

Rebalancing to the Pacific: Asia Pivot or Divot?

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The Obama Administration heralded its Asia Pivot strategy as a major break from the policies of its predecessor, even proclaiming that the U.S. was now back in Asia as a result. Asia was to be given primacy in American foreign policy, reflecting the importance of the region to U.S. national interests and the drawdown of American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Yet three years after its introduction, uncertainties linger as to just how significant a policy shift the Asia Pivot actually was. More important, Asian nations are now questioning U.S. military capabilities and resolve—the result of underfunded U.S. defense requirements and perceived American foreign policy missteps.

Perceptions that U.S. rhetoric has not been backed by sufficient resources and commitment and that Washington remains focused on a series of unresolved crises elsewhere can have profound implications for Asia. North Korea and China, for example, may be emboldened to test the United States as they pursue policies that are inimical to peace and stability in Asia.

Asia's Strategic Importance to the United States

Asia has been since the 19th century—and will continue to be—a region of vital importance to the United States. At present, Asia contains more than half of the world's population; two of the three largest global economies (China and Japan); and the world's fastest-growing economies, which generate 40 percent of the world's GDP growth—more than any other region.¹

Asia is America's largest trading partner,² accounting for 38 percent of total U.S. trade in goods for 2013,³ compared with 30 percent with North America⁴ and 20 percent for Europe.⁵ Five of the United States' seven major defense treaties are with Asia-Pacific nations, and Washington has strong partnerships with many other nations in the region.

Consequently, control of Asia by a hostile power would threaten American economic and security national interests. Yet stability in Asia is already being threatened by a number of factors: North Korea's growing military capabilities, China's increasingly aggressive behavior, long-standing sovereignty disputes, historical animosities, and rising nationalism.

In the absence of any regional architecture comparable to either the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or the European Union, the United States has proven to be the only nation with both the capabilities and the historical record necessary to assume the role of regional balancer and “honest broker.” But to reassure allies and deter opponents, the United States must maintain a strong economic, diplomatic, and military presence throughout Asia. Such an unambiguous approach is the key to regional peace and stability.

Continuity in U.S. Asia Policy

For decades, the United States has maintained a significant military presence in the Pacific. As President George H. W. Bush declared in his 1990 East Asia Strategy Initiative, “we believe that our forward pres-

ence in the Asia–Pacific region will remain critical to deterring war, supporting our regional and bilateral objectives, and performing our military missions.”⁶ In the words of Admiral Samuel J. Locklear, III, commander of U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), “For about the last 70 years, we have been the centerpiece of the security architecture [in the Pacific].”⁷

As the U.S. withdrew military forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama Administration evaluated the United States’ global security interests and saw the need for greater prioritization to Asia. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s seminal “America’s Pacific Century” article in *Foreign Policy* defined the Asia Pivot as “among the most important diplomatic efforts of our time.”⁸ President Barack Obama declared in 2011 that “I have, therefore, made a deliberate and strategic decision—as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future.”⁹

Emphasizing the reinvigoration of American focus on Asia, President Obama declared that “the U.S. is back in Asia.”¹⁰ The policy was able to build on the efforts of multitudes of U.S. diplomats, businesspeople, and servicemembers who had continued to toil in Asia even as greater priority had been placed on the global war on terrorism.

The Obama Administration points out correctly that the Asia Pivot is a multifaceted strategy that consists of more than just a military component. However, nearly three years after the rollout of the Asia Pivot, many of the details remain undefined, and there is uncertainty as to the extent to which the strategy is different from long-standing U.S. policies in Asia.

Since diplomatic and political engagement is ethereal and success is difficult to measure, some experts have adopted metrics such as “number of meetings in Asia attended by senior U.S. officials” in order to measure the success of the Asia Pivot. For example, the National Defense University assessed that Obama Administration officials have “spent significantly more time in [Asian] regional meetings” than those of his predecessors.¹¹ Meetings are important to affirm alliances, establish rapport among leaders, and push policy objectives; but it is easy to get lost in the procedures and forget that meetings, dialogue, and engagement are *tools* to reach an objective rather than objectives themselves.

Other than new trade agreements, economic interaction with Asia is largely outside of the govern-

ment’s control. Moreover, the major economic components cited as proof of the Asia Pivot—the South Korea–U.S. Free Trade Agreement and the multilateral Trans-Pacific Partnership—were both initiated by the Bush Administration.

Changes in the U.S. military force posture in Asia are thus the most measurable component of the Pivot and the one that lends itself to distinguishing this new prioritization from that of previous Administrations. President Obama pledged in 2012 that the United States “will be strengthening our presence in the Asia Pacific and budget reductions will not come at the expense of that critical region.” Then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta affirmed that “[w]e will continue not only to maintain, but to strengthen our presence” in Asia¹² and “increase its institutional weight and focus on enhanced presence, power projection, and deterrence in the Asia–Pacific.”¹³

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, during his 2012 Shangri-La Security Dialogue speech, declared that by 2020, the Navy would redeploy its forces from today’s 50/50 split between the Pacific and Atlantic to a 60/40 split in favor of the Pacific. He also stated that there would be six aircraft carriers in the Pacific as well as the majority of U.S. cruisers, destroyers, Littoral Combat Ships, and submarines.¹⁴

Asia Pivot Requires Forces and Funding

The Asia Pivot policy is sound only if the requisite military forces are deployed in the Pacific—a number that must be commensurate with a stated increase in the region’s importance. Without such a deployment, the Pivot will fail to reassure allies or deter potential opponents. Claims that U.S. forces in the Pacific will be immune from duties elsewhere or from budget cuts that will affect the U.S. Joint Force over the next several years simply do not hold water. Though the U.S. Army and Marine Corps were increased by 100,000 troops to handle the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, U.S. soldiers and Marines were also removed from Asia to serve in those wars.

Even well before sequestration-mandated budget cuts, it was obvious that the United States was underfunding defense requirements essential to maintaining security commitments in Asia. In February 2012, Panetta testified that the United States would rebalance its force posture to emphasize Asia, but he added that the defense budget maintained only the current bomber, aircraft carrier, and

big-deck amphibious fleets and restored Army and Marine Corps force structure in the Pacific to pre-Iraq and pre-Afghanistan deployment levels.¹⁵

On the surface, the Obama Administration's 2015 budget projections appear to maintain current levels of defense spending. As economist Robert Samuelson points out, defense spending in nominal dollars (unadjusted for inflation) remains static between 2013 and 2024: \$626 billion in 2013 and \$630 billion in 2024.

However, a closer review of these numbers reveals that, once adjusted for inflation, U.S. defense spending drops by 25 percent.¹⁶ It is difficult to envision how the President's Pivot can be executed successfully with such a decrease in defense spending, a point underscored by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, who has stated that, with sequestration budget cuts, the military is in danger of becoming "a hollow force, one that is not ready, one that is not capable of fulfilling assigned missions. In the longer term, after trimming the military enough to restore readiness and modernization, the resulting force would be too small—too small to fully execute the president's defense strategy."¹⁷

Asia Pivot Derailed by Defense Budget Cuts

Although there have been no force reductions in the Pacific as there have been in other commands, the cuts in the overall defense procurement and training budgets have already negatively affected U.S. forces in the Asia-Pacific region. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Acquisition Katrina G. McFarland admitted in March 2014 that as a result of defense budget cuts, "Right now, the [Asia] pivot is being looked at again, because candidly it can't happen."¹⁸

The ability of the U.S. to fulfill its security obligations rests on two factors: the actual number of military forces available and the quality of those forces. Having requisite forces in the long term requires sufficient ongoing funding for their procurement. The quality of those forces is determined in part by adequate training. Current U.S. defense budgets for military forces in the Pacific are insufficient to provide for numbers or quality, let alone both.

Navy. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert has told Congress that in order to meet the global needs of combatant commanders, the Navy would need a 450-ship fleet. Currently, the Navy has 289 ships and hopes to achieve a 306-ship fleet by the end of the decade, but attaining 306 ships

would require a shipbuilding budget of \$18 billion per year over the next 20-plus years. Since the current FY 2013–FY 2019 plan is for only \$13 billion per year, "the largest fleet of current ship designs that the Navy would be able to afford is 30% smaller than the goal—or about 220 ships."¹⁹

Representative Randy Forbes (R-VA), Chairman of the Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, has expressed concern that "in 2007 we met 90-percent [*sic*] of the combatant commander's requirements. This year we will only meet 43 percent."²⁰ In addition, the current defense budget does not include funding to refuel and overhaul the USS *George Washington*, which could lead the Navy to have to decommission the aircraft carrier. Doing so would reduce the carrier fleet from 11 to 10, despite then-Secretary of Defense Panetta's pledge that "the President of the United States and all of us have decided that it is important for us to maintain our carrier presence at full strength. And that means we'll be keeping 11 carriers in our force."²¹

Given that the Navy historically dedicates from one-third to one-quarter of its deployed fleet to operations in the Pacific, such a dramatic decrease in fleet size can only have a negative impact on the United States' naval capabilities in the region.

Marine Corps. Naval and amphibious operations are the backbone of U.S. military deterrence and defense capabilities in the Pacific. Yet Admiral Samuel Locklear, III, PACOM commander, testified that due to a lack of large amphibious ships, landing craft, and other amphibious vehicles, the Navy and Marine Corps do not have enough assets to carry out contested amphibious operations in the Pacific if a crisis were to arise.²² Locklear added that there is a "continuing demand" for PACOM to provide other deployed and ready forces to the other regional combatant commanders, creating "periods in PACOM where we lack adequate intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities as well as key response forces, ultimately degrading our deterrence posture and our ability to respond."

The Marine Corps has stated that it would need 54 amphibious assault ships to fulfill the validated requirements of all the combatant commanders. That would be the number needed to deploy three Marine Expeditionary Brigades (MEBs), since each MEB requires at least 17 ships for a force of 17,500 Marines and all their gear. But the Navy's shipbuild-

ing budget—a critical factor for U.S. forces in the Pacific—has not been sufficient to meet combatant commander requirements for years, so the Marine Corps and Navy have had to settle for the ability to transport and deploy less than two full MEBs—nearly half of required capabilities.

The most recent Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) again validated the requirement for 38 amphibious warships to move two MEBs, but current fiscal pressures led to a decline from 33 to 28 warships, meaning that the Corps' actual ability to conduct a large-scale amphibious operation will amount to a mere 1.5 MEBs, or roughly a half-dozen battalions of Marines with their supporting aviation—presuming that all amphibians from around the world were brought together for a single operation. The latest Navy plans do not envision a force of 33 amphibious warships until at least the mid-2020s, which would still meet only two-thirds of the total requirement.²³

Then-Marine Commandant General James Amos warned that defense cuts could “translate into increased loss of personnel and materiel, and ultimately [place] mission accomplishment at risk.”²⁴ Twenty retired Marine Corps generals wrote Congress in March 2014 to warn that the shortage of amphibious ships—and the reduced maintenance of the existing fleet—had “degraded our current national security capabilities and will have negative effects long into the 21st century.”²⁵

Beyond this, Marine Corps fighter squadrons used to have 12–14 aircraft available. Now they usually have 12, but in 2015 that may decrease to eight deployable aircraft per squadron.

U.S. Air Force. The U.S. Air Force has grounded 13 combat squadrons (250 planes), nearly one-third of its active-duty fighter and bomber squadrons. Air Force officials said they have implemented a “tiered readiness” approach for active-duty air combat units and warned that there may not be sufficient combat air power to respond immediately to contingencies. Moreover, for every month a squadron does not fly, it takes an equal number of months to retrain the pilots.²⁶

Recently, the Air Force had to cancel a two-week flying exercise in which units from the Asia-Pacific region and allied air forces would have trained together. The 374th Airlift Wing in Japan had to cut its flying program by 25 percent and cancel its participation in a combined drill in Thailand called Cope Tiger.²⁷

U.S. Army. The Army has had to cut training above squad and platoon levels, including all but one of the Combat Training Center rotations scheduled for brigades this fiscal year. Depot maintenance was also halted, and the Army cut flying hours from aviation training, creating a shortfall of pilots. General Raymond T. Odierno, the Army Chief of Staff, told Congress that “should a contingency arise, there may not be enough time to avoid sending forces into harm’s way unprepared.”²⁸

General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, commander of U.N. and U.S. forces in Korea, testified that he has doubts about America’s ability to counter a large-scale North Korean attack effectively due to the low readiness of forces stationed outside of Korea. He warned that “[a]ny delay in the arrival or reduction in readiness of these forces would lengthen the time required to accomplish key missions in crisis or war, likely resulting in higher civilian and military casualties.”²⁹

In other words, cuts in the defense budget affect the ability of the U.S. military to prepare for and engage in operations in general, but especially the Pivot to Asia.

Reducing Requirements Rather than Providing Resources

The ongoing cuts in the U.S. defense budget reflect President Obama’s intent to reduce U.S. commitments overseas. President Obama perceives that “the tide of war is receding” and with it “the end of long-term nation-building with large military footprints.”³⁰ Defining the overseas threat environment as less hostile, the President has directed a decrease in U.S. defense requirements and capabilities.

President Obama’s 2010 QDR stated that “U.S. forces must plan and prepare to prevail in a broad range of operations [including] conducting large-scale stability operations.”³¹ But his 2012 Defense Guidance reversed this position, saying instead that “U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations” like those in Iraq and Afghanistan.³²

Similarly, President Obama’s 2012 defense guidance advocated jettisoning the long-standing “two war” force-sizing construct. The new, more constrained strategy meant abandoning the decades-long U.S. objective of being able to fight two opponents simultaneously—instead substituting a delaying action against the second opponent.³³

By eliminating the standing U.S. objective of being able to fight two major regional conflicts simultaneously, the President provided himself the justification to slash defense forces. For example, the President noted that there is “significant excess capacity in the U.S. airlift fleets.”³⁴ However, this excess exists only because the President’s new policy no longer required the ability to manage two large conflicts. Furthermore, despite a critical need for transport in the Pacific, President Obama directed the Pentagon to cut 27 C-5, 65 C-130, and 38 C-27 transport aircraft³⁵ even though the Pacific theater—presumably the more important region as proposed in the Asia Pivot strategy—has a much higher requirement for long-range lift than any other due to its geography alone.

Unfortunately, as demonstrated by recent events, the international environment remains a dangerous arena. After Russia annexed Crimea, President Obama dismissed the idea of conflict in Europe as “the kind of thinking that should have ended with the Cold War.”³⁶ He described Russian President Vladimir Putin as operating from a “position of weakness” in Ukraine, despite Putin’s obvious success in carving out a portion of Ukraine’s sovereign territory and fomenting dramatic levels of instability in its eastern region. Similarly, Secretary of State John Kerry opined that “[y]ou just don’t in the 21st century behave in 19th century fashion by invading another country.”³⁷ It seems the leaders of other countries are not inclined to behave as the U.S. would prefer.

Kerry was also uncertain of the need to augment forces in the Pacific as part of President Obama’s Asia Pivot. At his confirmation hearings, Kerry announced:

I’m not convinced that increased military ramp-up is critical yet. I’m not convinced of that.... We have a lot more bases [and forces] out there than any other nation in the world, including China today.... You know, the Chinese take a look at that and say, what’s the United States doing? They [*sic*] trying to circle us?³⁸

The Asia Pivot Is Not Working

America’s Allies Are Not Reassured. During his 2014 Asia trip, President Obama claimed that “our alliances in the Asia Pacific have never been stronger. Our relationship with ASEAN countries in Southeast Asia has never been stronger. I don’t think

that’s subject to dispute.”³⁹ But for all the emphasis on the Asia Pivot, there is little to show in actual, tangible results. Allies are nervous, and opponents are emboldened. Indeed, a prevalent theme of President Obama’s foreign policy and his 2014 Asia trip was built around the need to reassure U.S. friends and allies in the region.

Allies of the United States around the world—not just those in Asia—have expressed grave misgivings about Washington’s capability and resolve to help them defend against escalating security threats. First up were the Europeans, who expressed concern that the Asia Pivot meant a reduced American commitment to their defense. The withdrawal of two U.S. Army brigade combat teams (BCTs) from the continent, cutting in half the BCTs that the U.S. maintained in Europe following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, heightened their trepidation.

Asian allies, initially heartened by the renewed U.S. focus on the region, continue to express concern about China’s unrelenting assertiveness in pushing extralegal sovereignty claims on their territories. The weak U.S. response to Beijing’s bullying led the Philippines, one of just a handful of American treaty allies, effectively to cede its claims to the Scarborough Shoals.

Consequently, an increasingly nervous Tokyo has called repeatedly for stronger U.S. support to deter similar Chinese intimidation against the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands. South Korea and Japan watched with growing dismay as Washington first cut \$480 billion from the long-term military budget only to warn then of the catastrophic consequences that sequestration would have for U.S. armed forces. Yet when the sequester hit, slicing an additional \$500 billion, Washington claimed that it could still fulfill American security commitments, though admittedly with “additional but acceptable risk.”⁴⁰

Seoul and Tokyo were flummoxed when Syrian President Assad crossed the U.S. redline against using chemical weapons against civilians and President Obama refused to implement the pledged military response. These allies have privately expressed fears that Washington might similarly abandon its defense commitments to them if North Korea or China attacked.

In early 2013, North Korea ratcheted up tensions by threatening nuclear strikes against the U.S. and South Korea, abrogating the armistice ending the Korean War and nullifying all inter-Korean nonag-

gression pacts. Initially, the United States demonstrated resolve, augmenting forces committed to an annual bilateral military exercise with South Korea. However, Secretary of State Kerry soon revealed that as the crisis continued, the Obama Administration had elected to change course in the face of North Korean threats. Kerry stated during a press conference in Seoul that “President Obama [had] ordered a number of exercises not to be undertaken. We have lowered our rhetoric significantly.”⁴¹

Rather than standing up to blatant belligerence, the United States stepped back, citing the potential for conflict escalation on the Korean peninsula as its primary concern. Secretary Kerry explained, “Let’s face it. Everyone here knows this, we’ve got enough problems to deal with around the world.”⁴² One can only imagine the glee in Pyongyang and the trepidation in Seoul at the U.S.’s prioritizing other regions over defending our Korean ally, in addition to the pall cast over the initial optimism accompanying announcement of the United States’ return to Pacific affairs.

Finally, Russia’s military incursion into Crimea and subsequent U.S. affirmation of support to European NATO nations triggered yet more concerns of a “reverse Asia Pivot.” U.S. officials were dispatched to provide reassurance once again to both European and Asian allies. But the ease with which Putin annexed Crimea and the U.S. inability to prevent it from happening heightened anxiety that China could be emboldened to try a similar seizure in the Pacific.

Opponents Have Not Moderated Behavior. Despite an uptick in meetings in Asia—a case of substituting wingtip shoes for soldiers’ boots—the United States has failed to temper Chinese and North Korean belligerence.

In recent years, Beijing has used military and economic threats, bombastic language, and military bullying to extend its extralegal claims of sovereignty in the East and South China Seas. In November 2013, China declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, including the Senkaku Islands, and threatened to use its military to enforce it. Washington condemned the declaration as a provocative act that exacerbated tensions in the region and increased the risks of a military clash. However, U.S. protests and those of other countries in the region have had marginal effect as China continues to maintain the ADIZ.

Beijing attempts to divert attention from its own actions by mischaracterizing Japan as a threat to regional security. China’s bellicose actions have fueled regional concern and have triggered a greater Japanese willingness to confront Chinese expansionism and strengthen the Japanese military. Japan’s willingness to defend its territory has been mischaracterized by China as a resurgence of 1930s imperial Japanese militarism when, in fact, it is a logical response to increased Chinese provocations.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has maintained his regime’s threatening behavior and has continued its quest to augment its nuclear and missile-delivery capabilities. North Korea credits Jong-un with being the mastermind behind the regime’s two attacks on South Korea in 2010, which resulted in 50 South Korean deaths. Clearly, the Administration’s current approach to North Korea is insufficient as the Communist nation continues to menace U.S. allies.

Conclusion

For the Asia Pivot to deter aggression, America’s opponents must believe that any belligerent act by them will invite a retaliatory response. Such a response must be able to inflict such cost and pain as to outweigh any potential benefit sought by the aggressor—thereby leading the aggressor to refrain from initiating a military attack in the first place. To deter an adversary, the threat of retaliation must be seen as credible, something that requires both viable military means and a demonstrated unquestionable resolve to use them.

Despite strong pledges of support from U.S. politicians and diplomats, America’s Asian allies will not be reassured—and opponents will not be deterred—if they perceive weakness in either American capabilities or American resolve. America’s slashed defense budgets and unenforced redlines embolden its opponents to practice coercive diplomacy and bully its allies.

North Korea and China could also be tempted to act if either perceives an American public weary of war, an intensely divided U.S. Congress, and U.S. allies even more reluctant than usual to employ military force to counter armed belligerence. Increasingly strained relations between Japan and South Korea over historic issues further complicate matters, as such conflict diverts attention away from current security threats while hindering the development of allied military capabilities.

During his 2014 trip to Asia, President Obama declared support for South Korea and affirmed that the Japanese–U.S. security treaty covers the Senkaku Islands. But for the Asia Pivot policy to be effective, a principled message of affirming U.S. support for international law and defending America’s allies must be backed by resolute U.S. actions, including (1) reversing dangerous defense budget cuts; (2) maintaining a robust forward-deployed U.S. military presence; (3) strengthening and modernizing America’s alliances; and (4) standing up to China’s use of intimidation, coercion, or force to assert a territorial claim.

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