

The Future of US Presence in Asia

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For over half a century, US military presence in the Asia-Pacific has been a key determinant of the regional security order. Forward deployed land, air and maritime forces underwrote US hegemonic leadership in the Asia-Pacific by reassuring allies and security partners in the framework of the ‘San Francisco’ system, and by deterring potential adversaries. Importantly, China since the 1970s also by and large accepted US presence in the region. This has led to a distinct pattern of Asian regional security integration: multilateral security integration among Asia-Pacific nations today is predominantly focussed on non-traditional security challenges, whereas traditional security, i.e. the prevention of major power war, is still largely left to the security umbrella provided by the United States and manifested in a bilateral system of alliances, security partnerships as well as US military presence.

Yet, doubts have grown over the future of US military presence in the Asia-Pacific. Three interrelated factors contribute to the discussion of whether US presence can continue to play a key role in maintaining regional stability:

- Firstly, the rise of China is seen by many as inevitably eroding the foundations of US hegemonic leadership. Already, some Chinese leaders have questioned the legitimacy of US regional force posture. Moreover, the continued build-up of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) with its focus on maritime power projection and anti-access/ access denial capabilities might deny the US the ability to control the sea and undermine its maritime power projection capabilities. In the future, the PLA Navy might be able to hold US carrier groups at significant risk given its investment in submarines and other anti-access military capabilities. For example, the future costs for the US in standing up to China in another crisis over Taiwan might be perceived to be too high by Washington.
- Secondly, US ability to maintain its leadership role and to ‘command the commons’ in the Asia-Pacific to many appears to be diminishing. In this view, not only long-term Chinese growth but also the dismal state of the US economy and Washington’s skyrocketing debt will impede on America’s ability to muster enough resources to support its leadership position. From the view of allies such as Japan this raises the question over the future credibility of US extended deterrence guarantees which is intimately related to the

military presence, and which has both a conventional and nuclear dimension. There was also a widespread perception that US attention had diverted from the Asia-Pacific region, reflected in the costly military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many US observers have thus called for a period of 'military restraint' and for a focus on rebuilding America at home.

- Finally, there is the assumption among some experts that US military presence in the region might be detrimental to efforts to accommodate China's peaceful rise as a major Asia-Pacific power. US presence as part of a potential containment strategy against China is seen as destabilising and confrontational. In this logic, US military presence is regarded as an impediment for regional security cooperation.

This paper will challenge these three propositions. It will argue that America's retrenchment from the Asia-Pacific is unlikely for the foreseeable future and that its forward presence will continue to provide the military foundations of its leadership position. It will also claim that US military presence will not obstruct China's peaceful accommodation in a new regional security order but will rather be a precondition for this development. Finally, the point will be made that Asian regional security integration will continue to be characterised by bilateral and multilateral modes of security cooperation that interact *and* compete with each other depending on the security issue at stake.

US leadership renewed

Contrary to current debate on American 'imperial overstretch', the US will be both willing and able to maintain a strong military presence as part of its continued leadership role in the Asia-Pacific. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent speech in Hawaii underlined Washington's continued commitment to a strategy of sustaining and strengthening leadership in the region, of increasing regional security, and of heightening prosperity and promoting US values. Clinton also stressed that securing US strategic interests as a 'Pacific Power' ultimately depended on a strong military presence, not least to reassure allies and security partners in the region.¹ While 'places not bases' in the Asia-Pacific will certainly increase in importance for the US to project power into the region, the US will continue to see its forward deployed presence in Japan, South Korea and Guam as a key to reassure allies.

Rhetoric about renewed US commitment will also be matched by resources. Predictions about major US defence cuts disregard that what is causing problems for the Pentagon at the moment are the huge operational costs stemming from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, these will end rather sooner than later, taking off the pressure from cuts which would go to US military substance. And there is much to the argument that US foreign and security policy will continue to be driven by the objective to maintain its global military presence, in particular in the Asia-Pacific given its strategic eminence in US grand strategic thinking. The next US Global Posture Review will very likely confirm Washington's commitment to a strong military presence in the region.

¹ U.S. Department of State, *Clinton's Speech on U.S. Agenda in Asia-Pacific Region*, 28 October 2010, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttransenglish/2010/October/20101028191722su0.9814875.html&distid=ucs>, accessed 30 October 2010.

Clinton's remarks captured the mood among US allies and partners that given China's rise and the apparent demise of Beijing's former policy of 'reassurance' in recent months a strong linkage between US leadership and its forward deployed military presence was vital to secure America's national security interests and to maintain regional stability. Despite its impressive economic growth, China is far from offering an attractive alternative leadership model for most Asia-Pacific countries. In this context, a narrow focus on growing Chinese economic and military capabilities underestimates the difficulty for Beijing of translating these assets into actual political influence and leadership capacity. In other words, a possible Chinese intention to replace US leadership and its related military presence depends on Beijing's ability to provide for an alternative regional security model. If China fails to provide an acceptable alternative leadership model and uses its growing leverage to bully its Asia-Pacific neighbours, these countries will only move closer to the US.

Recent events are very instructive in this regard. China's reactions to the sinking of the *Cheonan* and its growing assertiveness in the South China Sea have done much to reinvigorate US traditional alliances with Japan and South Korea, and to strengthening security partnerships with Southeast Asian countries like Singapore and Vietnam. US leadership and military presence as a building block in a 'hedging' strategy against uncertain Chinese behaviour seems to become more attractive for many countries in the region. Thus, contrary to widespread assumptions about a decline in US leadership the opposite might actually be the case. Growing Chinese assertiveness will work detrimental to any plans Beijing might have to undermine the legitimacy of US leadership and military presence in the region.

In sum, the likelihood of an American retrenchment from the Asia-Pacific region seems rather low for the foreseeable future.² For this to happen, a combination of events will need to occur. These factors include a dramatic shift in US foreign policy thinking coupled with a continued, massive downturn of the US economy; the evolution of an attractive Chinese leadership model; the conclusion of US allies (foremost Japan) and partners that they are better off without American military presence; and the development of new bilateral or multilateral defence structures. In this light, the assumption that the US will no longer be able and willing to sustain its military presence in the Asia-Pacific is premature. Likewise, the possibility that Asia-Pacific allies will ask America to pull its troops out and to put their faith in the US as an 'offshore balancer' seems unlikely for the time being. The issue is therefore not if the US will reduce its military presence but rather what functions it will perform in a future Asia-Pacific security order. The key issue here is if US presence will be detrimental to accommodating China's rise.

Precondition for China's peaceful accommodation

Rather than being a destabilising factor, US military presence will be a necessary precondition for China's peaceful accommodation in an evolving Asia-Pacific security order. This argument is based on the proposition that absent effective alternative bilateral or multilateral structures to deal with traditional security dilemmas and enduring questions of deterring major power wars, US military presence will be critical in reassuring allies and partners, and in encouraging responsible Chinese strategic behaviour.

² See also Joseph S. Nye, 'The Future of American Power', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 6 (November/December 2010).

A number of different order-building concepts in the future Asia-Pacific beyond uncontested US primacy can be envisaged, including a new balance of power with a high potential for US-Chinese strategic competition, US-Chinese condominium, and a 'concert of powers' (including Japan, India, South Korea, Indonesia and potentially Russia). In all of these scenarios, however, US military presence will be critical to maintaining stability:

- In a potential '*Asian Cold War*', US presence will be instrumental to guarantee stable conventional and nuclear extended deterrence, similar to America's role in Europe during the Cold War. In a new framework of strategic stability US presence will allow to develop mutual 'red lines' between the antagonistic parties, thereby contributing to crisis stability. In this scenario, the 'places' in Southeast Asia and Australia could be turned into bases to project power in a containment strategy.
- In the case of a *US-Chinese condominium*, where both China and the US reach a stable and mutually acceptable power sharing arrangement (a scenario which will take significant time to develop and which will suffer from setbacks), US military presence will provide two central functions. US bases in Japan, South Korea and Guam will still be kept – even if in reduced numbers – to reassure allies such as Japan in the case of a resurgent China. Beyond this, US maritime forces will provide vital military capabilities in a new division of labour between China and the US to, for example, jointly secure the SLOCs.
- Finally, in a hierarchical '*concert of powers*' scenario in which powers like the US, China, Japan, India, South Korea and potentially Russia will aim at securing influence in a maritime environment of 'multiple sea-denial', the US as the still biggest maritime power again will prove crucial in reassuring both allies and China about their respective 'spheres of influence'.

Very likely, the future security order in the Asia-Pacific will be characterised by no single country being able to dominate the maritime domain. While China's growing maritime and air anti-access capabilities over time will deny the US unrestricted 'sea control', the PLAN will likewise not be able to exert 'sea control' itself – also partly because of Japan's significant 'sea denial' capabilities. Also, Chinese military ability to holding US Navy carrier strike groups at risk does not necessarily translate into political influence, nor is it sufficient to prevent the US from continuing to project power to protect its strategic interests. As a consequence, China in the end will benefit from US military presence in that the US will be more 'relaxed' than other regional powers to accommodate an increased Chinese strategic reach as long as Beijing is not overstepping well-defined boundaries. In the end, managing the new maritime security order in the Asia-Pacific will depend on the powers' ability to agree on mutual maritime 'spheres of influence'.

Conclusion

An end of US military presence in the Asia-Pacific is neither desirable for the mutual goal to maintaining a stable security order, nor is it likely to happen any time soon. US presence, primarily build around a set of bilateral alliances and new security partnerships, should be regarded as a stimulus rather than an impediment to future strategic stability, also in regards to approaches to accommodate the rise of China. Since security cooperation and integration are not ends in themselves, but means to secure countries' strategic objectives and to maintain regional peace and stability, the

Asia-Pacific region will benefit much from keeping the existing system of bilateral and multilateral structures of security cooperation. It is hard to imagine current multilateral settings providing any credible alternative to the US-based system when it comes to addressing the manifold security dilemmas and the core questions of war and peace related to the future Asia-Pacific security order.

US-based bilateralism will continue to effectively contribute to regional security. Allies, partners and even potential adversaries will think twice before asking the US to leave as absent effective alternative mechanisms of collective defence the withdrawal of US military forces would open 'Pandora's Box' of all sorts of security dilemmas in the Asia-Pacific. A look at the European theatre might be instructive here. Over 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, European NATO allies still shiver at the prospect that the US might withdraw its forces from the region altogether. And, unlike the Asia-Pacific, this is a region commonly perceived to having overcome traditional security problems.

Those who ponder about Asia-Pacific countries in the future being able to maintaining regional stability 'on their own' will not only have to resolve the long-standing controversy over 'who belongs to the region and who does not'. Even more critically, they will have to demonstrate how the remaining and (potentially) new security structures can effectively substitute for US military presence. Otherwise, this 'experiment' can result in disastrous consequences. Anyone in for an Asian NATO?