Will the US Pivot Trigger a New Regional Arms Race?
By Richard A. Bitzinger

Some who fear that the US rebalancing toward Asia will stoke US-China rivalry also worry that it could lead to an arms race among countries in the region.

But military expert Richard A. Bitzinger points out that Asian nations have been on a binge of arms buying, especially of highly advanced arms, for more than a decade. What remains to be seen is whether that trend will accelerate in worrisome and potentially destabilizing ways with America’s pivot.

WHEN THE ADMINISTRATION of US President Barack Obama formally promulgated its new “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific region at the beginning of 2012, many hailed this move, later rechristened a “rebalancing,” as a significant, even consequential, realignment of US global power. After a decade-long preoccupation with fighting ground-based counter-insurgency wars in the Middle East, the US military now plans to emphasize air- and sea-based operations in an “arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia.”

In particular, this rebalancing involves the redeployment of US forces from other parts of the world. The US Navy plans to position 60 percent of its fleet in the Pacific Ocean compared to a current split of approximately 50:50 between the Pacific and Atlantic. In addition, 2,500 US Marines are to be based in Darwin, Australia, while Singapore has agreed to “host” four of the Navy’s new Littoral Combat Ships. Finally, the US is seeking to expand its access to ports and other facilities in the Philippines and Vietnam.

Of course, much of this supposed rebalancing is just old wine in new bottles. The US never really decoupled that much from the Asia-Pacific — the region was simply eclipsed by the overriding campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan and the global war on terror. Already, six of the US Navy’s 11 aircraft carriers are based in the Pacific, as well as 31 of its 53 nuclear-powered attack submarines. And there are more than 60,000 US military personnel based just in the Western Pacific, along with 42,500 uniformed service members in Hawaii and 13,600 more afloat.

Yet, this rebalancing is significant because it symbolizes Washington’s renewed focus on China and its growing concern over the growth of Chinese military power in the Asia-Pacific. The strategic pivot is not merely a diplomatic reengagement with Asia — it is a decidedly military effort by the US to counterbalance Beijing’s growing strength and influence in the region. Consequently, the pivot must be viewed through the lens of the Pentagon’s nascent Air-Sea Battle concept, an ambitious war-fighting model that anticipates massive counterstrikes against an enemy’s home territory, incapacitating the adversary by taking out its military surveillance and communications systems, while also targeting the enemy’s missile bases, airfields and naval facilities. In the Asia-Pacific, that perceived adversary is, increasingly, China.

If taken to its logical extremes, this rebalancing is not only a mechanism to re-energize the United States’ role in Asia and to reinvigorate military relations with its allies, it is also a call to non-aligned states in the region to pick a side in the increasingly militarized Sino-American rivalry. These pressures could in turn increasingly drive the decision-making process to acquire arms in the Asia-Pacific.

THE MILITARY BUILDUP IN ASIA
The military buildup in Asia, of course, predates the new American pivot. Beijing has been on a binge of new arms acquisitions for over a decade, powered by a defense budget that has grown more than five-fold in real terms (i.e., post-inflation) since the late 1990s, hitting $107 billion in 2012, making China the second largest defense spender in the world after the US. Since the late 1990s, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has acquired dozens of modern destroyers, frigates and submarines, both conventional and nuclear-powered; expanded its amphibious warfare fleet, and, most recently, commissioned its first aircraft carrier, the ex-Soviet Varyag. During this same timeframe, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) has acquired at least 700 “fourth-generation-plus” combat aircraft: 300 Su-27 and Su-30MKK fighters from Russia; 100 J-11s, a locally built, reverse-engineered version of the Su-27; and 300 J-10s, an independently developed fighter jet. Consequently, China operates the largest fleet of advanced combat aircraft in Asia.

The rest of Asia has not stood still. The pace of advanced arms acquisitions has picked up over the past decade or so. Japan is in the process of buying four new destroyers, a new class of submarines, outfitted with air-independent propulsion (AIP) for extended submerged patrolling, and two new helicopter carriers; it is also the first country in Asia to order the F-35 stealth fighter jet. South Korea is adding three large indigenous destroyers to its fleet (and may buy more), as well as three Dokdo-class amphibious assault ships and up to nine new AIP-equipped submarines; additionally, Seoul is buying F-15K combat aircraft and developing its own long-range cruise missiles.

Southeast Asia has experienced a similar buying spree in the same timeframe. Almost every navy in the region is acquiring new surface combatants, ranging from corvettes to frigates, while nearly every local air force has bought at least some modern fighter jets, such as the Russian Su-30, the Swedish Gripen, or the US F-15 and F-16. More significantly, perhaps, several Southeast Asian nations are either expanding their submarine fleets or creating such forces where none previously existed: Singapore has acquired six ex-Swedish navy submarines; Vietnam is in the process of buying six Kilo-class boats from Russia; Malaysia has taken delivery of two Franco-Spanish Scorpene-class submarines; and Indonesia recently announced that it would buy three used boats from South Korea.
BUT IS IT REALLY AN ARMS RACE?
Obviously, a lot of arms have flowed into the Asia-Pacific over the past 15 years, and will continue to do so. The question is, will the US pivot cause an acceleration of this process, perhaps to the extent of igniting a regional arms race?

On the face of it, probably not. Asia, after all, doesn’t appear to need any additional reasons to buy arms. Besides the already apparent “China threat,” other strategic motivations abound in the region. Southeast Asian nations have as many disputes with each other as they do with China; these include unresolved territorial squabbles and overlapping claims over maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the South China Sea. Korean arms purchases seem to be driven more by perceived strategic competition with Japan (as highlighted by the Dokdo/Takeshima sovereignty dispute) than any concerns about a rising China. National pride has also been a powerful incentive to acquire arms, aided by tremendous economic growth and the global “buyer’s market” in armaments, thanks to arms producers in the West and Russia who are aggressively looking to expand their markets.

Moreover, arms races are tricky things. Many observers are too quick to describe the current round of arms-buying in the Asia-Pacific as an “arms race,” but they fail to explain what they mean by an arms race in the first place. Arms races are not self-explanatory; rather they must conform to a specific set of circumstances. They are, for the most part, explicit competitions: countries openly designate each other to be adversaries, and their military expenditures and arms acquisitions are undertaken specifically in reaction to the actions of their particular competitors. If we apply such criteria to recent arms acquisitions in the Asia-Pacific, then very few can be described as an arms race.

DOES IT MATTER?
Nevertheless, the kind of tit-for-tat arms acquisitions that we are seeing in Asia are still worrisome and potentially destabilizing. In particular, they may contribute to a classic “security dilemma” — a situation whereby such arming, ostensibly undertaken to maintain regional stability, could actually undermine that very security due to misperception and over-reaction. In the long run, therefore, it may not matter much to the Asia-Pacific whether the current arms buildup is a classic arms race or not.

In addition, the Asia-Pacific is engaged in something far beyond the mere modernization of its regional armed forces. Militaries in the region have added capabilities over the past decade that they did not possess earlier, including stand-off precision-strike, long-range airborne and undersea attack, stealth, mobility and expeditionary warfare, and greatly improved command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) networks. Fourth generation-plus fighter aircraft, modern main battle tanks, cruise missiles, multiple rocket launchers and standoff precision-guided weapons, as well as active radar-guided air-to-air missiles, have greatly increased combat firepower and effectiveness. Submarines (some with AIP) and modern surface combatants, amphibious assault ships, air-refueled combat aircraft and transport aircraft have extended the theoretical range of action of forces in the region. Surveillance aircraft, satellites and unmanned aerial vehicles have considerably expanded their capacity to “look out” over the horizon and in all three dimensions.

Overall, therefore, Asian militaries are acquiring greater lethality and accuracy at greater ranges, improved battlefield knowledge and command and control, and increased operational maneuverability and speed. These expanded capabilities, in turn, promise to significantly alter and upgrade the manner of war fighting in the region. Above all, conflict in the region, should it occur, is likely going to be more high-tech — that is, faster, more long-distance and yet more precise, and perhaps more devastating in its effect.

Over the long run, the US pivot back to Asia, coupled with Air-Sea Battle, could fundamentally affect the regional strategic landscape, and therefore regional arms acquisitions. Certainly, Beijing could interpret US actions as an effort to contain China and to frustrate its national interests; that would only further accelerate the already rapid recent buildup of Chinese military power. Conversely, the need on the part of US friends and allies to hedge militarily against China will only grow in return. If such tit-for-tat arms acquisitions increase in quantity and, especially, quality, the end result could be very disquieting indeed.

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