

US Asia Pivot Strategy: Implications for the Regional States

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Abstract

The U.S. foreign policy largely covers presumptions of geostrategic challenges from various regions of the world. It pursues the goal of maximizing its own national interests sometimes at the cost of interests of other states. In this pursuit, where it has immensely engaged its men and material in various countries, its economy back home suffers tremendously. Resultantly, now one of the vital national interests of the U.S. is to secure its economic capacity, so as to provide a ladder to its defence planning. This becomes more pronounced in the wake of a rising China and dawn of the Asian Century. Nevertheless, in order to tackle the economic dominance of China and deal with its declining economy, the U.S. made public its 'Asia Pivot' strategy. This envisaged a policy of confronting some, while cooperating with others, as the prime objective. Competitions of such nature between two major powers have obvious repercussions for the Asian capitals.

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Introduction

The current U.S. outlook entails interplay of diverse underlying goals for maximizing its own national interests. Gauged through the external outlook the policies adopted remain tricky in terms of the factors shaping the final behavior. Some theorists believe that the internal environment plays a vital role in determining the policy, while some believe otherwise.¹ However, the fact remains that to date the policies adopted by the U.S. remain ambiguous. In a recent upturn of events, the U.S. 'Asia pivot' policy was made public.² Considering the spirit of the strategy, there are various questions that arise regarding this shift by the U.S; is it really fuelled by the rise of China as an economic power? What links does the deteriorating economic system of the U.S. have with the strategy? Why was a need felt to shift the focus to East Asia at this point in history? And most importantly, what implication does this shift envisages for the regional states?

At the end of the cold war, U.S. and China were not viewed as competitors and enjoyed fairly good relations.³ China's top trade destinations included US on the top, with \$162,899.6 million of exports and \$48,726.3 million of imports. Furthermore, Chinese trade amounted to 2.2 % of total American foreign trade.⁴ This pattern changed quite gradually and in the post-cold war era, they realized that China is rising rapidly and the U.S. started to think about what a rising China would mean to the world. China's GDP grew with a steady pace, while the U.S. was engaged militarily in various regions of the world.

Amidst the changing patterns, the U.S. shifted its focus from Europe to East Asia, mainly due to its growing economic importance. Concurrently, it also developed a sense of suspicion

regarding the Chinese outlook, and believed it to have ‘totalitarian’ political system, introvert military affairs, along with vague future objectives and capabilities. Nevertheless, the rise of China shaped differently both the acuity of Asia and also the balance of power at large. In this regard, China is considered as a prospective threat to the interests of the US in Asia by the conservatives and liberal groups. Whereas, the liberals emphasize on a ‘peaceful evolution’ and cooperative engagement through trade, interdependence and investment,⁵ the neo-conservatives aim to restrict Chinese rise by ‘pre-emptive confrontation’, following a diplomatic pattern, forming alliances and ending up in military confrontations.⁶

Theoretically, three major views have appeared as a response to China’s economic growth in the last two and half decades: firstly, ‘The threat’ perception argues that as China grows economically, at the same time, it attains modernization of its military, the predominant power of the US eventually fades away; especially in Asia and North Asia. Scholars of this group (Huntington, 1996; Bernstein and Munro, 1997; Bernstein and Munro, 1998; Meirshimer, 2001) argue that the growth of China has the tendency to disturb the global status quo and subvert Asia as well as the world. The strategy proposed by this group is to ‘contain’ China as soon as possible and by adopting any means.

Secondly, the liberals are rather more optimistic about China, and emphasize on ‘incorporating China into the world system’.⁷ Their argument flows from the idea that the rise of China may not turn out to be a threat to the global system and in turn destabilize the world. Instead this growth will in fact provide an enormous market to the rest of the world and the economic growth at large. This, they emphasize on due to various reasons: (a) China has an

exclusive non-expansionist culture. (b) growing interdependence will enhance China's wealth and it will be satisfied with the status quo of the existing global economic and military order; and (c), China's participation in international organizations has increased tremendously in the last two decades and that will prevent China from upsetting global order and stability.⁸ They also argue that if China becomes part of the international structure, it will follow international norms and regimes for its own benefit.

Thirdly, scholars from the "pro-conditioning" perspective are more optimistic than realists but more cautious than the liberals.⁹ They propose that in spite of China's extraordinary growth in the last three decades, it is still weak both economically and militarily as compared to the US. This is true because as China rises, it also faces intense internal and external problems that have a potential to hamper China's rise as a global power.¹⁰ China has been forced to adopt conservative rather than aggressive policies to upset global order and emerge as regional super power.

The economic rise of China may be a predominant factor for the US and its aim to maintain its hegemony in the world, however, the fact remains that China would never like to be the way US had been in the years ahead. Nevertheless, the US remains skeptical of the emerging powerful status of China and strives to 'contain' China through adopting various techniques. Will it be possible in achieving this goal, only time may tell, but the repercussions of a potential conflict between two major powers are bound to be huge on the regional states. For this an insight into the genesis of the 'Asia Pivot' is necessary to analyze the threat perception regarding the theoretical behavior of the US.

Asia Pivot: The Genesis

The concept of Asia Pivot or ‘Asia Re-balance’ is a combination of gradually developing aspects of the US foreign policy, originating essentially from the US Defence perspective, which was orchestrated by Mr. Andy Marshall of Pentagon- the most brilliant thinkers in the US military.¹¹ Consequently, at the outset of a post-cold war era, the Pentagon office became conscious of the varying global economic and strategic trends, especially after the realization that China is rising rapidly and they began to think that what could a rising China mean to the world?

Following this, the Obama administration disclosed the ‘Pivot to Asia’ strategy. This was articulated as a pompous strategy in order to reinforce the position of US in the Asian region, following the overt use of military, diplomatic, economic, and cultural instruments.¹² In the follow up, the US government is seemingly focusing on creating ‘military balance’, which would ultimately lead to revamping economic dominance. U.S. interface with Asia of such nature is not a new one; however, the truth of China rising as a global economic giant is a new chapter to strategic thinking. Despite the pivot policy, trade between U.S. and China has been immense in the past two decades and the Asia pivot seems to be an old wine in a new bottle.

So what are the pivot’s main goals? In March, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon restated in detail what America was trying to achieve in Asia. The U.S. government desires a “stable security environment and a regional order rooted in economic openness, peaceful resolution of disputes, and respect for universal rights and freedoms”, it is seeking to achieve that end through action in five specific areas:

- Strengthening alliances
- Deepening partnerships with emerging powers.
- Building a stable, productive and constructive relationship with China.
- Empowering regional institutions.
- Helping to build a regional economic architecture.¹³

The same objectives were discussed at the end of April 2013 by Joseph Yun, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, in to a Senate Committee, which mainly covered the security dimension of the re-balancing policy. The U.S. “commitment to the Asia-Pacific region is [being] demonstrated in a number of ways,” Yun said, including “intensive engagement at every level.”

Meanwhile, the U.S. has not done much regarding the pivot strategy. So far, only 2,500 marines have been shifted to a base in northern Australia, which raised concerns in China.¹⁴ In addition, their economic integration and inter-dependence also poses questions regarding the actual spirit of the pivot policy. Currently, the bilateral trade between China and U.S. has elevated immensely and is expected to rise in the year 2013.

Notwithstanding the above, today the US-China economic reality is one of complete integration. One cannot imagine the Chinese economy or the US economy being complete without each other. The Chinese debt holdings, trade, manufacturing etc. and many similar areas are reflective of the inter-connectivity between the two economies. It is unlike the Cold War, where the US-Soviet competition was divided along the ‘Iron Curtain’ and there was a conflict situation between the US and Russia. The US-China relationship is characterized by cooperation. Now, it is difficult to

imagine a military and political strategy, divorced from the economic realities of the day.

China- The Economic Giant

David Shambaugh, as early as the year 1993, predicted China's prospective economic growth with the potential of surpassing the US and EU in the early twenty first century.¹⁵ This rise would make China the global lead trading power, possessing the largest foreign exchange reserves, the largest consumer of oil, the largest military power, and the largest source of high technology and scientific advancement.¹⁶ In the beginning of 2008, Fareed Zakaria in the cover story of *Newsweek*, "The Rise of a Fierce Yet Fragile Superpower," confirmed that the advent of China as a global power was no longer a forecast but a reality.¹⁷

Currently, China's GDP growth is predicted to rise at a rate of 8.4 percent, up by 0.6 percentage points from that of 2012. The Center for Forecasting Science with the Chinese Academy of Sciences said, it expected China's economy will see a modest rebound in 2013, with secondary and tertiary industries rising by 8.9 percent and 8.8 percent, respectively. It put year-on-year growth in primary industry at 4.7 percent. Consumption and investment will drive economic growth up by between 4.2 and 4.5 percent, while exports from the world's second-largest economy are expected to decline by 0.3 percent, the center's figures show.¹⁸

Implications for the Regional States

In the year 2009, President Obama emphasized on enhancing the relations of the US with China.¹⁹ This sent shivers down the spine of the Asian capitals, where they thought of a G-2 condominium taking decisions over the heads of other states in the region.²⁰ In this regard, the general understanding of the 'pivot

policy' shows a discrepancy across the Pacific. The East Asian economic vibrancy is the future eye of the US foreign policy. Whereas, the Chinese are reluctant in the alliance structure as proposed by the US, as it gives vibes of 'containing' Chinese rise. Understanding the assumptions, on which the new strategy is based, is critical because they gravely affect the region's prospects for peace. The question is, why the pivot? Why now? The answer is not so obvious that one can say simply, China is rising, and America wants to prevent.

The pivot strategy like the other US policies remain ambiguous and is not well understood in most of the regions. The Chinese have developed a natural suspicion that the only real purpose of the pivot is its own containment, though Washington denies this. In Southeast Asia, some countries think a greater U.S. commitment will boost stability; others see it as a risk to stability. The U.S. itself has contributed to the confusion by repeatedly reframing the strategy, which was originally a "pivot" and then evolved into a "re-balancing", a "shift", and now also a "Pacific Dream."²¹ It has also failed to counter media portrayals of the pivot as an essentially military endeavor; partly, because the pivot's military board is the only one that has achieved well-articulated goals.

In case of Obama administration, the 'Asia Pivot' has translated into new defence deployments and active diplomatic leverage of shifting US emphasis on maritime Asia- Pacific deployments. In this regard, the only one, although relatively minor but potentially symbolic move, is the establishment of a marine base in Australia.²² At the same time, an increase in diplomatic outreach to all Chinese neighbors have been witnessed, and since the Chinese are worried about the US influence, there has been warming up of the US-

Vietnam relations.²³ Shifting dynamics and new investments, therefore, are being observed.

Concurrently, the shift has prompted a wave of anti-American feelings from within China. Major nationalistic groups are now calling for countering the US efforts through military means in order to deal with the US military posture in the Pacific and the upcoming US defence strategies.²⁴ For example, an article published in China's *Global Times*, a nationalistic newspaper owned by the Communist Party mouthpiece *People's Daily*, called for China to strengthen its long-range strike capabilities. Some voices are calling for closer alignment with Moscow and promoting the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) as a new "pole" in the international arena to strengthen the emerging powers against the West.²⁵

The US and the rising China have also realized that besides competition, they have serious differences in the later's neighborhood setting. Taiwan is a point in case.²⁶ In recent years, situation of potential conflict has emerged between US and China in spheres of Chinese-Japanese relationship and Chinese relations with North Korea and South Korea. Equally important are the rising potential maritime disputes that include countries like Vietnam, who have historically been opposed to the US, but as China is rising, have led to shifting alliances and relationships in the region.

In parallel to the military, diplomatic and strategic shift, US now has become increasingly interested in India too,²⁷ and this has been driven by some of the same dynamics as those in case of Asia pivot. The US military and defence planners are now planning ways for counter-balancing Chinese influence, adding extreme views on constraining, although the mainstream views do not agree with

‘containing’ but with counter-balancing. For the purpose, they looked towards Asia, having a number of smaller countries, but then, a booming India stood out because of its population and images of economic growth, although it is a midget, as compared to China.

Under the strategic umbrella of the US-China relationship, a natural observation is that there is a danger, considering the US getting close to India, while China and Pakistan maintaining their historic relationship, that a two-bloc scenario is emerging i.e. the US- India bloc and the China – Pakistan bloc. On the other hand, when we see the Pakistan-US relations, they depict a continuous deterioration over the past a few years. Supposing that a very difficult and ruptured Pak-US relationship emerges, within this four-way relationship context, and the crisis continue to mount, turning into truly hostile and conflictual relationship, this would cause grave concerns within the US and China relationship too, using North Korea analogy.

Pakistan: The Regional Player

Pakistan enjoys a unique geo-strategic disposition at the cross roads of various sub regions of the Asian continent. In this regard, it is one of the most important regional players and is bound to be concerned about any move of the major powers, which might have an impact on the regional peace and security. Re-focus of the U.S. on the Asia Pacific region and its ‘Asia Pivot’ policy, is indeed a point of concern for Pakistan, where it enjoys cordial relations with ‘Rising China’. The prime objective and agenda of the strategy of containing China, in fact, have long term implications for Pakistan.

Currently, Pakistan-US relations are going through difficult times yet again. The year of drawdown from Afghanistan-2014 is

just around the corner and both the states are still struggling to find an option which ultimately addresses the concerns of all, the stakeholders. Furthermore, there is a wave of anti-Americanism in Pakistan and the repercussions of the global war on terror are immense on the social fabric of Pakistan, especially the tribal belt. Pakistan's face as a moderate power has blurred in the Muslim world and is passing through the worst ever energy crisis. The U.S., by virtue of its ally status, is not of much help and also opposes Pakistan's endeavors of regional economic integration.

It should be kept in mind that Pakistan has an essential role for the U.S. in its broader Asia strategy. Pakistan definitely has an economic interest in taking advantage of the rising growth rates of East Asia, and thinking about many economic challenges that Pakistan is facing at home. The need of the hour is an economic opportunity, as a force for political stability. Recognition of this aspect has, in fact, led to an increase in the US Aid programs instead of capacity building. Billions of US dollars have been doled out, but one finds a poor track record of the U.S. in implementing simple infrastructure related programs.

In order to help Pakistan to increase its economic growth, it needs to tap the Asian growth miracle, increasing and sustained growth in China and at times a similar growth rate in India and the miracle economies like Thailand, South Korea are suitable for taking advantage of. In this regard, for Pakistan, the close cooperation of the US with India is more worrisome. India is no more projected as an emerging power, but in words of Hilary Clinton, "India has emerged as a power and assumed the role of Pacific power; India, geographically is not in Asia-Pacific, but we will make India a Pacific power".²⁸

Pakistan enjoys good relations with the Southeast Asian nations. The region has a great economic potential. The concept of energy corridor, the 'New Silk Route' and maritime choke points could bring peace and prosperity in the region and as a matter of fact, China cannot be ignored or isolated. Thus, it is in the interest of the US and the regional states that the policy of 'cooperation' and not 'confrontation' is adopted in the region.

Findings

The phrase 'Rising China' is, indeed, a fascinating one, but it comes with a lot of insecurities for the regional states. The US power is declining and in its efforts to curb the decline along with containing China's rise, it is inflicting insecurities in the regional states, including the ASEAN states. The international community is also highly concerned about the conflict prone outcome of any policy that may lead to any kind of race amongst the two powers. Hence, the following findings may be emanated from the foregoing discussions:

- The concepts of the 'Asia Pivot' strategy was floated from the Pentagon and reflects the spirit of the US defence endeavors. This has brought military thought on the lead and the political reasoning has been placed subservient to it, being a total reversal of logical thinking.
- Whenever the US has opted a strategy of cooperating with some and confronting some in any region, it has resulted in dismantling the balance altogether. Similarly in the Asia Pivot policy, Pakistan has not been provided its due place. As the drawdown from Afghanistan approaches near, the U.S. has ignored Pakistan in the due process and provided India the strategic lead.

- Pakistan and China enjoy a unique affirmative in their strategic relations. Pakistan has come a long way in taking up its role at the cross roads of regions and it will continue to take up a forward looking approach. In this regard, the Pak- China relations are one milestone, both the countries have achieved over the years. However, for securing their interests both the countries should re-vitalize their relations.
- As the US believes with regard to the emerging regional powers in Asia, China is considered as an 'enemy' and India the friend. While both the countries not only have a major role to play in the days ahead, but they also enjoy immense bilateral trade relations. Perceptibly the US is 'falling in love' with India and is not viewing the region with clarity.

Conclusion

In the backdrop of its Asia pivot policy, the US is creating more animosities and producing more enemies. What it really needs to do is to re-balance political, geo-political and economic imperatives. The US has a responsibility to contribute towards making the world a better place. In addition, the decline in its power is just predicted and not materialized as yet. There is a strong belief that the budgetary hurdles the US faces, might be one deal away to be totally eradicated. However, still the US might not be the super power as it once was after the World War II. Asia has risen and attained economic primacy. This, indeed, is a welcome development.

With regard to the Asia Pivot strategy, there are significant underpinnings about which Pakistan is likely to be concerned. The US is pursuing close cooperation with India and declared as an emerged power and the one which has assumed the role as the Pacific power. Undoubtedly, India is a secular democracy with a

growing economy. However, if India is given a much larger role to play and that too at the expense of Pakistan's role, then, this is not only going to have implications for Pakistan but also for the other regional states i.e. Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives.

End Notes

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