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The endless Army

Is ‘Pacific Pathways’ a necessary pivot, or a military budget grab?

By Andrew J. Bacevich

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ON THE scale of outrages emanating from Washington, D.C., which has become a byword for tomfoolery and cockamamie schemes, it barely registers. Yet let us pause for a moment to contemplate the US Army’s new initiative known as “Pacific Pathways,” established to counter threats in the Asia-Pacific region.

Note that the 21st century has not been kind to the Army. Since 9/11, it has engaged in two protracted and debilitating conflicts. The Iraq war, launched in 2003, finally ended more than eight years later in something other than victory. The Afghanistan war, begun even earlier, shambles toward its own ambiguous conclusion, having become the longest and least popular war in the nation’s history.

One might think that the soldiers who’ve born the brunt of these wars have earned a breather. But Army generals apparently disagree. Demonstrably uninterested in taking stock of what their exertions in the Greater Middle East have yielded — how much gain for all that pain? — they are hard at work searching for new venues in which to demonstrate the Army’s relevance. For relevance translates into budget share, within Pentagon circles the ne plus ultra. “This We’ll

Defend” provides the Army with an appropriately crisp official motto. But the “this” that generals defend most fiercely is their slice of the Defense Department’s budgetary pie.

One of the top underreported news stories of recent years is this: The United States is done with invading and occupying countries in the Islamic world. Whatever course events in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, or Iran may follow, Washington is unlikely to dispatch thousands of US troops to fix the problem. Done that. Didn’t work.

Soldiers and their families may view this shift in policy as a welcome development. But for Army generals, it represents a threat far more dangerous than that posed by Al Qaeda or the Taliban.

As the global war on terror peters out, what does the Army exist to do? For the Army’s top brass, the question has existential implications. They have apparently found their answer by looking East, the Obama administration’s much-ballyhooed “pivot” toward Asia offering the Army a chance to rebrand itself. Goodbye parched desert. Hello steamy jungle.

In national security circles, “pivot” is a euphemism, shorthand for “payday” as the Pentagon salivates over the implications of China’s rise. In evaluating how China might threaten regional stability (itself a euphemism for US hegemony), Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps planners have had a relatively easy time conjuring up scenarios allotting major roles for their own service. By comparison, the Army has lagged behind. Until now. Pacific Pathways signals the Army’s intention of claiming a piece of the action.

Rest assured that the Army is not gearing up to fight China, not yet anyway. Instead, Pacific Pathways envisions relatively small elements milling about the Far East so that whatever happens, whether act of God or act of evil-doers, the service won’t be left out. General Vincent Brooks, who heads US Army Pacific, explains the logic. “Forces that are already in motion have an advantage in responding,” he says. “We can no longer afford to build units and put them on a shelf to be used only in the event of war.”

As a recent article in the Washington Post explains, Pacific Pathways is already setting off alarms — mostly in the Marine Corps, which sees the Army horning in on its turf and therefore threatening its own budget share. Thus the tradition of bureaucratic interests perverting policy perpetuates itself.

The observer is left to wonder what part civilian leaders play in all of this. Where is the commander-in-chief? What are the views of the secretary of defense? Do they want the Army, not yet home from Afghanistan, beating a pathway to the Pacific? Do their opinions even count?

As for the generals, they should consider this possibility: The “this” that they are called upon to defend just might refer to the place where Americans live. Here. Keeping our Army on the shelf, held in readiness rather than looking for trouble, suits many of us just fine.