

Emerging Trends in Geo-politics of Asia Pacific Region

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Abstract

The, Asia Pacific region has emerged as a significant strategic centre in international political affairs. The region's dependence on Sea Lines of Communication and the proximity with a rising China has hoisted its stature in US policy calculus whose focus will now shift to this region once the planned withdrawal of its forces takes place by the end of 2014. Three key emerging trends in the geo-politics of Asia Pacific deserve our special attention i.e. America's re-engagement with Asia Pacific region, a seeming "containment" of China and propping up of India as potential "counter-weight" to China. Whether we would be having the beginning of a new Cold War in Asia Pacific, especially on the issue of South China Sea, is too early to reckon but that the geo-political landscape is getting more complex, fraught both with challenges and opportunities, which should not be hard to imagine. Pakistan will have to closely watch these developments and make necessary adjustments in her foreign policy outlook as well as outreach to Asia Pacific region.

Keywords: US' Re-engagement, Containment of China, Asia Pacific, US, ASEAN, India, Pakistan, South China Sea (SCS)

Introduction

The emergence of Asia Pacific region as a new strategic centre in international political landscape is now a reality. The region occupies a huge area starting from the Indian subcontinent to the west coast of America. It spans two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian, busy pathways of maritime activity and strategy. The region is home to about half of the world population. It has a number of important centres, of world economy whose goods, tools and services are competing with the West in many

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ways. Asia Pacific thus provides both a competitive edge and an economic challenge to the West.

Three of the most important straits — Malacca Strait, Sunda Strait and the Strait of Lombok — are situated in the region. The Malacca Strait is the world's busiest shipping lane equivalent to Suez or Panama. Almost all the shipping passes through these three straits which further signifies the strategic importance of this region for regional and international actors. Three regional littoral states Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are adjacent to these choke points and thus have the potential to exercise control over a significant percentage of the world's maritime trade.

Apart from dependence on the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC), the proximity with China has raised the region's stature in US policy calculus. Therefore, US's prime aim is to counter the emerging predominance of an Asian power — China whose rapid progress has the potential to challenge US supremacy in the world. The US along with her allies, particularly Japan, South Korea and Australia, wants to 'encircle' China. US's recent growing politico-military as well as economic ties with the ASEAN states are also marked to weakening China's growing ingress in Southeast Asia. The US-India strategic alliance is also a step in this direction, wherein both the countries view China as a potential challenger, for US at global level and India at regional level.

The 19th century was the century of Europe and the 20th century was that of America. With the advent of the 21st century several analysts have suggested it was now the turn of Asia to lead the world in international politics. It is viewed that the extraordinary chemistry of demography, the significant function of the state and the recent economic progress will take Asia forward.¹ It is assumed the next theatre would be Asia Pacific, where the future would be played out, where the world would see the involvement of major powers like United States of America, China, Russia, Australia, the European Union and India in a state of competition when their interests collide.

However, the 9/11 incident turned the course of the world and the US and its allies waged the so-called 'War on Terror' (WoT) that continues even after 11 years fighting al Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan and, in the meanwhile, relegating the Asia Pacific region to the background. Due to this preoccupation of the US with the 'War on Terror', China got the

¹ Shahid Javed Burki, "Pakistan Should Go Asian" Singapore Symposium 2012 Papers-1, Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) National University of Singapore (NUS) Insights, no.174 (July 27, 2012):1, (accessed August 1, 2012) http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Insight_174_Pakistan_Should_Go_Asian_27072012163024.pdf

opportunity to increase her influence in neighbouring East Asia, improve her economy and strengthen her military muscle. Her stand on South China Sea became more assertive. Reportedly, in 2010, China's total military related expenditures were more than \$ 160 billion. Meanwhile, China gradually focused on her naval power, with investment in new hi-tech weaponry. In 2012, China's military expenditures exceeded \$100 billion with an 11.2 per cent rise on 2011.²

Now, with the end of war in Iraq and American decision to withdraw her forces from Afghanistan by 2014, the US has reached at a pivot point to re-engage the Asia Pacific region. Furthermore, keeping in view the wavering economy of the United States, Asia's progressive growth and vigour has now become crucial to American interests especially in economic and strategic fields. Therefore, lately, President Obama has started to give priority to this region and declared that "the US is a Pacific power and we are here to stay".³ Hillary Clinton, then US Secretary of State rightly said 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".⁴ Leon Panetta, then US Secretary for Defence also amplified the "Pivoting to Asia" doctrine by announcing an American plan to move 60 per cent of her naval assets to the Pacific area by 2020. This could be interpreted as increasing strategic mistrust in the region that could take Asia back to the Cold War period hostility and a fresh arms competition. Actually, this distrust and conspiracy theories associated to it have generated their own discourse and caught the public attention, souring the overall political environment of the region.⁵

The aim of this study is to examine the new trends in Asia-Pacific region by analysing the factors behind the likely power shift, America's re-engagement in the region, the containment of China by the US and India

² H B Warimann, "South East Asian Armed Forces Modernize to Counter China Threat Perception," *Asian Defence Journal* (April 2012): 4.

³ David Pilling, "How America Should Adjust to the Pacific Century", *Financial Times*, November 16, 2011, (accessed February 4, 2012), <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/72bec88e-103e-11e1-8211-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1IPULyytO>

⁴ Hillary Rodham Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy.com*, November 10, 2011, (accessed February 4, 2012), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century?page=full

⁵ Zheng Wang, "American Conspiracy: Strategic Suspicion and US Re-engagement", *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, Asia Policy no.12, July 2011, (accessed February 5, 2012) http://www.nbr.org/publications/asia_policy/Preview/AP12_B_EngageRT_preview.pdf

and what prospects await the region in this context. The study will also shed light on Pakistan's interests in the region and suggest some viable policy options.

Power Shift from Eurasia to Asia-Pacific

US strategist, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his famous work *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geo-strategic Imperatives*, explained the concept of US Supremacy in these words: "How America manages Eurasia is critical, Eurasia is the globe's largest continent and is geopolitically axial. A power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions, almost automatically gain Africa's subordination, rendering the western Hemisphere and Ocean geopolitically peripheral to the world's central continent".⁶ "Now a non-Eurasian power is pre-eminent in Eurasia and America's Global Primacy is directly dependent on how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained".⁷ He advocated the use of force in Euro-Asia to form the "Western Front" in Europe, and the "Southern Front" in Asia.⁸

The Western Front was set up by integrating the Eastern states of Europe into the European Union (EU). In order to retain the integrity of the Western Front and to support the founding of the Southern Front, NATO was retained. The 9/11 incident became the justification to conquer Afghanistan, followed by Iraq in 2003. Therefore, the Southern Front was established and reinforced by NATO. Due to obvious reasons, the Southern Front is disintegrating. Meanwhile, the United States' economy is languishing with US\$ 16 trillion in debt. On the other hand, mass joblessness, foreclosures and cumulative poverty is generating a criminal culture. What to talk of the ambitions of retaining the sole super power status, the great American empire itself seems to be in decline.⁹ American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has weakened its economy and consequently affected its supremacy as the world's sole super power. According to a Cost of War study report, United States has spent close to US\$ 4 trillion on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. These two conflicts cost

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geo-strategic Imperatives*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997).31.

⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸ Mirza Aslam Beg, "America's Pacific Century!", *Frontier Post* (Islamabad), February 5, 2012, (accessed February 6, 2012), <http://www.thefrontierpost.com/?p=112313> (accessed February 6, 2012)

⁹ Ibid.

the US 75 per cent of the budget deficit.¹⁰ In the first week of August 2011, due to the American debt crisis, the credit rating agency Standard and Poor's downgraded the US credit rating from AAA to AA+. The US has never before been faced with such a situation. The agreement in the US Congress and Senate to raise the debt ceiling, is but a temporary measure.¹¹ The legislation lifts cash-strapped Washington's US\$ 14.3 trillion debt limit by up to US\$ 2.4 trillion while cutting at least US\$ 2.1 trillion in government expenditure over ten years.¹²

Now, the breakdown of the Southern Front has compelled the United States to move its strategic pivot to the Asia Pacific. Henry Kissinger highlighted the importance of the region in these words: "Tectonic international upheavals mark our period. The centre of gravity of world affairs is moving to the Pacific and almost all major actors on the international stage are defining new roles for themselves. That transformation is about concept as much as about power."¹³ Therefore, President Obama defined the prerequisite for this shift in his Defence Strategic Guidance planning as the "Strategic Pivot" in the Asia Pacific region, because "US economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities."¹⁴ Does this focus on Asia Pacific as the next political arena mean that the US is preparing for an Oceanic war over there?¹⁵

Emerging Trends

At present, three important emerging trends in the geo-politics of Asia-Pacific deserve our special attention i.e. America's re-engagement with Asia-Pacific region, a seeming "containment" of China and propping up of India as a potential "counter-weight" to China. The ensuing paragraphs examine these trends.

The US' "Re-engagement" with Asia-Pacific Region

On November 10, 2011, during her address at Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Honolulu and Hawaii, Hillary Clinton, then

¹⁰ Aijaz Zaka Syed, "America's Borrowed Glory", *News International* (Islamabad), August 8, 2011.

¹¹ "The Debt Crisis", *News International* (Islamabad), August 8, 2011, editorial.

¹² *News International* (Islamabad), August 3, 2011.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

US Secretary of State, remarked that the 21st century would be America's Pacific Century. She noted that with the end of war in Iraq and the commencement of the transition in Afghanistan, the US had reached a pivot point and could redirect attention to Asia, a region where opportunities flourished. She also recalled that in the 20th century, America had helped shape a trans-Atlantic network of institutions and relationships and played a crucial role in shaping the architecture across the Atlantic. Now, she declared, they were doing the same across the Pacific. She thought that the twenty-first century would be America's Pacific Century, an age of distinctive outreach and partnership in this vigorous, composite and substantial region.¹⁶ Secretary Clinton identified the following six key lines of action¹⁷ to advance America's re-engagement:-

- I. Strengthening bilateral security alliances (Australia, Japan, South Korea, Philippines and Thailand).
- II. Deepening working relationships with emerging powers (particularly Indonesia and India).
- III. Engaging with regional multilateral institutions (East Asia Summit-EAS, ASEAN and ARF).
- IV. Expanding trade and investment (bilaterally and through Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)).
- V. Building a wide centred military presence.
- VI. Progressing human rights and democracy.

While the US had always projected itself as a "Pacific Power", re-engagement process with Asia Pacific commenced when at the outset President Obama described himself as the first "Pacific President" of the United States owing to his Hawaiian origin and Indonesian childhood. Since 2009, the US has diligently built stronger ties with Indonesia; upgraded its engagement with ASEAN by consenting to the Treaty on Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN and joining the EAS. It has made special efforts to reinforce alliances with regional countries like Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, Japan and Thailand. At the same time, Washington has taken a high profile position on liberty of navigation in South China Sea and termed it as a matter of US national interest.¹⁸

On April 4, 2012, the first batch of 200 US Marines reached Northwestern Australia, to be stationed at joint 'US-Australia Military

¹⁶ Clinton, "America's Pacific Century".

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Robert G. Sutter, "US Re-engagement in the Asia Pacific Region: Where Does Taiwan Fit?" *Asia Pacific Bulletin* no.72, October 5, 2010, (accessed February 6, 2012), <http://www.american.edu/sis/aseanstudiescenter/upload/Sutter-101005-EW-Center-Analysis.pdf>

Base' at Darwin as a part of deal signed between the two countries in November 2011. The troops would be moved on a six-monthly rotation. Australian leadership welcomed the move and said it was the latest chapter in a more than sixty year alliance with the US.¹⁹ The base at Darwin is to host 2,500 US troops along with US ships, aircraft and vehicles, as well as increased military training between the two countries by 2016-17.²⁰ Earlier, on March 28, 2012, Australian media reported that the use of the Cocos Islands by the US to launch unmanned surveillance aircraft was also under consideration. In order to relocate American defence assets in the region, aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines could also be based at Perth. Over this likely development, Australia's Defence Minister, Stephen Smith, said the use of the Cocos Islands was a long term choice to boost US-Australia commitment and required substantial infrastructural upgrading, particularly its airfield. However, United States' current deployment in Australia is limited, mainly at Pine Gap satellite spy station near outback Alice Springs.²¹

The reinforced US presence in the region apart from portraying its military prowess, is an endeavour to counter Chinese regional preponderance. Recently, the US has started allying itself with regional countries, in particular the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam which are fearful of China's rise and see the US as a balancing factor. The US reinforced presence in the region may also instigate Cold War politics. Although US President Obama had clarified that US presence in the area did not mean encirclement of China, instead the aim was to respond quickly to humanitarian/security issues in Southeast Asia, including disputes in South China Sea, that the agreement with Australia had euphemistically characterized as "Force Posture initiative".²² Equally important, Hillary Clinton had undertaken a first historic trip to Myanmar in 2011 which was followed by her own and President Obama's visit to Myanmar in November 2012. Therefore, Obama took pride to become the first US President to visit Myanmar in 55 years.²³ These high level visits from United States show indications of growing deeper engagement between two countries and are

¹⁹ *Tehran Times*, April 5, 2012.

²⁰ *Daily Times* (Lahore), November 17, 2011.

²¹ *News International* (Islamabad), March 29, 2012.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ "President Obama Makes Historic Trip to Myanmar, Vows More US Help if Asian Nation Keeps Building new Democracy," *nydailynews.com*, November 19, 2012, (accessed April 19, 2013), <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/obama-arrives-myanmar-tasked-rebuking-repression-praising-progress-article-1.1204271#ixzz2QuPXDnm4>

seen by many experts in the region as part of a larger effort to wean the country away from China's influence.

In a major policy speech at Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore in June 2012, Leon Panetta, then US Defence Secretary, stressed the US rebalance towards Asia Pacific by highlighting the new US military strategy and strategic pivot. He stated that the US would shift 60 per cent of the US Navy's assets such as Battle Task Groups, aircraft carriers and nuclear armed submarines and other air force and military assets to South China Sea region, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean by 2020.²⁴ This would be reinforced by increasing US military exercises and augmented port calls across a wider area. Panetta declared that the US military was bringing heightened competences to that dynamic area. He also reiterated the American promise to strengthen pacts with Australia, the Philippines, South Korea, Japan and Thailand and develop significant partnerships with India, Indonesia and Singapore. He said that these states would be the pivot of US' new security alliance and partnerships. He made it clear that the US remained an Asia-Pacific power for all times.²⁵

Panetta told the conference that the strategic pivot was not designed for containing the power of rising China and reiterated that the US desired to work with China. He also said Asian countries had to evolve ways to resolve their own disputes and not expect the US to come and do this for them. Commenting on China's official media warning that US aggression in the region would jeopardize peace with the announcement of the new American defence strategy in January 2012, Panetta remarked that China should not be worried about the new US military attention on Asia.²⁶

The speech of Leon Panetta was the harshest and the most intimidating in even security parlance. It appeared just short of issuing an 'ultimatum or declare war'. This could be due to many reasons including the challenges US confronts in West Asia, decline in US economic power, crisis in US domestic politics, and China's rising power. It may also be a US effort to force ASEAN and East Asian states join a NATO like security architecture, for containment of China or a declaration of the dawn of Cold War II.

In its first official response to Panetta's speech a foreign ministry spokesman of China labelled the American resolution to shift the bulk of its

²⁴ Tanvi Kulkarni, "Shangri-La Dialogue: Reflections on Leon Panetta's Address," Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), June 15, 2012, (accessed August 18, 2012), <http://www.ipcs.org/article/military/shangri-la-dialogue-reflections-on-leon-panettas-address-3640.html>

²⁵ Maleeha Lodhi, "Shifting Asia-Pacific Landscape," *News International* (Islamabad), June 7, 2012.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

naval fleet to the Pacific as untimely and stressed upon the United States to respect China's interests in the region. Meanwhile, Chinese scholars observed that the United States had always followed a two-track policy of engagement and containment with China. They considered the new US military attitude as part of a familiar carrot and stick approach.²⁷

Seeming “Containment” of China

In her “Pacific Century” speech, Secretary Clinton noted that some people in the US saw China's growth as a danger to the US, whereas a number of people in China saw US moves in the region as aiming to constrain China. Implicitly dismissing such notions, she stressed that the US was profoundly steadfast to develop a constructive and cooperative relationship with China.²⁸

Secretary Clinton's public claims aside, the substance and meaning of many of America's statements and actions do tend to give credence to the perception that the US might be seeking to contain China. The most important element in this context is the US position on South China Sea, home to resource rich Paracel and Spartly islands. These islands have been the subject of a territorial dispute among regional states, including China, Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. In 1974, China annexed these islands and used them for intelligence gathering. China had hitherto enjoyed increasingly cooperative ties with ASEAN nations and worked to keep the territorial disputes with the claimant states within manageable limits. The ASEAN-China partnership on a range of trade, economic and development issues was viewed as mutually-beneficial, stable and flourishing.²⁹

Since July 2010, the US intervention on the South China Sea issue at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Ministerial Meeting in Phuket, this dynamic has changed. Countries like Vietnam and the Philippines have been encouraged enough to openly defy China. In May 2011, tension between China and Vietnam had increased dramatically, resulting in the stationing of additional naval forces in the problem area. Meanwhile, tensions between China and the Philippines had been on the rise since March-April 2012 when Philippines accused Chinese boats of illegal fishing in the Scarborough Shoal area. On April 11, 2012, China warned

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Clinton, “America's Pacific Century.”

²⁹ Sarabjeet Singh Parmar, “The South China Sea Imbroglio,” Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), October 14, 2011, (accessed June 15, 2012), http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/TheSouthChinaSeaImbroglio_ssparmar_141011.htm

Manila to stop illegal activities of its naval forces on an Island in the South China Sea. On April 17, 2012, China stressed upon the Philippines to withdraw a coast guard ship and an archeological research vessel from a disputed area in South China Sea. On April 25, 2012, China warned the US-Philippines military exercises raised the risk of armed confrontation over the disputed South China Sea. US and Filipino troops launched annual naval drills that seemed related to the standoff. Later on, both China and the Philippines showed some restraint on the disputed area. On June 5, 2012, China and the Philippines relocated selected vessels posted at a disputed South China Sea shoal and helped easing tensions building up since April 2012. After bilateral talks, China withdrew two government ships from Scarborough Shoal, and a Philippines fisheries vessel did the same. President Benigno Aquino's spokesman said that the organized pullback was a step in the right direction. The Philippines claims the shoal situated near the main Philippines island of Luzon and falls within its exclusive economic zone whereas China claims it along with nearly all of the South China Sea up to the coasts of Asian neighbours.³⁰

For its part, China has claimed undisputed authority over the South China Sea, shown some progress on the problem of Declaration on the Code of Conduct, advised outside powers to stay out of the matter, stressed the importance of peaceful resolution through bilateral dialogue, and dealt firmly with some of the on ground actions of certain claimants to establish their sovereignty in the disputed area. In one instance, the *Peoples' Daily*, a major Chinese newspaper and mouthpiece of the Communist Party even threatened India 'not to play with fire' after an Indian state company sought oil concessions in the disputed area with Vietnam.³¹

Besides, there have been tensions between China and Japan on the Daiyu Island, which is situated between Japan and Taiwan in East China Sea.³² Sensitivities have also been triggered on the Korean Peninsula where in March 2013 North Korea angered on the decision of United Nations Security Council sanctions over its nuclear test, threatened to wage pre-emptive nuclear strikes on United States and South Korea.³³

Earlier, China's firm statements and measures in certain cases have been projected by its detractors as signs of new "assertiveness" and

³⁰ *Daily Times* (Lahore), June 6, 2012.

³¹ *Daily Times* (Lahore), October 17, 2011.

³² H. B. Warimann "South East Asian Armed Forces Modernize to Counter China Threat Perception," *Asian Defence Journal (ADJ)* (April 2012): 5.

³³ Chelsea J. Carter, Kevin Voigt, "North Korea's War of Words Escalates-Timeline of a Crisis," *cnn.com*, April 10, 2013, (accessed April 19, 2013), <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/10/world/asia/north-korea-threats-timeline/index.html>

“muscle-flexing” by Beijing. On March 5, 2012, China’s then Prime Minister Wen Jiabao said that China must improve the ability of its troops to win local wars.³⁴ The US has responded to these developments by reinforcing its ties with the relevant smaller countries in each case — an approach interpreted by some as building a loose anti-China coalition. America's recent wooing of Myanmar is seen by them in the same light.

Meanwhile, stationing of US marines in Australia and Washington's insistence on expanding the EAS agenda to include traditional security issues like maritime security, non-proliferation etc. and raising the South China Sea issue at various ASEAN Summits are viewed by many observers as directly aimed at China. Furthermore, many people sense that Washington is seeking to shut Beijing out of the TPP, a multilateral free trade agreement that came into force in May 2006. Singapore, Brunei, New Zealand and Chile were the founding countries. Australia, Malaysia, Japan and the US are negotiating to join TPP. China is not a part of TPP. If seen in the regional context, ASEAN states are trying to create an East Asian Comprehensive Economic Partnership by 2015; besides China is also favouring ASEAN groups (like ASEAN+3 — China, Japan and South Korea). In case an East Asian Economic structure materializes, Chinese influence would be strengthened while the US might be further alienated in the region. In this backdrop, TPP, which is a US ally — Singapore’s initiative with no Chinese participation, might be employed by the US to wield its regional ingress and dilute Chinese influence regionally. The more emphasis on the Asia Pacific the more it reveals a rising conflict between China and the United States, as Americans are upset that Beijing may perhaps eventually control the junctions of the worldwide economy i.e. South China Sea.

The American proposal for use of Thai Navy’s airbase at U-Tapao to do a climate change research study has evoked an intense debate in the region. The Thai government seems willing to accept the US proposal; however, is facing resistance from Thai opposition to doing so.³⁵ There are fears that by agreeing to the US proposal, Thailand could become a part of a perceived US strategy to “contain” China. It is professed that US is going to establish a Control Station at U-Tapao Airbase for controlling ASEAN region in the garb of NASA. The US Chairman Joint Chief of Staff Committee, General Dempsey, who visited Thailand on July 8, 2012,

³⁴ Warimann “South East Asian Armed Forces Modernize to Counter China Threat Perception”, 5.

³⁵ *Bangkok Post*, June 8, 2012, (accessed July 26, 2012), <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/297065/abhisit-asks-why-govt-let-us-use-u-tapao-for-realif-hub>

endorsed that both sides examined ideas how to use U-Tapao airbase in future. He also assured that the United States would not establish a permanent base at U-Tapao and would not use it for any extra martial resolution.³⁶ U-Tapao Air base was built in early 1960s with US help and was later intensely used by America as forward base during the Vietnam War. Although the US had withdrawn her forces in 1976 yet Pentagon never excluded this base from its list of bases to be used for its forward policy.

After sensitizing Malaysian leadership to play a constructive role in Afghanistan, Obama administration is now trying to get Malaysian support for the implementation of its new defence doctrine for Asia-Pacific. Reportedly, Malaysia is ready to provide bases to Americans for operational and surveillance purposes. During his visit to Malaysia in August 2012, China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi discussed the South China Sea dispute and also conveyed Chinese apprehension on Malaysian decision to provide bases to US. However, Malaysian leadership held that the arrangement was not directed against China.³⁷

China is responding to these developments in a deliberate and measured fashion. It recognizes that an assertive approach could evoke more negative reactions and complicate China's goal of "peaceful rise". On the other hand, Beijing just feels compelled to do whatever is necessary to protect its vital national interests in the region. It would, therefore, be correct to assume some deep reflection taking place in Beijing on how to counter the coming onslaught.

China's enhanced economic dynamism has resulted in increased sensitivity to the SLOC. Furthermore, in view of the fast transforming geo-strategic maritime environment, China seeks an enhanced role in the region for the safety of its SLOC and has embarked upon a programme to develop various ports. These include Gwadar in Pakistan, Kyankpyu in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. China is also helping Indonesia in expanding and building state of the art port facilities at Tanjung Priok in Selat Sunda Strait on the north western tip of Java Island.³⁸ Tanjung Priok will provide the shortest alternative to the Malacca strait, in case Singapore under pressure from the US, decides to close it to maritime traffic proceeding or originating from China. Presently, Americans have increased the frequency of the visits to the littoral states

³⁶ *Exovera.com*, June 16, 2012, (accessed July 17, 2012),

<http://exovera.com/contents/us-plans-increase-use-u-tapao-naval-base-rouse-thai-media-suspicion>

³⁷ *Daily Times* (Lahore), August 13, 2012.

³⁸ *The Straits Time*, May 21, 2012.

especially to Singapore by their Nuclear Armed Aircraft Carriers. It seems that the US is readying up its plans for an “Asian NATO”, comprising Australia, Singapore, Philippines, Taiwan and Japan, with the prospect of roping in India, Republic of Korea and Vietnam. However, ASEAN nations such as Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia are not keen to join this line-up so far.

India as Potential “Counterweight” to China

With these developments taking place, an effort appears to be underway by the US to attract India to play a more pro-active role in South East Asia. In July 2011, Secretary Clinton during her major policy speech in Chennai, titled “India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century”, citing a whole range of common economic and strategic interests, urged “India not to just look east, but to engage East and act East.”³⁹ Among other things, Secretary Clinton stressed the importance of India and the US working in concert to shape the regional agenda and the evolving architecture in East Asia. She declared that America wanted to include India and other partners to establish the ESA into the Asia Pacific’s leading forum for dealing with matters relating to politics and security. She added that the United States desired to use ESA to help set American priorities and layout a vision for other regional institutes.⁴⁰ While discussing India’s growing role in the Asia Pacific and in South and Central Asia, she noted: “Yes it is ambitious agenda, but we can afford to be ambitious, because when we in the United States and particularly in the Obama Administration look at India, we see, as President Obama said, a nation that is not simply emerging, but has emerged, and a nation with whom we share so many bonds, and one that will be a leader globally in shaping the future we will all inherit.”⁴¹ In 2010, during his address to Indian parliament, President Obama said “the United States not only supports India as a rising power; we fervently support it, and we have worked to help make it a reality.”⁴² On June 6, 2012, while addressing the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), then US Defence Secretary, Leon Panetta said that “Defence cooperation with India

³⁹ Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks on India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century,” US Department of State, July 20, 2011, (accessed February 12, 2012), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/07/168840.htm> (accessed February 12, 2012)

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² William J. Burns “US-India Partnership in an Asia Pacific Century”, December 16, 2011, (accessed February 4, 2012), <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2011/178934.htm>

is a linchpin in United States' new Asia Pacific strategy.” He further said that the new policy of the United States would certainly follow to enlarge their military partnerships and their presence in the arc spreading on the Western Pacific, East Asia, the Indian Ocean and South Asian region.⁴³ Leon Panetta also said that India would be encouraged to play more active role in Afghanistan. Earlier, in May 2012, the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton visited India to help a deeper Indo-US strategic relationship.⁴⁴

The latest decision of the United States to declare India as the linchpin in her new Asia Pacific strategy is not a new development. Actually it is an extension of her old strategy towards India. Several new initiatives have been announced consistent with the evolving approach. India is indirectly reinforcing US position on South China Sea by making the “safety and security” of maritime commerce in the Indian Ocean a key theme in its official rhetoric. A new trilateral forum — US, India and Japan has been constituted. Earlier, former Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd claimed a trilateral (US-Australia-India) security and economic initiative, though India has denied any knowledge of such a proposal. Be that as it may, it is not without significance that the Australian Prime Minister Gillard decided to seek reversal of the uranium sales ban against India on the eve of President Obama's visit to Australia. As a result, on December 3, 2011, Australia's ruling party supported and endorsed policies to sell uranium to India under a mutual nuclear deal. It may be noted that this deal reversed a ban on sales to states that have not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The move to allow sales to India is seen as a significant step after a landmark US-India civil nuclear deal signed in 2008. Prime Minister Gillard said they had taken a decision that was in Australia's national interest and a resolution to strengthen its strategic partnership with India. She added that Australia already sold uranium to different countries like United States, China and Japan.⁴⁵ In addition India has already concluded “strategic partnership” with Japan and South Korea.

All this does not necessarily mean that India is able, ready and willing to act as a counter-weight to China at US prompting. India is too clever and proud to become an adjunct to the new US grand strategy for the region. New Delhi is also cognizant of the high stake of an adversarial relationship

⁴³ Raja Muhammad Khan, “Indo-US Strategic Alliance and Pakistan,” *Frontier Post* (Islamabad), June 13, 2012.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Telegraph*, December 4, 2011, (accessed February 12, 2012), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/energy/nuclearpower/8934139/Australia-ruling-party-backs-plans-to-sell-uranium-to-India.html> (accessed February 12, 2012).

with China. Yet, India is also quite capable of acting opportunistically to accrue some short-term, tactical advantages by aligning some of its statements and actions with broader US objectives in this context. Add to this India's self-perception of a "rising power" and its increasing confidence vis-a-vis China. It was significant that on November 14, 2011, Indian Foreign Secretary, Ranjan Mathai, in a key foreign policy address at National Defence College, stated that India and China as two large countries and emergent markets with intersecting areas of interests were certain to work together and contest concurrently. More significantly, he underscored that the progress in economic and military competencies of China and the way in which China exercised its power was being monitored carefully not only by India but by other neighbouring countries in East Asia, ASEAN and beyond. He added that handling their relationship with China would be perhaps the most serious component among the security magnitudes of Indian foreign strategy.⁴⁶

Because of its economic growth and strategic position in the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait areas, India is seen as a key partner in the new American strategy towards Asia Pacific.⁴⁷ India is also worried about China's challenge to free entrance to the waters of South China Sea. Furthermore, Indian curiosity to get benefits from Vietnam's energy sources puts it in direct clash with China's claims over the territory. Although, India looks favourably towards America's new strategy towards Asia Pacific, owing to its own concerns about an assertive and militarily powerful China, yet it has so far been seen as an inactive observer amid increasing oceanic tensions and territorial disputes in the region.⁴⁸ The degree and pace of Indian involvement in the US strategy would, however, be defined by the considerations of India's own strategic interests in the region and China's behaviour towards her border dispute and Indian priorities in the immediate neighbourhood.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ "Address by Foreign Secretary on "Security dimensions of India's Foreign Policy," South Asia Monitor.org, November 24, 2011, (accessed February 11, 2012), <http://southasiamonitor.org/detail.php?type=pers&nid=1270>

⁴⁷ Sukh Deo Muni, "Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia Pacific and India's Role", ISAS Working Paper no.159 (August 29, 2012):1, (accessed August 11, 2012), http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Working_Paper_159_Obama's_Administrations_31082012100801.pdf

⁴⁸ Harsh V. Pant, "South China Sea: New Arena of Sino-Indian Rivalry", *Straits Time*, August 7, 2012.

⁴⁹ Muni, 1.

Pakistan's Interests in Asia-Pacific Region

Vision East Asia Policy

Pakistan's Look East Policy has officially been termed as "Vision East Asia" and is aimed at discovering new areas of collaboration and follow the model of East Asian economies in development. Mr. Shaukat Aziz, then Prime Minister of Pakistan, defined the "East Asia Vision" in these words: "Our vision is aimed at political and economic growth, having enhanced cooperation with the regional partners and this vision is not developed in haste, rather we did a lot of research and brain storming".⁵⁰ In sum and substance, Pakistan's Vision East Asia policy is designed to establish comprehensive, productive and structural partnership with East Asian states in the field of trade, business, investment, transfer of technology and economic cooperation both at multilateral and bilateral level.⁵¹

Pakistan-ASEAN Relationship

ASEAN, a geo-political and economic association of 10 countries — Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam — has now developed as one of the most significant regional associations in the world. In 2011, its collective nominal GDP had grown to US\$ 1.8 trillion. Keeping in view the increasing significance of ASEAN, Pakistan has tried her best to improve her relations with this regional association. On April 7, 2011, at a seminar on "ASEAN-Pakistan Future Relations: Opportunities and Challenges" organized by the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) in collaboration with the Indonesian Embassy, Ms. Hina Rabbani Khar, then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, explained the significance of East Asia. She said that for Pakistan, the ASEAN region was vital in the past and had acquired even greater significance and would always be strategic to Pakistan's economic and political interests in the future. She further remarked that the gravity shift of global economic power from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia Pacific was obvious. Therefore, the emerging security and economic architecture in the region was of utmost significance to Pakistan's foreign policy goals.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ahmad Rashid Malik, *Pakistan's Vision East Asia: Pursuing Economic Diplomacy in the Age of Globalization in East Asia and Beyond*, IPRI Paper no.11, Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) 2006, 3.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "ASEAN-Pakistan Future Relations: Opportunities and Challenges", (accessed February 11, 2012),

http://www.issi.org.pk/publication-files/1302255324_65671916.pdf

In 1997, Pakistan became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner (SDP) of ASEAN in eight areas. These areas include Trade, Investment, Industry, Environment, Human Resource Development, Science and Technology, Drugs and Narcotics, and Tourism. In 2004, Pakistan became a member of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Pakistan also signed Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and ASEAN-Pakistan Joint Declaration on Cooperation in Combating Terrorism in 2005. Presently, Pakistan is struggling to achieve Full Dialogue Partner (FDP) status of ASEAN. In trade, both ASEAN and Pakistan undertook a Joint Feasibility Study for an ASEAN-Pakistan FTA to boost and increase the overall ASEAN-Pakistan economic commitment. Pakistan's trade with ASEAN region has increased from US\$ 4.3 billion in 2009 to \$5 billion in 2011. In May 2011, the 5th ASEAN-Pakistan Joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee (APJSCC) meeting was held in Jakarta where matters of economic interest were discussed.⁵³

Towards her contribution to the region, Pakistan has offered 10 fully-funded scholarships in various disciplines including medicine, engineering, IT and banking which need to be fully utilized by the ASEAN. Recently four fully funded English courses for nominees from the ASEAN member countries have been offered. Pakistan has created a Pak-ASEAN Fund worth US\$ 100,000, which has been further consolidated through another contribution of US\$ 1 million. Pakistan also provided technical assistance that includes training facilities in various fields and credit facilities of US\$ 10 million each to Cambodia and Laos. On March 8, 2011, Pakistan-ASEAN Photo Exhibition was held in ASEAN Secretariat. More than 400 diplomats, students, journalists, cultural elites and representatives of local think tanks attended the event.⁵⁴

Despite this cooperation, it is unfortunate that Pakistan is the only SDP and ARF member which is not part of FDP of ASEAN — considered so vital to reap the economic benefits from the Organization. The main hurdle in this status has been the opposition of certain ASEAN member states, especially Singapore. Other members have gradually been brought around but the former is still adamant, probably under Indian influence. Apart from economic reasons, Singapore has blocked Pakistan's entry by arguing it would use ASEAN platform to discuss India-related issues.

⁵³ "Fifth ASEAN-Pakistan Joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee Meeting," (accessed February 12, 2012),

<http://www.pakistanpressreleases.com/government-institutions/fifth-asean-%E2%80%93-pakistan-joint-sectoral-cooperation-committee-meeting/>

⁵⁴ "ASEAN-Pakistan Photo Exhibition Unveiled at ASEAN Secretariat," (accessed February 13, 2012), <http://www.asean.org/25995.htm>

Implications for the Region and Policy Options for Pakistan

For Pakistan and other regional countries the strategic shift from Eurasia to Asia Pacific is very important in the wake of withdrawal of US-led forces from Afghanistan. Geo-strategically, Pakistan is important for trade and commerce between South and Central Asia, East and West Asia. By working towards peace in Afghanistan, Pakistan can contribute significantly to establishing a new security model in the region. Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan constitute a relevant first regional power base in this respect. The second is the trio of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. The third power base led by the United States could be India, China, Japan, Korea and Australia to maintain the power balance in the Asia Pacific region. In this complex geo-political game, United States' role would be significant as a super power as this would further strengthen her through collaboration with a rising Asia⁵⁵

Pakistan can give practical shape to her proposal of providing "connectivity" to ASEAN with western part of China and Central Asian Republics by both land and sea through Gwadar Port. Pakistan's decision to hand over Gwadar Port to China after Singapore Port Authority (SPA) quit in August 2012 is a step in right direction. Reportedly, China will spend \$ 10 billion to develop the port and manage its operations. It is worth mentioning that after its development by China at a cost of \$288 million, Gwadar port was handed over to the SPA in February 2007 for its management, operations, maintenance and development.⁵⁶ This was done to benefit from SPA expertise in port operations as it was operating 22 ports in 11 countries. However, the desired progress was not achieved due to mutual disagreements and consequently SPA had to wind up this project. It is a fact that the Gwadar issue has made the worst impact on our bilateral relations with Singapore which may take time to mend. However, it is expected that the decision to go back to China to develop the Gwadar port and manage its operations was right and would prove in Pakistan's national interest.

The Asia Pacific especially East Asian region is today an arena of both collaboration and challenge. The important question is how the region would address the competition between China and the United States. As Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore's Prime Minister, puts it, "Asia is just one region for the US. China is here all the time".⁵⁷ It is a different matter who, whether China or the United States, would provide security and stability to the region. Terrorism and separatist movements are a source of instability in

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *Dawn* (Islamabad) August 30, 2012.

⁵⁷ Pilling, "How America Should Adjust to the Pacific Century."

the region. The region is not without its political and economic weaknesses. Moreover ASEAN's institution is a weak implementer of policy. Presently, its convening capability is its greatest strength. As a result, United States is using a multilateral approach to resolve problems and implementing policies.

It seems that due to American intervention, the South China Sea issue will remain a bone of contention among China and the other claimants — Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam on the one hand and between the US and China on the other. Lately Vietnam and the Philippines have asserted their claims. ASEAN states are divided over the role of extra regional powers in the South China Sea. Some regional countries are leaning on the US to get more deeply involved but China is rightfully averse to any outside interference and wants to resolve the issue bilaterally. ASEAN at this point may not be in a position to address the issue collectively as not all ASEAN members are involved or claimants in the issue. It may be noted that during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting in Cambodia in July 2012, no consensus was reached on South China Sea issue and the ASEAN Summit had to abandon its routine communiqué for the first time in 45 years. The Summit issued a six-point statement without referring to specific incidents. However, it was agreed to draft and implement a regional code of conduct, respect international law and exercise self-restraint.⁵⁸ The Chinese have insisted on bilateral discussions to resolve the issue, while, behind the scenes, the US has been insisting on a joint ASEAN position to confront China. But China has been successful in dividing ASEAN countries on the issue of South China Sea during ASEAN meetings. It is worth mentioning that China is a key financier of the much criticized host, Cambodia, and it is believed that Beijing had twisted Cambodia's arm to prevent any reference to the South China Sea in the communiqué. Both the Philippines and Vietnam criticized Cambodia. ASEAN's failure to reach a conclusion over South China Sea issue has exposed the conflicting interests of the member countries. In order to preserve the unity of ASEAN, the leaders of the member states will have to confine their disagreements within the house otherwise outside actors will be tempted to exploit their division.

China has developed so much economically and is contributing so much in the development of ASEAN countries that US worries about its ebbing influence in a region where more than military power, economic assistance and development aid carry more weight, look justified. China's aid to the region is untied and soft. As a result, the Asia Pacific region is now experiencing tremendous new developments. The US wants to keep

⁵⁸ *Daily Times* (Lahore), July 21, 2012.

this in check. The stakes are high, as the militarization of the Asia-Pacific region, is gathering momentum. The drums of war can be heard in the distance. The shift of offensive and forward basing by the US of strategic nuclear and conventional military assets has already begun. The US strategy is not related to maritime claims but part of a bigger game plan, also referred to as the 'Containment of China'.

India may like to play some kind of proactive role against China's rise by following in the footsteps of the US. It conducted a joint naval exercise with Japan and in the hope of being helped into a global power status India has struck a close strategic partnership with the US which is in operation between the Western powers including Great Britain, France, Australia and Japan to checkmate China's rise.

It is assessed that the current rivalry, which is real, is not going to create any crisis any time soon. Verbal skirmishes will continue among the claimants of South China Sea islands, with supportive statements from the US, off and on. The busiest Malacca Strait which is more important for Pakistan's trade with Korea, Japan and other countries of the region will not turn into a zone of conflict. No country can afford it. Any destabilization will hurt strategic interests of all the countries including China, Japan, Russia, India and the US etc. The low level competition and supply of US military technology and surveillance equipment will no doubt continue to flow into the region, especially to countries like Singapore, the Philippines and Vietnam. This would require that Pakistan remained balanced and circumspect in its dealings with ASEAN, China and the United States.

Recommendations

Keeping the above mentioned situation in view some recommendations are suggested:

- I. It should be explored what impediments bar Pakistan from attaining Full Dialogue Partner status with ASEAN. The reasons behind Singapore's opposition must be identified and properly addressed. There is a need to examine the overall mode of engagement with ASEAN, take stock of the projects initiated/proposed for Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam and expedite steps in the eight areas of cooperation agreed in various APJSC meetings.
- II. The Indian 'Look East Policy' and its military/nuclear nexus with US is a source of concern for China and Pakistan. So China and Pakistan should work together to neutralise Indian influence in the region. Pakistan may need a broader maritime strategy to

- secure its interests in the Malacca Straits. Pakistan may need to enhance its maritime fleet and naval assets in the Arabian Sea and work closely with Gulf and West Asian neighbours to evolve a 'strategic consensus' on emerging threats to the tranquility of the Arabian Sea by the naval power rivalry in the Indian Ocean.
- III. Time is now most appropriate to seek concrete timeline and investment commitments to build Gwadar, Ormara and Pasni Ports with the help of China, to provide it an access to the Arabian Sea and also serve as a 'transit corridor' for oil and gas pipeline and trade through the Karakoram Highway. Furthermore, the railway link between Havelian and Khunjerab Pass should be pursued with greater vigour.
 - IV. Pakistan must increase diplomatic/government to government interaction with all the states in Asia Pacific region in general and with Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore in particular. Furthermore, people to people contacts and interaction between intellectuals, experts, scholars and think tanks should be promoted so that problems confronting Pakistan could be better understood by ASEAN members specially.

Conclusion

In sum, Asia Pacific region is emerging as a new focal point both economically and strategically. Major powers of the world have been struggling to excel in the region and get maximum benefits. The manifold strategic, diplomatic, security, and other initiatives by the US in the region display the most important shift in the international and regional dynamics of modern times. It is early to say whether we are seeing the beginning of Cold War II in Asia Pacific, albeit with different protagonists. Only time will tell how far India will be able to play its expected role as a "balancer" vis-à-vis China. However, these emerging trends would have deep implications for the regional order. Presently, what is clear is that the geo-political landscape is getting more complex and complicated with both challenges and opportunities. Therefore, Pakistan will have to closely watch these developments and make necessary adjustments in both her foreign policy outlook as well as outreach to Asia Pacific region. ■