



IMPACT OF US REBALANCING STRATEGY ON ASIA PACIFIC

By Brig Gen Jamil Masud¹
(Pakistan)

In 2011 the Obama administration announced the new policy of a “strategic pivot” rephrased as a “rebalancing”. It means that while downsizing the presence in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Europe and elsewhere, the US is to invest more and pay greater attention to the Asia-Pacific, particularly Southeast Asia. In January the same year, Pentagon published its new “strategic guidance” paper, which named the Asia-Pacific region and the Persian Gulf as the nation’s two geostrategic priorities.

Jimmy Carter, ex President of USA while commenting on the issue of rebalancing said, “in the absence of an overarching security structure, the United States' military presence has played a pivotal role in ensuring regional stability and, we intend to continue to play that role. It’s good for us, and good for everyone in the region. The rebalance is not about China, the United States, India, or any other country or group of countries, it’s about a peaceful Asia-Pacific, where sovereign states can enjoy the benefits of security and continue to prosper”.

Though a very benign statement offering hope to everyone, but can it be taken on the face value? Every concerned academician and strategic practitioner is trying to construct the real motives behind this shift in the overall policy of US once she is already hopelessly committed in the affairs of Middle East and a highly unpopular war in Afghanistan with an early and respectable exit; at best a distant proposition.

The Obama doctrine largely suggested a new US strategy to strengthen its long-term role in the Asia-Pacific almost in all dimensions: security, political,

¹ Brig Gen Jamil Masud from Pakistan, participant of the 30th Defense and Strategic Studies Course, NDU, China.



diplomatic, and economic. But of all these, the most striking is the US military rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific.

According to a US strategist, the military aspect of the US strategic rebalancing is to include two interconnected efforts: geographical rebalancing and capability rebalancing. Agreements are being tried with countries like Japan, Australia, Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam to station maximum US presence allowable without aggravating local sensitivities .

With regard to capability rebalancing, the US is trying to rebalance its invest in military technologies and force structure to best address Asia-Pacific military challenges. This essentially calls for shift from its current counterinsurgency focus on land in Afghanistan to seaborne crisis response in the Pacific. To this end, the US is said to deploy 60% of its naval assets in the Asia-Pacific. Efforts will also be made to create new military capabilities in the nuclear, conventional (air and sea power), missile defence, and cyberspace fields. Meanwhile, the Pentagon has produced the so-called Air-Sea Battle combat concept as a new operational doctrine in its preparation to fight a war with regional powers specifically like China.

Despite the renewed focus on Asia-Pacific by the Obama Administration, it is a reality that United States had never left Asia. Instead, they stressed the elements of continuity in the current administration's strategy with those of its predecessors. The fact is that even before the recent announcement of Pentagon's new Asian orientation, the United States was quietly increasing its forces in the region. For example, despite the ongoing commitments in the Middle East and Afghanistan, half of the US Air Force's top-of-the-line F-22 fighters are deployed in the Asia-Pacific region. What do we know about the likely direction of US policy? Is USA becoming paranoid from the astronomical rise of China? Is there a realization within US policy makers that Asia-Pacific which has been her biggest economic client is slipping away from control? Or is USA capitalizing on the chaos and induced sense of insecurity within the periphery states while portraying China as a hegemonic power in the region?

At the strategic level, rebalancing seems to help strengthen the US position in the Asia-Pacific. The reality, however, has given full testimony to the adverse ramifications of the US's new strategy. The rising tensions have now become a hallmark in the otherwise peaceful and stable situation in East Asia. Territorial and maritime disputes have flared up, regional multilateral cooperation, which used to witness dynamics development, has experienced some challenges. The region has also seen a spiralling arms race, which may



force many states to scramble for more sophisticated weapons and equipment, and to be prepared to fight each other although all of them are fully aware that any military conflicts between them would only bring disaster for all: a classic lose-lose outcome.

Present unstable environment may just be what Washington intends to achieve from rebalancing strategy in Asia Pacific Region. Only when the Asia-Pacific is plagued by persistent political tensions, lingering historical grievances, rising territorial disputes, strong strategic suspicion and mistrust among East Asian states, would Washington find chances to continue dominate the region.

The military strategy to complement these above mentioned goals entails positioning of US military power along the approaches to the Western Pacific, the maritime chokepoints in the Indian Ocean including the Middle East may accord United States an inherent flexibility to apply pressures on the economic jugular of the potential adversaries, particularly China, right from the source(s) to destination(s).

By fostering deeper interactions with Vietnam, India and the other littorals, Pentagon would further complicate Chinese dilemma and provide US with strong leverage. This ring of US influence is expected to run in an unbroken arc from Japan and South Korea as formal military allies in the North Western Pacific - the United States itself at Hawaii, Guam and Northern Marianas - Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Taiwan in the South China Sea and Singapore guarding the Malacca Straits - Australia and New Zealand blocking off the southern deep water straits. Secretary Panetta hoped, possibly India acting as a “swing state” along with the US Central Command military component for concerted action in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

Over the long run, the US pivot back to Asia, coupled with Air-Sea Battle concept, could fundamentally affect the regional strategic landscape, and therefore regional arms acquisitions. Certainly, China is apprehensive about US actions as part of an effort to contain and to frustrate its national interests. However, US attempts at countering the interests of China through other countries of the region while keeping relatively stable relations with her makes the entire strategic setting somewhat akin to cold war era where at one time US and China were closely collaborating against the USSR.

Having carried out a general analysis of US rebalancing strategy in Asia Pacific, let me offer few conclusions on the subject.

United States is employing several tools to contain China, including military power, defence alliances, the trans-Pacific Partnership, and efforts to



drive wedges between China and its neighbours through diplomacy and arms sales.

There are lots of reasons which points towards inability of USA to attain her objectives in Asia Pacific, like emerging contours of multi-polarity, the inevitable persistence of its terrorism quagmire, enduring regional challenges in Iran and North Korea, the gradually widening economic clout, resurgent Russia seeking to constrain US global influence and China's growing power. This means that Asian countries would find it difficult to join a US led containment strategy. Such counterbalancing factors points towards mid to long term difficulties of US to achieve her aim of dominating the Asia-Pacific Region.

Path to confrontation as propagated by US has already been effectively countered by the new security strategy advocated by China and her insistence on peaceful co-existence and resolution of disputes through bilateral negotiations. Therefore, in the short to midterm, China and other countries of the region would best be served by a policy of engagement rather confrontation. Till the time China sticks to her stated principles, all efforts by US to demonize her and create a casus belli for her vested interests are likely to remain futile.

Leading trends of 21st century points towards rise of Asia inspired by Chinese example. Can it be reversed? I don't think so. It would suffice to say that nature has its course, machination of certain powers to manipulate the world can just be an exercise in futility. USA's rebalancing strategy reeks of foul play and is unsustainable in the long term. At the same time, countries of the region have started realizing that becoming pawn in a high powered tussle will be detrimental to their national interests. They have been duped in to aligning with super power only favourable to core interests of USA.

Edited by Abdul Rehman and Chen Senlin