

Southeast Asian Security: A Regional Perspective

by Marvin C. Ott

For Southeast Asia, as for the West, the end of the Cold War was a seminal event. The region had been a major Cold War battleground. Communism was a clear and present danger to the survival of regimes and, in the case of Cambodia, to the very existence of a people and culture. Marxism left its mark in the three wars and failed economies of Indochina; in the mid-1960s upheaval in Indonesia; as a contribution to societal disruption in Burma, Malaya, and the Philippines; and, even to a degree, in the militarization of some Southeast Asian polities.

In the years immediately following the Cold War, this picture changed dramatically. The collapse of Soviet power meant the withdrawal of the Russian Pacific Fleet back to port and the end of subventions to the Vietnamese economy. In September 1989, the Vietnamese army ended its occupation of Cambodia. In the Philippines, the communist New People's Army, which in the mid-1980s posed a genuine and growing threat to the Philippine government, had begun to ebb. The Khmer Rouge, who also posed a serious threat to take power, had by the beginning of the 1990s misplayed their hand and become politically isolated and increasingly ineffective.

Thus, for the first time, the Southeast Asian countries faced no major security threats from within or without the region. With relatively marginal excep-

tions, governments were secure, societies stable, the status quo accepted, economies were growing, and external powers posed no immediate danger. To a degree that far exceeded that which existed anywhere else in the Afro-Asian world, the Southeast Asian states had developed regional institutions and patterns of interaction that gave the region increasing coherence as a single political, economic, and even security entity. The centerpiece of that achievement was the establishment in 1967 of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which subsequently spawned the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), soon to be followed by the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

Meanwhile China was preoccupied with the task of consolidating the far-reaching domestic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping. By any historical measure, this was (and is) an extraordinary moment that could prove short-lived, or it could be an opportunity to consolidate regional security for the long term. As Jusuf Wanandi of Indonesia's Centre for Strategic and International Studies has warned, "If this opportunity is missed and these countries go their separate ways, it would be much more difficult five or ten years down the road to construct a security arrangement."

The urgency Wanandi expressed reflected a pervasive uneasiness among the foreign policy elite of the region that seemed to disprove their recent record of success and a palpable growth in national and regional

Marvin C. Ott is professor of national security policy in the National War College at the National Defense University.

self-confidence. This uneasiness derived from a number of perceived vulnerabilities, latent threats, and related concerns. Economics did not loom large in most calculations, but it was a crushing economic downturn that brought Southeast Asia's post-Cold War reverie to a sudden end.

As senior foreign affairs and defense officials in Southeast Asia assess the regional security environment, the vulnerabilities that they see begin but do not end with economic reconstruction.

Economic Recovery

The financial/economic crisis that began in Thailand in late summer 1997 and rolled across the region was (and still is) deeply unsettling. It revealed that the extraordinary economic growth and modernization of the last three decades—a phenomenon characterized by the World Bank as the “Asian Miracle”—was not as solid as nearly everyone had believed. The image of a kind of regional money machine gave way to a quite different picture of ineffective regulatory institutions, illusory bank balance sheets, wildly irrational investments, excessive corruption, and conspicuous consumption. As the value of the baht, rupiah, and ringgit collapsed, Southeast Asians were reminded that not just living standards, but also social order, political stability, and even national security rested ultimately on economic performance. The hubris so evident in statements associated with the “Asian values” debate of the 1980s and early 1990s gave way to a more chastened, far more worried tone.

Political Fragility

The political dangers embedded in economic failure were graphically revealed in Indonesia. For 32 years, the New Order regime of President Suharto had been a fixture of the Southeast Asian scene. Indonesia had been politically stable (if not static), economically successful, and socially dormant. But under the impact of the financial crisis, the framework of the New Order cracked, triggering mass political demonstrations, widespread street violence, and a change in regime. Next door in Malaysia where Dr. Mahathir had been entrenched as Prime Minister for 17 years, a somewhat analogous but less virulent chain of events ensued. A confrontation between the Prime Minister and his deputy over how to respond to the economic crisis took an ugly turn with the arrest and imprisonment of the latter on sexual misconduct and other charges. Mass demonstrations of a kind not seen in

Malaysia for 30 years shook the government to its foundations. In Thailand, the Chavalit government, paralyzed and ineffective in the face of the economic collapse, was replaced by parliamentary vote amid statements by senior military officers pledging that there would not be a coup. In sum, the political stability that had seemed almost as assured as continued economic growth was now clearly questionable.

Ethnicity

Although ethnic disputes have not proven to be as lethal in post-Cold War Southeast Asia as in some other regions of the world, ethnic/minority issues are a significant source of domestic tension. In Burma [Myanmar], a simmering civil war between the lowland Burmese and highland minorities (such as the Karen, Karenni, Shan, Wa, and Kachin) has continued at varying levels of violence for nearly fifty years. A series of agreements beginning in the late 1980s between the Rangoon government and several of the minority groups has dampened the fighting, at least for the moment. In Malaysia, the latent tension between the Malay majority and the over one-quarter Chinese population pervades national life. The spectacular economic growth of the Federation in the years since the communal riots of 1969 has been seen by many as almost imperative to preserve domestic stability.

Recurring communal tension and occasional violence gave way to something much more serious in Indonesia in 1997–1998. Under the strain of economic deprivation, widespread anti-Chinese violence destroyed not only property, but also the confidence of the Chinese business community in regard to their future as citizens of Indonesia. Violence against the Chinese seemed to trigger a chain reaction of ethnic and religious strife involving other communal groups that make up the complex patchwork of Indonesia. The secession of East Timor produced the bloodiest tableau of all—inflicted by “militias” associated with the Indonesian army. The potential for a still more violent confrontation looms in the province of Aceh.

Territory and Boundaries

Although the territorial status quo is broadly accepted by the Southeast Asian states, there are a number of specific disputes that have been minor irritants for some time and that could assume more

serious dimensions if the security climate in the region were to change. These include:

- The claim of the Philippines to the Malaysian state of Sabah;
- Claims to the Spratly Islands by China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines;
- Disputed ownership by Malaysia and Singapore over Pedra Blanca Island;
- Disputed ownership by Malaysia and Indonesia of the islands of Sipadan, Sebatik, and Ligitan;
- Clashes along the Thai-Myanmar border;
- A dispute between Thailand and Malaysia over the land border and offshore demarcation line;
- Boundary disputes between Malaysia and Vietnam and between Indonesia and Vietnam over their offshore demarcation lines;
- A boundary dispute between Cambodia and Vietnam; and
- A dispute between Malaysia and Brunei over Limbang and offshore boundaries.

Among these issues, the South China Sea is the most serious for several reasons. It is the only dispute to involve more than two Southeast Asian states and the only one to which outside powers (China and Taiwan) are a party. Large, potential offshore gas (and possible oil) reserves elevate the economic stakes to a higher level than elsewhere. Also, any conflict in these essential, heavily traveled sealanes would immediately jeopardize the interests of the United States, Japan, and other major powers.

External Powers and a Changing Security Environment

Two extra-regional powers, China and Japan, are a continuing source of uneasiness to security planners for the medium and long term, even as they assume roles in the present that are largely welcomed.

China

China is simply too large and too near not to be a major factor in Southeast Asian equations and not to be viewed with some trepidation. With certain isolated exceptions, China does not have a history of seeking imperial control over Southeast Asia. Moreover, for roughly three centuries comprising the European colonial epoch, China ceased to be a serious geopolitical factor in Southeast Asia. But this was an abnormal circumstance that has now passed into history. China's postwar support for communist revolutionary movements in the region marked the reappearance of Chinese power in Southeast Asia. This, coupled with the presence of economically influential

Chinese populations in nearly every Southeast Asian city, has bred distrust. Beijing's explicit claim that nearly all of the South China Sea constitutes Chinese territorial waters (and its refusal to disavow the use of force to back up those claims) has caused alarm in a number of quarters. Growing Chinese influence in Burma and Cambodia has been a further source of concern. Finally, the burgeoning of China's economy in the recent years has been welcomed by some (mostly ethnic Chinese) Southeast Asian businessmen as a major new investment opportunity while feared by others because of the potent competition from emergent, ultra-low wage Chinese industries.

The prevailing uneasiness and ambivalence concerning China is evident not only in official statements and actions but also in some suggestive public opinion data. For example, in U.S. Information Agency (USIA) polls, about 45 percent of respondents in Thailand and the Philippines view China as an "expansionist power," but only a small percentage in both countries regard China as a direct security threat. In a survey of regional executives (many of whom presumably were ethnic Chinese), the *Far Eastern Economic Review* found large majorities "concerned about the security situation in the South China Sea." A similar survey found majorities ranging from 53 percent (in Thailand) to 80 percent (in Indonesia) who favor a "greater [Chinese] leadership role in world affairs." This desired leadership role emphasizes the prevailing strategy among Southeast Asian governments to draw China into a role as a rising but status quo power by binding China to the rest of the region with ties of mutual economic advantage.

From Southeast Asia's perspective, the best China is one that is domestically preoccupied, much like the China of the last decade. The fear is that as China gets its domestic house in order, gains economic and military strength, and is largely freed of its historic security concerns to the west (Russia) and the east (Japan), it will feel increasingly free to turn its energies southward.

Japan

Japan labors under the shadow of the recent memories of its often harsh wartime rule over the region. However, these memories vary significantly by demography, ethnicity, and location. Political power has passed to a postwar generation that has no direct

personal recollection of the New Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Also, some populations like the overseas Chinese and the Filipinos experienced an often brutal occupation. But others like the Burmese and Indonesians recall the Japanese invasion as the critical event that broke the hold of European colonialism in the region and, in some instances, gave local nationalists their first taste of political power. Thailand effectively acquiesced to Japanese occupation and thereby escaped its most adverse effects. Since the war, Japan's interaction with Southeast Asia has been largely confined to economics—as trader, investor, and aid provider. In recent USIA polls, 92 percent of Indonesian respondents gave Japan an overall “favorable” rating compared with 77 percent for the United States. In Thailand, a plurality of opinion regards Japan as the Kingdom’s “closest economic partner.”

Today Japan is valued as an economic engine that powers much of Southeast Asia's economic growth. Japan plays no direct security role in the region, and the Southeast Asian states want to keep it that way. As long as the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty remains viable, the Southeast Asian governments are confident that Japan will be content to leave to the United States the task of protecting the vital Southeast Asian sealanes through which the bulk of Japan's oil supplies are transported. The great fear is that if Japan were to feel the need to use its own navy for that purpose, it will provoke China into military countermeasures. The last thing that the Southeast Asians want is a competition for military preeminence in the region between China and Japan.

The United States

Finally, Southeast Asians are uneasy about the United States—about America's commitments and its staying power. The reasons for doubt on this score are not hard to discern. Despite repeated assertions by American officials to the contrary, many Southeast Asians do not regard the United States as an inherently Asian power. In time, so the thinking goes, it will withdraw to its natural geographic sphere of influence in the eastern Pacific. Perhaps ironically, such doubts were reinforced by America's Cold War victory. The end of that contest provided the obvious rationale, if one were needed, for a substantial reduction of the U.S. security presence in Asia. Without a worldwide adversary, America acted logically by pulling back its overseas military deployments to gain a peace dividend. For the harshest skeptics, America's post-Cold

War record of military engagements overseas provided additional evidence. Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia put the matter in characteristically blunt terms: “The presence of a Western power will not make a difference especially after Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. It takes only one soldier to be killed before the whole force will be withdrawn.”

All Southeast Asian governments were keenly aware of the downward pressures on the U.S. defense budget in the immediate post-Cold War period. Most watched with dismay as the U.S.-Philippine negotiations to extend the U.S. military lease of its base at Subic Bay failed. Nor were they reassured by the defeat of President George Bush by a little known small state governor in a campaign that stressed U.S. domestic concerns to the almost total exclusion of foreign policy. Finally, the Gulf War, when U.S. troops were deployed through the Mediterranean rather than Southeast Asia, seemed to suggest yet one more reason why the United States might deemphasize its security role west of Guam. This is ironic because the primary route for logistical supply to that battlefield (mostly by sea) was across the Pacific and through the Indian Ocean.

Against this backdrop, the U.S. naval deployments in response to the Taiwan crisis of 1996 and the U.S.-led NATO operations in Kosovo provided a welcome degree of reassurance regarding American capacity and determination to retain its global security role. When U.S. warplanes bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, at least some senior military officers in Southeast Asia reacted, first by assuming the bombing was deliberate and second by welcoming it as a signal reminding China who is boss.

At the same time there is tangible uneasiness among the policy elite concerning another implication of Kosovo—a growing predilection on the part of the United States to engage in “humanitarian intervention.” The specter of the United States and its allies deciding what values are to be enforced internationally evokes not too distant memories of Western colonialism.

The Regional Response

The ASEAN response to this changing security environment has occurred along three dimensions: unilateral, multilateral, and bilateral (with the United States).

Unilaterally, the ASEAN governments have done two things. First, they have continued to act on the same central principle that they followed for nearly three decades: the foundation of national security is a successful and growing economy. “Resilience,” a formulation connoting social stability, economic success, and a general ruggedness, was coined in Singapore and soon spread as a kind of regional mantra to the other states. All of the successful ASEAN states have kept their focus on the priority objective of economic growth and modernization.

At the same time, these states began to invest more heavily in their respective military establishments. This growth has been sufficiently noteworthy to lead many observers to refer to a regional arms race. In the early 1990s, Southeast Asia was the one growth area in an otherwise contracting global arms market. Indonesia purchased much of the former East German navy—29 ships in all. Malaysia purchased FA-18s and Russian MIG-29s. Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand purchased F-16s. Thailand purchased Chinese tanks and armored personnel carriers, German helicopters, and American P-3s. The complete list of such acquisitions was long, but it was misleading to refer to a regional arms race.

What was going on was a reorientation of armed forces away from domestic counterinsurgency missions toward external defense coupled with a modernization and upgrading of forces by countries that now could afford it. The growth in military spending was within planned national budgets and generally tracked or only slightly exceeded aggregate economic growth. Other factors at work included (1) an effort to improve national capabilities to defend offshore territorial claims, particularly in light of China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea, (2) a response to the considerable political influence enjoyed by the armed forces in several countries, and (3) some undeniable competition and one-upmanship among the states of the region, notably between Singapore and Malaysia.

One of the consequences of the Asian economic crisis that began in 1997 was a scaling back of military procurement budgets throughout the region—most notably in Thailand’s decision to rescind its purchase of FA-18s from the United States. If a feeling emerges in the region that the economic crisis is effectively over, military budgets can be expected to benefit accordingly.

The most interesting developments in terms of regional security have a multilateral character. ASEAN has become the centerpiece in this process. When the

association was created in 1967, its declared purpose was to foster economic and cultural (and by implication, political) cooperation among its members. The founders of the organization were emphatic and explicit that ASEAN was not, nor would it become, a security organization (that is, a military alliance). In fact, ASEAN was, from the outset, an organization that had an overriding security purpose. Its achievements in terms of fostering cultural contact and understanding have been constructive, but hardly earthshaking. Its various initiatives in the direction of regional economic cooperation have come to little for the basic reason that the economies of the member states are competitive rather than complementary.

But security is another matter. ASEAN was founded in the aftermath of Indonesian “confrontation” against Malaysia, exacerbated by the Philippines territorial claim to Sabah. The clear intent in creating ASEAN was to prevent the outbreak of another conflict among the five founding members. This has been one of ASEAN’s great successes. Patterns of consultation and collaboration have been fostered; mutual trust has been nurtured; and political and foreign policy elites have become closely acquainted with one another. In short, ASEAN has become a “security community” defined as a collective in which military conflict among its members has become almost unthinkable. For example, despite recurring acrimony over a number of issues, a military clash between Singapore and Malaysia is about as unlikely as one between Spain and Great Britain over Gibraltar. Disputes exist, but they are either resolved through negotiations or adjudication or set aside until they become negotiable at some future time.

The second major achievement of ASEAN came in response to Vietnam’s 1978–1979 invasion and occupation of Cambodia. ASEAN took the lead in coordinating a remarkably effective diplomatic campaign that denied Cambodia’s UN seat to the Vietnamese-installed government in Phnom Penh. Three governments (Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand) also worked with the United States (and China) in providing covert assistance to the various Khmer guerrilla organizations conducting military resistance against the Vietnamese. These efforts, along with the U.S.-led economic embargo, were instrumental in persuading Vietnam to withdraw finally from Cambodia.

Although ASEAN is not a military pact, several of its members have been engaged in bilateral cooperation for many years on security-related issues of shared concern. Examples include Thailand and Malaysia on their common border (long a haunt of the Malayan Communist Party and Thai Muslim secessionists), the Philippines and Indonesia regarding smuggling, and Singapore and Indonesia concerning piracy. Since the U.S. decision to evacuate the Clark and Subic Bay bases, each of the ASEAN countries has offered to make appropriate facilities accessible to U.S. naval and air forces. Beginning in 1992, a multilateral dimension was introduced when security issues were explicitly included on the agenda of ASEAN ministerial meetings and uniformed officers were included in senior officials' meetings. In the same timeframe, the annual meeting of the ASEAN foreign ministers with ASEAN's "Dialogue Partners" began to encompass security issues. In 1993, this security dialogue was expanded to include China, Russia, and India. Meanwhile, Vietnam, Laos, Burma (Myanmar) and Cambodia have become full members of ASEAN. All of this official dialogue has been supplemented by semi-official meetings and conferences conducted by academics and policy institutes in the ASEAN countries with invited outside experts and devoted to security issues.

Eventually, the participants will have to decide whether to extend multilateral security cooperation beyond discussions to embrace operational activities, including possible multilateral joint exercises and training, and coordination of some equipment purchases (such as maritime patrol aircraft) to allow for possible joint use and interoperability. However, there is little or no likelihood that ASEAN will ultimately be transmuted into a full-fledged military alliance. There is no serious sentiment within the organization for such a step. The region remains too diverse with too little consensus regarding the identity and extent of security threats. Thailand and Vietnam, for example, have distinctly different views of China in this regard. Even if an alliance were established, the collective military strength of the region would be insufficient to cope with aggression or intimidation by a large power. Finally, nonalignment still exerts a significant tug on official sentiments within the region.

The latest development is an ASEAN decision to establish a formal arrangement to manage the official security dialogue—the ASEAN Regional Forum. The ARF hosted its first annual meeting in Bangkok in

July 1994. Comprising 19 Pacific Rim countries, including China, Japan, Russia, India, and the United States, the ARF had the potential of becoming a significant arena for addressing such common security concerns as piracy and such regional disputes as the Spratly Islands. In reaction to the discovery of Chinese military construction on Mischief Reef in 1995, the ARF became the vehicle for a serious initial attempt to resolve conflicting interests and claims in the South China Sea. Yet when additional Chinese construction was detected during the most acute phase of the Asian economic downturn, the ASEAN countries could not muster an effective response within the ARF. At this stage, the jury is still out as to whether the ARF will become a viable diplomatic vehicle for addressing security issues in the region. A current test is provided by efforts within ASEAN to use the ARF to negotiate a "code of conduct" for managing disputes in the Spratlys.

The U.S. Role

As a consequence—and somewhat paradoxically—the ASEAN states still look to external powers as the ultimate guarantors of their security. The Five Power Defense Pact links the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Malaysia. But it is the United States that is overwhelmingly the region's preferred security partner. This shows up clearly, as noted above, in USIA polling of regional opinion (for example, Thailand, Indonesia, Australia, and the Philippines), in official public statements (for example, Singapore) and in government actions and private comments by officials (for example, Malaysia). Even in nominal outliers like Vietnam and Burma, it does not take long for some senior military officers to reveal their preferences for a continued robust American defense presence in the region.

Since the demise of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1977, the United States has been party to only one multilateral Asian alliance with Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS). But America does have bilateral defense agreements with Thailand and the Philippines. More important, the U.S. 7th Fleet, headquartered in Hawaii and forward based in Guam and Japan (composed of permanently assigned units and those deployed for 6-month periods from central and eastern Pacific bases), operates on a con-

tinuing basis in the region. U.S. air assets deploy to the region out of Japan and Alaska, and forces from all services, including ground forces, regularly go to the region from the continental United States for a variety of exercises. Altogether, and on a continuing basis, approximately 100,000 American military personnel are forward deployed.

At the most basic level, U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia have remained consistent over the last five decades:

- Prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon,
- Keep open the sea and air routes that transit the area, and
- Maintain commercial access to the economies of the region and the peace and stability that commerce requires.

Pursuit of these interests has carried U.S. security policy through five historical phases over the past half century: (1) The war against Japan in the 1940s, (2) The counterinsurgency/nation-building period of the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in the Vietnam War, (3) The Nixon Doctrine and the focus on strengthening the 7th Fleet as a counter to the Soviet military presence based at Cam Ranh Bay in the late 1970s, and (4) Pressure (working with and through some of the ASEAN governments) against the Vietnamese military occupation of Cambodia, culminating in the 1989 Vietnamese withdrawal and the signing of the 1991 Paris Agreements establishing a framework for a possible political resolution of the Cambodian conflict.

Coincidentally, the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War removed Russian military power from the region. Since 1991, the United States has entered a fifth phase with the termination of the U.S. military presence in the Philippines. The loss of facilities at the Clark and Subic Bay bases compelled a rethinking of U.S. strategy that involved a dispersal of U.S. presence in the region through access arrangements in a number of countries, but no large U.S. bases. With the advent of the Clinton administration, there also was a change of emphasis that was more accommodating to multilateral approaches to security. The new approach embraced the advent of ARF and explicit intra-ASEAN discussions of security issues as fully compatible with existing U.S. bilateral security ties and activities in the region.

The United States now faces a substantially changed security landscape in Southeast Asia, one that reflects the essential success of its postwar policies. America currently is without challenge as the preeminent military power in the region and, from a Southeast Asian perspective, that presence is largely

benign because it comes without territorial or overt hegemonic ambition.

Security regimes generally develop in response to or in anticipation of threats. What makes the U.S. security role in Southeast Asia so distinctive and challenging in intellectual and policy terms is the absence of a clear threat. Instead, there is the regional sense of uneasiness noted earlier. The Southeast Asians want the U.S. presence as an insurance policy—a benevolent cop on the beat to protect them against potential external threats, against the unknown, and, to some extent, against each other. As long as the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty is operative and the U.S. 7th Fleet patrols the Southeast Asian sealanes, Tokyo will not need to contemplate its own military presence in the region. Disputes or potential disputes within the region are less likely to flare up or to provoke a local arms race if a neutral third party is by far the strongest military presence in the area. The day may come when the combination of growing economies, militaries, and multilateral institutions and processes will give the region sufficient strength and coherence to make a U.S. security presence largely superfluous—but not yet.

Other considerations that underlie Southeast Asian support for a continued U.S. presence include the preference among the armed forces of the region for American weapons and equipment and for the United States as a source of common military doctrine and shared intelligence. U.S. forces treat Southeast Asia as a single security area. Moreover, joint exercises, exchanges, and interactions with local armed forces give the region what coherence it now has in military terms. Finally, the U.S. military presence is valued as a means to maintain U.S. interest in the region and to encourage an increase in American economic involvement. The United States remains Southeast Asia's largest single market. Since exports and foreign investment have largely driven the economic growth of the region, the American connection remains hugely important to its future. Southeast Asian governments also want to encourage increased American investment as a counterweight to the massive presence of Japan in that sector. If Southeast Asian industry is going to compete successfully with lower wage Chinese competitors, an infusion of foreign technology will be required in many cases.

Note that significant constraints exist on American influence in the region. First, until recently, the most obvious were limitations on U.S. defense budgets. It is a

great irony that if the Philippines Senate had approved the tentative agreement for renewal of the lease at Subic Bay, the United States would have faced significant difficulties in fulfilling the financial terms of that agreement. In a new era of federal budget surpluses, it is no longer so evident whether budget limitations pose an insuperable hurdle to maintaining a major, capital, and personnel-intensive presence in Southeast Asia, like at the Clark and Subic Bay bases. That will become clear only if an opportunity for such a facility presents itself.

Second, nationalism constrains the willingness of Southeast Asian states to accept a close, visible tie with the United States. ASEAN has a long-standing formal commitment to the objective of establishing a Southeast Asian Zone of Peace Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), which would amount to the exclusion of the external great powers from the region. ZOPFAN has taken on no role beyond the declaratory, but it accurately reflects a widely held determination not to be the cat's paw of others outside the area. This impulse received a recent impetus from Indonesia's selection in 1993 to serve a 5-year term as leader of the Nonaligned Movement. One consequence of all this is a desire to minimize the size and visibility of the American military presence in each of these countries. None of the states want to have the raucous equivalent of Angeles City or Ilongapo that serviced American airmen and sailors outside the gates of Clark and Subic in the Philippines. Visiting Forces agreements establishing legal jurisdiction over U.S. military personnel have become a lightning rod for such concerns.

Third, there have been a number of recurring irritants in U.S. relations with the region, most related to trade disputes and human rights. Examples include a long-running and acrimonious quarrel with Thailand over protection of intellectual property rights; a public argument between the United States (including President Clinton) and Singapore (including former Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew) over the proper punishment for an American teenager found guilty of vandalism in Singapore; and the congressionally mandated cancellation of some International Military Education and Training (IMET) aid programs due to criticisms related to human rights—notably, Malaysia's policy toward Vietnamese refugees and Indonesia's handling of East Timor. During the 1990s, the mood in several of the ASEAN governments

became palpably more resentful of, and resistant to, U.S. pressure on behalf of a human rights/democratization agenda. Singapore and Malaysia were particularly outspoken concerning U.S. "arrogance" and "cultural imperialism." The Asian financial crisis tended to override and to mute these issues, while diplomatic negotiations resolved some of them. If Indonesia's newly empowered democracy takes hold, the political climate on these issues in the region will presumably become more receptive to U.S. views.

At the same time, the Asian financial crisis injected a new discordant element into the picture—a sense of acute vulnerability to the forces of the new globalized economy. Malaysia's combative Prime Minister Mahathir angrily blamed international currency speculators for triggering Asia's meltdown and the International Monetary Fund for running roughshod over local sovereignties in responding to the crisis. Mahathir's view that the West (and the United States in particular) had acquired too much economic power over Southeast Asia is widely shared by other less outspoken leaders in the region.

In sum, U.S. security planners face a complex environment in Southeast Asia that requires an intelligent, sensitive (even subtle) diplomatic touch; that integrates political, economic, and military considerations; and that looks beyond the immediate to at least the mid-term future. The names of the game are anticipation, prevention, deterrence, and reassurance.

Looking Ahead

Southeast Asian attitudes and approaches toward U.S. policy and presence will be shaped, in the first instance, by developments within the region. These will include performance of the major Southeast Asian economies, the viability and unity of Indonesia, and the cohesion and effectiveness of ASEAN. Beyond these obvious factors, there are some wild-cards in the deck, including a potential political upheaval in Burma.

Economic success breeds confidence and stability—or, in the parlance of the region, "resilience." Economic growth also provides the budgetary resources to upgrade national military capabilities. Economic growth undergirds the development and strengthening of regional institutions, including ASEAN and its various elaborations and spin-offs. A prosperous and modernizing Southeast Asia will deal more confidently with the major external powers, such as Japan, China,

the United States, and, in the future, India. Such a Southeast Asia will be more inclined to draw lines in the sand (or sea) regarding China and to insist on conditions and *quid pro quos* regarding the U.S. security presence. Conversely, a Southeast Asia unable to regain its pre-1998 economic footing will be less assertive vis-à-vis outside players and more prone to intraregional disputes. Such a region will be more vulnerable to growing Chinese influence and, at the same time, more inclined to look to the United States both for markets and for security support.

Indonesia is a huge factor in this regard. If it holds together and begins to restore economic growth under a moderate democratic government, Indonesia can regain its role as the linchpin of a modernizing, increasingly interactive Southeast Asia. In the worst case, a disintegrating Indonesia will fundamentally alter the balance of power in East Asia. Opportunities for Chinese ambition will grow, and the tendency of regional states to strengthen bilateral security arrangements with the United States will probably grow as well.

All of this is intimately connected to ASEAN. The association as we have known it cannot survive a breakup of Indonesia; it will survive only as a shell if Indonesia becomes the chronic sick man of Southeast Asia. ASEAN is already confronting major difficulties as a result of the Asian financial crisis and the ill-advised and rapid decision to expand its membership to include Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. ASEAN today is a distinctly less cohesive and effective organization than it was in 1996.

The second broad set of factors that will affect U.S. attitudes concerns the policies and actions of major powers in East Asia—notably China and the United States. The foreign policies of Southeast Asian governments generally are predicated on the hope and the expectation that China will give the highest national priority to economic development and modernization, which will in turn require good relations with its neighbors. A China focused on economic growth would logically desire increased trade with and investment from Southeast Asia. Such a China would eschew provocative, destabilizing policies in the South China Sea or elsewhere that would jeopardize such relations. Southeast Asian policies toward China have been designed to reinforce such logic and tendencies.

But few Southeast Asian officials are confident beyond doubt that Beijing will prove to be such a benign presence in the region. Unlike the United

States, China is geographically next door and does have territorial ambitions. There is an undercurrent of apprehension present in every Southeast Asian government to varying degrees. The possibility that China may pursue a strategy designed to assert its primacy in the region cannot be ruled out. Chinese statements and actions in the South China Sea validate the danger in the minds of many regional defense and intelligence officials.

A China with hegemonic tendencies poses another danger: Japan strengthening its military capabilities and assuming a more “normal” security role in the region. In short, a logical consequence of growing Chinese power could be a great power rivalry with Japan along Asia’s rim. None of this would be welcome in Southeast Asia.

The U.S. economic presence in Southeast Asia has never been seriously controversial. Not only was it a source of needed imports, technology, managerial expertise, and investment, but it was also, most importantly, a natural concomitant of America’s most important contribution—its market. As far as one can see into the future, that market will remain absolutely vital to economic well-being in Southeast Asia.

The U.S. security presence has been welcome in Southeast Asia since the early days of the Cold War for the measure of protection that it provided. In some instances that protection was direct and tangible, as with U.S. assistance to the Philippines against the Hukbalahap insurgency. In one case—Vietnam—it was direct, massive, and unsuccessful. But generally the U.S. presence has been valued for the general climate of stability and security that it has provided. As long as the strongest military power in the region was an outside player without territorial ambition, Southeast Asians could be confident that nothing really bad—for example, a hostile hegemon or a major interregional conflict—would be allowed to happen. That confidence in turn was key to foreign investment and other economic development initiatives that made the Asian Miracle possible.

In sum, the regional context in which Southeast Asians view the U.S. security role is remarkably dynamic and indeterminate. China’s strategic direction—aspiring regional hegemon or increasingly satisfied status quo great power—remains entirely uncertain. In all probability, the China of the next 10 to 15 years will emerge as a complex amalgam of the two. Just as China’s strategic direction is a question, so

too are its economic and political prospects. The Chinese economy of today faces huge problems, including hopelessly inefficient state enterprises, a technically insolvent banking system, and an alarming and unsolved environmental crisis. A substantial slowing of economic momentum has profound implications for a regime that has lost Marxism/Maoism as an effective source of political legitimacy and relies instead on an improving economy. Future historians may see the ongoing crackdown on the Falun Gong group as the first clear signal of a systemic Chinese political crisis.

Uncertainties concerning China extend to other elements in the strategic environment. As the Taiwan dispute becomes more acute, the confident expectations of a few years ago that the situation could be managed and contained are no longer prevalent. ASEAN is still reeling under the impact of the financial crisis in Asia and suffering acute indigestion from trying to incorporate too many new members too fast. The association's future is very much in doubt.

The economic crisis has raised a number of other uncertainties, the most basic being whether the region will make a full recovery. There are some hopeful indicators in that regard, but whether they represent a real or false dawn is still a question. Even larger questions surround Indonesia, including whether the archipelago will remain politically unified.

All of these uncertainties tend to impel the region, however reluctantly, toward increased reliance on the U.S. security presence as an anchor in stormy seas. This will be true only as long as the United States is really seen as an anchor. Southeast Asian states will become increasingly sensitive to any signs of declining U.S. interest in or disengagement from the region. Assessments of U.S. resolve will become even more of a cottage industry for Southeast Asian governments than they have in the past. For this reason, the continuing (and even growing) ambiguity concerning U.S. policy toward the South China Sea does not bode well. What exactly is America prepared to defend and under what circumstances? Few in Southeast Asia are confident of the answer. Those that are uncertain will tend to hedge that uncertainty. The logical alternative to reliance on the U.S. security presence will be some sort of regional accommodation to Chinese primacy.