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The US pivot: Rebalancing as retreat

By John Feffer

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In a future update of *The Devil's Dictionary*, the famed Ambrose Bierce dissection of the linguistic hypocrisies of modern life, a single word will accompany the entry for "Pacific pivot": retreat.

It might seem a strange way to characterize the Obama administration's energetic attempt to reorient its foreign and military policy toward Asia. After all, the president's team has insisted that the Pacific pivot will be a forceful reassertion of American power in a strategic part of the world and a deliberate reassurance to our allies that we have their backs vis-a-vis China.

Indeed, sometimes the pivot seems like little less than a panacea for all that ails US foreign policy. Upset about the fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan? Then just light out for more pacific waters. Worried that our adversaries are all melting away and the Pentagon has lost its *raison d'etre*? Then how about going toe to toe with China, the only conceivable future superpower on the horizon these days. And if you're concerned about the state of the US economy, then the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the regional free-trade deal Washington is trying to negotiate, might be just the shot in the arm that US corporations crave.

In reality, however, the "strategic rebalancing" the Obama administration has been promoting as a mid-course correction to its foreign policy remains strong on rhetoric and remarkably weak on content. Think of it as a clever fiction for whose promotion many audiences are willing to suspend their disbelief. After all, in the upcoming era of Pentagon belt-tightening and domestic

public backlash, Washington is likely to find it difficult to move any significant extra resources into Asia. Even the TPP is an acknowledgment of how much economic ground in the region has been lost to China.

There's also the longer arc of history to consider. The US retreat from Asia has been underway since the 1970s, although this "strategic movement to the rear" - as the famous military euphemism goes - has been neither rapid nor accompanied by "mission accomplished" photo ops.

The administration's much-vaunted pivot looks ever more like a divot - a swing, a miss, and a hole in the ground rather than anything approaching a hole-in-one.

The slowly shrinking footprint

During the Cold War, the United States fought more battles and shed more blood in Asia than anywhere else on Earth. From 1950 to 1953, under a UN flag, US forces struggled for control of the Korean peninsula, ending up without a peace treaty and with a stalemate at roughly the same dividing line where the war began. At one point, as the Vietnam War expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, US troop levels in Asia swelled to more than 800,000.

Since the disastrous end of that war, however, Washington has been very slowly and fitfully retreating from the region. US military personnel there have by now dropped under 100,000. The low point was arguably during the George W Bush years when the US military sank into the quicksand of Iraq and Afghanistan, and critics began to accuse his administration of "losing Asia" to a rising China.

Looking at the numbers, it's hard not to come to the conclusion that Washington's attention had indeed drifted from the Pacific. Consider Korea. Peace has hardly broken out on the peninsula. In fact, the North's nuclear weapons and the South's extensive military modernization have only had the effect of heightening tensions.

The United States, however, has repeatedly reduced both the size and the significance of its forces in South Korea in a process of punctuated devolution. On three occasions over the last 45 years, Washington has unilaterally withdrawn forces from the peninsula - each time over the objections of the South Korean government. There were nearly 70,000 US troops in South Korea in the early 1970s when the Nixon administration first recalled an entire division of 20,000 troops. Later, the Carter administration, initially keen to withdraw all US forces, settled for another limited reduction. In 1991, in response to the collapse of Communism in much of the world (but not North Korea), the George H W Bush administration unilaterally withdrew tactical nuclear weapons from the peninsula.

In the 21st century, the US military footprint shrank yet again from approximately 37,000 troops to the current level of 28,500, this time thanks to negotiations between Washington and Seoul. (A small contingent of 800 troops has just been dispatched to South Korea to send a signal of US "resolve" to the North, but it's only for a nine-month rotation.) In addition, the American troops near the de-militarized zone that separates north from south, long meant as a "tripwire" that

would ensure US involvement in any future war between the two countries, are being relocated further south.

However, Pentagon officials have recently hinted at leaving behind a residual force. The two countries are still negotiating the transfer of what, six decades after the Korean War ended, is still referred to as "wartime operational control", a long overdue step. The reduction of forces has been accompanied by the closure and consolidation of US bases, including the massive Yongsan garrison in the middle of the South Korean capital, Seoul. It will revert entirely to Korean control over the next few years.

It's not just Korea where the US "footprint" is shrinking. A quieter set of redeployments has reduced US ground forces in Japan, too, from approximately 46,000 personnel in 1990 to the 38,000-strong contingent today. Even larger changes are underway.

In 2000, on a visit to Okinawa, Japan's southern-most prefecture, President Bill Clinton promised to shrink the staggering American military footprint on that island. At the time, Okinawans were furious over a series of murders and rapes committed by US soldiers as well as military-related accidents that had claimed Okinawan lives and health threats from various kinds of pollution generated by more than 30 US bases. Ever since, Washington has been pursuing a plan to close the Futenma Marine Air Force Base - an old facility dangerously located in the middle of a modern city - and build a replacement elsewhere on the island. That plan also involves the relocation of 9,000 Marines from the island to US bases elsewhere in the Pacific. If it goes forward, US forces in Japan will be reduced by up to 25%.

Elsewhere in Asia, under pressure from local activists, the United States closed two military bases in the Philippines in 1991, withdrawing nearly 15,000 personnel from the country and replacing a permanent basing arrangement with a more modest "visiting forces agreement". In recent years, Washington has negotiated "cooperation agreements" with various countries in the region, including its former foe Vietnam, but hasn't built any significant new bases. Aside from forces in Japan and South Korea, and personnel aboard ships and submarines, the US military presence in the rest of the region is negligible.

Of course, a reduction of personnel and the closure of bases are not necessarily indicators of retreat. After all, the Pentagon has been focusing on a transition to a more flexible fighting posture, deemphasizing fixed positions in favor of lighter rapid-response units. Meanwhile, the modernization of US forces has meant that its firepower has increased even if its Pacific footprint has decreased. In addition, the United States has emphasized Special Operations forces deployments as part of anti-terror operations in places like the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, while pushing ahead with several tiers of ballistic missile defense in the region. All of these policies preceded the pivot.

Nonetheless, the trend line since the 1970s is clear enough. Even as their capabilities were being upgraded, US forces were also slowly moving to an over-the-horizon posture in Asia, with bases in Guam and Hawaii gaining importance as those in Korea and Japan were quietly downgraded. As it has given up ground, Washington has also pressured its allies to pay more to support its forces based on their territories, buy ever more expensive American weapons systems, and build up their own militaries. As it once sought to "Vietnamize" and "Iraqize" the military forces in

countries from which it was withdrawing troops, the United States has been engaged in its own slow-motion "Asianization" of the Pacific.

The non-existent pivot

The Pacific pivot has been billed as a way to halt this drift and reinforce the US position as a player in Asia. So far, however, this highly touted "rebalancing" has essentially been a shell game, involving not a substantial build-up, but a shifting around of American forces in Asia.

This shell game has involved, among other elements, the contingent of 18,000 Marines at that base in Futenma. For more than 15 years, Washington and Tokyo have failed to come to an agreement on closing the decrepit base and building a replacement facility. The vast majority of Okinawans still reject any new base construction, which would damage the area's fragile ecosystem. In addition, the island already houses more than 70% of all US bases in Japan, and its residents are tired of the collateral damage that US service personnel inflict on host communities.

Sooner or later, about 5,000 of those Marines are to be transferred to an expanded facility on the US island of Guam, a huge construction project underwritten by the Japanese government. Another 2,700 are slated to go to Hawaii. Up to 2,500 will rotate through an expanded Royal Australian Air Force base in Darwin.

About 8,000 to 10,000 Marines are supposed to remain in Okinawa - or, at least, Washington and Tokyo would like them to remain there. But that depends on the latest round of negotiations. At the end of December, Okinawan Governor Hirokazu Nakaima reversed his position against building a new base, thanks in part to 300 billion yen (\$2.91 billion) a year that Tokyo promised to inject into the Okinawan economy over the next eight years.

But it's far from a done deal. In elections this month in the town of Nago, which has jurisdiction over Henoko where the new base is to be built, Mayor Susumu Inamine won a second term after pledging to continue his opposition to the proposed construction. Turnout was high, and so was Inamine's victory margin - despite a promise from the conservative ruling party to provide an additional 50 billion yen to Nago if residents rejected the incumbent. Civic groups, meanwhile, continue to try to tie the project up in court.

Beyond shuffling Marines around the Pacific, what else does the pivot consist of? Not much. Four new Littoral Combat Ships are being sent to Singapore to beef up patrols in the region. A small-scale gesture to begin with, that experimental vessel, which has experienced serious cost overruns, is a clunker. The first ship to reach Singapore had to return to port after a mere eight hours on the water, the latest in a series of problems that have prompted a congressional inquiry into the program's viability.

The Pentagon has emphasized the importance of a planned readjustment of the balance of the US fleet globally. Currently, the ratio of Pacific to non-Pacific ship deployments is 50-50. In the years to come, that may shift to 60-40 in favor of the Pacific. But ratios don't mean much if the overall size of the US fleet goes south. The Navy recently submitted a plan to build up fleet size from its current 285 ships to 306 over the next 30 years. But that plan is based on the rosiest of

imagined future budget allocations: one-third higher than those the service has received over recent decades. A more likely scenario, in an age of belt-tightening, is a reduction of the fleet to 250 ships or fewer as more are decommissioned than added yearly.

In air power, too, the pivot comes up short, given what the United States already deploys in the region. As the American Enterprise Institute's Michael Auslin testified before Congress this past summer, "The US Air Force already rotates F-22s, B-52s, and B-2s throughout the region, primarily in Guam and Okinawa, and there are few more planes that can be sent on a regular basis".

It's true that Washington is pushing its new F-35 jet fighter - Japan has already promised to buy 28 of them - but pity our poor allies. The most expensive weapon system in history, the plane has 719 problems, according to a report by the Pentagon's own inspector general. That's a lot of problems for a weapons system that costs nearly \$200 million a pop (almost \$300 million in some versions).

Much of the Pentagon's future in Asia has been focused on "Air-Sea Battle", a joint Navy-Air Force integrated plan that made its debut in 2010 with the specific aim of denying adversaries (read: China) access to the seas and skies of the region. The Army, finding itself essentially left out, has put forward its own "Pacific Pathways" initiative, which aims to transform a largely land-based force into a maritime expeditionary force, potentially bringing it into direct competition with the Marines.

However, Washington's Pacific allies shouldn't expect much from it. The program is really no more than an effort to stanch the hemorrhaging of army personnel, already slated for a 10% drop in strength over the next few years - with signs of more shrinkage ahead. As political scientist Andrew Bacevich writes, "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."

While the pivot may not add up to much, one thing is certain: it will cost money, even with allied contributions factored in. For instance, the expansion of the Guam base is now priced at \$8.6 billion (or more), with only about \$3 billion of that picked up by Tokyo. The overall cost for the relocation of the Marines, the Pentagon estimates, is likely to be \$12 billion. And even that is undoubtedly a lowball figure, according to the Government Accountability Office, which estimates the move to Guam alone at as much as double that sum. No surprise, then, that the Senate - in a mood of unusual bipartisan agreement - has balked at the price tag.

The simple truth is that the Pentagon is no longer going to have the same kind of loot to throw around as it did in the go-go days of the last decade. If merely moving forces around the Pacific costs so much, it's hardly likely that outlays for major new deployments will make it past Congress. And this doesn't even take into account the inevitable tax revolt of the Japanese, Korean, and Australian publics when the bills for their own "contributions" start coming in.

Why Asia, why now?

Even if the Pacific pivot is more smoke than firepower, the United States is hardly a paper tiger in Asia. It remains by far the most powerful military actor in the region. Aircraft carriers, destroyers, fighter jets, and nuclear subs all mean that the United States can throw its weight around when necessary.

But perception means a great deal in geopolitics and right now China is winning the perceptions game. Beijing is flush with money and has been using its considerable foreign exchange surpluses to win favor with countries in the region (even as it undercuts some of that good will with its territorial claims and military actions). In 2010, it teamed up with its Southeast Asian neighbors to form a free-trade zone large enough to compete favorably with Europe and North America.

Although China won't have power projection capabilities even remotely comparable to the United States in the foreseeable future, double digit military spending over the last decade has closed the gap with Japan and Korea. Tensions in the region have increased - over disputed islands between Japan and China, around the potentially oil-rich South China Sea, and in airspace as well after China unilaterally established its own "air defense identification zone" in November that covers the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

China's muscle flexing is about the only thing that could turn the Pacific pivot into something real. Countries that were once ambivalent about the US military presence - such as Vietnam or the Philippines - are eagerly putting out the welcome mat for American forces. Japan is using the "China threat" to further water down its "peace constitution" and ratchet up cooperation with the Pentagon. And the United States is eagerly stitching together its various bilateral relationships - from India to Australia to Korea - into a cloak of containment to stifle China's rise.

Even without much meat on its bones, the Pacific realignment "works" so far because so many disparate actors find it useful to believe in. For China, it provides a convenient rationale for buying or building new weapons systems to deny the United States complete control over air and sea. For US allies, the pivot offers an additional insurance policy that requires them to pay premiums in the form of building up their own militaries. In the United States, hawks rejoice at a Rambo-like return to Asia, while doves bemoan the inherent militarism of the new policy. The Pentagon sees more basing options; arms manufacturers see more lucrative contracts; other US corporations see greater access to overseas markets through the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

However, one major Asian reality has to be taken into account when considering Washington's increased focus on and interest in the Pacific: not since the end of World War II has the United States been able to impose its will on the region. It had to make do with a stalemate in the Korean War; it lost the Vietnam War; and it hasn't been able to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons. It can't even stop allies Japan and South Korea from quarreling over the ownership of a tiny outcropping of rocks that lies midway between the two countries. And

the US economic relationship with China - a codependency grounded in overproduction and overconsumption - is a brake on US unilateralism in the region.

In an age of economic austerity and policy coordination with China, the Pacific pivot amounts to a complicated dance in which the United States steps backward as we propel our allies forward. It might seem a penny-wise way of sharing the security burden, but the realignment is still woefully expensive. And "Asianizing" the Pacific through arms exports and visiting forces agreements only helps to fuel what has emerged as the most significant arms race in the world today.

The lumbering aircraft carrier known as the United States should be executing a pivot that lives up to its name: a shift from the martial to the Pacific. Instead, it's just roiling the waters and leaving instability in its wake.