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A Little Help from Our Friends: Security Partnerships and the Rebalance

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Marvin Ott, senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center, and **Julia Allen**, strategic studies major at Johns Hopkins University, explain that “the Rebalance will be unsustainable without heavy reliance on tangible expressions of regional support [from critical partners] Australia, the Philippines, and Singapore.”

The geopolitics of East Asia, particularly maritime Southeast Asia, has been undergoing rapid and dramatic change. China’s growing military power and evident determination to employ that power for territorial expansion in the South China Sea has created a new strategic landscape. For U.S. security planners the emerging choice, forced by China, is surprisingly stark. America can acquiesce to the subordination of Southeast Asia in a Chinese sphere of dominance – a kind of latter day Tribute System to the modern Middle Kingdom. Alternatively, the U.S. can try to frustrate, at least in part, China’s *territorial* ambitions and in the process preserve a semblance of the strategic status quo – an autonomous region of genuinely independent states. The U.S. decision became clear early in the Obama Administration when Secretary Clinton articulated the “Pivot” (or “Rebalance”) to Asia. Given a choice between acquiescing or contesting Beijing’s ambitions, Washington chose the latter.

It is one thing to articulate strategic intent; it is quite another to make it operationally effective – particularly given the formidable and rapidly growing maritime capabilities of the Chinese armed forces. The challenge posed by China is not solely military, but the military dimension is central, near term, and inescapable. China has already used military means to seize land features formerly in the possession of Vietnam and the Philippines. Chinese military facilities (airfields and ports) are under construction; the South China Sea is being prepared as a battle space. As a result, the Rebalance has acquired a largely military coloration in its current phase.

In this emerging contest China enjoys a huge geographic advantage of proximity and access. Given this dramatic asymmetry, the Pacific Command (PACOM) must rely upon a long-established set of security linkages to the region often characterized by a “hub and spoke” metaphor. These linkages include formal treaty alliances, security/strategic partnerships, access agreements, rotational deployments, equipment/weapons transfers, joint exercises, and military training – all sustained by often lengthy supply lines. It is axiomatic that the Rebalance will be unsustainable without heavy reliance on these tangible expressions of regional support. What follows is a brief baseline inventory of existing linkages with the three countries most critical to the future of the Rebalance: Australia, the Philippines, and Singapore.

Australia

The ANZUS Treaty (1951) binds Australia and the U.S. to “consult on mutual threats ... and act to meet common dangers.” In the past century, the two countries have not participated in a single major conflict without the support and assistance of the other. Canberra has welcomed the Pivot and agreed to new force posture initiatives that will permit an increased level of U.S. military forces and activity in Australia including the rotation of a U.S. Marine Expeditionary Brigade through Darwin and the forward positioning of more warships and aircraft. Strategic intelligence sharing, including the use of joint facilities, has long been

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a staple of the alliance. The very close collaboration between the two countries retains strong bipartisan political support in both capitals.

The Philippines

The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MBT) commits America “to help defend the Philippines against external attack” and facilitated the establishment of a large number of U.S. military facilities during the Cold War – most notably Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay Naval Station. The lease agreement that authorized these facilities was allowed to expire in the early 1990s when the two governments could not agree on revised terms. For a decade thereafter U.S.-Philippines defense relations had little operational substance. This began to change after 9-11 with modest American support for Philippines Army counterinsurgency operations in southern Mindanao and Sulu. The advent of the current Aquino Administration (2010) coupled with Chinese naval penetrations of waters claimed by the Philippines has revived U.S.-Philippines defense ties.

In April 2014, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was signed whereby both countries agreed to maintain an “increased U.S. military presence” in the Philippines over the next decade. The EDCA calls for U.S. military personnel in the Philippines to be deployed on a rotational basis at facilities, e.g. Subic Bay and Clark, utilized rent-free by the Americans but owned by the Philippines. The Agreement generally allows for an increased presence of U.S. forces, ships, aircraft, and equipment in the Philippines and for greater U.S. access to Philippines military bases. The implementation of the EDCA has been suspended pending a Philippines court review whether legislative ratification is required. U.S. officials expect a favorable court ruling “soon.”

A key ambiguity lies at the heart of the defense relationship. The U.S. interpretation of the MBT excludes maritime territories claimed by Manila in the South China Sea. However, Philippines ships and aircraft attacked while on/over the “high seas” would be covered by the U.S. defense obligation.

Singapore

If any country is the linchpin of the Pivot, it is Singapore – by virtue of its location, the advanced capabilities of its armed forces, the strategic acumen of its leadership, and its close working partnership with PACOM. A series of agreements beginning with a 1990 MOU allow use of Singapore’s facilities for naval repairs and port visits (including aircraft carriers), air force training and rotational deployments, as well as reciprocal logistical support coordinated through a PACOM group headquartered on the island. A Defense Cooperation Agreement authorizes annual strategic policy dialogues among senior officials as well as joint exercises. In 2013 the U.S. Navy deployed its first advanced Littoral Combat Ship to Singapore – to be followed by three more for rotational basing by 2018. Singapore occupies a unique strategic space as a de facto, but not de jure, ally of the U.S. while also maintaining close proprietary ties with China.

Washington’s cultivation of other security partnerships in Southeast Asia is ongoing – most interestingly with Vietnam but also including Malaysia and Indonesia. But the three countries examined here provide a critical foundation upon which the Rebalance will rely.

For four decades since the end of the Vietnam War U.S. forces in the Pacific have enjoyed unchallenged maritime dominance. They could play a vital stabilization role simply by their presence. That era is over and coping with rising Chinese maritime power will require something very new and demanding. The security partnerships described here are just one of four elements that must comprise a viable Rebalance strategy. The others are: (1) military deployments and upgrades, (2) new levels of funding, and (3) the formulation of an applicable warfighting doctrine. Partnerships and alliances are therefore a necessary, but not sufficient condition for a 21st century security strategy for maritime Southeast Asia.

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