America’s New Security Strategy and Its Military Dimension

By Michael McDevitt

Much has been made of the military implications of America’s pivot to Asia, especially in the context of perceptions that the US is engaged in an effort to contain China.

Retired US Navy Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt argues that while China is an important factor in the US strategic shift, the pivot is about much more than China. It is about shaping the environment so that a US-China conflict never becomes necessary, and perhaps someday is even inconceivable.

IN NOVEMBER 2011 the administration of US President Barack Obama announced a rebalancing of its strategic focus away from the wars of the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. It also announced that this new strategic rebalancing, or pivot, included an integrated mix of diplomatic, economic, budgetary and security-related initiatives.

The strategy was widely interpreted in the Western media as being all about China, which the administration denies, while in China, the strategy was widely perceived as being one more step in a Washington containment strategy. The truth, of course, is that China is a significant consideration, but it is also true that the rebalance is not all about China, nor is it an attempt to contain China. In fact, anyone who knows anything about Asia realizes that none of China’s neighbors would support a containment strategy. While they may be nervous about China’s growing power, they are also, in one way or another, historically, culturally and economically linked with China. After all, China is every Asian nation’s largest trading partner. They also recognize that China is always going to be their largest neighbor.

The rebalance, to be sure, is not officially blind to China’s rise. In a Foreign Policy article that provides the most comprehensive written description of the administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote: “China represents one of the most challenging and consequential bilateral relationships the United States has ever had to manage. This calls for careful, steady, dynamic stewardship, an approach to China on our part that is grounded in reality, focused on results, and true to our principles and interests.”

The rebalance strategy is really about the fact that over the past 10 years Washington has poured immense resources into Iraq and Afghanistan. In effect, America’s strategic focus was “out of balance.” It was much too heavily weighted toward fighting wars in the Persian Gulf region and Afghanistan—at the expense of America’s more traditional security focus, which was more balanced among regions.

Thus, the administration’s strategy is more accurately understood as an attempt to restore the traditional balance of interests and focus to American security policy, which since 1898 has always had a strong Asia-Pacific orientation, and at the same time to reassure friends and allies that the US remains committed to the Asia-Pacific and to stability in East Asia. The rebalance is intended to counter the regional narrative of American decline in the face of Chinese growth; hence, the real diplomatic and informational focus of the strategy is reassurance.

THE EVOLVING STRATEGIC SETTING: CHINA MOVES TO SEA

In those 10 years of US involvement in the wars of the Middle East, the strategic balance in Asia has been changing. For half a century, the military balance of power in East Asia was unchanged. The continental powers of East Asia, the Soviet Union and “Red” China were effectively balanced by the offshore presence of the US and its island andarchipelagic allies. This balance began to change about 16 years ago, when China had the political motivation and economic resources to begin to address a historic strategic weakness — its vulnerability to military intervention from the sea.

The incentive for Beijing was the fear that newly democratic Taiwan was moving toward de jure independence and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), short of nuclear escalation, was essentially powerless to prevent it, particularly if the US elected militarily to support such a course of action.

Beijing also had plenty of historical motivations. China’s “Century of Humiliation” started in the mid-19th century with its defeat in the Opium War by the British, who came from the sea. Over the decades, China was repeatedly humiliated by foreign powers that exploited China’s weakness along its maritime approaches.

As a result, the combination of economic and geo-strategic factors related to security merge to form the strategic motivation for a historically unique Chinese defense perimeter that extends hundreds of miles to sea. The strategic drivers for Beijing are: the issue of Taiwan itself; the fact that the vast majority of China’s unresolved security issues are maritime in nature; the reality that its economic development depends upon imports of raw materials and exports of finished goods that travel mainly by sea; and, perhaps most importantly, the fact that China’s economic center of gravity is located along its eastern seaboard, exposed to attack from the sea.

IF CHINA IS ONLY DEFENDING ITS INTERESTS, IS THIS A PROBLEM?

By moving its defenses far to sea, China is effectively undermining the traditional maritime-continental balance that has provided the security and stability that have enabled the Asian economic miracle of the last 30 years. As China improves its defenses, it is making the security situation of the countries that live in the shadow of China worse. It is creating what academics call a “security dilemma”—one country’s defenses become so effective that its neighbors fear for their own security.

In 2001, the US Department of Defense began publicly to fret about this situation, characterizing the military problem as “anti-access” and “area denial.” The Chinese have also coined a term to describe what they are trying to achieve militarily: PLA strategists refer to it as “counter-interdiction operations.” In practical terms, this refers to the knitting together of a large submarine force, land-based aircraft carrying anti-ship cruise missiles, and in the near future, ballistic missiles that have the ability to hit moving ships. All these capabilities depend on a very effective ocean surveillance system that can detect and accurately locate approaching naval forces.

No matter what one calls this concept, the desired military outcome is the same — to keep US naval and air forces as far away from China as possible. The strategic implications of this for...
China’s neighbors, many of whom depend upon the US to underwrite their security as alliance or strategic partners, are obvious. If “we” get into a confrontation with China, can “we” depend upon the United States to be able to support us?

Beijing argues that its strategic intentions are clear: China is on a path of peaceful development and is not a threat to its neighbors. I believe that China’s leaders believe this. The trouble is that, as any strategist will argue, intentions can change in an instant; what really matters are the military capabilities that China will possess when its counter-intervention force is completed. Will China be able to defeat US forward-deployed forces and prevent additional forces from the US from reaching East Asia in the event of a conflict? Addressing this worry over American staying power in Asia in the face of a rising China is a key issue that the Obama rebalance strategy intends to address.

THE LONG TERM US RESPONSE

The US response to the challenge posed by the PLA’s “counter-intervention operation” was actually unveiled in the US’s 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review Report. It announced that the US Air Force and US Navy had combined to develop a new operational concept known as Air-Sea Battle (ASB). ASB aims to counter any anti-access threat in the world, including that posed by China. Details of this concept have for understandable reasons remained highly classified, but recent statements by the heads of the Navy and Air Force have indicated that ASB will focus on three lines of effort: 1) disrupting enemy surveillance systems, so surveillance is the backbone of any anti-access system. If you can’t locate an approaching naval force, you can’t attack it; 2) destroying enemy launching systems so that precision weapons cannot be launched (during the Cold War, this was known as shooting at archers not at arrows); 3) defeating enemy missiles and other weapons. This means shooting them down, or decoying them away.

NEAR-TERM ACTIONS

During his November 2011 trip to Asia, Obama announced the creation of a US Marine Corps presence in Australia. Today only 250-strong, it is planned to grow to 2,500, a full Marine Expeditionary Unit. This is likely to trigger an amphibious build-up in Singapore: this is where US naval forces have been disembodied ships that rotate to the Western Pacific so that these Marines have the lift necessary to be employed within the region. The Obama announcement built upon the statement made earlier in 2011 by then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, that several of the US Navy’s newest surface combatants, known as the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), would be permanently stationed in Singapore. Finally, the US Navy Chief of Naval Operations also addressed re-establishing some sort of rotation presence in the Philippines.

Collectively, these posture announcements are intended to signal that the rebalance strategy includes improving the US presence in Southeast Asia, an area that had been neglected when compared to the US presence in Northeast Asia.

Also announced were specific force posture changes that build on initiatives launched during the second term of former US President George W. Bush. Specifically, the US said that over the next seven years it intends to gradually increase the overall percentage of US Navy ships assigned to the Pacific Fleet to 60 percent. Today, according to the Secretary of the Navy, the fleet is already home to about 55 percent of the US Navy. Since the US Navy currently has 287 ships, that means about 158 are in the Pacific Fleet. Plans are to gradually increase the numbers to the 60 percent target, not by transferring ships from the Atlantic to the Pacific, but by adding newly built ships to the Pacific Fleet. Building plans for the future indicate that by 2019 the Navy hopes to have between 295 to 300 ships. So, to reach the target of 60 percent of this fleet size suggests that by the end of this decade, the Pacific Fleet will be between 177 to 180 ships strong. So, the rebalance will gradually grow the Pacific Fleet by around 20 ships.

Until recently, there had been no public announcements regarding US Army and Air Force posture changes associated with the rebalance strategy. Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter broke this silence in August 2012. In a speech in New York, he indicated that the Air Force intends to shift very important surveillance capacity from Afghanistan to the Asia-Pacific, to include the MQ-9 Reaper, U-2 reconnaissance aircraft, and the Global Hawk. In addition, the Air Force will also be able to allocate space, cyber and bomber forces from the US to the Asia-Pacific region with little new investment. As operations in Afghanistan end, for example, B-1s will become available, augmenting the B-52s already on continuous rotational presence in the region. Carter also indicated that Washington was working with Australia to establish a rotational bomber presence, building on the success of bomber rotations to Anderson Air Force Base in Guam.

The Army’s presence in South Korea will be protected from any budget changes, according to Carter. He opined that the Asia-Pacific region will see more Army and Marine Corps presence for the simple reason that they will not be in Iraq and Afghanistan any more.

THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE

It is unlikely that China will halt development of what it considers necessary for its defenses. It is also clear that the US does not intend to sit idly by and permit the introduction of military capabilities that could deny it access to East Asia in a time of conflict, and in peacetime undermine its credibility as a capable ally. Thus, it seems likely that for the foreseeable future the region will witness a “military capabilities competition” in which China introduces capabilities that could deny access, while the US military, especially the Navy and Air Force, introduces capabilities that will assure access. It will be a period of competing strategic concepts, assured access vs. denied access, manifested by the introduction of military capabilities by both sides to accomplish these ends.

Importantly, however, as the recent CSIS report on the US posture in Asia advises, the top priority is not to prepare for a conflict with China; rather, it is to shape the environment so that such a conflict is never necessary and perhaps someday inconceivable. The military posture changes that Washington and its allies are pursuing are intended to achieve this objective.

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