



Smart-Power Bounty of RIMPAC 2014 by Nicole Forrester

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Amidst the flurry of activity and cacophony of accents, Adm. Harry B Harris, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, stood on the deck of the *HMAS Success* surveying one of the many RIMPAC festivities celebrating the arrival of 21 guest nations, 25,000 personnel, 49 surface ships, six submarines, and 200-plus aircraft for five weeks of shore and sea phase training activities in Hawaii this month.

The biannual *Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)* 2014 is the world's largest maritime exercise. This year marks the 24th iteration since 1971, and includes veteran participants – Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Tonga, and the UK – and first-timers China and Brunei.

RIMPAC's traditional maritime drills include integrated exercises, joint assaults, interceptions and landings, evacuation and resupply operations, as well as more recent non-traditional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and medical exchanges. But RIMPAC is more than just a military-military training mechanism to improve communication, coordination, and interoperability across navies – most of which do not usually operate in English.

In a region that produces 60 percent of global GDP and is marked by hotly contested maritime domains, the opportunity to bring together disputing parties in a cooperative naval environment to collaborate and cross-train is invaluable. Exercising together builds confidence and a better understanding of behavior, lessening the risk of misperception or miscommunication if and when navies encounter each other elsewhere.

RIMPAC affords commanders the opportunity to have candid, real-time conversations that can develop and shape a mutual understanding of challenges. A focus on practice, such as when divers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy train with divers from the US Navy and the Royal Australian Navy, promotes and supports the cooperative relationships that are essential to maintaining the safety of sea lanes and maritime security. These habits of cooperation, discussion and personal relationships also build a foundation for mutual understanding.

With nearly two dozen countries represented, RIMPAC provides a military mechanism for important cultural and interpersonal (or diplomatic) exchange to build *esprit de corps* among these navies. This too helps build trust and reduce

undesirable traits like “othering” and tears down inaccurate stereotypes.

Beyond lessons drawn from regional militaries exercising together, RIMPAC's real success story is a diplomatic one, especially for Australia. There is growing concern in Australia about the prospect of intensified competition between the US and China sharpening into confrontation and perhaps even conflict. In this environment, Canberra should do all it can to buttress the foundation that RIMPAC is laying between two of Australia's most important partners.

Fears that China's invitation to RIMPAC could be costly are misguided. China will no doubt try to learn as much as it can – legally and illegally – about others' technologies, equipment, personnel, tactics, and procedures. Other countries will return the favor. But in a highly scripted exercise like this, it is unlikely China would glean any more than they would have by other means. Direct exposure to US equipment, personnel, and capabilities should give the Chinese a more realistic assessment of what the US and its allies are capable of doing. Mistaken notions of US decline are likely to be corrected in the process.

Successfully leveraging China's RIMPAC participation could counter the Chinese assertion that the “the US rebalance is another attempt to contain China.” The challenge for Australia is to convince China that RIMPAC's engagement of multiple regional partners through cooperative action is not containment; rather, it is more like maritime socialization.

Other countries benefit as well. RIMPAC affords Japan a vehicle to steer the collective self-defense reform narrative away from remilitarization and illustrate that greater Japanese Self-Defense Forces contributions would benefit the entire region. On the margins of RIMPAC, smaller trilateral or quadrilateral exercises would provide political cover in Seoul and Tokyo to attempt to expand the limited Korea-Japan mil-mil cooperation beyond the existing *Search and Rescue Exercise (SAREX)*.

As ever, the working premise is that laying this foundation through RIMPAC today will allow issues to be resolved rather than escalated tomorrow. The practice of building security cooperation will, at the very least, help avoid future escalation via miscalculation and avoid kinetic conflict.

Pacific Forum CSIS Co-Chairs Joseph Nye and Richard Armitage have written that smart power “underscores the necessity of a strong military, but also invests heavily in alliances, partnerships, and institutions... Providing for the global good is central to this effort.”

The real measure of the success of RIMPAC 2014 is not a demonstration of US military muscle – impressive though it is – and the resultant deterrence benefits. Rather, for Adm. Harris, who wants PacFleet to lead America's rebalance to the

Pacific, RIMPAC's real bounty is its less tangible soft power gains. That is smart power at its peak.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.