

Why has South East Asia become the second front in Bush's "war on terrorism"?

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Just months after the US military began bombing Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban regime, the Bush administration opened up what was dubbed in the American media "the second front" in the so-called global war against terrorism—South East Asia.

Since January, the US has dispatched 660 troops on a "training mission" to the southern Philippines, encouraged Singapore and Malaysia to hunt down Islamic fundamentalist militants and pressured the Indonesian government to do likewise. More American troops are arriving on the Philippine island of Basilan to carry out a series of construction projects to facilitate military operations.

A steady stream of senior US Pentagon and State Department officials, along with the FBI Director General, has visited the region. The Indonesian and Philippine presidents—Megawati Sukarnoputri and Gloria Arroyo—have made trips to Washington with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad due to follow next month. A top-level, two-day meeting of Indonesian and US military officials has taken place this week.

The US press set the stage for the "second front" with a string of articles describing the region as a "haven" for Al Qaeda and other Islamic fundamentalist groups. A series of arrests in Singapore and Malaysia provided more grist for the mill with *Time* magazine writing in early February: "Terrorists are being uncovered throughout South East Asia with nefarious plans, bombs—and intriguing connections." No evidence was offered for these allegations, other than the unsubstantiated claims of police and intelligence sources.

The US targeting of South East Asia has provoked criticism in the region. In an article entitled "Wrong Target," the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported: "Many people in the region are now saying that US efforts to combat global terrorism are in danger of doing as much harm as good. The US has been criticised as clumsy, misguided and falling into longstanding local disputes that have festered for years and pose little international threat."

Lee Poh Peng, professor at University Kebangsaan in Malaysia, told the magazine: "The US campaign is disproportionate to the evidence of terrorism in South East Asia." The article continued: "Lee and some other analysts are mystified by the choice of South East Asia for what Bush calls a 'second front' in the fight the US is leading against terrorism. Some speculate about ulterior motives, suggesting that the US wants to regain a strategic toehold after being evicted from Philippine bases a decade earlier."

Having timidly raised the suggestion that the US may have "ulterior motives" in opening a "second front" in South East Asia, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* took the matter no further. But the idea is neither far-fetched nor merely a question of speculation. A number of documents published by US think tanks over the past few years demonstrate that, well before the September 11 attacks, a debate was underway in ruling circles over the necessity for a more aggressive US intervention in the region.

Following the installation of Bush, rightwing figures made a concerted push to place a far higher priority on US engagement in South East Asia,

where, it was argued, Washington had crucial strategic and economic interests. While the language in these public documents is cautious, the emphasis is on military involvement and the "threat" posed by an expansionist China—a line that dovetails with Bush's more belligerent stance towards Beijing as a "strategic competitor".

Some of the main arguments are set out in a key report released in May 2001 by a task force of academics, corporate executives and officials under the auspices of the Council on Foreign Relations. In its memorandum to Bush, the taskforce declared: "[T]his is a timely moment for your administration to focus on a region that too often in the past has fallen off our radar screens, always to our peril" (*The United States and Southeast Asia: A Policy Agenda for the New Administration*, p.1).

Without naming Clinton, the report's critique of the lack of "a clear, coherent strategy" was aimed in his direction. Under the Clinton administration, Washington seized on the Asian economic crisis that erupted in 1997 to push the IMF's long-held plans for sweeping economic restructuring to open up the region's economies to US investors. At the same time, Washington pushed for "democratic reforms," most notably in Indonesia, as a means of refashioning so-called crony capitalist regimes to meet the requirements of international capital. While not dropping these economic objectives, the taskforce findings argued for different priorities based first and foremost on a more assertive US military stance in the region.

Summing up its criticisms, the report stated: "American influence in the region has waned as a result of a mix of inattentiveness and imperious hectoring, and the perception if not the reality of a belated and inadequate response to the traumatic 1997-98 financial crisis. In addition, an American preoccupation with developments in East Timor distorted the overall US approach to Indonesia and may have distracted policymakers from focusing on broader regional concerns. This was exemplified by our delayed and lackadaisical attitude towards Chinese encroachments in the South China Sea in 1995 and again in 1999" (*ibid*, p.23).

The message to Bush was: drop Clinton's lecturing over democracy, particularly in Indonesia, where the "preoccupation" with East Timor has led to a Congressional ban on US-Indonesian military ties, and counter Chinese influence in the region, especially in the strategic South China Sea. In relation to Indonesia, the report explicitly insisted that: "The United States must cease hectoring Jakarta and instead do its utmost to help stabilise Indonesian democracy and the Indonesian economy, as well as re-engage Indonesia's army."

In the background of these concerns about waning influence in the region is the impact of the US defeat in Vietnam. After the US was compelled to withdraw its military forces from Indochina in the early 1970s, it lost the use of major bases in the Philippines—the Subic Bay naval facility and the Clark air base. In 1998, the Indonesian military strongman, Suharto, on whom Washington had relied heavily, particularly after the Vietnam War, was forced to resign. Those arguing for an end to "inattentiveness" are pushing for a reversal of these political and strategic

setbacks, particularly in conditions where US interests in the region and beyond have expanded and, following the 1997-98 financial crisis, political instability has risen markedly.

As the Council on Foreign Relations taskforce report noted obliquely: “A quarter of a century after the United States fought a wrenching war in Southeast Asia, a war whose aftermath shaped an entire generation, the region still poses a complex challenge for American policymakers and for the public.” It then proceeded to outline the extent of US interests.

“Even putting aside the tragedy of the Vietnam War, it is difficult to acknowledge that such a large area, with nearly 525 million people and a \$700 billion GNP, that is our fifth largest trading partner, could somehow be an afterthought in US policy. This should not be the case, particularly in a part of the world where the United States has fought three major wars over the past six decades, and where the 1997-98 currency crisis threatened to destabilise the entire world financial system” (ibid, p.14).

It noted that US-based firms were second only to Japanese companies as investors in the region, with most of the top Fortune 500 multinational corporations having significant interests in South East Asia. Four countries—Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines and Malaysia—together received more than \$35 billion in investment in 1998. With the exception of Indonesia, US direct investment is beginning to grow again after the Asian financial crisis.

“Of special note are oil and gas reserves and production levels in Indonesia and Brunei. Indonesia, the only Asian member of OPEC, accounts for 20 percent of the world’s liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports, and its reserves are still not fully known. New oil and gas fields are being discovered there, in Malaysia, in Vietnam and the Philippines” (ibid, p.29).

The report pointed to the region’s strategic significance as “a place of great geopolitical consequence that sits aside some of the world’s most critical sea-lanes.” More than \$1.3 trillion in merchandise trade passed through the Strait of Malacca and Lombok in 1999—nearly half of the world’s trade—including crucial oil supplies from the Persian Gulf to Japan, South Korea and China. “As a result, any disruption or dislocation of energy supplies would have an immediate and devastating impact on the economies of East Asia and would have significant secondary effects on the US economy, as well.”

The report presents the issue as a defensive one: to prevent disruption by another power. But control over the key sea-lanes or “choke points” through South East Asia would also place Washington in a strong position to put pressure on China and, should the need arise, its economic rival, Japan. Moreover by strengthening its military presence in the region, the US would also be able to challenge Chinese claims to the South China Sea and its disputed island groups—the Spratlys and Paracels—that are believed to have significant oil reserves.

At the top of its list of proposals to address US interests, the report called for the strengthening of the US military presence. “The highest American priority should still be assigned to maintaining regional security through the prevention of intraregional conflict and domination by an outside power or coalition. The administration should preserve a credible military presence and a viable regional training and support infrastructure,” it stated, specifying “high-priority efforts” in the areas of “joint and combined military training exercises” and “individual and small group exchanges and training”.

Similar conclusions were drawn in a study produced for the US Air Force by the RAND Corporation in 2000 entitled “The Role of Southeast Asia in US Strategy Toward China.” The conservative think tank has close ties not only to the Pentagon and defence industries but also to the Bush administration. Significantly, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who has been Bush’s leading advocate of assertive military action, has a long association with RAND, serving as its chairman/president. Zalmay Khalilzad, a key Bush appointee as special

representative to Afghanistan, was the project leader in charge of the study.

The report explicitly drew attention to the danger posed by China to present US predominance in South East Asia and advocated what it termed “a hedging strategy” to strengthen the US military presence and access to facilities in the region. No explanation was offered as to why China—an economically backward country, heavily dependent on foreign investment and export markets, particularly American, and lacking in sophisticated naval and air power—presents any challenge to the US. As in North East Asia where the US maintains tens of thousands of troops along with naval and air support, the “Chinese threat” is a convenient pretext for maintaining and strengthening Washington’s military position in South East Asia.

The report baldly declared in opening: “China’s emergence as a major regional power over the next 10 to 15 years could intensify United States- People’s Republic of China (PRC) competition in Southeast Asia and increase the potential for armed conflict. The United States is currently the dominant extraregional power in Southeast Asia.... Economic growth in the Asia-Pacific region, which is important to the economic security and well-being of the United States and other powers, depends on preserving American presence and influence in the region and unrestricted access to sea lanes.”

Key aspects of the report’s strategy included “shaping a more favourable security environment through engagement, dialogue, reassurance and trust-building” and cultivating “stronger ties with many ASEAN states”. Singapore, the Philippines and “possibly Vietnam” were identified as key areas, particularly for the US Air Force to establish access to facilities. While Singapore is “ideally located” close to “strategic chokepoints” such as the Strait of Malacca, access to the Philippines and Vietnam “would help establish air superiority over the sea-lanes of the South China Sea.”

The RAND study advocated “a robust security assistance program to allies in the region, particularly the Philippines”. It called for the provision of “urgently needed air defence and naval patrol assets to the Philippines... to reestablish deterrence vis-à-vis China” and advocated the restoration of “full military-to-military ties with Indonesia and resume the transfer of military equipment and spare parts to prevent the further deterioration of Indonesian defence capabilities”.

While various US strategists and analysts, particularly those connected to the Pentagon, viewed the installation of the Bush administration as a prime opportunity to push for decisive American action in South East Asia, prior to September 11 all their plans ran up against the same major obstacle. Governments in the region, even conservative ones, were reluctant to run the risk of either provoking anti-US opposition within their own countries or needlessly alienating Beijing by developing close links to the US military.

As the RAND study commented: “[W]ithout clear and unambiguous indications that China seeks to overturn the status quo, many ASEAN states will be reluctant to arouse Chinese antagonism by taking actions that China would regard as provocative.” In other words, in the absence of any evidence that China posed a threat, ASEAN leaders would think twice about allowing the presence of the US military within striking distance, not only of the South China Sea but of the Chinese mainland itself.

After September 11, the Bush administration rapidly seized the opportunity to give effect to the proposals drawn up by think tanks such as RAND and the Council on Foreign Affairs taskforce. The “global war on terrorism” proved to be an instrument par excellence for riding roughshod over local hostility to an enhanced US military presence in South East Asia. Under strong pressure from Washington, one national leader after another was compelled to offer support, including the use of staging facilities and military bases and the granting of overflight rights for US forces bound for Afghanistan. Philippine President Gloria Arroyo has

been in the forefront but all of the other governments, including that of Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who has been repeatedly chided for insufficient cooperation, have followed suit in varying degrees.

The statements of various US specialists on South East Asia after September 11 reflect a barely suppressed enthusiasm for capitalising on the opportunities that have opened up in the region. Catharin Dalpino, a fellow at the Brookings Institute, wrote in the *International Herald Tribune* in February: “These developments are also a wake-up call that US relations with Southeast Asia are in serious disrepair... This has been a long, slow slide. US attention to the region evaporated after 1973, when American troops were withdrawn from South Vietnam. For the past three decades, officials and analysts have viewed the region as marginal to security in Asia, focusing instead on threats in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula.”

Often, those who were pushing for greater “attentiveness” to South East Asia prior to September 11 were also the leading advocates for opening the “second front” of the so-called war against terrorism. RAND’s Senior Policy Analyst Angel Rabasa, one of the authors of the 2000 study, appeared before the Congressional Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific last December to argue in almost identical language to the original report that “China’s emergence as a major regional power” required “a robust security assistance... especially to the Philippines” where the US should provide “urgently needed air defence and naval patrol assets... to reestablish deterrence vis-à-vis China.”

Rabasa provided no more detail than the US media of any real dangers posed by Islamic fundamentalist groups. Nevertheless he seized the opportunity to argue, as the RAND report had done well before September 11, that “the United States should expand and diversify its access and support arrangements in South East Asia to be able to effectively respond in a timely way to unexpected contingencies.” After all, he declared rhetorically, “six months ago, who would have thought that US armed forces would be confronted with the need to plan and execute a military campaign in Afghanistan?”

It was left to the Heritage Foundation, a rightwing think tank with close connections to the Republican Party, to spell out that, as in Afghanistan, the “war against terrorism” would ultimately be pursued in South East Asia with or without the express approval of local governments. An article entitled “Southeast Asia and the War against Terrorism” by Dana Dillon and Paolo Pasicolan last October set out a list of proposals for strengthening US ties in the region and then concluded with the following:

“While the preferred solution is to use local governments and local security forces to attack terrorism at its roots, in order to protect Americans from terrorist acts, Washington must always keep open the option of direct military intervention. Should there be a clear and immediate threat to US citizens or property that local security forces in Southeast Asia cannot handle, Washington must be ready to act.”

As a review of the documents demonstrates, the decision by the Bush administration to open up “a second front” in South East Asia was neither accidental nor a response to any serious threat to the US. The September 11 attacks were seized upon by the White House and the Pentagon to press ahead with long-held plans to reverse the decline of the US military presence in the region and to aggressively assert US economic and strategic interests.



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