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Report

U.S. Strategy in the Asia-Pacific



Brahma Chellaney*



The Asia-Pacific is the world's most economically dynamic region, where the specter of a power imbalance looms large. The new U.S. strategy — part of President Barack Obama's 2012 strategic guidance for the Pentagon — calls for "rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific." (1) This "rebalancing" is already under way, as is apparent from America's warming relationships with India and Vietnam, policy shift toward Burma (Myanmar), and planned deployment of 2,500 Marines at a new forward-staging base in Darwin, Australia, that is to serve as a launch pad for Southeast Asia. The United States is also building up forces on its territory of Guam, a key strategic enclave in the Pacific much like the British island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.

The fundamental U.S. strategic objective in the Asia-Pacific remains what it has been since 1898 when America took the Philippines as spoils of the naval war with Spain — the maintenance of a balance of power. The security thrust of America's Asia policy also is unlikely to change. The United States has been, and will continue to be, the leading security player in Asia, building and maintaining strategic ties and arrangements with more Asian states than any other player.

For the past century, or at least since the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack (which was partly prompted by a U.S.-British-Dutch oil embargo against Japan), the United States has clearly signaled that American security begins not off the coast of California but at the western rim of the Pacific Ocean and beyond. As British economic historian Niall Ferguson has written, even "when they were comprehensively beaten by Japanese forces in 1942," the Americans (and Europeans) "fought back with the aim of restoring the old Western dominance" in Asia. (2)

The American belief that U.S. security begins in the Pacific's western rim may explain, even if partly, why the U.S. military fought in Korea and Vietnam, why it entered into the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty, why the U.S. security treaties with Japan and South Korea remain critical to American forward military deployment in the Asian theater, why it has a security commitment to Taiwan, and why it has forged new strategic relationships with several Southeast Asian countries and India.

In addition to its determination to stay as Asia's security anchor, America's balance-of-power objective remains dominant in its Asia-Pacific policy. During the first half of the Cold War, the United States chose to maintain the balance by forging security alliances with Japan and South Korea and also by keeping forward bases in Asia. By the time the Cold War entered the second phase, America's 'ping-pong diplomacy' led to Richard Nixon's historic handshake with Mao Zedong in 1972 in an 'opening' designed to reinforce the balance by employing a newly assertive, nuclear-armed China to countervail Soviet power in the Asia-Pacific region.

Today, the United States would not want any single state in Asia to dominate the Asian continent or any region there. As part of its hedging strategy against China, it is reinforcing its existing military relationships and building new allies or partners, including roping in states that can serve as potential balancers in Asia. China too plays balance-of-power politics in Asia, but its balancing is primarily designed to keep its peer rivals (like Japan and India) bottled up regionally.

It is true that the United States views with unease China's not-too-hidden aim to dominate Asia — an objective that runs counter to U.S. security and commercial interests and to the larger goal for a balance in power in Asia. To help avert such dominance, the U.S. has already started building potential countervailing influences, without making any attempt to contain China. At the same time, the U.S. shares important interests with China, including maintaining peace on the Korean peninsula, keeping oil supplies flowing from the Persian Gulf, propping up Pakistan, and seeking strategic stability in the Pacific. On issues where U.S.-Chinese interests converge, Washington will continue to work closely with Beijing.

For the United States, China's rising power actually helps validate American forward military deployments in the Asian theater, keep existing allies in Asia, and win new strategic partners. An increasingly assertive China, in fact, has proven a diplomatic boon for Washington in strengthening and expanding U.S. security arrangements in Asia. South Korea has tightened its military alliance with the U.S., Japan has backed away from a move to get the U.S. to move its Marine airbase out of Okinawa, and India, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines, among others, have drawn closer to the United States. But the China factor can remain handy only as long as the United States is seen by its partners as a credible guarantor of stability and security, which is a function not of military strength but political will in Washington.

Washington has chosen to chart a course of tacit neutrality on Sino-Indian territorial and other disputes and urged Beijing and Tokyo to settle their dispute in the East China Sea through negotiations. But when Chinese actions pose a direct challenge to U.S. interests in Asia, Washington has been willing to send out a clear message, such as on China's move to enforce its claim to almost the entire South China Sea as its "historical waters." That move collides with U.S. interests, including the traditional emphasis on freedom of navigation. It appears to be part of China's "access denial" strategy aimed at keeping the U.S. Navy from operating freely in the South China Sea. After all, it is in this theater that the Chinese Navy is seeking to transform itself from a seal-denial to sea-control force. In this light, the South China Sea has become the hub of a new Great Game between the U.S. and China — a theater where Sino-U.S. interests not only diverge but also clash.

Yet, between China and its neighbors, the United States has continued to play a delicate balancing act. It has sought to reassure its Asian partners and allies that it will remain engaged in Asia and will work for a peaceful resolution of the territorial and maritime disputes in Asia, including rival claims over islands, undersea mineral wealth, and fishing rights. At the same time, it has also sought to shield its equally important interest to build closer ties with Beijing, including a healthy military-to-military dialogue.

America's allies and partners in Asia are watching whether Washington will be tempted to join hands with Beijing to manage affairs in East Asia or Southern Asia. If the bilateral relationship between the United States and China would sublimate America's relations with other Asian powers, including Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and India, the result will be the weakening of the U.S.-led alliance system and partnerships. Each ally or partner would then seek to focus more on building adequate defense capabilities of its own rather than relying on U.S. assurances.

President Obama, for example, angered India in November 2009 when in a joint communiqué in Beijing he granted China a role in South Asia, as if that region were part of a U.S.-China condominium. The reference to a role for China in India-Pakistan relations not only meshed with Beijing strategy's to reinforce the India-Pakistan pairing, but also overlooked the reality that China has a longstanding strategic nexus with Pakistan that is specifically directed at India.

Another question with a bearing on the future Asian security is whether U.S. policy toward Japan will change with the changed geopolitical circumstances in East Asia. Japan is the only democracy in East Asia that can balance the power of rising China in that region. While China will clearly prefer a Japan that remains dependent on America for its security than a Japan that can play a more independent role, the post-1945 system erected by the U.S. is more suited to keep Japan as an American protectorate than to allow Japan to effectively aid the central U.S. policy objective in the Asia-Pacific: a stable balance of power. A U.S. policy approach that subtly encourages Tokyo to cut its overdependence on America and do more for its own defense can assist Japan in shaping a new strategic future for itself that directly contributes to Asian power equilibrium.

The prospect that the United States might be forced to cut back on its assets in Asia reinforces the need for such a policy shift. America faces a pressing need for comprehensive domestic renewal to arrest the erosion in its relative power. The

imperative to reduce its huge deficit could prompt it to trim its ground capabilities in the Asia-Pacific.

Actually, the U.S. doesn't need the enormous and extensive assets on the ground that it presently maintains in Asia. President George W. Bush's administration used the U.S.-led war on terror to rapidly expand U.S. military presence on the Asian continent. Today, the U.S. has military bases extending from Okinawa to Bahrain that can cover every part of Asia.

Moreover, the U.S. can effectively advance its objectives by relying more on being an offshore balancer. But to make significant savings in defense expenditure while keeping its Asia-Pacific strategy robust, it will need to make fundamental changes in its Cold War-era hub-and-spoke system. The patron-client framework of the hub-and-spoke system, for example, is hardly conducive to building new alliances (or "spokes"). India for example, cannot be a Japan to the United States in the 21st-century world. Indeed, Washington has worked to co-opt India in a "soft alliance" devoid of treaty obligations.

One of the ways Washington has sought to strengthen its cooperation with Asian allies and partners is to build new sub-alliances within the framework of its hub-and-spoke system. For example, the recent launch of trilateral strategic consultations among the United States, India, and Japan, and their decision to hold joint naval exercises this year, signals efforts to form an entente among the Asia-Pacific region's three leading democracies. At a time when Asia is in transition and troubled by growing security challenges, the U.S., India and Japan are seeking to build a broader strategic understanding to advance their shared interests. Their effort calls to mind the pre-World War I Franco-British-Russian "Triple Entente" to meet the threat posed by the rapid rise of an increasingly assertive Germany.

This time, the impetus has been provided by China's increasingly muscular foreign policy. But unlike the anti-German entente of France, Russia, and Great Britain of a century ago, the aim is not to contain China. Rather, U.S. policy is to use economic interdependence and China's full integration into international institutions to dissuade its leaders from aggressively seeking Asian hegemony.

Indeed, the intention of the three democratic powers is to create an entente cordiale without transforming it into a formal military alliance, which they recognize would be counterproductive. Yet this entente could serve as an important strategic instrument to deter China's rising power from sliding into arrogance. The three partners also seek to contribute to the construction of a stable, liberal, rules-based regional order. Over time, this trilateral initiative could become quadrilateral with Australia's inclusion. A parallel Australia-India-U.S. axis, however, is likely to precede the formation of any quadrilateral partnership, especially in view of the earlier failure to launch such a four-party coalition.

The U.S., for its part, is now pursuing a broader strategy in Asia to re-embrace multilateralism. In past years, the U.S. had come to view Asian regional groups as limiting its ability to act on its own. By contrast, China had embraced regional groups. Now those roles are being reversed, with the U.S. re-embracing multilateralism, including by joining the East Asia Summit, and China wary of multilateral initiatives because of fear that its smaller neighbors will gang up against it. For example, the *Global Times*, a subsidiary of the Communist Party's flagship newspaper, *People's Daily*, said on November 15, 2011 that the United States was trying to "form a gang" against China's territorial claims on the South China Sea.

America's continued central role in the Asia-Pacific will remain safe in the foreseeable future, but the long-term viability of its security arrangements boils down to one word: credibility. The credibility of America's security assurances to allies and partners, and its readiness to stand by them when it comes to the crunch, will determine the long-term strength and size of its security-alliance system in the Asia-Pacific.

*Brahma Chellaney is a Professor of Strategic Studies at the New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research, an independent think-tank.

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