Asia Overreacts to U.S. Military Pivot
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Despite the warnings from China, the Pentagon's Defense Strategic Guidance offers few surprises. Change has been coming for a while.

Asian countries have reacted strongly to the Pentagon's new "Defense Strategic Guidance" issued earlier this month. Arguing that the United States finds itself at a "strategic turning point" with the winding down of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the end of the defense buildup that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the report calls for rebalancing U.S. military capabilities by functional and geographic areas, including by "pivoting" U.S. national security efforts eastward toward Asia.

"U.S. 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," the Guidance affirms, "creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities" that will lead the U.S. military to "rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region."

More colorfully, Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained during the briefing marking the Guidance's roll out: "All of the trends, demographic trends, geopolitical trends, economic trends and military trends are shifting toward the Pacific. So our strategic challenges in the future will largely emanate out of the Pacific region, but also the littorals of the Indian Ocean."

The Guidance therefore advocates a lasting "strategic partnership" with India, reaffirms U.S. security commitments to Japan and South Korea, and declares U.S. intent to invest in the capabilities required to ensure U.S. access to the global commons and freedom of maritime movement despite efforts by some countries (i.e. China and Iran) to deny the United States access to these areas.

The Asian allies of the United States welcomed the Pentagon's new Guidance. At a Seoul news briefing, Kim Kwan-bin, South Korean Deputy Minister for National Defense Policy, said that "The U.S. defense ministry will put boosting economic and security benefit of the Asia-Pacific region as its first priority, and will recognize South Korea and other allies as the core nations for security in the Asia-Pacific region and strengthen security cooperation."

Chinese analysts received the new strategy less warmly. A commentary in the English-language *Global Times* said that the new Strategic Guidance indicated that China was "a firm strategic target of the U.S." and that Beijing's "efforts to improve Sino-US relations have proved incapable of offsetting U.S. worries over its rise."

A Xinhua commentary warned against U.S. "muscle flexing" in Asian regional disputes: "the United States is welcome to make more contribution to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, but it's possible militarism will cause a lot of ill will and meet with strong opposition in the world's most dynamic region." In elaborating, the commentary explained that "the United States has the greatest potential to secure world peace and stability, but it also has the greatest power to create chaos. With power comes responsibility, so the United States should exercise the utmost caution in the use of its military forces."

Asian readers of these texts need to bear certain facts in mind. These national security documents, issued regularly by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and other U.S. government agencies, have multiple audiences within the United States (government agencies, the Congress, and analysts) as well as abroad (foreign allies, partners, and adversaries). They serve both formal and informal functions. Within the United States, they offer official policy and program guidance as well as unofficial tools for bureaucratic infighting by providing documents from which actors can cite supporting statements in their speeches and other statements in budget battles with other agencies. Overseas, they communicate implicit messages to foreign audiences. When they appear in a presidential election year, like this one, you can be fairly certain that White House political advisers had some impact on its drafting as well.

In essence, the Guidance reflects three main developments: the U.S. defense budget is stabilizing due budgetary constraints; the major U.S. wars of the past decade, Afghanistan and Iraq, have or are winding down; and Asia is rising in relative importance in the world, and therefore for the United States, due to its growing share of global population, trade, GDP and other assets.

Given this context, Asian governments shouldn't overreact to the new document. The Guidance doesn't describe any new missions, capabilities, or defense initiatives. The Pentagon will simply do the same things it's currently doing, with some adjustments, mostly downward, in the scale of its activities. The most significant proposed change from current U.S. defense policy is to de-emphasize large-scale, counterinsurgency campaigns, but the reluctance of the Pentagon to engage in further Iraq's and Afghanistan's has been evident for a long time now.

If anything, the Strategic Guidance and the accompanying public briefings make evident that the document and the thinking behind it represent not revolutionary change, but a retrospective doctrinal blessing of the strategic approach that has guided U.S. national security policy since the end of the Cold War and, arguably, even earlier.

For example, the U.S. National Military Strategy released last year also spoke of the global security environment reaching "a strategic inflection point." It, too, noted the need to realign U.S. defense resources released by the military's withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan to address to other priority regions, especially Asia.

The Navy has already been moving nuclear attack submarines, Aegis missile defense vessels, and other ships to bases in Guam and Japan. Developing strategic bonds with Asia has been a recurring U.S. objective, never fully realized, for decades.

The Pentagon, like other U.S. and foreign government agencies, has joined with the private sector in recognizing rising relative global importance of the Asia-Pacific region in terms of human, economic, and military potential. Asia contains two large rising powers (China, India), several especially dangerous states (North Korea and Iran), close U.S. allies (Japan, South Korea) ,many other important countries, and the globe's most vibrant economic region whose growing wealth enables its nation states to field ever more powerful militaries armed with advanced foreign weaponry.

Managing Asian security would be a challenge even for a reinforced Pentagon due to the region's disruptive demographic trends (Chinese growth vs. Japanese and Russian stagnation), natural resource competition (especially over underwater energy reserves), diffusion of advanced military technologies, and the complexity and fluidity of regional alignments and security institutions.

U.S. policy makers aren't assuming an inevitable a war with China, but managing China's rising economic and military strength is an obvious preoccupation of U.S. policymakers.

"Over the long term, China's emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the U.S. economy and our security in a variety of ways," the Guidance maintains. "Our two countries have a strong stake in peace and stability in East Asia and an interest in building a cooperative bilateral relationship."

Panetta and other U.S. officials have cited economic interdependence as the general reason for the United States to avoid war with China, but they also saw specific areas where the two countries' national security interests overlap sufficiently to envisage opportunities for collaboration: the Korean Peninsula, freedom of maritime navigation, nuclear proliferation, as well as humanitarian crises and disasters.

Like previous DoD documents, the Guidance cautions that "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." But this construct is merely to justify renewed efforts at defense diplomacy and other forms of bilateral military engagement.

Although Chinese commentators warned of a U.S. military buildup in the Pacific, Asia's elevated strategic priority won't necessarily result in an increase in number of U.S. troops stationed in the region.

Thanks to a budget deal reached last August, the Pentagon has half a trillion dollars less to spend than it originally planned. Far deeper cuts will occur should the congressional sequestration (mandatory cuts to all U.S. government programs) take effect in January 2013, as envisaged in the Budget Control Act, though such an outcome will probably be averted since such arbitrary cuts fail to discriminate among U.S. programs. And even the modest projected nominal increase that will remain after the August 2011 reductions will be negated by the typically higher inflation rates of defense items resulting from rising operations and maintenance costs, unanticipated high tempo of operations, procurement process inefficiency, and expanding entitlements for military personnel and their families (growing cost of military health care, pay and retirement benefits).

In addition, few opportunities exist to base more forces in Japan and South Korea due to popular opposition to hosting more American soldiers, as well as other constraints. If anything, the United States expects that these traditional U.S. security allies will use their own expanding military power to assume more regional security responsibilities.

For example, in the case of South Korea, the anticipated overall reductions in the size of the U.S. armed forces will make it even less likely that the United States could execute its plan to deploy 690,000 troops in South Korea within 90 days of a war's breaking out. But South Korea has already been building up its own forces in preparation for assuming full operational control of its own troops, a responsibility Washington had already planned to transfer to Seoul by December 2015.

The Pentagon will most likely shield its Pacific-oriented forces better from planned budget cuts rather than increase them even further. The U.S. Navy and Air Force, which have already been partnering to develop an "AirSea Battle Concept" designed at negating anti-access tactics and weapons, will receive disproportionally smaller cuts because they are needed to operate across the vast Asia-Pacific domain. For example, the Navy will keep all 11 aircraft carriers primarily because of their value in the vast Pacific.

In contrast, Army and Marine strength will be less well protected, and these reductions will be most evident in Europe and the Middle East rather than Asia. Even there, the United States will rely less on permanent bases and more on rotating forces through the region on a temporary basis, especially to countries that don't host a permanent U.S. military presence such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Singapore. These rotations will allow the Pentagon to strengthen the capabilities of local military forces through enhanced training opportunities. Furthermore, the United States will pursue "expanded military cooperation with India on non-proliferation, safeguarding the global commons, countering terrorism, and elsewhere." In addition to building the military capacity of regional allies, U.S. arms sales to these countries might also reinforce the rotations and exercises in developing security ties with Asian states.

But the recent agreement to rotate more troops through Australia for training shouldn't obscure the fact that such large semi-permanent training opportunities are limited. Most Asian-Pacific countries wouldn't welcome a large U.S. troop presence on their soil, even on a rotational basis. And even Australians have punished their leaders when they described their role as serving as Washington's regional proxy.

At the end of the day, recent history has made clear that, even if the U.S. national security establishment would like to concentrate its resources on one theater or against one enemy, history can throw up obstacles in this path. During the Cold War, the United States had to dissipate its military power through endless side conflicts in developing countries.

More recently, what looked to be a new Pentagon focus on China's growing military strength by the incoming George W. Bush administration in 2001 was aborted by the 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks, which forced the U.S. government and its allies to pivot into a campaign against global terrorism, in which China was seen as a necessary if not ideal partner. The reality is that the Middle East still looks primed to generate further problems in the coming years – and that could have a similar Asia-diverting effect in the future.

Source: http://the-diplomat.com/asean-beat/2010/10/18/mahathir-vs-lee/