

US Rebalancing Strategy in Asia Pacific Region

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Introduction

President Obama in his foreign policy statements in an address to the Australian parliament in November 2011 and as recently as in May 23, 2014 address at the US Military Academy at West Point, New York has emphasized US rebalancing in the Asia Pacific region. Obama's emphasis on the Asia Pacific or rebalancing strategy is built on the same grounds, but perhaps on more extensive level, as the policy formulated by George W. Bush.¹ Rebalancing includes efforts to solidify relations with existing regional partners and allies, and negotiating new regional economic arrangements using existing multilateral initiatives like Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), as well as developing new partnerships with emerging powers such as India, Indonesia and Vietnam. Lastly it entails augmenting military capabilities in the southern and western Asia Pacific region primarily through new rotational deployments.²

Key officials of the Obama administration believe that the US was "underweighted in Asia, given the importance of the region, given the economic dynamism in the region, and the strategic dynamics in the region".³ There is no doubt that the rebalancing policy was guided by rising concerns and apprehension over China's growing influence in the Asia Pacific region.

This rebalancing strategy came to light in early months of the second Obama administration, and was largely reflected in a series of senior officials visits to the Asia Pacific in 2009⁴ (including the president, and the secretary of state), and fresh initiatives signaling a higher level of US involvement in multilateral institutions (such as the East Asian Summit or EAS).⁵

These activities were followed up in successive years. Growing US involvement in both South and East China Sea and territorial disagreements between Asian nations gave a boost to this strategy.

Addressing the Australian parliament, on November 17, 2011 president Obama stated that US policy orientation to Asia Pacific is to ensure that “US will play a larger and long term role in shaping [the] region and its future.”⁶ Objectives of the policy were articulated in two major policy documents. The new defense strategic guidelines, released by Obama administration on January 3, 2012⁷ mentioned Asia Pacific region as a key strategic priority and China was identified as potential threat. Second articulation of this strategy was published in defense strategic guidelines on January 17, 2014 which shed some light on its operational procedures.⁸ A conceptual framework was published by the US defense department pertaining to new approach of organizing US military power: the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC).⁹ The concept lays down the mechanisms for a greater degree and more flexible combination of space and cyberspace operations into the conventional and unconventional air-land-sea maneuvers than ever before. This paper first analyzes the rebalancing strategy. Then an attempt is made to examine the rationale behind the rebalancing strategy and its core elements, followed by future outlook of the rebalancing strategy.

Rise of China

Rising power of China is the most significant development in the contemporary international political system. Since economic reforms undertaken by China in 1978, China has grown at a remarkable pace. It is estimated that China will leave behind the US economy by 2019 and this is likely to take China to a historical position of global prominence as it would become world’s largest economy.¹⁰ In 2010, China became the second largest economy after the US overtaking Japan. The US trade deficit with China was \$321.4 billion in 2012, which was higher than that of any other of its trading partners.¹¹

China’s defense spending per year has increased by 175% since 2003.¹² Its defense budget for FY 2013 was \$188 billion, which is the second highest allocation for defense by any country in the world, except the US.¹³ It is understood that Chinese rising technological advancement along with economic growth would enable it to acquire sophisticated modern weapons from abroad, and to also develop them indigenously.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is a proposed regional free trade agreement (FTA) among 12 countries: Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States, and Vietnam. The negotiating countries have expressed their willingness to allow this proposed “living agreement” to include new trade topics and members that are ready to adopt agreement’s high standards. Japan is the most recent country to seek access into the TPP. The Obama administration gave Congress notice of its intent to negotiate with Japan on the TPP on April 24, 2013.¹⁴

Regardless of what China thinks or does and despite its phenomenal progress, the West so far is not ready to adjust the existing world order to accommodate China’s rise. While avoiding direct confrontation the US and other western powers are adopting policies that are designed to make the international system resist China’s rise. The TPP is one such initiative. TPP is similar to NATO which was against Russia because it was a military power. NATO was based on collective defense against Russia.¹⁵ China is more of an economic power therefore there is a trade pact (TPP) against its rising economic clout. Objectives of both NATO and TPP are the same to restrict strategic space for maneuvering by another major power. Goal of these new initiatives is to curtail China’s share in international trade and to set rules and regulations which will force China to follow terms set for it by other powers. The US is endeavoring to extend rebalancing strategy to reinforce its long-standing relations with various states in the periphery of China in order to help these states boost their power and reduce relative power of China in the region.

China too is taking appropriate measures. It is an active member of security oriented Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).¹⁶ It regularly attends annual meetings with its BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa) partners. China and Russia have signed an agreement worth \$ 400 billion for supply of Russian gas to China.¹⁷ BRICS states are also planning to set up a development bank which they claim would work more efficiently than the World Bank in provision of development funds.¹ Beside China has secured port facilities in a number of countries of Indian Ocean.

¹ BRICS Bank was launched on 15 July, 2014, the first day of the 6th BRICS summit held in Fortaleza, Brazil. ed.

Expanding China's Aims

Realists believe that historically rising powers are revisionist powers. They tend to subvert the order established by *status quo* powers. This phenomenon is not restricted to a particular regime type. Samuel P. Huntington has observed that, "The external expansion of the UK and France, Germany and Japan, the Soviet Union and the United States coincided with phases of intense industrialization and economic development."¹⁸

With the change in the strategic position of China, its strategic aims have also changed. At this moment in time, a primary objective of China is to sustain its present level of growth. For that purpose it needs to ensure open and free movement of its exports on strategic routes and the security of vital energy imports to sustain its rising stature.

China also aims at expanding its influence in the region by translating its vast economic power into military power. It enjoys amicable economic relations with developed states and wants to turn these relations into strategic collaboration. In order to enhance its military strength Chinese have shown more interest in acquiring precision technology and subsystems related to military hardware from countries like UK, France, Germany, and Israel.¹⁹ It is also trying to acquire modern dual use high-technology for defense purpose, which will also help in advanced research and development in other fields. Primary aim of China's military modernization strategy is to ensure its defence and obtain the ability to neutralize all types of security threats. It also aims to use military modernization as an instrument of diplomacy in regional disputes and power projection.²⁰

China's ultimate aim would be to attain great power status. To pursue this objective it is also actively involved in humanitarian activities, anti-terrorism, and anti-piracy activities in different world regions.²¹

Rebalancing Strategy

Writers and analysts have described rebalancing policy in different ways. The area to which this new approach is directed is also contested by analysts. Some analysts believe that rebalance is not only specific to Northeast Asia, which is the traditional focus area of the US policy in Asia Pacific, but it also encompasses other

areas of vital interests in the region like Southeast Asia, Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean. This makes rebalancing policy different from the traditional American approach.²² The rebalancing is not solely a military strategy. Military strategy is but one dimension of a multidimensional approach. Although the strategy is governed by foreign policy, it includes other aspects such as security, economics, and diplomacy. This new policy is dynamic because of the very nature of the Asia Pacific region and politico-economic circumstances prevailing within the US.

Strategically, South China Sea is of great importance. Every year \$5.3 trillion worth of trade takes place through this sea. According to a UN estimate more than 80% of world's oil transits through the Indian Ocean and it is also estimated that by 2035, 90% of the oil from the Middle East will go to Asia.²³ These estimates flag the strategic importance of South China Sea and the Indian Ocean for China. Besides, the sea holds huge gas and oil deposits. According to the US Energy Information Administration, South China Sea has unexplored oil reserves of 11 billion barrels and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.²⁴

Current US China relations, however, are characterized by competition for power as well as trade cooperation. The rebalancing strategy takes into account the reality of Chinese power today and makes engagement with China a central piece of the strategy. US policy aims to contain China's thriving military and economic influence in the region but at the same time engage China to sustain existing cooperation and incentivize it to achieve relative gains.

Rebalancing Rationale

Strategic importance of Asia Pacific region to the US has increased manifold in the last few decades. Geopolitical shift toward Asia Pacific is in progress which could further accelerate in future as a result of great power politics and emerging regional disputes. Policymakers in Washington D.C. are well aware of China's growing economic clout and its rising military power, but the rebalance has been driven by a much broader set of strategic, economic, and political considerations. After more than a decade of wars (Afghanistan, Iraq) Obama administration is now more focused on an area of foreign policy which had thus far been neglected. Strategically US rebalancing strategy is a grand strategy for achieving its foreign policy objectives.

This policy shift primarily underscores US' strategic assurances to its allies, partners and friends against unfriendly powers in the Asia Pacific, that the US is not yet too war weary. It is also reassuring its friends that the US is not shackled by domestic political and economic constraints.

Thus US' policy also aims to enlarge the areas of cooperation and engagement favorable to the US interests through international institutions and major regional powers. This includes China and in broader perspective India, Japan and Australia are also part of this policy.

Rebalancing Elements

Focus on increasing US' military strength in the region forms the major dimension of rebalancing strategy, which makes it all the more contentious. President Obama in 2012 strategic guidance pledged to minimize the cuts in the size of US Navy.²⁵ With the exception of the Korean Peninsula, the Asia Pacific region is seen mainly as a naval theater of operations by the US. The decision to make cuts on non-naval forces is one indication that for the US naval power is still the preferred instrument for policy implementation.

US Department of Defense is also making adjustments by prioritizing military industrial production specifically focused on Asia Pacific. These measures are aimed at transforming US defense posture to meet potential challenges from China.²⁶ There has been greater focus on developing capabilities that can counter Chinese 'anti-access/area denial' strategies. An anti-Access (A2) strategy refers to capabilities, generally long-range, designed to thwart an adversary's force from influencing an operational area. Area-Denial (AD) strategy refers to capabilities, usually of shorter range, designed to limit an adversary's freedom of maneuverability within the operational area.²⁷ The rebalancing strategy also entails significant military cooperation of the US with Australia, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and Philippines. On the occasion of 28th anniversary of Australia-US ministerial consultations (AUSMIN) on November 20 last year (2013) both countries pledged to strengthen their enduring strategic partnership.²⁸

US-Australia Relations

The US and Australia agreed to augment partnership between their defense capabilities in order to develop new opportunities for cooperation across Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. It was decided to enhance the interoperability of Australian and US forces and especially relates to cooperation on combat and transport aircraft, helicopters, submarine systems and weapons, with special focus on future submarine efforts.²⁹ Both states agreed to implement comprehensive US force posture initiative including the deployments of the rotational US Marine Corps supplemented by US Air Force aircraft. It is estimated that full Marine Air Ground Task Force will consists of 2500 personnel and relevant military equipment.³⁰

Both states have agreed to provide greater access to US Air Force on Royal Australian Air Force bases. Strategic naval cooperation between both states is also under consideration. Last year, in June, US secretary of defense, Chuck Hagel stated that both US and Australia have an agreement to deploy Australian warships in a US carrier strike group in the Pacific.³¹ Participation of both states in the biennial Talisman Saber series exercises is an example showing enhanced capacity for interoperability between forces of the two states. The US and Australia have also signed a MoU for jointly operating a US space surveillance telescope which will start in early 2016.³² It will help in tracking naval developments with more accuracy in Asia Pacific and increase coverage of the area under surveillance.

US-Philippines Relations

Philippines which was under the US control since 1898 (except from 1942-1945 under Japanese control, and got independence in 1946), is a major non-NATO US ally. US had maintained Subic naval base and Clark air base in Philippines till 1991.³³ After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, there was a popular nationalist wave in the Philippines which pushed the government for the closure of the US bases on their soil. In January 1996 clash over Spratly's Mischief Reef took place between China and Philippines. This development brought into focus Philippines' own vulnerability against a major power and it requested the US for help.³⁴ Following this event Visiting Force Agreement (VFA) was signed between the US and Philippines in 1999. VFA however, remained only on paper as no

practical steps ensued to enhance Philippine's defense capabilities.³⁵ AS the rebalancing strategy unfolded the US again warmed upto the Philippines and the US secretary of state Hillary Clinton and Philippines' foreign affairs secretary Albert F. Del Rosario signed *Manila Declaration* on November 16, 2011 which reasserts Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) of 1951.³⁶

On April 28-29, this year during Obama's visit Philippines and the US mutually agreed upon a new 10 year defense pact that will allow increased presence of the US troops in the archipelago. The 'Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement' (EDCA) which was under negotiation for eight months is, according to Evan Medeiros, National Security Council's senior director for Asian Affairs, "the most significant defense agreement that we have concluded with the Philippines in decades".³⁷ It will give the US forces access to Subic naval base and Clark air base again and allow them to station planes and ships there. The US had closed these major military bases after the Cold War. Reopening of these strategic bases indicates that Philippines which was a principal ally against Soviet expansionist threat in Asia Pacific is now again going to be a strategic partner against rising Chinese power. It had since long been looking for international support against China over the disputed Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal. For the US, the pact provides an opening to pursue its interests in the South China Sea. This agreement also serves to boost US prestige in the region and underscores its commitment to regional allies. In the long run, however, it may contribute in creation of a balance of power in the region.³⁸

US-Malaysia Relations

Obama's visit to Malaysia in April 2014 set up a framework for the host country to play a role in the emerging strategic uncertainties in the Asia Pacific. US offered USS Denver (LPD), which will be decommissioned this year, to Malaysia along with AAV-7 amphibious vehicles.³⁹ Apart from this US has also offered Malaysia military equipment from Afghanistan after withdrawal of its troops from there by end 2014. Last year in October, Malaysian government stated that it would establish a military base at Bintulu on the South China Sea to guard the adjoining oil rich area.⁴⁰

US-Vietnam Relations

When secretary of state Hillary Clinton visited Hanoi in 2010, she proposed to upgrade bilateral relations into strategic partnership with the host country. A MoU was signed in September 2011 between the US and Vietnam on 'Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation'.⁴¹ Following this MoU, secretary of defense Leon Panetta visited America's new strategic partners in the South China Sea for tangible development on bilateral defense cooperation. He also visited Cam Ranh Bay, which had served as a US military base in South China Sea during US-Vietnam war, and stated that access to this facility is "a key component" of bilateral defense cooperation and it has 'tremendous potential' for future strategic cooperation".⁴²

Later, on July 25, 2013 Vietnamese President's visit to the US paved the way for 'US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership'. Hanoi sees this partnership as an instrument to manage China's strategic intentions in South China Sea. China and Vietnam have long standing territorial disputes, particularly over Paracel islands. Vietnam is also considering taking China to International Court of Justice to resolve this dispute.⁴³

Nevertheless, there is a baggage of history in US-Vietnam relations. Memories of the Vietnam war still haunt many Vietnamese. US' efforts are, therefore, seen with suspicion and its commitments are often questioned in Vietnam's policymaking circles.⁴⁴ There is also a an emerging view in Vietnam which advocates that cooperating more with US does not essentially entail less cooperation with China.⁴⁵

US-Japan Relations

US-Japan strategic alliance is the key stone of US policies aimed at maintaining strategic stability in the region. Japan has an important place in the US strategic and security priorities, particularly, in regard to China and North Korea. 53,000 US troops are stationed in Japan and US maintains 89 exclusive facilities there.⁴⁶ US also provides security guarantee, including nuclear umbrella, to Japan. In 2010 both states initiated a 'Bilateral Extended Deterrence Dialogue'.⁴⁷ Although Japan rejects the idea that the main purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter a nuclear attack, it however has augmented and extended the deterrence provided by the US through its own BMD technology.⁴⁸ The number of Japan's and US' BMD

interceptors are considered to be sufficient for deterrence without straining the strategic stability in the region.

Alliance with the US and strengthening Japan's defense is high on the agenda of Japanese Premier Shanzo Abe since December 2012, when he got reelected. He took appropriate measures to make Japan's defense stronger by increasing defense budget after eleven years and raised it to \$51.7 billion⁴⁹. He also brought about changes in defense policy and successfully mustered support for the construction of new US Marine Corps base on Okinawa Islands.⁵⁰

The US and Japan are gradually enhancing bilateral cooperation in various other fields, like Ballistic Missile Defense buildup (BMD), Cyber Security, and use of space for military purposes. In 2013, both states agreed to revise Mutual Defense Guidelines (MDG), by the end of 2014.⁵¹ MDG serves as an umbrella document covering US-Japan defense agreement which was previously restructured in 1997.⁵² In the same year (2013) Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) echoed its rising apprehensions about regional security dynamics; Security threats from nuclear North Korea, and the territorial dispute with China in East China Sea.⁵³ NDPG of Japan highlights concerns and measures to cope with emerging multipolarity and power shift which has brought relative change in the US' influence.⁵⁴ The document further states that Japan needs to advance its means to gauge and respond to threats to its sovereignty from ongoing Chinese incursions. The need to buy a range of new military equipment and develop better intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities are also highlighted in the document. The NDPG termed the new guidelines as "Proactive Pacifism" that envisions Japan taking an active role in international operations in concert with other states.⁵⁵

The document (NDPG) also highlights Japanese interest in close collaboration with Republic of Korea (ROK), which may strategically support US presence in North East Asia in the future.⁵⁶ At present Japan and South Korea have a dispute over certain islands known as Takeshima (Japanese) Dokdo (Korean).⁵⁷ Japan also has a dispute with China over Senkaku Islands. In China these islands are called Diaoyu Islands. Tensions between Japan and South Korea increased in 2011, when South Korea expressed its intention to construct a 300 million dollars naval base on Ulleung Island (part of Dokdo/Takeshima) in the East Sea/ Sea of Japan.⁵⁸

Economically both states are in a complex relationship. Japan is South Korea's biggest trading partner. More than 40 billion US dollar worth of goods and services are exchanged yearly between them. Both countries have nuclear North Korea as a common enemy. If relations between Japan and South Korea deteriorate further, both states may suffer economically as well as strategically. Realizing the disastrous consequences of such an eventuality the US has made efforts in recent years to repair relations between Japan and South Korea, two of its very important allies in the region.

Tensions in the region escalated in November 2013 when China's defense ministry publically announced the establishment of an East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).⁵⁹ The set of rules for operationalizing ADIZ necessitate all non-commercial air traffic to submit flight plans before entering the area, which included the disputed Islands (Diaoyu/Senkaku) along with most of the East China Sea.⁶⁰ In response to this move, Chuck Hagel reaffirmed US' support for Mutual Defense Treaty of US and Japan, which also covers the disputed islands. President Obama on his trip in April 2014 also backed Tokyo over ADIZ and said "article five (of the US-Japan security treaty) covers all territories under Japan's administration including (the) Senkaku islands."⁶¹

Japan has also showed its willingness to join US led (TPP) free trade agreement. This trade initiative will not only foster economic ties between the two countries but will also help in shaping Japan's financial system. Japanese efforts to cooperate in the US 'rebalancing' effort have been welcomed by the Obama administration particularly in the backdrop of China's expanding assertiveness in maritime claims.

US-Taiwan Relations

Although the US has only unofficial relation with Taiwan or Republic of China (ROC), it has made military sales to it. Taiwan Relation Act (TRA) that was signed in 1979 forms the foundation of relation between both states in the absence of formal diplomatic recognition of ROC by the USA.⁶² TRA was signed because the US recognized ROC until the end of 1978. Before recognizing Peoples Republic of China (PRC) it had to officially cut off its relations with ROC. US acknowledged 'One China' on both sides of the strait of Taiwan and didn't explicitly claim the sovereign status of ROC in joint communiqués of 1972, 1979 and 1982 with PRC.⁶³

US' operational policy over Taiwan, however, remains undefined. It neither treats Taiwan as an independent state nor does it recognize China's claim over it. The US has significant security and economic interests in Taiwan. US Assistant Secretary of State, Kurt Campbell, in the House of Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on "Why Taiwan Matters", said "a critical part of that overarching strategy is building a comprehensive, durable, and unofficial relationship between the United States and Taiwan".⁶⁴

It is the 12th largest trading partner of the US and needs the US for its security. It, therefore, wants to be a part of various initiatives undertaken by the US in the region. It has sought US support to include Taiwan in its strategic 'rebalance', as well as regional and international organizations, East and South China Seas dispute negotiations, and TPP.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Although the *rebalancing strategy* of the US is still unfolding but a number of high profile visits of senior US officials to Asia Pacific region, have convinced leading observers of international relations that the new policy is primarily aimed against China and both China and the US are asserting their power to consolidate and expand their influence in the region.⁶⁶ Rebalancing strategy is a grand strategy to contain China on economic as well as military front. Given their competing interests and emerging rivalry in South China Sea, relations between the US and China may turn acerbic in future though both have so far avoided direct criticism of each other's policies in the region. Their mutual interests however, demand a careful and cautious approach, which the two sides have adopted so far.

This non-confrontational approach towards each other has helped, both China and the US, to avoid over-militarization of the region. However disagreements over the mechanism for the resolution of disputes in the South China Sea still persist. China is apprehensive of US' efforts to internationalize these disputes and prefers a bilateral approach to the resolution of disputes in its neighborhood. From the regional alignment perspective too there is a strong likelihood that in a crisis situation US' allies are likely to call on the US, as a Pacific power, to balance Chinese influence in the region. Under such volatile and uncertain geo-strategic environment China undoubtedly believes the US rebalancing strategy will have an unsettling influence in the region.⁶⁷

Power is becoming more diffused and less homogeneous in the contemporary world. US unipolarism faces challenges from emerging powers such as China. This new global reality is manifest in the emerging regionalism. As the US is the primary *status quo* power in the Pacific, it is developing new strategies to protect its pre-eminent position in the region. Rebalancing Strategy along with the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) of containing China have been devised to achieve these strategic goals.⁶⁸

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