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**A U.S. BASE AT CAM RANH BAY, VIETNAM:  
WILL IT STRENGTHEN PACOM'S EFFORTS TO CONTAIN PRC  
EXPANSION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA?**

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of  
the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations**

**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: //SIGNED//**

**4 May 2011**

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## **Abbreviations**

AOR	Area of Responsibility
APOD	Aerial Port of Debarkation
APOE	Aerial Port of Embarkation
ARG	Amphibious Ready Group
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
C2	Command and Control
DOD	Department of Defense
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
ISB	Initial Staging Base
MEU	Marine Expeditionary Unit
NORTHCOM	U.S. Northern Command
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN)
OFDA	Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID)
PACOM	U.S. Pacific Command
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
SPOD	Seaport of Debarkation
SPOE	Seaport of Embarkation
TSCP	Theater Security Cooperation Program
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USFK	U.S. Forces Korea

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## **Abstract**

Establishing a base at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam can provide a strategic point from which to counter PRC expansion outside the South China Sea. As a common base between the United States, ASEAN, and India, Cam Ranh Bay could be leveraged by PACOM for multiple uses. Providing a home for quick response forces for regional security and for a centralized HADR capability for the region would be but a few uses of such a base. Cam Ranh Bay requires an overhaul, but would cost only a fraction of what it would take to build a base from the ground up. The United States has the resources to refurbish the base, but needs to take advantage of the opportunity before another regional player steps in.

## **Introduction**

The East Asia security environment that is the responsibility of U.S. Pacific Command is currently under duress. The Department of Defense priority of fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in what is now labeled “Overseas Contingency Operations,” while a necessary endeavor, has unfortunately detracted from what must be a primary focus on the rise to power of the PRC and the means to contain it.<sup>1</sup> To assist in a renewed focus, a recently exposed regional security enhancement and PRC containment opportunity has appeared in the form of the port facilities at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam.

Trust between the United States and Vietnam has increasingly strengthened since diplomatic ties were reestablished 15 years ago, and even more so since 2003 with the first port call of a U.S. warship in 30 years.<sup>2</sup> Establishing a U.S. base, or at least a significant presence, could establish a stronger foothold for the United States in the South China Sea, or in what Vietnam refers to as the Eastern Sea.<sup>3</sup> This foothold could allow the United States to keep a closer eye on China while at the same time providing Vietnam with an added sense of security. Its increasingly strategic location coupled with an alliance with a major power such as the United States would provide the smaller nation with a boost to the international stage.

With increasing U.S. port visits, Vietnam has become increasingly open to the possibilities of a more definitive U.S. presence at Cam Ranh Bay.<sup>4</sup> Cam Ranh Bay’s geostrategic position can provide an ISB for regional operations, and can also provide SPOD/SPOE and APOD/APOE capability to support manpower and logistics in the region. Taking advantage of the potential availability of Cam Ranh Bay as a key centralized staging area for operations in and around the South China Sea should be a

priority for the PACOM. As the United States continues to shift its focus to the region, establishing a base of operations at Cam Ranh Bay would strengthen PACOM's efforts to contain PRC expansion and influence in Southeast Asia.

## **Background**

There are several key factors that support the re-establishment of an American presence in Cam Ranh Bay. The theater strategic value of such a base to PACOM cannot be underestimated, and requires a hard look to be taken at its location in relation to other current or proposed U.S. bases. Building up the port facilities and air base will assist in building strategic relationships by increasing the potential of establishing Vietnam as a Critical Regional Partner of the United States.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Cam Ranh Bay can provide a potential area of common interest with members of ASEAN as an ISB for supporting future soft or hard power operations against any potential challengers of security in the region. Just as importantly, it can offer a much-needed facility from which to establish centralized Command and Control (C2) for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations in the region. Since a new base requires manning, Cam Ranh Bay can provide a home for U.S. forces currently scheduled to be shuffled throughout PACOM.<sup>6</sup>

Having recently opened the port of Cam Ranh Bay for commercial and military ship repairs and other services, the Vietnamese government has remained ambiguous regarding its intentions to lease the facilities to a specific country. However, Vietnamese ambiguity may be simply masking a plea for a U.S. naval presence to counteract China's growing naval capabilities.<sup>7</sup> There is reason to believe that this plea may be very real



indeed, and it would not be the first time the Vietnamese have sought to offer Cam Ranh Bay as a base in exchange for U.S. support. In 1946, as Ho Chi Minh was struggling to win Vietnamese autonomy from French rule, he hinted at offering the base to the United States and promised that he would make Vietnam ‘a fertile field for American capital and enterprise.’ It was a tempting offer indeed, but the political landscape of the time simply would not allow the United States to accept such an offer.<sup>8</sup>

### **Historical Precedent**

With the natural protection of a seaward peninsula covering inner and outer harbors, Cam Ranh Bay is one of the most desirable deep-water ports in the world, and has a long history of military usage. In 1905, the Russian Balkan Fleet made a port call on its way to meet the Japanese fleet in battle at Tsushima Strait. Early in World War II the Japanese used the bay to assemble warships and transports for the invasion of Malaysia, which eventually led to the downfall of Singapore.<sup>9</sup> During the Vietnam conflict the United States developed Nha Trang, the nearest major city to the north of Cam Ranh Bay, as a major logistics hub. U.S. contractors constructed an airfield, and the U.S. Navy took full advantage of the natural anchorages, extensive loading docks and adjoining warehouses that the facility had to offer.<sup>10</sup> More recently, the Russians, who occupied the bay from 1979 to 2002, improved the airfield into an extensive multi-use facility for both commercial and military traffic. However, after many years of neglect, the facilities now require millions of dollars in upgrades to fully function.<sup>11</sup> If the United States is willing to make what would amount to a relatively minimal investment, it could certainly pay dividends for PACOM.

Cam Ranh Bay would provide the Combatant Commander (CCDR) the added benefit of ease of operational movement throughout the Asia-Pacific region in concert with regional partners such as Singapore and the Philippines. The Asia-Pacific region, a smaller subsection of the western Pacific and the PACOM AOR, generally includes the countries of China, Japan, North and South Korea, Taiwan, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, East Timor, and Brunei (See Map 1). It encompasses some of the most important transoceanic commerce routes in the world. The region is comprised of many island as well as continental nations, and contains several international straits such as the Strait of Malacca, and Singapore Strait. These straits receive about half of the world's shipping traffic, and Cam Ranh Bay sits at China's entrance to these very same shipping lanes. The shipping lanes pass through archipelagic choke points which are susceptible to blocking by military vessels or mines. Unfortunately, this region and its all-too-crucial shipping lanes are equally susceptible to natural disasters as well.

From 2000 to 2008 the region accounted for approximately forty percent of the world's natural disasters and account for eighty-five percent of global deaths resulting from those disasters.<sup>12</sup> Recent events with an 8.9 earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Japan and a 6.8 earthquake in Myanmar only two weeks later have highlighted this regional anomaly by leaving thousands dead, injured, and homeless.<sup>13</sup> Natural disasters such as these can further contribute to regional instability with ensuing riots, looting and general political and social unrest. Therefore, it becomes that much more important for the United States to offer assistance in providing food, supplies, and security in order to get these nations back on their feet. It is imperative that the United States helps critical



Map 1. (Reprinted from Dr. David Chu Program in Asia Pacific Studies  
<http://www.utoronto.ca/davidchu/undergrad.html>)

regional partners such as Japan to return to pre-tsunami strength in order to maintain the balance with China in the Asia Pacific region.

As China gains in military strength and continues to make vaunted territorial claims outside of the mainland, the United States must be in a position to keep a watchful eye on the PRC as it plans to expand throughout the region.<sup>14</sup> A potential PRC expansion strategy, referred to by the international community as the “String of Pearls,” has manifested itself over the past few years.<sup>15</sup> This strategy consists of Chinese investment in port development to establish “places” outside of China for the PLAN to refit and resupply its ships. To date the string extends from Hainan Island in the South China Sea to Chittagong in Bangladesh, and ports in Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia. Across the Indian Ocean, it includes Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Pakistan’s Gwadar Port, and

extends to islands in the Arabian Sea (See Map 2).<sup>16</sup> These current conditions may serve as catalysts for challenges that PACOM could face in the coming years, and highlight the increasing need for a centralized base of operations in Southeast Asia. However, there are some potential problems with any attempt by the United States to establish a presence at Cam Ranh Bay, and most of these issues center on China and its perceptions of U.S. motives.

### A Threat to China's Regional Influence

It could be argued that the risk of upsetting the balance between the United States and China is too high. As China's power grows both economically and militarily, it has taken steps to expand its influence outside its borders. Vietnam is on China's



Map 2. (Reprinted from Devonshire-Ellis, Chris. "China's String of Pearls Strategy." China Briefing, 18 March 2009. <http://china-briefing.com/> (accessed 20 March 2011).

southwestern border, and the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) may perceive the basing of U.S. Naval assets at Cam Ranh Bay as a direct threat to their influence in the region. The United States and China have already had brushes in the past over the Republic of China (ROC/Taiwan) that nearly resulted in direct confrontation. Although tensions have cooled, the Taiwan issue is a top priority for the PRC, and most likely will be for some time to come.<sup>17</sup> Having already come extremely close to a direct clash on this issue in the past, the stationing of U.S. forces in Vietnam could spark further confrontation.

China has long held that Taiwan is an internal issue. The PRC feels the same way about other territorial disputes in the South China Sea, such as the complex dispute over the Spratly and Paracel Islands (See Map 3). The dispute over the Spratly Islands (currently occupied by Chinese forces) also involves the countries of Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan.<sup>18</sup> The PRC prefers to bilaterally handle territorial disputes, while the United States prefers a multilateral approach in the form of a "collaborative, diplomatic process."<sup>19</sup> U.S. involvement in these disputes, no matter how welcome it is by Vietnam, is construed by the PRC as interference in Sino-Vietnamese relations. Another possible issue with respect to stationing nuclear powered naval vessels in the bay is the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANWFZ) of 1997.

Also known as the "Bangkok Treaty," the SEANWFZ requires that signatories not "develop, manufacture or otherwise acquire, possess or have control over nuclear weapons; station or transport nuclear weapons by any means; or test or use nuclear weapons."<sup>20</sup> Although nuclear powered vessels are not included in this treaty, it is apparent that nuclear weapons and nuclear energy are of great concern to the



Map 3. (Reprinted from “Boundary Claims in Spratly Islands 1988,” <http://www.spratlys.org/maps/3.htm> (accessed 20 April 2011).

Vietnamese government. This concern may lead to the same type of resistance that the United States faced in Japan in 2008 when the nuclear powered USS George Washington (CVN-73) replaced the conventional powered aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk (CV-63). Popular concerns about nuclear power continue to grow as the recent earthquake off the coast of Japan has caused a heightened international awareness of the dangers that nuclear energy may pose. With reactors critically damaged from the quake, tsunami, and ensuing aftershocks, radiation leaks from the Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear power station have the Japanese government scrambling to contain them.<sup>21</sup> This recent event is most likely receiving critical scrutiny from the Vietnamese government since it has expressed interest in developing nuclear power for peaceful purposes. However, the U.S. Vietnamese relationship is still in its infancy, and has far to go to build the type of trust it

would take to either offer or receive assistance in this type of endeavor. Of course, there is certainly an argument to be made for the United States establishing a base with a country with which a more mature relationship is already established.

Nations such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the Philippines, or Thailand have long histories of partnership with the United States with different types of agreements for use of ports and airfields, and in some cases the stationing of military forces.<sup>22</sup> But the United States must tread lightly in this aspect so as not to be construed as imperialistic in nature, as it was during its involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to U.S. policy, the PRC does not currently base military forces in foreign countries, and continually references this policy as evidence of their intent on “peaceful development.” The Chinese also desire greatly to avoid any impression that they are imperialistic, and have taken great pains to do so.<sup>24</sup> The United States has long stationed forces in both Japan and South Korea, but perceptions to allowing the stationing of military forces have changed, and must be handled delicately if troop redistribution throughout the region is to be a possibility.

A DOD redistribution or consolidation of pre-existing PACOM forces to Vietnam may not be considered a welcome overture at all, and may even prove to be unsafe for American service members. There is still a very real western sensitivity to Communism, which is Vietnam’s current form of government. However, in 1992, a new constitution reorganized the government and increased economic freedom.<sup>25</sup> Increasing economic freedoms and a capitalistic nature have changed Vietnam greatly in the past twenty years. But even the new representative powers bestowed on the Vietnamese National Assembly

do not change the fact that the Communist Party still directs it, and as such is at odds in many areas with U.S policies, such as issues on human rights.<sup>26</sup>

Disagreements on human rights issues in Vietnam have been slow in reaching a resolution, and may not bode well for allowing a U.S. military presence. However, with the millions of dollars in upgrades required for Cam Ranh Bay, it would be at least three years before any outside navy could operate the naval base at full capacity.<sup>27</sup> The time it would take for repairs and upgrades to be completed could allow for ironing out the differences required to create a multilateral pact between Vietnam, the United States and ASEAN. As the nations of ASEAN have shown a distinct desire recently to collaborate in HADR operations in the region, Cam Ranh Bay can provide a potential area of joint interest for cooperative naval and air exercises.<sup>28</sup> This collaboration could also include other emerging powers within the PACOM AOR, such as India, who has used the facilities in the past and may even offer resources toward future use.<sup>29</sup> This type of arrangement would be a great leap toward establishing a strategic relationship with India as a significant regional partner in containing China's growing desire to expand its reach, and would directly address the U.S. desire to develop strategic relationships in the region.<sup>30</sup>

### **Building Strategic Relationships**

According to the Quadrennial Defense Review of 2010, "The United States plans to maintain regional stability, in part, by develop[ing] new strategic relationships with India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, to address issues such as counterterrorism, counter-narcotics, and support to humanitarian assistance operations in the region."<sup>31</sup>



Furthermore, the National Security Strategy specifically addresses the need to “...deepen our relationships with emerging powers, and pursue a stronger role in the [Asia-Pacific] region’s multilateral architecture...”<sup>32</sup> Establishing a base at Cam Ranh Bay would certainly follow this intent. The U.S. Integrated Global Presence and Basing Strategy, written in 2005, had little reason at the time of publication to include Vietnam as a place of potential U.S. military development.<sup>33</sup> However, China’s aggressive territorial claims have only served to strengthen U.S.-Vietnam ties, and to help forge a partnership of such great potential that would have seemed unlikely only a few short years ago.<sup>34</sup>

In its current state, the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship is much stronger than the ties between China and Vietnam ever were. While it is true that the Chinese provided military assistance to the Vietnamese in the recent past to fight the United States, this type of support is much more the exception than the rule.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese and Vietnamese have a long history of strife that stretches back much further than any grievance with the United States, and degenerated into outright conflict with a border war in 1979.<sup>36</sup> This animosity continues even today with the disputed claims of the Spratly and Paracel Islands. These ongoing territorial disputes have only served to widen the historical gap between the two countries and further foment a growing mutual distrust of each other.<sup>37</sup> Nobody seems to understand this better than the U.S. Pacific Commander.

In its 2010 Asia-Pacific Economic Update, PACOM recognized the implications of this friction between the two nations as well as the potential effects it can have on the Vietnamese economy with its dependency on China.<sup>38</sup> Vietnamese control of at least some of the contested areas in the South China Sea is clearly in the best interests of the United States. Cam Ranh Bay is certainly a position from which PACOM can provide at

least tacit support of Vietnam's position in this endeavor with the mere physical presence of a welcome U.S. Fleet. With the United States in its corner, Vietnam would be in a much stronger position from which to push territorial issues. While the U.S. policy on this issue has been to refrain from taking sides, it has also pushed for "jurisdictional disputes in the region to be addressed through a collaborative multiparty process," and highlights the increasing U.S. interest in Vietnam and its potential as an ally.<sup>39</sup>

Washington has been actively seeking access to Vietnam through Cam Ranh Bay since at least 2002. In 2005 U.S. government officials sought an agreement with Vietnam to actually establish a base at Cam Ranh Bay, but the relationship between the two nations had not yet blossomed, and Washington was rebuffed.<sup>40</sup> However, the exponential growth in relations and the recent shift in U.S. policy toward the region have been recently and consistently demonstrated by key U.S. leadership.

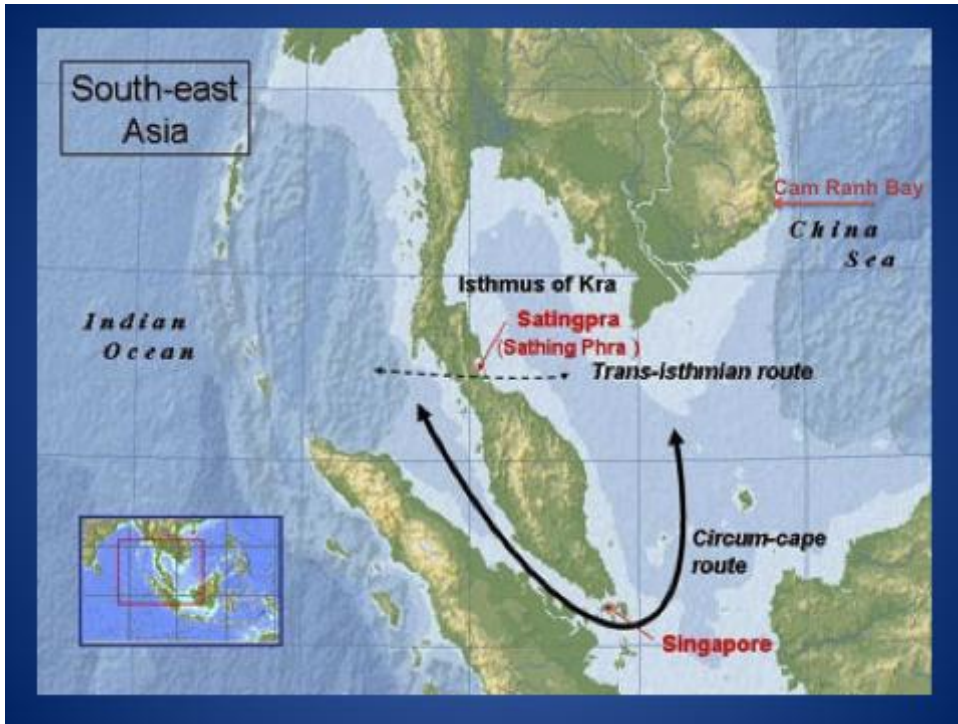
Secretary of State Hillary Clinton overtly discussed the shift at the July 2010 meeting of ASEAN in Hanoi, which was chaired by Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> Admiral Robert Willard, the CCDR of PACOM, demonstrated his focus on the shift in policy when he testified on Capitol Hill in April 2011. By making the statement that he is "seeking an improved Pacific Command posture in accessing Southeast Asia and the South China Sea region," Willard, along with a group tasked by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, has been looking into the possibilities of increasing U.S. military presence and activities in Australia.<sup>42</sup> But even Australia, over 1700 nautical miles (nm) from center of the South China Sea, simply is not close enough to ensure U.S. freedom of movement throughout Southeast Asia and provide the hedge against China that the Vietnamese may be implicitly seeking. Cam Ranh Bay would provide a reaction time of a manner of hours rather than the days it

might take for a U.S. fleet to reach the vicinity. The necessity for this type of proximity has become even more vital as China has recently been pushing to reactivate the Kra Canal Project through the isthmus of Thailand; a project that would have significant strategic implications for Vietnam.

The proposed Kra Canal, an approximately twenty billion dollar project, would connect the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean and allow shipping from the South China Sea to directly bypass the Strait of Malacca near Singapore (See Map 4).<sup>43</sup> If this canal were to be built, the strategic implications for Vietnam would be enormous. The PRC's concern over the "U.S. Friendly" Malacca Straits has caused China to offer up considerable resources to a canal's development. A canal through Thailand could make the PRC's perceived "String of Pearls" that much easier to attain by enabling it to bypass the Malacca Strait altogether.<sup>44</sup> This proposed canal also causes military security concerns for India. Since it would give the PLAN another direct access point to the Indian Ocean, monitoring of this new strategic choke point will be required. With that in mind, Cam Ranh Bay's proximity to this new choke point through Thailand significantly increases its strategic value to both the United States and India. A U.S. partnership with India at Cam Ranh Bay can help to solve many of the issues PACOM has to deal with in regards to the operational factors of space, time, and force in light of China's apparent designs on expansion.

### **An ISB for Promoting Regional Security**

Although China does not wish to be perceived as imperialistic in nature, the PLAN



Map 4. (Kra Canal Indian Ocean / South China Sea Project to be Revisited 2009. [www.2point6billion.com/news/2009/03/18/kra-canal-indian-ocean-south-china-sea](http://www.2point6billion.com/news/2009/03/18/kra-canal-indian-ocean-south-china-sea) accessed April 23, 2011).

has made it clear that it is looking to expand by establishing its “String of Pearls.”<sup>45</sup>

Since Cam Ranh Bay does not currently seem to be a part of this attempt at SLOCs, the establishment of Cam Ranh Bay by the United States and India as a multi-use facility could severely dampen the PLAN’s designs on expansion. In regards to the operational factors of space and time, a base of operations at Cam Ranh Bay would place U.S. forces in an almost immediate position to deny those same SLOCs to the PLAN and to directly interdict the “String of Pearls.” A base in this location directly addresses both the maritime and air dimensions of the operational environment. Cam Ranh Bay can provide the harbors, anchorages, and airfields so essential in gaining maneuver space to shipping routes and chokepoints in the immediate vicinity, and act as APODS and SPODS to support many types of operations.<sup>46</sup>

By establishing a U.S. presence as close to the South China Sea as possible, Cam Ranh Bay's deep-water port and air base can provide that contingency, and can serve as a hub from which the United States and its partners could provide security for the South China Sea and for the region in general. The port and adjoining facilities can provide a base for staging operations as a decisive point against any potential environmental or militaristic threat to regional stability. Upgraded port facilities in Vietnam could provide at least a regular port of call and repair facility for U.S. warships and commercial shipping, and provide a legitimate doorstep to the South China Sea. However, the obstacles highlighted as to the Vietnamese position and obligations to the Bangkok Treaty bear further investigation and analysis.

As a signatory of the Bangkok Treaty, Vietnam's nuclear concerns are obvious. The permanent basing of a CVN can help to alleviate those concerns. Since the treaty specifically mentions stationing of nuclear weapons but makes no mention of ships with nuclear power plants, nuclear powered ships should not pose a problem, and would actually provide a more profound form of deterrence from attack.<sup>47</sup> Vietnam has already allowed U.S. carriers and other ships to make port calls and use the facility for extensive repairs. Access to the facilities at Cam Ranh Bay has opened the door to develop options outside of dependence on Japan for a CVN homeport and bases for other U.S. forces.<sup>48</sup>

Although the wheels have been set in motion to move U.S. forces to Guam with an added possibility of using bases in Australia, these locations would only serve to place readily accessible U.S. forces outside the same Southeast Asia-Pacific region that requires careful monitoring of security and humanitarian issues.<sup>49</sup> The earthquakes and tsunami that recently devastated Japan have only further exacerbated Japanese nuclear

concerns, and the heightened levels of radiation leaking from the Daichi-Fukushima nuclear power plant have shaken the Japanese population's faith in their government's ability to protect them.<sup>50</sup>

### **A Centralized Regional HADR Facility**

This most recent event, while tragic, has created the potential for an incredible opportunity for Vietnam to provide a new home for a U.S. carrier, as well as the possibility for the United States to shift other resources to the area. Units such as the 31<sup>st</sup> MEU, and the Essex ARG, also currently stationed in Japan, could be easily moved to the area, and a distinct U.S. presence can help to alleviate other nations' concerns about security and stability. Further boosting this potential is the recent shift in U.S. policy toward ASEAN and the desire to establish a more robust profile in the region.<sup>51</sup>

Building up the port facilities and air base to accommodate all manner of international commercial and military shipping and aircraft will provide a much needed step toward establishing a regional partnership and security cooperation between ASEAN and the United States. It could also provide a much-needed centralized facility from which to establish C2 for HADR operations in the region. The Asia-Pacific region, and more specifically, the area of Southeast Asia encompassing Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines, suffered eighty-five percent of all deaths from natural disasters worldwide, thirty-eight percent of the world's economic losses from 1980-2009, and is considered twenty-five times more likely to be affected by natural disasters than Europe or North America.<sup>52</sup> Cam Ranh Bay is central to this particular sector. According to the National Security Strategy of the United States, "a changing climate portends a

future in which the United States must be better prepared and resourced to exercise robust leadership to help meet critical humanitarian needs.”<sup>53</sup> Part of that resourcing means leveraging both existing and potential sources of centralized response in Thailand and Singapore.

Currently there is a USAID OFDA Regional Office in Bangkok, with emergency supply stockpiles in Bangkok and Singapore.<sup>54</sup> These facilities can certainly augment Cam Ranh Bay’s capacity in the event of a disaster response. However, the port and airfield at Singapore is continuously operating at maximum capacity, and would have a difficult time sustaining a prolonged HADR operation.<sup>55</sup> Facilities at Cam Ranh Bay would be extremely well-suited for providing the collection points for shipping and aircraft in support of a HADR operation in the region, a facility that ASEAN does not currently have access to. ASEAN has been conducting annual HADR exercises for several years, but has no common centralized base facility from which to work. With ASEAN in the lead, a Joint Coalition Staff Core Element comprised of supporting planners from the United States and India, could be established at Cam Ranh Bay to plan for and react to any regional crises. Of course, a base at Cam Ranh Bay would require U.S. manning, and these personnel would most likely need to be drawn from the region.

## **Recommendations**

Currently scheduled force reductions and redistributions from American bases in South Korea and Okinawa offer a unique manpower pool of PACOM experience and infrastructure to draw from. Establishing a base in Vietnam can provide a new home for such units as the 31st MEU in Okinawa, which has been slated for a possible move to

Guam which currently lacks the facilities to sustain that force. It can also offer a base to move remnants of some 4,000 personnel of the 8th Army and 7th Air Force yet to leave South Korea and return stateside. With the ongoing force reduction of the U.S. military, a subsequent re-shuffle of assets in the PACOM AOR is imminent. A 2005 Congressional Report for Congress summarized this redistribution to be, "...within current host nations such as Germany and South Korea, and new bases would be established in nations of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Africa. In the [DOD] view, these locations would be closer, and better able to respond to trouble spots."<sup>56</sup> The South China Sea fits the description of a "trouble spot" to a tee, and Cam Ranh Bay would certainly be a closer location from which to respond. It also has the facilities to support a response.

This opportunity may not be around for long, and the United States is not the only country in the world with their eyes on Cam Ranh Bay. The Russians, who held a lease on the facilities until 2002, are currently keeping the Vietnamese military well-supplied and attempted to negotiate a new lease with the Vietnamese government in 2010.<sup>57</sup> They failed to procure a lease, but signed a 1.3 billion dollar defense deal to provide Russian consultants, technology, and materials to rebuilding the port facilities.<sup>58</sup> Although Russia is not as strong as it once was, there is no reason to believe that it is not still interested in continued negotiations for exclusive use of Cam Ranh Bay. The associated costs with refurbishing Cam Ranh Bay are well within the means of the United States, and would make a base at Cam Ranh Bay a relatively inexpensive venture. The United States has a second chance with Vietnam, but it must act quickly to exploit the current situation between China and Vietnam, and get a foot in the door before Russia slams it shut.



## **A Second Chance**

Now that Americans have gained a better understanding of the Vietnamese people and the historical nature of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, the U.S. can use this relationship and the general Vietnamese distaste for China to build a tighter bond between the United States and Vietnam. Perhaps the U.S. can even assist in bridging the gap between China and Vietnam regarding territorial disputes. The idea of being in a position to provide interdiction is obviously on the mind of Admiral Willard, as he is currently looking into basing U.S. troops and assets in Australia. But Australia is simply too distant from the Asia-Pacific region to be able to react quickly enough to either prevent or react to a crisis in the region. Centralized proximity is the key to supporting the Pacific Commander's Theater Security Cooperation Plan by providing increased regional stability and security through international cooperation.

Cooperation between Vietnamese, Indian, and U.S. navies, along with goodwill cruises and joint exercises, can pave the way for closer mil-mil relations and help to relieve regional tensions. PACOM can utilize its naval resources to prove that it has common interests with Vietnam and India with negotiated defense agreements in counter-piracy operations and anti-terrorism. With the HADR concept as a basis from which to establish a more profound U.S. presence at Cam Ranh Bay, better mil-mil relationships can be established between both large and small powers of the region. As they open their ports further to both commercial and military traffic, smaller nations such as Vietnam and other ASEAN members will potentially feel a greater sense of security while at the same time adding strength to PACOM's efforts to contain PRC expansion.

## Endnotes

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To become a Critical Regional Partner, a country must meet the following criteria:

1) Must be a direct recipient of U.S. security cooperation resources 2) Cannot achieve one or more end states without engagement 3) Reflect a deliberately select group of countries or organizations 4) May be current relationships or desired future relationships 5) Partnerships must be pursued during the life of this [current GEF] guidance (next 2 years).

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