Should Washington rearm Southeast Asia against China?

There is no single problem with United States President Donald Trump's two-week-old presidency. There are plenty.

Not least of which has been how his advisors' ideologically distorted worldviews drive United States foreign policy. Think of the recent chaotic immigration policies or the cavalier alliance management moves.

The melee notwithstanding, both the Republican-controlled House and Senate as well as the White House seem to agree that former president Barack Obama's “rebalance” to Asia has emboldened China and damaged American interests. In response, they believe, the US should beef up its military presence and re-arm its partners and allies to push back against China.

Most recently, Senator John McCain, head of the Senate's Armed Services Committee, proposed US$7.5 billion of new funding for US forces and their Asian counterparts. The funds would go to new military construction, such as runways in Australia and the Philippines, munitions procurement and capacity building of and exercises with allies and partners. Reuters quoted a Trump official arguing that the proposal was “very much in general alignment with the administration’s goals in the region.”

This proposal might be an expanded version of Obama's Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative launched by then defense secretary Carter in 2015 (although it was suggested by McCain). This initiative committed roughly $425 million over five years to strengthen the maritime capabilities of the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Now that the US has pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Trump's penchant for bilateralism is likely to marginalize ASEAN, rearming regional countries to deter or contain China could be the dominant engagement policy.

For Southeast Asia, however, a rearmament strategy is flawed for two reasons.

First, there is no empirical evidence that Southeast Asia has been militarily balancing against China to begin with, nor is it capable of doing so — notwithstanding the hype over the region's recent procurement of new air and naval capabilities (e.g. submarines).

According to IHS Jane's data, the top-seven largest defense spenders in Southeast Asia disbursed roughly 78 percent of their budgets between 2012 and 2016 on routine expenditure: personnel as well as operations and maintenance. When it comes new capability development — seen through defense research and development as well as procurement — they only spent about 19 percent.

Further, despite the upward procurement projections for Indonesia ($2.1 billion), Singapore ($1.9 billion) and Vietnam ($1.2 billion) by 2021, their real value is minuscule compared to what Japan, India, or South Korea spend on their weaponry. Bear in mind that there is also a growing need in Southeast Asia to replace aging platforms — most of them are between 35 and 55 years old — to meet day-to-day operational demands.

Historically, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data also shows that for much of the post-Cold War era, when China's military rise and the South China Sea loomed large, regional arms imports remained below their Cold War levels. Only Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore imported more arms after the Cold War.

Regional countries' weapon suppliers have barely changed since the 1980s as well, although the relative budget share of some suppliers fluctuates.

By 1950 and 2015, SIPRI data show that Southeast Asian countries consistently had 19 different arms suppliers on average; ranging from a low nine for Laos to a high 32 for Indonesia. Put differently, each country has had the same set and number of weapons suppliers for decades, regardless of the changes in the strategic environment.

These patterns, taken as a whole, point to a lack of military options for Southeast Asia to balance China. This is why the region prefers diplomatic engagement tools, whether through ASEAN or strategic partnerships with the US or other regional powers (what scholars have dubbed “soft” or “institutional” balancing).

Second, as technological rearmament cannot easily reverse the structural constraints surrounding Southeast Asia's defense spending and import dependence, Washington should not focus on providing more defense material.

Instead, the US should focus on improving the professional quality and human capital of Southeast Asia's armed forces. After all, IHS Jane's data show that the largest suppliers for decades, regardless of the changes in the strategic environment.

The views expressed are his own.