

Militarization of the Asia Pacific Region: America Revives And Expands Cold War Military Alliances Against China

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This article initially published in June 2012 sheds light on Washington's Pivot to Asia Strategy

On May 30 2012 the two officials most in charge of the U.S.'s formidable global military machine, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, visited Pacific Command headquarters in Hawaii to launch multi-nation tours of the Asia-Pacific region and formally commence the announced shift of American military concentration and assets to the area.

The two, General Dempsey by way of the Andersen Air Force Base in Guam, arrived in Singapore for the eleventh annual Shangri-La Dialogue defense forum, where they met with their counterparts from 26 Asia-Pacific nations. Afterwards each went his own way: Panetta to Vietnam and India, the most significant new U.S. Asian military partners in the entire post-Cold War period, and Dempsey to the Philippines and Thailand, two long-standing military allies.

While in Singapore, Panetta announced that Washington would increase the percentage of U.S. naval forces in the Asia-Pacific – aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, littoral combat ships and submarines – from 50 to 60 percent and strengthen and expand military alliances with nations throughout the region, especially those in Southeast Asia which are embroiled in territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. As General Dempsey put it following the Shangri-La Dialogue, “This means that as the rebalance evolves, we’ll make available our most advanced ships, our fifth-generation aircraft and the very best of our missile defense technology as we work with our partners.”

Defense Secretary Panetta stressed an intensification of military collaboration with the six Asia-Pacific countries with which the U.S. has defense treaties (signed during the height of the Cold War and at the time aimed against China) – Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand – as well as broadening and deepening existing partnerships with nations like Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and India. Panetta additionally spoke of forging military ties with Myanmar, which like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (along with Brunei, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam).

Dempsey pursued the same design with fellow military chiefs at the Shangri-La conference.

After leaving Singapore, Panetta arrived at a U.S. ship docked in Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay, a year after the U.S. and Vietnam signed a memorandum of understanding to promote military cooperation in five areas and two years after the USS John S. McCain guided missile destroyer visited Da Nang to engage in a joint exercise in the South China Sea. He was the first major American official to visit the former U.S. military base after the end of the Vietnam War.

Following Panetta's eight-day Asia-Pacific trip to, in the words of the Defense Department's press service, "promote President Barack Obama's new 'pivot to Asia' in foreign policy," the Pentagon's website reported his two main themes to be that "Washington is putting a greater policy emphasis on Asia and the Pacific, as opposed to Europe and the Middle East" and "the United States intends to increase its military activities in that region, with more joint exercises involving more countries, including Australia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, and with more equipment, including at least 40 new ships."

While the American defense chief was consolidating a strategically important partnership with China's rival on the western shore of the South China Sea, General Dempsey was on the eastern end, in the Philippines, doing the same with the nation that is most directly at loggerheads with China in the sea at the moment.

Two weeks after the USS Caroline nuclear attack submarine spent a week at the former U.S. naval base in Subic Bay, Dempsey visited the headquarters of the Special Operations Task Force Philippines in Mindanao where as many as 600 American service members are deployed for counterinsurgency operations. Later he met with his Philippine counterpart General Jessie Dellosa in Manila.

During the American military chief's visit the nation's foreign secretary, Albert del Rosario, announced that "We can anticipate a greater number of port calls [by U.S. warships]" and asserted "the increased presence of the US is consistent with its strategic guidance for the Asia-Pacific. "

On June 5 the Philippine Star disclosed that "American troops, warships and aircraft can once again use their former naval and air facilities in Subic, Zambales and in Clark Field in Pampanga," citing Undersecretary for Defense Affairs Honorio Azcueta after he had met with Dempsey. (The U.S. has supplied the Philippines with two warships since last year. In November Philippine Navy Chief Vice Admiral Alexander Pama referred to the acquisitions as symbolizing "the revival of the Philippine Navy.")

When asked by a reporter "if American troops as well as their warships and their fighter planes will be allowed access to their former US Naval Base in Subic," Azcueta confirmed that they would, stating "That's what we want...increases in exercises and interoperability. "

Like Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay, the Subic naval base and its airfield were used for major operations during the Vietnam War.

As was the U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield 90 miles southeast of Bangkok. After leaving the Philippines, General Dempsey visited Thailand where he met with the country's defense minister, chief of defense forces and heads of the army, air force and navy.

Among other matters dealt with, Dempsey secured the use of the U-Tapao base for American operations, ostensibly solely humanitarian in nature but, as Xinhua News Agency

pointed out, “some skeptics are saying that the naval airfield would eventually be used for military operations.”

The base was used by the U.S. for its war in Vietnam and is currently employed for joint U.S.-Thai Cobra Gold military exercises, the largest U.S.-led multinational military drills in the Asia-Pacific region. This year’s Cobra Gold also included the participation of Indonesian, Japanese, Malaysian, Singaporean and South Korean military forces.

The Pentagon’s news agency paraphrased Dempsey as stating, “Geostrategic location and global commitment, paired with a maturing military and a growing economy, make longtime U.S. ally Thailand an attractive prospect for even greater bilateral cooperation, ” and quoted him directly as saying “They’re in an extraordinarily key location.”

The news source described that strategic position as vital in that Thailand borders Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia and Myanmar, “with Vietnam, India and China not much further away” and has “an eastern coastline on the Gulf of Thailand – opening into the South China Sea – and a west coast on the Andaman Sea, also known as the Burma Sea.”

Dempsey announced that the U.S. and Thai militaries “are examining concepts for a center of excellence in Thailand devoted to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief” which “may begin as a bilateral U.S.-Thai effort, or it could involve additional nations from the beginning,” according to the Pentagon’s website.

Panetta’s overture to Myanmar has been mentioned. Discussing the increasingly wider range of new military partnerships in Southeast Asia, particularly the role of the U.S. in upgrading the militaries of its partners, the Pentagon chief stated in Singapore on June 2, “We will encourage that kind of relationship with every nation that we deal with in this region, including Myanmar.”

Until the U.S. successfully courted it last year, Myanmar was one of China’s few dependable allies in Asia.

On June 2 Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen assured Defense Secretary Panetta of his government’s willingness to host four American littoral combat ships as an obligation entailed by the Strategic Framework Agreement signed by Washington and Singapore in 2005. The two defense chiefs also pledged to further implement the agreement and increase the scope of joint military exercises; for example, adding a naval to the existing air force component of annual Commando Sling exercises.

Panetta and his counterpart also discussed using the Murai Urban Training Facility for bilateral exercises involving U.S. Marines and the Singaporean armed forces beginning next year.

Regarding the rotation of U.S. warships to Singapore, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff head Dempsey said that “The littoral combat ships that will soon begin rotational deployment to Singapore are an example of the increased military engagement called for under the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy.”

The Asian nation rests on the southeastern end of the Strait of Malacca that connects the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea and through which oil flows from the Persian Gulf to the oil-hungry East Asian economies of China, South Korea and Japan.

By forming military partnerships with the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations the U.S. is building the foundation for an Asian analogue of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. As the first has been expanded to enclose, contain and ultimately confront Russia, so the new alliance is intended to achieve the same objective in regard to China.

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