As the World Rebalances in the Asian-Pacific Century, So Must the United States

By Patrick M. Cronin

As the world’s center of economic gravity continues to shift to the Asia-Pacific region, the US decision to refocus its foreign policy toward Asia is motivated by both long-term interests and short-term events, such as China’s more aggressive behavior in the East and South China Seas.

But that doesn’t mean it is a veiled strategy to contain a rising China, writes Patrick M. Cronin.

WE LIVE IN A CENTURY likely to be dominated by the rise of Asian-Pacific power. This trend is not new. During the last half of the 20th century, Asian economies expanded at nearly twice the rate of the rest of the world. While the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 briefly trimmed that pace, the resilient region’s rise has been rekindled, accelerated in part by America’s response to the tragedy of 9/11 and mounting debt.

Future historians writing about the 21st century will focus on crucial turning points. One milestone will take place in less than four years: According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, China’s gross domestic product will surpass that of the United States at the end of 2016. Seeking to capitalize on these trends, the Australian government recently published a volume documenting the coming of the “Asian Century.” Despite the fact that populous China will continue to lag far behind in per capita income, Americans will have to come to grips with their relative decline. Recall that the US ascended to economic pre-eminence in the post-Civil War era known as the Gilded Age. That period as the world’s largest economy is about to end. Although power has been steadily shifting from across the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific and Indian Oceans, it has been a long time since the US has been No.2 with respect to such a major power indicator.

Some of the Asian prosperity that has bloomed in the past few decades can be attributed to Japan’s economic rebirth after the Second World War, as well as the rise of the Asian tiger economies of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea. But it is China’s rise that has been most profound. Deng Xiaoping’s fateful decision to open China to the world has produced decades of near-double-digit economic growth and multi-trillion-dollar foreign exchange reserves. As the world’s workshop, China has become the largest or near-largest trading partner with all Asian-Pacific neighbors. US-China trade has quadrupled in the past decade, and today China is second only to Canada as America’s key trading partner. Between now and 2030, China’s continued rise is expected to enable tens of millions more people to join the ranks of the world’s middle class. The pace and scope of China’s transformation is thus far unprecedented in history: whereas it took Britain 155 years to double its per capita income with

fewer than 10 million people, China is achieving its economic pre-eminence with 100 times the population in one-tenth the duration. And India is not far behind China, while the countries of Southeast Asia are becoming a formidable economic community of their own.

Because we live in the early stages of an Asian-Pacific Century, the US is right to rebalance its economic, political and military power to seize opportunity and forestall challenges in this vital region. While the promise of Asia’s rise is alluring, the future is unpredictable and far from preordained.

THE KIM CONUNDRUM

Even in the relative short run in East Asia, traditional security risks on and around the Korean Peninsula and in the East and South China Seas could unexpectedly impede the path toward regional growth and co-operation.

Kim Jong Un appears bent on achieving the permanent status of nuclear weapon state for North Korea. Kim 3.0’s about-face on a missile and nuclear moratorium, missile diplomacy and recent revelations about proliferation off the Korean Peninsula have undercut hopes that the young leader with an outgoing style is pursuing reform. The peninsula remains the most militarized zone in the region, and a single provocation along the lines of the sinking of the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan or the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 could escalate and bring not just the two Koreas to blows, but also risk war between their major-power allies, the US and China.

South Korea’s Park Geun-hye, who is leader of the Saenuri Party and a presidential candidate in the December 2012 elections (taking place as Global Asia went to press), has called for North Korea to follow the example of Burmese reform. She is likely to seek an inter-Korean summit meet-
All of these steps seem to contravene Deng’s ‘one China’ policy: they undermine the independent status of Taiwan and the administrative autonomy of Hong Kong and Macao, and his sovereignty claim to the South China Sea and the Chinese national resolve to safeguard national honor, territory and maritime rights and interests. They are a clear challenge to China’s national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests. In this respect, China’s national interests are seriously and fundamentally compromised.

Global Asia has also established a political outlet for Chinese nationalism, especially if China’s domestic economy sputters. and its political stability is seriously undermined.

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Introducing the review, US President Barack Obama states: “We seek the security of our nation, allies and partners. We seek the prosperity of emerging alliances to open resistance of its nine-dashed-line claim of the south China sea in its passports, has unsettled the region and heightened concerns that a rising China could upset the growing prosperity of the region.

Meanwhile, China’s maritime standoffs with the Philippines and Japan are casting shadows on the Asian-Pacific Century. In April, the Philippine navy sought to respond to Chinese poaching within the horseshoe-shaped reef located in the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone. China then heightened pressure with civilian law-enforcement ships and refused to back off even when Manila de-escalated. Similarly, in the latter part of 2012 China dispatched a continuous presence of surveillance ships into and near the territorial waters of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Although administered by Japan, the islands could become a political outlet for Chinese nationalism, especially if China’s domestic economy sputters. And Japan’s new more conservative government will be challenged to demonstrate that normal military powers (including the right of collective self-defense) can be exerted without precipitating hostilities in Northeast Asia. In this regard, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are the means, not the end, of a potential renewal of regional competition.

While the review considers Europe, the Middle East and specific functions of US security forces, it begins by stressing Asia’s importance, as this extract shows:

US economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the US military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region. Our relationships with Asian allies and key partners are critical to the future stability and growth of the region. We will emphasize our existing alliances, which provide a vital foundation for Asia-Pacific security. We will also expand our networks of co-operation with emerging partners throughout the Asia-Pacific to ensure collective capability and capacity for securing common interests. The United States is also investing in a long-term strategic partnership with India to support its ability to serve as a regional economic anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region. Furthermore, we will maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula by effectively working with allies and other regional states to deter and defend against provocation from North Korea, which is actively pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

The maintenance of peace, stability, the free flow of commerce, and of US influence in this dynamic region will depend in part on an underlying balance of military capability and presence. Over the long term, China’s emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the US economy and our security in a variety of ways. Our two countries have a strong stake in peace and stability in East Asia and an interest in building a co-operative bilateral relationship. However, the growth of China’s military power must be accompanied by greater clarity of its strategic intentions in order to avoid causing friction in the region. The United States will continue to make the necessary investments to ensure that we maintain regional access and the ability to operate freely in keeping with our treaty obligations and with international law. Working closely with our network of allies and partners, we will continue to promote a rules-based international order that ensures underlying stability and encourages the peaceful rise of new powers, economic dynamism, and constructive defense co-operation.
it’s not a choice between the Middle East or the Asia-Pacific, but between how the US chooses to use its power now and shape tomorrow’s world while retaining pre-eminence. Fighting endless, protracted, unwinnable ground wars in the Middle East begets further violence, drains US resources and forfeits the opportunities of a global power shift to rising Asian economies.

The Obama administration not only identified the US ‘Pivot’ to Asia as a strategic imperative for decades, but has been successful in changing the policy conversation. By continuing to push forward on the “pivot”, the US will overcome the objections of critics because it will reinforce deterrence, reassure allies and partners, and help others advance their capacity for contributing to regional peace, and be vigilant for tomorrow’s strategic surprises. After all, military investments are for decades, not any single year.

But this has not stopped criticism of rebalancing. Many opponents generally worry about neglecting other interests or advancing confrontation with China. These critics, however, often put forward false choices, such as a need to choose between the Middle East or Asia and between cooperation with China or continued US strength.

For instance, some critics claim that the administration is running from the Middle East and that a resort to offshore balancing will invite further violence. To be sure, there is definitely some truth to the line that the Middle East appears to be the source of many troubles, and Asia the fountainhead of solutions. But it’s not a choice between the Middle East or the Asia-Pacific, but between how the US chooses to use its power now and of State Kurt Campbell, widely regarded as one of the architects of the overall policy.

Although business investment and trade policy lag behind, the administration has placed renewed emphasis on concluding a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to help ensure World Trade Organization-like standards across the Pacific. The administration needs to consider more bilateral free trade agreements with regional countries, even as it progresses forward on TPP.

Although military shifts have received inordinate attention in local press coverage, decisions to dispatch up to four US Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore and some 2,500 Marines to conduct rotational exercises in Darwin, Australia, are sensible, limited steps. They will remind the region of America’s determination to help preserve stability and prosperity throughout the region so that all countries can benefit from Asian dynamism.

Going forward, while the broad policy of rebalancing will require a series of adjustments in the second Obama term and beyond, it will survive. It will overcome the objections of critics because it is founded on strong, US national interests supported by both Democrats and Republicans.

But this requires sufficient military presence and engagement to maintain deterrence, reassure allies and partners, help others advance their capacity for contributing to regional peace, and be vigilant for tomorrow’s strategic surprises. After all, military investments are for decades, not any single year.

Finally, some critics misconstrue America’s military efforts as hostile to peace. In particular, they misrepresent the Air-Sea Battle concept as an anti-China strategy. But Air-Sea Battle is merely a combined-forces doctrinal concept to try to ensure that the US Armed Forces can cope with modernizing military capabilities around the world, given that it is America’s ability to project military power that helps to keep the peace throughout the global commons. Seeking to be able to deal with anti-access/area-denial capabilities is far more of a generic hedge than the anti-US capabilities driving China’s rapid military and maritime modernization. When China fails to rein in North Korea’s burgeoning nuclear and missile programs, or when it unilaterally declares “indisputable sovereignty” over most of the South China Sea, it creates uncertainty and anxiety throughout the region.

Strengthening America’s military presence is designed to protect freedom of the seas and maintain stability. The overriding aim of US policy is nothing less than erecting an inclusive, rules-based system in which all countries can live in peace and growing prosperity. As the Asia-Pacific becomes the geographic center of global power, so must the US step up its engagement and rebalance comprehensive power throughout this critical region.

Patrick M. Cronin is Senior Advisor and Senior Director, Asia-Pacific Security Program, Center for a New American Security in Washington, D.C.