

Washington Debates the Pivot to Asia

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Over the last two years, the Obama administration has executed what the president has termed the “*Pivot to Asia*” strategy, whereby the United States’ global military force posture is being reconfigured to focus on the Asia-Pacific region as Washington’s central front.

Movement has been rapid, with Washington expanding its naval exercises with Japan, sending marines to Australia, conducting military exercises in the Philippines with its allies, and supporting the negotiating positions of the Philippines and Vietnam on the dispute over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, or what Filipinos now call the West Philippine Sea. Sixty percent of the U.S. Navy’s strength has been deployed to the Western Pacific.

Containment of China is the aim of the Pivot strategy, which has drawn criticism from liberal critics of the policy like Robert Ross, a professor of Political Science at Boston University and a China expert. Writing in the November-December issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Ross acknowledges that China’s actions in the South China Sea—including claiming the whole area as Chinese territorial waters—come across as aggressive. However, the Pivot, he claims, is based on “*a fundamental misreading of China’s leadership*,” which Ross says is now given to “*appeasing an increasingly nationalist public with symbolic gestures of force*.”

For Ross, China’s increasingly bellicose rhetoric stems less from expansionist intent than from the insecurities brought about by high-speed growth followed by economic crisis. Long dependent for its legitimacy on delivering economic growth, domestic troubles related to the global financial crisis have left the Communist Party leadership groping for a new ideological justification, which it has found in nationalism. Countering China’s rhetoric with a military cordon sanitaire, says Ross, would deepen the “insecurities” of Beijing, heightening the possibility of an outbreak of conflict while losing China’s cooperation in managing conflicts such as the crisis in Syria.

The riposte to Ross came in the form of an article in the succeeding issue of *Foreign Affairs* authored by Shawn Brimley and Ely Ratner of the Center for a New American Security. While not the official response of the Obama administration, the Brimley and Ratner article brings together in one piece what Obama’s lieutenants, like former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, have said in defense of the Pivot to Asia strategy. The aim of the strategy, say Brimley and Ratner, is not to contain China but to promote adherence to international norms and rules of conduct. They write: “*Washington is trying to construct a regional order undergirded by rules and institutions. US diplomacy regarding disputes in the South China Sea, for instance, is based on principles and has sought to prevent a conflict from breaking out by encouraging all countries concerned to adhere to international law. ... That this approach appears to favor certain countries—and that Beijing objects to multilateral cooperation that might constrain its ability to coerce its neighbors—says more about its bias than it does about any American bias.*”

The credibility of Brimley and Shatner’s defense is, however, undercut by the reality that they themselves find it hard to conceal the aggressively militaristic thrust of the Pivot, noting that “the ending of the war in Iraq and the ongoing drawdown in Afghanistan are freeing additional military resources to be directed toward the Asia Pacific region in the form of new deployments, the prepositioning of military assets, and additional locations for the US military to train and exercise with long-standing allies and emerging partners.” They continue: “In the years ahead, the continued

evolution of the US force posture in the region should be complemented by efforts to strengthen partners' armed forces, carry out joint exercises, and pursue more ambitious military diplomacy."

A Feint

The truth of the matter is that, as in the Middle East and Latin America, there is more continuity with the Bush administration than rupture in the Obama administration's approach toward Asia. One might say that Obama's Pivot is the resumption of Bush's preferred Asia-Pacific strategy, which was put on hold by the necessity of enlisting China as a U.S. ally in the "war on terror."

Yet the Pivot is not simply a question of taking up where Bush left off in 2001. It represents a retreat from the comprehensive global military dominance that the neoconservative faction of the U.S. ruling class attempted under Bush. It really is a feint, a maneuver to cover up a strategic retreat from America's disastrous two-decades-long engagement in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. The Pivot is an attempt by Washington to retreat to an area for imperial power projection that it sees as more manageable than a Middle East that is running out of control.

Yet this maneuver faces two problems. First, the Middle East, with its explosive mix of oil, the Arab Spring, Israel, and Iran, will not allow Washington to disengage. Owing to its own past policies, the United States is condemned to a condition of imperial overreach. Second, the U.S. redeployment of military force to the Asia-Pacific will, as Ross says, trigger a military competition with China that has the potential of running out of control as the Chinese leadership responds to what it sees as Washington's effort to contain its rise to prominence as it races to become the world's biggest economy.

Ross is largely right. However, his analysis of the sources of China's flag-waving is a bit naïve. For him, the Chinese leadership's bellicose rhetoric and moves in the Western Pacific are mainly an attempt to harness nationalism as a source of legitimacy to replace China's fading ability to deliver economic growth and higher living standards as the Chinese economy enters into crisis. On the contrary, China's push to claim the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands, as well as the whole South China Sea, reflects the cold calculation of a power seeking to stake a claim to an area rich in natural resources, including oil, that would support its drive to become a regional hegemon.

Although China faces many economic and political challenges, one cannot say that its foreign policy moves are feints to cover up economic and political weakness. Also writing in the January-February issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Eric Li, a Shanghai-based Chinese political scientist, characterized the turnover of leadership in the Chinese Communist Party last November as a "smooth and well-orchestrated demonstration by a confidently rising superpower." One can say the same of China's demonstrations of power in the Asia Pacific region.

Does this mean that there is all the more reason for the United States to come in as a "balancer"? More likely, this is a prescription for destabilizing regional conflicts. In Asia as in Europe, states have often ended up in conflict as political one-upmanship and arms races ran out of control and upset the regional balance of power. China and its neighbors have legitimate territorial disputes. For the United States to insert itself, ostensibly to help China's rivals, will simply result in superpower dynamics exacerbating the territorial issues.

Washington's military withdrawal from Asia is overdue. Instead of normalizing relations between China and its neighbors, the U.S. presence has long prevented the emergence of mature post-Cold War relations among them. Left to themselves, China's neighbors will be forced cooperate to come up with ways of dealing with the challenge posed by China. One must not forget that China's foreign

policy is the product of over two centuries of Western intervention, a history that is shared by other countries in the region. One must not underestimate the capacity of China and its neighbors to work out a new regional order that does a better job of promoting peace, harmony, and respect for sovereignty than the current regime of U.S. military hegemony.

P.S.

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