

The conference on
International Cooperation in the War Against Terrorism
in the Asia-Pacific
with a Special Emphasis on the Malacca Strait

Mississippi State University
March 8-9, 2006

Hosted by
Center for International Security and Strategic Studies, MSU
In partnership with
Center for US-Japan Studies and Cooperation, Vanderbilt University
Asian Security Forum, Tokyo

Evaluation Report

This conference addressed an important policy issue and one that has not received adequate attention, particularly in the United States. Southeast Asia is viewed by many as the second most important arena in the struggle against terrorism. About half of global trade and roughly two-thirds of East Asia's energy imports pass through the Malacca Strait. As such any terrorist attack or even threat of attack affecting the strait could have a major impact on world trade and the economies of East Asia.

The littoral states have long believed that the security of the Malacca Strait is their sovereign responsibility. The user states, including Japan and the United States, have resources that could be used to address terrorist threats and much at stake in the security of the strait. This conference was designed to bring together experts from the countries in Southeast Asia most affected by terrorism and from a group of concerned user states – the US, Japan and Australia – three countries that have developed in recent years a Trilateral Security Dialogue (TSD).

The conference provided a neutral environment in which mutual confidence could develop and in which these experts could deepen their understanding of each other's perspectives. The goals of the conference's host organizations were to encourage the littoral states to be more accepting of assistance offered by user states and to shape recommendations on how user states could offer assistance in a manner likely to be accepted.

The conference organizers succeeded in attracting to Mississippi State University an outstanding group of leading international experts on these issues from both the ASEAN and user (TSD) countries. This success was only possible because of the extensive network of contacts of Dr. Janos Radvanyi of MSU and Dr. James Auer of Vanderbilt. Without their energy, reputations and leadership this talent could not have been assembled.

Recognizing the sensitivities of the subject, the organizers strove to create an environment that would facilitate frank but constructive dialogue. Their careful selection of participants, the tone they established at the start and their design of the conference panels and social events produced a remarkably open and productive two days of discussion and exchange.

The proof of their success can be seen in the Recommendations adopted at the final session of the conference. These recommendations are practical yet accurately reflect the concerns, interests and resources of different parties. As such it is important that these recommendations be given wide dissemination. The organizers intend to post the conference papers and the recommendations on their website. The organizers also plan to use their informal networks to bring the recommendations to the attention of their respective governments. Doing this will be important.

The conference also provided a vehicle for enriching the international affairs offerings of MSU. MSU faculty participated in the conference and members of the History Department attended panel discussions. History Department students were encouraged to attend and had an opportunity to interact with conference participants.

In looking to the future, the conference participants not unexpectedly recommended holding a follow-up conference. It is quite certain that the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia and the Malacca Strait will remain and warrant further attention. If a follow-on conference is held two participation issues should be addressed. First, India and China should be included. Their omission was noted, and various participants made valid cases for including both, which I strongly endorse. Second, if a future conference includes a focus on the Malacca Strait, representatives from the International Maritime Organization or its Bureau should be invited to reflect the interests of private sector shippers. The sponsors invited IMO representatives, but in the end they did not attend.

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