

The Long, Short, and Breadth of It: Mapping the Pentagon's Rebalance to Asia

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Introduction

This policy brief is designed to provide a brief overview of the military dimension of the Obama administration's signature foreign policy initiative: the pivot, or rebalance to Asia. Although the military dimension is only one of several pillars of the rebalance, it is arguable that "the security component of U.S. rebalancing is the essential framework supporting other national efforts."¹ Yet despite this significance and the high degree of scrutiny this policy has received, its military component remains poorly understood. In particular, questions and skepticism persist regarding its purpose, its scope, and the ability of the Obama administration to see it implemented.

This paper sets out to accomplish two limited objectives. First, it attempts to explain why the US military rebalance to Asia should be viewed through both a short-term (current and ongoing) and a long-term (decades long) lens. Efforts to measure or even understand the US military rebalance to Asia need to be sensitive to two simultaneous and overlapping US Department of Defense (DoD) requirements: 1) a short-term policy of signaling presence and determination to regional actors; 2) a broader long-term geostrategic rebalancing to Asia that is part of (yet transcends) Obama administration defense policy. Second, this policy brief provides a quick heuristic map of the breadth of the military rebalance by focusing on the six key components as generally articulated by the Pentagon itself.

The Long and Short of It

The rebalance to Asia is the Obama administration's key foreign policy initiative originating in a series of public announcements in late 2011 and early 2012.² Yet the rebalance (and specifically its military dimension) also contains a strong degree of *continuation* of work carried out by previous US administrations. This continuity has led one well-placed

analyst of the military aspect of the rebalance to comment that "(f)rankly, despite the hype about a "pivot" to Asia, we found that the policy largely built upon existing plans and policies started in the Bush and even Clinton administrations".³ Amidst protestations from many in the US defense establishment that "we never left" Asia in the first place, and facing stronger criticism that the pivot has over-promised and under-delivered, defense officials have articulated both a short-term and a long-term vision of (and timeframe for) the rebalance.

In the short term, Pentagon officials have underscored that the rebalance is already being implemented every day, arguing that "the rebalance is not a goal, not a promise, or a vision — it's a reality." This emphasis is partially driven by the fact that since military deployments are more visible than diplomatic and economic initiatives, the DoD has had a disproportionate burden of "signaling" active implementation of rebalance policy vis-à-vis other government departments.

With an insatiable demand for concrete examples of the rebalance, the DoD has used a series of public speeches between 2011 and 2014 to highlight what Defense Secretary Hagel has ironically referred to as his "litany of moving assets and posture." This repetitive public process of listing what the DoD is already doing in the region includes the following: new Littoral Combat Ship deployments in Singapore and Marine rotations in Darwin Australia; planned deployment targets favoring Asia (e.g. from the current 51 to 58 ships by next year, and 60% of US naval assets, or 67 ships, deployed in the Pacific by 2020); new regional Foreign Military Sales (FMS) (e.g. Apache helicopter sales to Indonesia); new tactical aircraft deployments (e.g. F-22s, P-8s, V-22s in Japan); and recent alliance modernization successes such as progress on troop realignment in Okinawa and a new agree-

1 Wallace Gregson, "Rebalancing U.S. Security Posture in Asia", *Asia Policy* July 14 2012 p.47.

2 See Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy* October 11 2011.

3 Michael Green, 'A Strategy for enhancing our alliances and partnerships in the Asia Pacific' Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. April 25, 2013.

ment with the Philippines for an increased US military presence.⁴

Yet this short-term emphasis on military achievements has caused some critics to suggest the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia may be committing a two-fold error of "being all bark and no bite."⁵ That is, they argue it unnecessarily antagonizes China with a military-centric messaging of the rebalance, while simultaneously under-delivering the military hardware necessary to alter China's perception of the strength of the US military presence in the region. Tellingly, both critics and advocates of current US military rebalancing efforts have expressed concern that the Obama administration is moving ahead without providing clear strategic guidelines for what it wants the military to accomplish (more on this below). This ambiguity has required DoD planners to adopt definitions for the rebalance that are flexible on content, such as "it is a holding group for our policies and initiatives for the region...it is not just one policy."⁶ It has also led to critical assessments of administration directives aimed at Asia Pacific force posture, such as Ashton Carter's remarks of "no change in Marine Corps presence west of the international dateline", that fall well short of coherent strategy.⁷

2 In a parallel, long-term framework, the Pentagon has contextualized the military's place within the rebalance to Asia both forwards and backwards, in terms of "seven decades of commitment and history of commitment"⁸ extending back to WWII and out to 2020 and beyond. Indeed, one Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) official involved in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) 2014 process suggested that the rebalance needed to be contextualized in terms of the last sixty years and out into the next sixty.⁹ This should not be dismissed as an attempt by the DoD to deflect perceptions of rebalance underachievement today. Rather, it is a pragmatic acknowledgement that the administration's military pillar of the rebalance to Asia is inextricably intertwined with and cannot be separated from previous efforts—both intellectual and material—to update American defense policy in the Asia Pacific over the last fifteen years. Tellingly, looking backwards, the DoD was already publicly discussing its concerns with anti-access and area-denial (A2AD) technologies and their effects on regional military balances as early as the 2001 QDR. This long-term perspective is also driven by projections of a globally shifting balance of power towards Asia that the military will have to deal with directly well into the future after the Obama administration's second term is completed. Today, a large percentage of current military documents contextualize the rebalance to Asia as a *logical and necessary* outgrowth of geostrategic trends in Asia encompassing economic, military, political, and demographics dimensions that will compel the U.S. to stay militarily engaged in the region for decades to come. While this long-term rebalance is clearly *partially* about China, it is not *only* about China, nor is it a

policy reminiscent of Cold War containment. In the words of USN Rr. Adm. (ret.) McDevitt, the long-term function of the US military's pivot to Asia is not about preparing for conflict with China, but rather proactively shaping the security environment in such a way that conflict remains unnecessary and perhaps someday inconceivable.

Mapping the Military Strategy of the Rebalance

One widely shared criticism of the Obama administration's handling of the rebalance to Asia policy is that it has not issued a strategic document containing a singular, explicit articulation of its strategy. Despite claims that "the United States has successfully moved forward with the initial phases of implementing the military aspects of the rebalance",¹⁰ remarks made by Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Greenert last month regarding the strategy of the rebalance is more accurate and revealing: "*there is no real particular end-state yet that I am aware of or that we have been given.*"¹¹ With relatively undefined *strategic* guidance, but with clear *political* guidance to initiate a rebalance to Asia (e.g. QDR 2014)—the armed services, United States Pacific Command (PACOM) and its various service components have, at different times and places, each articulated different visions for how they will contribute to the rebalance.¹² Nevertheless, despite the absence of a singular strategic document, the military rebalance to Asia has been expressed through a series of public statements by DoD officials (e.g. press releases, Congressional testimony) and formal defense guidance. An examination of these documents reveals a generally consistent message of what the military rebalance consists of and it can be expressed in the following categories:

- 1) Rebalancing the Force Structure
- 2) Rebalancing Asia Pacific Posture and Presence
- 3) Modernizing Alliances and Extending Partnerships
- 4) New Operational Plans and Tactics
- 5) Investments and Acquisition Strategies
- 6) Engagement with China

Rebalancing Force Structure

Perhaps the single most important metric for whether or not the military can implement the rebalance is its ability to effectively carry out its regional mission of *reassuring* allies, *detering* and *dissuading* aggression from potential adversaries, and supporting the US political agenda of order and peace maintenance. However, measuring this core metric is complicated by the intersubjective and psychological nature of these italicized variables. Viewed through this lens, quantitative measurements are in a crucial sense only *inputs*, rather than *outputs*, of the rebalance to Asia, and cannot accurately be used to measure either the rate of implementation or its effectiveness.¹³ In the words of one interviewee, "you can surge troops but you can't surge trust."

4 Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter's speech at CSIS in Washington DC on April 8 2013 provided one of the most detailed lists of moving military assets in support of the rebalance.

5 Interview, Dan Blumenthal, Director of Asian Studies, American Enterprise Institute. Washington DC, December 2013.

6 Interview with OSD official. December 2013, Pentagon, Washington DC.

7 Interview, former US administration official currently working on rebalance to Asia policy. April 2014, Washington DC.

8 For the most recent example, see Defense Secretary Hagel's speech delivered at Shangri La Dialogue, May 31 2014.

9 Interview with OSD official. December 2013, Pentagon, Washington DC.

10 See "Rebalancing the Rebalance: Resourcing U.S. Diplomatic Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region", Majority Staff Report, US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 17, 2014.

11 Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Johnathan Greenert, speech delivered at CSIS, May 19, 2014.

12 For instance, in 2013 Congressional testimony PACOM Commander Locklear offered a modified version of the template I use below with only four components, including "planning for operations and contingencies" which is not included here.

13 Telephone interview with Lt. Gen. (ret.) Wallace Gregson, December 2013, Washington DC. General Gregson served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs from 2009 to 2011.

Nevertheless, the DoD has made a series of high-profile announcements about its quantitative rebalance of US military forces to the Asia-Pacific within the aforementioned “litany of moving assets and posture.” It has also stressed its emphasis on quality by stating that PACOM is and will continue preferentially receiving the best defense resources available. Yet quantitative questions remain, such as Michael O’Hanlon’s 2013 observation that the net value of annual Pentagon expenditures on the rebalance measured in terms of hardware remains at 10-12 billion dollars—a relatively meagre sum.

This figure speaks to the critical question of the ability of U.S. military to implement the rebalance while undergoing significant force reductions and budget cuts. Due to the strong budgetary pressures placed on the DoD by the Budget Control Act defense cuts of 2011 and continued sequestration, a common refrain amongst Washington defense officials has been “PACOM will grow by staying the same.” That is, US Pacific forces will grow in relative terms as they are shielded from defense cuts. This preferential treatment is a top-down directive of the January 2012 Strategic Guidance and the 2014 QDR, but is it happening? For now, there is anecdotal evidence that it is. The Marine Corps has committed to maintain or increase its current troop levels in the region despite cuts to overall size of its force in QDR 2014, and it has allocated funds to shield troop readiness levels in the region despite degradation of operations and readiness elsewhere.¹⁴ However, in particularly sobering testimony, PACOM Commander Locklear has said that continued sequestration has threatened to hollow the force and at least in the short term had already degraded troop readiness levels.

Updating Posture and Presence

Plans and efforts to update the US military posture and presence in the Asia Pacific region have been highlighted as key elements of the rebalance via the announcement that US forces will be “geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable.” The focus on *political sustainability* refers to ongoing efforts to hedge against the political vulnerabilities associated with basing troops outside of US sovereign territory. This includes the risk of being ordered to leave (e.g. Philippines 1992) as well as the risk of having US operational freedom curtailed due to political pressures in the host countries ranging from local democratic processes to external coercion from third parties. Efforts to reduce the US military footprint in Japan is central here and remains a work in progress. The focus on *operational resilience* largely stems from new and emerging technological threats to forward-deployed US forces from Chinese anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) weapons capabilities and the need to maintain credible deterrence in the face of this challenge.

The focus on a *geographical distribution* of forces logically reinforces the other two points. At a macro-level, geographical distribution involves plans for an innovative and rotational troop presence in the region best summed up with the expression “places, not bases.” Geographical distribution also signals growing US interest in South East Asia. Occasionally referred to as the “rebalance within the rebalance”, deployments to Singapore and Australia, and growing ties with Indonesia are indicative of this trend.

Modernizing Alliances and Extending Partnerships

Modernizing the five formal military alliances the US has with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand and

developing new security partnerships is a critical component of the rebalance. Official Pentagon statements outlining a need to “...strengthen alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific so that we can more efficiently and effectively advance a common security vision for the future” speak to a desire to shift away from the traditional Cold War “hub and spokes” model towards a more integrated network of overlapping, coordinated (and ideally shared) defense capabilities and commitments.¹⁵

Driven in part by declining US defense budgets, the DoD is looking to use targeted FMS and joint training and exercises to strengthen the capabilities of allies and partners. It is also seeking multilateral security gains by coordination in areas like information sharing, submarine networking, and ballistic missile defense. These efforts have not been easy, with historical grievances hindering important trilateral security cooperation between Japan and South Korea specifically.

The increasing strategic relevance of “partnerships” is related to operational concepts focusing less on bases and more on places — that is, increased rotational or *ad hoc* access to a much wider set of locations rather than an emphasis on building new large and permanent bases. Rebalance policy successes include the Littoral Combat Ship deployments in Singapore and continue to grow at a fast rate, with the PACOM Commander testifying earlier this year that the US is pursuing partnerships with 11 new countries in the region. Indonesia, for example, is already allowing site access for American P-3 and P-8 maritime patrol craft operations.

Operational Plans, Concepts, and Tactics

Pentagon officials discussing operational plans in the context of the pivot to Asia have typically focused on current efforts by the US military to develop techniques to guarantee US forces *assured access* in the face of growing threats from *anti-access* and *area-denial* (A2/AD) technologies being developed by China. This requirement of maintaining assured access is now a key element of current DoD strategic guidance, and we are already witnessing a period of competing strategic concepts—assured access versus A2AD—that parallels the technological aspect of this competition between the US and China.

Intriguingly, one key problem for the rebalance has been the messaging of its operational plans. Although the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) released in January 2012 was specifically designed to address the A2AD threat, the JOAC has been publicly overshadowed by the highly controversial concept of Air Sea Battle (ASB). ASB has been criticized along four basic lines: 1) it is a militarily provocative operational plan that demonizes China; 2) it is expensive and technology-centric in a time of fiscal austerity; 3) its content remains opaque to US regional allies and thus unusable as a tool of reassurance; 4) its focus on high-intensity warfare renders it useless as a deterrent to the small-scale acts of regional “tailored coercion” by China. In reality, defense insiders stress that ASB should be seen as providing combatant commanders with a toolbox rather than a strategy, and that it remains a work in progress. And progress appears to be occurring with Admiral Greenert stating that the Air Sea Battle Office has come up with “more than 200 initiatives” underway.

15 Robert Scher, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Plans, and David Helvey, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, Joint Statement before House Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness, August 1 2012.

14 Lt. Gen. Wissler, “Realizing the Rebalance: The United States Marine Corps in Asia” Carnegie Endowment for Peace, April 10 2014.

The US Army, which has largely been left out of the Air Sea Battle concept, has looked to increase its relevance and role in the rebalance in a number of ways, including its Regionally Aligned Forces concept. The USARPAC has also begun to explore a new deployment concept called “Pacific Pathways” designed to enhance its training engagements in the region.

Investments and Acquisition Strategies

Acquisition strategies and investments in force modernization is another important aspect of the rebalance to Asia policy discussed by the DoD. One crucial question will be how decades-long defense acquisition cycles will be influenced by an iterative strategic process between the United States and China as each acts and reacts to the other’s military capabilities. This need not be understood as an arms race, yet such a reflexive A2AD and counter-A2AD dynamic is already well underway within the region.

Publicly, the Pentagon has committed to “invest in capabilities that are most relevant to the Asia-Pacific” such as the fifth generation F-35 stealth fighter, the Virginia class submarine and Payload Module, the P-8 maritime patrol craft, and the LRS-B long range bomber.¹⁶ These rebalance-centric technologies, platforms and weapons systems featuring enhanced intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), stealth, and long-range capabilities are specifically designed to operate in a future Asia Pacific theater characterized by an A2AD environment.

However, the Pentagon’s ability to follow through with these investments has been called into question by Frank Kendall, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics who testified this year that defense budget cuts are disproportionately affecting investments, research and development, and procurement.

4 ¹⁶ See Congressional testimony by Michael Lumpkin, acting Undersecretary of Defense for Planning, “Rebalancing to the Asia Pacific Region. January 28, 2014.

One avenue being explored by the DoD via the rebalance that may mitigate some of this risk is extended and deepened consultation and cooperation in investment and acquisition planning between the US and its allies and partners in the Asia Pacific. However, these efforts have also been slowed by both the absence of a coherent US vision of what partnership capacity is necessary, and by a lack of White House guidance to its allies explaining the capabilities that it wants them to develop.

Engagement with China

A core tenet of the Obama administration’s rebalance to Asia is that the US must proactively engage with China, and military to military diplomacy and engagement is a part of the Pentagon’s rebalance effort. Over the long term, as China’s armed forces (and its navy in particular) expands its operations in the region, this US engagement will be focused on shaping a rising Chinese military to play a responsible and constructive role in regional security, and to observe international laws and norms of behavior. US encouragement of Chinese participation or observer status in regional military exercises such as Cobra Gold, Exercise Balikan, and for the first time this year’s RIMPAC exercise is a critical element of this outreach—although levels of such participation by China remain limited by Congress.

Conclusion

Assessments of the military dimension of the Obama Administration’s rebalance to Asia must take into account both its short-term and long-term facets—the latter of which predate and will outlast the current administration. Future attempts to measure the degree to which the policy is being implemented should account for each of these six different dimensions of the rebalance, and be analytically sensitive to the fundamentally intersubjective nature of the Rebalance to Asia’s core function: reassuring US allies in the region and deterring potential adversaries.

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