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The Impact of Washington “Returning to Asia” Strategy on East Asia: the Strategic Choices for Beijing, Tokyo and Moscow

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Abstract

At the end of 2011, Washington proclaimed, in high-profile, its “Returning to Asia” strategy. Subsequently, US launched a series of policy to fulfill this strategy: promoting TPP in APEC summit and redeploying the military arrangement in West Pacific. Washington’s new strategy is definitely to cast impact on East Asia and dramatically alter the present situation in this area. Accordingly, regional powers, such as China, Japan and Russia, will adjust their strategy to the new situation and make their own strategic choices.

Keywords: Returning to Asia, Strategy, East Asia

For the first ten years after the end of the Cold War, the US had been engaged in NATO’s eastward expansion, which is to stabilize the countries originally manipulated by the former Soviet Union. By the end of last century, Washington had already started to shift its focus to Asia-Pacific. However, “9.11” attack dramatically altered the agenda of Uncle Sam’s foreign policy. It took Washington 10 years to fight against terrorists around the globe. With the end of two major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration made up its mind to reinvest time and energy in Asia-Pacific, as the State Secretary, Hillary Clinton claimed, “one of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment -- diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise -- in the Asia-Pacific region.”²

1. Washington’s “Returning to Asia” strategy

The so-called “returning to Asia” strategy means that the United States seeks to establish, maintain and reinforce its leading status in Asia again. There are two pillars for Washington’s “Returning to Asia” strategy, one is the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) in APEC framework, the other is redeployment of its military presence in west Pacific.

TPP is a brand new thing, which was initiated in 2000 by Brunei, Singapore, New Zealand and Chile, for the sake of increasing their export to US. It was not until 2009 when Washington had made its decision to join in this organization that TPP had got more attention. In the APEC summit 2011, altogether there are 9 countries that signed the Framework Agreement, and Japan, Canada and Mexico showed their willingness to the negotiations. US’ favor on TPP rests on three reasons: firstly, TPP would be conducive to US’ goal of doubling its export in five years, which had been proposed by Obama in his election campaign. And whether the task could be fulfilled would directly cast the impact on his running for reelection. Secondly,

² Hillary Clinton, America’s Pacific Century, Foreign Policy, Nov. 2011.

TPP could be an effective makeup for the stagnation of Doha Development Agenda, in which US could launch some breakthrough and set up some new rules or regulations for multilateral trade. Thirdly, with the rapid development in the East Asia, the further unfold of economic integration, and Beijing's growing clout in this region, Washington was lingering in the fear of being isolated. US hope, through TPP, to play a leading role in Asia-Pacific again. However, it is still too early to evaluate the effect of TPP, since multilateral trade negotiation would always take time and it would arouse more collision as the talk goes deeper.

In January of 2012, the White House announced Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense, which elaborated its new military strategy.³ Washington proclaimed that though US had to reduce its overall capacity, its dominance in security would still be maintained through relocation of its armed forces. US military strength in Asia-Pacific would be enhanced, while that in Europe, Africa and Middle East be cut down. Just before and after the announcement of this government document, US initiated and attended plenty of military exercises with many nations in Asia-Pacific to declare the return of Washington's military power, which makes the complex situation in East Asia more complicated.

In the near future, it is undoubted that Washington would input more in Asia-pacific. How the other powers in this region, such as China, Japan and Russia, react to US' new strategy, and what kind of strategic choices Beijing, Tokyo and Moscow would make?

2. Strategic Choices for China, Japan and Russia

2.1 Beijing

Though the economic interdependence goes deeper between Washington and Beijing, the frictions and conflicts between the two grow in quantity proportionally. Just after China surpassed Japan as the second largest economy, US proclaimed in high-profile its "Returning to Asia" strategy. Subsequently, President Obama promoted TPP in APEC summit, and military exercises initiated or attended by US in Asia-Pacific had been launched one after another. It seems that another "Cold War" is approaching. What would be Beijing's response?

First, what kind of attitudes may China take to TPP? Even though it seems that the qualification for TPP shuts China out, and TPP poses a challenge to the FTA (Free Trade Area) proposed by China and ASEAN, whether it could be accepted by ASEAN is still unknown. Firstly, US would definitely manage to play a leading role in TPP. But it is reluctant for ASEAN to accept any kind of FTA dominated either by US or by China. ASEAN would still try to maintain its leadership in economic integration in East Asia. As the negotiation goes deeper, the gap about the dissent in leadership would be wider. Secondly, China with its biggest market and potential import capability would be more attractive than US. It will be a hard decision for ASEAN to appease US by sacrificing their trade benefit with China, since now their economy relies heavily on the trade with China. In 2011, the trade volume between ASEAN and China has reached \$ 350 billion which ranks the third place just after that of Sino-US and Sino-Europe. Thirdly, the interdependency of Korea on China has been enhanced while that on US has been lessened with each passing year. In 1990, the interdependency of Korean economy on US is 27%, which has been downgraded to 9.3% in 2010;

³ The White House. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities For 21st Century Defense*. Jan 3rd, 2012.

comparatively, the interdependency of Korean economy on China has upgraded from 2.9% to 20.4% in these 20 years. Therefore, In the long run, a regional organization of economic integration without China would be impossible. Neither could US isolate China out of TPP for a long time, nor would other nations allow such thing to happen. What China should react now is to be open to TPP, comprehend its regulations, research and analyze its discrimination policy for later use, and at the same time, continue advancing FTA with ASEAN, and with Japan and Korea.

The South China Sea would be another hot spot for Washington's new strategy. With Washington involved in, the South China Sea disputes has become more complicated. Sometimes US false signals give nations illusion that US was to be their sides if the clashes with China occur. US hope to distract China's rapid development through supporting the trouble-makers in China's neighborhood, meanwhile carefully manage to prevent the military conflict in this region. But the policy taken by Washington can be quite dangerous, since its alliance may misjudge its strategy and directly drag US into the conflict with China. How can Beijing cope with Washington's dual character? On the one hand, Beijing should declare clearly to Washington that China would not bargain with its territories. On the other hand, when conflicts really happen, China should be more cautious about resort to force. Beijing should confine the conflicts in a small scope and avoid escalating into full-blown war. It would be a good option to use trade leverage to make disputing nations realize that what they get from the South China Sea would be much less than the loss of trade with China.

To Japan, Beijing ought to be tougher and firmer than before to retort Tokyo's aggression. If conflicts are really unavoidable, China should be ready to using force to counterattack, for showing weakness would be taken advantage by Japan's Right-wing, which may result in catastrophic consequence. China supplanting Japan as the second largest economy and relative lapse of US Empire, has already given the Right-wing an excuse for rearmament. In the foreseeable future, Tokyo may tend to take more offensive policy to probe Beijing's tolerance for its militarization. China should clearly express its zero-tolerance about Japan's rearmament and be ready to take actions accordingly. Besides, for Korean Peninsula issue, Washington and Beijing need to be more cooperative, and both Pyongyang and Seoul are to be warned to regulate their actions, in order to avoid deterioration of the situation in East Asia.

Finally, Beijing needs to deepen the cooperation with the other member states of SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), for up to now, it is the only organization Beijing could rely on to confront the conceivable more severe containing strategy from Washington. In SCO summit 2012, SCO approved its first development plan — SCO Mid-Term Development Strategy Plan, which redefined the core interests of members in the Middle Asia and emphasized the uniformity on the issues related to the overall strategy. Now SCO has been indispensable for the peace and development of Middle East and casted strategic effects on Chinese national security.

2.2 Tokyo

US-Japan alliance is the cornerstone for US Asian Policy. Since Yoshihiko Noda came to power, he made great efforts to reinforce the alliance between the two countries and totally tilted to US. In April, 2012, Yoshihiko Noda launched his first official visit to US to indicate the intimacy between the two allies. President Obama and Secretary Clinton expressed, one after another, that Japan-US alliance is the most

important partnership in East Asia. Since Diaoyu Island collision incident, Japan and US feel that China more and more tends to take a tougher stance in disputes. Tokyo expects Washington to contain rising China, and meanwhile, US needs Japan to continue functioning as a balance to China.

Besides, Japan plays a supporting role for US involvement in the South China Sea issue and wish to keep China at bay. Japan discussed more cooperation with Philippine and backed Philippine in the disputes with both the announcement and military equipments. Noda implied more than once, that Philippine and Japan has shared value and strategic interests, and balancing China's influence would be the most significant goal for the two countries deepening cooperation. Recently, Tokyo has established strategic partnership with Manila. In addition, Noda proposes a marine cooperation mechanism — Marine Forum of East Asia, composed by officials and scholars of Southeast Asia nations, which maps out two themes: one is how to guarantee the freedom of navigation; the other is how to implement international laws. Obviously, the forum is aiming at rising China, and Japan means to establish such a multilateral cooperative framework with ASEAN to contain China in South China Sea. In the following years, with the implicit support from the White House, Japan would get more involved in and arouse more troubles for the South China Sea disputes.

India is another country Japan wish to draw to its side to balance China. First, Indian Ocean has been crowned as modern-day Silk Road, the only way which must be passed for energy transportation from Middle East and Africa to East Asia. As Beijing has already built up ports along Indian Ocean in Myanmar, Both Tokyo and New Delhi felt urgent to find partners in containing ever-growing influence of China in Indian Ocean. On Dec. 19, 2011, Japan, US and India held the first trilateral dialogue, in which the three parties probed into, besides marine security, humanitarian assistance and anti-terrorism, the issues related to China. On the same day, after meeting Hilary, Koichiro Genba, Japanese foreign minister, indicated that Japan and US was intensifying their strategic partnership with India. Even Wall Street Daily pointed out, China is the unspoken target of the cooperation among three parties.

Economically, Japan shows its willingness to participate in TPP negotiations. Tokyo's interest in TPP roots in its economic downturn. Japan's international competitiveness and per capital GDP has descended from the world No.1 and No.2 to No.27 and No. 19 respectively. Tokyo hopes, through TPP, to stimulate economy by increasing export, and at the same time, to get some edges in its trade with China, which may pressure China to import more rice and export more rare earths. However, whether Japan could join in TPP is still in question. Yoshihiko Noda has already confronted the criticism from some Japan lawmakers for the hastiness. Since most of the member states of TPP are small economies, which can't provide market for Japanese industrial products, while Japanese agriculture, heavily relying upon high-tariff protection, would be severely struck by US, if Tokyo had to lower the tariff according to the TPP regulation.

Militarily, Japan has realized that the umbrella from US may not ensure its security, as China's military power grows and the gap between US and China narrows. Once US were kicked out of East Asia, Japan would be sieged by Russia, China and North Korea, the nations with nuclear weapons. Therefore, Tokyo decides to strengthen its self-defense capabilities. Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines 2010 has the tendency to do away with the "Basic Defense Force" approach that has characterized Japanese defense

thinking before.⁴ Japan even thinks about reexamining Three Principles on Arms Exports and involving itself in developing and producing arms with other countries. However, rearmament of Japan could be quite dangerous, which would arouse its neighbor's worry about revival of militarism which had brought the Asians great bitterness and misery in the Second World War.

2.3 Moscow

With the unveiled US new strategy, Moscow also shifted its focus to the East. Sergei Lavrov, the head of Russian National Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee, advocated and backed up "Look East" policy just after US putting forward "returning to Asia" strategy. He claimed that it is time for Russia to shift its focus to Asia and Russia is also a Pacific power. Sergei Razov, Russian Ambassador to China, also underlined the enhancement of Russian economic strength in Asia-Pacific as one of the strategic priorities for Moscow. The Kremlin expects to gear up the development of Russian Far East area with the help of the economic boost in Asia-Pacific. He regards the relations between Russia and US in APEC as competitive rather than cooperative.

In February, Putin, then Russian Prime Minister pointed out, in his diplomatic document Russia and the changing world, that the key for Russian foreign policy is to promote the cooperation among BRICS. For rejuvenation and security of Russia, Moscow must attach more importance to the status and role of Asia and have scaled up its attention to and input in Asia. For implementation of Russian "Look East" Strategy, the Putin administration set up a new government agency --the Ministry for the Development of Far East, which functions differently from other ministries, since it only administers the issues and formulates policies for Far East, which implies that the development of Far East has been upgraded to the height of the national strategy.

The reelection of Putin as the President indicates that Kremlin would present tougher response to Washington's European Policy, and Asia-Pacific may function as another chip for the two countries' game in Europe. His recent declination to G8 in Camp David, but presence in SCO in Beijing, has clearly revealed that the new President's may prefer closer relations with its Asia neighbor rather than appeasing the only superpower.

Putin refuted the China Threat Theory and asserted that China does not strive for hegemony, but functions as a constructive power both in regional and global issues. Putin also emphasized that the prosperity and stability in China is crucial to development of Russia, and the prospects for cooperation between the two states are broad and unlimited. Russia needs a prosperous and stable China, and China needs a powerful and successful Russia. Razov has also reiterated the importance for strengthening the Asia-Pacific regional security cooperation between China and Russia. He pointed out that both Moscow and Beijing would engage more in the peace and security of this area. Razov criticized that it is unwise and ineffective that some nation attempted to establish an exclusive military alliance and plan plenty of joint military exercises, which would ruin rather than promote the peace and development in Asia-Pacific. In the predictable future, based on common interest and cooperation in SCO, Moscow and Beijing would remain a closer

⁴ Axel Berkofsky. Japanese Defense and Security Policy and the "National Defense Program Guidelines" (NDPG): Radical Changes or Business as Usual? *ISPI*. No.45. Feb., 2012

near-alliance to confront the hegemony of Washington.

Meanwhile, with the Washington's "returning" to Asia and further consolidation of US-Japan alliance, the relation between Tokyo and Moscow may deteriorate. The American administration once said it was sympathetic to Japan's Northern Territories claims. For the exercise of sovereignty, Dmitry Medvedev landed on Kuril Islands (Northern Territories) twice in 2010 and 2012 successively, as President and Prime Minister respectively, which implicates that, on the one hand, Russia would input more on the development of Far East; on the other hand, Moscow would be even tougher in dealing with disputes with Japan, US ally in Asia.

3. Conclusion

Washington's "Returning to Asia" strategy, beyond doubt, will cast profound impact on the peace and development of East Asia. In the coming years, China, Russia, Japan, Korea and ASEAN, to some degree, would adjust its strategy to the new situation accordingly. Though it is impossible for the emergence of another Cold War in this region, it is probably that two blocs may appear: one is the China-Russia alliance on the basis of SCO, the other is the group of US with its Asian allies based on US-Japan alliance.

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