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14. ABSTRACT Southeast Asian countries have tended to focus on bilateral relations since the end of the cold war. However, non-traditional security problems ranging from regional environmental haze to arms trafficking and terrorism, are not confined to borders and are multinational in nature. This text will consider the prevailing United States views, as well as those of Southeast Asian nations and China concerning this balance between bilateralism and multilateralism. It will also address specific potential areas where USPACOM collaboration in a multilateral environment may pay significant dividends. It will elaborate on recommendations to focus on multilateral exercises and operations, especially those involving humanitarian assistance and information sharing that can lead to increased stability and mutual regional interdependence.						
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Bilateral Vs. Multilateral Approach In Southeast Asia

by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature _____

17 May, 2005

Since the end of the Cold War, United States security initiatives with Southeast Asian countries have tended to focus primarily on bilateral relations. While a veritable web of bilateral relationships exists among Southeast Asian countries, those involving the United States have traditionally been of a “hub and spoke” nature with the United States as the “hub” and others in the region as “spokes.” Historically, this has favored the United States because it has been the dominant power in each relationship.¹ However, non-traditional security problems in Southeast Asia, ranging from regional environmental haze issues to arms trafficking, terrorism, and in some cases, insurgency movements, are not confined to borders and are multinational in nature. As they continue to grow in frequency and importance, tracking these threats will require cooperation and coordination among many nations within the region.² United States policy makers will need to determine whether to rely on bilateral relationships with traditional military allies, seek greater involvement with multilateral regional initiatives, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), or achieve a balance between the two approaches.³ This paper will consider the prevailing United States views as well as those of Southeast Asian Nations, and China concerning this balance between bilateralism and multilateralism. It will also address potential areas, ranging from intelligence sharing to counterterrorism, where the United States military collaboration in a multilateral environment may pay significant dividends.

The debate between bilateral and multilateral approaches in Southeast Asia has taken on greater significance. Increased United States interest in multilateralism as a mechanism for security in Southeast Asia coincides with the region’s rising importance to America’s economy and security. The most recent Quadrennial Defense Review

advocates shifting the focus of United States military power away from Europe toward Asia.⁴ However, security concerns in Asia are unique. While failing states and radical Islam are the primary concerns in Europe, security concerns in Southeast Asia are often more traditional, focusing on resource and international boundary disputes – issues that do not always lend themselves easily to a multilateral approach.⁵

At the national political level, United States decision makers have typically focused on bilateral security relationships with Southeast Asian countries, while multilateral relationships have tended to expand at the level of routine military training, exercises and operations.⁶ This trend does not necessarily reflect United States' preferences so much as existing realities within the region. Although successful national-level multilateral security relationships within the region would tend to have a stabilizing influence, and while many in the United States advocate increased multilateralism in Southeast Asia at the national political level, most Southeast Asian nations wish to be viewed as independent and many want to be leaders of the region.⁷ And, while the United States may encourage multilateralism, bilateral arrangements will probably continue to dominate, at least to some degree, relationships at the national political level because Southeast Asian nations are comfortable with them and view them as responsible for the stability and economic prosperity of Southeast Asia.⁸ Conversely, day-to-day military relationships often occur with less visibility and fanfare. Consequently, routine military relationships are not usually as impacted by national pride and do not usually have a *direct* effect on the economy. However, multilateral military cooperation at the theater level and below breeds mutual familiarity, respect, and reliance, which have great potential for positively influencing regional security and stability, both of which are

integral to a strong regional and even global economy. The United States Pacific Command's (USPACOM) continued support for regional cooperation initiatives and its ability to leverage real world events such as the Global War on Terrorism and humanitarian relief for tsunami victims can enhance the likelihood that multilateralism will be successful in Southeast Asia.

Shifting focus in Southeast Asia to multilateralism, however, even at lower levels, is not a simple matter. From the United States perspective, there are additional pressures for encouraging bilateralism in Southeast Asia beyond the advantages of United States dominance in traditional "hub and spoke" relationships described above. One concern is that as Southeast Asian states depend more on each other for assistance and cooperation, the United States may gradually become an outsider in regional politics, especially if these nations elect to ally with China.⁹ Even the United States military is not immune from pressure to maintain bilateral relationships in Asia. USPACOM, Seventh Fleet and United States forces based in South Korea all owe some of the rationale for their existence to bilateral alliances. And the United States armed services, especially the Navy, have a vested interest in the continuation of bilateral alliance relationships that stress the need for United States presence over multilateral security.¹⁰ Finally, thanks to unique bilateral arrangements with Japan and South Korea, both of whom subsidize the costs of maintaining United States forward presence (48,000 troops in Japan and 37,000 in South Korea), returning military personnel and equipment back to the United States would save little money unless these forces were also demobilized.¹¹

These sources of bureaucratic friction and others like them must be overcome, or at least taken into account, in order for multilateralism to be a successful security

mechanism in Southeast Asia. Fortunately, multilateral and bilateral approaches in the region are not always mutually exclusive. Because America's commitment to Asia will continue to rest on the security guaranteed by the continued presence of forward deployed United States forces, multilateral initiatives will have to complement, rather than replace current bilateral ties. The United States Defense Department's East Asia Strategy report of 1998 states, "The United States views all of these multilateral mechanisms, built upon the foundation of solid bilateral relationships and continued United States military presence in the region, as playing an increasingly important role in regional affairs in the future."¹² While realists may argue that successful, consensus-based multilateral processes would result in a loss of influence for all participating nations (most importantly, the United States), when properly balanced with traditional bilateral ties, the overall advantages to regional security offered by multilateral solutions to transnational issues justify some loss of direct United States influence.

From the perspective of the Southeast Asian states, there are a number of impediments to increased multilateral security cooperation. The idea of a security community is alien to the region. As already noted above, desire for independence and regional leadership on the part of many Southeast Asian states are stumbling blocks. Persisting bilateral tensions and territorial disputes have also served to undermine efforts to develop a stabilized security community in Southeast Asia. Points of interstate territorial friction include the Indonesian disputes over islands with Malaysia and Singapore, a Thai-Malaysian dispute regarding their common border, and Malaysian disputes with the Philippines, Brunei and China over local islands. Additionally, twelve

of the fifteen maritime boundaries in the South China Sea are in dispute.¹³ With so many sharp bilateral disagreements, multilateral solutions have been difficult to achieve.

Although ASEAN has served as a source of regional multilateralism since the 1960s, and its membership has become even more inclusive over the past decade, it has often been ineffective as a multilateral security mechanism. While some member states such as Malaysia have pushed for a policy of constructivism. Additionally, twelve of the fifteen maritime boundaries in the South China Sea are in dispute. With so many sharp bilateral disagreements, multilateral solutions have been difficult to achieve.

Although ASEAN has served as a source of regional multilateralism since the 1960s, and its membership has become even^{??} more inclusive over the past decade, it has often been ineffective as a multilateral security mechanism. While some member states such as Malaysia have pushed for a policy of constructive because it was unwilling to violate state sovereignty. Only United States threats to stop further monetary loans convinced Indonesia to cooperate with Australia to end the crisis.¹⁶ Regional multilateral groups such as the Singapore-based Asia-Pacific Cooperation organization have also been relatively ineffective as evidenced by their lack of relevance in the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98. The International Monetary Fund led the recovery effort while APEC sat on the sidelines.¹⁷ Finally, ASEAN members strongly oppose a multilateral military alliance within the grouping. Bilateral defense ties are seen as more flexible and more viable due to the absence of a commonly perceived external threat such as China's former support for regional insurgencies.¹⁸ Australia and New Zealand, in particular, were opposed to a NATO-style security alliance in Southeast Asia until only recently.¹⁹

Although multilateral military alliances or even a security community are viewed by Southeast Asian states as unlikely in the near future, there is still reason to believe a multilateral approach to Southeast Asian economic and security issues is feasible. For example, according to Thailand's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, with a 6. percent GDP in 2003 (second in Asia only to China), is a strong proponent of multilateral economic initiatives to support regional developing countries through multilateral organizations.²⁰ Additionally, some Southeast Asian states, most notably the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand support some degree of multilateral approach to fighting terrorism.²¹ Efforts should concentrate on reasonable goals such as confidence building, preventative diplomacy, conflict resolution and military cooperation in areas such as information sharing, and humanitarian and disaster relief. If successful, such initiatives could make important contributions to the maintenance of regional stability and the promotion of the region's economic development.²² They could also serve as stepping stones toward more far-reaching multilateral initiatives.

Engagement with China is a key tenet for successful establishment of multilateral initiatives in Southeast Asia. And, because it is a major regional and global power, the United States has a significant interest in engagement with China.²³ Engaging China in Southeast Asian multilateral processes is in the self interest of all nations of the region, as well as the United States and China. Establishing a cooperative security framework in Southeast Asia without Chinese involvement would be extremely difficult. But in order to properly engage China on issues pertaining to Southeast Asia, an understanding of how China views multilateralism is necessary. It appears to recognize ASEAN's growing role in regional affairs, including multilateral security. China's view of issues pertaining to

human rights is shared by some other ASEAN member nations and ASEAN's policy of non-intervention and respect for sovereignty are certainly in China's best interests. Beijing has also used its economic power to foster closer ties with ASEAN as a potential hedge against perceived threats such as the United States-Japan security pact.²⁴ However, while multi-polarization in Southeast Asia is beneficial in balancing against a strong U.S.-Japanese alliance, it is not without cost from China's perspective. A strong ASEAN can also pose an economic threat and could provide a unified adversary in South China Sea disputes.²⁵

Overall, China appears to favor focusing on balance of power in its foreign policy, engaging in what has been called "conditional multilateralism."²⁶ Essentially, China supports regional security dialogues, but attempts to avoid committing itself to more institutionalized entanglements. Therefore, it employs the principles of multilateralism selectively. Its approach to resolving disputes over territory serves as an excellent example. China wishes to avoid multilateral dialogue regarding disagreements over the Spratley, Paracel, and Diayutai island groups, fearing such dialogue will institutionalize resolution efforts, and thereby limit her flexibility. But while China prefers bilateral dialogues regarding the Spratleys, she will not participate in bilateral talks with Japan on East China Sea disputes, indicating that South Korea must also be included.²⁷

Successful engagement with China will require flexibility on the part of the United States and Southeast Asian states. A multi-channel approach, varying bilateral and multilateral initiatives at various levels (political, military, economic and organizational) depending upon the situation, will be necessary. In working toward a

solution in the Spratleys for example, gradually moving from bilateral dialogues to sub-regional dialogues, and finally toward region-wide dialogues, although a slow, laborious process, may be the only realistic path to success.²⁸

Based on the above analysis, it appears that a balanced approach between bilateralism and multilateralism in the region, with a graduated, iterative shift toward greater reliance upon multilateral stability and security mechanisms over time is feasible. It also seems likely, as experience over the past decade attests, that greater inroads in multilateral relations and cooperation will be achieved over the near term at the theater level of military cooperation as opposed to the national political realm. There are several ways in which the United States military, and specifically USPACOM may be able to expand upon current initiatives to improve interoperability among the region's armed forces to enhance security.

USPACOM is already actively engaged in a myriad of multilateral activities under its Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP). The TSCP is a deliberate planning tool that provides a wide range of bilateral and multilateral activities for developing a theater-wide engagement strategy.²⁹ USPACOM's multilateral initiatives under its TSCP include elements of all eight CJCS categories of activities.

Among the more important initiatives, the congressionally mandated and USPACOM supported Asia-Pacific Regional Initiative conferences have promoted Asian multilateralism through robust information operations programs and other coalition events that improve doctrine, experimentation and training and enhance interoperability.³⁰ Under Admiral Blair, USPACOM expanded numerous formerly bilateral exercises into multilateral events that have included not only Southeast Asian

nations, but participants and observers from as far away as Mongolia.³¹ Today, USPACOM-sponsored multilateral exercises include COPE TIGER, a U.S, Singapore and Thailand combined interoperability air force exercise, COBRA GOLD, a combined operations exercise with the same participants, and USPACOM's largest event, TEAM CHALLENGE, a U.S, Thailand and Philippines multilateral interoperability training exercise.³² PACIFIC REACH, a bi-annual submarine rescue interoperability exercise drew participants from the United States, South Korea, Japan, Singapore and Australia with observing nations that included Russia, China, Indonesia and Thailand.³³ (Of note, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia also participate in their own submarine rescue multilateral exercise.)³⁴ Training initiatives include the Multinational Planning and Augmentation Team designed to train staff officers to reinforce coalition headquarters and other forms of International Military Education and Training that offer participants an opportunity to meet their regional counterparts and establish working relationships that pay dividends throughout their careers. Additionally, the USPACOM-organized 18th Annual International Military Operations and Law Conference hosted by the United States Embassy in Singapore addressed potential multilateral legal solutions to issues related to such pertinent regional topics as terrorism and non-standard warfare.³⁵

While training, conferences, exercises and similar activities are important elements of USPACOM's TSCP, the area where it can arguably make the greatest and most immediate contributions to Southeast Asian regional, multilateral collaboration is in the routine conduct of operational activities. Issues such as drug trafficking, smuggling, illegal migration, piracy, terrorism, and natural and medical disaster relief are all often transnational in nature and impact almost every country in Southeast Asia. USPACOM

has already established a strong record of multilateral military cooperation that addresses each of these issues. Regular engagement in these areas helps to establish common doctrine, tactics and procedures, and improves interoperability.

Given the fact that USPACOM is already engaged multilaterally in Southeast Asia via several operational activities, where can efforts be concentrated to provide even greater security returns? Humanitarian and disaster relief efforts, counterterrorism, and information sharing are three areas worth consideration that may offer the greatest potential opportunities for multilateral engagement.

The 9-magnitude earthquake that struck Indonesia and created a tsunami that wreaked havoc in six countries throughout Southeast and South Asia in December 2004 dramatically illustrated the impact a disaster can have upon an entire region. USPACOM supported United States government interagency initiatives by providing military forces dedicated to disaster relief efforts in UNIFIED ASSISTANCE. The United States-led, multilateral relief effort involved coordinated support from twenty one nations. The Combined Support Force was comprised of military assets provided by eighteen nations.³⁶ Beyond the obvious value of the humanitarian assistance, the disaster relief efforts provided opportunities to improve multilateral military coordination, refine tactics and procedures, and improve interoperability. However, the international goodwill generated by the tsunami relief effort was the most important benefit to the United States. Given the stated importance placed by the Bush administration on multilateral cooperation in combating terrorism, the value of the international political goodwill engendered by its humanitarian relief efforts to United States foreign policy (especially among primarily Islamic nations such as Indonesia) cannot be overstated.³⁷ For strong

operational, as well as political reasons, it is in the nation's best interest for USPACOM to continue promoting and participating in multilateral humanitarian relief and disaster relief exercises.

Exercises and operations in support of counterterrorism are other activities where multilateral military cooperation might appear on the surface to pay high dividends. The October 2002 terrorist attack in Bali, Indonesia clearly demonstrated that terrorism is a transnational threat with economic impacts that transcend national borders. Ambassador Richard Haas, the State Department's Director of Policy Planning, stated that "Expansive multilateral cooperation offers the best hope of defeating the scourge of terrorism"³⁸ and President Bush's initiative to create a global anti-terrorism alliance includes Southeast Asia.³⁹

Although the United States supports the notion, actual United States national efforts to foster multilateralism in Southeast Asia have been mixed. For example, the United States has not used the ARF to coordinate counterterrorism operations in Southeast Asia., often preferring to enlist support on a bilateral case-by-case basis.⁴⁰

Southeast Asian views have been mixed regarding the balance between bilateral and multilateral counterterrorism approaches. ASEAN issued a declaration in November 2001 offering rhetorical support for the United States position, but has not taken an active role in promoting multilateral efforts at counterterrorism. The Philippines has been the most active supporter of the United States position in the Global War on Terror, partly because the government faces its own violent Islamic opposition in the form of the Abu Sayyaf group. However, most of the Philippine government's efforts have been bilateral in nature, to include GLOBAL PISTON, USPACOM's counterterrorism exercise with

the Philippine Armed Forces.⁴¹ And while the United States is paying \$100 million in military assistance, some Philippine support of the United States was withdrawn following the terrorist kidnapping of Philippine citizens in Iraq.⁴² Thailand's support to United States counterterrorism efforts has been limited due to its fear of inflaming sentiments of its own Islamic separatists in its southern provinces, while Indonesia and Malaysia's responses to President Bush's call for support have been tempered by their majority Muslim populations and concern that Islam itself might be targeted.⁴³ Singapore, Australia and New Zealand are all supportive of United States counterterrorism efforts.⁴⁴ Although these latter three countries may represent opportunities for conducting multilateral counterterrorism exercises and operations, Singapore's proximity to Indonesia and Malaysia could make overt displays of multilateral counterterrorism cooperation difficult.

Although USPACOM may find it difficult to engage in counterterrorism multilateral exercises and operations, it can support such efforts and numerous others less directly through information and intelligence sharing. Given its traditional role as a force multiplier, multilateral intelligence sharing offers opportunities to support almost all aspects of USPACOM's TSCP. Although the sensitivity of information, of course, needs to be considered, there are still several identifiable areas where much can be gained from intelligence sharing. The Joint Military Intelligence College's annual International Intelligence Fellows Program provided a vehicle to examine this very issue. Their second annual conference focused specifically on multilateral intelligence cooperation in Asia.⁴⁵ Although it is a very complex issue due to preferences for bilateral security

structures in the region, several areas were identified where there is much to be gained from multilateral intelligence sharing.

The prospective gains through regional cooperation in sharing counterterrorism intelligence were deemed by the Fellows to be excellent. Although, as noted above, politics can make regional cooperation difficult, terrorism is a transnational threat that transcends borders. Multilateral information and intelligence sharing can greatly assist regional counterterrorism efforts without raising some of the political issues that more visible means of multilateral cooperation might engender. Multilateral Intelligence sharing can also contribute to combating other transnational regional issues to include drug trafficking, maritime piracy, maritime terrorism and WMD proliferation. Better strategies also need to be developed for sharing medical intelligence and information on transnational medical threats such as HIV/AIDs, various forms of deadly flus, and other diseases.⁴⁶ Effective intelligence cooperation can positively impact all of these regional issues, each of which uniformly impacts almost every country with interests in Southeast Asia.

There are a number of tools the Intelligence Community in general, and the Joint Intelligence Center, Pacific specifically can use to enhance and promote multilateral information sharing and support.

Commercial imagery sharing is a great potential source for sharing intelligence. Problems with sharing imagery still exist today because protection of sources and capabilities makes it difficult to release imagery to second and third party partners.⁴⁷ Heavier reliance on commercial imagery would greatly alleviate this problem. Although advances in commercial imagery have not advanced as quickly as hoped, they still offer

great opportunity. Additionally, the expected shift in reliance from overhead imagery to aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicle images will make multilateral imagery sharing easier.

Networking, both electronic and human, is another area where military counterparts can establish routines for sharing information, thereby facilitating a greater sense of regionalism in Southeast Asia. Multilateral networks could consist of both human and virtual intelligence sharing hubs.⁴⁸ Regional training centers could be established to facilitate electronic networking through shared procedures. Whether human or electronic, an established multilateral information sharing networking, by instituting a greater understanding among military regional counterparts, would facilitate more rapid commencement of no-notice multilateral operations such as disaster relief.

For the foreseeable future, United States political relations in Southeast Asia will likely maintain a bilateral flavor. This is as much a reflection of reality and the wishes of other nations with interests in the region as it is any desire on the part of the United States. Southeast Asian nations are comfortable with existing bilateral relationships and see them as responsible for the stability and security of the region. But, as transnational issues such as terrorism, international crimes of piracy and smuggling, and disaster relief continue to grow in importance, multilateral processes will probably also grow in importance as regional security mechanisms for the future. While the balance between bilateral and multilateral initiatives remains to be determined, they will both undoubtedly play an important role in Southeast Asian security. The challenge for the United States, and USPACOM in particular, will be to achieve an appropriate balance between bilateral and multilateral approaches in the region. Emphasizing lower level, routine military

multilateralism in the form of exercises, and especially operations, will help achieve this balance by encouraging cooperation and establishing interdependence, while also minimizing negative political repercussions. If approached patiently, the resulting habits of cooperation and increased interdependence will inexorably lead to greater multilateral efforts at higher levels.

China's stance on multilateral initiatives will greatly influence whether regional cooperation in Southeast Asia is truly successful. China's efforts in regional cooperation will depend upon her relations with the United States. It is in the best interest of United States policy makers to include China in multilateral efforts whenever feasible and for USPACOM to consider the impacts of its Southeast Asian multilateral initiatives upon China. Because China will probably continue to adopt a policy of conditional multilateralism, the United States should focus on leveraging opportunities as they arise. China will probably not be inclined to participate in multilateral exercises and operations to any great degree. Therefore, multilateral economic initiatives, rather than lower level multilateral military cooperation, will probably result in the greatest success over the near term.

Regarding the rest of Southeast Asia, however, resistance to multilateral solutions will remain greatest at higher national political levels, while routine multilateral training, exercises and operations will continue increase in volume over the near term. If the frequency of multilateral coordination and cooperation continues to increase among regional military counterparts, the familiarity and comfort their respective leaders are likely to gain from exposure to these initiatives will hopefully begin to break down some of the political barriers to greater national multilateral cooperation in the region.

USPACOM has an impressive record of promoting and participating in multilateral initiatives. Its TSCP uses all forms of activities and embraces both bilateral and multilateral processes in seeking solutions to military issues in Southeast Asia. Although multilateral approaches have met with varying degrees of success across the board, there are some key areas where USPACOM might foster even greater inroads into multilateral cooperation.

Somewhat counter intuitively, counterterrorism may not offer as many opportunities for multilateral cooperation in Southeast Asia as might be expected. To be sure, any opportunities for cooperation should be exploited whenever possible. But large Islamic populations in the region (especially in Indonesia and Malaysia) and fears of inciting further violence from internal separatist movements (such as in Southern Thailand) will make overt, politically charged, regional multilateral counterterrorism cooperation difficult.

Conversely, humanitarian assistance and information sharing should offer outstanding opportunities to foster multilateral regional cooperation with minimal resistance. The very nature of humanitarian assistance operations makes cooperation politically desirable for all regional participants. And information sharing, because of its low public visibility, is an excellent vehicle for establishing mutual interdependence, while at the same time, generating little political resistance. Multilateral humanitarian/disaster relief training and exercises and information/intelligence sharing should both be pursued whenever opportunities arise. Both offer significant practical and political gains for participants in the region that outweigh their relatively minor costs of implementation.

Regardless of specific areas of emphasis, an appropriate balance between bilateralism and multilateralism in Southeast Asia will benefit the long term efforts of the United States. The relative success of multilateral mechanisms in Southeast Asia will depend upon the ability of individual nations with interests in the region to understand the benefits of cooperation to their own self interests.

Notes

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- ²⁷ Ibid., 22.
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