. efforts to advance this future, which will rest in part on the political sustainability of U.S. presence and access arrangements in the years ahead.

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### **Center for a New American Security**

1152 15th Street, NW  
Suite 950  
Washington, DC 20005

TEL 202.457.9400  
FAX 202.457.9401  
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TEL 202.457.9400  
FAX 202.457.9401  
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