

Rebalancing, Hedging and Regional Security***By Dr. Tang Siew Mun****Director for Foreign Policy and Security Studies**Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia*

In the wake of the Cold War, there was a genuine concern in Southeast Asia of a US strategic withdrawal from the region. The pullout from Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base gave credence to these anxieties and fuelled talks of a strategic vacuum in Asia. Two decades later, the US put paid to these perceptions by unequivocally reaffirming its commitment to the region.

Last year, Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton confirmed the primacy of Asia in the US grand strategic outlook in her much referenced “pivot” article. Using the poker analogy, American thinkers have posited that the US is “all in” on Asia. With a growth rate of 8.3% and accounting for close to 21% of its exports (2011), it is easy to understand why the East Asia and Pacific region is of primary importance to the US.

“Pivoting” has since given way to “rebalancing.” Secretary of Defence, Leon Panetta recently outlined that “by 2020 the Navy will reposture its forces from today’s roughly 50/50 percent split between the Pacific and Atlantic to about a 60/40 split between those oceans.

Without downplaying the significance of the “rebalancing” exercise, the quantitative increase in combat ships plying the Asia-Pacific waters may not be as pronounced as thought. Robert Haddick pointed out that the US Navy is expected to have a total of 181 major combat ships in 2020, and 109 of these will be deployed in the region. This, argues, Haddick is an increase of eight ships from today’s numbers. Eight ships still pack a lot of firepower, especially if one of these is an aircraft carrier with more air assets and firepower capabilities than most of the regional air forces except China and Japan.

The main storyline on the rebalancing strategy is not – while important – the redeployment of US military assets in the region. US military forces have been a fixture in the region’s strategic balance since the 1945. The pertinent questions are where would these assets be located and how would this strategy affect regional security?

To pre-empt concerns of attempts to re-establish a network of bases in the region, Washington was quick to put this issue to rest with the “places not bases” doctrine. The US is enlarging its military footprint in the region by expanding its scope of partnership and cooperation with regional parties.

Recently, Singapore agreed to support the forward deployment of four littoral combat ships. The Philippines and Thailand – which are US treaty partners – appear to be prime candidates to join the roster of “places” for US forward deployment. Australia has subscribed to this strategy when it agreed to host the rotational deployment of up to 2,500 US Marines last year. To date, the US have two firm “places” of operations, and may add to this number with either or both Bangkok and Manila joining the fold.

To be sure, “places” is different from “bases.” The former is more politically palatable for the host country and implies an impermanent arrangement. The effect, however, for regional security is similar. Both arrangements will enable the US to position and operate out of “places” in the region.

While the US's diplomatic and political "return" to the region is applauded and welcomed, the reception for the rebalancing strategy may be less enthusiastic. There are several reasons for such pessimism. While the erstwhile pivot strategy is multifaceted and not uni-dimensionally focusing on military power, its newer incarnation appears to be "military heavy." This may prove to be controversial. To the extent that rebalancing entails an enlarged and more visible military footprint, it will be destabilizing 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.

When asked for her opinion on "rebalancing" by *The Nation*, China's Vice-Foreign Minister, Ambassador Fu Ying, diplomatically offered that "China has no problem accepting the US presence and its positive influence in the Asia-Pacific." At the same time, she noted that Chinese and Asian commentators are uncomfortable with the US heavy emphasis on the region's security agenda.

It is difficult to accurately gauge the region's reactions to the rebalancing strategy. Thus far, responses from the region have been rather diplomatic and positive. ASEAN states need to be more circumspect and carefully weigh the pros and cons of an enlarged US military footprint in Southeast Asia.

The bottom line is military assets are tools to achieve strategic goals. It is all too convenient to justify the increased military presence in the context of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief or other non-traditional security concerns. The strategic implications of the rebalancing strategy need to be fully understood.

The rotational deployment of US Marines in Darwin changes the dynamics of Southeast Asian security. Washington and Canberra were quick to emphasize 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 Southeast 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 operations into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Additionally, if the Philippines and Thailand joins Australia and Singapore in supporting US military operations – in temporary or permanent forms – it will give the US unparalleled access to the strategic waterways from the eastern part of the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. Coupled with its bases in South Korea and Japan, the US will have a string of operational platforms spanning from the Indian to the Pacific oceans. US efforts to buttress its military presence across the Indo-Pacific region are not lost to Chinese policy-makers and strategists or their Asian counterparts. The rebalancing strategy fundamentally changes the "latent" nature of the US hubs-and-spokes alliance system to one that is "active." It also adds another dimension to the alliance with Thailand and the Philippines from the defence of these countries by a third party attack to utilising the relationship to pursue Washington's strategic objectives vis-à-vis China and other emerging strategic competitors.

In this regard, the implementation of the rebalancing strategy is not a matter of bilateral concern between the US and its strategic partners. It is a bilateral decision that will have regional implications. There may be quarters in Southeast 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. Hedging is not without its risks and drawbacks. It takes strategic finesse to execute and maintain a hedging strategy. Increased US military presence in the region may imperil this delicate hedging strategy and even entrench hedgers into the orbit of the US. Thus, ASEAN states should evaluate Washington's rebalancing overtures comprehensively and in a regional context. Is the acceptance of some form of enhanced US military presence part of the hedging strategy vis-à-vis China or is this the beginning of a shift toward balancing China?

ASEAN states are hesitant to address these questions for fear of marginalizing either of the major powers. Our time-honored mantra is “not having to choose” and we shall strive to maintain close relations with China and the US. If China is not a threat, we should be witnessing a scaling down of military power, rather than an increase as what the rebalancing strategy seems to be doing. There is something fundamentally wrong when we advocate cooperation while concomitantly be laying the groundwork for strategic competition. ASEAN states would do well to tread with caution. For us, the rebalancing strategy goes beyond affirming our friendly and cooperative ties with the US. It will also be an important marker of our relations with China and the US. The price for hedging has increased and the days when ASEAN states have to make the difficult choice is looming.