



The Role of Armed Forces in Regional Security Cooperation by Dennis C. Blair

I am struck by the stark difference between my social discussions with military counterparts in the Asia-Pacific region and business colleagues' discussions with their counterparts. In my discussions, when the plates are cleared and the last cups of tea are served, I am warned that I cannot trust the country that I am going to next, or the one that I just came from. Just look at history. Yet my private colleagues' discussions, when the business of the day is done, are mainly about their children going to school and setting up businesses in each other's countries. Many military counterparts are thinking in terms of long-term rivalries. Most other leaders and citizens are thinking in terms of long-term cooperation. How can we build the security structures for a peaceful, cooperative Asia?

Genuine security within the region will come only when nations share dependable expectations of peaceful change and act in concert to address common challenges. I believe that the path to security in the region ultimately will be through the effects of the information age – loosening state control of data and opinions through financial and economic interactions with their prerequisite long-term security, and through diplomacy and cooperation in non-military areas: law enforcement and environmental cooperation.

Capable U.S. military forces operating in the Asia-Pacific region have been a foundation of regional security. One pillar of this foundation is the role that American armed forces play in reassuring allies and security partners by deterring armed aggression and intimidation. Another is the extended nuclear deterrence over states hosting U.S. armed forces that simultaneously protects and also limits incentives to develop their own nuclear forces. This role of U.S. military forces in Asia has been well recognized and understood. But, another pillar, that has been less recognized in the past and has high potential for the future, is the role of U.S. armed forces in helping to build trust among the other armed forces in the region by working together on shared interests.

The prevalent way of thinking about international relations throughout the Asia-Pacific region is in balance of power terms. Leaders in China, India, Russia, and other states talk of a multipolar world where major states represent centers of power, continually maneuvering to create balances. This is the world of Bismarck and 19th century Europe.

An alternative approach, better suited to the communal violence and transnational concerns of the 21st century, is one in which states concentrate upon shared interests in peaceful development, and actively promote diplomacy and negotiation to resolve disagreements.

Territorial disputes in the region involve remote and often inhospitable bits of land borders, small islands, and the natural resources that go with them. Investment needed to extract energy resources will only come with political accommodation. Compared to the potential gains from cooperation on peacekeeping, terrorism, international crime, environmental degradation, fishing, wealth distribution, and other challenges to peaceful development, these territorial disputes are paltry. All gains will result from diplomacy, financial incentives, and market forces rather than war.

The fundamental security problem resides less in tangible differences than in zero-sum, balance of power mindsets, fueled by excessive ethnic and religious zeal and historical fears and grievances.

To combat a way of thinking that was undermining creative solutions in a domestic context, President Roosevelt told Americans during the Great Depression that they had nothing to fear but fear itself. In Asia, it seems to me that we have nothing to fear from great power rivalries except the great power rivalries themselves.

The issue is not force structures. It is mindsets and ambiguous intentions. Countries in other regions of the world have historic animosities, deep policy differences, competing economic claims, and well-developed armed forces. However, they also share dependable expectations of peaceful change, where the prospect of using force to resolve differences never arises.

The question is how to transform leadership mindsets in the Asia-Pacific region from measuring differences to measuring progress. Part of the answer lies in developing multilateral approaches to common security challenges.

One key is to develop policy coordination, including combined military cooperation on a particular regional security issue, or a series of related security issues.

To develop habits of cooperation, nations need not be treaty alliance signatories – they do not need a common enemy or national threat. They need only shared security interests and the willingness to work together. Nor must all coordination and cooperation involve U.S. participation, and certainly it does not all require U.S. leadership, though often nations will desire access to U.S. capabilities.

While respecting sovereignty, the nations of the region share interests in extracting their citizens caught in the path of communal violence and in mitigating consequent humanitarian disasters. As members of the UN, we share both interests and responsibilities for supporting UN mandated peace enforcement and peacekeeping operations. We share interests in countering the transnational challenges of terrorism, illegal drug trafficking, piracy, and weapons proliferation, where

effective action requires international cooperation. We also share interests in assisting people in distress at sea and can offer assistance to each other when natural disasters strike. These security challenges – where we share interests – are those most likely involve our armed forces in operations over the coming decades.

The path to creating shared expectations of peaceful change is one of improving communication to build understanding and trust, and developing habits of cooperation and a shared sense of responsibility for regional security.

The fundamental security challenge in the Asia-Pacific region is to transform the balance of power approach proposed by those who advocate a multi-polar global power structure into one where the prospect of using armed force to resolve disputes never arises. The challenge is to nurture a security approach in Asia in which the nations:

- Genuinely do not plan or intend to fight each other;
- Are willing to put collective efforts into resolving regional points of friction;
- Are willing to contribute armed forces and other aid to UN- mandated operations to support diplomatic solutions;
- Are willing to contribute to humanitarian operations; and
- Are willing to plan, train, and exercise their armed forces together to build trust and confidence and capabilities to conduct these kinds of operations.

Indeed, there are centers of power in Asia. The challenge is to channel the energies of these centers into working together on the problems that affect the security and prosperity of all our peoples, and away from intimidation and armed conflict.

I am not naive on this score. There is a great deal of historical distrust and antagonism in the region. There is a natural tendency to look for short-term, unilateral gain. There is a concern that compromise and negotiation will be interpreted as weakness. Habits of regional cooperation are only rudimentary.

However, I am more optimistic than most. If pursued skillfully, I believe efforts to change mindsets in Asia over time will take hold and build durable security that will support prosperity and improvements in the standard of living of Asians. It is a worthy goal for those who live in, are engaged in and care about the region.

Admiral Dennis C. Blair, USN is the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Command. This article is a shortened version of a speech he presented to the Senior Policy Seminar held at the East-West Center in Honolulu on August 8, 2000.