

Malaysia offers its military facilities for US spy planes

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Malaysia's closer integration into the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific against China was underlined last week when it was revealed that Kuala Lumpur has offered the use of its military facilities for American spy planes.

Admiral Jonathan Greenert, US chief of naval operations, said that "recently the Malaysians have offered us to fly detachments of P-8s out of ... East Malaysia." The P-8A Poseidon aircraft is the US Navy's latest and most sophisticated reconnaissance plane, capable of long-range surveillance and anti-submarine missions.

Greenert was speaking on September 8 at the Washington-based think tank, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, on the broad naval aspects of the Obama administration's "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia. As part of the "rebalance," the Pentagon plans to station 60 percent of US naval and air assets in the Asia-Pacific by 2020.

The chief of naval operations stressed the importance of Malaysia's "closeness to the South China Sea" and identified Malaysia, as well as Indonesia and Singapore, as "the key" to the US navy boosting its presence in Asia. Speaking about the US presence in South East Asia, he said: "We have opportunities here and I think we've got to continue to nurture them."

A US Navy officer told the *Wall Street Journal* that the facility likely to be used was the Royal Malaysian Air Force base on the island of Labuan, off the coast of Borneo. While Labuan is not subject to any territorial disputes, it lies at the southern end of the Spratly Islands, parts of which China contests, not only against Malaysia but also the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei and Taiwan.

Over the past four years, the Obama administration has systematically stoked tensions in the South China

Sea by encouraging challenges to China's territorial claims. The US insistence on "freedom of navigation" in the region in practice means free access for US and allied warships and aircraft, including continual reconnaissance of areas close to the mainland and Chinese activities in the South China Sea.

Unlike Vietnam and the Philippines, the Malaysian government has to date kept a relatively low profile in the disputes. As a result, it attempted to play down Greenert's remarks so as not to antagonise China. According to the *New York Times*, Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein denied that permission had been given for "US fighters" to operate from Malaysia, but was not asked about surveillance aircraft.

Anxious not to embarrass Malaysia, US naval spokeswoman Lieutenant Rebekah Johnson clarified that no agreement had been reached but a Malaysian offer had been made "on a case-by-case basis." A senior Asian diplomat told the *New York Times* that talks about the use of a Malaysian air base had been underway for some time.

If US spy planes do begin to operate from east Malaysia, the move would mark a significant shift by Kuala Lumpur toward Washington that could provoke retaliation by Beijing. Chinese officials have repeatedly criticised US spying operations, especially on sensitive Chinese military bases, such as those on Hainan Island, adjacent to the South China Sea.

Over the past four years, the US has made a concerted drive to build alliances and strategic partnerships and obtain basing agreements throughout the region. A deal in 2011 to open up Australian bases to US forces has been followed by a comprehensive agreement with the Philippines this year to provide open-ended access to the American military. As well as longstanding military

bases in South Korea, Japan and Guam, the US is basing warships in Singapore and is seeking greater access to Vietnamese ports.

Greenert's reference to the nurturing of relations in South East Asia, particularly with Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, is significant. A central aspect of the Pentagon's war planning against China includes an economic blockade enforced by cutting off vital Chinese imports of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. The three countries sit astride key "choke points," such as the Malacca Strait, through which ships to the Chinese mainland must pass.

While Malaysia has close economic relations with China, Prime Minister Najib Razak has quietly strengthened ties with Washington. Malaysia is part of the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which is aimed above all at opening up new trade and investment opportunities in Asia for US corporations and undermining China economically.

The US has also been building its strategic linkage with Malaysia. A US Congressional Research Service report published in May noted: "In a 2002 speech in Washington DC, then-Defence Minister Najib Razak called the cooperative US-Malaysia defence relationship 'an all too well kept secret'... The Obama administration's strategic rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region has put more emphasis on bolstering security ties with Malaysia and other so-called emerging partners."

The report outlined the "solid ties" that have been built "through frequent military exercises, combined training, ship visits, and military education exchanges," pointing in particular to "the dozens of Malaysian officers" who study in the US every year. It continued: "In 2013, the US and Malaysian militaries conducted over 75 cooperative activities, highlighted by jungle warfare training at a Malaysian facility, bilateral exercises like Kris Strike, and multilateral exercises like Cobra Gold, which is held in Thailand and involves thousands of personnel from several Asian countries plus the United States."

In April, Obama became the first US president to visit Malaysia since 1966 and elevated the relationship between the two countries to a "Comprehensive Partnership" across a range of areas. Obama pointedly shelved any, even limited, criticism of the autocratic

methods of the Malaysian government, and did not meet with opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, whose acquittal on bogus sodomy charges had been overturned in March.

Obama's visit clearly set the stage for closer strategic ties, including moves toward granting US forces access to Malaysian bases.



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