

# The Maritime Strategy of the United States: Implications for Indo-Pacific Sea Lanes

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*The maintenance of safe and secure sea lanes, particularly those that link the United States with its partners in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, is at the very core of US interests. Therefore, US maritime strategy seeks to sustain credible combat power in the Western Pacific and Arabian Gulf/Indian Ocean so as to preclude attempts at interrupting vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and commerce. Given these strategic imperatives and the capability of both state and non-state actors to disrupt the Indo-Pacific sea lanes critical to global prosperity, the United States has renewed its commitment to maritime security in Asia. In recent years, the United States has made significant adjustments to its defence posture in order to bring more maritime forces closer to Indo-Pacific sea lanes and defence officials have stated their intention to further enhance US posture in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean while maintaining US presence in Northeast Asia. Recognizing that the expansive nature of Indo-Pacific maritime territory and the complexity of the region's maritime challenges prevent any one country from resourcing the operations necessary to provide sea lane security, the United States is also strengthening cooperation with its maritime partners by expanding relationships and trust-building efforts, contributing to the capacity of its partners and enhancing interoperability. At the same time, the United States is supporting the strengthening of maritime symposiums and regional organizations as the foundations for the security architectures necessary to ensure the security of Indo-Pacific sea lanes and sustain regional prosperity.*

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It has become cliché to refer to the twenty-first century as the Asian Century. Indeed, when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently said in Kuala Lumpur, “We know that much of the history of the twenty-first century will be written in this region, because it is the center of so many of the world’s greatest opportunities and biggest challenges”, she was merely restating what most US strategic planners have taken for granted for some time.<sup>1</sup> A more controversial idea related to her statement is whether the rise of Asia means the relative decline of the United States. In this regard, US strategy appears to be focused on the concept that America can continue to rise with Asia. During his first trip to Asia as president, Barack Obama observed that “the fortunes of America and the Asia Pacific have become more closely linked than ever before”, and pointed out that Asia and the United States are not separated by an ocean, but bound by it.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the United States is a maritime nation, and its prosperity is intrinsically connected to and sustained by active commerce with its partners. The sea lanes to, from, and within Asia carry the bulk of that commerce, and therefore US maritime strategy is focused on sustaining free communication over those waters.

During an address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2010, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates provided an overview of how the United States sees strategic priorities in Asia within the context of broader US defence priorities. Gates underscored that the United States is a Pacific nation and that it will remain a power in the Asia Pacific. He explained that with sovereign territory and longstanding economic and cultural ties to this region, US security interests and economic well-being are integrally tied to those of Asia. Specifically, he highlighted United States commitment to: free and open commerce; a just international order that emphasizes the rights and responsibilities of nations and fidelity to the rule of law; open access by all to the global commons of sea, air, space, cyberspace; and the principle of resolving conflict without the use of force.<sup>3</sup>

These priorities, which he reiterated in his address to the 2011 Shangri-La Dialogue, clearly reflect that maintaining safe, secure sea lanes and upholding the principle of freedom of navigation is at the very core of US interests in Asia.<sup>4</sup> These critical sea lanes are not just those of the Pacific, but extend into the Indian Ocean and carry trade between East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe. Therefore, Indo-Pacific sea lanes are not only vital to

those states at their termini, but to all nations with economic and security interests in Asia.

In October 2007 the United States issued a new maritime strategy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Seapower*, referred to by the shorthand, CS21. Some critics have asserted that this document is too broad-based, is more a collection of public affairs-friendly abstract statements than a hard strategy and lacks the concrete substance necessary to drive action or guide decisions.<sup>5</sup> Many of those skeptics should have been answered by the 2010 publication of the *Naval Operations Concept* (NOC10), a document which “describes the ways with which the sea services will achieve the ends articulated in *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (CS21).”<sup>6</sup> That said, CS21 was being implemented in real and practical ways well before the publication of NOC10. From its inception, CS21 has provided the common principles guiding maritime strategic decisions and served as a vital reference for leaders at all levels in the US sea services. Comprehensive by necessity, the language in CS21 was carefully and intentionally developed. Every word was deliberately selected and thoroughly vetted.<sup>7</sup> At first read the strategy does indeed appear expansive and general, but a closer review reveals the specific details needed to guide decision making. Strategy and policy staff officers working on the Navy Staff (OPNAV) since CS21’s creation were directed to continually reference CS21 in the course of formulating and executing their work and to frame all recommendations to the Chief of Naval Operations and other senior maritime leaders in reference to the strategy.<sup>8</sup>

Two sentences from CS21 describe the strategic imperative driving US decisions regarding Indo-Pacific sea lanes. The first reads, “Credible combat power will be continuously postured in the Western Pacific and the Arabian Gulf/Indian Ocean to protect our vital interests, assure our friends and allies of our continuing commitment to regional security, and deter and dissuade potential adversaries and peer competitors.”<sup>9</sup> The second, “We will not permit conditions under which our maritime forces would be impeded from freedom of maneuver and freedom of access, nor will we permit an adversary to disrupt the global supply chain by attempting to block vital sea-lines of communication and commerce.”<sup>10</sup> Given these imperatives, it can be understood that the United States has chosen to concentrate maritime power at the eastern and western edges of Asia because the nations of both areas are key trade partners of the United States, and because both areas are home to threats from state and non-state actors that could disrupt that commerce.

### State Actor Capacity to Disrupt Indo-Pacific Sea Lanes

CS21 states that US maritime power will be concentrated to “deter and dissuade potential adversaries and peer competitors”. The strategy does not name specific states, but several states have displayed capability and intent to interfere with freedom of navigation and have thereby affirmed the prudence of this strategic observation. Most notable in this regard is the recent behaviour of North Korea, whose artillery attack on the South Korean civilian population of Yeongpyeong Island in November 2010, numerous missile tests, and the recent unveiling of nuclear enrichment facilities, all demonstrate the dangerous and reckless nature of the Pyongyang regime. The unprovoked sinking of the South Korean frigate, *ROKS Cheonan*, off the west coast of the peninsula in March 2010 provides a stark example of irresponsible North Korean provocations reaching into the maritime domain. The United States has worked especially closely with its two Northeast Asian allies, South Korea and Japan, to fashion appropriate responses to these actions. Among those responses have been demonstrations of naval power and increased trilateral defence activities. In July 2010 Japanese observers joined Exercise *Invincible Spirit*, the first in a series of South Korean-United States combined naval exercises developed in response to the attack on *ROKS Cheonan*. Later, in December 2010, South Korean Navy observers joined the United States-Japan combined Exercise *Keen Sword*. The United States, South Korea and Japan continue to deepen these ties through ministerial-level discussions, trilateral chiefs of defence consultations, ministry-level defence trilateral talks and trilateral staff talks at the fleet level. The United States is also seeking greater cooperation with China — North Korea’s primary benefactor — in the hope that Beijing can use its influence to shape Pyongyang’s behaviour.

As two great trading nations, the United and China share many common interests in the maritime domain and both nations have vested interest in sea lanes that are safe for commerce.<sup>11</sup> In this arena they have recently achieved some successes.<sup>12</sup> For example, the Chinese surface group conducting anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden has regularly exchanged information with the United States and its partners during the mission, which is now in its third year.<sup>13</sup> In addition, in the last few years the United States and China have hosted each other’s senior maritime leaders, conducted port visits in each other’s countries, and, in 2006, Chinese and US forces conducted a limited scale search-and-rescue exercise. In October

2009, Secretary Gates and General Xu Caihou, Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission, agreed on a relationship agenda that includes seven priority areas for developing military-to-military relations, one of which is invigorating existing diplomatic mechanisms to improve military maritime operational and tactical safety.<sup>14</sup>

The October 2010 plenary session of the United States-China Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), held in Hawaii, was a modest, yet positive step forward. The session included professional and frank exchanges between military leaders of both countries, with a focus on the safety of sailors and airmen operating in close proximity.<sup>15</sup> Maritime security was also an important topic of discussion at the December 2010 Defense Consultative Talks between the United States and China. More recently, maritime security was among those issues discussed during Defense Secretary Gates' January 2011 visit to China and the May 2011 visit to the United States by People's Liberation Army (PLA) Chief of the General Staff General Chen Bingde.

The fact that China's military modernization proceeds uninterrupted despite superficial improvements in cross-straits relations raises important questions about the ultimate intentions of Beijing, especially given the limited transparency associated with the country's military build-up. Developments in the maritime domain are particularly worrisome because of their potential to disrupt commerce beyond Chinese territory. While China's robust anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities are primarily focused on a potential conflict with US forces over Taiwan, these capabilities now extend far beyond that theatre.<sup>16</sup> These systems appear to be designed to deny others access to operate in regional sea lanes, an approach that threatens to undermine the basic norms that have underpinned the region's peace and prosperity. This is significant when one considers the inclusion of "anti-SLOCS operations" as one of the six offensive and defensive campaigns identified in official Chinese Navy doctrine.<sup>17</sup> A key capability, China's anti-ship ballistic missile based on the DF-21 medium-range ballistic missile airframe, has been assessed to have the range needed to attack ships in critical sea lanes such as the Straits of Malacca and those passages crossing the northern Indian Ocean. Other Chinese A2/AD capabilities enable strikes even further from the Chinese homeland bringing all of the primary Indo-Pacific sea lanes into range.<sup>18</sup> The Chinese Navy's developing capability to sustain blue-water operations will further expand its abilities to conduct anti-SLOC campaigns.

These capabilities provide greater reason for concern when coupled with increasingly assertive Chinese maritime behaviour that has proven both dangerous to mariners and disruptive to freedom of navigation. Specifically seeking to influence US behaviour, Beijing has declared military activities conducted near China to be illegal and hostile. Demonstrating that it is willing to take rash actions to achieve this influence, China has instigated recurring incidents at sea, such as the harassment of *USNS Impeccable* in March 2009.<sup>19</sup> Despite such Chinese activity, there are no signs that the United States will reduce its commitment to exercise the freedoms of navigation enshrined in customary international law.<sup>20</sup>

Aggressive Chinese maritime behaviour has not only affected the United States, but much of maritime Asia.<sup>21</sup> The heavy-handed way in which Beijing responded to the detention of a Chinese fishing trawler after it collided with several Japan Coast Guard patrol vessels near Japanese-administered islands in the East China Sea in September 2010 suggested a determination on the part of Beijing to assert its territorial claims through an increasingly aggressive maritime presence. Similarly, a series of incidents in the South China Sea in the first half of 2011 has aggravated tensions with China's maritime neighbours in Southeast Asia. These incidents include the firing on Filipino fishermen from Chinese vessels in February 2011, a confrontation between the Philippine oil exploration vessel *MV Veritas Voyager* and two Chinese patrol boats in March 2011, and an interaction between a Chinese marine surveillance vessel and a PetroVietnam survey ship which resulted in a Vietnamese undersea cable being cut, provoking official ire and public demonstrations in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in June and July.<sup>22</sup>

While not taking sides on competing sovereignty claims, US officials have regularly stated their firm opposition to the use of force or to any actions that may hinder freedom of navigation. Believing that customary international law, as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), provides clear guidance on the appropriate use of the maritime domain, and rights of access to it, they explain that the US is committed to ensuring freedom of navigation and unimpeded lawful commerce. Furthermore, they explain that when disputes arise over competing sovereignty claims, the US is committed to resolving them peacefully, without any resort to the threat or use of force, based on customary international law. Senior US leaders have called on all parties to engage in collaborative diplomatic processes and resolve differences in these waters through

peaceful, multilateral efforts. Specifically, they have applauded the steps taken since the signing of the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DoC), stated their preparedness to facilitate initiatives and confidence building measures consistent with the DoC and noted that they are encouraged by China's recent steps to enter discussions with ASEAN about a more formal binding code of conduct.<sup>23</sup>

In the Western Indian Ocean/Arabian Gulf, US government officials have explained that Iran is another state where noteworthy A2/AD capabilities are coupled with unclear intent. When then Commander of US Central Command, General David Petraeus, stated before the Senate Armed Services Committee that, "The Iranian regime is the primary state-level threat to stability in the region", his remarks focused on the Iranian regime's illegal nuclear programme, its support for terrorist organizations and its anti-Western stance.<sup>24</sup> However, Iran's maritime capabilities are also of noteworthy concern. The Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that, together, the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy include nearly 40,000 personnel which man submarines, surface craft, naval aviation units and anti-ship coastal defence missile batteries. Together these systems create a layered system designed to control access to the waters adjacent to Iran. Of particular note are Iran's C801/802 cruise missiles, first imported from China in 1995, which provide Iran the capability to target any point within the Straits of Hormuz and much of the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.<sup>25</sup> Given that these sea lanes are absolutely critical to the trade between the Arabian Gulf states and the rest of the world, US strategy commits to deterring Iran from engaging in destabilizing activities.

### **Non-State Actor Threats to Indo-Pacific Sea Lanes**

Non-state actors such as terrorists, pirates and other criminals present additional challenges to the safety and security of Indo-Pacific sea lanes. Only half a decade ago, much of this concern was focused on the waterways of Southeast Asia. In the late 1990s and into the first years of the twenty-first century, International Maritime Bureau (IMB) statistics annually placed about half of the world's piracy attacks in Southeast Asia.<sup>26</sup> Between 2000 and 2004, while terror attacks in Bali, Jakarta and Manila captured global headlines, bomb attacks against ferries in the Philippines and Indonesia killed approximately 300 ferry passengers. These bombings, coupled with transnational kidnapping operations conducted by the maritime-savvy Abu Sayyaff Group

(ASG), and a number of unexecuted plots to attack US Navy targets discovered by Singaporean authorities, led regional leaders to speculate that maritime terror might interfere with the tremendous volume of shipping carried by Southeast Asia's global sea lanes.<sup>27</sup> The criminal and terrorist threat became so significant that from July 2005 to August 2006, international insurers included the Straits of Malacca on their list of Hull War, Strikes, Terrorism and Related Perils Areas.

Since that time, the governments of the littoral states, acting both independently and in partnership with each other and extra-regional states, have taken significant action to address these transnational threats.<sup>28</sup> Southeast Asian piracy rates were significantly reduced between 2004 and 2009 and authorities have inflicted significant damage on radical groups operating in the region. Nevertheless, these transnational threats cannot be disregarded and US activities support the further strengthening of national efforts and regional cooperation to counter these threats.<sup>29</sup> Organizations such as Jemaah Islamiyah and the ASG continue to exploit regional vulnerabilities. The July 2009 bombings in Jakarta demonstrated that regional terrorist groups retain operational capacity, while in March 2010, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia issued warnings that terrorists were planning attacks against maritime traffic transiting the Malacca Straits, further demonstrating that sea lanes remain potential terrorist targets.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in 2010 the IMB counted 71 acts of piracy and armed robbery in maritime Southeast Asia; despite the progress that has been made in this waterway only the waters around the Horn of Africa were recorded to be more piracy-prone.<sup>31</sup>

Today, the pirates in the western Indian Ocean pose the greater threat and merit global attention. Naval forces from around the world have deployed to the waters around the Horn of Africa to conduct anti-piracy operations and improve the safety of navigation along key sea lanes. In an attempt to avoid these maritime forces, pirates have responded by extending their range to the east and the south. Somali pirates have now conducted operations closer to India than Africa, and on 29 December 2010 Somali pirates struck farther south than ever before, conducting two unsuccessful attacks in the Mozambique Channel, over 900 nautical miles south of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania.<sup>32</sup>

A diverse set of maritime terrorists also operate in the western Indian Ocean and have executed a number of sophisticated operations in recent years. Earlier this century, both *USS Cole* and *MV Limburg* were attacked in these waters. More recently the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks were executed from the sea.

Furthermore, the July 2010 attack on the Japanese tanker *MV M. Star* in the approaches to the Straits of Hormuz — believed to have been staged by the Islamist terror group Abdullah Azzam Brigade — further highlighted the continued vulnerability of sea lanes in the western Indian Ocean.<sup>33</sup> The likely nexus between pirates and maritime terrorists in the western Indian Ocean, particularly evident from their financial linkages and shared safe havens in the territories of failed states, demonstrates the importance confronting maritime challenges within the maritime domain as a part of a comprehensive “whole of government” effort.<sup>34</sup>

The US response to these non-state actors in the western Indian Ocean has been centred on building and effectively employing forward, capable and coalition-focused forces. In his role as Commander, Combined Maritime Forces, US Navy Vice-Admiral Mark Fox leads a force comprised of three multinational task forces built with units contributed from global maritime partners: Combined Task Force 150 (CTF 150), Combined Task Force 151 (CTF 151) and Combined Task Force 152 (CTF 152). Established around the beginning of US-led military operations in Afghanistan in 2001, CTF 150 conducts maritime security operations in the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean with a particular focus on monitoring and intercepting the movement of personnel and supplies of terrorist organizations. Currently under the command of Royal Australian Navy Commodore Gregory Sammut, CTF 150 has in the past been commanded by Australia, Canada, France, the Netherlands, Pakistan and the United Kingdom. Republic of Singapore Navy Rear Admiral Harris Chan Weng Yip currently commands CTF 151, which was established in January 2009 to conduct counter-piracy operations under a mission-based mandate to actively deter, disrupt and suppress piracy in order to protect global maritime security and secure freedom of navigation for the benefit of all nations. CTF 151 has been commanded by Pakistan, South Korea, Singapore and Turkey. CTF 152 operates in the international waters of the Arabian Gulf and takes part in Operation *Enduring Freedom*. Established in March 2004, CTF 152 conducts maritime security operations with regional partners, as well as being prepared to respond to any crisis inside the Arabian Gulf. Currently under the command of Colonel Isa Al Doseri of the Royal Bahrain Naval Force, previous commanders have been from the navies of Italy, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom.<sup>35</sup> These task forces work closely with North Atlantic Treaty Organization Task Force 508, European Union Task Force 465 and forces deployed from partners such as China, India,

Japan, Malaysia, Russia, to ensure regional sea lanes are open for free and safe commerce.

### **Strengthening Naval Posture Near Indo-Pacific Sea Lanes**

Given the importance of Asian trade to American prosperity and the emerging threats to the safety and security of Indo-Pacific sea lanes, it is only logical that the United States has renewed its commitment to maritime security in Asia. Some analysts have been quick to point out the challenges involved in doing so. They point out that at a time when the challenges are quickly growing, the United States Navy is shrinking and the defence budget is being carefully apportioned.<sup>36</sup> Despite these challenges, the United States is becoming more, not less capable in maritime Asia. It is doing so by simultaneously strengthening its regional posture and by enhancing its maritime partnerships.

In recent years, the United States has made a number of significant adjustments in its defence posture to bring more maritime forces closer to Asian sea lanes and to increase its regional presence. These changes include: replacing the forward-deployed conventional aircraft carrier *USS Kitty Hawk* with the more modern nuclear aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* in Japan; upgrading the ships assigned to Destroyer Squadron Fifteen in Yokosuka, Japan, so that the squadron is now a seven-ship strong “all-Aegis” destroyer force; deploying three *Los Angeles*-class nuclear attack submarines in the US territory of Guam; stationing three Global Hawk aircraft in Guam, increasing the number of minesweepers forward-deployed to Sasebo, Japan from two to four; investing in increased resiliency measure for airfields, ports, and infrastructure used by US forces in the Indo-Pacific; planning for the construction of an aircraft carrier-capable berth at Guam; and shifting vessels from the Atlantic Fleet to the Pacific Fleet. These changes strengthen US capacity to deter adversaries and respond rapidly to crises and conflicts, and demonstrate US commitment to international partners.<sup>37</sup>

At the 2010 and 2011 Shangri-La Dialogues, Secretary Gates described US commitment to further bolster its defence presence in Asia. He described an enhanced posture that will be more “geographically distributed, operationally resilient and politically sustainable”.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, he stated that the US seeks to maintain its presence in Northeast Asia while expanding its presence in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.<sup>39</sup> The precise nature of this

posture remains to be determined, but the United States is engaged in dialogue with a number of regional partners to develop a better understanding of which options will be feasible and prudent. These dialogues are not driven by specific US proposals, but involve frank discussions designed to learn more about partner-nation needs and jointly discover mutually beneficial solutions. Possible developments could include expanded opportunities for rotating crews on ships homeported in the United States without bringing the vessels back to North America (aka “sea swaps”), more rotational deployment locations for operational forces, greater numbers of regional port visits, the pre-positioning of equipment, expanded military-to-military training opportunities and cooperative activities such as medical missions and civil engineering operations.

These posture discussions appear most advanced between the United States and Singapore, and the United States and Australia. With Singapore, a maritime state nestled in the littoral of a critical sea lane, the United States is strengthening its relationship within the context of the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement and pursuing greater operational engagement. At the 2011 Shangri-La Dialogue, Secretary Gates announced that the United States will deploy Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore and is examining opportunities such as propositioning disaster response supplies, improving command and control capabilities and expanding training opportunities.<sup>40</sup> According to Singapore’s Minister for Defence Ng Eng Hen, “The US’s strong presence and continued engagement in this area has been, and will continue to be a critical force of stability and progress for this region. In that spirit, we are open to his proposal for forward deployment of the littoral combat ships in this area, so that it allows them to achieve that purpose of having a strong presence, a continued presence in the Asia Pacific region.”<sup>41</sup>

In November 2010, Australia and the United States announced the establishment of a new bilateral working group to examine the possibility of enhanced US-Australian cooperation on Australian soil. This group is evaluating a range of options that include increasing combined naval presence, improving Indian Ocean facilities and expanding training exercises.<sup>42</sup> While some analysts might question the value of such activities given Australia’s remoteness and the costs associated with forward-deployment, Australia’s location near the critical Indo-Pacific sea lanes that link these US force concentration areas and carry the bulk of global trade will likely make such options more attractive.

## **Strengthening Indo-Pacific Maritime Partnerships**

### *Global Maritime Partnerships (GMP)*

An important element of US efforts to enhance the protection of Indo-Pacific sea lanes centres on strengthening maritime cooperation within the Global Maritime Partnerships (GMP) concept. GMP embraces a cooperative approach to promoting maritime safety, security and stability among the United States, the international community and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Flexible in nature, the GMP concept allows maritime stakeholders to come together, at times without formal agreement, to address common security concerns or respond to crises such as natural or man-made disasters. GMP can be accomplished in a manner that complements existing alliances, partnerships and coalitions without necessarily establishing a new organization or governing body, as long as the challenge addressed is of mutual concern.<sup>43</sup>

Some analysts have suggested that GMP, and the 1,000-ship Navy concept that preceded it, should be understood as efforts by the United States to compensate for its purported decline as a maritime power — but such analysis is misguided. GMP is not about finding ways to complete the same missions with fewer forces. Instead the GMP describes a commitment to working with partners to ensure a greater number of missions are executed more effectively to the common benefit of all maritime states. At its core, the concept focuses on building efficiencies and achieving greater results.<sup>44</sup> Central to this effort to invigorate maritime relationships are US initiatives to build trust, capacity and interoperability with a growing number of partners. Recognizing that “trust and cooperation cannot be surged” and that they “must be built over time so that the strategic interests of the participants are continuously considered while mutual understanding and respect are promoted”,<sup>45</sup> GMP calls for steadily building trust and confidence over time. Within this context, the United States has increased communications and interaction with its Indo-Pacific maritime partners.

### *Senior Leader Engagement*

Expanding engagement by senior US leaders plays an important role in building partners’ trust. President Obama has been personally involved in this effort, investing considerable time in demonstrating his tenure will be a “Pacific Presidency”. By June 2011, Secretary Clinton had made seven trips to the Asia Pacific. Secretary Gates,

who has described the priority he gave the conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia upon arrival in office, has since become a more frequent visitor to the region. His June 2011 visit to Singapore to attend the Shangri-La Dialogue was his fourteenth trip to the region in four-and-a-half years.<sup>46</sup> More than goodwill visits, these travel engagements assure the region of continued US commitment and serve as opportunities to advance progress towards important policy goals.

Examples of these tangible outcomes can be seen in America's renewed relationship with Indonesia, which is strategically important for a number of reasons: it is the world's fourth largest nation by population; is home to more Muslims than any other country; and its archipelago lies astride some of the world's most important sea lanes. Furthermore, since 1998 it has emerged as a vibrant democracy and is renewing itself as a regional leader. As the Indonesian military has retracted from its role in domestic security, it has reoriented its focus on regional security issues such as maritime security, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) and peacekeeping. These areas have become the focal point for US military engagement with Indonesia.<sup>47</sup>

In June 2010, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia, Robert Scher, and the Indonesian Director of Strategy and Planning, Major General Syarifudin Tippe, signed the Framework Arrangement on Cooperative Activities in the Field of Defense, a framework based on the principles of mutual respect, benefit and trust, covering several areas, one of which is maritime security.<sup>48</sup> During a November 2010 visit to Jakarta by President Obama, he and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono discussed security cooperation as an element of the US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership.<sup>49</sup> Later visits by the Commanders of the US Navy's Pacific and Seventh Fleet resulted in the announcement of an expanded navy-to-navy partnership that substantiates the US-Indonesia security relationship and enhances the Comprehensive Partnership.<sup>50</sup>

### *Navy and Fleet Staff Talks*

While US forces deployed to the region help build trust, the United States has simultaneously sought to strengthen cooperation by improving alignment between its military leaders and those of its partners. Maritime security features as a prominent topic in defence policy dialogues that the United States carries out with many Indo-Pacific partners. In 2009, the US Navy Staff established

formal, recurring talks with Japan, South Korea and Australia, among others, and is initiating formal headquarters-to-headquarters talks with both India and Singapore.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, the US Navy has developed more robust mechanisms for discussion and information sharing at the fleet-to-fleet level with other maritime partners. These fleet-to-fleet interactions include staff talks between the Commander of the Pacific Fleet or the Commander of Seventh Fleet and their regional counterparts.

Beyond formal staff-to-staff mechanisms, sustained person-to-person contact, especially habitual and coordinated contact between leaders is critical to building confidence. An excellent example of such contact is tied to the United States-Malaysia submarine-to-submarine relationship. In order to foster a deep and operationally-focused relationship, the Commanders of the US Pacific Fleet's Submarine Group Seven have committed to regular meetings with their Malaysian counterparts.<sup>52</sup>

### *Ship Visits and Fleet Reviews*

Regional port visits by naval vessels provide crucial opportunities for the United States to build trust with its maritime partners. Once regarded primarily as opportunities to boost morale and “show the flag”, port visits are increasingly seen as strategic opportunities for focused engagement and targeted trust-building with specific partners. Recently, the US Navy has been able to capitalize on this approach by sending ships to a greater number of ports and focusing on locations where relationship-building has been identified as a strategic priority. For example, the United States Navy has made 12 port visits to Vietnam since 2003, when the first US Navy ship arrived since the Vietnam War.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the United States has increased the regularity of its port visits to India. The July 2007 *USS Nimitz* visit to Chennai was the first ever port call in India by a US aircraft carrier while the April 2011 visit to Goa by *USS La Jolla* was the first such visit by a US nuclear submarine. US ships have also visited partners such as Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia more frequently. In Malaysia, for instance, the number of annual port visits has nearly tripled since 2006, with 35 visits taking place in 2010 and even more planned for 2011.<sup>54</sup>

Fleet Reviews offer opportunities for building relationships with a number of partners simultaneously and are therefore priority engagements. An excellent example of such prioritization was the US Navy's participation in *Sail Bunaken 2009*, a whole-of-government

marine event celebrating Indonesia's Independence Day in Manado, Indonesia. The United States delegation included the Chief of Naval Operations, the US Ambassador to Indonesia, and naval vessels such as the aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* and four Aegis-equipped escort ships. The size of this delegation was appropriate given the newly minted United States-Indonesia strategic partnership and the importance of Indonesia as a leading maritime nation.

### *Humanitarian Missions*

Other important vehicles for trust-building have been the humanitarian missions conducted by US maritime forces. While these operations are primarily motivated by a desire to contribute maritime expeditionary capabilities in response to human suffering, US strategy recognizes that such capacity must be built on relationships forged in times of calm.<sup>55</sup> Since 2006, the most significant single effort to build such relationships in the Indo-Pacific has been the annual *Pacific Partnership* mission. *Pacific Partnership* is a mission to strengthen relationships with host, partner nations and other partner organizations; strengthen HA/DR capacity; and improve security cooperation among partner nations. Under its auspices, engineering support units and healthcare professionals from partner governments, US interagency actors, and international NGOs provide robust services and training to host governments and local communities. When executing *Pacific Partnership*, the US Pacific Fleet adopts a “by, with and through” approach to providing medical, dental, veterinary and engineering assistance to underserved populations — everything is provided by the invitation of the host nation, *with* host nation involvement/participation, and *through* the host nation government.<sup>56</sup> Other countries that have contributed their naval resources to *Pacific Partnership* have included Australia, Singapore, New Zealand and Japan, all of which have sent ships to work alongside the US Navy's effort.

An excellent example of the cooperative approach of Pacific Partnership was *United States Naval Ship (USNS) Mercy's* participation in *Sail Banda 2010*, in Ambon, Indonesia. *Sail Banda 2010* provided an umbrella for a series of events hosted by the government of Indonesia in July and August 2010 to promote the future of small islands. Focusing on ecology, conservation and environmental awareness, *Sail Banda 2010* sought to build on the success of *Sail Bunaken 2009* by bringing together numerous nations to strengthen relationships and build cooperation and mutual understanding.

The personnel aboard *USNS Mercy* carried out medical and dental care clinical operations and construction projects. Notably, the *Sail Banda 2010* participants included the Indonesian Navy hospital *KRI Dr Suharso* hospital ship and the Singapore Navy's *RSS Endeavour*, which carried a full complement of medical personnel. The medical personnel joined with military personnel from New Zealand, Australia, Cambodia and Malaysia to support the cooperative *Surya Baskara Jaya* health services operation.<sup>57</sup> Indonesia is now planning *Sail Wakatobi-Belitung 2011*, to continue its effort to strengthen international maritime cooperation.<sup>58</sup>

### *Training and Technology Transfers*

Training and technology transfers are other tools which the United States uses to strengthen its maritime partnerships. The International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme and other arrangements make US government training courses available to individuals from partner militaries. The United States also organizes Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) that deploy to the host nation in support of specific training objectives. The training programmes build partner capacity by simultaneously improving capabilities while the personal contact between the US trainer and the partner student provides opportunities to expand trust and confidence. The US Navy's training relationship with Malaysia provides a useful illustration of the scope and value of such a cooperative training programme. In recent years Malaysian Navy students have completed courses in the United States that include Surface Warfare Officer School, Navy Command College and Navy Staff College and programmes of studying in diving, defence resource management, maritime intelligence, mine counter measures, naval logistics and explosive ordnance disposal.<sup>59</sup>

Technology transfers are another important element of US capacity building programmes. Technology transfers are particularly important to those maritime partners with less capacity and lacking the budgetary support to quickly grow on their own. For example, the United States has provided equipment to bolster the capacity of the Maldives to conduct maritime counter-terror operations such as rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIB), dive gear and small caliber weapons free of charge. In Financial Year (FY) 2010 US funding supported Indonesian maritime counter-terrorism activities by providing twelve RHIBs and related equipment and training, as well as equipment and training to improve day and night counter-terrorism air missions.<sup>60</sup>

One especially important focus area for these technology transfers has been in the field of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Regularly referred to by Admiral Gary Roughead, the Chief of Naval Operations, as the “glue” that binds CS21 activities together, MDA is the effective understanding of anything associated with the maritime domain that could impact the security, safety, economy or environment of a nation.<sup>61</sup> Successful MDA requires surveillance data to be gathered, collated and understood, a demanding and challenging task for resource-constrained states with vast sea territories. In the Indo-Pacific, valuable tools used by the US government to execute these cooperative technology transfers have been so-called “1206-Funds”. Named for the federal code that authorizes their disbursement, 1206-funds can be allocated by the Regional Combatant Commanders (such as the Commander of Pacific Command) to fund capacity-building projects that support counter-terrorism missions.<sup>62</sup> In the Indo-Pacific, 1206-funds have been employed for a variety of projects including the establishment or upgrading of radar stations along key sea lanes in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia.<sup>63</sup> Fully owned and operated by the recipient nation, these stations have been linked to domestic MDA systems and provide significant service to partner security forces. US-funded projects like these can help partners bridge gaps in maritime surveillance and interdiction capabilities.

In some cases, partner nations have to bear some financial burden in cooperative capacity-building programmes. For example, in May 2011 the former US Coast Guard cutter, *USCGC Hamilton* was transferred to the Philippine Navy for service as a multi-mission vessel and as the new flagship of the Philippine Navy through the US foreign military sales programme.<sup>64</sup> The transfer serves to support a US pledge to assist in the development of the Philippines’ maritime security capacity made at the inaugural US-Philippines Strategic Dialogue held in January 2011.<sup>65</sup> US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell described this pledge as “a critical component of our partnership” where “much of this work is already underway, and we seek to intensify it in the months and years ahead”.<sup>66</sup>

Transfer of new and emerging technology systems and equipment is also important to building maritime partnerships. This is not just because of the capabilities such technology brings to the recipient, but because when nations decide to adopt each others’ high-end defence equipment they are entering into a long-term strategic relationship that ties them together in terms of interoperability. Examples of high

technology systems recently transferred to Indo-Pacific partners in support of sea lane security include the sale of Aegis technology for Australian and South Korean destroyers, the manufacture of S-70 maritime helicopters for Singapore and the contracting of P-8 maritime patrol aircraft for sale to India. Exemplifying these efforts, the United States is working with Saudi Arabia to recapitalize the Royal Saudi Naval Forces' (RSNF) Eastern Fleet. Beyond the acquisition of sophisticated surface and air assets with interoperability with US forces, these efforts will have the effect of strengthening the already close partnership between the RSNF and US Navy.<sup>67</sup>

Maritime partnerships have also increased partnership capacity by delivering technology from the Indo-Pacific to the United States. For example, in December 2010, the American division of Australian-headquartered Austal Corporation was awarded a US Navy contract to construct up to ten Littoral Combat Ships incorporating advanced hull technology derived from Austal's experience as the world's largest fast ferry manufacturer. Similarly, the United States and Japan are in advanced stages of co-development of the SM-3 Block IIA ballistic missile interceptor that will be fired by the Aegis combat system.

### *Training and Exercises*

In addition to building trust and capacity, US maritime partnership initiatives focus on improving interoperability with partners. To some extent, interoperability is a matter of systems and technology, i.e. the ability for the underway replenishment rig from a supply vessel to connect with the recipient or for two combat systems to conduct electronic data transfer. However, interoperability also has important human elements involving the ability of partners to communicate, safely execute routines and cooperate to accomplish complex tasks. The greater the interoperability, the more partners can accomplish together. Combined training and the Pacific Fleet's recurring international exercise schedule plays an important role in building such interoperability between maritime partners.

In recent years, the United States has passed several significant milestones in partnership training activities in the Indo-Pacific. In particular, 2010 was a hallmark year. Exercise *Rim of the Pacific 2010* (RIMPAC 2010), the world's largest maritime exercise, involved 14 nations, 34 ships, 5 submarines, over 100 aircraft and 20,000 personnel. Among the noteworthy "first-time" events associated with RIMPAC 2010 were amphibious landing training events undertaken by Indonesian and Malaysian military personnel. During Exercise

*Cobra Gold 2010*, an exercise hosted in Thailand, the United States, Thailand, Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Indonesia strengthened their military-to-military relationships through a number of ashore and at-sea training events. During these events, South Korean marines joined their US and Thai counterparts for an amphibious assault exercise. These landings marked the first time Thai marines have completed such a landing with Asian partners and the first time South Korean marines had done so overseas since the Vietnam War.<sup>68</sup>

The annual *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training* (CARAT) series of maritime events also achieved remarkable firsts in 2010 and is set to achieve similar milestones in 2011. CARAT is a series of bilateral exercises that has been held annually in Southeast Asia since 1995, beginning with six partner countries — Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Its overarching goals are the enhancement of regional cooperation, promotion of understanding between participating navies and the continued development of operational readiness of participating forces. Since its inception, CARAT has increased in complexity and has steadily gained prominence within the region. An adaptable and flexible exercise with scenarios tailored to shared goals of the host nation and the United States, all CARAT events have common themes of developing maritime security capabilities and increasing interoperability. CARAT specifically contributes to regional maritime security by enhancing capabilities in areas such as maritime interdiction, information sharing, anti-piracy and anti-smuggling exercises and combined operations at sea.<sup>69</sup>

In 2010, Cambodia participated in CARAT for the first time. Representing the first time the US and Cambodian navies had operated at sea as part of a dedicated exercise in more than four decades, the Cambodian segment of CARAT included at-sea maneuvers, communications drills and surface gunnery events. Also, in 2010, Vietnam participated in a CARAT-like event known as a Naval Engagement Activity.<sup>70</sup> This event took place after Vietnam had sent observers to a third-party CARAT events in 2008 and 2009. In 2008, Vietnam Navy Senior Colonel Nguyen Van Kiem explained that “Vietnam has never participated in joint training with any other country” and his delegation had joined as observers “because we are interested in exploring the possibility of bilateral training, and we may participate in a future CARAT”.<sup>71</sup>

CARAT 2011 began in May 2011 with the arrival of a US Navy task group in Sattahip, Thailand. New exercise areas added for 2011 include unmanned aerial vehicle operations, advanced boarding

procedures and expanded anti-submarine warfare. Perhaps more notably, in 2011, Bangladesh joined the CARAT series for the first time. Describing CARAT 2011, Captain Dave Welch, Commander of the US Task Group 73, stated, “Relationships are crucial in Southeast Asia, and CARAT provides an exceptional venue to enhance relationships in this vital region. We work side by side with our Southeast Asian partners to tailor each CARAT program. As we plan and execute each series, we promote security and stability, discuss shared concerns and hone our professional skills.”<sup>72</sup>

Other maritime training milestones reflect the way in which partnerships can evolve to reach the highest levels of interoperability. Under the *Peace Triton* programme, the US Navy provided training to the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) and the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) personnel in maritime helicopter operations. Utilizing the US-built S-70 helicopter, the US Navy assisted with integrating these new aircraft into the Singaporean fleet.<sup>73</sup> *Peace Triton* culminated in a one-week bilateral certification exercise near San Diego, California that included RSN helicopters, *RSS Stalwart*, and five ships, one submarine, two maritime patrol aircraft and six helicopters from the US Navy.<sup>74</sup>

### **Strengthening Regional Architectures to Protect Sea Lanes**

Another element of US strategy is to work with partners to strengthen regional cooperation via multinational organizations in the belief that they will encourage the establishment of regional security communities conducive to promoting stability. This support for the strengthening of multinational organizations does not reflect any reduction in US military commitment to its allies. Indeed, US alliances such as those with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia continue to underpin regional security and provide the foundations upon which to strengthen cooperative architectures. Describing this commitment in his address to the 2011 Shangri-La Dialogue, Secretary Gates stated, “Although bolstering our bilateral relationships in the region has been a key priority in the Asia-Pacific area, the United States has also made a major commitment to help foster new multilateral cooperation.”<sup>75</sup> Given the challenges inherent in these vast waters, such multilateral cooperation is particularly important to sea lane security. As the US Pacific Fleet Commander, Admiral Patrick Walsh wrote, “It is simply not practicable or possible for one country to resource the complete range of operations in an area

as wide and as expansive as the oceans and seas of the world, or maritime commons. International maritime symposiums and multi-national engagement on the high seas are critical to ensuring security, stability, and prosperity.”<sup>76</sup>

Several regional organizations stand out as particularly noteworthy with regard to the promotion of regional sea lane security. For example, the United States participates in the maritime security dialogues sponsored by the ASEAN Regional Forum. Secretary Gates attended the first ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus in October 2010 where maritime security was a major topic of discussion and he has since stated his optimism that this body is making progress on this agenda item.<sup>77</sup> At the Navy-to-Navy level, United States leaders have described the Western Pacific Naval Symposium as an important vehicle for building regional cooperation and enhancing security.<sup>78</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The United States is a resident power in the Indo-Pacific and the free flow of commerce to, from, and within that region is vital to the prosperity of Asia, the United States and the world. Therefore, the United States has clearly established its commitment to sustaining safe and secure sea lanes open to all. Unfortunately free commerce on these waters can be threatened by actions of both state and non-state actors. As a result, the United States appears committed to reinvigorating its capabilities in Asia. It is doing so by simultaneously strengthening its regional posture and by enhancing its maritime partnerships. Posture strengthening efforts include both the deployment of more capable forces to more US bases in Guam and Japan, and dialogue with partners to identify opportunities to expand America’s presence in South and Southeast Asia. Central to the effort to invigorate maritime relationships in the region are US initiatives to build trust, capacity and interoperability with a growing number of partners. At the same time, US strategy recognizes that just as it is not possible for one country to provide security over such vast waters, it is also inefficient and impractical to entirely rely upon bilateral relationships to perform that mission. Therefore, it is not unusual that an important element of this strategy is focused on building the cooperative security architecture needed to ensure the safety and security of Indo-Pacific sea lanes.

## NOTES

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