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Why the US is back in Asia for keeps

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Mark Valencia, For The Straits Times

According to United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech on Jan 12, 'the US is back in Asia... to stay'.

Given this policy declaration, it is useful to review and update US maritime security priorities in Asia. First and foremost for the US is keeping critical military and commercial sea lanes open, safe and secure for its vessels and those of its friends and allies. Such sea lanes include strategic straits like the Malacca and Singapore straits, and certain Indonesian straits like Makassar and Ombai-Wetar, as well as the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Strait in North-east Asia.

The other side of this coin - not often mentioned by US government spokesmen - is the US strategy to deny use of these straits to enemies in times of conflict. Such potential enemies include China, which claims much of the East China and South China Seas in various ways for various purposes.

This 'strategic denial' imperative underlies much of US policy in South-east Asia. To advance its interests, the US government has offered assistance to the Malacca Strait countries, and proposed the Regional Maritime Security Initiative and its follow-on, the Maritime Domain Awareness programme.

Singapore has always supported direct US involvement in securing the Malacca and Singapore Straits. But Malaysia and Indonesia have been wary of such direct foreign involvement.

So far, there are no US naval assets based in the Malacca Strait. But of course its warships already frequent the area and 'show the flag' by calling at Singapore and Port Klang in Malaysia, and by transiting the Strait.

Moreover, since Sept 11, 2001, the US has been concerned with the possibility of maritime 'terrorism' in South-east Asia, and its intelligence agencies work closely with those of its allies and friends to prevent attacks on its vessels and assets in their ports and waters.

As part and parcel of this US interest in securing these sea lanes, it undertakes military surveys and surveillance of the region, including Chinese waters and its naval assets. As China expands its interests and capabilities seaward, these interests clash, producing such incidents as the downing of the US EP-3 in April 2001, the September 2008 US Bowditch/Chinese destroyer confrontation in the Yellow Sea and, more recently, the dangerous manoeuvres in March last year between the US Impeccable and Chinese vessels.

Another US maritime security priority in Asia - which can, given the right circumstances, supersede the first - is to constrain shipments of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), their components and delivery systems. This is a global struggle, but it focuses on East and Southeast Asia because a main concern is the transfer of WMD components from North Korea to the Middle East, especially Iran, and between Pakistan and North Korea. What was transferred in the past probably moved mainly by sea. But now movement by air is probably the main means of transfer.

Nevertheless the seaborne option remains and, if this could be closed off, then the US could concentrate on air and land routes. But Malaysia and Indonesia have declined to participate in the Proliferation Security Initiative the US

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created to prevent the transport of WMD.

A subsidiary US maritime security priority is to ensure the safety of US companies and their personnel in their efforts to explore for and exploit offshore oil in the region. In early 2008, US giant ExxonMobil quit a major offshore concession in the South China Sea granted to it by Vietnam because of veiled threats from China, which also claimed the area. There are many other disputed areas with petroleum potential that are of interest to US companies in the South China and East China Seas.

As Mrs Clinton said, the US is 'back to stay'. But China never really left, and is bent on reclaiming its sphere of influence and areas that it considers stolen from it by colonial powers and that are now held by their seceding colonies.

It seems inevitable that warships, submarines and military aircraft of the two will increasingly confront each other in and over the South and East China Seas. Needed urgently is at least an Incidents at Sea Agreement, if not an informal set of agreed guidelines regarding the operations of US military vessels and aircraft in China's claimed waters. Otherwise, the seas of East Asia may become increasingly dangerous for all concerned - both politically and otherwise.

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