

## CHAPTER 9

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# The United States and the Asia-Pacific: Challenges and Opportunities

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### Introduction

It is important to note at the outset of this brief presentation on the key security challenges facing the United States in Asia, the implications of these challenges for the defense sector, and the prospects for regional cooperation, that President Obama's remarkable November 2011 visit across the region should not obscure how much the United States continues to be also engaged elsewhere and preoccupied by other topics.<sup>1</sup>

### Identify and Discuss the Top 3 to 5 Important Security Challenges Facing the United States

Publicly available official United States statements and documents highlight a range of security challenges facing the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. Regarding Asia, Commander of U.S. Pacific Command Admiral Robert Willard for example listed eight security challenges in testimony to a congressional committee in April 2011. These included: North Korea, violent extremist organizations, China's military modernization with unclear intent, assertive postures on territorial disputes, cyber threats, transnational crime, humanitarian disasters and environmental degradation.<sup>2</sup> Variations on these themes—by scope, detail and priority—may be found in other official assessments. The United States is working actively to be able to deal with these challenges.

I would like to look beyond these “known knowns” to consider some over-arching

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<sup>1</sup> For example, most of the top ten *Foreign Affairs* web stories in 2011 were on the Middle East/counter-terrorism, with two on Europe, and only one on Asia—on PRC-Pakistan relations. Of the top print stories, not one was about Asia—not even about China! <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/features/collections/best-foreign-affairs-web-stories-of-2011>.

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.pacom.mil/web/PACOM\\_Resources/pdf/TestimonyofAdmRobertWillardUSNAVy-14April2011.pdf](http://www.pacom.mil/web/PACOM_Resources/pdf/TestimonyofAdmRobertWillardUSNAVy-14April2011.pdf).

challenges to US policy in the region. I believe there are three broad categories of such challenges:

- Sustaining the “pivot”/“rebalancing” towards the Asia-Pacific;
- Managing security mechanisms; and
- “Re-mapping” US Asia-Pacific policy.

While each of these challenges has traditional security and military/defense sector origins and implications, they also encompass “whole of government” challenges to U.S. interests and policies in the region. And therefore meeting these challenges requires responses that are not only military or defense-based.

### ***Sustaining the “Pivot”/“Rebalancing” to the Asia Pacific***

Sustaining U.S. attention and resources to Asia will continue to be a challenge in the coming years. Notwithstanding the fact that Asia is increasingly integrated into American economic and social life as measured by a range of factors including trade, foreign direct investment, and employment from exports<sup>3</sup>, attracting and maintaining attention to Asia will depend on many things, including but not limited to future US administration objectives, key personnel, public recognition of Asia’s importance<sup>4</sup>, monetary resources to support aid as well as military, diplomatic and public diplomacy presence in the region and competing priorities in the Middle East, Southwest Asia, and Russia not to mention domestic politics and economic recovery. The Obama administration has made the “return” to Asia a signature of its administration and declaratory policy and intentions are fully in line with this emphasis. Only time will tell whether such an emphasis can be maintained.

### ***Managing Security Mechanisms***

A second important challenge for the US in the Asia Pacific is managing key security mechanisms: alliances, new partnerships, calibrating an “Asia first” rather than an “alliances first” or “China first” approach and making multilateralism work. Alliances

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<sup>3</sup> See East West Center’s [www.AsiaMattersforAmerica.org](http://www.AsiaMattersforAmerica.org)

<sup>4</sup> Recent public polling shows Americans for the first time deem Asia more important than Europe but their perceptions of the economic and employment challenges posed by Asia and PRC in particular are also higher; interesting given that Europe’s economic crisis could have much more profound downside risks to the US economy than a slowdown in Asia.

remain the bedrock of the US security approach to the region. But it is very clear that alliances will have to adapt to meet new conditions. Some of the ways in which alliances will have to adapt include “leverage[ing] them to help shape the environment,” “building multilateral relationships,” and creating “a more effective presence” in addition to long standing priorities such as increased interoperability.<sup>5</sup> Building new partnerships has also become an important priority for US security management in the region; it is worth noting that PACOM’s strategic guidance document has as its first priority to “Strengthen and Advance Alliances and Partnerships.” In earlier years, such a priority might have been stated as two separate items. Some allies and close partners express anxiety about the US focus on new partnerships. However, the increased attention to new partnerships reflects less on the state of relations with US allies and more on the profoundly expanded opportunities for the US to engage countries across the Asia Pacific from Sri Lanka and India to Vietnam and Burma and Indonesia. Though each is a unique relationship, new US relationships with India, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia have made considerable progress. Though alliances and new partnerships will continue to be the key mechanisms for U.S. security management in the region, unlike a few years ago when some argued for one or other of the “alliance first” or “China first” approaches to “getting Asia right,” a major challenge will continue to be calibrating US-China relations with other US relationships and interests in the region. Put simply, the US does not want a “G2” or a “CW2.” So far, the US has managed to calibrate well, but this will require persistent work ahead.<sup>6</sup> A final challenge for the United States will be to make multilateralism work in a way that leverages alliances and new partnerships, contributes to the “Asia first” policy approach and institutionalizes US presence, interests, norms and values including a concern for human rights and democracy. US challenges and approaches to making multilateralism work are addressed in more detail in the section below on “Prospects for Regional Cooperation.”

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<sup>5</sup> See [http://www.pacom.mil/web/PACOM\\_Resources/pdf/PACOM%20Strategy%20Sep%202010.pdf](http://www.pacom.mil/web/PACOM_Resources/pdf/PACOM%20Strategy%20Sep%202010.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal describes this as “A more complex U.S. Strategy” saying “The Obama Administration does not seek to confront China across the board. Rather, it has adopted a two-pronged approach: to reaffirm and strengthen cooperative ties with China; and to establish a strong and credible American presence across Asia to both encourage constructive behavior and to provide confidence to other countries in the region that they need not yield to potential Chinese regional hegemony.” See “The American Pivot to Asia,” *Foreign Policy*, December 21, 2011.

### **“Remapping” Asia**

A broader challenge for the US is to “remap” Asia policy through a number of specific initiatives that support security, economic, politico-diplomatic, normative and order-building interests. For example, the concept of the “Indo-Pacific” allows the US to develop a new partnership with India, lay the path for its possible inclusion in security planning for the region, seek opportunities to work more closely with smaller South Asian states and emphasize the continuity of a maritime focus running along the vast Asian littoral. The “Trans-Pacific” Partnership not only offers the prospect of a new trade and investment platform consistent with American economic interests, but also the application of rules and standards sought by the US at the global level, increased links with like-minded partners, and an Asia and the Pacific alternative to an exclusive Asian regional effort centered on China. A third element of “remapping”—partially covered by the concept of the Indo-Pacific, is an effort to adjust the US presence and role in northeast Asia with one that gives greater emphasis to south and southeast Asia. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen stated in the 2011 National Military Strategy “we must also invest new attention and resources in Southeast and South Asia.” Another element of policy initiatives that “remap” Asia includes those that seek to increase Asian support for US objectives at the global level including through such forums as the Group of 20 (G20). For example, some have argued that creating a “larger West”—“extending from North America and Europe through Eurasia (by eventually embracing Russia and Turkey), all the way to Japan and South Korea—would enhance the appeal of the West’s core principles...” Though it may seem that “remapping Asia” is an abstraction, the underlying policy elements of including new countries and subregions in US Asia Pacific policy, buttressing the link of the United States to Asia across the Pacific, and building cooperation with Asian countries in global settings are directly relevant to addressing shifting power balances and resource capabilities: the two fundamental global security challenges facing the United States.

### **Implications for the Defense Sector**

The US defense sector is on the verge of flux. The administration has disseminated a new strategic guidance entitled *Sustaining Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. In due course, this document will have to be squared with actual budget numbers—a process that will be complicated by 2012 being an election

year. Therefore, much uncertainty surrounds the issue of the defense sector and its relevance to US policy in the Asia Pacific region. But several things may be said at this stage, and are not like to change.

First, as the above discussion about US security challenges in the Asia Pacific suggests, the defense/military sector is a critical, but not sufficient, part of meeting US interests, objectives and challenges. Moreover, an important question is not how the defense sector will be altered by key security challenges, but rather how the US will address security challenges due to a declining budget for the defense sector (as well as aid, diplomatic and other programs).<sup>7</sup> At this time, the size and nature of U.S. defense budget cuts are not known, though significant cuts are certain under the Budget Control Act (approximately \$500 billion over the next decade) and possibly another \$500 billion if the “sequestration” requirement is not finessed in Congress by the end of the calendar year. In this environment of extraordinary defense budget uncertainty, thinking about the US defense sector in the Asia-Pacific might do better to focus on core issues.

Second, whatever cuts do take place in the defense budget, they are not likely to have major implications for overall US force posture or commitments in the Asia-Pacific. The Obama administration categorically stated in a speech to the Australian parliament in November 2011 that “reductions in U.S. defense spending will not—I repeat, will not—come at the expense of the Asia Pacific.” This is reiterated in the January 2012 Department of Defense strategic guidance. This is not to say that US capacity in the region will grow tremendously, or that they will not be reduced in some ways (e.g., perhaps the number of personnel), but it likely means that the Asia-Pacific will be at the end of the line for reductions. There is a degree of debate over just how expensive US military presence in the region is when the considerable support by allies and partners is taken into account.

Third, US force posture in the Asia Pacific region is to be “broadly distributed,” “flexible” and “sustainable.” It is well known that the US is seeking to distribute

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136637/benjamin-friedman/how-cutting-pentagon-spending-will-fix-us-defense-strategy> and <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136639/david-w-barno-nora-bensahel-and-travis-sharp/how-to-cut-the-defense-budget-responsibly> which calls for the US to focus on Asia.

its force posture more evenly from the concentration in northeast Asia to South and Southeast Asia. In terms of flexibility, moving from what Admiral Willard characterized in April 2011 testimony as “post-World War II and Cold War-era basing and infrastructure” will be critical as the US seeks more opportunities for access, prepositioning, maintenance support, logistics cooperation and other activities that avoid the creation or maintenance of large defense footprints. In this context, new partnerships as well as existing alliances become crucial. Finally, also well known are ongoing efforts to adjust US force posture in ways that make existing base and infrastructure presence less intrusive and problematic for host nations to support. The difficulties for example in relocating marines in and from Okinawa is an example of the kind of defense sector changes that will have to occur in the years ahead. An example of an initiative that meets all three criteria of “broadly-distributed,” “flexible” and “sustainable” is the announced plan to rotate US marines through northern Australia.

A final core issue about the defense sector that is well known among Asia-Pacific security analysts but bears repeating is the likely future focus on the maritime domain and air power. Again, what this will mean for acquisitions, operations and strategy is far from clear at this stage, but a number of structural factors ranging from increased energy flows and commerce to assertive maritime claims to enhanced maritime capabilities are driving a future defense sector toward maritime and air power priorities.

## **Prospects for Regional Cooperation**

As noted above, a key American security challenge in the region is to make multilateralism work. After years of significant internal debate about whether and how to proceed on regional organizations, the US has made key decisions: join the East Asia Summit (EAS), routinely hold US-ASEAN Summits, engage the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), and continue support for the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). The launching of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) also constitutes an innovation in the US’ approach to regional cooperation.

There are “5 calibrations” regarding regional cooperation that will shape US efforts

to make multilateralism work. The first calibration for the US is determining how “enduring commitment... sustained and consistent presidential engagement” can be reconciled with the need for deliverables that justify US participation. Even as recently as this past November there were discussions about the utility and efficacy of the President travelling for such a long stretch to attend “talk shops.” There has been long standing concern about the ability of any US president to attend two summits per year in the region. Most important will be whether specific regional cooperation efforts deliver the kind of results that justify presidential attendance. It is worth noting that few expect that the President will attend the APEC summit to be held in Vladivostok later this year.

A second calibration for the US will have to be between acknowledging ASEAN’s central role and as Secretary Clinton put it “translat[ing] dialogue into results.” The US has recognized ASEAN as a “fulcrum” for regional efforts, but this does not mean that the US will be willing to fully accept the “ASEAN Way” approach to moving these organizations forward. By simultaneously working through the US-ASEAN Summit process, the US may be able to move forward both the US-ASEAN relationship and ASEAN’s approach to its leadership of regional organizations.

A third challenge will be calibrating the “active agenda” items that Secretary Clinton outlined in 2010 (i.e., nuclear proliferation, conventional arms, maritime security, climate change and promotion of human rights) with the agendas of other EAS members and the so-called “heritage issues” that have been a priority at the preceding five EAS Summits; namely, finance, education, energy, disaster management and avian flu prevention among others. At the EAS held in November 2011, President Obama successfully steered the discussions in ways that covered issues important to the US—such as maritime security—but it remains to be seen whether future US issue priorities will be shared and supported in the same way. It is important to note that this is not an either/or choice in terms of the issues. For example, the US was strongly supportive of working on disaster responses—an original ASEAN-driven agenda item.

A fourth calibration for the US is how to make the EAS “complement and reinforce the work being done in other forums” while continuing to carry out functional differentiation of various regional institutions and the need eventually perhaps to

create hierarchy or a *primus inter pares* arrangement for regional order building. Right now, APEC and EAS are the only leader-level meetings while ARF and ADMM are not. In the future, APEC may not be a leaders-level meeting (unless it can be held adjacent to EAS) and perhaps the agenda can be managed by trade and finance ministers.

A fifth and final calibration is that between EAS and other regional institutions and the expanded scope of US bilateral relationships in the region and rule-making efforts in trade such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The United States has made a choice to fully participate, help shape and make multilateralism work in the region. There are enormous diplomatic, political and normative gains to be made by doing so. However, in terms of dealing with major security challenges themselves, there is still a very long way to go in making regional cooperation a priority. Ultimately the significance of the US joining all major regional organizations and being active in them is that they demonstrate to the region US commitment and institutionalize the US role in such a way as to keep the US “all in.”

## Conclusions

The Asia Pacific is now prominent in American attentions. On the whole, the US is in an admirable position in the region. Its alliances are robust. New partnerships are being developed at a viable pace. The US has committed to being an active member of regional organization and order-building efforts. The US has made a start in pursuing economic ties through the TPP that will supplement our diplomatic and military ones. The demand side for its leadership remains high. The US has a good “Goldilocks balance” (not too hot and not too cold) regarding the supply and demand for its security presence, the issues across which it is engaged (e.g., not just terrorism or military), and an “Asia first” rather than “China First” or “alliances first” approach suitable to manage the dynamics at work in the region. The United States is becoming increasingly integrated into and institutionalized in the region.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Satu Limaye, “Want a New Map of Asia? Include the United States,” *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, Number 105, April 2011. [http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb105\\_6.pdf](http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb105_6.pdf)

The fundamental challenges facing US security policy—relative power shifts and resource constraints—are important but not overwhelming. This is a largely optimistic assessment but also a credible one.

