
The US Pivot and its Implications for the Current East Asian Security Architecture

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1 The Evolution of American Interest in Asia-Pacific

After the end of the Second World War, the US became the chief guarantor of peace and security in Asia-Pacific by preserving a continental balance of power. The “San Francisco System” signed in San Francisco on September 8, 1951 was at the heart of this effort. It not only restored independence to Japan but also established the bilateral U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which granted the United States the right to “maintain armed forces ... in and about Japan,” and encouraged Japanese rearmament. Viewed from the perspective of a separate peace, which neither invited Communist China nor the Chinese Nationalist regime, the San Francisco settlement thus laid the groundwork for an exclusionary system (based on an asymmetric engagement) that not only detached Japan from its closest neighbors and had long-term consequences for the Chinese-Japanese relationship, but also introduced what became the classical hub-and-spokes system consisting of additional bilateral security alliances between the US and Australia, New Zealand (ANZUS 1951), the Republic of the Philippines (1951), the Republic of Korea (1951) and finally Thailand (after the dissolution of SEATO in 1967), which gradually established American outposts from Hawaii to Manila. And ostensibly the system propelled Japan (and partly the other partners) into a posture of looking east across the Pacific to America for security and, indeed, for its very identity as a nation.

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As a result, China's leaders for almost five decades accepted the American geostrategic dominance in the Pacific. Even when the country had become more prosperous since the introduction of capitalist market principles in 1978 and its military transformation had started at the beginning of the 21st century its goal (at least officially) was still not to achieve strategic parity with the United States. The main goal rather was to catch up with the West economically. With annual growth rates averaging around ten percent China surpassed Japan as the biggest foreign holder of U.S. Treasury securities in 2008 and became the largest creditor nation in the world. Today the country is the second largest economy in the world after the United States, the world's biggest recipient of direct foreign investment, as well as the US' and EU's most important trading partner—as a matter of fact, as the Atlantic powers consider how to pivot together to Asia, Asia, that is particularly China, is pivoting to the Atlantic as well (Hamilton 2014, pp. 125–172). However hopes that China's integration into the global economy signaled converging interests between China and the West soon turned out to be an illusion. With the economic relationship becoming ever bigger, political tensions between Beijing and Washington arose simultaneously; today nowhere is this more apparent than in bilateral investment ties (Goodman Mar. 31. 2017). By the second decade of the twenty-first century, China's assertiveness as a great power finally is challenging the military status quo in Asia-Pacific heating up old territorial disputes and contested history issues and provoking U.S. responses to maintain the so far unchallenged Pax Americana in the Pacific.

All this has happened at a time when there was growing concern in Washington about the potential medium or long-time decline in America's military preeminence and Pentagon officials worry about the US armed forces capability to operate globally in forward defense of allies and partners (Quadrennial Defense Review [QDR] 2010). After two cost-intensive wars in the Middle East and Southwest Asia the US wanted to minimize stabilization operations in favor of enhancing its political and economic engagement in Asia-Pacific. But as China's primary objective is to create armed forces capable of deterring America's projection of power into China's offshore waters (referred to as China's pursuit of "anti-access/area denial" (A2/AD) capabilities), US military and geostrategic interests in the region were (and are) also directly affected (Blackwill and Tellis 2015). That is why the Obama administration's pivot to the region in the end was a comprehensive one, requiring growing trade and economic engagement, active but effective diplomacy, but at the same time military investment and presence. Officially, this "rebalancing" to the region was not meant to contain China, because of the realities of globalization and interdependencies in US/EU-China relations, but today it isn't also any longer just an American effort to integrate China into the liberal international order. Rather Washington under the second Obama administration

had been following an alternative, multi-faceted balancing strategy between these two poles that incorporates elements that undermine China's capacity to misuse its power ("hedging strategy"), but at the same time continues to interact with China politically and economically ("engagement strategy"). This strategy was driven by the conviction that Washington has to avoid a major strategic rivalry—or even clash—with Beijing, but at the same time must uphold the regional balance of power by creating new preferential trading agreements with US allies in the region (which consciously bypass China), preventing China from acquiring military and strategic capabilities that would enable Beijing to inflict major harm on the US and its partners, and improving US military force projection capabilities along the Asian rimlands.

2 China's Evolving Strategy

China's foreign and security policy is driven by two different "kinds of assertiveness" (Small 2015, p. 39). Its particular strategic concern lies within its immediate neighborhood that is the "first island chain" or "inner island chain," which includes the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. Beijing's more assertive approach to traditional maritime disputes with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines in this region is driven by the ambition to accumulate "comprehensive national power", including the preservation of internal order and high levels of economic growth necessary to preserve social order (Tellis 2009), while at the same time developing "asymmetric capabilities" that will enable its forces to offset America's ability to intervene militarily should, primarily, a conflict over Taiwan arise.

On the other hand, China's strategic goal of enhancing its status as a central actor in the global system (particularly as part of the most relevant international institutions) contrasts with its slowly evolving role as a "responsible stakeholder" (Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick 2005) or "normal great power" (very much welcomed by the US and the rest of the world—(Quinn 2015)). In the recent past, Beijing rather pursued a global strategy that tried to avoid damage to its relations with other major powers, assuming a defensive role on issues such as the conflict in Iraq/Syria, the Iranian nuclear program, or, most recently, the Russian-Ukraine crisis—if at all it presented an obstacle, it has been in concert with Russia or other non-permanent members of the UNSC.

Meanwhile, however, China has increased its involvement in Central Asia (Afghanistan), in peace-keeping and counter-piracy missions in general, or in Africa (as in the cases of Mali and Sudan) and the Middle East (Libya) in particular (Brown 2014). Strategic planners in Beijing have realized the country's eventual exposure in conflicts in the Greater Middle East, and how important

the development of forward-deployment assets and access to port facilities capabilities in countries along the Indian Ocean (such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma), the Mediterranean (Egypt, Greece and Israel) or on the Horn of Africa (Djibouti) are to respond more effectively to such crises and to pacify its extended geographic periphery in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. China today is surrounded by major power competitors, among them not only Russia, Japan and India, but also smaller states, such as South Korea or Vietnam, which have started to distance themselves from China. Above that, these concerns have been heightened not least by worries about a diminished US role in the Greater Middle East which have forced Beijing to take on a greater responsibility itself and think about how to stabilize its western periphery by implementing its plans for a Silk Road Economic Belt (also known as China's Belt and Road Initiative—OBOR) and Maritime Silk Road. Both projects will connect the country with its key markets and resource supply routes from Central Asia to the Middle East and Europe via sea as well as on land (Goodman and Hillman 2016).

For all of these reasons, China has developed a multi-dimensional approach to the region as well. It is deepening its economic ties with its neighbors, but at the same time increasing its strategic influence with them. It is making common cause with Russia, which refuses to join any balancing strategy in the region against China. And it is trying to build new alliances to counterbalance the US alliance system and promote a new security concept that is managed by Asians alone. In other words, China's ambition seems to be to dominate Asia and recreate a new bipolar system globally (Odgaard 2016, pp. 17–24).

Accordingly, the accelerated militarization on China's part reflects more than rising economic clout and assertive nationalism. China's heightened assertiveness on maritime disputes since 2008 also includes the use of trade and economic instruments (such as oil-drilling in disputed territories or restrictive import and export measures) to serve its strategic goals, but is primarily driven by an increased military presence of Chinese vessels and aircraft in their waters and airspace demonstrating that the takeoff of digital technology and the revolutionary transformation of precision-guided warfare has reached the People's Republic. China's asymmetric capabilities today include a wide range of weaponry, among them: nuclear warheads; short-range and medium-range ballistic missiles; long-range cruise missiles; a "fourth generation" jet aircraft as well as a "fifth generation" stealth fighter (Chengdu J-20); missile-carrying submarines, warships, and aircraft; an envisioned though still distant fleet of aircraft carriers; advanced command and control centers, laser and radar systems; new satellite surveillance systems, and anti-satellite and cyberwar capabilities etc. (Cronin 2014). And there is no doubt among US strategic planners that, should conflict with U.S. forces

arise, China's response presumably would include missile attacks on U.S. bases in Guam and Okinawa.

It is for this reason that the international community in general and the US in particular do worry about China's bullying actions in Southeast Asia, including its increasingly aggressive action in the South China Sea. Though Beijing claims that it is seeking a peaceful resolution to the maritime disputes with five other nations (Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan) over a couple of smaller islands, China repeatedly has referred to its historically dubious "nine-dash-line" as a legitimate entitlement to its territory and maritime zones, rejecting any modest claims of those countries to have similar rights. And though Beijing was willing to negotiate a binding "code of conduct" with other claimants, it has never taken such talks seriously. Rather, it has started to develop a land reclamation strategy of island-building to create "facts on the sea", including air bases and port facilities as well as the detachment of armed coast guard vessels. And it has enforced its own interpretation of rights and obligations within the 200 nm exclusive economic zones (EEZs) by denying other countries, including the US, access to what it perceives its own exclusive zone—contrary to the terms of, and its obligations under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Even though there still is no clear definition of the rights and obligations of states regarding military activities within the maritime zones of other states, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague has ruled in June 2016 in favor of the Philippines on most counts, including the most sensitive issue, by declaring China's nine-dash line lacks any legal basis (Patrick 2016). Beijing, however, has neither accepted nor complied with the Court's ruling and instead lashed out with even more aggressive actions to assert its sovereignty claims, not least by declaring an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the entire area contained within the nine-dash line. By doing so, Beijing has challenged the other claimants as well as the US for a united, hard line vis-à-vis China, putting the former more than ever before at the mercy of the two global powers. While they had learned to "balance, hedge, and bandwagon" between two distinct orders in the past, they now are rethinking their economic as well as security ties with both powers.

3 US Strategic Planning to Counter the Chinese Challenge

Of course, China's military modernization agenda is provoking those who take America's overwhelming military superiority in the Pacific for granted, especially in the United States and Japan. That is why the American response is also calling to mind the early years of the Cold War, when American and Chinese values

and interests were rather adversarial than convergent. To many strategic planners in the US, preserving American primacy for the future thus requires to replace the concept of integrating China into the global system by one that is balancing its rise and reinvigorating US core principles for national security, that is: prevent any threat of conventional and unconventional attacks on the US; maintain the regional balance of power in Asia-Pacific through American leadership (that is, manage the geostrategic challenge of a more assertive China and escalating tensions and competing claims in East and South China Seas); prevent the use and proliferation of nuclear weapons and other WMD (North Korea); promote global prosperity.

In U.S. strategic planning circles, the most widely publicized concept to implement such a strategy is aimed at countering “emerging anti-access/area denial challenges” (called Air-Sea Battle (ASB)). First mentioned publicly by the secretary of defense in 2009, it calls for integrated air, sea, space, and cyberspace forces capable of overcoming the “asymmetric capabilities” of adversaries by “disrupting, destroying and defeating” their A2/AD threats (Department of Defense 12. May 2013). Though US officials emphasize that the concept does not specifically target China and is still a rudimentary projection, it, in fact, dates from the early 2000s when China (and Iran) was identified as the major adversary and operations such as destroying surveillance systems and missile defenses, followed by air and naval assault were part of the Pentagon’s Grand Strategy. The same is true for alternative strategic concepts such as the Pentagon’s overarching JOAC (Joint Operational Access Concept), Army and Marine Corps projections such as the GMAC (Gain and Maintain Access Concept) and JCEO (Joint Concept for Entry Operations), and the Navy’s MDBS (Mutually Denied Battlespace Strategy) (Flynn and Richardson 2012, pp. 38–44). All of these strategies focus on amphibious, airborne and air assault operations to gain and maintain inland access to the adversary’s territory, while the Navy’s plan relies on U.S. maritime superiority to deny access to Chinese warships in their own and surrounding waters. At the same time, the United States announced plans to shift long-range B-1 and B-52 bombers as well as a fleet of surveillance drones from the Middle East to the Pacific to intensify its consistent air presence in the South and East China Seas.

There are, however, two reservations about Washington’s military “pivot to Asia” or “rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region”. First of all, as mentioned above, it was/is part of a grand strategy, which former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented in an article on “America’s Pacific Century” that could be interpreted as a clear signal by the Obama administration that the hegemonic Pax Americana should be maintained by a multi-dimensional, less confrontational and, above all, more balanced multinational power sharing (Clinton 2011; Cronin 2014). While according to this view it was necessary to develop high-level diplomacy

with China and at the same time deliver on the TPP, it was also important that any US Grand Strategy includes interoperability with allies and the support of regional partners to develop their own AD capabilities against China. Second, due to sequestration caps in the recent past, and because Washington wanted to avoid a major confrontation with China, the US' military pivot so far has been nevertheless small. That is why the US' security role vis-à-vis the region is based on deterrence and offshore balancing and at the same time is trying to "enable" partners to build and strengthen a regional security network together with the US, including a ballistic missile defense posture—a strategy that is likely to be pursued by the Trump administration as well, which indeed has announced a significant increase in defense spending (by 10%), but seems to be less concerned about military and security affairs, particularly superiority over rivals.

4 Reinforcing a New Web of Partnerships

Such a network would consist of three elements: One that focuses on joint U.S. military operations that optimize cutting-edge weaponry and technologies for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), robotic and unmanned systems, and cyberspace, the other involving greater strategic bilateral and intra-regional cooperation (with direct or indirect US support) with traditional Asian allies like Japan and South Korea and, beyond that, other powers in Southeast and South Asia. The third and rather new element would be another pivot (or rebalancing) by the US within Asia, away from the almost exclusive traditional concentration on Northeast Asia toward closer contacts with the ASEAN members; this would also imply moving from mostly bilateral relations to more multilateralism (Cronin 2014, pp. 51–74).

Taken all these elements together implies that—despite all aspirations for cooperation and interdependence with China—current developments in Asia are again shaped by the inherently confrontational and hierarchical aspects of the San Francisco System with the US' military role remaining one of offshore balancing.

The main element of this system, based on bilateral security alliances, had been the containment of the communist expansion in the region. Today, the US as a Pacific power again retains an element of being the distant security guarantor that provides shelter for and promotes incremental militarization of its closest allies such as Japan, Korea and Australia—all of them being concerned about North Korea's traumatizing development of nuclear weapons and mounting tensions with China. The new element in the current evolving security architecture in the region, however, is the increasing significance of multilateral Institutions

(East Asia Summit; ASEAN-US summit) reflecting the common interest of smaller and middle-sized Asian states and the US as external actor to accommodate and balance the rise of China.

At the heart of the reinforced bilateral partnerships still is the relationship with Japan whose test of a ballistic missile in 1998 triggered a series of policy decisions that prioritized establishing a multi-layered missile defense system in close collaboration with the United States. Ever since, Japan has expressed concerns over China's military modernization and incrementally lifted earlier restrictions on arms exports (anticipating the selling of submarines to countries like the Philippines and perhaps Vietnam) and a ban on the military use of space. In 2010, the revised defense guidelines for the first time took note of a "global shift in the balance of power", worrying about the relative change of influence of the United States in the region and new "gray zone areas" such as the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and the seas and islands (in the case of Japan the Senkaku islands) to the South threatened by China (Liff 2010). At the same time, they also reflect Japan's willingness to develop technologies capable of a more proactive defense posture and thus deepen the security alliance with the United States in areas such as contingency planning, joint training and operations, and technology cooperation, with a particular focus on ballistic missile defense.

The result of Japan's continuous efforts to set new parameters for the cooperation with the US is the new Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation, released in April 2015. These guidelines allow greater flexibility for the defense planners in both countries pursuing "seamless, robust, flexible, and effective" bilateral responses and providing "general framework and policy direction" for the cooperation necessary for such responses (Department of Defense 27. Apr. 2015). They focus on how both countries will respond to the security concerns that directly affect Japan's security by singling out space and cyber as the two domains that hold the greatest potential for expanding cooperation. And they, for the first time, mention cooperation in defense equipment, encouraging Japan to come up with a coherent policy on how it wants to nurture its defense industrial base.

Apart from Japan, the strategic relationship with South Korea remains essential to maintain the balance of power in Northeast Asia. Parallel to the agreement with Japan, Washington and South Korea have embarked on the idea of shared command structures at the tactical level in June 2015. By establishing a combined division comprising units of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division and the ROK Army 8th Mechanized Infantry Division both sides want to strengthen their capacity of making swift and coordinated tactical responses to crises in an expeditious manner. The presence of the combined division north of Seoul is to help deter conventional North Korean threats by displaying a robust alliance at the operational levels, but

also at a tactical level. Above that it is to make North Korea more cautious in planning any military aggression against that area (Jee 2015). The agreement has been accompanied by a clear signal by Washington to extend its security guarantee to South Korea by increasing support for the ROK's BMD capabilities as well.

Along with the reassurance of staunch allies in Northeast, Washington has launched several initiatives to rebalance itself within Asia-Pacific by growing partnerships with many Southeast Asian states, which primarily pursue soft balancing of China. As evidenced by recent Chinese activities in the South China Sea and throughout the Pacific islands, the stakes are growing fastest in South and Southeast Asia. Though Australia and the Philippines have always been the Southern anchors of US partnerships in the Pacific—with Australia being the essential link in the US, Indo-Pacific strategy –, countries such as Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia or Malaysia (some of them still with rather repressive regimes) are meanwhile reaching out to Washington for stronger military (as well as economic and political) cooperation as well—and, vice versa, is the US pivoting to them. In October 2014, Washington lifted its restrictions on some military sales to assist Vietnam in resisting Chinese territorial encroachments in the South China Sea. Since 2011, the US has participated in several joint military exercises with all of these countries, spending over \$100 million on involving joint military forces, interagency activities, and several partner nations. And it has increased its efforts to support and prepare the countries for shared regional challenges according to their specific relevance by e.g.: pushing the Philippines to develop a full range of defense capabilities; improving Indonesia's air-sea capabilities; upgrading Singapore's air force capabilities; expanding the scope of activities during the annual US-Vietnam naval exercises; and advocating substantial international military and education training (IMET) expansion throughout Southeast Asia. All these efforts are meant to guarantee US deterrence and the regional balance of power by sustaining not only a forward military presence in the Asia Pacific, but also enabling its network of allies and strategic partners on deterring other states, primarily China, from challenging American core values and interests such as the freedom navigation.

5 Conclusion

With the election of Trump America's traditional role of the offshore balancer is likely to erode if the president would follow his campaign rhetoric. Particularly his view on trade can have implications for security in the region as well. Trump's withdrawal from TPP (and other multilateral trade agreements such as

TTIP) while at the same time scaling up protectionist measures and squeezing economic concessions from China on trade and alleged currency manipulations will probably—at least temporarily—increase output growth, possibly reaching 4%, by driving up the price of import-competing goods and triggering higher inflation (with the Fed's independence coming under attack); this will have positive impacts for the world economy, including Europe. It will, however, also have serious implications for the US' economic and strategic interests in the region in the medium run by giving Beijing leeway for its own geopolitical interests. More likely than the other 11 members going ahead and implementing TPP without the US is that China becomes the game-changer stepping forward to try to shape the rules in the region favorable to its interests. As Russia, Beijing will be eager to fill the power vacuum left by the US geopolitical withdrawal. The consequences could be a double backlash to the US interests: Economically, more countries could start giving up their traditionally rather neutral position between China and the US and rebalancing toward Beijing, while countries relying on the US' security umbrella (like Japan) might think of other strategic options. At the same time the idea of disrupting commerce with China would not only negatively affect US manufacturing supply chains with Chinese facilities (which cannot simply be disrupted by huge new tariffs anyway) but also have a huge impact on the US budget deficit being primarily financed by Chinese currency reserves. Against this background the crucial challenge for Washington will be to accept that China is becoming a maritime power that operates in maritime zones traditionally controlled by the US and its allies on the one hand, and further support the principles of sovereignty and maritime zone rights without compromising globally recognized principles of international law on the other hand. Washington could agree to scale down its own "Freedom of Navigation Operations" (FONOPs) and overflight exercises—which it recognizes as customary international law—without giving up on its status as offshore balancer for the other ASEAN claimant nations, thereby probably avoiding any escalation of major encounters at sea.

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