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Securing US Influence in Asia Pacific: The Military Angle

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Synopsis

Although economic and diplomatic domains of the US pivot dominate discussions, the military angle cannot be ignored. This dimension consists of two pillars: Air Sea Battle to offset China's Anti-Access and Area Denial capabilities and closer military relations with allies in the Asia Pacific.

Commentary

PRESIDENT OBAMA's recent tour of Asia was an attempt by the United States to reassure its allies in the Asia Pacific region that the rebalance strategy remains a priority. Although economic and diplomatic domains of the pivot continue to dominate discussions, one cannot ignore the military aspects of the pivot.

This consists of two distinct but related pillars: The first is developing the Air Sea Battle (ASB) capabilities of the US to offset China's Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) threat. The second is forming closer military relations with key allies in the Asia Pacific region.

Developing the Air Sea Battle concept

The ability of the US to project its armed forces far from its shores and then to be able to sustain them while they fight is unparalleled in military history. The US now worries that this capability could come under increasing threat in the Asia Pacific. China's rising military expenditure has largely focused on an increasing arsenal of cruise, ballistic, air-to-air and surface to air missiles with improved range and accuracy to be able to strike enemy platforms and bases.

Its A2/AD capabilities are designed to thwart enemy projection of forces and to protect important Chinese targets from sustained attacks. By integrating capabilities of the air, land, naval, space and cyberspace forces, the ASB concept aims to provide US commanders with better ability to project power and sustain operations and thwart the adversary's A2/AD capabilities in the advent of a war.

The US is developing its force structure in the Asia Pacific accordingly. The USAF has between 43,000-46,000 personnel in the Pacific and has stationed close to 60 per cent of its F-22 Raptor fighter fleet in and around the Pacific theatre. It has also announced that the first basing location for the new multirole F-35 will be in the Pacific.

Under the ASB concept, the USN is expected to assemble a sizable naval force in the Asia Pacific region with 60 per cent of its fleet stationed in the Pacific by 2020. The Navy also plans to acquire a new class of ballistic missile submarines to replace the current Ohio class strategic ballistic missile submarines.

Network of alliances & agreements

The US is rebuilding and strengthening its regional network of alliances that will support its ASB operations across the Asia Pacific. China's growing assertiveness in the East and South China seas has caused many US allies to deepen their defence and security alliances with Washington.

As a result of bilateral disputes with China, the Philippines is revamping its military. For decades, long-running insurgencies by Muslim and communist groups forced the military to be structured primarily for counterinsurgency operations. While these security threats still exist, the Philippines has been increasingly working with the US to strengthen its navy since the Scarborough Shoal incident with China in early 2012.

Washington sanctioned US\$50 million to the Philippines under foreign military aid late last year. The funding, however, comes with a stipulation - it can only be used to improve Philippines' naval capability, which seriously lags behind that of its major neighbours. An agreement on the US-Philippines defence cooperation, signed during President Obama's Asia tour, will allow the rotation of 4500 US military personnel and ships and aircrafts throughout the Philippines.

This will allow the US access to bases and will enhance readiness of the Philippine military as a result of joint training. The US Navy SEALs have already conducted training exercises with Filipino personnel on how to use small UAVs at sea – a useful asset to conduct better surveillance in the South China Sea.

Japan's dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands has resulted in Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe seeking to increase Japan's military power. The government would like to modify Japan's Constitution, which would remove obstacles to Japan's use of military force thereby allowing it to fulfil its collective security treaty obligations. Japan has also announced plans for a "Dynamic Joint Defence Force," which involves improving the interoperability of Japan's Self Defence Forces.

The USN plans to deploy the P8 maritime patrol aircraft in Japan – a first deployment of the P8 outside the US – and the USAF will be deploying the Global Hawk unmanned aircraft rotationally. By 2017, Washington plans to position a squadron of F-35B Joint Strike Fighters. Most of the new military hardware that Japan plans to acquire is air and sea equipment, clearly illustrating Abe's focus on protecting Japan's maritime assets. The US has welcomed these plans of the Abe government, which will allow Japan to play a greater role in its self-defence.

Defending allies?

The Republic of Korea (ROK) and US alliance is largely directed towards the threat from North Korea. The ROK and US have conducted several military exercises for potential war situations on the Korean peninsula. The US has also initiated a trilateral dialogue between its two most important Asian allies – Japan and ROK.

Australia has an extremely important military role to play in the pivot. In addition to the rotational deployment of 2500 troops in Darwin, an American drone base is being developed in the Cocos Islands. Pine Gap, near Alice Springs, is one of the three major satellite tracking stations operated by US Intelligence agencies and US military and is a very important facility for the analysis of data transmitted from US satellites operating in several regions including South East Asia.

Due to its geographical location, Australia can potentially provide vital logistical and intelligence support to the US forces in case of a Sino-US confrontation. As American bases in the Western Pacific are coming under greater threat, Australia's support as an ally during such operations will be important for Washington as Australia remains at a safe distance from the bulk of China's conventional missile inventory.

The rebalancing strategy of the US may or may not be aimed at containing China. But the network of agreements that Washington continues to develop in Asia clearly depicts a forward looking plan that will ensure that the US is well prepared for any air sea battle to defend its regional allies.

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