

USA'S PIVOT TO ASIA; COOPERATION OR CONTAINMENT- AN INTRUSIVE ANALYSIS FROM REALIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Southeast Asia stems its geopolitical significance predominantly from its position at the intersection between the accumulation of military power, technological and industrial advanced states in Northeast Asia to the north, the oil rich Middle East and Indian subcontinent to the east and Australia lies towards the south. It is also a region of massive unexploited natural resources and junction of the world's supreme sea trade routes. Since the end of Second World War, the USA has maintained substantial presence in Southeast Asia which has provided stability to a large extent. The massive investment and development of infrastructure resulted in rapid post war recovery of devastated region, which also helped China (Now World's Economic Giant) towards rapid pace of economic development. Southeast Asia reverberated even during Cold War times and in the Vietnam War. After the end of Cold War, the U.S A shifted its focus from security to economic issues in Southeast Asia. "Market access" and "market-opening" became the prominent slogans of US policy for this region, which focused on the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC). President Trump after taking over office renewed his commitments and policy preferences for greater focus and engagement in Asia-Pacific region by rephrasing it as Indo-Pacific region for dealing with the existential threat of North Korea and assuring allies of unstinted US support for continued engagement in the region. This is an academic discourse; therefore, views expressed in this research are author's own views.

Keywords: Pivot to Asia, rebalancing, Cooperation, Containment.

Introduction

The geopolitical importance of Southeast Asia is chiefly attributed to its location at the hub of technologically and industrially advanced Northeast Asia to the north, oil rich Middle East and the Indian subcontinent to the East and the Australian continent to the south. Significant trade of Japan, China, Taiwan, the Republic of Korea, and Australia, mostly their oil imports, transport through the straits and Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) in Southeast Asia¹. U.S has maintained a significant foot prints in this region immediately on termination of Second World War as USA was victor and the outcome was decided by US nuclear strikes against Japan as war termination strategy. The

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presence in the region has been manifested with varying intentions, generally unclear². Since the global inflation and China's economic boom, the geopolitical balance in the region has shifted towards China, the relations of Southeast Asian countries with China have been generally positive. USA's recent overtures has reinvigorated the relations with the Asia-Pacific and other global powers and is significantly supporting increase in defense spending and ambitious modernization programs of Southeast Asia and other countries of the region. US joint military exercise with Republic of Korea, Japan, Myanmar and Vietnam and enhanced engagements with Philippine are some of the factors contributed towards heightened tension in the region. On the pretext of freedom of navigation, ASEAN countries are encouraged to follow the suit of USA, which is creating friction with China. While China and USA have pragmatically handled the controversial issues of South China Sea by demonstrating restraint and mutual accommodation, yet occasional distractions due to heating of temperatures are causing a degree of destabilization.

Significance of Research Article

Asia – Pacific region has always been very important due to its geopolitical and geo-economic potentials and power tussle between USA and China. USA considers important pillar and guarantor of stability and development of region, while China considers it as her near abroad with legitimate right for bigger influence in the region. While Chinese approach has generally been demonstrated by common development and prosperity through win-win cooperation, whereas, USA's approach in contrast is manifested more in security and military dimensions, with overwhelming cooperation in boosting offensive capabilities and enhanced physical presence in the region. The war of words has been softening since then, however, a covert mind-set of China containment remains at the heart on new US Administration's policy planning. This research article will unveil and analyse the constituents of USA's Pivot to Asia with potential implications on China and the region.

Discourse Analysis on USA's Pivot to Asia Strategy

US presence in troubled region of North and South East Asia provided greater degree stability and large scale development of the region after devastation caused by World War-II. The massive investment and development of infrastructure resulted in rapid post war recovery of distressed region and also helped China in rapid economic development. In the period 1947-1950, the

national security planners drafted policy guidelines for maintaining visible US presence in order to continue her influence in post war recovery of Southeast Asia. National Security Council (NSC) architects realized the need for building the old colonial state's capacity for long term sustenance and development, therefore, the region of Southeast Asia boomed even during Cold War and Vietnam War.

As the Cold War ended, the U.S shifted its focus from security to economic aspects in Southeast Asia. George H. W. Bush (1989-1993) made free trade as the dominant objective, and as a result "Market access" and "market-opening" became the buzzwords of U. S. policy for the region, which centered around the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC). In the recent past, the U.S has begun to recognize the strategic importance of Southeast Asia by realizing the need of "Pivot to Asia" or "Rebalance"³. Hillary Clinton former US Secretary of State described this region as the "fulcrum" of developing a regional economic and security architecture⁴. Another important aspect worth noting is that U.S arms sales and technology transfers are assumed to be essential factors for maintaining balance of power and dissuading China from cooperative engagement⁵. This has been pooled with a placid rebalancing of regional political dynamics as the states begin to pivot against China's envisaged leading position by reiterating their associations with the U.S.⁶.

Washington has indicated that it does not recognize China's sovereignty over the several islands including reefs in the Spratly archipelago by stating that for the sake of retaining hard earned freedom of navigation, the U.S. Navy will endure to operate here⁷. This policy shift implies shifting of diplomatic, military and economic resources to the region from other parts of the world. In Southeast Asia, a dominant manifestation of the pivot includes developing relations with these countries and reviving close U.S. links with Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand. The previous administration of President Obama also elevated defense cooperation with most of regional countries with emphasis on port and basing of combat ships in Southeast Asia. The pivot had several constituents; mainly shifting of U.S. foreign policy orientation from Afghanistan and Middle East to Asia-Pacific, relocation of naval assets and new dispositions of U.S. Marines to other locations and forging treaties with allies and partners⁸.

The "pivot" to Asia was introduced through an article in foreign policy magazine published in November 2011 authored by Hilary Clinton, the former

Secretary of State. It elucidated the future plans for the military relocations as *“We are modernizing our basing arrangements with traditional allies in Northeast Asia while enhancing our presence in Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean. In the section of “Primary Missions of the U.S. Armed Forces,” rotating presence is cited as “U.S. forces will conduct a sustainable pace of operations abroad, including rotational deployments and bilateral and multilateral training exercises. These activities reinforce deterrence, help to build the capacity and competence of U.S., allied, and partner forces for internal and external defense, strengthen alliance cohesion, and increase U.S. influence”.*

New USA-Japan Defence Guidelines

U.S. and Japan signed a new Defence Guidelines in 2015⁹. The main components are;

- Ensure long term strategic commitment including the presence of the U.S. forces in Japan.
- Augment the known collective self - defense, the growth of mutual defense cooperation from regional to international level in traditional and new areas are considered vital to current geo-strategic settings, mainly the cyber security and space.
- The 1997 effort was made to settle North Korean issue and its revised version in 2015 is perceived as a counter action against Chinese expansionist designs.
- A key area underscored in new strategies is maritime security. This is relevant to Southeast Asia, as the tensions in maritime domain increased substantively in the South China Sea succeeding to host of incidents, like Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil-rig stand-off between China and Vietnam, and China's reclamation activities to name a few.
- One initiative announced in the new guidelines is the “Partner Capacity Building”.
- Through power projection strategies, Japan's enhanced involvement points towards possible appearance of Japan as a counter weight to China.
- New Navel and Sea concept also implies growing USA's engagement with Japan to isolate China.

Analytical Debate on the Emerging Scenario and its Implications

The Realists believe in the concept of Power as the ultimate human desire. It has two dimensions, i.e. Offensive Realism which is manifested in Power maximization and secondly Defensive realism which is manifested in Security maximization. The previous US deployment and basing in Southeast Asia and current Pivot to Asia perfectly fits in both dimensions of Realism. The ensuing analysis will touch on both these aspects.

Visualized Impact of USA's Pivot to Asia

There is increased U.S emphasis on demographic shift from Middle East to Asia-Pacific in all policy guidelines, National Military Strategy and defense reviews. This shift is assessed to be the current economic growth of China which has averaged 9.5% since last three decades. The analyst debate that the Chinese economy, currently the 3rd largest, and world's fastest growing, is destined to become the world's leading economy by overtaking the U.S.A in coming decade. The U.S is likely to strengthen associations with Philippines, Japan, Singapore and the Republic of Korea for manifestation of Joint Force's contingencies. U.S is providing aid package to archipelagic states to deter Chinese Coast Guard in South China Sea and boost respective maritime law enforcement flotillas. The U.S has contributed to the misperception by frequently framing the strategy, which was initially a 'pivot' and later transformed into a 'rebalancing' which is now a 'Pacific Dream'. The U.S has been unsuccessful in countering media narratives of the pivot as an essential military endeavor, partly because the pivot's military portion is the only one that has encompassed the overarching goals of this shift. The futuristic procurement plan and all other endeavours are confirming that U.S policies are China-centric with implied leaning towards North Korea. Moreover, for spreading negative perceptions about China, frequent anti-China statements by the U.S officials and policy documents and other U.S allies around Southeast Asia are testimony of growing risks of China containment. It is worth mentioning that U.S is planning to have an Air Force capable of worldwide projection of power competencies as these are critical for manifestation of new strategy. Concurrently, updating new generation Air Force combat apparatus containing bombers and fighters – predominantly against advance air defense systems possessed by China.

Factoring North Korean Nuclear Posturing and President Trump's Overtures

North Korean nuclear posturing and ensuing exchange of heated words between North Korean leader Kim John Un and President Trump present highly charged regional environment with trigger ready alert positions on both sides. President Trump's tweet in March 2017 "*North Korea is behaving very badly. They have been 'playing' the United States for years. China has done little to help*"¹⁰. It is evident that USA is trying to club China with North Korea, thus setting the stage for casus-belief for containing China. Despite Chinese protests and concern, US is perusing disposition of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) in South Korea on the same pretext of dealing with North Korea and potential deterrent against China.

Evolving Security Architecture

The security architecture in the region suffers from lack of trust between the China and U.S bilateral and military relations due to clash of interests. Preventive actions by both states to pre-empt each other's perceived intentions continue to feed instability in the region. The rebalancing act of the U.S packaged under the notion of Asian Pivot appears to contain China's growing power, triggered apprehension within the regional powers about their own security. The presence of U.S forces are largely considered synonymous to Cold War Containment that will increase militarization, friction and increased regional tension.

South China Sea Issues

The claim of South China Sea is supported by government of China's proclamation of a map in 1948 and the subsequent notes submitted to the U.N in May 2009. Therefore, the claim should be interpreted and accepted accordingly by the international community. The claim by China for maritime regions in the South China Sea has origin of past several decades. It firstly elicited less agitated reactions by other plaintiffs because China was economically more involved with all the countries of ASEAN.

Conclusions Drawn from the Analytical Debate

Containment of China

USA's "Pivot to Asia" strategy with demonstrated intentions of military posturing and basing in China's near abroad in East Asian region has contributed to a large extent in creating mistrust and instability. In China, it is widely perceived in policy circles that Obama Administration's "Pivot to Asia" in-fact interrupted the course of joint development and needlessly strewed dissatisfaction by bringing the conflicts at center stage thus creating haze among the neighbours regarding Chinese future intentions despite China's outreach and assurances of settling disputes through peaceful means and dialogue. The scenario thus created point towards mistrust which is considered unfavorable towards regional stability, bilateral and military relations between China and USA. It is also worth mentioning that Air-Sea Battle element of Pivot to Asia is offensive in outlook and manifestation and perceived to be directed against China, which also contributed towards growing suspicion with deleterious prospects of military relations. The frequently discussed preservation of hard earned freedom of navigation by USA containing surveillance of China undermine trust and harm China's core security concerns, impinge on China's sovereignty which have proved to be destabilizing factors. With above stated empirical evidences, it can be concluded that "Pivot to Asia" appears to be self-fulfilling prophecy of USA by depicting China as competitor rather than partner in regional and global affairs and keeping the trumpet of "**China Threat Theory**" alive, thus retaining legal grounds of enormous US military presence in the region. The aspects of "**China containment**" are aptly exemplified from offensive military doctrines, posturing and joint military exercises by USA and its regional allies.

USA's Over Commitment to Alliance Partners

USA's overt support to alliance partners in this region and sequestering their behavior are also contributing towards instability and trust deficit between China and USA. Notwithstanding USA's firm partnership with ROK, Taiwan, Japan and several other regional countries are understandable and much appreciated, however, USA's security treaty and enormous arms sale to Taiwan, Japan and Philippine with offensive posturing demonstrated during joint military exercises with USA, witnessed as regular yearly feature are considered as China specific which degenerates prospects of enduring stability and trust building.¹¹ The two militaries i.e. USA and China believe that better relations and

understanding of each other's sensitivities are vital for enduring stability, yet US military is regularly involved in mock exercises of worst case scenarios of military confrontation demonstrated during joint exercises with alliance partners.

China's Emphasis on Negotiated Settlement of Disputes

Another important aspect worth highlighting is the Chinese government and military's preference for negotiations and mutual respect without use of force for dispute resolution. However, China has explicitly demonstrated for preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity like any other sovereign nation. At regional and international level, the China has adopted official policy of not challenging the leadership of USA which is exemplified by joint press conference between President Xi Jinping and President Obama on the sidelines of APEC. President Xi announced that "*China will never challenge the leadership of USA*" and President Obama announced that "*USA welcomes peaceful development of China and does not support the independence of Taiwan*". President Trump has also reiterated his administration commitment to "*One China policy*"¹². It is worth noting that in last 30 years, China has successfully maintained regional peace and stability despite challenges, disputes and peacefully settled its border issues with twelve countries, which indeed are highly creditable endeavours. China has also declared supportive engagement with the militaries of regional countries and USA in order to formulate joint response mechanism against evolving nontraditional security threats. The manifestation of "Pivot to Asia" has been perceived as containment of China for regional dominance by USA supported by her allies due to overwhelming military component and offensive posturing by USA and allies, thus eroding trust level and pushing the region back into cold war mentality.

Recommendations for Enduring Stability and Trust Building

Trust Building between USA and China

Both USA and China have to develop comprehensive understanding of the relationship following the principle of "*managing differences for common development*", avoiding confrontation and taking steps for furthering trust. In this backdrop, following measures are recommended;

- The **first** aspect is that Chinese President Xi Jinping's offer of building "New Type of Major Power Relations" should be formalized at an early

date by signing a 4th Communiqué and preparing comprehensive implementation road map. Both countries should also pursue the goal of long term relationship which has not yet been demarcated despite changing geopolitical realities and transformation in the international order after demise of USSR dimming the cold war notion of containment.

- The **second** aspect needs consideration is the United States explicit commitment on removing the prevailing haze and any misperception on its intentions of containing the peaceful rise of China by assuring the respect for China's territorial integrity and national sovereignty as well as political system. The USA is suggested to dispel any misinterpretations of her over commitment to alliances in East Asia, take contemplation of the sensitivities of non-allied countries, ; avoiding a new cold war by demonstrating that it has no intentions of dividing the region.
- And **lastly**, it is suggested that both countries should refrain from demonizing each other and take measures for enhancing communication on policies and actions to avoid misunderstanding. Use of media or press conferences to some extent have impacted negatively on bilateral relations, therefore, dialogues and exchanges of education, positive assurances, joint training in addressing non-traditional security threats should be formalized and implemented immediately.

Mechanism to Manage Tension and Crises

In the region of heightened tension and prevailing mistrust, following is recommended for avoiding conflict and managing crises arising due to perceived miscalculation by any side;

- The **first** and foremost important aspect is the policy of robust engagement between USA and China both at bilateral diplomatic and military levels to keep channels of communications open. Through military exchanges and joint military exercises, both countries can be partners in major international issues concerning non-traditional security. Template of cooperation in Gulf of Aden anti-piracy cooperation is a good starting point which is recommended to be capitalized and enhanced for mutual benefit and the world at large. Another positive avenue is the engagement in regional security matters

and humanitarian relief activities, where both countries can become dependable members in the Asia-Pacific region. With due regards to the outcome of process in immediate or later timeframe, the suggested process of dialogue, cooperation and commitment will create conducive environment for positive development of the relationship between USA and China.

- **Secondly**, the most important aspect needs consideration for all stake holders is the initiation of significant measures for building trust and bridging communication gap at the governments and military levels. One such method to be initiated early is the open ended and constructive dialogues between the government ministers and senior military officials. The dialogues should not be expected to be conclusive overnight, therefore, should be perused with continued emphasis and hectic efforts are suggested to be made to keep these focused and result oriented, while listening to each other's positions carefully with patience and open mind. It is suggested that frequent reciprocal visits of Defense Ministers, services chiefs, and staff officers will also pave the way for enhanced cooperation and building trust. A lot of ice melting has occurred with engagement policy of new Trump Administration which has helped in understanding each other's positions, concerns and increased the prospects of enhanced engagements for eventual benefit of all parties. Both governments should also pledge to veneration of core interests of each other, view each other's strategic intents tangibly and factually and take steps for blossoming of positive environments by eliminating the chances of unsubstantiated accusations.
- **Thirdly**, enhancing bilateral cooperation on host of global issues like; DPRK nuclear issue, Iranian nuclear issue, non-traditional security like disaster relief operations, anti-piracy operations etc, counter terrorism and transnational crimes, cyber-security, environmental challenges, steadiness of international economic system and ensuring uninterrupted energy supplies.
- **Fourthly**, the conflict prevention, risk management and mitigation. Few suggested measures are; establishing of hot lines between the two militaries and formalizing the mechanism of notifying each other's military manoeuvres and major exercises and routine training events for trust building and avoiding any miscalculations and stimulate better synchronization. The subsequent aspects relate to the devising Rules of

Engagement and SOPs for dealing with problematic circumstances in a befitting manner.

Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that USA's presence in this region in post-world war II era has immensely contributed towards stability and economic development. However, recent developments like USA's "pivot to Asia" and other such provocative actions like joint military exercises and infringing on the sovereignty of China has heightened the tension as the scenario is once again pushing the region into cold war mentality of containment. Being sole super power, USA has to reach out to China and other regional countries for bridging trust gap and maintaining conducive environment, therefore, military transparency has to be backed up by practical actions for trust building between USA and other stakeholders.

NOTES

- ¹ Shipping transiting the region must pass through one of four chokepoints: the straits of Malacca, Sunda, or Lombok, or possibly the straits east of East Timor. See John H. Noer, *Chokepoints: Maritime Economic Concerns in Southeast Asia*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1996.
- ² Creating Framework to Assess Mil Transparency by POSSE (Program on Strategic Stability Evaluation), 11 - 14 November, 2012, Workshop at Vienna, Austria.
- ³ Ernest Z. Bower, CSIS; *Southeast Asia's Geopolitical Centrality and the U.S - Japan Alliance*. June 2015.
- ⁴ Hillary Clinton, "America's Engagement in the Pacific", Remarks at the Kahala Hotel, Honolulu, Oct 28, 2010.
- ⁵ Lexington Institute, 9 November 2011.
- ⁶ Waves of concern - Southeast Asian states plan naval defences", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 14 April 2011.
- ⁷ Adam Rose and David Brunnstrom, December 10, 2015: China warns U.S. it will not allow violations of its waters, Beijing/ Washington.
- ⁸ East Asia does not include Australia, which is usually analyzed separately, although Australia is an important ally and has played a major role in the pivot.
- ⁹ *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No 329, 25 March, 2016.
- ¹⁰ Time to end wishful thinking about China's North Korea Policy, *The Diplomat Newspaper* , 5 August 2017.
- ¹¹ US Pacific Fleet Commander Joins 7 Hour Surveillance over South China Sea, *US News-Newspaper*, 15 July 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/07/19/us-pacific-fleet-chief-joins-surveillance-of-south-china-sea> (2 November 2017)
- ¹² Ben Blanchard & H. Steve, Trump Changes Track, Backs One China Policy in Telephone Call with Xi, *Reuters Newspaper*, 10 February 2017.