

## **Pivot, Rebalance, Et Cetera: What Next? The Future of US Engagement in Asia**

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Apropos the US ‘Pivot to Asia’, “The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action,” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had announced in February 2011, when she had presented the Barack Obama administration’s strategy towards the Asia Pacific.<sup>1</sup> However, come 2017 and mid-March saw the US ‘Pivot to Asia,’ or ‘Rebalance’<sup>2</sup> or ‘Pivot to the Pacific’<sup>3</sup> being declared dead. The US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Susan Thornton, discussing US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s inaugural trip to Asia in a press conference, said on March 13, 2017, “On the issue of pivot, rebalance, et cetera, that was a word that was used to describe the Asia policy in the last administration. I think you can probably expect that this administration will have its own formulation and it hasn’t actually, we haven’t seen in detail what the formulation will be or if there even will be a formulation.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The Pivot and the Trans-Pacific Partnership**

The US Pivot to Asia was a major policy initiative of former US President Obama which was a strategic rebalance effort by shifting US diplomatic and military resources towards Asia. The economic undertone to this was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) which would link 12 Pacific Rim nations that accounted for 40% of world trade.<sup>5</sup> The ‘rebalance’ had been spoken of as the most effective counterbalance to Beijing’s growing influence and assertiveness. While reassuring its allies and partners, the rebalance, while keeping China in check, also imposed a ‘strategic cost’ on it.<sup>6</sup>

China’s view was that the rebalance was a means to contain it and simultaneously maintain US preeminence in the region; a strategic tool one could say to hold back China’s

rise. Washington on the other hand had maintained that the rebalance increased regional security and economic prosperity for all.<sup>7</sup>

The East China Sea and the South China Sea have been of late witnessing regular ‘happenings,’ whether on water or within the shorelines of the countries involved i.e. China, Japan, North Korea, the Philippines, etc. So, what next then? The United States despite quitting the ‘Pivot to Asia’ have definitely not quit the area – neither in terms of the projection of hard power or of soft power. While one of the first acts of the Trump administration was to withdraw the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade pact that incidentally the previous US administration believed would strengthen US leadership in Asia,<sup>8</sup> the US is obviously not letting its commitment to Asia take a backseat.

However, mere declaration of intent is not enough to have the same effect as actions. For the United States to show resolve in maintaining its preeminence in Asia it has to have the ability to back its policies with not just power projection- but power projection that is sustainable. For any fleeting show of arms - and speaking of arms i.e. in tandem with the use of economic and diplomatic power - will not demonstrate the same resolve as one with the capability of long term commitment. With or without the ‘Pivot to Asia’ having been abandoned, the US will still need to have a sufficient number of seafaring vessels in place to build the kind of confidence that it wants Asia to look towards the US for. So, while abandoning the ‘pivot,’ is the US 2018 defense budget any indicator of things to come?

## **A Bigger Fleet?**

In September 2016, the then US Defense Secretary Ash Carter spoke of launching a new phase of the ‘rebalance’- that of increasing funding for the US Coast Guard and increasing Foreign Military Financing for the ten countries that form the ASEAN security collective. However, with the change in administration and of its priorities, the US Coast Guard and the Foreign Military Funding appear to be heading for cuts.<sup>9</sup>

On March 16, 2017, US President Donald Trump unveiled the Pentagon’s fiscal 2018 (FY2018) budget proposal. The President’s fiscal budget requested for USD 639 bn in funding for the Pentagon, an increase of USD 52 bn from the 2017 level of USD 587 bn. The proposal included USD 574 bn for the base budget and USD 65 bn for Overseas Contingency Operations.<sup>10</sup> This is the largest increase since President Ronald Reagan’s military build-up of the 1980’s.<sup>11</sup> The US budget intends to facilitate funding for a stepped up fight against

ISIS, enhance troop readiness and build new ships and planes.<sup>12</sup> The United States Navy has 274 ships.<sup>13</sup> Analysts in general agree that there is an urgent need for the US Navy to increase its fleet size and reduce the pressure on the Navy given that they appear to be stretched. However, it is not clear yet what this figure will be. The figure put forth by the US Navy is 355 ships, the latest as per the new Force Structure Assessment completed in December 2016.<sup>14</sup> The Trump administration on the other hand has often stated 350 as the number including two new aircraft carriers.<sup>15</sup> America incidentally accounts for more than half of the world's 18 active aircraft carriers and while no specifics have been given for the requirement for new carriers, they would take years to build.<sup>16</sup> Senator John McCain, the Chairman of the US Armed Services Committee has said that the plans to increase the fleet to 355 ships by 2022 was “unrealistic” but that the Navy could have an increase of 59 ships in that timeframe, including five fast attack submarines, five fleet oilers, two amphibious ships, two undersea surveillance ships, and one aircraft carrier. He also said that the marines could add 3000 troops a year to reach 200,000 by 2022 with a further scope for increase.<sup>17</sup> However, apart from the funding issues it appears that the US shipbuilding industrial base will not be able to meet the projections.<sup>18</sup>

## **The Asian Conundrum**

With tensions ratcheting up in the East and South China Seas, along with the new Trump administration determined to show its resolve, the United States will have to make the best use of diplomacy along with flexing its economic might if it wants to sustain and develop its interests in the Western Pacific – Indian Ocean region. As far as diplomacy goes, the job of the America's top diplomat, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, is an unenviable one. While Beijing has cheered the March 2017 visit of the US Secretary as a diplomatic win,<sup>19</sup> and with the Trump-Xi visit going better than could be expected in the present global scenario, it hasn't made the diplomat's job easier as the preponderance of North Korea remains the numero uno challenge for the United States. Despite the recent 'diversion' of Syria, North Korea continues to be in US crosshairs. And this is where the importance of the US Navy comes to the fore. Because diplomacy apart this is the most efficacious means that the US have, to back up their Asia policies. Following North Korea's test firing of a medium range ballistic missile from its eastern port of Sinpo into the Sea of Japan on April 05, the US declared on April 09, 2017, that a US Navy Strike Group would be moving to the Korean Peninsula. The strike group comprises the USS Carl Vinson – a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier, two guided missile destroyers and a guided missile cruiser. The strike group also has the

capability to intercept ballistic missiles. Experts opine that North Korea might conduct more tests and that it may even test an intercontinental ballistic missile.<sup>20</sup>

While North Korea has hit out at the US Navy Strike Group move<sup>21</sup> and upped the ante in an already tense situation, the move by the US is an evidentiary show of US commitment to the region and an indication of sorts of US President Trump's recent statement "If China is not going to solve North Korea, we will."<sup>22</sup> President Trump's ordering of a missile strike on Syria late on April 06 – during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to the US<sup>23</sup> was a clear indication of US resolve under the Trump administration to both China and North Korea. It also was a signal to allies Japan and South Korea that US involvement in the region was likely to gather steam rather than a lessening post 'pivot'.

## **What Next?**

While the US Navy Strike Group sails on to the Korean peninsula it would be pertinent to note that US Naval presence in Asia is still a force to reckon with, notwithstanding how US plans for their naval forces with respect to Asia pan out. The end of the pivot does not mean that US Naval presence will reduce or wane in importance. On this note it would do well to remember the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training or 'CARAT' series of exercises that the US Navy conducts in Asian waters.<sup>24</sup> CARAT is a bilateral exercise series between the US Navy, US Marine Corps and the armed forces of nine partner nations in South and Southeast Asia, including Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines Singapore, Thailand and Timor-Leste. CARAT Brunei 2016 was held in November 2016.<sup>25</sup> Pivot or not, with US defense cuts being removed and a United States Navy build up on the cards, one could take guidance on likely US policy in Asia from what the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs had to say last month when she spoke on 'pivot, rebalance et cetera': "We're going to remain active and engaged in Asia. The Asian economy is very important for US prosperity and growth so we'll be there working on fair and free trade issues; working on regional security challenges, such as North Korea, and continue to press for a rules-based, constructive, peaceful, stable order in Asia."<sup>26</sup>

The 'Pivot to Asia' was the keystone of the Obama administration eight years ago, with the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement at the heart of it and 'underpinning a mesh of American security alliances.'<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding Assistant Secretary Susan Thornton's remarks last month, the US needs to now declare a policy and clearly signal its intent to its Asian allies. With China's slogan of the 'new model of great power relations' by which China

signals its hopes for an Asian sphere of influence,<sup>28</sup> a new US policy, while being reassuring to its allies would also have to maintain a balance with China. There is a view, that the abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership could lead to a leadership and security vacuum in the region.<sup>29</sup>

With the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean regions becoming increasingly joint with common and overlapping economic and security concerns, the US needs to incorporate what one could call ‘affordable actions,’ which would in essence address all the stakeholders on the economic, diplomatic and security fronts; without putting itself in an invidious position. While US interests in the region are likely to remain largely much the same it is the architecture that is likely to change. The resources that it would require to balance its interests in today’s geopolitical environment are definitely going to see an increase and that is where the expansion of the US Naval fleet will come in. What is going to be of essence is how the new administration decides to go about it. But with the Trump administration it’s still early days, and going by the first 100 days it wouldn’t be too much out of place if US policy makers to Asia spring a surprise; and that too probably sooner than later.

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## Notes and References

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