

## THE IMPERIAL 'PIVOT' TO ASIA-PACIFIC AND THE NEW COLD WAR

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The Pentagon document on Strategic Guidance entitled, "Sustaining Global Leadership: Priorities for Twenty First Century" released in January 2012 has inaugurated a new cold war. If the theatre of the 'old' Cold War was Europe, the new theatre is the Asia-Pacific. The document affirms that the US will of necessity *rebalance* towards Asia-Pacific region. 'Rebalance' seems to have replaced the earlier term 'pivot'. The document maps the region as "the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia".

The increasing focus on Asia reflects rebalancing in several ways: Change in the balance of US concentration from the Middle East to Asia after the ebbing of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; a change in the balance of forces within Asia from a Northeast Asia focus to a broader reach emphasizing more flexible deployments, rotation and operation and a change in the balance of tools of soft power and hard power moving to the latter.

### *Redefining Asia-Pacific*

In his Introduction to the document for the release of which he made a rare visit to the Pentagon, "As Commander-in-Chief," remarked President Obama, "I am determined that we meet the challenges of the moment responsibly and that we emerge even stronger in a manner that preserves American global leadership, maintains our military superiority...". George W. Bush can be proud of his successor. About Obama's appetite for military action, Aaron David Miller, an adviser to six secretaries of state, wrote in *Foreign Policy*, "Barack Obama has become George Bush on steroid." American 'global leadership' is the fancy name for the Empire, admittedly maintained by military superiority.

The Obama administration has written a new chapter in American foreign policy saying that the US will now 'pivot' away from two wars in Southwestern Asia to focus on the rising power of China. Supporters claim that the President has established a foreign policy vision for the next century. Sceptics point out that there is more political spin than substance to the Obama Asia 'pivot'. Both are right. The increased American focus on Asia is bipartisan and sustainable. "The real debate is not about the importance of Asia, but how the US will resource its increasing engagement of the region." (1)

The Administration's increased emphasis on A.P. appears to have been prompted by four major developments:

- the growing economic importance of the Asia-Pacific region and particularly China to the US's economic future.

- China's growing military capabilities and its increasing assertiveness of claims to disputed maritime territory with implications for freedom of navigation and the US ability to project power in the region.

- the winding down of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- efforts to cut US government's defense budget which threaten to create a perception in Asia that the US commitment to the region will wane. (2)

Announcing a new US military expansion in Australia in autumn 2011, Obama declared in the Australian Parliament, "The US is a Pacific power and we are here to stay." Early 2012 the Obama administration further clarified the shift saying that it would intensify the US role in the Asia-Pacific region. To do this, it intends to raise the region's priority in US military planning, foreign policy and economic policy. With the US troops gone from Iraq and poised to be drawn down in Afghanistan, administration officials say they plan to 'rebalance' US attention towards planning for future challenges and opportunities. As Obama said in his statement to the Australian Parliament, his goal is to ensure that the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping the region (AP) and its future. "As we consider the future of our armed forces, we have begun a review that will identify the most important strategic interests and guide on defense priorities and spending over the coming decade. So here is what this region must know. As we end today's wars, I have directed my national security team to make our presence and mission the AP region our top priority. As a result reduction in US defense spending will not – I repeat will not – come at the expense of Asia Pacific."

#### *Global control – The role of the military*

In a November 2011 article in *Foreign Policy* entitled 'America's Pacific Century', Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the "future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq and the US will be right at the centre of the action." She detailed US plans to bolster its military presence in the region. Claiming that it is the US which "maintains peace and security, defends freedom of navigation and ensures transparency", Clinton emphasized the importance of Asia-Pacific's economic development, trade routes, resources and investment opportunities for the US." The Asia-Pacific's "remarkable economic growth... and potential for continued growth," she wrote, "depends on the security and stability that has long been guaranteed by the US military" whose presence has to be further strengthened.

The new policy towards Asia-Pacific has two fundamental elements. First there is a clear admission by the USA that its defense posture must be substantially recalibrated in view of its economic circumstances. Second, the policy document reaffirmed that the US has vital interests in the whole region and is therefore determined to continue to play a more prominent role in shaping the future of the region.

Many aspects of the Asia-Pacific pivot represent an expansion rather than a transformation of policy. A number of Obama's discrete initiatives build on previous actions so that some observers argue that the administration overstated the depth and scope of its pivot. For instance, in the military sphere the administration is expanding and accelerating policies under Bush. The Obama administration is also expanding Bush-era initiatives such as strengthening

relations with existing allies in Asia and forging new partnership with India, Indonesia and Vietnam.

That said, there are at least three broad new features of US policy that are worth emphasizing: new military priorities and deployments; an arguably more integrated and region-wide approach to the Asia-Pacific and a vision of the region's geography to include the Indian Ocean.

The highest profile new initiatives lie in the security sphere. The planned deployment of troops and equipment to Australia and Singapore represent an expanded US presence. Moreover the pledge that reductions in deficit spending will not come at the expense reflects Asia-oriented priorities. The most obvious implication subsequently reflected in the Department of Defense's January 2012 'Strategic Guidance' has been to minimize cuts in the size of the navy with reductions focused on the Army's ground forces. Asia is seen mainly as a naval theatre of operation and the decision not to cut the Navy as sharply as other services reflects a shift in priorities that is unusual in year to year defense planning. It is an ocean-centered strategy in which the USA is far superior to China.

A second new dynamic is the way the various new and old military, diplomatic and economic initiatives have been presented as parts of one package.

Another new element in the Obama administration's policy is the inclusion of the coastal areas of South Asia in the geographic area of the Pacific pivot. South Asia has often been considered as a distinct strategic sub-region of Asia. Increasing strategic rivalry between China and India also serves to bring that Asia sub-region into a larger Asia-wide strategic dynamic.

In her *Foreign Policy* article, Secretary of State Clinton defined the Asia-Pacific as "stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas, the region spans two oceans – the Pacific and the Indian – that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy." Underlying the rebalancing is the Administration's belief that the centre of gravity for US foreign policy, national security and economic interests is shifting towards Asia and that US strategies and priorities need to be adjusted accordingly.

As Noam Chomsky wrote in *Al Jazeera* (7 May 2012) the US pivot towards the Asia Pacific region is in response to what he calls the classic security dilemma posed by the rising influence of China and Russia. The pivot is perceived as bullying, threatening and an intrusion of the same – in other words more of the same – by those most impacted by US foreign military presence. The "classic security dilemma makes sense" Chomsky argues, if one operates under the assumption that the US "has the right to control most of the world and that US security requires absolutely global control."

The most high profile and concrete elements in the Administration's announced rebalancing toward Asia Pacific have come in the military realm. Leon Panetta, U.S. Defense Secretary, unveiled at the annual meeting of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies

on June 3 in Singapore, the details of the military's plans for Asia-Pacific. The Navy, Mr. Panetta said, would reconfigure its forces from a 50-50 split between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific to 60 per cent of the Navy's assets assigned to the Pacific. He said, "Make no mistake in a steady, deliberate and sustainable way the United States military is rebalancing and brings enhanced capabilities to this vital region." Some nations represented at the meeting questioned the wisdom of stepped up military emphasis, arguing that it appears intended to force a confrontation with China, a situation feared by many countries in the region, all of which enjoy strong trade ties with China.

#### *Aimed at China?*

As Obama administration officials have said in the past, Mr. Panetta insisted the renewed US interest in the Asia Pacific region was not aimed at China. But few in the audience which consisted of Asian defense ministers and military officials said they believed that. The concern of most Asian countries was expressed by Marty Natalegawa, Indonesia's Foreign Minister who said, "What worries is having to choose; we don't want to be put into that position. The Pacific is sufficiently accommodating to provide not only for the role of China and the United States but of emerging powers too," he added.

At the same time, some Asian leaders may feel that the enhanced U.S. presence may serve as a counterweight to China as it asserts territorial rights to the oil-rich South China Sea that are disputed by other Asian countries. The U.S. asserted its position in the region at the ASEAN regional forum where it declared the outcome of the disputes in the South China Sea to be of 'national interest'. The stance received conspicuous support within and beyond ASEAN and was accompanied by efforts to energize U.S. relations with Vietnam and the Philippines.

We may have to go back a bit in White House history to see the significance of South China Sea in US strategy. There is reason to believe that President Obama is implementing the geopolitical blueprint of former Vice-President Dick Cheney. Among the key features of this blueprint prominent is "to dominate the sea lands of Asia so as to control the flow of oil and other raw materials to America's political rivals China and Japan."(3)

Among the strategic initiatives that the Department of Defense has been developing apparently with AP in mind is a new 'Air Sea Battle (ASB)' concept that is intended to improve the joint effectiveness of U.S. naval and air force units, particularly in operations for countering anti-access strategies. This strategy is of course the primary reason that the South Korean navy is building at the behest of Pentagon, the naval base on Jeju Island. US Navy needs more ports to dock their warships. The Pentagon has stated that it is modernizing its basing arrangements with traditional allies while enhancing its presence in South East Asia and into the Indian Ocean. It is working on an "operational concept" to translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific Ocean which in effect will mean military presence over a broader region.

#### *Military Bases*

Concerns over China in the past were founded mostly on its claims to Taiwan which it considers a renegade province. But that has broadened out to Beijing's increasingly assertive claims to South China Sea where it has territorial disputes with half a dozen countries. Those rival claims came to a head in April, when the Philippines Navy accused Chinese boats of fishing illegally around Scarborough Shoal which Manila claims as part of its exclusive economic zone, but which Beijing insists has been Chinese for centuries. The standoff has yet to be resolved though no shots have been fired.

Beijing's perceived highhandedness in the South China Sea has strengthened Washington's hands and promoted the project of the construction of a network of bases and alliances encircling China, the globe's rising power, in an arc stretching from Japan and South Korea in the north to Australia, Vietnam and the Philippines in the southwest and hence to India in the southwest.

- Singapore has agreed to allow US to deploy four new littoral Combat Ships designed to fight close to shorelines to its main naval port, starting next year.
- Indonesia which had only limited military relations with Washington in the 1990s because of human rights concerns, is now looking to buying a wide range of American military hardware and is conducting joint exercises.
- The Philippines which kicked out US forces based on their soil in 1992 is actively courting increased US military support including allowing more troops on a rotating basis and base facilities.
- South Korean navy is building at the behest of the Pentagon, the naval base on Jeju Island.
- Washington is already testing out that approach in Australia which has agreed to allow up to 2500 marines to deploy to the northern city of Darwin. The marines will use Australian facilities not a new US base and the plan has met with little opposition. The new basing facility in Darwin is close to the South China Sea.

It may be useful to look at the role of military bases or base-like facilities. Foreign military bases have been established throughout the history of expanding states and warfare. They proliferate where a state has imperial ambitions either through direct control of territory or through indirect control over the political economy, laws and foreign policies of other countries. Whether or not recognizing itself as such, a country can be called an empire when it projects substantial power with the aim of asserting and maintaining dominance over other regions.

Chalmers Johnson has pointed out that the enforcement of American hegemony over the world constitutes a new form of global empire. "Whereas traditional empires maintained control over subject peoples via colonies, since World War II U.S. has developed a vast system of hundreds of military bases around the world where it has strategic interests. This vast network of American bases in every continent except Antarctica actually constitutes a new form of empire

– an empire of bases with its own geography, not likely to be taught in any high school geography.”

Bases are usually presented above all as having rational strategic purposes. The empire claims that it provides towards defense of the homeland, supplies other nations with security and facilitated control of trade routes and resources. More recently as well, bases have been used to control the political and economic life of the host nation. Military bases in South Korea, for example, have been key parts of the continuing control that the US military exercises over Korean forces and Korean foreign policy. More specifically it has extracted important political and military support for example in its wars in Vietnam and more recently in Iraq. (5)

### *The Chinese Response*

It is only natural that the U.S. Asia ‘pivot’ has prompted Chinese anxiety about U.S. containment. One might inquire on what is exactly about ‘rising China’ that is being counterbalanced with such an increased military presence in the Pacific. The US is not putting a military presence in the region to be an impartial or fair mediator but to pursue its own interest and that of its allies which are competing against China for ownership of resource-rich islands (including oil). (6)

Although Obama administration officials have often stated that these moves are not aimed at any one particular country, the *Strategic Guidance* document says they are responses at least in part to China’s growing influence. “The maintenance of peace, stability, the free flow of commerce and of US influence in this dynamic region will depend in part on an underlying balance of military capability and presence. Over the long-term China’s emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the US economy and our security in a variety of ways... The growth of China’s military power must be accompanied by greater clarity of its strategic intention in order to avoid causing friction in the region.” This is a rather strange statement and would suggest that there is clarity about USA’s strategic intention.

“The new developments from the US side are about one thing: containing China’s military rise and the tectonic shifts associated with it.”(7) While commentators of all ideologies agree that China by virtue of its advances on the entire standard measures of power from economic to military putting it high up in the list of rising powers it is far from clear it is a menacing power. One may even say that China’s military rise is normal – not illegitimate, if we speak in terms of power politics.

The widespread perception that the ‘rebalancing’ initiative is aimed at China creates a host of risks. The pivot to the Pacific is seen by some in China in starker terms as focused on dividing China from its neighbors and keeping China’s military in check. Such an impression may strengthen the hands of China’s military (PLA) which has long been suspicious of US intentions in the region. The military in turn could become more determined to strengthen China’s anti-access capabilities and more assertive about defending China’s territorial claims. The

impression that the rebalancing is aimed at containing China could potentially make it more difficult for the US to gain China's cooperation in issues such as North Korea. China cannot ignore the new U.S. stance. The question is how they interpret it.

An interpretation was given by *China Daily* in an article at the end of last year (27-12-2011). It said, "Washington uses the 'China threat' as an excuse to maintain excessive military spending so that it can continue its hegemony." It added that "the confused policy of 'conengagement' – mixing containment and engagement – has increasingly characterized the US approach to China." The article accused the US of "attempting to maintain a de facto empire on borrowed money while its creditors are at its doors." The new strategy is seen as threat in Beijing. "The administration's plan to augment America's permanent strength in Asia cannot be seen as anything but threatening," spokesman of the Ministry of Defense, Geng Youshang said. "We believe it is all a matter of a cold war mentality."

But there are even more strident voices from Beijing. Writing in the *People's Liberation Daily* on 13<sup>th</sup> January 2012, Major Luo Luan bluntly warned that the US was targeting China. "Casting our eyes around, we can see that the US has been bolstering its five major military alliances in the Asia-Pacific and is adjusting the positing of its four major military base clusters in the AP region while also seeking more entry rights for military bases around China. Who can believe that you are not directing this at China?" he asked.

In theory senior party and government cadres have not abandoned late patriarch Deng Xiaoping's famous foreign policy dictum of the early 1990s: "Take a low profile and never take the lead." A rising number of influential academic and military advisers in Beijing have argued that due to China's fast-rising quasi-superpower status and intensification the country's competition with the US and its Asian allies, the low profile has become all but obsolete. According to widely published defense theorist Yang Yi, "It is no longer possible for China to keep a low profile." (8)

The differing responses reflect a debate in Beijing that intensified after last year's NATO intervention in Libya, which caused losses of billions of dollars of Chinese investments in that country. This happened in the wake of the NATO's ousting of the Libyan regime of Gaddafi. The NATO was able to do this only with the support of the US. The US is now threatening Iran which China relies on as a major supplier of oil. One camp advocates a continuation of the present cautious policy of avoiding a confrontation with the US. The second calls for a shift to a more aggressive policy to defend China's growing economic and strategic interests around the world.

In the run up to the leadership transition that will take place at China's 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress this fall, Beijing is inwardly focused and unlikely to act on its fears. However 2013 could see a change in China's foreign policy based on the new leadership's judgment that it must respond to a U.S. strategy that seeks to prevent China's re-emergence as a great power.

*India Aligned or Non-Aligned?*

What does the US pivot to Asia mean for India? The Indian Ambassador to Washington recently pointed out that the idea of a 'pivot' is hardly new. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister used this time to characterize India even before there was an India, saying of his not-yet independent country. We are of Asia, India is the pivot of Western, Southern and Southeast Asia.

India is highly visible in the new US Asia-Pacific map. The January Strategy Document refers specifically to "the area extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia". Hillary Clinton was even more specific when she defined Asia-Pacific as reaching from the Indian subcontinent to the Western shores of America. Not to be outdone, Indian diplomats have taken to referring to the Indo-pacific region – a term one can guess that will not gain much traction in China. (9)

Leon Panetta, US Defense Secretary came to New Delhi at the end of the first week of May with an agenda to win India to the US side in its new Asia-Pacific strategy. India gets a prominent place in the Strategy Guidance document of the Pentagon. It says that the US intends to invest in a 'long-term strategic partnership' with India in order that New Delhi might serve as a regional economic and military anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region. Commenting on New Delhi's role Panetta said defense cooperation with India is a linchpin in US strategy. "India is one of the largest and most dynamic countries in the region and the world and with one of the most capable militaries." Defense cooperation with India has deepened from the time of the War on Terror and India is the largest partner in defense exercises with the US. Moreover from that time India had aligned itself with the USA.

But observers have noticed a shift in India's policy recently. Responding to Panetta's overtures, the Indian Defense Minister Antony emphasized the need to strengthen multilateral security architecture in the Asia Pacific and to move to a pace comfortable to all countries concerned. India is closely watching the ramifications of US rebalancing as it will considerably increase American military presence in its neighborhood especially in the Indian Ocean. It did not go unnoticed that exactly the same days Panetta was in New Delhi, India's Foreign Minister S.M.Krishna was in China where in response to questions about the new US strategy he affirmed that the bilateral relationship with China was a priority for India's foreign policy. More specifically he expressed India's desire to expand strategic cooperation with China.

There seems to be a debate within the Indian establishment with one section arguing for a new non-alignment in the emerging cold war in Asia and another advocating linking its strategic partnership with the USA's Asia Pacific rebalancing.



From Central and South Asia to Africa, the Middle East and Asia, the Obama administration is working out its formula for a new American way of war. In its pursuit, the Pentagon and its increasingly militarized government partners are drawing on everything from classic precepts of colonial war to the latest technologies. The U.S is an imperial power chastened by more than ten years of failed heavy footprint wars. No wonder the current combination of special ops, drones, spy games, civilian soldiers, cyber warfare and proxy fighters sound like a safer brand of war-fighting. The new light footprint Obama doctrine actually seems to be making war an even more attractive and seemingly easy option. As a result, the new American way of war holds great potential for unforeseen entanglements and serial blowbacks. (10)

Although conventionally treated as separate, America's four wars in Asia were actually phases in a sustained US bid for regional dominance, according to Michael H. Hunt and Steven Levine. The effort unfolded as an imperial project in which military power and the importance of America's political will created the Arc of Empire. America's wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam follow the long arc of conflicts across. "Seventy five years from the Philippines war through Japan and Korea to Vietnam, we trace the way American ambitions, ascendance and ultimate defeat. By the time we got to the Japan war, we were convinced how American leaders had developed a strong sense of a stake in the future of Pacific." (11)

The consequence of this strategy as well as ideological stake were soon apparent in Korea and then in Vietnam. After seventy five years President Nixon finally abandoned the forward policy in East Asia. Ultimately the political and social changes transforming the region proved beyond the control of Americans despite the military advantage that their vastly superior weaponry and material resources conferred.

Only in the last decade or so have the uninhibited exercise of US global power sought to sweep aside popular hesitations and doubts. These latter day champions had forgotten the lessons learned the hard way over the last half century. They don't seem to have learnt anything either from the imperial adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The new cold war in Asia-Pacific is a continuation of the US-led imperial project for dominance in the region recreating the Arc of the Empire.

*Notes:*

1. Michael Green, "The US Turns Its Gaze to the Public," *The World Today*, February and March, 2012.
2. "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration Rebalancing Towards Asia," *Congressional Research Service*, March 28, 2012.
3. Michael Klare, "Is Barack Obama Morphing Into Dick Cheney?" *Asiatimes Online*, June 23, 2012.
4. Chalmers Johnson, "America's Empire of Bases", *TomDispatch.com*, January 15, 2004.
5. Catherine Lutz, "US Bases and Empire: Global Perspectives on the Asia-Pacific," *Transnational Institute*, July 2009.
6. Michael McGrehee, *New York Times Examiner*, November 8, 2011.
7. Willy Lam, "Beijing Laces Up Its Foreign Policy Lace," *Asiatimes Online*, June 28, 2012.
8. Robert Kagan, *Atlantic Magazine*, April 2012.
9. Robert M. Hathaway, *Yale Global Review*, February 24, 2012.
10. Tom Singlehardt, *TomDispatch.Com*, June 13, 2012.
11. Michael H. Hunt and Steven L. Levine, "Arc of Empire", University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

## SOME TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Implications and challenges of the 'Pivot' for Peace with Justice in Asia.
2. The strategic significance of the Pacific and Indian Oceans.
3. China's response to 'Pivot' and possible changes in its foreign policy.
4. The Role of India: Non-Alignment 2?
5. U.S. Military Bases in Asia-Pacific.
6. Arms race in Asia including nuclear.
7. Military Strategies of the 'Pivot'.
8. The Asia Pivot and the Empire.