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## A military pivot to Asia

By TANG SIEW MUN



**Controversial strategy:** Obama meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao during the Apec Summit in Honolulu, Hawaii, in November last year. Obama's campaign to reassert the United States as a Pacific power has triggered a sharp reaction from China, presaging tough times ahead as the two economic giants vie for influence. - Reuters

**'Pivoting to Asia' is fast becoming the centrepiece of US strategic and diplomatic objectives.**

IF there were doubts about America's "return" to Asia, all were dissipated with the release of the new strategic guidance report by the Pentagon on Jan 5.

Washington's grand objective can be gleaned from the title of the report, "Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defence".

While the report affirms US interests worldwide and renews its pledge to uphold its commitments to its allies and friends, it unambiguously stresses the importance of Asia. It states that the US "will of necessity rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region".

The report follows through the grand strategic vision enunciated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in an article published in *Foreign Policy* where she declared that "the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the centre of the action".

"Pivoting to Asia" is fast becoming the centrepiece of US strategic and diplomatic objectives.

Before "pivoting" became the cornerstone of the US-Asia policy, the region was abuzz with the US "return" to Asia. China, understandably, was especially agitated.

Indeed, there are segments in China who view the US "return" to Asia with a sense of foreboding, as US initiatives are seen as stratagems to contain China's growing influence and power in the region.

If hitherto there were concerns about the US return to Asia, then Washington's "pivot movement" to Asia will certainly generate more discussion and potentially countervailing measures.

To be sure, "pivoting" is different from "returning". In general, a US return would be marked by its heightened diplomatic engagement, especially with its newfound interest and support for multilateral initiatives such as the East Asia Summit.

A US "return" to Asia would be largely viewed by South-East Asia as a positive development, especially in an uncertain strategic environment punctuated by China's expanding economic and military power.

In this regard, the US is seen as a reliable and indispensable power to balance and, if necessary, to check Chinese aggressive designs.

However, pivoting in the context of the Pentagon report may see an increased US military presence in the region.

South-East Asia is no stranger to the US military. Up until November 1991 when the Clark Air Base was returned to the Philippines, the US had maintained a large military footprint in the region.

The US has close relations with its treaty partners Thailand and the Philippines. In November 1990, the US negotiated an arrangement with Singapore that gave it access to and use of facilities in the city state.

Singapore is also home to the US Navy's Logistics Group Western Pacific that provides logistics support for the US Seventh Fleet.

For many decades, the US had consistently maintained a high strategic profile through bilateral and multilateral military exercises and other military-to-military cooperation.

The hubs-and-spokes system of bilateral security treaties, which includes South Korea, Japan and Australia, has long been regarded as the backbone of the region's security.

The strategic presence of the US in, and its engagement with, the region is often quoted as one of the primary reasons for South-East Asia's stability and growth.

The argument goes that the US provided the security umbrella which allowed South-East Asian states to limit their defence outlays.

This argument was certainly valid during the Cold War era when the Asean states were undoubtedly pro-American and cooperated to varying degrees with the US.

In fact, when the US Air Force pulled out of the Clark Air Base, there was a sense of trepidation and the perception that the US was withdrawing from the region.

There was genuine fear about a power vacuum which would "invite" other major powers to supplant the US' dominant role in regional security.

Fortunately, these fears were unfounded as the expected jostling for primacy in Asia and the feared US retreat did not materialise.

While the US' diplomatic and political "return" to the region is applauded and welcomed, reception for its "pivot to Asia" may be less enthusiastic.

There are several reasons for such pessimism. Granted that the pivot strategy will be multifaceted and not uni-dimensionally focusing on military power.

However, it is the latter component of the pivot strategy that may prove to be most controversial.

To the extent that pivoting entails an enlarged and more visible military footprint, it will be destabilising and anathema to regional security.

An increased US military profile will generate what academics understand as a "security dilemma" and make China feel uncomfortable, to put it mildly.

A case in point is the recent announcement of the deployment up to 2,500 US Marines on a "rotational" basis in Darwin, Australia.

Washington and Canberra were quick to emphasise the transient nature of the deployment, but whichever way one attempts to slice and dice "Darwin", in the eyes of the Chinese and the rest of South-East Asia, this move puts hundreds of well-trained and highly mobile US military personnel at the edge of the region.

It is a potential "beach head" for the US to organise and launch military expeditions into South-East Asia and the Indian Ocean.

We can also expect to see more of the Stars and Stripes in the region.

Last month, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert wrote in the US Naval Institute's Proceedings that the US is contemplating deploying littoral combat ships in Singapore and "other places" in South-East Asia.

We must ask ourselves whether there is an imminent threat in the region that necessitates increased fire power from the US.

There is a point beyond which an increased military presence provides a negative marginal return. More is not always necessarily better.

There may be quarters in South-East Asia that embrace a larger US military role and profile. Notable among these are the "hedgers" who no doubt see the US as the ultimate "insurance policy" to guard against strategic uncertainty.

When it is diplomatically untenable and militarily impractical to balance against China's expanding military might, then the growing presence of the US is reassuring, to say the least.

It cannot be denied that the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) growing muscle is being closely monitored and analysed.

While there is no unified response to this phenomenon, it is accepted that South-East Asia cannot match the PLA gun for gun.

A military response is destructive and ultimately futile. The preferred modality is to embed China in a web of regional and multilateral cooperation mechanisms.

The Asean China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) and the Asean Plus Three (APT) are but two examples.

South-East Asia should stay the course and continue its ongoing successful engagement of China. However, the military component of "pivoting" may serve to amplify the strategic divide and suspicions between China and South-East Asia.

The implications of "pivoting" are multiple. For a start, the US will seek a larger voice and role in the region.

Secretary Clinton spoke for many Americans when she asserted that Asia is the future and correspondingly the US must be in Asia.

The substantive question that needs to be asked is, "When the US leads, should Asia fall in line and accept US leadership?"

It would be unrealistic for Washington to assume that Asia will do this. Acceptance of US leadership is not universal, nor is it automatic.

Support for the US in Indonesia, South-East Asia's largest country, is slipping. The Pew Global Attitudes Survey showed it has declined from 56% in 2009 to 49% in 2010.

Asia does not dance to the tune of Washington, nor does it march to the beat of the Chinese.

While Washington sees its future in Asia, it needs to be mindful that the success of its "pivot" strategy is contingent on the concurrence and support of Asia.

The operative words are cooperation and collaboration.

The region's strategic uncertainty – read as fear of China – cannot be resolved by the placement of more US troops in the region or through military grandstanding.

It is not about being pro-US or anti-China but how to build a stable, secure and prosperous future. The US pivot to Asia should be welcomed to the extent that it contributes constructively to a better and brighter future for Asia.

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