A SEA Change

By Marc V. Schanz, Senior Editor

The US military is refocusing its attention on the threats and opportunities in Southeast Asia, a region often overlooked in the last decade.
An F-15C takes on fuel from a KC-135 while flying over Korat, Thailand, during Cope Tiger 2011.
This past spring, a long simmering area of tension flared up, approximately 123 miles west of Subic Bay in the Philippines in the South China Sea.

A Philippine military aircraft spotted Chinese vessels in the disputed Scarborough Shoal, prompting the deployment of the Philippine Navy’s largest ship, BRP Gregorio Del Pilar, a former US Coast Guard cutter. Filipino naval personnel boarded the vessel for an inspection and discovered large amounts of illegally collected coral, shellfish, and other marine animals. Not long after, two Chinese maritime surveillance ships positioned themselves between the Filipino ship and the Chinese, preventing arrest of the fishing crews, causing a high-level diplomatic standoff between the two countries. Eventually, the Filipinos withdrew their warship, and the Chinese vessels slipped away. Not long after, Chinese ships returned to the shoal and tensions remained as of the first week of June.

The incident was one of several such skirmishes in recent years where China has forcefully asserted claims in areas around the South China Sea, emboldened by its increasing economic and military power. As a result, many countries in Southeast Asia have quietly supported a more assertive US presence in the region as a check on Beijing. While public statements from the region’s governments are often cautious, concern about China’s willingness to bully its way through territorial disputes is pressing nations to increase their ties with the US. In early June, Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta referenced the the Scarborough Shoal incident during the Shangri-La Security Dialogue in Singapore. He said the US opposes “coercion” in the region and urged settlement “in a manner consistent with international law.”

Preceding and following the Scarborough confrontation, numerous multinational US military exercises unfolded across Southeast Asia, rarely grabbing headlines beyond the region. In Thailand this February was Cobra Gold 2012—a US Pacific Command combat exercise hosted by Thailand, involving forces from the US, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, and Japan. It was followed by Cope Tiger 2012 in March, an air combat and mobility exercise featuring USAF, Thai, and Singaporean forces.

In early April, as tensions rose off the coast of the Philippines, Pacific Air Forces sponsored a biennial aerial exercise in Malaysia—Cope Taufan—featuring 67th Fighter Squadron F-15s from Kadena AB, Japan, flying with Royal Malaysian Air Force MiG-29s, F/A-18s, and other aircraft. PACAF also conducted subject matter exchanges with the Malaysian military on topics such as force protection and engineering and participated in civil affairs projects. And while the standoff evolved at Scarborough, the US and Philippine armed forces conducted Balikatan 2012, the 28th iteration of the multiservice joint exercise, with more than 4,400 US personnel. It featured a range of combat and humanitarian response training events, including aircraft control, communications, and pararescue activities.

The command chief of PACAF, CMSgt. Brooke P. McLean, visited the exercise and met with many Philippine and US service members. “Having partnered nations and strong capabilities on both sides are very important,” McLean said. “The Philippines has been a treaty ally with us for many years.”

The activity is deliberate, even if the timing is coincidental. McLean’s sentiment reflects the strategic thinking now playing out in the so-called “Pacific

A-10Cs taxi at Osan AB, South Korea, on return from deployments to Balikatan in the Philippines and Thailand’s Cope Tiger in 2011.
rebalancing” of US military priorities, as the US adapts to changing security dynamics. The effort in PACOM intends to safeguard and ensure the interests of allies in Asia and the Pacific.

A subtle shift in US attention has great implications. The presence of US military forces in the Asia-Pacific has long emphasized northeast Asia—South Korea and Japan—and American territory in the Pacific Ocean, most notably Hawaii and Guam. While the US continues to capitalize on the relationships built on Cold War “hub-and-spoke” alliances with Japan and South Korea, it is moving to expand its military and security cooperation activities in Southeast Asia as nations in that region worry about the growing military power of the People’s Republic of China.

A Rising China

America’s allies are careful in their statements about the US military in Asia, while also voicing their concerns about the Chinese. Singapore’s Foreign Minister Kasiviswananthan Shanmugam said during a February speech in Washington, D.C., that “the world and Asia are big enough to accommodate a rising China and a reinvigorated US,” as many nations of Southeast Asia have economic and trade ties with both countries. But, he added, “the US has long played a major role in the region’s stability and prosperity,” and Singapore for one had encouraged the US to engage with Southeast Asia “long before it was fashionable.”

As part of the rebalancing of forces in the Asia-Pacific and the development of concepts such as AirSea Battle, the Pentagon is reviving traditional ties with longstanding allies such as Singapore, the Philippines, and Australia, and expanding contacts with emerging regional players such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and even Vietnam. By doing so, it is expressly acting on the new US defense guidance, which emphasizes the “existing alliances” in Asia and also the need to “expand our networks of cooperation with emerging partners.”

The “emerging partners” piece of the strategy is playing a greater part in US efforts in Asia, as evidenced by senior Obama Administration officials, DOD statements, and visits with allies.

Even prior to the January 2012 release of the Obama Administration’s updated defense strategic guidance, senior Administration officials telegraphed there would be no cutbacks of investment in the Asia-Pacific. In October 2011, Panetta made his first trip to the region since assuming the top post at the Pentagon, to assure allies the US would maintain its presence despite a forecasted period of belt-tightening of defense expenditures. His first stop was, tellingly, Indonesia, where he met with the Defense Ministers of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). He announced the US would not back away even through hard times. From PACOM’s perspective, ASEAN and its numerous forums—including its annual meeting of Defense Ministers, the East Asian Summit, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation initiative—“have advanced to become the most effective Asia-Pacific multilateral organizations,” according to Adm. Robert F. Willard, then PACOM commander.

Historically somewhat derided as a “talk shop” when contrasted with alliances such as NATO, ASEAN’s influence in the region has steadily grown in the last decade—especially regarding humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Singapore and Indonesia, both founding members of ASEAN, have actively pushed for the group to build closer defense ties within its ranks. The US has moved to elevate its security cooperation with Indonesia in particular and in June 2010 announced a US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership to expand a wide range of joint activities, according to PACOM officials. Along with the Philippines and Malaysia, Indonesia is key in not only the South China Sea, but in the Sulu and Celebes Seas as well, officials with the command note, and building cooperation in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance sharing, disaster response, and air and maritime capability is of concern to all three nations.

US partnership with Australia has also been reinvigorated. While the November 2011 announcement by Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and President Obama emphasized the new US Marine presence in the country’s north, the military agreement will expand USAF’s presence in the future and promises wide-ranging military cooperation. Australian officials confirm that future deployments and rotations of aircraft may include heavy bombers (B-52s) and mobility airlift (C-17s). These potentially would operate from Royal Australian Air Force Base Tindal, about 200 miles southeast of Darwin.

US forces in the region are also pursuing more multilateral training opportunities, both with traditional allies and emerging partners, PACOM and PACAF officials say.

US relations with the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia “seek to enhance current bilateral cooperation [and] where possible expand bilateral relations to multilateral,” a PACOM official said, regarding the state of US military cooperation in the region. PACAF is steadily expanding its participation in exercises such as Cope Taufan in Malaysia and Pacific Angel joint humanitarian, capacity-building exercise.

Flexible and tailored partnerships—from small footprint civil affairs visits to large-force exercises—will be vital as the US builds mil-to-mil relations in Southeast Asia. “Every nation has a bilateral opportunity, but multilateral processes [are] critical to having interoperability and unity of effort when it is required,” said PACAF Commander Gen. Gary L. North in February. North said the nations of Southeast Asia recognize this, and as their defense and security budgets are sized for their needs, they also see a “collective opportunity” for interdependence and interoperability. This is evident in efforts such as Cope Tiger in Thailand.

A US Marine Corps CH-46 helicopter passes USS Tortuga and the Royal Thai Navy ship HTMS Surin during the exercise Cobra Gold in February. Some Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand see a “collective opportunity” for enhanced interoperability with the US and other nations in the region.
“Is it the way of the future?” North asked rhetorically. “When diplomatic and political entities approve of multilateral [operations] in real world ... contingencies and ... exercises, it is advantageous to us all.” North noted the most recent iteration of Cope North was a great example of this trend. Cope North is a major aerial exercise held on Guam, traditionally with the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force and USAF. February’s event involved the Royal Australian Air Force for the first time and more than 78 aircraft participated in a range of large-force combat exercises and simulated disaster relief and humanitarian assistance scenarios.

The Pivot in Motion

Since the rollout of the new strategy in January, US defense officials have pushed initiatives and partnership activities with allies in the region. Several Southeast Asian Defense Ministers have visited the Pentagon since January. The US finalized a deal to rotate littoral combat ships through Singapore and has expanded longstanding defense ties with the small nation, particularly with its Air Force. Singapore is home to the bilateral Commando Sling air combat exercise held with USAF, is one-third of the Cope Tiger exercise, and has four Republic of Singapore Air Force training detachments in the US. During his visit to Washington in April, Singapore’s Defense Minister, Ng Eng Hen, specifically cited training cooperation with USAF as a “testament indeed to the strong and close defense ties that we have.”

The US has escalated security discussions with the Philippines, hosting a “two-plus-two” meeting between the defense and foreign ministers of both countries in April in Washington. It was the first such meeting for the two nations that signed a mutual defense treaty in 1951.

In a joint April 30 statement from the meeting, they agreed to reaffirm their obligations under the treaty, enhance security cooperation, support efforts to increase multilateral cooperation with ASEAN and the ASEAN defense ministerial, and pledged to find ways to strengthen the defense capabilities of the Philippines.

Disputes with China over the South China Sea loomed over the document. The statement pledged expansion of joint training and exercises to increase US-Philippines interoperability and to expand joint ISR activities to “deter and respond proactively, rapidly, and seamlessly to various situations in the region.”

According to Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert F. del Rosario, speaking before the two-plus-two meeting, his country would like to increase contacts with the US and would submit a request for more military equipment sales. The nation wants to buy another cutter and a squadron of decommissioned F-16s to build its tactical air forces. Del Rosario also said the country would discuss opening its military facilities for joint use with US forces. The last permanent US bases in Southeast Asia were in the Philippines and were shuttered in the early 1990s when the Air Force left Clark Air Base and the US Navy departed its base at Subic Bay.

Today’s climate has even allowed for developing ties with a one-time foe, Vietnam, which has its own complicated and sometimes hostile relationship with China. (China’s People’s Liberation Army’s most recent sustained combat, it should be noted, was its abortive punitive invasion of Vietnam in 1979.) The Vietnamese have long running territorial grievances with the Chinese in the South China Sea, which they refer to in their latest defense white paper as the “East Sea.” The country is also currently modernizing its sea and air forces in light of China’s increasingly powerful military. In addition to enlarging its submarine fleet with the purchase of Russian attack subs, Vietnam also moved to acquire a dozen Su-30MKK fighters.

“We are very excited about mil-to-mil relationships with the Vietnamese; ... this relationship is building,” North said in February, adding that he traveled to the country in 2011 on an official visit. The Navy has conducted several ship port calls and exchanges with the Vietnamese, and North noted one important area for cooperation is search and rescue exercises and training. Vietnam has a lengthy coastline, and its Air Force holds the responsibility for SAR operations. “There were good discussions on this,” North said.
Maritime security and ISR have become regular themes in meetings with military chiefs, according to PACOM officials, and the defense priorities of the region are evolving to reflect the reality of challenges and threats that air and naval forces are designed for. Despite the region’s geography, many countries have militaries dominated by their armies, PACOM officials said, and many of these focus on internal security.

While a great deal of the emphasis on security cooperation in the region has focused in the last decade on countering terrorist groups, many countries have been steadily modernizing their conventional military forces, particularly their naval and air arms. In almost all cases, this modernization is driven by concerns about China’s expanding power projection capabilities and the military imbalance it is creating.

Singapore-based military analyst and scholar Richard A. Bitzinger noted in a paper on ASEAN countries’ military modernization that almost all nations in the region now possess at least some fourth generation fighter aircraft—either Russian or US variants—and have standoff-range radar guided missiles. Many Southeast Asian nations have built up command and control and airborne early warning capabilities, in large part to respond to the increasing power of the PLA Navy and Air Force.

Of course, not all US partners have the same capabilities, and engagement must reflect this, officials state. “We’re not just talking about what we’re going to have to do, but [also] shaping for conflict prevention,” said Lt. Col. Jeff Kronewitter, the Southeast Asia branch chief for security cooperation and assistance programs in PACOM’s logistics shop. “You have to balance the realities of how those countries are built up, … and it’s a very land-centric force, [even though] everyone has a coastline of some sort,” he said. “Some countries are waking up to the fact that, ‘Hey, we actually need a fairly good maritime capacity,’” Kronewitter said.

Airborne ISR is a vital piece of this for many nations that don’t necessarily want to create interdiction capacity but want to know what’s happening on the edges of their territory. Some US allies in the region—such as Thailand—have fairly modernized and capable militaries but are seeking to improve their sustainment and maintenance practices, Kronewitter said. The Thai military responded proactively to the 2011 floods that ravaged wide swaths of the country, he said, and have worked closely with airmen from Guam’s 36th Contingency Response Group to refurbish some of Thailand’s maintenance capacity lost to flooding that affected its mobility hub at Bangkok’s Don Muang Airport.

**Places not Bases**

Since there are no permanent bases in Southeast Asia, access will remain a key factor in the Pentagon’s future cooperation efforts. The increase in attention to the region reflects a “strong desire to balance … forces more effectively into Southeast Asia and South Asia,” said then-PACOM commander Willard testifying in March. Currently, all permanently garrisoned forces outside of Guam and Singapore are “by and large in northeast Asia,” Willard noted, and there is little enthusiasm for the return of a large permanent US presence like at Clark and Subic Bay in the Philippines.

The prospect of a bigger US military footprint in the region is a touchy subject for ASEAN countries—even those with longstanding treaties with the US—due to the complex relationships many have with China. For US officials, however, the permanent basing of forward forces is a slightly semantic argument. Willard said whether forces are stationed permanently or rotated is “inconsequential,” and what is most important is that US forces can be ready and respond when needed.

“They have to dwell there long enough to be trained and exercised and equipped and resourced, and engaging on a fairly continuous basis. To that end, deployments such as the new Marine presence in Australia “will be very effective,” he said.

This approach has become known as “places not bases”—where the Pentagon will seek visiting forces and cooperation agreements with allies and not to build new facilities on par with Cold War garrisons. The places-not-bases construct is here to stay, North said in February. “There’s no appetite to support new bases [in the Pacific]; we must leverage partners and allies.” This will involve utilizing existing locations to conduct activities and exercises, temporary deployments, staging areas, and access agreements for contingencies, and other approaches.

This is where multilateral operations and exercising will pay off, he added. “It’s something we do as a matter of practice, … so the arrangements where we can have access or throughput in our partner nations [will be] critical to our success in the future.”

DOD’s new strategic guidance has “invigorated some of those discussions,” PACOM’s Kronewitter explained. For several years, there was not much consideration for basing and access in places such as south and Southeast Asia, mostly due to DOD’s priority on securing transit to and from US Central Command. Now, the US wants “to be a bit more habitual and partners with [this] type of relationship,” and with several countries, he said.

The US is not the only interested party angling for influence in the region, several officials also noted. “It’s the Iranians sailing around, it’s the Chinese sailing around,” said one. “It’s not just us.”