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The China pivot and the US 'siege' strategy

By David Isenberg
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On January 5, the Pentagon released a strategic review. The document itself was not particularly novel. The Pentagon regularly does strategy reviews, trying, like a modern version of the Oracle of Delphi, to divine the future and adjust its forces accordingly.

Since the end of the Cold War the Pentagon has had the Bottom Up Review, the Commission on the Roles and Missions of the US Armed Forces, and several Quadrennial Defense Reviews, to name but a few.

The latest document, "Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense" describes the projected security environment and the key military missions for which the US military will prepare.

The review did attract some attention for its supposed new focus on Asia, also called the "pivot to Asia", which first appears in the document on page two, when it states:

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. Accordingly, while the US military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.

The next paragraph said:

The maintenance of peace, stability, the free flow of commerce, and of US influence in this dynamic region will depend in part on an underlying balance of military capability and presence. Over the long term, China's emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the

US economy and our security in a variety of ways. Our two countries have a strong stake in peace and stability in East Asia and an interest in building a cooperative bilateral relationship. However, the growth of China's military power must be accompanied by greater clarity of its strategic intentions in order to avoid causing friction in the region.

China is referred to only one more time in the eight-page document, in a paragraph on "Project Power Despite Anti-Access/Area Denial Challenges."

That is rather curious considering that for years most US military planners have been looking to China as the yardstick by which US military forces must be measured for its next major conflict.

Those looking for the etiology of the China pivot need to go back a few months earlier, to the article by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, which appeared in the November 2011 issue of Foreign Affairs journal. She wrote:

As the war in Iraq winds down and America begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the United States stands at a pivot point. Over the last 10 years, we have allocated immense resources to those two theaters. In the next 10 years, we need to be smart and systematic about where we invest time and energy, so that we put ourselves in the best position to sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values. One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment - diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise - in the Asia-Pacific region.

Actually, Clinton was quite diplomatic. She wrote that, "Some in our country see China's progress as a threat to the United States; some in China worry that America seeks to constrain China's growth. We reject both those views. The fact is that a thriving America is good for China and a thriving China is good for America. We both have much more to gain from cooperation than from conflict."

A standard view of what many commentators see at the Chinese military threat was written by foreign affairs journalist Robert Kagan in the April issue of the Atlantic Magazine:

Advances in Chinese naval, air, space, missile, and cyber-warfare capabilities are reshaping the strategic landscape. China's acquisitions demonstrate that it does aspire to be a great military power. It is China's shop-till-you-drop acquisition of nuclear and advanced diesel-electric submarines that particularly worries Pentagon planners. Naval warfare is going undersea, as surface warships become more vulnerable to missiles and other anti-access technology.

China has been acquiring submarines at the rate of 4-to-1 vis-a-vis the United States since 2000, and 8-to-1 since 2005. Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore are all acquiring submarines to counter the Chinese buildup. US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has vowed that defense cuts will not come at the expense of America's Pacific military assets.

Clinton has voiced an intention to pivot from the Middle East to the Pacific. President Barack Obama has announced the deployment of 2,500 marines to Australia. Australia, a country of only 23 million, will spend \$279 billion over the next 20 years for new subs and fighter jets. These statements and developments are about one thing: countering China's military rise and the tectonic shifts associated with it.

While commentators of all ideologies agree that China, by virtue of its advances on the entire standard measures of power, from economic to military, merit putting it high up on the list of rising powers it is far from clear that it is a menacing power. Even Kagan conceded that:

The larger question is whether internal developments in China will impede its further military growth. Will an economic crisis stoke or defuse Chinese nationalism; increase or decrease defense budgets? No one knows. I have written often that China's military rise is normal - not illegitimate, like America's at the start of the 20th century.

But China and the Asia-Pacific region has long been an area of military concern for the United States. The US military has long divided the world into military fiefdoms, ie unified combatant commands, for military planning purposes, and the fiefdom encompassing the Asia-Pacific region is the US Pacific Command, headquartered in Hawaii. The state also headquarters the US Pacific Fleet and Pacific Air Forces.

Recently, the Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported that a higher profile in Asia and the Pacific is in the works for Fort Shafter in Honolulu and within the ranks of the army, with construction of a new 330,000-square-foot headquarters under way as well as an effort to upgrade the three-star command to four stars. The fort is the headquarters of the United States Army Pacific Command. Aside from enhancing bureaucratic clout a renewed emphasis is also good for weapons manufacturers. The Zumwalt is a planned class of United States Navy destroyers, designed as multi-mission ships with a focus on land attack. The class is multi-role and designed for surface warfare, anti-aircraft, and naval fire support.

Previously, the navy tried to kill this enormous, expensive and technology-laden class of warship because of its cost but it is now viewed as an important part of the Obama administration's Asia-Pacific strategy.

The production cost is roughly \$3.8 billion apiece but if you include research and development, the cost grows to \$7 billion each. Much of the weaponry the US military plans to acquire in the future is of a stand-off nature. Due to concerns over other countries anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities the US military has expressed concern over Chinese progress in this area for years. It is a staple of the report on Chinese military power the Pentagon annually publishes.

To counter this, the Pentagon developed a concept called Air-Sea Battle (ASB) that assumes any war in the region is dominated by naval and air forces, and the domains of space and cyberspace.

It is consistent with the traditional US approach to war, which seeks to substitute technology for manpower and avoid protracted conflicts with a major land power; especially one with armies, navies, air forces, and nuclear weapons like China.

But ASB has downsides. Writing in the April issue of Armed Forces Journal Colonel Douglas McGregor (US Army-Retired) writes:

To those convinced of China's dangerous and aggressive intentions, ASB offers a military solution that is attractive in two important ways. First, the majority of congressmen, four-stars and political appointees in the Defense Department are preoccupied with the threat of war with a capable opponent, an opponent like China with armies, air forces, air defenses, naval forces and nuclear weapons.

Leaders in a country that for 50 years has been the world's only true center of military, political and economic gravity, their predisposition is to police the globe with American military power even if most of the world doesn't want policing and US taxpayers cannot afford it. The strategic imperative to contain or counter Chinese military power is, to them, irresistible.

Second, when it comes to warfare, high-tech/remote/standoff solutions encourage the illusion of certainty, light casualties in action and operational success in the thoroughly unpredictable environment of extraordinary brutality and barbarism that is real war. ASB provides a new way for many in the armed forces and congress to look for solutions that avoid this ugly reality.

In short, it is a concept for the joint employment of precision-guided missiles and munitions against future target sets on the assumption that the capability and capacity to destroy thousands of targets with great precision will be sufficient to drive future opponents toward acceptable termination. Ground forces were not included because it would take too long for them to deploy and make a meaningful contribution at the outset of the precision-strike campaign.

This is both an optimistic and potentially catastrophic illusion, according to Macgregor. He notes that US war games rarely assume a protracted military campaign that might last months or years. The impact of such war games on the thinking and behavior of American national political and military leaders should not be underestimated.

He warns that, "the unspoken assumption implicit in Air-Sea Battle is that a precision-strike campaign against China would not drag on without result. This is not the first time the English-speaking peoples of North America, Britain and Australia have perceived the world beyond their borders in ways that flattered their self-image of unconstrained economic growth and sea-based global military power."

Anybody who doubts the truth of that has only to recall what the US public was told prior to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

One might dismiss Macgregor, on the grounds that as a retired army officer, he objects to a future war plan that largely excludes ground forces. Yet, given China's overall size and demonstrated historical ability to survive external attack it would be dangerous to ignore his warning.

He points out that without integrated US expeditionary and allied ground forces, ASB risks becoming the 21st-century equivalent of medieval siege warfare. Put more bluntly, he views relying primarily on ASB as a sucker's strategy:

Given China's size and depth, its authoritarian culture and supporting institutions of internal security, American air and naval strike forces are likely to run out of precision-guided munitions long before they run out of targets to attack or achieve conditions favorable for acceptable termination.

Without a realistic plan that integrates US and allied ground forces from regional states like Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and even Russia, and powerful ground forces capable of holding China's regime survivability and internal national cohesion at risk from multiple directions, the

probability of achieving conflict termination on terms that favor US and allied interests is low to nonexistent.

Macgregor also believes that those who believe a conflict between a rising China and other nations is inevitable, as devotees of the realist approach to international relations contend, ignores significant counter-availing forces:

Lastly, military planning for a potential conflict with China must also be viewed in the context of contemporary Chinese society, whose problems include ones not terribly different than those of past dynasties reaching back centuries.

The mobilizing power of Chinese or "Han" nationalism to support aggressive external war is less than many Western analysts think, thanks to ethnic irredentism, regional secessionist tendencies and severely uneven economic development, particularly between the eastern coastal areas and China's interior.

Today, these historic problems are compounded by China's dependence on an export-driven economy, widespread corruption in the public and private sectors, dangerous levels of pollution in its most densely populated areas, and a growing housing bubble that, like all bubbles, must eventually burst. A military confrontation with the US is the last thing on the central government's mind.