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Challenges of the US Rebalance

by Sanjay Pulipaka



The recent crisis in the Korean peninsula, the visit of the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, to South Korea, China and Japan and the policy pronouncements of other senior officials such as Deputy Secretary of Defense, Ashton B. Carter, have brought forth some of the significant dimensions of the US Pivot to the Asia-Pacific.

The military component of the US "pivot" was clearly articulated by the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Ashton B. Carter, in his talk at CSIS, Washington DC on April 08, 2013. He mapped the four pronged strategy of the US pivot: first, transfer of 60% of naval assets to the Asia Pacific; second, bolstering the forward presence by mechanisms such as deploying appropriate equipment and rotation of troops; third, investments in defence capabilities that are directly relevant to the Asia-Pacific; and fourth, strengthening relationships with allies and the establishing new partnerships in the region.¹

It is not merely in the realm of the military but also in the economic realm that the US has been making sustained efforts to engage the Asia-Pacific region. The US has been working to operationalise the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a high standard free-trade agreement. So far, 11 Asia-Pacific countries have been part of the negotiation process. The TPP received a shot in the arm with the recent addition of Japan to the negotiation process and there is an anticipation that more countries would now be willing to join these discussions leading to the future creation of an Asia-Pacific free-trade area. (FTAAP)

The question that naturally emerges from all this is why is the US rebalancing towards Asia? It should be noted that after the United States, the two largest economies, China and Japan,

Chair's Column

Assessing the US Rebalance

Asia's economic potential and increasing geo-political significance has been accompanied by growing Chinese assertiveness. The resultant unease among China's neighbours has contributed to a largely welcoming response across Asia towards the US rebalance.

However, there are questions in the region about the US resolve to maintain its pre-eminent role as a resident power underwriting regional prosperity and security. These have only increased in the initial months of President Obama's second term, as the Administration seeks to provide reassurance to allies and partners in Asia without contributing to rising tensions over territorial disputes and North Korea's nuclear blackmail.

In this May issue of *India-US Insight*, Sanjay Pulipaka, Programme Fellow, examines the various challenges confronting the US rebalance. He concludes that no one country can single-handedly shape and sustain the security architecture in broader Asia. China, as an increasingly dominant power, must recognize Asian multi-polarity. Quite apart from the role of the United States, regional powers such as India, Japan and ASEAN must be part of advancing rule based and balanced multilateral security architecture through the EAS process. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's forthcoming visit to Japan for a summit meeting with Shinzo Abe, who is leading Japan's revival, provides a timely opportunity to explore such possibilities.

Hemant Krishan Singh
ICRIER-Wadhwani US Chair

are in the region. The relative economic weight of the Asia-Pacific in the world economy is also bound to increase in the coming years. The Asia-Pacific has emerged as an important component of US trade amounting to as much as 60% of total exports of US goods in 2011. Therefore, it is not surprising that former Secretary of Defense, Leon E. Panetta, said a year ago: "In this century, the 21st century, the United States recognizes that our prosperity and our security depends even more on the Asia-Pacific region."²

On the other hand, China's economic engagement in the Asia-Pacific region has increased exponentially in the recent past. In 2011, China was the largest trading partner of Japan, India, South Korea, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Vietnam. During the same year, it was the second largest trading partner of Indonesia, Thailand and Laos. All this indicates that the Asia-Pacific has emerged as an important economic hub for both the US and China. It should be noted that increased economic engagement with China did not result in an improved security environment for many countries in the Asia-Pacific. China is perceived as being very assertive in territorial maritime disputes in the region and has not held back from testing the territorial/maritime boundaries claimed by various countries. As a consequence, there have been demand signals emanating from the region seeking engagement of a diverse set of actors to balance the increasing assertive actions of China. Therefore, given its economic interests, long history of engagement and its commitments to allies, the US has been pivoting to Asia. However, the US pivot faces numerous and growing challenges.

Pivot and Conflict Prevention



The US has to strike a fine balance between standing up for its allies and preventing its engagement from resulting in increased tensions. The recent Korean crisis exemplified these challenges. In response to the sanctions that were imposed for its nuclear weapons programme and to US-South Korean military exercises, the North Korean authorities threatened to launch a preemptive nuclear strike. As tensions escalated, the US beefed up the US missile defences in the region. Significantly, B-2 stealth bombers of the US conducted a long-range precision strike exercise in South Korea. The rising tensions in the Korean peninsula provided the US with an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment as a genuine security provider to its allies in the region. As General Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has stated: "The reaction to the B-2s that we're most concerned about is not necessarily the reaction it might elicit in North Korea, but rather among our Japanese and Korean allies.....Those exercises are mostly to

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File Photo: B2 Stealth Bomber, Source: Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository

assure our allies that they can count on us to be prepared and to help them deter conflict."³

While the US military has made its presence felt, the challenge has been to prevent this demonstration of commitment becoming the basis for provocative strategies of other countries in the region. The presence of appropriate forces in a given theatre may deter actors from indulging in misadventures. However, there is always the danger of escalatory tactics spiralling into a conflict.

It is to prevent such possibilities that the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, visited South Korea, China and Japan, the key stakeholders, during the recent Korean crisis. While Kerry's diplomatic initiative was needed, there is a perception that he may have gone too far to elicit Chinese cooperation. Observers point out that Kerry's call for a "special relationship"⁴ with China in Beijing gave an impression that he was elevating the relationship to a new level without any significant positive movement from China. In fact, there has been very little reciprocation from China. Since Kerry's visit, China has violated the territorial waters of Japan in the Senkakus, reportedly supplied helicopter gunships to an ethnic armed group in Myanmar, undertaken a 19 kilometre deep incursion of its troops in India's Ladakh region, and issued a new defence white paper which omits references to its long-standing no-first use nuclear doctrine. Moreover, it is difficult to say if the blustering leadership in North Korea is even willing to consider the possibility of rolling back its nuclear weapons program. These developments indicate the complexities that confront the US rebalance towards Asia viz., the increased presence of the US should hinder conflict while simultaneously demonstrating a reassuring commitment towards US allies and friends in the region.

There are other challenges, such as rise of nationalism, which complicate the already murky waters of the East Asian security scenario. There are concerns that the Chinese authorities will have to resort to increased nationalistic rhetoric to maintain domestic political stability and this would lead to even greater assertiveness in its behavior.⁵ The rise of nationalism and political transitions are bound to add a qualitatively new dynamic to the security scenario in the East Asia. Relations between US allies Japan and South Korea are clouded by history issues. Though these issues are not its creation, the US has to factor in these developments.

Pivot and Perceptions

The lingering economic slowdown, imminent budget cuts and the growing domestic constituency within the country calling for a reduction in US global security commitments have cast a shadow on the sustainability of the Pivot. There is a concern among US allies and friends in the Asia-Pacific that the Pivot may be a transient phenomenon. US officials have been arguing that the withdrawal from Iraq and the imminent withdrawal from Afghanistan would leave them with enough resources to redeploy in the Asia-Pacific region, even if there is significant resource crunch. Does this imply that the US is disengaging from the Middle East? Kurt Campbell opines that such a question caricatures US policy towards the Middle East and argues that US has been successful in recruiting rising powers such as Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand to play an active role in the region.⁶ He notes: "For really the first time, many Asian nations developed an "out of area" perspective and became much more actively engaged in the diplomacy, development challenges and security matters of the Middle East and South Asia."⁷ Seen from this perspective, the Pivot is not resulting in a "power vacuum" in the Middle East. Instead, Campbell and others argue, US policy over the years has ensured that there is an increase in density of actors working towards ensuring stability in the Middle East.

There is also an apprehension that the US Pivot to Asia may result in its disengagement from European security issues. US officials have been trying hard to convince their European allies that the rebalance would not be implemented at their expense. As John Kerry noted during his visit to Berlin: "We are paying attention to Asia, and so are you, and so should you. But we're not doing it at the expense of Europe, not at all. And in fact, President Obama's announcement about the US-EU Trade Agreement is evidence of the fact that we think Europe is critical to creating the kind of leverage, if you will, that comes from a larger market and from our working out the rules of behavior between us."⁸

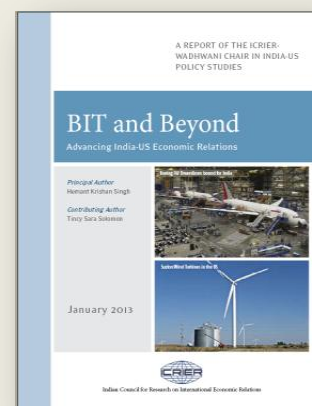
Along with reassuring allies in the other parts of the world, the US officials have modulated their articulation of the Pivot. There is an increasing discomfort among policymakers in using the word "pivot" and instead a clear preference to use the term "rebalance." This is being done to indicate that "rebalance" does not indicate a fundamental reorientation in US foreign policy and it is definitely not about containment of any country. Most importantly, unlike 'pivot,' the word 'rebalance' suggests historical continuity in the US policy towards Asia-Pacific.



US Secretary of State John Kerry addressing a press conference during his recent visit to Republic of Korea.

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The Economic Drivers of the Pivot

On the economic front, TPP is a key component of the US Pivot. With Japan joining the negotiation process, TPP member countries account for 40% of the global economic output. There are concerns that the TPP would undermine the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). East Asian countries may also find it difficult to measure up to the high standards of the TPP initiative.⁹ Matthew P. Goodman of CSIS argues that these apprehensions, on closer examination, are not based on solid evidence.¹⁰ The increasing momentum of the TPP negotiation process indicates that there are constituencies in the region which are positively inclined for such a high standard trade agreement and the fact that sixteen rounds of discussions have already taken place indicates that the TPP process is gaining momentum. The challenge for TPP would be to demonstrate and communicate that the process would be inclusive and that it would not undermine other regional initiatives. Inviting countries such as India to be part of APEC and later the TPP can probably be a first step in this direction.

Conclusion

In essence, the US Pivot is a response to a structural shift in global economic and political relations. It is a recognition that the relative economic weight of the Asia-Pacific has increased and there is a need for robust security architecture to sustain and enhance economic growth in a region which will be the main motor of the global economy. The US Pivot is bound to impact the security landscape of the Asia-Pacific and in turn will be impacted by developments within the region. Hence, the Pivot will be a dynamic and evolving process. As the above mentioned challenges demonstrate, no one country can single-handedly shape and sustain the security architecture in a region as economically dynamic and politically diverse as emerging Asia. The multi-polarity within Asia must be recognized by China, and other regional powers such as India, Japan and ASEAN must be part of advancing rule-based and balanced multilateral security architecture through the EAS process. The visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Japan later this month provides a timely opportunity to explore such possibilities.

Endnotes

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