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The United States' Retreat From the Middle East and Pivot to the Far East Is Likely to Intensify

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This article outlines the reasons one should expect that the United States will shift more military forces to and focus more diplomatic efforts on the Far East and away from the Middle East. The term forecasting is employed rather than prediction, to remind that the statement holds only if no “black swans” appear, that is, if no major unexpected forces come into play. (This caveat deserves special attention given the poor record of those who predict international developments, as demonstrated vividly when the Arab Spring unexpectedly erupted in Tunisia and when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.) U.S. role is akin to that of a physician who finds two abnormalities in an x-ray and is influenced in choosing on which to base his intervention by subconscious motives.

Zhreat assessments

Recent U.S. intelligence and think tank assessments have tended to elevate the threat posed by China, and downgrade the threat posed by Islamist terrorism stemming largely from the Middle East and North Africa.² Thus, where the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) viewed al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups as the “greatest threat” to U.S. security,³ and the Bush Administration’s National Security Strategy viewed the threat posed by “common dangers of terrorist violence and

¹ I am indebted to Rory Donnelly for research assistance on this paper.

² See James Clapper, “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community,” Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29 2014

³ Mike Nizza, “Intelligence Estimate on Terrorism Released,” New York Times, July 17 2007

chaos” as greater than that posed by strategic rivalries⁴--the 2013 NIE listed cyber-attacks and cyber espionage⁵ by China⁶ before terrorism. Thus, President Obama indicated that al-Qaeda now poses a “localized” threat.⁷ Most recently, though, in a May 2013 speech at the National Defense University, President Obama has acknowledged that terrorism remains the “most direct threat to America at home and abroad,”⁸

China, American analysts stress, is rapidly increasing its military budget and modernizing its forces.⁹ China is expected to pass the U.S. as the world’s largest economy by 2028,¹⁰ or as soon as 2014 if one adjusts the data for the cost of living, or “purchasing power parity.”¹¹ China has invested in anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities that Americans hold are designed to prevent the U.S. military from operating effectively in East Asia, allowing China to challenge the U.S. regional position. The most prominent of these are said to be China’s anti-ship ballistic missiles, believed to be a cost-effective way to sink the aircraft carriers that form the centerpiece of United States power projection in the region.

China is also viewed as assertive, if not aggressive, in its territorial disputes with its neighbors. China claims to include most of the South and East China seas in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), imposed an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea in November 2011, occupies or seeks to control various islands and reefs off the coasts of its neighbors,¹² and disputes Japanese control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. After a standoff between the Philippines and China over the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, the U.S. mediated a deal for both countries to withdraw military forces, but Chinese forces broke the deal.¹³ In another area disputed between the Philippines and China, the Johnson South Reef, China has begun filling in the sea in violation of a 2002 agreement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).¹⁴ And in May 2014, China installed an oil rig in Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone,¹⁵ having previously been accused of sabotaging Vietnam’s own oil exploration.¹⁶

In the longer term, Americans fear, China’s acquisition of modern weapons including aircraft carriers, attack submarines, and stealth fighters may allow Beijing to dominate its neighbors (including U.S. allies like Japan and the Philippines), restrict other states’ freedom of navigation in the South and East China Seas, and even project power to challenge the U.S. outside of East Asia.

⁴ Joseph Nye, “Soft Power and American Foreign Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119:2 (2004): 255

⁵ “DOJ brings first-ever cyber-espionage case against Chinese officials,” *Fox News*, May 19, 2014

⁶ Ellen Nakashima, “U.S. said to be target of massive cyber-espionage campaign,” *Washington Post*, February 10 2013

⁷ “US Intel Officials Differ With Obama in View of al-Qaida,” *Defense News*, February 11 2014

⁸ Mark Landler, “Obama Warns U.S. Faces Diffuse Terrorism Threats,” *New York Times*, May 29 2014

⁹ While China’s military spending in 2013 was less than a third of that of the U.S., it is steadily increasing by more than 10% per year and on course to catch up in about two decades. China also benefits from the fact that the U.S. military is dispersed worldwide, while that of China is concentrated in East Asia. See Jonathan Moyer, “China and the U.S. Buy Guns,” *Huffington Post*, March 13 2013

¹⁰ “Cebr’s World Economic League Table 2013 shows China overtaking US in 2028; UK to overtake Germany ‘around 2030,’” *Centre for Economics and Business Analysis*, December 26 2013

¹¹ Chris Giles, “China poised to pass US as world’s leading economic power this year,” *Financial Times*, April 30, 2014; Middle of the road estimates see China as catching up with the U.S. by 2018 or 2019. see “Catching the eagle,” *The Economist*, May 2nd 2014; see also

¹² See Derek Watkins, “Territorial Disputes in the Waters Near China,” *New York Times*, May 8 2014

¹³ Keith Bradsher, “Philippine Leader Sounds Alarm on China,” *New York Times*, February 4 2014

¹⁴ “Banyan: Force Majeure,” *The Economist*, May 24 2014

¹⁵ “Vietnam, China Exchange Water Cannon Spray Near Disputed Oil Rig,” *Voice of America News*, May 12 2014

¹⁶ “Q&A: South China Sea dispute,” *BBC*, 8 May 2014

Most recently, there has been some limited recognition that Al Qaeda and its affiliates have regrouped and spread in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and throughout Africa; that terrorist attacks on the US homeland may still pose major threats; that Pakistan is moving to develop and deploy tactical nuclear weapons in ways that raise security concerns; and that disengaging from the Middle East hurts America's credibility with regional allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia, which leads U.S. allies in the Far East to question U.S. reliability.. However, the current consensus is still that China is the major and rising adversary—"out to eat our lunch" as a high ranking Pentagon official put it.

The Pivot to Asia

In 2011, then-Secretary of State Hilary Clinton called for the U.S. to "pivot to new global realities" through increased engagement in East Asia. This foreign policy shift contained "six key lines of action: strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening our working relationships with emerging powers, including with China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights."¹⁷ President Obama subsequently declared that "after a decade [of Middle East wars,] the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region" in order to "play a larger and long-term role" and "advance security, prosperity and human dignity across the Asia Pacific."¹⁸

Several explanations have been advanced for this shift. One is that it reflects President Obama's long-held view, expressed even before his election, that the "center of gravity in this world is shifting to Asia," requiring the U.S. to "look east" and "take a more active role,"¹⁹ as well as his identity as "America's first Pacific president."²⁰ Having come to office forced to focus on the Great Recession and the Afghanistan war, Obama turned his attention to Asia once those issues became less pressing.

Others view the pivot as "strong on rhetoric but lacking in substance."²¹ It is said to have involved merely the shifting of a few naval vessels from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, the positioning of a few Marines in Australia, and the beginning of negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade pact.

Finally, some argue that the pivot reflected the passing needs of Obama's 2012 reelection campaign (by countering assertions that Democrats are "soft on defense" and distracting attention from major failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as inaction in dealing with Syria and the Arab Spring).²²

¹⁷ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11 2011

¹⁸ Barack Obama, "Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament" (Speech, Canberra, Australia, November 17 2011), accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>

¹⁹ See Barack Obama, "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs," (Speech, Chicago, April 23, 2007), accessed at <https://my.barackobama.com>; "The Democrats' First 2008 Presidential Debate" (Transcript, April 27, 2007), accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com>

²⁰ "Obama calls himself 'America's first Pacific president' & hails expanded US engagement in Asia," Associated Press, November 14 2009

²¹ M K Bhadrakumar, "Obama resets the 'pivot' to Asia," *Asia Times*, May 9 2014

By

²² See Kate Brower and Lisa Lerer, "China-Bashing as Campaign Rhetoric Binds Obama to Romney," *Bloomberg*, June 13 2012

Most recently, the very term of “pivot” was dropped and replaced with “rebalancing.” Instead of being portrayed as increasing its commitment to East Asia, the United States is now said to be merely restoring its commitment to a previous, unspecified level.

Actually, as I see it, the shift is much more substantial. It is driven in part by changes in the threat assessments, which like x-rays can be interpreted in different ways, but are increasingly read as if indicating that the Middle East is less of a problem and China—more of a threat. In part, the shift is driven by subterranean forces that favor engaging the Far East over the Middle East.

Beyond rebalancing

The U.S. shift of focus to the Far East is more extensive than it may seem, although many of the changes are usually not referred to as part of the pivot or the rebalancing. These include forming a new defense pact with the Philippines allowing the U.S. to deploy troops and equipment on local bases; a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation with Vietnam, joint military exercises with Japan focusing on island defense, expanded war games with South Korea,²³ an agreement with Singapore allowing U.S. deployment of littoral combat ships, and reassurance that the U.S. mutual defense treaty with Japan covers the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Above all, the Pentagon has adopted an Air-Sea Battle (ASB) strategy. It aims to restore the ability of the US to discharge what it considers its duties to its allies in the region and to the international order (including freedom of navigation), and thus retain its status as the world power. ASB entails, in case of conflict with China, attacks on the Chinese mainland to neutralize the A2/AD weapon systems—that is, an escalation to total war. It involves a coordinated attack using bombing, missile and cyber-attacks, and space weapons among others. Critics, such as the leading Australian strategist Hugh White, hold that it might well lead to a nuclear war. Advocates of ASB hold that faced with vastly superior American forces, China will avoid situations that could lead to armed conflicts.

If ASB is to be implemented, it involves changes in the U.S. military’s force structure from that used in the Middle East to that needed in the Far East, by cutting the Army and increasing investments in the Navy and Air Force, as well as in cutting-edge weapons like those needed for cyber warfare. These changes are already beginning to take place.

ASB will require the purchase and development of major weapon systems. Among those listed are “submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, long-range penetrating bombers, aerial tankers, ballistic missile defenses, survivable satellites, robust battle networks, autonomous unmanned systems, and escort ships,”²⁴ as well as, in the longer term, directed energy (laser) weapons.²⁵ Many of these acquisitions are in the planning stages, but they are reflected in the move to phase out older platforms like the A-10 fighter, which is specialized to support ground forces such as fighting insurgents in theaters like Iraq, while buying more F-35 fighters, which are of little use in low

²³ Donald Kirk, “U.S. Marines Put Obama’s ‘Pivot’ Into Action In S. Korea War Games,” *Forbes*, April 3 2014

²⁴ Jan Van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point-Departure Operational Concept*, (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010): 44

²⁵ Jan Van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point-Departure Operational Concept*, 84

intensity warfare. The same holds for a current commitment to purchase two Virginia-class attack submarines and two Arleigh Burke destroyers yearly through 2019.²⁶

The pivot, rebalancing, and especially the ASB are driven not merely by a particular reading of the threat assessments but also by subterranean forces. Understanding these forces is of special importance for those who believe, like the author, that the threat assessments are misread, that the Middle East poses much greater short term and longer term challenges, relative to China, than the American prevailing reading currently holds.

Military Industrial Congressional Alliances

There is no single Military-Industrial Complex (or Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex complex) or “Iron Triangle”²⁷ in the U.S., as critics from the left often state. There is no one power elite that meets at night in a motel in Arlington to decide what the military should purchase and how to divide the spoils, or how to promote an ASB strategy that favors its interests. There are, though, a number of military-industrial-congressional alliances that, while competing with each other, do jointly affect U.S. foreign policy and tilt it toward the Far East and away from the Middle East.

A major reason the Far East is preferable from the viewpoint of such major alliances is that preparing for war in this region is capital intensive, while wars in the Middle East— fighting terrorists and insurgents—are labor intensive. Counterinsurgency operations like the Iraq and Afghanistan wars require high troop levels.²⁸ The main forces used were the Army (Special Forces included), Marines, and CIA. These forces spend a greater part of their budget on personnel costs (salaries, benefits) and use relatively low-cost equipment. Although some corporations specialize in service provisions to these troops and in supplementing them with private contractors, corporations gain little from funds allotted to salaries and benefits.

In contrast, the major forces to be used in the Far East are those of the Air Force and Navy. These are capital intensive services that use aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, fighters and bombers, all manufactured by the private sector at high cost. The business model of major defense contractors, including Lockheed, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics, relies on capital intensive rather than labor intensive expenditures.

Next, corporations can gain a monopoly or at least a duopoly on in the production of many of these so-called big ticket items because the nature of the market discourages competition. The market for major weapons systems is characterized by high entry costs, technical complexity, “winner-take-all” competitions, and increasing emphasis on versatility rather than diversity of platforms, which facilitates consolidation and even monopolies among producers of such systems.²⁹ By winning the contract in 2001 to design and manufacture the Joint Strike Fighter, for example, Lockheed Martin positioned itself as the monopoly player in advanced fighter aircraft. Along the same lines,

²⁶ Grace Jean, “Pentagon budget 2015: US Navy prioritises shipbuilding at expense of aviation procurement,” IHS Jane's Defence Weekly, March 2 2014

²⁷ That is, a “military-industrial-congressional” complex

²⁸ Peter Krause, “Troop Levels in Stability Operations: What We Don't Know,”

²⁹ John Driessnack and David King. “An Initial Look at Technology and Institutions on Defense Industry Consolidation” Management Faculty Research and Publications (2004).

Huntington-Ingalls has a monopoly on building and servicing U.S. aircraft carriers, and a duopoly (along with General Dynamics) on Navy submarines.

Such a position gives producers of major systems certain advantages, as it is difficult for the government to cancel a contract if there is no alternative source. Despite the technical issues, delays, and cost overruns associated with Lockheed's F-35 stealth fighter, for example, the Pentagon has little choice but to work with Lockheed for a weapon system officials consider indispensable.³⁰

The list of items favored by those who see the Far East as the next front includes F-35s, next-generation long-range bombers, refueling tankers,³¹ attack submarines,³² and missile destroyers.³³ These are favored and promoted by major corporations.

One should note in this context that although corporations always played a role in these matters, their leverage over Congress has increased in recent years following several major decisions by the Supreme Court that allowed corporations in effect unlimited campaign contributions to members of Congress.³⁴ Those who believe that these contributions do not affect congressional decisions may wish to note that several studies demonstrate a "robust relationship between defense earmarks and campaign contributions from defense political action committees,"³⁵ while "even after controlling for past contracts and other factors, companies that contributed more money to federal candidates subsequently received more contracts."³⁶ The largest defense contractors have the greatest stake in government procurement decisions and are among America's top spenders on lobbying.³⁷

Military proclivities

In his insightful essay "Silicon, Iron, and Shadow," retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General David Barno lays out the three forms of war the U.S. is likely to face in the coming years.³⁸ The US military strongly prefers to fight WW2-style conflicts in which the naval, air and land forces of one nation are clearly arrayed against another—what Barno calls "iron wars." In the words of former Defense Secretary Gates, conventional war is in the military's "DNA," leading to a misconception that "if you train and equip to defeat big countries, you can defeat any lesser threat"—ignoring the lessons of

³⁰ Otto Kreisher, "F-35 Sails Through Crucial Senate Hearing; Witnesses Testify There's No Alternative," *Breaking Defense*, June 19 2013

³¹ Michael Donley, "Air Force today and the Asia-Pacific rebalance," (speech, Air Force Association Global Warfare Symposium, Los Angeles, Nov. 16, 2012), accessed at <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Air+Force+today+and+the+Asia-Pacific+rebalance.-a0331926531>

³² Jan Van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point-Departure Operational Concept*, 66.

³³ Grace Jean, "Pentagon budget 2015: US Navy prioritises shipbuilding at expense of aviation procurement," *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, March 2 2014

³⁴ Particularly *Citizens United v. Federal Electoral Commission*, 558 U.S. (2010)

³⁵ Michael S. Rocca and Stacy B. Gordon. "Earmarks as a Means and an End: The Link between Earmarks and Campaign Contributions in the U.S. House of Representatives." *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 75 (2013): 241-2; *See also* David Heath. "Connecting Congressional Earmarks With Campaign Contributions." *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2008. Accessed at <http://nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100471>; "111th Congress Earmarks." Center for Responsive Politics, accessed at <http://www.opensecrets.org/earmarks/index.php>

³⁶ Christopher Witko, "Campaign Contributions, Access, and Government Contracting." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (2011) 21 (4): 761-778.

³⁷ "Top Spenders," Center for Responsive Politics, 2014. Accessed at <https://www.opensecrets.org>

³⁸ David W. Barno, "Silicon, Iron, and Shadow," March 19, 2013

Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam.³⁹ Thus, the military, defense contractors, and Congress fight to retain “the big procurement programs initiated during the Cold War” and drag their feet in preparing for asymmetric conflicts against terrorists and insurgents, or what Barno calls “shadow wars.”⁴⁰ It was in this sense that in February 2014 Undersecretary of Defense Kendall referred to the U.S. military as “distracted” by counterinsurgency and at risk of losing its technological superiority.⁴¹ This proclivity further reinforces the preferences for fighting in the Far East over the Middle East.

Energy policy

The transformation of America’s position in world energy markets is another major reason the Middle East is much less of a core interest than it used to be. The US was famously dependent on Middle East oil for much of the 20th century. However, over the last decade the US has begun major exploitation of oil and gas reserves in its own mainland, becoming the world’s biggest oil producer in 2013 and even considering exporting oil and gas.⁴² Moreover, more than half of U.S. oil imports are now from Canada and Latin America, and less than a third from the Persian Gulf.⁴³ Where the U.S. once brooded over dependence on foreign energy and viewed the Middle East as a major source,⁴⁴ U.S. public opinion now favors disengagement from the Middle East.⁴⁵ True, several foreign policy scholars point to compelling reasons for the U.S. to remain engaged, including the energy security of its European and East Asian allies, terrorism, and commitments to Israel and Saudi Arabia, but decision-makers may question why “the U.S. Navy is carrying the burden” of securing Chinese oil imports⁴⁶ and prefer America to “wash its hands of Middle Eastern problems.”⁴⁷

Psychological forces

As it is becoming increasingly evident that the very costly, in human and economic terms, U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were devastating failures, that the intervention in Libya backfired, that the Sunni and Shia remain engaged in strife in many parts of the Middle East and the U.S. has little to gain by siding with either, and that the U.S. has no good options in Syria—downgrading the messy Middle East is increasingly popular. In contrast, in the Far East, the U.S. has many strong allies, while China is increasing isolated and antagonizes its own neighbors. Although China is growing in power, the U.S. holds that it can still contain it quite readily. In short, at least psychologically, East Asia seems a much more manageable and victory-prone arena.

³⁹ Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, (New York: Knopf, 2014): 143. 118

⁴⁰ David W. Barno, “Silicon, Iron, and Shadow,” March 19, 2013

⁴¹ “Kendall Cautions Against Complacency in U.S. Tech Superiority,” American Forces Press Service, February 25 2014

⁴² “U.S. surges past Saudis to become world’s top oil supplier,” Reuters, Oct 15, 2013

⁴³ “How dependent are we on foreign oil?” U.S. Energy Information Administration, May 10 2013

⁴⁴ See Glenn Greenwald, “David Frum, the Iraq war and oil,” *The Guardian*, March 18 2013

⁴⁵ “U.S. Foreign Policy: Key Data Points,” Pew Research, January 6, 2014

⁴⁶ Loren Thompson, “What Happens When America No Longer Needs Middle East Oil?” *Forbes*, December 3 2012

⁴⁷ Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation* (New York:Doubleday, 2013): 222

In conclusion

There is much more to the pivot to the Far East and away from the Middle East than meets the eye. It is likely to continue, unless a major new force enters the international power struggle. The forces that drive it are a combination of a particular reading or misreading of threat assessments, and considerable subterranean forces.