

## The U.S. Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific: Development and Prospects

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### Introduction

While speaking aboard the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson on September 29, 2016, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter explained the third phase of the Obama administration's Asia-Pacific rebalance, which, according Carter, will strengthen military posture and security cooperation in the region. "Rebalance" is the Obama administration's approach that has been prioritizing the Asia-Pacific region since 2012 or so, but as the term "third phase" suggests, it has followed its first and second phases. According to Secretary Carter, the rebalance began with quantitatively and geographically expanding the U.S. presence in the region. It then shifted to qualitative strengthening of this presence. In this new phase, it will involve the acceleration of past initiatives. This paper will attempt to elaborate the nature of the rebalance, which the U.S. Department of Defense has advanced for five years under the Obama administration, by linking each phase of this approach. The paper then presents its implications for regional security and future prospects for the rebalance.

#### 1. First Phase of Rebalance—Quantitative expansion and geographical distribution of presence—

The framework of the Obama administration's Asia-Pacific rebalance was presented in then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's *Foreign Policy* article of October 2011 and in President Obama's speech given to the Australian Parliament in November. It accompanied the withdrawal of troops from the Middle East with a

shift of the United States' strategic priority to the Asia-Pacific region and the strengthening of its investment of economic, diplomatic, and military resources there. The context of this policy is thought to be the goal of achieving a "balance of influence" in response to a power vacuum appearing in East Asia in 2000s, accompanied by a dramatic increase in China's influence in the region, as a result of the U.S. "war on terror" that took place primarily in the Middle East.

Based on the direction shown by the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Defense codified the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region as a security strategy in the Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG). The DSG positioned the maintenance of the security order and U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific region as the primary goal of the rebalance, and cites the following as the main methods for achieving this goal: (1) strengthening and expanding relationships with allied and friendly countries, and (2) strengthening military capabilities and military presence.

In the area of military diplomacy, in addition to deepening relationships with existing allied and friendly states, the United States sought to develop new cooperative relationships with countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Defense expanded its strategic horizon from the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean and emphasized the strategic importance of India in particular.

Regarding the U.S. military's force posture, the ratio

of naval and air forces deployed to the Pacific region, versus those deployed to the Atlantic region was changed from 5:5 to 6:4, demonstrating a clear shift in the relative importance to the Pacific region. On the other hand, a policy of dispersing military forces formerly concentrated in Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia, Australia, and Guam was shown. A noteworthy technique in this case is rotation deployment, and this not only gave regional partners a feeling of security by showing a material rebalance, it also presumably improved the operational capabilities of nations in the region through training and exercises. As explained by Secretary Carter in the aforementioned speech, the quantitative and geographical expansion of the force posture is a characteristic of the first phase of rebalance. Meanwhile, these developments are based on geographical distribution, operational resiliency, and political sustainability, that former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stressed repeatedly prior to 2011. Moreover, the distribution of military force to the South reflected the U.S. intention to contain the excessive claims of maritime rights and harassment of the freedom of navigation around the South China Sea, which have become increasingly conspicuous since the latter half of 2000s. Doubts about the effectiveness of and a lack of consistency in the rebalance have been pointed out, but enhancement of relationships with partner countries and readjustment of the force posture of the U.S. military are being implemented in the Asia-Pacific region as its core strategies.

## **2. Second Phase of Rebalance —Networking security cooperation —**

The United States has faced many challenges since the Obama administration launched the rebalance. In 2013, sequestration of the federal budget was implemented, forcing President Obama to cancel a round of visits to East Asia. In the same year, the Middle Eastern situation became extremely chaotic as it

was reported that the Assad regime in Syria had used chemical weapons. Then, in 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) expanded its influence, and the Obama administration undertook limited military actions in the region. Additionally, Russia's aggressiveness during the Ukraine crisis in 2014 reminded the Obama administration of the need to reinforce its military presence in Europe.

In the Asia-Pacific region, meanwhile, the security environment continued to deteriorate. In the seas around East Asia, confrontations between government vessels and patrol boats operated by concerned countries became commonplace, increasing the level of tension. In particular, China's assertive stance has grown over time. In November 2013, it arbitrarily established an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea and reclaimed the lands in the South China Sea at an astonishing pace. Moreover, interference and dangerous actions by the Chinese military on the high seas and their sky are frequently reported. In response to such circumstances, the Obama administration strengthened its efforts to manage the crisis with China, but failed to achieve a fundamental resolution to this problem.

As the security environment inside and outside the Asia-Pacific region was becoming increasingly severe, Secretary Carter referred to the next phase of the rebalance in a speech he gave on April 6, 2015 at Arizona State University. Here, he presented four pillars: (1) investment in future military capabilities, (2) deployment of the latest platforms to the region, (3) qualitative enhancement of the defense posture, and (4) strengthening alliances and partnerships. However, at this stage, it can be said that he emphasized strengthening relationships with allies and friendly states in particular.

It is particularly noteworthy that efforts to expand the roles of the United States' allies and partner countries and support their capacity building were enhanced. In

2014, the United States signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) that is intended, among others, to improve the capabilities of the Philippine army. During President Obama's visit to India in 2015, he referred to the U.S.-India Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) intended to encourage the joint development and joint production of weapons systems. The partial lifting of the embargo on the export of weapons to Vietnam which the Obama administration announced in October 2014 was followed by a historical total lifting of the embargo in May 2016. The Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) announced by Secretary Carter at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2015, which offers countries in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam) equipment support, training and so on amounting to \$425 billion over a 5 year period, is not only viewed as capacity building support, but also as a way to promote independent efforts by the countries of the region to tackle maritime problems.

Linked to efforts by the United States to strengthen the capacities and encourage the proactiveness of countries in the region, it is also emphasized the growing web of a new security network. In recent years in particular, in addition to traditional bilateral alliances such as Japan-U.S., U.S.-ROK, U.S.-Australia alliances, trilateral cooperations, including Japan-U.S.-ROK, Japan-U.S.-Australia, and Japan-U.S.-India, have expanded. Another important point is that the United States' partner countries are promoting their own initiatives, as shown by joint maritime exercises by Japan and Vietnam, Japanese support for the building of the Philippines' maritime law enforcement capability, and trilateral conferences by Japan, Australia, and India, and the joint trilateral maritime patrols among Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, upon Indonesia's proposal. Such expansion of relationships between countries will likely enable more flexible and efficient security cooperation through prompt responsiveness and

interoperability when a crisis has occurred, and information sharing or mutual understanding during peacetime.

As mentioned above, the cooperative security system in the region expands as a series of concentric circles centered on the United States. Through this process it is forming a web-like system as, in addition to the traditional hub-and-spoke system, spoke-to-spoke relationships have also been reinforced. It is worth noting that in the Asia-Pacific region where a security system like the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has not been established, the regional countries began to proactively build a network. Facing deteriorating international situation and restrictions, both internal and external, the United States need a Japan and other regional countries that proactively and collectively maintain the regional order more than ever before.

### **3. Third Phase of Rebalance — Qualitative strengthening of the U.S. force posture —**

However, even after the second phase of the rebalance was launched, the international and regional security environment had been far from recovered. Rather, in the Asia-Pacific region, the situation has worsened, as illustrated by the frequent missile launches and nuclear tests conducted by North Korea, and the militarization of the South China Sea by China, which became apparent beginning in the latter half of 2015. China in particular has adopted a clear policy of not accepting a July 2016 arbitration ruling concerning the South China Sea, and along with its militarization of the region by, for example, installing missiles on the reclaimed lands, its challenge to the principles of the rule of law and access to international public resources in the regions has become increasingly conspicuous.

Against this background, Secretary Carter referred to the third phase of the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific in his speech of September 29, 2016. He emphasized

problems related to China and North Korea as challenges the U.S. military faces in the Asia-Pacific region, and stated that efforts introduced in the first and second phases of the rebalance to deal with these problems will be reinforced.

But unlike the second phase, which emphasized the enhancement of relationships with partner countries, a characteristic of this new phase that Secretary Carter cited is the qualitative strengthening of the U.S. military's force posture. This definitely includes the security network including trilateral cooperation by Japan, the United States, and the ROK in response to the problem of North Korea, and the agreement to patrol international waters by the three countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. However, because less than one year and a half has passed since the phase two, it has only been moderately successful in this region.

Matters concerning the military capacity of the United States are particularly noteworthy aspects of this new phase of rebalance. Accordingly, Secretary Carter gave details of areas of priority investment in the FY2017 budget, which included Virginia class attack submarines (SSN), unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV), B-21 Raider Long-Range Strike Bomber (LRS-B), F-35 stealth fighters, KC-46A airborne refueling aircraft, standard missiles (SM-6), cyber, and space war capabilities, and so on. Investment in the newest platforms of this kind will, of course, be very costly. For example, he said that over the period of five years beginning in 2017, \$40 billion would be spent on underwater forces and \$56 billion on the F-35, and expected that investment in space and cyber capabilities would cost \$34 billion in the coming year.

On the other hand, considering the harsh financial conditions, the innovative measures Secretary Carter reports are interesting. For example, it will be difficult to maintain the pace of construction of Virginia class SSNs to keep the pace of retiring SSNs, which will

increase in the 2020s. In order to avoid reducing the number of cruise missiles accompanying the reduction in the number of submarines, Virginia Payload Modules (VPM) are added to the Virginia Class SSNs, which enables them to carry up to 40 Tomahawk cruise missiles instead of the present 12. Another is making use of the SM-6, which is basically used for air defense, as an offensive asset such as an anti-ship missile. Carter also clarified that the relatively out-of-date avionics and radar, and electronic warfare systems of bombers and fighter aircraft will be modernized, in order to keep using them. Such efforts to prevent qualitative and quantitative voids in war-making capacity using existing platforms are remarkable as well.

The capabilities above suggest that the clear goal is to ensure dominance in the air and under water, centered on undersea military capability and long-distance aerial military capability. This in particular reflects the U.S. concern about China, whose military intentions in the surrounding regions are becoming increasingly opaque. The United States is well aware of China's so-called anti-access aerial denial (A2/AD), which, among others, combines missiles and cyber capabilities as a form of asymmetrical warfare to challenge its operational access and power projection capability. The U.S. Department of Defense set strengthening its anti-A2/AD capacity as one of ten priority areas in the 2012 DSG, and has announced Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) and Air-Sea Battle (ASB) as strategic concepts for maintaining and recovering access. The areas of such an anti-A2/AD concept which are considered important, are resiliency in space and cyber space, long range attack capabilities from outside the A2/AD area, and underwater capability which remain dominant over China's anti-submarine capability.

It is significant that the areas of investment listed by Secretary Carter are presented consistently. In the context of the rebalance, it is not necessarily the case that the past force posture has been in line with

anti-A2/AD purpose, and there are frequent references to points involving political elements, such as strengthening presence with high value assets, which are considered to be vulnerable to A2/AD.

On the other hand, the listed military capability above have specific aims at high-end threats, presenting the U.S. intention to further strengthen its military superiority in the A2/AD environment. In fact, Secretary Carter's memorandum for Secretary of the Navy in December 2015 called for reduction of the number of littoral combat ships (LCS), arguing that practically effective force posture, not mere presence, must be emphasized so as to deal with an high-end conflict. The priority investment areas shown above seems to be based on this goal, and in this sense, the focus of U.S. military posture under the rebalance has shifted from quantity to quality. The U.S. Department of Defense has promoted the Third Offset Strategy since 2014, and in January 2015, began to study the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC), which updated the ASB. The enactment of a concrete operating concept, which will show how the U.S. military will combine its various capabilities in the future, is much anticipated.

#### **4. Rebalance: Prospects and challenges**

As shown above, while conditions inside and outside of the United States become more complex, the Department of Defense continues to demonstrate its commitment to the Asia-Pacific region. However, this system is unlike that which functioned during the Cold War, whereby the United States unilaterally guaranteed the safety of its partner countries. The United States is counting on the further expansion of security roles of the regional countries, and is seeking a security cooperation system, which in turn makes, with its limited resources, the U.S. commitment sustainable. The security network that Secretary Carter advocated is one that will encourage greater security roles of the

regional countries during peacetime (or so-called greyzone situations), and will reduce the United States' burden at the low end. The United States has, since the Cold War, demanded that the European states in particular become "producers of security," and it seems that this trend is also gradually appearing in the Asia-Pacific region.

These trends are also accompanied by the fear that the United States will abandon its responsibility for security, or be passing the buck to other countries in the region. However, this fear is probably groundless at this time. The security network that the U.S. Department of Defense advocates has been derived through the process of cooperative relationships between the United States and its regional partners, and there is no doubt that the United States is positioned at its center. Furthermore, the United States invests huge sums in strengthening the U.S. military's capacity to deter high-end conflicts, and continues to play its role in stabilizing the military balance in the Asia-Pacific region. This point was clarified by Secretary Carter stating "...the United States will continue to sharpen our military edge so we remain the most powerful military in the region and the security partner of choice" in his September 29th speech. Rebalance can be defined as the redistribution of security responsibilities among the concerned countries.

Nonetheless, whether or not the security network will continue to consolidate and expand in the future remains to be seen, since it is greatly dependent on the will of the regional states. Some of them, including partners of the United States, are cautious about being a part of a U.S.-led network. A typical example is the refusal by the newly elected President Duterte of the Philippines to continue joint maritime patrols with the United States. Additionally, in the military field, unlike the area of diplomacy , the United States and China are in a pure competition, and some countries may be concerned about this power dynamics. Given these

complex circumstances, U.S. expectations of Japan playing greater security role in the context of U.S. regional strategy, may grow larger.

## Conclusions

2016 was literally the final year of the Obama administration, but why did Secretary Carter speak of the progress of the Asia-Pacific rebalance at this particular point? One answer to this question is the administrative change scheduled for early 2017. In fact, during his speech, Secretary Carter referred to regional security from a long-term perspective and repeatedly stressed the potential impact of the rebalance on the future shape of the region's security landscape. There is no guarantee that after the change of government, the rebalance will remain the core of the U.S. regional policy. That said, the policy of focusing on the Asia-Pacific enjoys bipartisan support within the United States and support from most of the countries of the region, and it would actually be very difficult to dramatically alter this effort that has been in place for about five years. While the rebalance faces various concerns and restrictions, perhaps Secretary Carter reminded those within and outside the United States the importance to sustain its commitment to the Asia-Pacific.

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