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U.S. and Japan in the Malacca Strait: Lending Hands, Not Stepping In by Yoichiro Sato

During a maritime security conference in Singapore in May 2004, a Singapore delegate called for maritime patrols by U.S. and Japanese naval vessels. This echoed a March comment by Adm. Thomas Fargo, commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, that the United States was considering the deployment of special forces or marines on speed boats to combat maritime terrorism in the Strait of Malacca. Both calls were immediately opposed by Malaysia and Indonesia. The diverse positions in regard to maritime patrols in the Malacca Strait stem from combinations of historical factors and strategic interests. However, the differences among the three in regard to a regional security role for the U.S. and Japan are more nuanced than they appear, and neither Singapore's embrace nor Malaysian and Indonesian rejections should be taken at face value.

Declining Role of History

All three countries were occupied by Japan during World War II; that history set a bottom line for Southeast Asian leaders, but strategic factors have begun to push this concern aside for all three countries. An invitation to Japan from Singapore, a country with an ethnic Chinese majority that suffered more than ethnic Malays in Malaysia and Indonesia, is proof that history matters less than strategic interests.

ASEAN Solidarity?

Since its foundation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has emphasized regional solidarity and the exclusion of outside influences from the region. While this was not practical at the time of the Cold War and hot wars in Vietnam and Cambodia, when the socialist/communist states of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar joined ASEAN in the late 1990s, the organization had an opportunity to revisit these objectives.

On maritime security issues, the desire to exclude outside influences is most closely shared by Malaysia and Indonesia, the two countries that view the Strait of Malacca as a sovereign issue. Singapore's increasing cooperation with the United States, such as preparation for port calls by U.S. aircraft carriers, is a divergence from the policies of the other two countries. This stems from Singapore's greater emphasis on Strait security as a national strategic interest; the other two countries have broader sets of security priorities. Fear of its bigger Muslim neighbors, Indonesia and Malaysia, is often cited as a reason for Singapore's flirtations with outside powers. Though this may be true, but Singaporeans also argue that Indonesian and Malaysian maritime security shortcomings are the real concern and that the call for U.S. and Japanese help is intended to be a wakeup call.

The China Factor

Southeast Asian countries also view China's rising naval power with caution. For this reason, their attitude toward the U.S. presence in the region is ambiguous. Despite vocal opposition to permanent basing by the U.S. fleet, a less visible presence, such as bilateral assistance from and joint training with U.S. forces that upgrade local force capabilities, is welcomed by both Indonesia and Malaysia. Malaysia has actively participated in joint naval exercises with the United States. Indonesia's lack of participation is not the result of its reluctance, but of U.S. sanctions after human rights violations by the Indonesian military in East Timor.

In Malaysia, fear of China has also been enhanced by PRC interferences during the 1960s when Beijing aided local communist insurgencies. Historical fear of Japan is matched, if not outweighed, by China's more recent "history problem" with Malaysia.

Nevertheless, the three ASEAN countries are not interested in antagonizing China over enhanced cooperation with the U.S. and Japan. China is recognized as an important balancer to be engaged and used to deter other superpowers. China has been invited to major regional antiterrorism meetings along with the U.S. and Japan.

Expectations for Japan

Despite being divided about Japanese patrols, the three Southeast Asian governments agree that Japan, whose oil imports depend on security in the Strait of Malacca, needs to contribute to that security. Jakarta has requested that Japan give foreign aid to allow Indonesia to purchase more patrol boats. Japan's aid provisions, which banned military aid, prevented this. Similar wishes are also heard from Malaysia, if only informally. Related calls for assistance can be found in the dual-use areas of civilian and military technologies, such as satellite intelligence gathering, maritime traffic monitoring, and real-time information sharing. Japan's contribution to the Piracy Center in Kuala Lumpur is acknowledged but considered insufficient.

Financial and technical aid from, and even joint training with, Japan are welcome. They increase the resources available to those governments in absolute terms. They also diversify the sources of assistance for Southeast Asian countries, reducing their current dependence on the U.S.

International Law

Recent U.S. pronouncements of the Regional Maritime Security Initiative emphasize enforcement by the littoral states of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The controversial idea of deploying U.S. special forces or marines to patrol the Strait has been scaled down. International law allows involuntary onboard inspections of foreign-flag vessels in international

waters only in special circumstances, such as hostage taking and slave trading. In the Malacca Strait, the littoral states recognize rights of passage by foreign vessels through their territorial water, but tightly retain sovereign rights of law enforcement against vessels suspected of more common crimes, such as smuggling and sea robberies. Thus, it was likely that the U.S. call that pushed the limits of international law merely intended to provoke discussions on this urgent matter.

Conclusion

The diverse responses of the three Southeast Asian countries to the proposed naval patrols in the Malacca Strait by the U.S. and Japan reflect differences in their strategic objectives. Those differences may not be as sharp as they appear. ASEAN solidarity against interventions by external powers plays an important role in their thinking. Their calculations are predominantly shaped by *realpolitik*, and their desire to create a more complex balance of power in the region. Ironically, the best way for the ASEAN countries to check unwanted interventions by any major external power (the U.S., China, Japan, India, and possibly Korea), would be to invite them all on a limited scale, so that the external powers would balance among themselves. Such a move may put ASEAN governments in the driver's seat when it comes to multilateral security cooperation in the Strait: outside powers would play supporting roles and leave enforcement to the littoral states themselves.

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