



## EMERGING SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN SOUTHEAST & EAST ASIA THE AMERICAN PIVOT AND REBALANCING



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A belief persists that the new American policy to 'pivot' or 'rebalance' towards Asia is an exaggeration, because the United States was always present in Asia. In our view, the 'pivot' or "re-balancing" of American attention toward Asia became inevitable after the end of the Cold War encouraged Western triumphalism, best symbolized by the Fukuyama thesis that Western liberal democracy had triumphed over the Marxian idiom.

Thereafter, the end point of human evolution, Fukuyama proclaimed, was "the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of

Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

The American triumph, however, did not last beyond one decade. The 9/11 attack by the al Qaeda on the American mainland unleashed a series of events that mired the United States in two wars (Iraq and Afghanistan) wherein the problems of extrication became more greatly complex than that of entry. These conflicts also triggered the financial crisis currently afflicting the United States and Western Europe. There is no end in sight to this financial crisis. But, an American response to this power shift was only to be expected.

How has the United States manifested its 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' towards Asia? During his visit to Australia in November 2011 President Obama delivered a clear message regarding American interests in Asia, when he informed that the United States would station 2500 US Marines in Darwin, and position military aircraft in northern Australia as part of a planned



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expansion of American presence in the region. President Obama also announced that: "Every nation will chart its own course. Yet it is also true that certain rights are universal, among them freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and the freedom of citizens to choose their own leaders. This is the future we seek in the Asia Pacific — security, prosperity and dignity for all... So let there be no doubt: in the Asia Pacific in the 21st century, the United States of America is all in". Apart from countering China's 'soft power', the United States will also be shifting 60 % of its naval assets from the Atlantic into the Pacific Ocean. Indeed, the US 'pivot' towards Asia would be as decisive as its allying with Europe to confront the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Some doubts have appeared recently whether the Obama II administration will remain committed to 'pivoting' towards Asia as it was earlier, but its actions do not reveal any dilution of purpose.

## I MOTIVES OF THE US 'PIVOT'

The United States is fully aware of the growing mistrust in East and Southeast Asia with Chinese assertiveness in their neighboring waters, and has seized the opportunity to enlarge its presence here. The US has also noticed the apathy in these regions towards any dispensation dominated by China. Hence, pivoting towards Asia would reassure US friends

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and allies that they can shelter under its security umbrella. Washington does recognize its need to cooperate with China due to their close economic interdependence. But, the United States also has China in its cross-hairs while 'pivoting' towards Asia. Assuredly, the US 'pivot' and Chinese intransigence could generate greater volatility in the Asia Pacific.

Four more reasons are underlying the US pivot towards Asia in response to the tectonic shift in the world's center of gravity from Europe to Asia.

First, the state of the US domestic finances needs greater attention with the financial crisis having crippled its economy with no credible signs of its early amelioration. No doubt the 'financial cliff' was averted. But the Obama Administration continues to face a serious fiscal challenge to balance its budget. Else it faces a mandatory 'sequestration' of funds necessitating, among other measures, painful reductions in military expenditure.

A bipartisan consensus on how military expenditure might be reduced has proven elusive, and a bitter debate proceeds on how to reach a consensus agreement. The consequent re-prioritization of objectives and retrenchment of commitments might include withdrawing aircraft carrier task forces from active deployment, postponement of procurement plans for new missiles, reduction in flying hours for training pilots and so on. These stresses on the defense budget have informed a diminution of the American presence in the Atlantic, and its transference to the waters off the Asia-Pacific rimland. The US could make a bigger play thereafter for Indonesia and Vietnam to augment its alliance with South Korea, Japan and Taiwan.

Second, viewed in historical perspective, the Clinton administration had wished to treat China as a strategic partner, but the Bush administration considered China to

be a strategic competitor, and identified the East Asian Littoral as being the chief focus of US security interests. This region was defined as extending from Japan to Australia and the Bay of Bengal where the Obama administration is focusing its attention. Rivalry with China is currently shaping the geo-strategic policies of the United States, which is supported by its Treaty partners--South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Australia. The US 'pivot' amounts to an offshore containment strategy, resembling the US on-shore containment of the USSR by establishing an American presence along the periphery of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Third, the United States has also cast itself in the role of upholding the international norms relating to freedom of the seas, which is a universal right. Thereby, the United States is ensuring the right of all nations to the peaceful use of the oceans. By contrast China's aggressive plans to expand its territorial waters in the East and South China Sea on the basis of vague claims to "lost territories" casts it in the role of a contrarian power wishing to alter the settled law on the freedom of the seas. In a defensive move, the Southeast Asian and East Asian nations have been forced to band together and solicit the countervailing power of the United States. Overall, the pivoting of the United States towards strengthens American influence, but works to the detriment of Chinese global interests in Asia.

Fourth, an emerging reason explains the American 'pivot' towards Asia evident from President Obama's State of the Union Address, in which he said, "We produce more oil at home than we have in 15 years. We have doubled the distance our cars will go on a gallon of gas, and the amount of renewable energy we generate from sources like wind and solar... Last year, wind energy added nearly half of all new power capacity in America. So let's generate even more. Solar energy gets cheaper by

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the year...I'm also issuing a new goal for America: Let's cut in half the energy wasted by our homes and businesses over the next 20 years." In consequence, the United States could lighten its footprint in the Middle East and transfer its attention to East and Southeast Asia.

## II MILITARY DIMENSIONS OF AMERICAN PIVOT

The military implications of the US 'pivot' have great significance for the Asia-Pacific region. As noted earlier, it involves a shift of 60 % of American naval-air forces from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, with a new emphasis on Asia-Pacific cooperation. The United States has also evolved a new AirSea Battle concept premised on tri-Service integration and cyber security. It is designed to counter China's A2AD anti-access/area denial strategy. The US is also establishing Expeditionary Strike Groups, which requires an upgradation of sea-based forces and control of maritime choke points. The cooperation of the maritime Asian powers will be necessary to operationalise this new strategy.

The foregoing makes clear that China is the main competitor of the United States for a medley of strategic, political and financial reasons. But China is heavily invested in US Federal reserves, and cannot withdraw its investments without weakening the dollar, which would adversely affect Chinese investments. The

strategic and economic aspects of Sino-US relations are thus intertwined, and their relationship resembles that of Siamese twins joined at the hip.

Kissinger's views on the inherent relationship between an aspiring and status quo power demand our attention. In his book, *On China*, he cites with approval Eyre Crowe, a British Foreign service official, who argued in 1907 that relations between a rising Germany and the established United Kingdom must inevitably clash. Like UK, the United States is an established maritime power, whereas China, like Germany, is a rising continental power. China emerged in the first half of the twentieth century as a Communist state after two centuries of foreign domination. It constituted a central challenge for the United States, which opposed its entry into the United Nations for over two decades.

The Nixon-Kissinger initiative in 1972 reset American policy towards China. Zhou En Lai had the wished, apparently, to foster a new international equilibrium, but not a final state of Sino-American relations. What Chou really wanted was a world in which China could find security and progress through a kind of combative coexistence within the concept of coexistence. Kissinger also believes that: "The appropriate label for the Sino-American relationship is less partnership than "co-evolution." It means that both countries pursue their domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjusting their relations to minimize

conflict. Neither side endorses all the aims of the other or presumes a total identity of interest, but both sides seek to identify and develop contemporary interests."

### III

#### CAN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA BECOME A DUOPOLY?

If they cannot be separated and must "co-evolve", is it possible for the United States and China to establish a cooperative and non-competitive relationship? The contrary case can first be noticed.

As contrasted with Australia the pivots of both North America and Europe are half-hearted, since Asia does not stir their 'imaginaries', or the values and cultural references that bind populations together. Washington's pivot is military, including rotation of US marines through Darwin, Australia, and increasing naval presence in the Pacific. Whether Beijing, and Taipei, Tokyo, Seoul and Canberra see these military postures as credible in the light of US budgetary weakness and political discord is uncertain, What is clear, however, is that China has always been a continental power. Its maritime interests and activities are growing now, which presages an inevitable contestation with the United States. The paradox arises from the reality that U.S. primacy cannot remain uncontested, but its withdrawal from the Asia-Pacific region would not serve the best interests of the East and Southeast Asian nations.

The question of finances becomes all-important here since the United States will need to compete with China in Southeast Asia that has been investing heavily in its neighborhood. However, pressures on American finances leading to budget cuts, sequestration of funds and so on could reduce the ability of the United States to maintain its new commitments in Asia arising from the US 'pivot' or 'rebalancing.'

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The possibility, therefore, of a Sino-US duopoly emerging in Asia is not credible for reasons that include finance and economics, but also lie within the lessons of history, which informs that an inherent hostility underlies relations between aspiring and status quo powers. It can therefore be prognosticated that a see-saw relationship between China and the United States shall be witnessed to acquire the crowning position of G-1 in the world. China, moreover, has divorced its trade and financial relations with nations from its political and strategic content as evident from the course of Sino-Indian relations, which would be equally applicable to Sino-American relations. However, the United States is hardly likely to articulate its desire to contain China within Asia, but would probably emphasize its need to develop a strategic partnership with China; hence US policy towards China must be inferred from American actions, and not its words.

#### IV CONCLUSIONS

It has perceptively been noticed by Amitav Acharya that, "The United States has conflated what is essentially a military approach, underpinned by a balance of power mindset, with Asia's pre-existing cooperative security approach, which underpins the ASEAN Regional Forum, APEC and the EAS. Cooperative security means 'security with' China; rebalancing means 'security against' China."

However, China must also share responsibility for avoiding regional conflict, now that it is registering an enhanced presence in Southeast Asia by shifting its low-end manufacturing units to this region because of rapidly rising labor costs in China. But, China has, fecklessly, provoked disputes and used primitive nationalism to intimidate their neighbors. Beijing's posture on the South China Sea, for instance, is couched in needlessly belligerent terms.

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For their part, the East and Southeast Asian states have taken advantage of China's economic growth; their angst vis-à-vis China has been mitigated by deepening intra-regional cooperation, alongside strengthening military ties with the US. They are also deepening trade links with the rising Asian economies like India and Indonesia.

Nothing illustrates China's responsibility towards ensuring regional stability better than its self-anointed role to moderate North Korea's nuclear intransigence. China urges the other participants in the Six-Party Talks to show patience in dealing with Pyongyang, but has failed to stop its steady pursuit of nuclear weapons and missile capabilities. Each nuclear test (2006, 2009, 2013) conducted by North Korea has stirred up debate in Seoul on exercising its nuclear option. Seoul's interest in these weapons goes back to the 1970s. Not that Seoul is likely to exercise its nuclear option at this juncture and prejudice its intimate tie with the United States. Moreover, it would to emulate North Korea by withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, that would invite the opprobrium and economic sanctions from the international community. On the contrary, North Korea's successful nuclear quest that China could not prevent has led to a renewed security commitment by the United States to South Korea and Japan. A larger American military presence in the region would heighten the threat to China, but also provide a greater

strategic rationale for the US 'pivot' towards Asia.

Finally, what of India? The geographical reality must inform us that India's Andaman and Nicobar islands lie closer to Southeast Asia than to mainland India; hence its strategic interests are bound to clash with that of China in this region. India's interests, moreover, in the off-shore oil fields of the South China Sea has both energy and security dimensions. It is also apparent that a paradoxical situation is obtaining in the international system, involving simultaneous rise and decline in bilateral relations viz. between China and the U.S. in the global sphere, and between India and China in Asia.

Remarkably, India's emergence does not cause much anxiety in Asia, unlike the rise of China. Lee Kuan Yew had dramatized this difference by inquiring why states fear China's 'peaceful' rise but not India's 'emergence.' The answer lies in the bon mot that if China's rise is peaceful, why does it need to keep emphasizing this point? It is entirely conceivable that Asian states will move closer to India to hedge against China, which offers New Delhi important strategic advantages. Significantly, this also implies that India's own ambitions would mesh more closely with those of the United States in Asia. Both India and the United States have an obvious interest in enlarging and strengthening a regional security architecture that privileges pluralism and democracy. America's role as resident power would not cause much discomfort.

A counsel of perfection would suggest that India's best interests lies in staying neutral between China and the US. Indeed, the anemic policy of non-alignment has gained a fresh lease of life in New Delhi, but this is unlikely to have much shelf life. The alternate policy of

equidistance between Beijing and Washington, however, seems likely to become increasingly untenable as their rivalry and competition hardens alongside India's own unreconciled problems with China. The essential question before India's foreign policy establishment has resolved into whether India and China can ally or only 'co-exist' and 'co-evolve' in the Washington-Beijing model? The answer would enable India to deal more dexterously and greater aplomb with Washington's 'pivot' towards Asia.

