

A difficult 'rebalancing' act

MARKER: Asean must weigh the pros and cons of enhanced US military footprint

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BUTTRESSED by a buoyant economy, Beijing has successfully "charmed" itself into the good books of this region in providing much-needed economic stimulus and growth.

But China's concerted effort to modernise the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a cause for concern. It would be all too easy to miss out on the "other" important strategic development -- the enlargement of United States' military footprint in the region.



Visitors queue to boarding a US Navy P-3C plane at the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition last year. (LIMA)LIMA last December. Washington has stressed the 'places not bases' doctrine.

Last year, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confirmed the primacy of Asia in the US grand strategic outlook. With a growth rate of 8.3 per cent and accounting for close to 21 per cent of its exports (2011), the East Asia and Pacific region is of primary importance to the US.

Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta recently outlined that "by 2020 the Navy will reposture its forces from today's roughly 50/50 per cent split between the Pacific and Atlantic to about a 60/40 split between those oceans. The quantitative increase in combat ships plying Asia-Pacific waters may not be as pronounced as thought. Robert Haddick, managing editor of Small Wars Journal, pointed out that the US Navy is expected to have a total of 181 major combat ships in 2020, and 109 of these will be deployed in the region -- an increase of eight ships from today's numbers.

The main storyline on the rebalancing strategy is not -- while important -- the redeployment of US military assets in the region. US military forces have been a fixture in the region's strategic balance since 1945.

The pertinent questions are where would these assets be located and how would this strategy effect regional security?

To pre-empt concerns of attempts to re-establish a network of bases in the region, Washington was quick to put this issue to rest with the "places not bases" doctrine.

The US is enlarging its military footprint in the region by expanding its partnership and cooperation with regional parties.

Recently, Singapore agreed to support the forward deployment of four littoral combat ships, while Australia agreed to host the rotational deployment of up to 2,500 US Marines last year.

If the Philippines and Thailand join Australia and Singapore in supporting US military operations -- in temporary or permanent forms -- it will give the US unparalleled access to the strategic waterways from the eastern part of the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. Coupled with its bases in South Korea and Japan, the US will have a string of operational platforms spanning from the Indian to the Pacific oceans.

When asked for her opinion on "rebalancing" by The Nation, China's Vice-Foreign Minister Fu Ying diplomatically offered that "China has no problem accepting the US presence and its positive influence in the Asia-Pacific. We welcome a constructive US role in regional affairs".

At the same time, she noted that Chinese and Asian commentators are uncomfortable with the US' heavy emphasis on the region's security agenda.

Thus far, regional responses have been rather diplomatic and positive. However, Asean states need to be more circumspect and carefully weigh the pros and cons of an enlarged US military footprint in Southeast Asia.

Military assets are tools to achieve strategic goals. It is all too convenient to justify the increased military presence in the context of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief or other non-traditional security concerns. The strategic implications of the rebalancing strategy need to be fully understood.

The rebalancing strategy will have an impact on the region's relations with China. Is our acceptance of some form of enhanced US military presence part of our hedging strategy vis-à-vis China? Or is this the beginning of a shift towards balancing China?

Asean states are hesitant to address these questions for fear of marginalising either of the major powers. Our time-honoured mantra is "not having to choose" and we shall strive to maintain close relations with China and the US.

If China is not a threat, we should be witnessing a scaling down of military power, rather than the increase which the rebalancing strategy seems to be making.

There is something fundamentally wrong when we advocate cooperation while concomitantly laying the groundwork for strategic competition.

The rebalancing strategy goes beyond affirming our friendly and cooperative ties with the US. It will also be an important marker of our relations with China and the US.

The price of hedging has increased and the days when Asean states have to make the difficult choice is looming. Is the solution to be found in reaffirming the zone of peace, freedom and neutrality?