

The U.S. Shift to the Asia-Pacific and its Influence upon the Strategic Environment and International Structure

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From 2011 to 2012, the Obama Administration put significant focus on the centrality of the Asia-Pacific region in its foreign and security policy. In order for the new policy to progress as expected, there are a number of issues that still need to be resolved. Influence on the international strategic environment is also an important concern. Finally, the key which defines the future development of regional cooperation as the "Asia pivot" of the U.S. is the reaction of new governments in each country.

1 Introduction

From 2011 to 2012, the Obama Administration put significant focus on the centrality of the Asia-Pacific region in its foreign and security policy.

In an address to the Australian Parliament in 2011, President Obama reaffirmed that the United States was turning its attention to the vast potential of the Asia-Pacific region; and stated "As a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger role and long-term role in shaping this region and its future."¹

Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also discussed, in an article she contributed to November 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine, that the Administration considers the Asia-Pacific region as vital to U.S. security and wrote the following:

The Asia-Pacific has become a key driver of global politics. Stretching from the Indian subcontinent to then western shores of the Americas, the region spans two oceans -- the Pacific and Indian -- that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy. At a time when the region is building a more mature security and economic architecture to promote stability and prosperity, U.S commitment there is essential. It will help build

¹ Address by President Obama to the Australian Parliament on November 17, 2011.

that architecture and pay dividends for continued American leadership well into this century, just as our post-World War II commitment to building a comprehensive and lasting transatlantic network of institutions and relationships has paid off many times over --- and continues to do so. The time has come for the United States to make similar investments as Pacific power, a strategic course set by President Barack Obama from the outset of his Administration and one that is already yielding benefits.²

According to her article, the Obama Administration's policy toward the Asia-Pacific region consists of at least the following four principles:

- (1) Strengthening and updating bilateral security alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand, which will leverage the U.S. regional presence and enhance its regional leadership at a time of evolving security challenges;
- (2) Building new partnerships with countries including China, India, Indonesia, Singapore, New Zealand, Malaysia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Brunei, and the Pacific Island countries to help solve shared problems;
- (3) Engaging the region's multilateral institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, mindful that the U.S. work with regional institutions supplements and does not supplant the U.S. bilateral ties with those countries;
- (4) Enhancing the U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia and in the Indian Ocean to increase its operational access in these regions.³

With the goal of promoting stability and prosperity across the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions, the United States is endeavoring to build a "responsive, flexible, and effective regional architecture." In addition, the Administration has concerns regarding the unpredictable future of China, which is a rapidly expanding economic and military presence, and the regional environment in which not only traditional security challenges but also non-traditional ones exist. The policy of the Asia-Pacific shift is the result of these considerations.⁴

Furthermore, in early 2012, the Department of Defense (DOD) released a new Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG), stating that the U. S. military will "rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region" and "emphasize our existing alliances" while expanding "our networks of cooper-

2 Clinton, Hillary, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011.

3 In June 2012 at the Shangri-La Dialogue, then-Defense Secretary Panetta also stressed this point, saying "while strengthening our traditional alliances in Northeast Asia and maintaining our presence in Southeast Asia and in the Indian Ocean region."

4 Hillary Clinton wrote in *Foreign Policy Magazine* of November 2011 that "[T]oday, China represents one of the most challenging and consequential bilateral relationships the United States has ever had to manage. This calls for careful, steady, dynamic stewardship, an approach to China on our part that is grounded in reality, focused on results, and true to our principles and interests. We (the U.S. and China) both have much more to gain from cooperation than from conflict. But you cannot build a relationship on aspirations alone. It is up to both of us to more consistently translate positive words into effective cooperation -- and, crucially, to meet our respective global responsibilities and obligations. These are the things that will determine whether our relationship delivers on its potential in the years to come. At the end of the day, there is no handbook for the evolving U.S.-China relationship. But the stakes are much too high for us to fail. As we proceed, we will continue to embed our relationship with China in a broader regional framework of security alliances, economic networks, and social connections."

ation with emerging partners throughout the Asia-Pacific to ensure collective capability and capacity for securing common interests.”⁵

However, in order for the new national defense strategy of the United States to progress as expected, there are a number of issues that still need to be resolved. Unexpected challenges lie ahead in an environment of mounting deficits, domestic economic anxiety, and political tension. The future of U.S. foreign policy in fact seems quite uncertain.

2 Under a fiscal crisis, U.S. posture emphasizes Asia-Pacific Policy

The foremost concern has been the so-called budget sequestration (legislatively defined automatic, forced reductions in spending). The United States faces a serious budget deficit problem and DOD is pursuing ways to trim its budget. In April of 2012, President Obama announced a plan for cutting \$400 billion over the next ten years from national security spending to 2023. This drastic cutback may not only significantly impair U.S. military capabilities but also lead to a decline in the diplomatic leadership of the Obama Administration.

In June 2011, then-Secretary of Defense Gates acknowledged that the questions raised about the sustainability and credibility of U.S. commitments around the world were “serious and legitimate.” He also assured that regardless of its fiscal challenges, the United States remained a Pacific nation inextricably linked with Asia. He stated that this understanding was shared by U.S. leaders and policy makers across the political spectrum. And he argued strongly for sustaining U.S. commitments to allies while maintaining a robust military engagement and deterrence posture across the Pacific Rim.⁶

How can the Obama Administration both strengthen its strategic engagement with the Asia-Pacific region and save on its budget?

The Obama Administration, in the efforts to bolster U.S. strategic engagement in Asia-Pacific region, “will proceed along six key lines of action: strengthening its traditional bilateral security alliances; deepening its working relationships with emerging powers, including with China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.”⁷ Furthermore, the U.S. faces “challenges now to build a web of partnerships and institutions across the Pacific.”⁸

Under the need to drastically cut its own budget and to tackle so many challenges, the United States considers it better to construct an alliance-centered, multi-layered realm of ties to provide long-term engagement with the region while enhancing its power to respond to various security challenges.

In a December 2011 article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, Harvard Professor Stephen M. Walt, taking into account the above trends, commented that “offshore balancing” was a grand

5 U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 5, 2012.

6 The U.S. Secretary of Defense Gates’ Speech at the 10th annual IISS Asia Security Summit (the Shangri-La Security Dialogue), June, 2011

7 Hillary Clinton, *American Pacific Century*, *Foreign Policy*, November, 2011

8 *Ibid.*

strategy whose time had come.⁹ Offshore balancing is a strategy where a great power uses favored regional powers to check the rise of potential hostile powers. It arguably permits a great power to maintain its power without the costs of large military deployments around the world.

Nevertheless, serious reduction in the defense budget will indeed cause a decline in the total warfare capabilities of the United States, thus weakening its deterrent power in the world and also forcing its allies and partners to share defense burdens.

The Obama Administration makes assurances that preclude any possibility of military reduction for the Asia-Pacific region. However, the U.S. military force in the Asia Pacific region will be required to cope with contingencies such as the worsening security situations in Afghanistan or Iraq. In such a case there is no doubt that the U.S. would reduce its presence in the Asia Pacific region.

Therefore, the new security strategy will promote the integration of the security situations of the Middle East, Southwest Asia and East Asia; U.S. alliances and partners of the Asia-Pacific region will be required to share more military costs and obligations than before. In other words, the real intention of Asia-Pacific rebalancing that the U.S. envisions is the unification of the Indian Ocean region and the Asia-Pacific region rather than the retreat from the Middle East and the Southwest Asia. It should be called “the Indo-Pacific strategy” or “Pan-Asia strategy” which is formulated by involving allies of the Asia Pacific region.

In addition to the rationality of U.S. new strategy, its influence upon the international strategic environment is also an important concern.

Current U.S. military power is increasing far more than during the cold war, and the U.S. is fully equipped not only with the ability to deploy forces on a global scale, but also with the ability to carry out a grand strategy. In fact, the gap between the military strength of the U.S. and that of other countries is widening. U.S. military expenditures account for nearly half of the world’s total military spending.¹⁰

However, emphasizing the “pivot to Asia” as a hallmark of the Obama Administration foreign policy platform may give some countries the misleading impression that the United States is retreating from global power to regional power, even though the new strategy seeks an improvement in effectiveness of deploying military resources through military force reorganization.

In Europe, especially for Central or Eastern European countries, a reduction of U.S. military presence means a significant decrease in security. After the end of the Cold War, some of them joined the NATO as means of assuring sovereignty against Russia, but Western powers lack sufficient military force to counter Russia and also have no prior experience in de-

9 According to explanation of Professor Walt in 2005, “offshore balancing is the ideal grand strategy for an era of U.S. primacy. It husbands the power on which U.S. primacy depends and minimizes the fear that U.S. power provokes. By setting clear priorities and emphasizing reliance on regional allies, it reduces the danger of being drawn into unnecessary conflicts and encourages other states to do more to help the United States. Equally important, it takes advantage of America’s favorable geopolitical position and exploits the tendency for regional powers to worry more about each other than about the United States. But it is not a passive strategy, and does not preclude using the full range of U.S. power to advance core American interests.”

10 The U.S. military expenditures amounted to about \$708 billion in 2011, \$651 billion in 2012. This is equal to the military expenditures of the world’s second to fifteenth largest military countries put together. (Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute)

fending them. Instead, Germany before World War II, just like Russia, was the threat and aggressor in the recent past. Therefore, the retreat of American forces could sway intra-regional relations in Europe.

On the other hand, in Asia, the Asia-Pacific rebalancing policy could cause tension with China, because it heightens Chinese anxiety about possible military and political pressure by the U.S. If China takes a hard-line position, the U.S. allies in Asia-Pacific region, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia will be under pressure to expand their military capability and to increase cooperation with the U.S. in the field of security missions.

3 Some concerns about the U.S. rebalancing policy for the Asia-Pacific region

As discussed above, each country has many issues that should be examined in the light of the new American strategy, and particularly in the context of the major 10-year reduction in the U.S. defense budget.

Formulating strategies requires a clear assessment of the strategic environment and the tools available to develop an operative strategy. Thus, there is a common direction of policy choices any Asia-Pacific government should select, because they are defined by the environment and availability of such choices.

In the strategic environment and international structure, some phenomena suggest the possibility of the new era of U.S. supremacy, albeit qualitatively altered from former hegemonic power. In fact, U.S. national power has not declined throughout the decade of the War on Terror, but rather has demonstrated some expansive tendencies.

In terms of military strength, there are some overwhelming gaps between the United States and other countries. Most allies rely on the U.S. for strategic direction, reconnaissance, communications, and logistical systems to complete their military tasks. Some influential allies or partners are receiving outsourced U.S. defense-services benefits, and need to cooperate and work closely together in regional conflicts with the U.S. to carry out their independent and proactive national strategies.

From the perspective of military technology, the U.S. demonstrates overwhelming capability. Furthermore the U.S. conducts persistent testing of new weapons to achieve its future dominance over other countries and prepare for new forms of military attack. It is quite a contrast to Russia, its former rival, which is having difficulty in dealing with its own existing nuclear warheads, and with a lack of technological reserves in conventional weaponry.

Although the greatest remaining problem is the combined case of international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, which remains a threat given the accelerating process of globalization, it is certain that within the present global power system no single state can vie with the U.S.

The future development of U.S.-China relations is also important in forecasting the international security situation. For each country in the Asia Pacific area, the meaning of the U.S. strategy regarding China has important implications on the development of its own security strategy.

In a discussion on “Containment or Engagement of China?” the U.S. government has reit-

erated its stance that it will not seek to contain China, but also will seek more opportunities for cooperation with Beijing. Over the last three years, the United States has tried to build a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive relationship with the next giant in Asia. Launching the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) with China is an example. Also, the U.S. government made S&ED a priority in building a military-to-military engagement with China in order to increase transparency in this bilateral relationship.

Therefore, it is possible that the United States seeks to balance its strategy toward China without containment by realizing strategic the potential of allies/partners and increasing their mutual cooperation through deepening their partnership with the U.S. As the result of such action, the U.S. government may consider that misuse of Chinese power in Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions can be constrained.

Of course, the U.S. “rebalancing” in Asia will be sure to formulate a circle closing in on China by its allies and partners, but it is clearly different from the characteristic strategy toward the USSR during the Cold War, which intended to suppress its growth of influence by isolating the Soviet bloc from the West and the rest of the world.

This direction suggests that either the U.S. does not want confrontation with China or, in some cases, could compromise with China. For its allies or partners, such an attitude on the part of the U.S. may raise strong doubts about its capability and credibility of defense for the Asia-Pacific region, and as for China, it awakens the expectation of a U.S.-China “G-2 domination” that would make decisions over the heads of the smaller member countries.

4 Responses of each country in East Asia

The key that defines the future development of regional cooperation in the “Asia pivot” of the U.S. is the reaction of new governments in each country.

Therein, a series of actions by the Abe Administration of Japan clearly demonstrates Japan’s positive cooperative posture toward the U.S. strategy. One could cite a round of visits to Southeast Asian countries by the Prime Minister Abe, the Deputy Prime Minister Aso and Foreign Minister Kishida; the declaration of a “revival of strong Japan-U.S. alliance”; and participating in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations. Moreover, those actions mean that the Abe Administration is going to help stabilize the regional power balance through strengthening ties with countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Ocean. For the Abe Administration, promoting negotiations with Russia and strengthening relations with India are also important in forming a regional power balance. The Administration, in fact, is stepping up efforts to bolster ties with those leaders.

For China, it is important to exclude the possibility of China containment by the U.S. rebalancing policy and to form counterbalancing measures against it. On the other hand, China will not desire a confrontation with the United States. Thus far, China’s official response to the Obama administration’s rebalancing policy has been relatively muted. However, Chinese policymakers are constrained by an outpouring of support for nationalistic expansionism and anti-American sentiment in China, which the U.S. new strategy has triggered. In order to control such anti-foreign sentiment, the prime task of the Xi-Li Administration must be to keep the economy growing while simultaneously restraining growing discontent over official

corruption, environmental problems, and income inequality. It may convert its attitude to peace promotion rather than confrontation. Under that situation the U.S. can encourage Beijing to abide by global norms and rules and peacefully resolve disputes.

As a U.S. key ally and a Chinese economic partner, South Korea is trying to hedge between the two great powers. The Park Administration should keep a robust alliance with the U.S., while improving the “strategic partnership” with China.

However, it is not easy for South Korea to harmonize the U.S.-Korea alliance with a strengthening of the Korea-China relationship. Of course, if the U.S. and China cooperate more than compete with each other, the Park Administration would maintain its alliance with the U.S. and improve relations with China; otherwise it may face a difficult situation.

It would be possible for the Park Administration to lead other powers, including the U.S. and China, by urging confidence building, creating a regional multilateral security framework in order to improve U.S.-China cooperation, and so forth.

It will become possible to envision a new and viable regional cooperation in East Asia, if each country adopts a strategy aimed at a reconciliation of mutual interests to make the U.S. “rebalancing policy” successful. Given the various motivations considered, the North Korean issue is thought to be a common strategic opportunity to realize near future cooperation in East Asia.
