

ANZUS and alliance politics in Southeast Asia

Revisiting the ‘southern flank’

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Introduction

Discussion over the future of US alliance politics in Asia has recently intensified. China’s power is growing, and US President Donald Trump is showing antipathy towards what he views as insufficient allied efforts to support America’s defence strategy in the region.¹ While much attention has been understandably directed towards the US’s security ties with Japan and South Korea during Trump’s ongoing efforts to negotiate a denuclearisation agreement with North Korea, US strategic relations with Southeast Asia and its neighbours—what’s termed here as the ‘southern flank’—are also critical to Washington’s own long-term geopolitical interests and to that region’s sustained economic growth and geopolitical stability.

The southern-flank portion of the US regional alliance network—also known as the ‘San Francisco system’—includes formal bilateral defence treaties with Thailand and the Philippines and the ANZUS defence pact entered into in 1951 with Australia and New Zealand. It also involves growing American strategic partnerships with such states as Singapore,



US Navy officers taking part in the 2017 ASEAN Fleet Review Parade in Pattaya, Thailand: iStockphoto/justhavealook.

Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam that complement the more formal components of US alliance networking in the region. The US's use of regional strategic partnerships to supplement its formal Indo-Pacific alliances with Australia, the Philippines and Thailand is a recent but increasingly important trend.

US strategy in the southern flank involves more than just Washington's formal alliance and partnership ties. It's more comprehensive than a straight containment strategy directed against a rising China. With over 640 million inhabitants, ASEAN is the world's fifth largest market, and its member states together make up the US's fourth largest trading partner.² Apart from its dynamic economic growth (5.2% per annum in 2017),³ its geographical location places it squarely in the centre of two key sea lanes of communication through which much of the world's maritime commerce flows—the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea (Figure 1). If the US were denied access to—and the ability to control—such conduits during war or high crises, its capacity to deny passage to Chinese ballistic-missile submarines or other naval units, and its control over the 'first island chain' leading to the wider Pacific Ocean, would be seriously impeded. In a broader context, the US's influence within, and its ability to traverse and trade throughout, the entire Indo-Pacific region could be critically impeded as China, India and other powers establish their own economic and geopolitical power there. To preclude such outcomes, various Southeast Asian states can, combined with their ANZUS counterparts, work to sustain an enduring balance of power in the region.

Figure 1: Geographical boundaries of the first and second island chains



Source: Wikimedia commons, [online](#).

The true test of the Trump administration's evolving 'free and open Indo-Pacific' policy is how successful it will be in overcoming still apparent ASEAN and Australian concerns that Washington is easily distracted by events in other parts of the world from sustaining its influence and strategic presence in Southeast Asia.

What follows is my assessment of how the San Francisco system's southern flank matters in contemporary US strategic policy. After a brief explanation of the southern flank's post-Cold War environment and developments, I review the continuities and changes in how the Barack Obama and Trump administrations have managed the Southeast Asian component of America's security network. I then examine recent developments in the Philippines, Thailand and other 'security partner' countries. I conclude by advancing three specific policy recommendations for enhancing southern-flank security relations through the US–Australia alliance framework. The recommendations include upgrading joint strategic policy planning between ASEAN and ANZUS members. ANZUS sensitivity to the sovereign rights and diverse forms of governance operating in various ASEAN states with which the alliance partners wish to collaborate must be fostered. Given resurgent streams of neo-isolationist thinking in elements of the American polity, Australian political and national security leadership will need to work harder and more closely with policymakers in Washington—and with political leadership across Congress and any given administration—to ensure that the utility to US (and Australian) interests of US engagement with ASEAN is understood.

US interests and the evolving southern flank

US alliance policy regarding Southeast Asia remains critical for the region's sustained economic growth and geopolitical stability. The San Francisco system of US alliances in Asia has endured for nearly 70 years. Over the past decade, however, the US's policy and strategy there have been more frequently questioned by America's Southeast Asian allies and partners, which increasingly regard the US as inconsistent on the security issues most relevant to them. Perhaps most notably, in their view, successive US administrations have shifted between embracing ASEAN's approaches to multilateral security and rigidly adhering to the American-led 'hub-and-spoke' Cold War network of security alliances. Indeed, strategic circumstances are significantly changing. The ASEAN and Australian view mirrors concerns, now being debated by some of the US's most respected observers of international relations, that the American public is losing the will to continue underwriting traditional postwar security commitments and selective military interventions abroad against myriad complex and seemingly intractable direct threats to their own country's national security and prosperity.⁴ Without a concerted effort to buttress that will, the relevance of US alliances and partnerships in the southern flank of the US alliance and security network to Southeast Asia may indeed decline and make strategic planning for and the future viability of what's now an undeniably robust ANZUS more difficult.

Since the end of the US military involvement in the Vietnam War (1974), and the traumas American involvement in that conflict evoked within the US policy community and electorate at large, Washington has tended to assign the San Francisco system's southern flank less importance than its Northeast Asian counterpart. The US's bilateral security alliances with Japan and South Korea reflect US-perceived core interests in safeguarding those two countries and their globally substantial economies by extending deterrence against hostile nuclear forces that could otherwise adversely affect the balance of power in Asia and internationally. Approximately 75,000 US military personnel are deployed in the Northeast Asian sector (over 28,500 in South Korea and approximately 47,000 in Japan).⁵ By contrast, the loss of Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines in 1991 was the end of the last large postwar US force deployment in Southeast Asia. US strategic objectives, and selected force missions, have become diverse and fluid—even in confronting such 'non-traditional' security challenges as terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and climate change.

However, responding to China's intensifying efforts to exert sovereign control over South China Sea territorial waters, by conducting freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPs) to underscore the US's support of international law, remains consistent with traditional US postwar threat-centric alliance strategy. The US is still the world's paramount maritime power and wishes to safeguard this critical, traditional, security interest—unmitigated access to Southeast Asia's sea lanes of communications and offshore trading routes. This policy objective is currently pursued through the US maritime security initiative for Southeast Asia.⁶ While emerging military technologies and stand-off delivery systems could render US forward basing operations and

manoeuvrability in the region more difficult in future conflicts, the symbolic weight of a consistent and sustained American strategic objective in Southeast Asia endures. This is particularly important as China, and to a somewhat lesser extent Russia, enhance their maritime power-projection capabilities throughout Southeast Asia and into the wider Indo-Pacific. Southeast Asia remains critical for American and ANZUS strategic objectives and operations designed to sustain an acceptable balance of power throughout the region.

The US's military withdrawal from Vietnam during the Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford administrations led to subsequent administrations adopting a lower-key strategic posture towards Southeast Asia that reduced the prospects for direct US military intervention in the region and responded to the American public's disillusionment with Asian ground wars. This development, along with the subsequent economic success of many ASEAN member states, has allowed ASEAN to stake a claim that its 'centrality' to regional order and community building is credible and steadfast. Until recently, this trend has led Washington to maintain a second core assumption relating to Southeast Asian geopolitics: ASEAN's 'weight, population size and geographic features' ensure that its continued adherence to international rules and norms will be enough to constrain great-power predators from encroaching on ASEAN member states' sovereignty.⁷

How reliable that assumption is, however, remains subject to increased debate. Nearly half of the Southeast Asian respondents polled from that region's governments, think tanks and academic and business sectors expressed concern about potential Chinese revisionism and hegemonic behaviour. In a recent survey conducted by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, nearly 70% of respondents expressed alarm over a perceived decline in US regional involvement during the Trump administration.⁸ China's greater assertiveness in the South China Sea is only the latest example.

Concerns over the direction of US strategy in Asia, of course, are hardly new. Indeed, New Zealand questioned the power of postwar US extended nuclear deterrence in the mid-1980s, resulting in its *de facto* operational exclusion from ANZUS. By the end of that decade, Thailand had shifted from unqualified strategic cooperation with the US to a more calibrated posture featuring rapprochement with Indochina and closer ties with the Chinese as marketplaces gained ascendancy over battlefields at a time when the international community was undergoing intensified globalisation.⁹ Following close on the heels of the 'People Power' revolution in 1986, a more nationalist Philippine Senate eventually voted to block the renewal of US basing operations in its country. Led by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, an 'Asian values' movement challenged the US-led international liberal order throughout the 1990s—a trend that intensified with the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) initiative, strongly backed by Washington and its pro-Western allies in Asia such as Japan and Australia, and promoting free trade and 'open regionalism', was contested by Malaysia, China and others that envisioned a more exclusivist regional economic arrangement that would allow ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea to collaborate in building an Asian-centric order.

With the Cold War receding into history, and the tides of change deepening throughout Asia, President Bill Clinton visited all five US formal treaty allies in 1996 to reaffirm the San Francisco system's importance. His visits were deemed necessary because at least some of his recent predecessors had appeared to be less than completely enamoured with the prospect of the US sustaining its high level of security commitments and assistance to those allies. President Jimmy Carter had been close to pulling out US ground forces from South Korea until updated intelligence reports disclosed that previous assessments had underestimated North Korea's military strength. George HW Bush's White House produced two East Asia strategy reports (in 1990 and 1992), which rationalised a gradual reduction of US force levels deployed throughout Asia and 'the need for [greater allied] defence burden-sharing' in the region.¹⁰ Between 1990 and 1992, the US reduced its Asian force strength by 15,000 personnel, including withdrawing from its military bases in the Philippines, as Washington prioritised access to Southeast Asia's growing markets over maintaining high levels of forward force deployments. Southeast Asian leaders were concerned about whether the US would still be willing and able to be an 'offshore balancer', even though by 1998 Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia had all entered into military access arrangements with Washington. Even the Philippines partially modified its previous nationalistic aversion to a US force presence by signing a visiting forces agreement with the US in 1999.¹¹

However, a lingering Southeast Asian fear of an underlying US strategic disinterest in or indifference to the southern flank's balance of power at a time of rising Chinese power has persisted. The George W Bush administration's 'selective re-engagement' posture directed towards Southeast Asia, most evident in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, emphasised the potential for Southeast Asia to become a 'second front' in the 'global war on terror'. More traditional security geopolitics were relegated to a secondary status, despite developments such as Thailand being designated as a 'major non-NATO ally' and the growing importance of US–Singapore bilateral defence ties highlighted by the signing of a strategic framework agreement in 2005.¹² This view persisted with the Bush administration's hyping of Australia under John Howard's government as America's 'deputy sheriff', implying that Canberra would spearhead future counterterrorism operations against predominantly terrorist (as opposed to state-based) threats in Indonesia, Malaysia and Melanesia.

This perceived limitation of the geopolitical US posture generated considerable resentment. Many Southeast Asian policy elites were concerned about the apparent downgrading of the Clinton administration's previous support for—and involvement in—ASEAN multilateral security initiatives such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, complementing the San Francisco system's bilateral alliance network.

Rebalancing and 'America first'

Obama's ascension to the US presidency in January 2009 and his appointment of Hillary Clinton as his Secretary of State signalled a renewed American sensitivity to Asian allies' and partners' unease over a perceived American strategic retrenchment in their region due to Washington's preoccupation with events in Iraq and Afghanistan. Clinton was dispatched to Asia during the following month, and again in July, to drive home the message that the US 'was back in Asia'. Over time, the Obama administration developed what became known as a 'rebalancing' or 'pivot' strategy designed to redirect US policy energy and resources towards the Indo-Pacific. Special emphasis was assigned to Southeast Asia.¹³ Obama supported the US joining the East Asia Summit hosted by ASEAN, established a separate US–ASEAN annual summit, and deployed limited but well-calibrated American naval and marine elements in Singapore and Australia to enhance US crisis response capabilities in the region. The US–Philippines Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed in April 2014, allowing the US to rotate troops into the Philippines for limited stays, even though it was precluded from restoring permanent basing operations there.

US–Thai relations were strained over democratic governance and human rights issues following Thailand's May 2014 military coup. Nevertheless, the annual Cobra Gold military exercises spearheaded by US and Thai military forces continued (if somewhat reduced in scale from 4,300 US forces participating in 2014 to 3,600 in 2015 and just under 3,300 in 2016). The 2012 US–Thailand Joint Vision Statement for the Thai–US Defense Alliance signed by the two countries' top defence officials was followed up by Obama's visit to Thailand to reaffirm alliance ties in November of that year. Most notably, the Obama administration worked with Australia, various ASEAN members and other regional trading partners to form the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) multilateral free-trade agreement to counter China's growing economic and geopolitical clout throughout the region.

Obama linked the economic components of his administration's rebalancing strategy with a discerning military posture. In June 2012, his Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, announced that the US would deploy 60% of its total navy fleet to the Pacific by 2020. This followed up the president's announcement made before the Australian Parliament in November 2011 that up to 2,500 US Marines would be deployed on a rotational basis over the ensuing years to train with Thai, Indonesian, Malaysian and other regional militaries.¹⁴ US officials denied that such initiatives were part of an anti-China containment policy. Yet Beijing's efforts to enforce its claims over much of the South China Sea and to initiate massive land reclamation efforts there over the objections of its regional neighbours, and in defiance of the Hague Tribunal's 2016 decision favouring the Philippines' territorial claims in those waters, were clearly a factor in the Obama administration's decision to increase the number and tempo of the US Navy's FONOPs in the South China Sea.¹⁵ Even so, US southern-flank allies and partners watched with dismay the sustained American preoccupation with Russian activities in Crimea and Ukraine, and the rise of ISIS in the Middle East, which resulted in a lack of US focus on fulfilling its 'pivot' strategy in their region.

Similar apprehensions were shared by southern-flank countries over Trump's 'America first' posture. His decision less than a week after assuming office to withdraw the US from the TPP dismayed TPP signatories Australia, Singapore and Vietnam—the latter having moved to establish visibly closer defence ties with the US as China moved ever more forcefully to oppose Vietnam's territorial claims in the South China Sea. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and Thailand's military government had been persistent critics of the Obama administration's propensity to harp on human rights violations. Trump's apparent indifference to the US sustaining economic and strategic leadership in the Indo-Pacific validated their decisions to upgrade their relations with Xi Jinping's China. A tense phone call between Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Trump in late January 2017 resulted in the US President railing against Australia's deal made with Turnbull's predecessor to transfer a small number of refugees from Nauru and Manus Island to the US. It ended with the anti-immigration American leader labelling his conversation with Turnbull as the worst he had conducted with a world leader since taking office (although Trump eventually delivered on the Obama-era commitment and mended relations with Turnbull at a dinner he hosted for the Australian prime minister on a decommissioned aircraft carrier, USS *Intrepid*, in May 2017).¹⁶

These developments reinforced already existing perceptions that Trump was critical of regional allies and partners he viewed as extracting unfair trading advantages from the US without adequately contributing to defence burden-sharing and in other ways required for US forces in the Indo-Pacific to maintain an acceptable power balance against China and other potential adversaries. For Australians, in particular, this stance was puzzling, as even Trump acknowledged that Australia was one of the few countries with which the US enjoyed a favourable trade balance. The new US president was likewise unsympathetic to ASEAN's brand of multilateralism (long supported by Australia), preferring to pursue bilateral trade and security relations with individual regional actors and to focus strongly on rectifying the US's trade imbalance with China. Influenced by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Trump's first appearance in the region during its 'summit season' in November 2017 featured his address touting an 'Indo-Pacific dream' or 'free and open Indo-Pacific' environment based on reciprocity and fairness in observing trading rules and norms and the pursuit of renegotiating bilateral trade and private investment agreements (a vision since adopted by Australia, India and Trump's Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo).¹⁷ While congratulating ASEAN on 50 years of successfully promoting peace, prosperity and stability in Southeast Asia, Trump offered its heads of state attending the ASEAN summit in Manila no specific US strategic commitments for upholding its regional security, although he did offer to personally 'mediate' the South China Sea dispute between Beijing and ASEAN claimants when conferring with the Vietnamese President after the APEC summit, which preceded the ASEAN meeting.¹⁸

Linking the southern flank and the wider Indo-Pacific

The Trump administration's release of its National Security Strategy in December 2017 marked a turning point, in the tone and orientation of the administration's policy towards the southern flank and the broader Indo-Pacific. That document explicitly acknowledged that the Philippines and Thailand 'remain important allies and markets for Americans' and that Australia 'continues to reinforce economic and security arrangements that support our shared interests and safeguard democratic values across the region'. It observed that Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore were 'growing security partners' of the US. Linking the Southeast Asian alliances and partnerships with the broader region, it stated that the US 'will seek to increase quadrilateral [security] cooperation with Japan, Australia and India'.¹⁹ This policy approach, largely crafted by US Secretary of Defense James Mattis, was more in line with traditional American thinking and behaviour regarding the San Francisco system.

A major challenge for the US in implementing a credible free and open Indo-Pacific strategy is that a substantial number of regional actors—including US allies and partners in the southern flank—view it as merely an updated version of Cold War containment strategy against China. Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong depicted this concern at the 2018 Australia–ASEAN summit convened in Sydney: 'We do not want to end up with rival blocs forming or countries having to take one side or another.'²⁰ To at least some extent, this narrative mirrors the Chinese Communist Party's position on the concept.²¹

In this context, a recent American effort to revive the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Australia, India and Japan, which was successfully neutralised by Chinese opposition in 2007–08, is significant and is being discussed in Southeast Asian policymaking circles.²² The very carefully tailored US communiqué released at the end of a November 2018 Quad session (no joint communiqué was issued) emphasised the participants' common values and their determination to underscore the importance of non-traditional security issues. It linked the Quad initiative to existing ASEAN-led regional security architectures and was careful to avoid language that could imply that the Quad was a military coalition directed only towards containing China.

Evolving alliances and partnerships

Striking a judicious middle ground between encouraging China to mesh its own strategic visions with a broader comprehensive and collaborative order-building process, while still maintaining a credible US commitment to its southern-flank allies' and partners' territorial and geopolitical security, has emerged as the major strategic challenge confronting the US in the southern flank. Australia faces a similar policy dichotomy. Its trading relationship with China remains highly interdependent (although characterised by many as an Australian dependency on China) at a time when the Trump administration is levying considerable tariffs on Chinese exports to the US. There's widespread recognition that China's current policies and practices are designed to facilitate its access to others' intellectual property and technology. However, the reality of China's economy of scale and the fact that it will continue exercising its status as the Indo-Pacific region's major economic player can't be wished away. The complexity underlying this challenge has led to the Philippines and Thailand hedging towards extending greater accommodation to Beijing and scrutinising with ambivalence traditional bilateral commitments for their own national security.

The Philippines

The Philippines is perhaps most illustrative in this regard. After coming to office in June 2016, President Duterte opted to 'set aside' the South China Sea tribunal ruling supporting the Philippines' submission to that body and nullifying most of China's territorial claims to the South China Sea. Duterte did not want 'to impose anything on China'²³ and has ignored the Hague decision. During his first visit to Beijing in October 2016, Duterte proclaimed his country's strategic 'separation' from the US by seriously reducing or even ending joint US–Philippines military exercises and by abrogating the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement signed by the previous (and more pro-American) Philippine Government and the Obama administration in April 2014. Duterte and his advisers later backtracked on his anti-alliance rhetoric. His Defence Minister insisted that the agreement would be retained and that the annual *Balikatan* bilateral military exercise between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and US forces would be continued. Indeed, *Balikatan* 2018 also included both Australian and Japanese as well as American and Filipino military personnel.

There were several reasons for Manila's policy shift. While Duterte promoted a more independent foreign policy for his country, he understood that public opinion in the Philippines remained fundamentally pro-American and largely suspicious of China and that inducing China to underwrite Philippine infrastructure projects wasn't necessarily synonymous with cutting all defence ties with Washington.²⁴ Moreover, in the face of stepped-up Chinese efforts to consolidate its territorial claims in the South China Sea by harassing AFP outposts in the Spratly Islands chain, Duterte has been forced to respond by adopting a more visibly nationalist posture against Beijing.²⁵ Trump administration officials, including US Secretary of State Pompeo, have reinforced Duterte's increasingly tough line by explicitly reassuring Duterte's government that the US will be a reliable ally in the event that Philippines-claimed territories in the South China Sea come under Chinese armed attack.²⁶ The US has also offered to negotiate for the Philippines to purchase US F-16 combat aircraft, notwithstanding Manila's plans to buy Russian submarines. Critical US and Australian military assistance to the AFP in quelling an insurgent siege in Marawi during 2017 highlighted the value of Manila's traditional alliance and partnership ties with the ANZUS countries. In summary, Duterte still wishes to establish a more independent Philippine foreign policy without relinquishing the US–Philippines security treaty. The US needs to tread carefully, however, given his strong populist sensitivities and history of anti-Americanism.²⁷

Thailand

With the Thai military's intervention against Yingluck Shinawatra's elected civilian government in May 2014, Thai-US relations became increasingly strained. The Obama administration imposed sanctions on military assistance and arms sales to Thailand and the US substantially reduced the scale of the annual Cobra Gold military exercise.²⁸

The US also launched what seemed to the Thai military junta to be a relentless barrage of criticism against Thailand with a pro-democracy and human rights theme. Acting Thai Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha and his associates unsurprisingly turned to China as a means of generating counter-leverage to traditional American dominance in Thailand's alliance politics. Thailand upgraded its military exercise tempo with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) with the Blue Strike exercise, which involved land and sea operations, and humanitarian relief training. In September 2018, the Thai and PLA air forces conducted Falcon Strike at the Udorn Royal Thai Air Base, following up two previous such drills carried out in 2015 and 2017. The Thais also moved to procure new Chinese weapons and military equipment, including three S-26 diesel-electric submarines and 49 MB-3000 battle tanks.

It's important to note that China's inroads into Thailand's strategic calculations hardly represent an outright zero-sum win for Beijing and a complete loss for Washington. The Thais have long been adroit in playing off China and the US against one another. Reports have surfaced of various delays in Thailand's submarine procurement and of Chinese interest in developing Thailand's Kra Canal as an alternative route of passage to the Malacca Strait.²⁹ Apart from the contraction of Cobra Gold, US defence officials had restored much of the military-to-military relations component of the Thai-US military alliance by the end of 2015. Trump's election and his relative indifference to human rights issues played well among Bangkok's military elite. Following a meeting between General Prayut and the Trump White House, the Thai Embassy in Washington noted that the two leaders 'underscored the importance of further advancing the Thai-US alliance so that this alliance will continue to be a key feature underpinning peace and stability in the vital Indo-Pacific region'.³⁰

Other US security partners

In the broader Indo-Pacific, the US has, for well over a decade, cultivated upgraded defence ties with India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. The last four countries fall within the American purview of southern-flank-related alignment politics and are thus briefly considered here.

Indonesia

After nearly two decades of being targeted by congressionally mandated sanctions based on human rights transgressions by its Indonesian Army Special Forces, Indonesia has once again, with the Trump administration's ascent to office, become a viable American security partner. US Secretary of Defense Mattis's visit to Indonesia in January 2018 was a benchmark in intensifying US-Indonesian bilateral defence ties that had already been upgraded by the Obama administration. Indonesia trails only the Philippines as a beneficiary of US foreign military financing programs in Southeast Asia. It's significant that Australian-Indonesian military relations were simultaneously being upgraded with the signing of a new defence cooperation agreement. Given Indonesia's history of successfully managing the coexistence of largely secular governance with the world's largest Muslim population, the ANZUS powers view Indonesia as a bulwark against terrorism. However, Indonesia's strong legacy of non-alignment, and its self-appointed role as ASEAN's guardian against external great-power competition, still render Indonesia's partnership with both Australia and the US as qualified. This may change if Jakarta concludes that unyielding Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea threaten ASEAN's long-term viability.³¹

Malaysia

The return in May 2018 of Mahathir as Malaysia's Prime Minister appeared to be initially accompanied by a more aloof Malaysian posture towards China compared to his predecessor, Razak Najib's, extensive and cosy economic ties with Beijing—although the most recent indicators are that this impression may have been overblown. What concerns Kuala Lumpur harbours towards China,

however, can in no small part be attributed to China's intensified maritime presence within Malaysian-claimed waters in the South China Sea. Evidence is accumulating of closer US–Malaysian defence ties being developed as a counterweight to the 'China factor'. For example, the Cope Taufan 18 bilateral tactical airlift exercise held in July 2018 focused on air superiority, airborne command and control, interdiction, air refuelling and tactical airlift and air drop—all components relevant to future military operations in a South China Sea combat environment.³² Other bilateral exercises continue (between 14 and 16 annually), notwithstanding Malaysia's insistence that ASEAN's longstanding principle of observing a 'zone of peace, freedom and neutrality' remains the core priority of Malaysian regional diplomacy. It remains to be seen to what extent Malaysia will be able to project more than a minimum deterrence posture to balance against the territorial threats it now faces.

Singapore

Singapore represents a more successful case of security partnership with the US and Australia. Following the closure of US basing operations in the Philippines in 1992, Singapore agreed to host a US Navy logistical command unit that's critical for US Indo-Pacific Command operations. Six years later, Singapore agreed to allow US forces to access and use the Changi Naval Base. In 2005, the two countries entered into a landmark strategic framework agreement that intensified their bilateral cooperation in counterterrorism, joint military dialogues, exercises and training, and defence technology transfers. Despite its relatively small size and population (approximately 5.7 million), this city-state is viewed by many in Washington as a *de facto* American ally with its own highly modernised military underpinned by a comparatively high defence spending rate and motivated by common threat perceptions, including fears of an unstable South China Sea.³³ Australia likewise has pursued numerous areas of strategic cooperation with Singapore. Already collaborating as partners in the 1971 Five Power Defence Arrangements (in which the US isn't a member), Australia and Singapore signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement in 2015. This accord, along with the Australia–Singapore Military Training Initiative (launched in May 2016), has substantially expanded the Singapore Armed Services' access to Australian training areas in Queensland and has facilitated the two countries' military intelligence and defence technology cooperation.

Vietnam

Vietnamese–American security relations have improved immeasurably since the two countries normalised their relations in 1995. This process has been largely fuelled by Vietnam's growing apprehension over Chinese activities in the South China Sea and by the US's increased acknowledgement that differences in the two countries' political cultures should not override their willingness to pursue common security interests. The US–Vietnam Bilateral Defence Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding in 2011 initiated collaboration in maritime security, high-level defence dialogues, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and UN peacekeeping. US assistance in developing the Vietnam Coast Guard's participation in the Rim of the Pacific maritime exercise, and the lifting of a long-term American ban on arms sales to Vietnam in 2016, have been reciprocated by at least tacit Vietnamese support for US FONOPs in the South China Sea and the visit of a US aircraft carrier (USS *Carl Vinson*) to Danang in March 2018.

This positive momentum is qualified, however, by Vietnam's still constrained posture that precludes alienating the more geographically proximate and economically crucial China relationship.³⁴ Instead, maintaining ASEAN centrality and working through the steps required to complete a code of conduct for the South China Sea that safeguards Vietnam's national interests seem to be paramount objectives in Hanoi's foreign policy strategy.

President Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the TPP was not helpful to Vietnam in this context—a plight Hanoi shares with every other TPP signatory. Low-key defence ties between Vietnam and Australia have been evolving for the past two decades, highlighted by their signing in October 2010 of a bilateral memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation. Australian naval contingents carry out visits to Vietnamese ports, Vietnamese officers are trained in Australia under a defence cooperation program, and a bilateral strategic dialogue is conducted annually at the vice-ministerial level. This growing bilateral Australia–Vietnam security relationship complements the increasingly substantial US–Vietnam strategic connection.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

President Trump's much-heralded 'free and open Indo-Pacific' strategy suffers from more of the same credibility problems as his predecessor's 'rebalancing strategy'. US regional allies and partners remain uncertain about American staying power in their neighbourhood.³⁵ To date, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue remains at least partially constrained by a lack of clear American leadership and differences in strategic orientations between India (which anticipates a multipolar regional security environment in which it can maximise its own strategic autonomy) and Australia (which would prefer a geopolitically resurgent US).³⁶ The US is still perceived by southern-flank actors as most interested in retaining its strategic influence in the ASEAN region in ways that necessitate ASEAN members resorting to hedging tactics to sidestep either American or Chinese dominance over their region.

In these circumstances, applying the ANZUS alliance to breathe new life into the San Francisco system's southern flank and its peripheries may well be worth pursuing. Any number of policy measures could be considered by policymakers in Washington and Canberra as initial steps for implementing such alliance rehabilitation. Three such measures immediately come to mind and are offered as policy recommendations here.

One is upgrading joint policy planning between the ANZUS allies and Manila on how to respond forcefully and credibly to incessant Chinese encroachments of Philippines-claimed territories in the South China Sea. This may involve Australian, Filipino and other allied naval contingents coming together for the conduct of future such exercises in a demonstration of collective resolve to oppose Beijing's permanent military dominance in that theatre of operations. This doesn't imply that a NATO High Command for the Pacific need be established, but it does require the generation of a strong policy consensus on how to balance what southern-flank and most other ASEAN states view as a genuine threat to Southeast Asia's regional order and stability.

A second policy recommendation is for the US and Australia to extend their already established diplomatic posture of ceding the political destiny of Vietnam to the Vietnamese people to the political situations in both the Philippines and Thailand. This doesn't mean that the US and Australian governments should completely refrain from comment on human rights developments in those two countries. It does mean that Australian and American policymakers should focus on demonstrating sensitivity to the Philippines' and Thailand's sovereign rights to develop and practise forms of governance that may not conform completely to the ANZUS governments' values. The effective application of US and Australian soft power to Southeast Asian societies is best achieved through adopting quiet forms of communication supporting such societies' political preferences rather than openly lecturing them, with the obvious risk that an unacceptable loss of face by those countries would be the primary outcome. This communication should be supplemented by a gradual and selective development of substantive security partnerships beyond the current but still intermittent array of military exercises and defence exchange visits.

Finally, any Australian Government, of whatever persuasion, must remain steadfast in encouraging US policy consistency in its alliance politics in the Indo-Pacific. The greatest impediment to the San Francisco system's credibility is Washington's tendency over the years to oscillate between alliance commitment and alliance detachment. Trump's 'America first' posture is the latest case of this US tendency but is hardly the only instance of Washington struggling to choose between its roles as a global superpower and as an Indo-Pacific regional power balancer. The Nixon Doctrine, Carter's 'swing strategy' and George HW Bush's flirtation with an immediate post-Cold War peace dividend are all precedents illustrating this American predisposition to shift between internationalism and neo-isolationism. As Brexit threatens to erode what remains of Britain's (and possibly Europe's) global reach, and as the world at large appears to be slipping into the abyss of dangerous and unpredictable multipolarity, the durability of the San Francisco system remains one of the democratic community's most valued security frameworks. ANZUS policymakers could do far worse than to assist in ensuring that it stays that way.

Notes

- 1 Zack Beauchamp, 'How Trump is killing America's alliances', *Vox*, 12 June 2018, [online](#); Steven Erlanger, Jane Perlez, 'America's allies fear that traditional ties no longer matter under Trump', *New York Times*, 21 December 2018, [online](#).
- 2 Office of the US Trade Representative, *Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)*, Executive Office of the President, Washington DC, April 2019, [online](#).
- 3 Steven G. Cochrane, Veasna Kong, Katrina Ell, Steven Shields, *ASEAN outlook: slower momentum*, Moody's Analytics, February 2019, [online](#).
- 4 Walter Russell Mead, 'US draws curtain on its leading role', *The Australian*, 8 March 2019, [online](#).
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Acronyms and abbreviations

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
FONOP	freedom of navigation operations
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership

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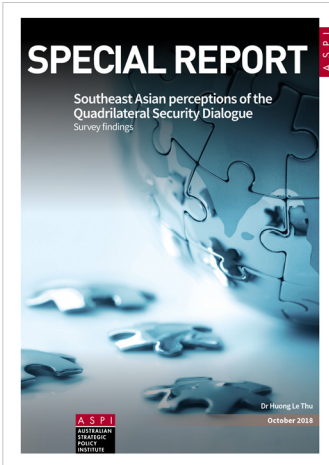
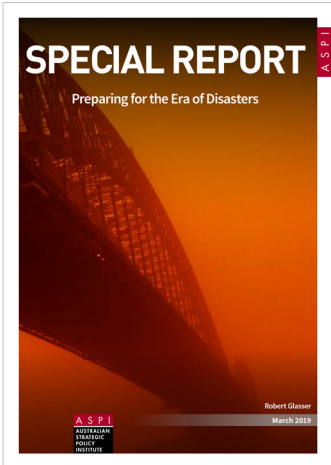
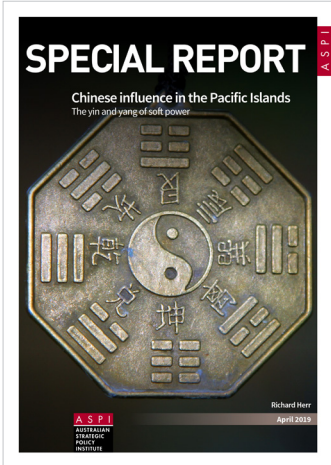
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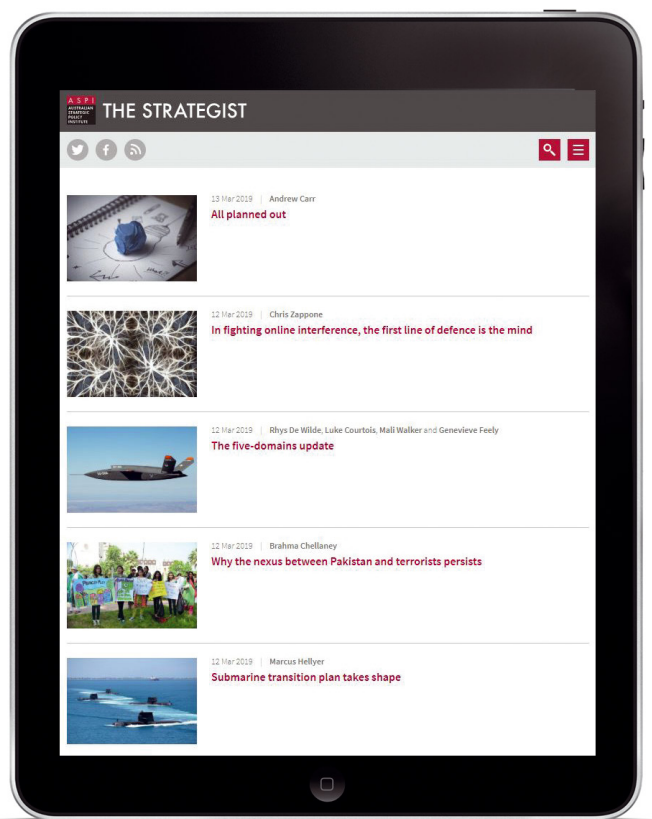


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