

Malaysia's security dilemma
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Early this week, the Chinese language Oriental Daily News reported that Admiral Timothy J Keating, the Commander of the United States Pacific Command, who was in Kuala Lumpur for the Military Operations and Law Conference 2007, had said Washington was not ruling out the possibilities of installing a monitoring and surveillance platform in Southeast Asia, with the Global Hawk Unmanned Aerial Vehicle being an option.

The same newspaper also quoted the Jane's Defence Weekly as saying that the US Pacific Command was engaging in talks with Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, with a view to setting up a 24-hour air reconnaissance facility. Covering a perimeter up to 5,500km, the Global Hawk would be a highly effective device to monitor countries as far out as China. US apologists who have metamorphosed into pro-China propagandists since the farcical war on Iraq should take note.

Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak dismissed categorically the report that Malaysia had received a request from the US to that effect. He however stated that Malaysia was currently studying the possibilities of the country becoming a signatory to the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).

The PSI was a brainchild of President George W Bush and his administration in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Realising that traditional non-proliferation measures such as diplomacy, arms control, threat reduction assistance, and export controls were inadequate in preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs, and I can see some sarcastic smiles whenever it is mentioned), the PSI was unveiled by the president himself on 31 May 2003 in Krakow, Poland.

As we all know, Poland has always been at the heart of the global divide since 1945. For 36 years, the country hosted the headquarters of the infamous Warsaw Pact at the behest of the former Soviet Union. Since 1999, Poland has become an anchor partner of the US following its entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Poles were also solidly behind the US during the Iraq War, a stance that is still popularly seen as adroitly exploited by the neo-cons to drive a wedge between the "new" and the "old" Europe.

The keyword in the PSI is 'interdict', which would give the participating states the right to arrest the transport of WMDs, WMD delivery systems, and related materials to or from states or others who may be proliferating them. Currently, only Japan, Australia and Singapore are member countries from the Asia-Pacific region.

But the US still needs a relatively neutral territory in Southeast Asia in order to implement the objectives of the PSI effectively in this part of the world, and also to enhance the safety of the volatile Malacca Straits. Having only Singapore on board is clearly not enough, especially when the island state continues to arouse suspicion, justly or unjustly, from its hostile neighbours like Malaysia and Indonesia, with Thailand coming closely behind nowadays.

The strategic values of Southeast Asia and the Malacca Straits are beyond dispute, which explains why all the major powers, from the US, Russia, India, Japan to China, are all vying for influence in this region. Given that the US is the only country in the world today that is

equipped with the infrastructure for sustained projection of military force, its top-notch position makes it the frontrunner in military terms.

In the Quadrennial Defense Review 2001 (QDR 2001), released less than a month after September 11, Washington publicly contended for the need to have more forces and bases in Asia "due to the expansion of threats there across the spectrum of conflict".

Scaled-down version

In early 2004, the US also proposed the Regional Maritime Security Initiative, under which the Americans would carry out military interdiction of vessels suspected of carrying terrorists. Not surprisingly, the move received wholehearted support from Singapore, but was opposed by Indonesia and Malaysia, as the two Muslim nations wanted to keep the Malacca Straits within the jurisdiction of the littoral countries. A scaled-down version of the proposal was put in place instead, with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia agreeing to conduct coordinated patrols in the straits, buttressed by intelligence and training cooperation with the US.

Nearly six years after the QDR 2001, it would seem that the Bush administration has not given up the goal and Admiral Keating is seeking to secure cooperation of the regional countries for this purpose. All the effort has to be, of course, subject to the sentiments of the regional populaces.

As always, the views of the Malaysians on regional and global issues often diverge in tandem with their ethnic and religious affiliations. While the non-Malays and the non-Muslims, especially the Chinese, may welcome the US-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement, seeing it as a way out of the quagmire of the pro-Malay protectionism, the Malays remain skeptical, which has so far hindered the progress in this regard.

On the issue of terrorism, although Singapore has been quick to acknowledge it as a real and existential threat, the Muslim electorates in Malaysia and Indonesia are understandably wary of the attempt by the US to associate terrorist acts with Islam.

Singapore has joined the PSI on the belief that it is one of the effective mechanisms in countering terrorism, but the war on global terrorism and electoral politics invariably make strange bedfellows in both Malaysia and Indonesia.

With the threat of terrorism constantly lurking in the background, the Southeast Asian states are faced with the dilemma of facing up to and tackle it head-on, and of turning themselves into strategic pawns of the big powers. Najib is no doubt walking the tightrope, especially when the general election is just around the corner, while his political future remains clouded by series of scandals.

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