

## **The United States Rebalance to Asia: How Will It Change America's Defense Strategy in the Region?**

*An Open Forum with*

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### **Introduction**

As what many refer to as a rebalance to the region, the United States has exhibited a considerable interest in shifting its focus to the Asia-Pacific. This interest is evident by the recent increase of involvement by the United States mostly in the field of military with some countries in the Asia-Pacific, including Australia, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

This notion of the United States rebalance in the Asia-Pacific raises an essential question of how it will impact the relations between the United States with all countries in the Asia-Pacific region. How will this increased engagement specifically benefit Indonesia as one of the emerging and influential countries in the region?

On September 11, 2012, USINDO hosted an Open Forum with Lt. Gen. Daniel P. Leaf, Director of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS). Lt. Gen. Leaf presented his views on the explanation behind this shift and the positive impacts that it brings to the region and Indonesia.

This brief is USINDO's summary of his talk.

### **Behind the Shift: Preserving Regional Stability and Targeting the Market**

The United States rebalance in the Asia-Pacific incorporates wide-ranging interests and concerns of global security, regional stability, economy, and democracy. The United States rebalance to the Asia-Pacific is widely misunderstood as a framework of containment toward China. It is also narrowly defined as focusing only on the enhancement of military capacity. Military should be understood simply as an instrument to strengthen the capability and commitment to achieve broader concerns. To fully understand the impact that the United States rebalance brings to the region, it is therefore essential to further comprehend the actual reasons behind it. There are basically two main reasons behind this rebalance.

The first reason is to preserve the regional stability and prevent any possible tensions among nations in the Asia-Pacific. This goal in preserving the stability is substantially why it is called 'rebalance' as in rebalancing the growing tensions in the region. The most recent and prominent tension is the dispute over the South China Sea where China is at odds with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. This dispute over the South China Sea is then how the increased military presence is interpreted as a containment to curtail China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific.

To clear this misperception, it is highly important to emphasize that the United States rebalance is not about containing China. There is however an element of "containment" which is a part of the broader good. This logic suggests that the United States would increase its capacity in the Asia-Pacific to contain any possible violence that comes from the competition between the United States and China because it would be destructive for the stability and economy of the region and the world at large.

The second reason for this rebalance is to increase economic engagements with the emerging and attractive markets in the Asia-Pacific. The shift in the focus of the United States extends more broadly beyond the government to industry. The Asian market is perceived as the best market with a very promising prospect for a broad range of industries in the United States, including the defense industry. The United States believes that more intensified economic relations with the Asia-Pacific nations will bring mutual benefits for all parties involved, not only in an economic sense but also in a diplomatic sense.

### **Sustaining the Rebalance: The Significance of Indonesia in the Asia-Pacific Region**

The future of the world is currently set in the Asia-Pacific region. It is not about the risks or threats, but more importantly about the opportunity for the Asia-Pacific to set the standard of conduct in the area of development. In that regard, Indonesia is of special importance.

Economic relations between Indonesia and the United States started in the 7th century and have continued to progress ever since. In addition to economic importance, Indonesia has also become a leading nation when it comes to democracy and soft power in the Asia-Pacific. It sets the standard in responding to natural disasters of extraordinary magnitude and provides stoic leadership in the Association of South East Asia Nations (ASEAN). Indonesia's presence in the Asia-Pacific is still extremely important even without the mention of China and the United States. Due to its importance in the region, the United States would thus still interact with Indonesia notwithstanding the absence of tensions involving China.

Responding to this importance, the United States strongly believes that Indonesia will play a key role to help sustain the United States rebalance in the Asia-Pacific and promote peace, stability, and democracy. The United States thus spends a lot of effort to engage with Indonesia. As a notable example, the United States Pacific Command focuses dynamic energy into activity with Indonesia. Some of the activities were initially limited to disaster relief such as for earthquake, tsunami, and volcanic activity, but now it has gradually evolved to encompass all facets of energy cooperation.

### **The Impact to United States Rebalance for the Asia-Pacific**

The major shifting of U.S. interests and engagement in the Asia-Pacific is not important unless it affects some change. And the change has to be for the better, not only for the United States but also for the region.

U.S. focus is intended and should be intended to promote world peace, regional stability, and mutually beneficial economic relations for all nations. Peaceful use of military power is admittedly significant and inevitable to attain and maintain these impacts. In short, balance of power is a healthy thing when it is in fact a balance among nations that act responsibly and adhere to the rule of law.

In that regard, the United States rebalance has facilitated positive impacts in the form of greater interaction, greater understanding, and more collaboration in the region. The more the United States has sustained efforts in the region, the more it will understand the considerations, concerns, and objectives of nations like Indonesia and China. Subsequently, the United States will be able to play a positive role and contribute in the efforts to build peace, stability, and security in the Asia-Pacific.

In the end, the United States believes that its rebalance in the region should have a higher purpose than just a focus on defense strategy. This higher purpose must be a more stable and secure the Asia-Pacific region that serves the interest of the United States and all nations in the region in a positive way. And it is also important to note that the realization of this purpose depends on the commitment and participation of all nations in the region to reach and achieve it.

## Questions and Answers

***Q: Considering that global warming has now become a global security issue, what contributions has the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) made particularly on the impact of climate change?***

Climate change is an important component of our courses at APCSS. Although we do not study it specifically, we have a lot of experts and fellows who are really knowledgeable about this. So what we give and convey during the courses is a good understanding on the impact of climate change throughout the region from wide ranging perspectives of the United States, the region, and also the world. We incorporate climate change education in our courses and we learn a great deal from our fellows and colleagues from this region who are also the majority of attendees in our courses.

***Q: What is your perspective on Indonesian security strategy after the reform took place?***

From what I have seen and observed through APCSS, I think Indonesia has embarked progressively on its journey to improve its democracy and security. The strategy has and still continues to evolve. I also would like to emphasize the importance of a security strategy that does not only focus on risks and threats, but also abundant opportunities to build understanding with our neighboring countries and promote peace and stability worldwide.

***Q: You mentioned that the goal of the United States policy is to ensure peace and stability in the region. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the gesture creates a totally different reaction in the region. The recent development highlights from the United States ironically initiate more aggressive actions from the Philippines in the case of the South China Sea. My question is how do you think the United States and Indonesia can eliminate the potential misperception that the presence of the United States is to bring peace and stability, and not as a threat to the region? Because just like you mentioned, the worst threat is when the competition between United States and China reaches maturity and all countries in the region are forced to take side.***

Thank you for the question and please allow me to correct the statement. The worst case is not when the competition between China and the United States reaches maturity, but instead, when it reaches immaturity. I think that it is only natural that the initial response would be turbulent with regard to the South China Sea. But that does not make it unimportant. It certainly takes time to ensure that our presence has a positive effect. I can offer a reassurance that our rebalance has a peaceful and beneficial purpose both for the United States and also the region. I am personally optimistic that we can all reap positive impacts.

***Q: Can you provide us any information regarding the success of cooperation between the United States Department of Defense and the Indonesian Department of Defense to help Indonesia develop and improve its defense strategy?***

To answer this question, I will reemphasize my previous statement that Indonesia has thoughtfully and seriously embarked on a national security journey. Our collaboration with Indonesia, especially through ACPSS, has been very productive and there is still work to do. However I am afraid I cannot provide you a more detailed explanation because it is certainly still ongoing.

***Q: As the director of an institution that focuses on the education of Indonesian military professionals, what is your expectation on the improvement of Indonesian security and how do you see its military professionalism in the next ten years?***

On the question of our expectation on security improvement in Indonesia and in the region, we have to honestly say that it will take time for the United States to define and understand what the objective should be. On the second question of military professionalism in Indonesia, we cannot really foresee yet how it will evolve for the next ten years. But what we will keep doing is share the tremendous experiences, exchange perspectives, and build strong ties and understanding with all countries in the region. As an example of this, in October of this year we will hold a workshop about the United States rebalance that brings together regional participants from the Asia-Pacific and officials from Washington, DC to expand the understanding and ties in the area of defense.

***Q: According to your assessment, what soft powers does Indonesia possess to shape the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific, especially to overcome the tension between China and other nations in the South China Sea?***

I believe that Indonesia has three prominent soft powers that it can offer in the region. The first is humanitarian assistance and disaster response, which is highly essential for the region. Furthermore, Indonesia can also offer conflict resolution as it has played a very significant role in resolving conflicts and shown ability, skill, and credibility in this regard. Last but not least is its democracy. Indonesia can be both a leader and a model of democracy in the region because of its journey to embrace democracy, while other countries in the region are still starting to adopt it.

***Q: I recently talked to some investors in Los Angeles who are all concerned about the security issues in Indonesia. How would the security partnership between Indonesia and the United States help to resolve this concern?***

Before responding to this question, I would like to emphasize that we also have domestic challenges in security too. What I and APCSS personally do in this regard is to incorporate a practical dimension into our courses so it does not only focus on the academic or intellectual values. In our defense and security cooperation course, for example, the education model also integrates practical application especially on the specific subjects of intergovernmental cooperation within agencies that will sharpen the negotiation skills of Indonesian professionals.