



Maritime Military Context of the US Rebalance: Strategic Basis and Prognosis

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The global order is undergoing a churn and the general pointers forecast an era of a cataclysmic systemic change. The pronouncement of the “Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific”, indicating a shift in US strategic focus to Asia, has captured the imagination of the scholars and the analyst community alike. Within the prevailing nebulous and uncertain global architecture, this strategic recast by the dominant security provider has far-reaching implications. Considering the contextual underpinnings of various policy articulations and the geographic construct of this strategic reorientation, the maritime element would play a crucial role in this re-alignment of US strategic posture. This paper aims to deconstruct the maritime–military context of the US rebalance and draw out necessary implications for international, regional and Indian strategic calculus.

Mahan wrote about the emerging globalised milieu and the connection among political, economic and the military dimensions of national strategy. His words, written about 100 years ago, mirror the strategic dilemmas and security challenges

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that confront the United States in a contemporary environment.¹ Given a particular persuasion, it has been argued since mid-1990s that the 21st century will belong to Asia, to the Pacific, Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific, where the resident Asian stakeholders would act as the drivers to shape the global geostrategic trends. However, when one considers the current developments, an equally compelling and opposite argument emerges. On the one hand, there is a mixed trend about the Asian drivers, i.e. China is expected to record a high but comparatively lower single-digit growth, India is attempting to recover from a recent economic dip and there are renewed economic stirrings of Abenomics Japan. There are also the recent green shoots in the US economic indices, a relative stability in the EU and a resurgent Russia.

Notwithstanding the above, the US pronouncement of “Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific” indicates a larger strategic focus to an Asian centric geography, which has attracted the attention of the global strategic community. Under the prevailing ambiguous strategic environment, “rebalance” and the geographic construct of “reorientation”, it is surmised that the maritime element would play a crucial role in this re-alignment of US strategic posture. Historically, the importance of maintaining a favourable balance in the “global commons” is a critical factor in shaping US security strategy.² In current parlance, while cyber and space are also considered as the commons, the visibility and importance of world’s oldest commons, i.e., the oceans, remains as relevant as ever.

The US National Security Advisor’s (NSA) briefing in November 2012 serves as a good point of departure to help understand the “strategic” intent and content of the US “rebalance”. There are politico-diplomatic, economic and commercial, ideological cum informational, and military–security dimensions to this rebalance strategy.³ The fact that this rebalance has been planned since 2008 as a long-term and deliberate US policy decision, the rationale for the shift from “pivot” to “rebalance” and the essential components of this strategic orientation were delineated on this occasion. The recent increase in US diplomatic interactions with their counterparts in the Asia-Pacific forms the politico-diplomatic component of this strategy. In a similar vein, the concerted efforts for an early implementation of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) are the economic-commercial pole of the US emphasis on the Asia-Pacific as a region of geo-economic importance. The details of these reinvigorated political, diplomatic and economic dimensions of US strategic re-posturing do not form part of this paper. However, the larger geo-political and geo-economic issues with a direct bearing on military–security aspects of the US rebalance are included to contextualise the

arguments. Furthermore, the rebalance is not a fixed single-track approach but would evolve and mutate because of the interplay between the perceptions and responses from other stakeholders, largely due to “cause and effect” dynamics.

Military rebalancing within a predominantly maritime or a mixed continental–maritime milieu is not new and historical precedents exist of such reorientations. The French attempted a similar concept by redistributing their naval forces to Brest (across the English Channel) and Toulon (Mediterranean) to complicate the British naval calculus during the Napoleonic Age. During the tense phase preceding the outbreak of the First World War, Admiral John Fisher’s concentration of British naval strength in the home waters as a counter to Tirpitz’s *Risikoflotte Theory* (Risk Fleet, also referred to as the “Fleet-in-Being” concept) can be cited as another example. One might be tempted to quote the consolidation of Royal Navy in the Atlantic and Mediterranean theatres during the Second World War as supporting evidence. While true in a mechanistic sense, this was more of a forced choice necessitated by the rapid German advance across continental Europe and Italian gains in North Africa.

Global Churn – Reorder, Disorder and Strategic Hedging

The new millennium has witnessed a fundamental redistribution of geo-strategic salience, characterised by a relative decline of the West accompanied by a corresponding ascendance of the East.⁴ While surprising to some, such a shift including the arrival of the information revolution was predicted in the closing stages of the Cold War.⁵ It is also a generally accepted posit that the global order is undergoing a serious churn and if the indicators espoused by the *longue duree* (long cycle) theorists are correlated with current evidence, all pointers forecast an era of a cataclysmic systemic change, upheaval and uncertainty.⁶

While the aforementioned rationale help forecast a revolutionary change in the global order, an exact quantifiable logic that can predict the ultimate shape of a new order remains elusive. Using history and empirical evidence as the basis, systemic changes have generally involved three processes. The first being major wars, or in other words, interstate violence involving the majority of dominant and rising powers on a wide geographic scale *à la* the First and the Second World Wars. The second process involves strategic overstretch or the collapse of one of the protagonists during an extended–exhausting geo-strategic competition, like the collapse of the Soviet Union. The third case involves, in rare and isolated instances, a consensual

accommodation and acceptance of peer competitor(s) interests by the existing major power(s). The decision by Britain, an eminent pre-Second World War power, to accept a subaltern status under the US umbrella in the face of Communist threat is a pertinent example.

It is difficult to make clear-cut assessments about the strategic intents of major players across an extended Asia-Pacific (from India eastwards to the Western Pacific) that the US rebalance seeks to address. Simultaneous declarations of cooperation and competition, nationalistic rhetoric, calls for synergistic responses and an increasing securitisation of strategic discourse prevail across the policy, media and analytical community narratives. The important factors contributing to such a trend are the economic uncertainty, political churn and the changing balance of military power, which can be clubbed under the an umbrella term of “strategic flux”. Differing approaches due to conflicting perceptions and strategic cultures among the stakeholders community, resident and non-resident alike, despite shared interests, has led the majority of these states to adopt a posture of “strategic hedging”. This hedging policy can best be described as a delicate and difficult balance among the competing economic, politico-diplomatic and security imperatives. In certain cases, while implicit choices have been made, alternate options as complementary or supplementary strategies are being explored and implemented for the proverbial “rainy day”.⁷

US Grand Strategic Orientation and Maritime Centricity

The special military–maritime connection to the US security policy can be gauged from the constitutional provisions where Article I, Section VIII, dealing with the congressional powers, mandates “to raise and support army and militia” with monetary appropriation not exceeding two years; but makes no such time limitations while affirming “to provide and maintain the Navy”. Based on these provisos, it is argued that the US grand strategy has always been driven by maritime considerations, albeit with differing domestic inflections.⁸ The first ever US foreign policy pronouncement of Monroe Doctrine was articulated within three decades of independence and had emphasised “adequate naval power” being central to preserving the American sphere of interests in the “western hemispheric new world”.⁹ This isolationist US policy underwent a major change and became more expansive during the New Imperialist era of 1880–1920. This change, to some extent, was driven by

the writings of Stephen Luce and Alfred Thayer Mahan, who found active support from the Secretary and the Assistant Secretary of the US Navy, namely Benjamin Tracy and Theodore Roosevelt.¹⁰ In his study of international politics spanning mid-17th to late-18th century, Mahan propounded a grand strategic vision for US primacy based on robust naval and commercial maritime capabilities. His other noteworthy writings also emphasise a predominately Asia-Pacific bias.¹¹ While Mahan focussed on national ends and means through a naval telescope, Julian Corbett averred that synergy among politics, strategy and military were ideal for achieving the desired end states/effects on land and his writings have had a profound effect on shaping the naval thought the world over, including the US naval strategy.¹² The third US grand strategy forged during the Second World War was of a global outlook and based on power projection through an offensive use of naval strength and sea-based air power. Most of the US naval historians state that US grand strategic outlook remains founded on the three pillars of global reach, power projection and the US Navy, being a critical adjunct to the American foreign policy and security strategy.¹³

During the Cold War, the trinity of global reach, joint application and operational flexibility complemented by the principles of forward presence, power projection and expeditionary outlook were the pillars of the US maritime strategy, under the rubric of a “Grand Sea Control”.¹⁴ With end of the Cold War, the US naval strategic vision adopted a more nuanced littoral focus due to the relative downsizing of the peer competitor (Soviet Navy) and a fragile security global environment, especially in North Africa and Central Europe.¹⁵ The experience of first Gulf War reinforced this littoral logic and these remain central to US military strategy as evident from the recent policy articulations. These include the 2007 Maritime Strategy, 2010 Naval Operations Concept (NOC), Defence Strategic Guidance (DSG) issued by the US President in January 2012 and the Capstone Concept for Joint Operations (CCJO) released by the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff in September 2012.¹⁶

From “Pivot” to “Rebalance”

The “Pivot to Asia-Pacific”, reworded in a more unobtrusive and politically acceptable avatar of “rebalance”, was first pronounced by the former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. In this instance, the strategic context was emphasised by reiterating the connection between the US interests and global security, economics and shared

co-prosperity.¹⁷ This is also the only instance when a key US policy official has used the term “Indo-Pacific”. On all other occasions, the “rebalance strategy” is framed through the “Asia-Pacific” description. The fact that strategic reorientation was already in the making is evident from Hillary Clinton’s articulations at Honolulu almost a year before.¹⁸ The Asia-Pacific as the centrepiece of US strategic calculus due to its geo-economic, geopolitical and military–security relevance were stated by the US President in his November 2012 speech to the Australian Parliament.¹⁹ At the annual Shangri La Dialogue in 2012, the US Secretary of Defence outlined apportioning an additional 10% of US military power from the hitherto equitable balance between the Atlantic and the Pacific theatres. During this speech, the earlier mentioned tenets of forward presence, force projection, linked primacy of maritime context, technological dimension, freedom of manoeuvre and the importance of cooperative security arrangements were reiterated. The historical and contemporary relevance of Asia-Pacific were unequivocally qualified by the statement “... over the course of history, the United States has fought wars, ... deployed our forces time and time again to defend our vital interests in the Asia-Pacific region ... we were there then, we are here now, and we will be here for the future.”²⁰

The historical importance attached by the USA to its west can be gauged from the collection of writings marking 100 years of Mahan’s most famous book in the “The Influence of Seapower” trilogy. In this case, most authors aver that while the book provided him considerable worldwide recognition, the US strategic posture during this period remained essentially non-interventionist. However, his views did invigorate US efforts for more balanced a two-ocean outlook that included the Pacific theatre.²¹ The US has fought two prolonged major wars in Asia-Pacific during the Cold War era, i.e. Korea (1950–53) and Vietnam (1963–1975). In November 2012, the key elements of the security dimension of US rebalance that found emphasis are:

- (a) Recalibration and strengthening of security alliances and partnerships;
- (b) Increased engagements with emerging nations for forging partnerships;
- (c) Deepening of institutional linkages at global and regional levels for effective regional cooperative frameworks, peaceful resolution of disputes and adherence to human rights and international law;
- (d) Stable and constructive relationship with China as an indispensable global player that has critical leverage.

Why of Rebalance Strategy

The reasons for US rebalance can be best explained by the tri-polar logic that links geography, geopolitics and geostrategy. This argument is based on the immutability of these three factors in shaping international discourse and their successful alignment as key to international primacy and in determining the relative hierarchy of states.²² While physical geography does not change as a whole, it can be redefined by tectonic occurrences and by political processes of territorial annexation or mutual adjustment among states. Geopolitics on the other hand, in a current globalised and interconnected environment, is constantly shifting and moulded by human factors, distribution of resource hubs, lines of communication, technology, besides economic, political and strategic importance of such locations.²³ Geostrategy can be described as the geophysical point of reference for foreign policy for focussed politico-diplomatic efforts, consolidation of military potential, economic activity and ideological nuances, if the circumstances so demand. It has also been argued that geography is an inescapable factor that shapes politics (policy) and strategy. This particular pitch derives that geography has been a universal critical factor, albeit not the only one, to have multiple related dimensions. These include, but are not limited to, society, history, culture, ethics, organisation, information, intelligence and technology – all of which have pervasive strategic connotations.²⁴ Furthermore, the imperatives of “context” [contemporary environment] in all its varied dimensions have had a profound effect on the international political architecture that is constantly evolving, depending on the changes in the balance across politics [policy], economics and commerce, as well as the security–stability paradigm.²⁵

The military and particularly the maritime milieu needs to be examined through the prism of long-term strategic challenges facing the USA. The end of the “unipolar moment”,²⁶ signifying the relative downsizing of American global dominance, can be traced to the 1997 National Security Strategy (NSS) statement, which for the first time acknowledged strategic flux in international affairs by stating “The security environment in which we live is dynamic and uncertain, replete with numerous challenges”.²⁷ This particular trend has thereafter found constant mention in all the US national security strategy documents. The other two challenges that have found continuous reference are the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), especially the nuclear dimension and transnational terrorism. These themes also resonated in the National Military Strategy (NMS) statements released during the period. The 2005

National Defense Strategy (NDS), the first-ever to be articulated by a US Secretary of Defense, stated “We live in a time of unconventional challenges and strategic uncertainty” and that the strategic objectives were homeland security, strategic access and global freedom of action, cementing alliances/partnerships and to obtain a favourable security environment.²⁸ The 2008 NDS was quite similar to the previous version except that it also included winning the long war (protracted conflict against transnational terror) as an objective and shaping choices of key states besides as part of an integrated approach to US national security. The NMS 2011 titled “Redefining America’s Military Leadership” drawing upon the 2010 NSS and Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) stated “... the ongoing shifts in relative power and increasing interconnectedness in the international order indicate a strategic inflection point” and “... [the] changing distribution of power indicates evolution to a ‘multi-nodal’ world characterized more by shifting, interest-driven coalitions based on diplomatic, military, and economic power”.²⁹ The document identifies demographic trends and assured access to global commons and globally connected domains against disruptive defensive capabilities [Anti-Access, Area-Denial (A2/AD)] by state as well as non-state actors as key result areas for US national security. While discussing regional security environment, Asia and the Pacific finds the last but the most detailed reference wherein it is posited “... strategic priorities and interests will increasingly emanate from the Asia-Pacific region. The region’s share of global wealth is growing, enabling increased military capabilities ... creating new challenges and opportunities for our national security and leadership.” While acknowledging China’s impressive rise in strategic terms and in seeking cooperative relationship, it also expresses concerns about its military modernisation and assertiveness, particularly in the global commons comprising oceans, cyberspace and space by stating “... [US] will be prepared to demonstrate the will and commit the resources needed to oppose any nation’s actions that jeopardize access to and use of the global commons and cyberspace, or that threaten the security of our allies”.³⁰

The three key strategic challenges to US security that are clearly evident from the primary official documents are: (a) to deter the rise of a peer or a near-peer competitor; (b) to stem the spread of nuclear WMDs; and (c) to counter transnational terrorism that impinges on US interests. The first challenge, though unstated but obvious, comes from China. The source of the second challenge, in one case, could be the Iranian nuclear imbroglio with a larger Middle East connotation. Considering the present progress of P 5+1 talks and a positive Iranian attitude, this impasse shows

signs of a probable resolution. The second nuclear flashpoint is Pakistan, which has witnessed perennial internal strife, religious extremism, poor governance and a difficult relationship with India. The third nuclear concern is North Korea, which has recently displayed an increasingly inflexible behaviour.

As far as transnational terrorism is concerned, it can be described in an unbroken arc running from North and Central Africa up to the Middle East and South and South East Asia. Considering the long drawn-out nature of counter-terrorism operations, it is assessed that this challenge will remain a priority area in the US security calculus despite the scheduled 2014 drawdown and ongoing operations in Iraq and Syria against the IS (Islamic State). However, the other two challenges of a rising China and nuclear WMDs carry the seeds for bringing about a systemic change and can be geographically delineated into two distinct domains – the first with an Asian bias (Middle East–South Asia) and the other with a Pacific Rim locus. It is opined that the strategic contest with a recently assertive and muscular China from achieving regional hegemony in a critical space of Asia-Pacific is the primary, though not the only, driver of rebalance strategy.

The geo-economic importance of Asia-Pacific to the USA is evident from the expanding with Asia and Pacific Rim regions. Since 1997, US–Asia trade has grown from US\$568.5 billion to US\$1324.9 billion in 2013 thus registering a 233% rise. During the same period, the US–Pacific Rim trade rose from US\$509.1 billion to US\$1059.6 billion, a two-fold (208%) increase (Figure 1A). Furthermore, the Asia (24%) and Pacific Rim (20%) were the regions of largest share of bilateral trade with the US (Figure 1B).

Geopolitically, the region is important given the long-standing US security partnerships with Japan (1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security), the Philippines (1953 Mutual Defense Treaty), South Korea (1953 Mutual Defense Treaty) and Taiwan (1979 Taiwan Relations Act). In addition, the USA has a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with Australia (1963), Malaysia (1960, revised in 1990) and Singapore (1985). The trilateral ANZUS (Australia–New Zealand–US) Security Treaty remains in force as a bilateral US–Australia mutual security obligation after New Zealand withdrew in 1984 over the nuclear visiting issue. The region also assumes relevance in light of the multiple strategic rivalries that have a Middle East–Asian geographic bias and their pervasive as well as enduring nature rooted in emotive territorial disputes.³¹

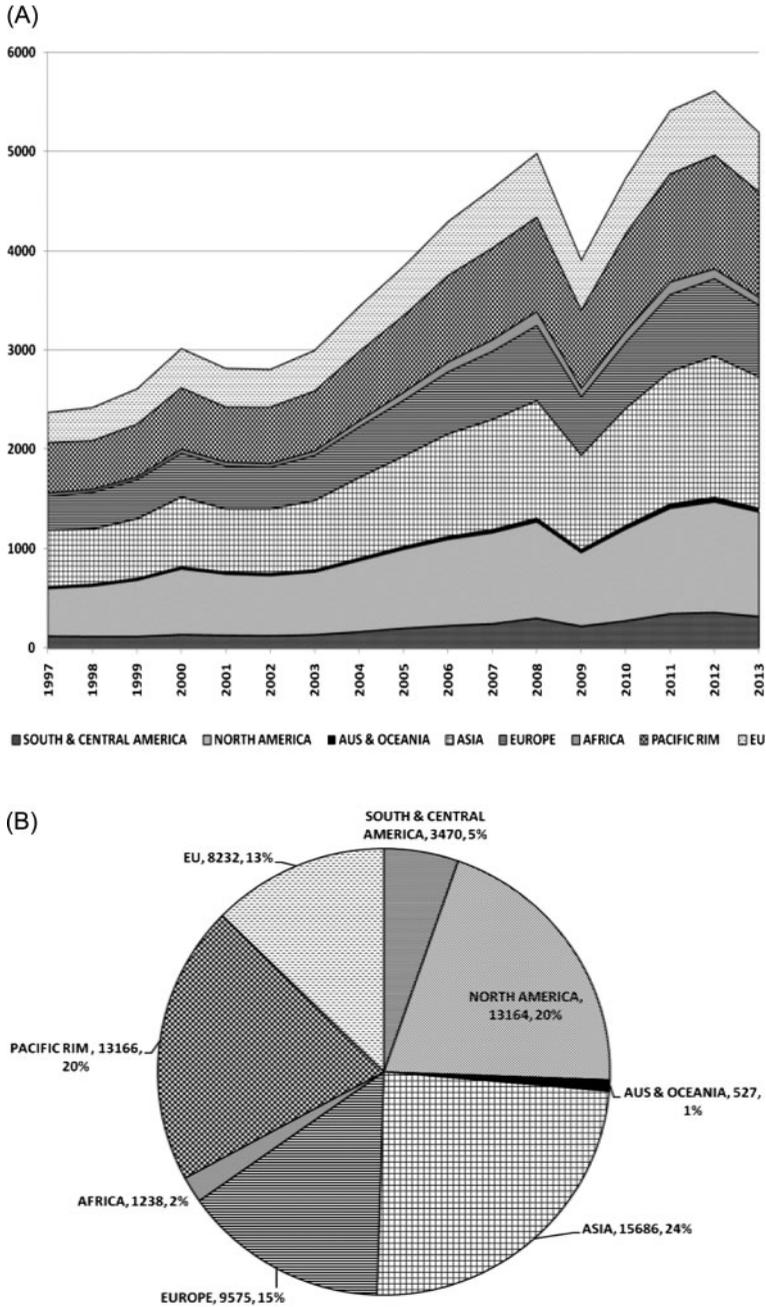


Fig 1. US Interregional Trade (1997–2013) (US\$ Bn): (A) Historical Trend; (B) Cumulative Share.

China Factor

The recent articulations by US strategic community make the case that while the spread of WMD and transnational terror are a serious challenge to USA, it is the ongoing strategic competition with China that would be vital to a US-enabled maritime-centric systemic order.³² The extent of concern felt by the US polity is evident by the congressional mandate to the US Department of Defense (DoD) to issue annual reports on the Chinese military strategy, doctrinal trends and force levels while passing the 2000 National Defense Authorisation Act (NDAA).³³ To date, 13 such reports have been published, commencing 2002. The US Naval War College has also established a dedicated China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI), which has published 11 such reports since 2008, dealing with various dimensions of Chinese maritime developments.

Since the 1978 liberalisation reforms started under Deng Xiaoping, China has emerged as the second largest economy in a short span of about 35 years, leaving in its wake some of the traditional powerhouses such as Germany, Japan, UK and France. The share of exports and imports as a component of Chinese GDP has grown from a mere 21.6% in 1980 to 47.1% in 2012. In a similar manner, the share of merchandise trade that is primarily carried by maritime means has grown from 20.1% to 47% during the same period (Figure 2).

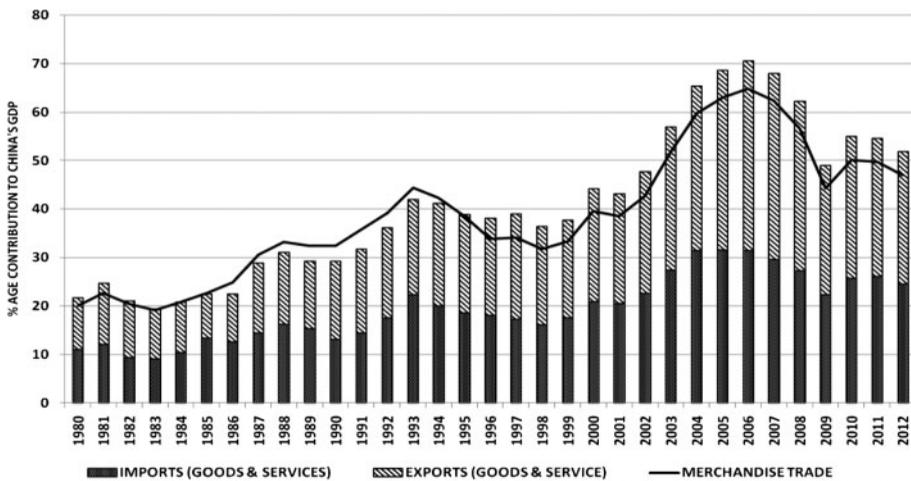


Fig 2. Share of Exports, Imports and Merchandise trade in Chinese GDP (1980–2012). *Source:* World Bank Database, Author's Compilation.

An analysis of regional military expenditure shows that Asia–Oceania is the only region except the Americas that has witnessed a growth in military expenditure during the 21st century. This 4% rise may seem small at first glance; however, if measured in quantitative terms, this increase translates into an increase of US\$180 billion. In an Asia–Oceania intra-regional context, Chinese military expenditure has increased by US\$120 billion during this period, thus contributing two-thirds of the cumulative rise in military expenditure. More importantly, this increase in Chinese military expenditure has significantly changed the balance of military power amongst the Indo-Pacific maritime stakeholders. As far as the US–China equation is concerned, the gap in military spending has widened between the two from US\$357 billion in 2000 to US\$511 billion in 2012. However, the relative ratio between the two countries has shrunk from 10.6 (2000) to 4.2 (2012). While comparing Japan and China, the Japanese quantitative advantage of US\$23 billion in 2000 has been reversed to a deficit of US\$83 billion in 2012. In a Sino-Indian context, the Chinese advantage of about US\$11 billion has widened to US\$110 billion during this period. In relative terms, the gap has widened from a factor of 1.4 in 2000 to 3.3 in 2012.³⁴

China is also bridging the qualitative and technological deficit by a rapid introduction of modern offensive as well disruptive systems. Some examples are the DF 21D Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM), J-20 Stealth Fighter, revitalisation and commissioning of aircraft carrier *Liaoning*, reports about Type 095 SSBNs and Qing Class SSNs, expanding expeditionary and logistic capacity, and the series of more capable multi-purpose principal combatants with advanced capabilities, such as conformal radars and stealth features. Furthermore, media reports regarding the successful maiden flight of *Lijian* (Sharp Sword) UCAV on November 20, 2013, and the testing of a hypersonic missile WU-14 on January 9, 2014, are indicators of the impressive improvements that China has made in research, design and harnessing of cutting-edge defence technologies.³⁵ These have been accompanied by a series of events indicating escalatory and assertive Chinese behaviour since 2000 and the recent examples are:

- (a) Near collision with USS *Cowpens* while shadowing an aircraft carrier group on December 5, 2013;
- (b) Positioning of the Chinese drill rig Haiyang Shiyou – 981 in disputed waters of the Paracel Islands during May 2014, sparking multiple collisions between Chinese and Vietnamese vessels;

- (c) Aggressive Chinese fighter manoeuvres in close proximity of the US P-8 *Poseidon* Maritime Reconnaissance aircraft on August 22, 2014.

Origins and Contours of the Military Context of Rebalance

As discussed earlier, while the planning for rebalance strategy started in 2008 and preliminary policy declarations commenced in 2011, the first signs of this repositioning of US military power were visible in 2001 QDR. On strategic environment, it stated “In particular, Asia is gradually emerging as a region susceptible to large-scale military competition. Along a broad arc of instability that stretches from the Middle East to Northeast Asia, the region contains a volatile mix of rising and declining regional powers.”³⁶ Some of the key decisions in respect of the US Navy that show the first signs of the “pivot” or “rebalance strategy” were:

- (a) Increased aircraft carrier presence in the Western Pacific and, options for basing an additional three to four surface combatants, and guided cruise missile submarines (SSGNs);
- (b) New concepts and options to shift some of the ready expeditionary capability from the Mediterranean toward the Indian Ocean and Arabian (Persian) Gulf and the feasibility of conducting training for littoral warfare in the Western Pacific;
- (c) Maintain critical bases in Western Europe and Northeast Asia, which may also serve the additional role of hubs for power projection in future contingencies in other areas.³⁷

The 2006 QDR emphasised combating transnational terrorism through a proactive and integrated approach in an unpredictable security environment. For the first time, China is acknowledged as a nation with the greatest potential to compete militarily with the US and the ability to offset traditional US military advantages through disruptive military technologies (A2/AD).³⁸ Cementing the rebalance/pivot strategy much earlier than its official proclamation, the US Navy was to “adjust its force posture and basing to provide at least six operationally available and sustainable carriers and 60% of its submarines in the Pacific to support engagement, presence and deterrence”. To a large extent, this directive was achieved as stated in the December 2009 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report on China’s naval modernisation.³⁹

The 2010 QDR was dedicated to reorienting the US military capabilities to prevail in contemporary conflicts, develop capabilities for futuristic scenarios with greater fiscal prudence where the strategic environment was assessed as complex with greater diffusion of global political, economic and military power. The key aspects of tailoring US military to rebalance strategy were discussed in detail and the salient issues identified as:

- (a) Expand future long-range strike capabilities and exploit advantages in subsurface operations;
- (b) Increase the resiliency of US forward posture and base infrastructure and assure access to space and the use of space assets;
- (c) Enhance the robustness of key ISR capabilities and defeat enemy sensors and engagement systems, and enhance the presence and responsiveness of US forces abroad.⁴⁰

Naval strategic orientation was reemphasised as power projection and forward presence. In a departure of sorts, instead of mentioning a fixed number of various capabilities/platforms, a range of figures are used that seems to be a sign of fiscal realities facing the US. A substantial restructuring of key naval projects that included the cancellation of the new generation cruiser [CG(X)] and extending the timelines of the DDG 1000 (Zumwalt Class) destroyer as well as the Gerald Ford class of aircraft carriers were included in the report.⁴¹ Two key issues enumerated in relation to the maritime component of rebalance were: (a) an AirSea Battle (ASB) concept to defeat A2/AD scenarios with specific mention of China, Iran and North Korea; and (b) enhanced cooperative engagements with partners and allies with focus on capacity building.⁴²

The latest QDR released on March 4, 2014 reiterates the strategic importance of Asia-Pacific by highlighting the importance of rebalance strategy. China's growing military modernisation and its investment in A2/AD capabilities finds special emphasis.⁴³ The key efforts for cementing the rebalance strategy are:

- (a) Positioning additional forward-deployed naval forces in critical areas, such as the Asia-Pacific region, to achieve faster response times and additional presence at a lower recurring cost, and employing regionally focused forces to provide additional tailored packages that achieve critical global and regional objectives, including in critical areas such as the Asia-Pacific region;

- (b) Optimising the use of multilateral, joint training facilities overseas in order to increase readiness and interoperability with our allies and partners;
- (c) Developing concepts, posture and presence options, and supporting infrastructure to exploit the Department's investment in advanced capabilities rapidly, and pursuing access agreements that provide additional strategic and operational flexibility in case of crisis.⁴⁴

As far as the naval capabilities are concerned, the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) programme is capped at 32 platforms, 10–11 Ticonderoga Class cruisers slated for modernisation and, if the sequestration continues beyond FY 2016, one aircraft carrier will be laid up due to fiscal constraints. The strength of naval platforms including SSBNs works out between 249 and 252, which do not include the support, intelligence and military sealift elements. At a current strength of 285 platforms in the US Navy, the additional 10% allocation as part of “Rebalance to Asia-Pacific” translates into 28 combatants. As a general rule of thumb calculation, the additional assets that may be allocated to USPACOM are one aircraft carrier, nine large and four medium surface combatants, three amphibious ships, five nuclear attack submarines (SSN), one guided missile nuclear submarine (SSGN), and five support ships.

It would thus be evident that rebalance strategy in effect has been under implementation since 2001. As per the publicly articulated time lines, the restructuring is scheduled to be completed by 2020. The rebalance strategy also has an internal dimension in which the US military power is being redistributed within the Asia-Pacific theatre by reducing the forward footprint of US Forces. In all probability, this is for improved burden sharing by its allies and a possible strategic aim where the USA is not seen an active participant in regional sovereignty disputes.

Constraints on US Rebalance

The foremost constraint that could impinge on US rebalance could be the geography of the Asia-Pacific region. The Pacific as the largest ocean covers nearly 43% of the global seascape. The distances involved in this region are quite large compared with the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans, which put together, are roughly equal to the Pacific in terms of area. A case in point being the distance from the US mainland to Guam via Hawaii; the furthest overseas territory is 5565 nautical miles. It would require about 13 days to traverse this distance at a modest speed of 18 knots. Thus, in

case of a sudden crisis, it would be difficult to achieve the required force concentration unless *a priori* information is available or sufficient forces are forward deployed. The incidental constraints of combat potential eroding with distance due to fatigue/wear and tear besides the requirement of a strong logistics support chain would also be critical due to the large geographical spread. It is for this reason that forward presence and strategic basing have found repeated mention in US strategic documents.

The second restraint to US rebalance arises from the ideational dissonance amongst alliance partners. The mutual security alliances and the visiting forces agreement that the US has with its geographically disparate Asia-Pacific partners are bilateral in nature unlike the compact trans-Atlantic umbrella structure of NATO. Furthermore, given the legacy of Second World War, most of the US partners are not very comfortable in cooperating with Japan, which happens to be its strongest regional military ally. Therefore, the US regional architecture works on a “hub and spokes” model but not as a “wheel” where the possibilities of multilateral security cooperation are likely to be few.

The most important limitation is likely to come from possible shortfalls in budgetary support. Traditionally navies have been capital and technology intensive, require long gestation time for design and build-up and, an additional period for the assets to become operationally deployable. As has been argued that “sea power demands national – not just naval – consciousness, consensus, commitment, and stamina”,⁴⁵ the present fiscal uncertainties presents a very difficult challenge towards sustaining US oceanic preponderance. The effects of the 10-year US\$487 billion sequester arising out of 2001 Budget Control Act provisions mandates that US\$50 billion are pared annually until 2022. The effects of this sequestration were ameliorated to some extent by the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013, which provided modest immediate relief, the annual cuts are expected to resume in FY 2016. As per QDR 2014, the defence appropriations in FY 2015 seek to reduce military spending by US\$113 billion in next five years, which is significantly lower than the cuts mandated by the sequestration.⁴⁶ Such large uncertainties may hamper the top-line programmes in the longer run with adverse consequential effects, not only on the future force structure but operational readiness as well. The US Navy’s share that used to be largest amongst the three services until 2000 has been overshadowed by Army budget given the two prolonged military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Figure 3A). The current projections indicate that the naval share is expected to rise from 2014. However, the overall increase in real terms during the period 2000–2017

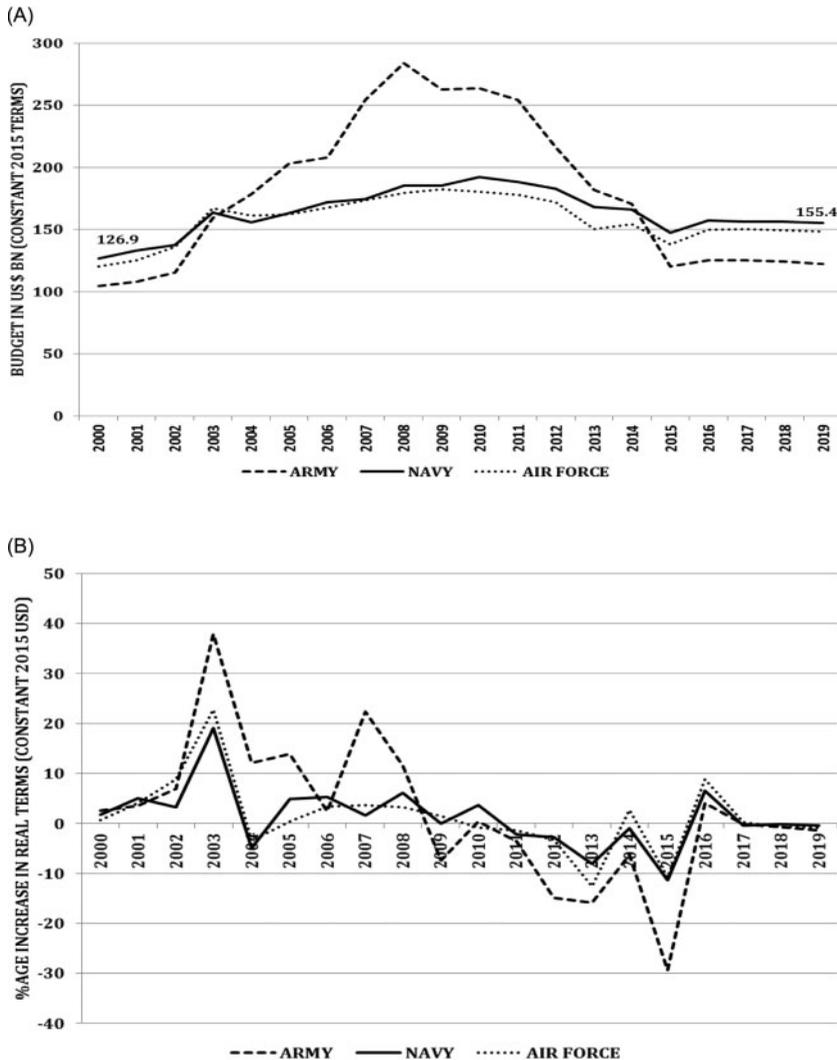


Fig 3. US Defence Budget: 2000–2019 (constant 2015 US\$ Bn): (A) Inter Service Distribution; (B) Real Growth. Source: Office of US Congressional Budget Office, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2015*, Author’s Compilation.

would be a insignificant US\$33.4 billion. In real terms, the value of naval budget from FY 2017 onwards would have dropped below FY 2000 levels thus putting a question mark over the future innovative technologies and capital intensive programmes like the aircraft carriers and future SSBN (Figure 3B).⁴⁷

Regional Perceptions

The rebalance strategy is seen in a favourable light by Japan, Philippines and Vietnam given their recent stand-offs with China over the East and South China disputes.⁴⁸ The Chinese military sees the rebalance as a containment policy and in unequivocal terms stated that:

The Asia-Pacific region has become an increasingly significant stage for world economic development and strategic interaction between major powers. The US is adjusting its Asia-Pacific security strategy, and the regional landscape is undergoing profound changes ... Some country has strengthened its Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanded its military presence in the region, and frequently makes the situation there tenser.⁴⁹

Given an unbroken arc of US military presence at Hawaii, Guam, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Singapore and Australia, Beijing could be justified in making such a pronouncement. This, however, does not detract from the negative connotations of its recent aggressive behaviour.

The South Korean attitude, evident through careful articulations, seems to be of “soft balancing” between its large continental neighbour who is also the benefactor of its North Korean *bête noire*, and its security concerns.⁵⁰ Taiwan looks at the US strategic reorientation as a “stabilising influence”, given the widening cross-strait military quotients.⁵¹ Singapore appears to be “hedging its bets” and balancing between its economic and security imperatives.⁵² Thailand, despite strong military linkages, remains concerned about the negative fallouts of US’s Asia-Pacific security focus and finds greater comfort in Beijing’s new mantra of “Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships”.⁵³ The US rebalance has found “broad support” in Australia with only opposition coming on the basis it being “too slow” in its implementation.⁵⁴ Indonesian views gravitate between warmth and cool on different strategic dimensions of the rebalance strategy. While a deeper US economic and politico-diplomatic engagement with the region is viewed in a positive light, the military dimension seems to evoke negative reactions.⁵⁵

Indian Perceptions and Responses

India has been variously described as the “lynchpin”, “close partner”, “provider of net security” and an “important strategic swing state” crucial to the US rebalance. The

response to US seeking closer military–security cooperation with India is mixed with four mainstream perceptions about the US rebalance.⁵⁶ The most discussed “soft nationalist” posture is of a non-entangling, equidistant balance between US and China.⁵⁷ The second category is of the “hard nationalists”, who based on the premise of a relative US decline consider strategic independence and deterrence through nuclear weapons. The third and fourth categories are the “great power realists” and the “bandwagoners” who seek a closer engagement with the US. The argument by hard nationalists seems to be somewhat misplaced, as the use nuclear weapons in Indian strategic calculus are considered “political weapons for use *in exterminis* situations and may not be a viable military tool for conventional and sub-conventional purposes”. The point about military being supportive of US rebalance is debatable given the long-standing military engagement with the erstwhile Soviet Union and the majority of military hardware being of Russian origin.

The Indian strategic culture and contemporary perceptions, to a certain degree, are coloured by the Cold War context, which is not surprising considering that an independent India spent close to 45 years under the shadow of “violent peace”. The second strategic deficit comes from equating “security” to “defence”, which in turn produces a proximal outlook. The third and the last gap is delinking security in all its dimensions from the globalised and expanding nature of Indian politico-diplomatic and economic facets. These gaps produce an inward looking, “barrier and fence syndrome” thus missing the interconnectedness of broader maritime security dimension for national security ends.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The military context of US rebalance to Asia-Pacific is dictated by three primary concerns, a near peer competitor China, which can upset the systemic order premised on US primacy, WMD proliferation especially the nuclear overhang, and transnational terror inimical to US interests. This rebalance strategy is reflective of great power behaviour in a defensive realist mode, which is attempting to maintain the *status quo* in international hierarchy. While the recent abrasive Chinese behaviour seem to have resulted in the US finding new friends, rediscovering old allies and partners, the military centric discourse on the rebalance has led to suspicion, strategic dissonance and a dyadic *realpolitik* discourse. The maritime military context of a large geography, mutually non-supporting cooperative security architecture and not least

difficult fiscal choices, presents a complex web of uncertainties to the USA. The strategic context of rebalance should be seen as a comprehensive attempt to align the imperatives of geography, geopolitics and geostrategy for continued international relevance. When viewed through a historical perspective, a maritime centrality of setting would ensure a prolonged contest along competitive lines and India by its geographical position would inevitably get involved. The globalised context demands that India devise a coherent strategy to manage paradoxical imperatives simultaneously, which would require some smart policy framework, the shoots of which are visible in recent foreign policy and military–security initiatives.

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