

**JIIA CONFERENCE ON US MILITARY TRANSFORMATION
TOKYO, JAPAN
24–25 May 2006**

**Session III
Implications of Those Transformations for Southeast Asia**

Dr Stephen Leong
Assistant Director-General
Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

I. Southeast Asia and United States Military Transformation

“Military transformation means much more than just the mere modernisation of one’s armed forces – it is the promise of a paradigm shift in the character and conduct of warfare.” (Source: *Come The Revolution: Transforming the Asia-Pacific’s Militaries*” by Richard A. Bitzinger)

Transformation requires fundamental changes in military doctrine, operations, and organization.

Military transformation, according to the US Defence Department’s Office of Force Transformation, is also a “continuous process, as opposed to a start-stop modernisation process with a definite endgame in mind”. (Source: US Defence Department)

Military transformation is also much more than just defence – it is a process for keeping the world system up and running – interoperability is key.

Issues of concern include:

- i. The possible impact on bilateral alliance relations, including interoperability and coalition operations,
- ii. The prospects for multilateralising regional alliance relationships,
- iii. The impact on regional great-power security relationships,
- iv. The prospects for expanding security cooperation with ad hoc coalition partners, and,

- v. How the US-Japan military transformation may affect collective efforts to combat pan-regional security threats, such as terrorism and proliferation

China is a critical factor in pressing the US-Japan transformation in the region. China as a competitor in Asia that would challenge US predominance in the region has been a major driver of their transformation efforts.

China, in fact, is responding to US military transformation by pursuing its own RMA, by seeking to further modernise its armed forces and gain asymmetric advantages over the United States.

Overall, US military transformation has the potential to greatly affect the security situation in the region, as it entails significant changes in the ways US forces will operate in the area. These changes include:

- i. The future basing and deployment of US military forces,
- ii. Where and how they will operate,
- iii. What kind of equipment they will require, etc.

(Source: “*US Military Transformation and Implications for Asian Security*” by Bernard Loo.)

The focus will be on capabilities and effects, not numbers.

The United States will continue to need coalition partners and basing privileges to operate in the region, but the requirements of both will change.

The US military will have increased need for interoperability with allies and friendly states when it comes to such emerging military requirements such as:

- i. Counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency,
- ii. Counter-proliferation,
- iii. Maritime security, and
- iv. Missile defence.

(For example: The recent move by the United States in wooing Southeast Asian biggest country Indonesia and India in South Asia.)

Southeast Asian countries viewing security in terms of comprehensive security rather than focus on defence security which places high premium on the role of the military.

Priorities of ASEAN countries are focused on national development nation building with political, and economic social development as major tasks. Malaysia's Vision 2020 aims at building achieving industrialized and developed country status by the year 2020.

ASEAN countries are striving towards an ASEAN Community by the same year. While a major pillar of ASEAN Community is the creation of the ASEAN security Community (ASC), reflecting the positive state of intra-ASEAN state relations where no member sees another as threat to its national security, the envisaged ASC does not include plans for encouraging individual militaries to undertake advanced transformation, let alone the radical US-type RMA.

While ASEAN members undoubtedly will aim at modernising their respective militaries, with much focus on the other two pillars of the ASEAN Community, that is, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Social and Cultural Community (ASCC), it is clear to ASEAN members (with the exception of well-developed Singapore), prohibitive costs and lack of capacity (human resources and technology) understandably compel the militaries to opt for evolutionary rather than revolutionary transformation.

This increased need for interoperability will put allies and friendly states at a growing disadvantage as the United States continues to modernise and transform its armed forces.

The growing digital gap between US and Southeast Asian military forces will make it problematic for friendly states to make an effective contribution to mutual defence and joint operations.

As US military transformation relies heavily on advanced technology that most Southeast Asian armed forces could not hope to match, allied and friendly states are viewed to be distinctly disadvantaged as they lack the economic and technological resources to keep up with US transformational efforts.

Since transformation is about consolidating and reinforcing US military supremacy, this process could have inadvertent negative consequences for the region. For example, on the war on terror in Southeast Asia, with newly developed precision weapons at its disposal, the Pentagon might be tempted to resort to quick pre-emptive strikes if local governments are reluctant to act against what the US deems to be imminent threat to it or its interests.

Nevertheless, there appears to be an air of inevitability about US military transformation, and sooner or later the leading militaries in Southeast Asia will have to come to grips with it as a concept and as an operating principle. Here

again, the relevant question is to what extent would a US-type military transformation be applicable to their individual needs and whether budgetary constraints will stand in the way of such costly changes.

One of the positive implications of military transformation and modernisation is the transformation and modernisation of the sectors that are related both directly and indirectly to it. Since the current wave of US military transformation is entrenched in communications and technology, it therefore ensures the further and rapid development of the field. This could lead to possible technological transfer between US and Japan and their allies or friends in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the US could promote transformation and interoperability in Southeast Asia via focused arms sales and perhaps even cooperation in missile defence.

A possible negative side to this technological transfer might be an arms race or the forced military expansion by those nations which are not beneficiaries of privileged relations with the US or Japan. For national prestige and image, the “keeping up with the Jones” syndrome might occur among the region’s militaries. Consequently, allied and friendly states in the region might wish to focus on fulfilling critical niche capabilities by partnering with the United States.

The US military transformation includes a significant reduction in deployment numbers in East Asia. This is positive for United States’ image in the eyes of the region for the presence of large numbers of US forces have occasionally caused social problems for host countries (eg, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines).

II. Japan’s Military Transformation and Southeast Asia

Japan’s military transformation embodies a transformation of Japan’s foreign and defence policy. It represents an unprecedented strengthening of its political and military alliance with the US.

Japan is moving from a defence posture that is vital to the security to Japan to one that is of importance to both regional and global security. Japan’s quest for “normal state” role in security matters has increasingly become more acceptable to most of its neighbours.

Concerns about China and North Korea dominate Japan’s need to assert itself as a military power both regionally and globally, with broadened operational scope to support its US ally in their renewed strategic partnership, especially on the war on terror.

Although Japan is still restricted in its global capability by its post-war pacifist constitution and its inability to obtain permanent membership of the UN Security Council, with constant US pressure for a bigger security role for Japan, Tokyo will find means to legitimise its anticipated pro-active role in regional and global security.

Crucial in improving interoperability between the US and Japan is both the need “to develop respective defence capabilities” and “to maximise the benefits of innovations in technology”.

Ballistic missile defence (BMD) is a core issue for cooperation, particularly since the North Korean ballistic missiles flight over Japan in 1998. The transfer of US military technology is of major industrial importance to Japan because of its 1967 policy directive prohibiting the export of arms and military technology. These restrictions were partially lifted by the Koizumi government in December 2004 for the purpose of cooperation with the US on anti-missile defence.

To the extent that Southeast Asian militaries are concerned with US and Japan’s military transformation, undoubtedly, there has been more interest in the US process. Unsurprisingly, Southeast Asians have not examined the nature of Japan’s RMA except for a general awareness that Tokyo has been keen to assume a larger regional security role and its collaboration with the US on BMD. While Southeast Asian countries remember Japan as a colonial power in the 20th century, they also acknowledge that since the end of Second World War, they have been beneficiaries of Tokyo’s salutary achievement as a global economic power. Most recently, Malaysia (which has had a quarter-century Look East Policy to Japan) received a Japanese training vessel for its newly set-up Maritime Enforcement Agency. Together with staff training courses enrolled by Southeast Asian officers in Japan’s military academic establishments, the dispatch of Japanese trainers to the region could serve to acquaint Southeast Asian personnel with aspects of Japan’s RMA .

III. Military Transformation in Southeast Asia

There are those who are worried that US defence transformation might have negative repercussions in the region. Since it is about “consolidating and reinforcing US military supremacy”, it might lead to the creation of new threats. They were concerned that countries unable to modernise their national defence systems might pursue “offsetting asymmetric responses, such as low-intensity fighting (insurgency and guerrilla tactics) or expanding their WMD capabilities (missiles and nuclear-biological-chemical warheads)”. (Source: “*US Defence*

Transformation: Implications for Security in the Asia-Pacific Region”, APCSS, Hawaii, 1-3 December 2004.)

It is significant to note that none of the Southeast Asian states view one another as threats.

For Southeast Asia, military modernisation has thus far been focused on:

- i. Upgrading weapons and weapons systems via purchases from abroad
- ii. Rationalising military structures
- iii. For a few countries, filling in the strategic vacuum (i.e. “Battlespace Management” - Land, Airspace, Subspace, Outer-space).
- iv. Improving interoperability between the militaries in the region by conducting yearly bilateral and multilateral training exercises. These exercises are a positive indication of the level of confidence, trust and cooperation between one state and another.

All military modernisation is dependent upon cost and technological know-how. In general, the Southeast Asian states (with the exception of Singapore) spend approximately 4% of their national GDP on their military budgets. The level of spending reflects their national priorities of economic and social development.

The lack of a marked spending increase with regards to the military also shows the lack of an “arms race” among the Southeast Asian states.

Military transformation and expansion in Southeast Asia need to be undertaken at a gradual pace. The transformation and modernisation of methods and equipment need to be in accordance with overall priorities of individual countries and their peoples. Human capacity (educational and training of military personnel at all levels in the chain of command, especially at frontline, with requisite technological skills to handle state-of-the-art equipment in emergency situations) is most relevant. Tactical miscalculations could lead to accidental or inadvertent conflict.

Military modernisation in Malaysia, for example, is a relatively new and young enterprise. Until 1990, Malaysia was busy dealing with the domestic communist threat. Its entire military strategy was then focused on land-based counter-insurgency. A war of ideologies required little in terms of technological modernisation.

Reflecting the priorities for national development, in Malaysia, military modernisation efforts have not been solely directed towards improving military capability alone. Its aims also include developing other areas of national

interests (ie, penetrating economic markets, eg, sale of palm oil to Russia and purchase of Russian aircraft, and Russian agreement to train future Malaysian astronauts.)

US transformation is too technologically exotic and therefore may not be suitable for low-level threats, particularly terrorism or counter-insurgency operations. Having had long and successful experience in confronting terrorism, Malaysia is confident that it can continue to deal effectively with the threat.

IV. Southeast Asia and Deepening of US-Japan Alliance

Although not much talked about in Southeast Asia, the US-Japan alliance has nevertheless been perceived as being positive because it ensures a certain level of security in the region.

However, because the US-Japan alliance is a very mature relationship, rather than strengthening/deepening an already firm bilateral security arrangement, Southeast Asians would like to see both partners join other members to strengthen the ARF, where ASEAN members represent the core. For the smaller countries of Southeast Asia, multilateralism is the preferred choice of security frameworks.

The US-Japan alliance has undoubtedly been the strongest and most powerful alliance in Asia since post-war years. It is a combination of the world's two leading global economic powers, whose military budgets rank No. 1 and No. 4 in the world. Both are also the world's foremost leading technological giants. It is therefore eminently sensible that with such a long and strong bilateral arrangement, more efforts should be directed to promoting the multilateral and inclusive ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as a body to deal with security matters in East Asia and the wider Asia Pacific.

China, a major concern of the US-Japan alliance, is simply no match to the combined strength of the US and Japan. While China will very likely emerge as the next superpower with a stronger military, the US alone will ensure that its technological and military prowess will remain unsurpassed in the decades ahead. With Japan's well-advanced economy and cutting-edge technology, it's hard for Southeast Asians to understand US-Japan anxiety over China.

From a Southeast Asian perspective, the China factor in the US-Japan alliance is indeed important. As the US-China relations are most crucial in the Asia Pacific, and the Japan-China relations are the most important among East Asian countries, Malaysia, for example, is keen that the US and Japan manage their

often strained relations with China well as the latter perceives itself (besides North Korea) as a target of containment by their alliance.

The 2+2 Meeting between the US and Japanese defence and foreign officials in Washington in February 2005, which referred to Taiwan as a common security concern is generally regarded as anti-Beijing and pro-Taiwan for if conflict occurs between the Mainland and Taiwan, the US may have little choice but to intervene on behalf of Taiwan and such intervention would be supported by Japan. For Malaysia, which has very good relations with both East Asian countries, and concerned about the security situation in the Northeast Asia, the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance by the 2+2 Meeting would have destabilizing effects for it would antagonise Beijing and encourage Taiwan to advance further in its quest for independence.

The strengthening of US-Japan alliance (including Japan's dispatch of troops to Iraq) reinforces the image of Japan (among Malaysians and other Southeast Asians) that Japan's foreign policies are aimed at supporting US regional and global interests, and being so dependent on the US for its own security, it would be difficult for Japan to craft its own stands on international affairs. For many in Southeast Asia, a classic manifestation of Japan's perceived "lack of independence" in its foreign policy occurred in 2003, the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan as dialogue partners, when Japan balked at acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. It was only a year later that Tokyo was willing to sign the TAC, after China and India had done so in 2003.

Rather than strengthening the military relationship whose dynamics are inevitably directed at external threat(s) or potential threats, Southeast Asians would much prefer that the two major powers maximise their well-endowed "soft power" (open and affluent society, democracy, civil society, popular culture, trade, environment, urban infrastructure and healthcare) for the benefit of Asia in general.

For a more cooperative and secure future with enduring peace and stability, Japan should join other East Asian countries to actively promote the building of an East Asian community of peace, prosperity and progress. The values of trust and amity, which are sorely lacking in Japan-China relations, could be nurtured and developed through regional community building.