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The Middle East and the Pivot to Asia: Obama's US Foreign Policy Bait and Switch

By Jack A. Smith

June 13, 2014

President Obama chose to ignore the most important strategic aspect of U.S. foreign policy in his major address May 28 at West Point graduation ceremonies. It was perhaps thought politically wise to emphasize current events rather than military preparations for a possible major future confrontation with China.

Instead Obama mainly focused on defending his policies against mounting criticism from warhawks in both parties variously demanding that the U.S. attack Syria, or Iran or Venezuela, and adopt more provocative measures toward Russia. He was even criticized for not being tougher toward China, which is preposterous, as we shall discuss in this article when deeds, not words, are examined.

Obama swings back and forth on toughness (he'll bomb, not bomb, Syria) but he was correct to spend time explaining why he opposed the hawks this time around. Why get bogged down in Syria and Iran or into immediate clashes with Beijing and Moscow when there is a far more important long-range objective for the White House and those who rule America. At the same time, on his trip to Poland in early June, Obama rattled sabers to the delight of European allies, sending jets and military equipment and encouraging them to increase defense spending against the nonexistent "threat" from Russia.

Oddly, the president identified “terrorism” as the main direct threat to America “for the foreseeable future,” but just a year ago he suggested the war on terrorism was ending. He also wants several African countries to join the war on terrorism in place of the U.S. in most cases and is spending \$5 billion to pay them off. He further pledged to continue supplying the non-jihadist sector of the war against the Syrian government when everyone knows the jihadists, particularly al-Qaeda’s Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, are responsible for the large bulk of the fighting.

Entirely omitted from his speech was the “pivot” to Asia and the principal thrust of foreign/military policy — maintaining unilateral (or unipolar) U.S. global hegemony when time appears to be running out on this endeavor. Washington attained solo world leadership, which it has transformed into world domination, by default, when the Soviet Union unexpectedly imploded more than 20 years ago, leaving but one superpower on top. That superpower has no intention of abdicating the global throne.

During this same period, however, other nations — such as China, Russia, India and Brazil, for example — have arisen to demand a more representative and collegial multilateral world order in place of one-nation world leadership. They think the U.S. throws its weight around more than it should; that it is too violent toward other countries and peoples; and that its main goal as leader is to further its own interests first, not those of the world. These states are getting stronger as America becomes weaker economically and politically incapacitated in internal affairs. Washington’s ability to order other nations around, which goes back in some cases to the mid-1800s, is declining, but this probably will continue for many years.

Much of Latin America, as an example of this change in world affairs, has broken away from its former overlord. And look how these other key countries have changed: Russia from 1991 to 2001 was prostrate and subservient to the United States. China until the mid-1990s was not considered a major industrial society. India, until somewhat later was in the same category. Brazil’s rise was even more recent. At the same time it appears that the U.S. economy has become stagnant, boosted by periodic financial bubbles that eventually burst in the face of the deteriorating working class, lower middle and portions of the middle class.

It is worth stressing at this point that (1) elements of multilateral leadership have already appeared on the world stage and that (2) Beijing has not evidenced a scintilla of interest in itself becoming world hegemon, replacing the U.S.

For these and other reasons the number one strategic foreign/military objective of the present and future U.S. government is to block or greatly delay the inevitable development of multilateral leadership, though it is never acknowledged openly. (Should the U.S. ever consent to sharing leadership in future, it probably would demand the status of first among equals.)

Obama hinted at his long-range goal in the West Point speech, camouflaged in nationalist jingoism, hubris and braggadocio:

“The United States is and remains the one indispensable nation. That has been true for the century past, and it will be true for the century to come.... Here’s my bottom line: America must

always lead on the world stage. If we don't, no one else will. The military that you have joined is, and always will be, the backbone of that leadership.... I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being.”

In the first sentence substitute for the words “indispensable nation” the words “global hegemon” and you get the point. And while it is true that in time China may far exceed the U.S. economically and develop several major allies in the process, the U.S. military will insure American supremacy continues through this century — or so Obama slyly suggests.

Obama not only neglected to mention retaining hegemony, he avoided touching on Washington's program to preserve its exalted status — the three-year-old reorientation of foreign policy primacy from the Middle East to Asia.

The transition has been slower than expected because the White House and State Department have been preoccupied by Iran, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Israel/Palestine, the Afghan war, drone wars in several other countries, and the Ukrainian imbroglio — this latter an entanglement of White House creation by supporting the ouster of the democratically elected president in Kiev. Political paralysis at home is another reason. The budget crisis forced Obama to cancel attending an important weeklong journey to four Asian countries in October to attend two regional summit meetings. Also the resignation of prime pivot advocate Hillary Clinton slowed the pivot process.

The delay in focusing on Asia provoked Richard N. Haass, who heads the establishment's Council on Foreign Relations, to write April 22:

“U.S. foreign policy is in troubling disarray.... The change [to Asia] is warranted by the fact that the United States has enormous interests in the Asia-Pacific region, which is home to many of the countries likely to dominate the current century.... A Secretary of State [John Kerry] can only do so much; time spent in Jerusalem and Geneva is time not spent in Tokyo and Beijing.”

The pivot has moved somewhat forward with Obama's recent (April 22-27) trip to Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines.

The Asia policy has two main goals: (1) To politically constrain the international rise of China even within its own logical sphere of interest in East Asia. (2) To interject Washington deeply into Asia's economic milieu, and for American corporations to become more profitably involved with the region's extraordinary economic growth, especially since it now is the most advantageous location for direct investment, both to and from the United States.

Like the “Devil's Pitchfork,” the pivot has three prongs:

1. Political: The best way to undermine China regionally is to surround the country with U.S. allies, a process that is nearly complete. Washington has been engaged in this effort since the success of the Communist revolution in 1949. To quote from an article in the May-June Foreign Affairs: “The United States has five defense treaty allies in the region (Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand), as well as strategically important partnerships with Brunei, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Taiwan and evolving ties with

Myanmar” and Vietnam. In East/Southeast Asia this leaves Beijing with friendly Russia, troubled North Korea, essentially allied Cambodia, and Laos with one foot in China and the other in Vietnam.

Since the pivot was announced, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Vietnam have become embroiled with China over territorial claims in the vast East and South China Sea as never before. These are long standing differences but were largely low-key disputes until the U.S. interjected itself on behalf of its allies.

It was reported May 25 in Chinatopix that Washington is constructing a new “security alliance [consisting] of the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia and Japan, according to unnamed official sources in the Philippine government. Press reports from Manila said Washington also wants to include Singapore and Thailand in the alliance while encouraging Malaysia to become its strategic partner.”

Last month, Obama announced the U.S. would abide by the terms of its defense treaty with Japan if its dispute with China about dominion over the Diaoyu islands (called Senkaku by Japan) became a serious confrontation. The U.S. hasn’t said what it would do in that event. At worst is the surreal possibility of a war over possession of several uninhabited mostly barren islands that are little more than rocks, the largest being 1.7 miles square. The irony is that the Obama Administration does not have a position on which country actually has the right to possession —Taiwan also claims the islands — but it will defend Japan in event of a confrontation.

“In the Chinese perception,” according to J.M. Norton in The Diplomat April 21:

“Washington is the principal driver of Japan’s transformation. Over time it has helped transform [‘pacifist’] Japan’s self-defense force into a national military. And it has assisted the Japanese side in acquiring and manufacturing through joint cooperation technologically advanced weapon systems, some of which have offensive capabilities. Right now the Chinese leadership sees the U.S. as the main driver of Japan’s resurgence and as lacking the political will to restrain an increasingly assertive Japan. Further, the current Japanese leadership’s increasing assertiveness takes place in the context of growing nationalism with an imperial twist. In short, from the Chinese viewpoint, U.S. leaderships have spurred the ‘revival and outward expansion of Japanese militarism,’ which represents a violation of Chinese concerns articulated in the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué establishing Sino-U.S. relations.”

2. Economic: Washington’s hoped for economic power in the Far East is the vast expansion of the relatively small Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was formed by the Bush Administration in 2006. The Obama Administration seeks to transform the TPP into the most important free trade organization in the East Asia/Pacific region with participating countries from the Americas, the main Pacific island nations, and as many states on the Asian mainland as possible. Ideally, from the White House perspective, such an entity would surpass all other East and South Asian regional trade groupings. China, which has been excluded from the TPP, supports development of an inter-Asian trade organization similar to a 2012 proposal by the Association of South East Asian Nations. According to a June 9 article in Global Times by Lancaster University (UK)

Professor Du Ming, “Both ASEAN and China share concerns that the TPP may be a centrifugal force arising to rip asunder the economic integration of East Asia.”

An important purpose of the TPP is to position the U.S. as a major economic actor in Asia, reinforcing its global dominance and extending its sphere of influence into China’s front and back yards. The trade deal, however, has encountered many problems in the U.S. as well as Asia. Among some countries, including many people and politicians in the U.S., there is a fear that the still mostly secret deal allows capitalism to run riot against the interests of the people. Congress has rejected Obama’s demand for fast-track approval of TTP, indicating continued delay as changes are made. Supporters of environmental sanity, labor rights and full disclosure are among the most vociferous opponents.

Despite satisfying the U.S. by apparent willingness to return toward militarism, Japan’s right wing nationalist Prime Minister Shinzo Abe refused Obama his main reason for visiting Tokyo in April. He did not agree to become a TPP member, despite the American president’s extreme entreaties. Japan — the intended Asian keystone of the project — demands concessions on agricultural tariffs and automobiles.

It must be understood that the United States has no desire to weaken China economically, just politically so that it cannot erode Washington’s unilateral world leadership. Indeed, as Indian correspondent M. K. Bhadrakumar wrote in Asia Times May 9:

“China’s growth is integral to the recovery and rejuvenation of the American economy. China is potentially the principal source of investment in the American economy. China’s proposed reforms in the direction of opening up the financial system and domestic market are hugely attractive for the American business.”

3. Military: This is where all Washington’s continual pledges that it isn’t out to “contain” China fall apart. The U.S. has surrounded China with an ever-increasing ring of military fire, from NSA surveillance and spy satellites, to Army, Marine, Navy and Air Force bases; from nuclear-armed submarines and a majority of America’s 11 mammoth aircraft carriers to warships, bombers and fighters in dozens of varieties; from short-, medium- and long-range missiles to thousands of nuclear weapons that can be fired from the U.S. and demolish hundreds of major Chinese cities. This does not include firepower from America’s ally, Japan, which amazingly possesses a larger and stronger navy and air force than China.

While it is true China is far behind the U.S. in military technology, weapons development and a contemporary arsenal it is trying to catch up. The U.S. continually complains about the size of Beijing’s war budget, but it is at most a tenth that of the U.S. budget. Indeed, the 2012 combined military spending of China, Russia, the UK, Japan, France, Saudi Arabia, India, Germany, Italy and Brazil are close but cannot match the Pentagon’s yearly spending about \$650 billion — and this doesn’t count an almost equal sum for national security outlay, including Homeland Defense, enormous interest payments on past war debts, building and maintaining nuclear weapons, fielding 17 government spy agencies and costs related to security and war by other government departments.

But isn't the U.S. cutting defense spending while China is increasing? In answer we'll quote from President Obama's November 2011 speech to the Australian parliament when he announced the U.S. was expanding its role in the Asia/Pacific region:

"I have directed my national security team to make our presence and mission in the Asia Pacific a top priority. As a result, reductions in U.S. defense spending will not, I repeat, will not, come at the expense of the Asia Pacific. Indeed, we are already modernizing America's defense posture across the Asia Pacific. It will be more broadly distributed, maintaining our strong presence in Japan and the Korean peninsula, while enhancing our presence in South-East Asia."

Two things must be kept in mind:

(1) Militarily, China is at least 20 years behind the U.S., but it is swiftly improving its weapons technology, development and manufacturing. The U.S., however, is doing the same and it plans to retain a huge lead well into the future. (2) Beijing has sought no military bases abroad (compared to 800 for the Pentagon) because its main interest by far is developing, enriching and protecting its own territory. Don't touch Tibet. Breakaway Taiwan does not deny it is part of China, so its apostasy is accepted. Hong Kong is what the Chinese Communist Party used to call a bourgeois democracy, but it remains part of China so hands off. China has some sharp squabbles with its neighbors, which is unfortunate, but it is about China Sea territories Beijing has long assumed were part of China. The present system is too confrontational and it is not all because of China by any means, despite contrary White House allegations.

Since the pivot was announced, the number of U.S. bases in Asia/Pacific has been expanding rapidly, from Australia to the Philippines. According to Agence France Presse April 28:

"The Pentagon has been scouring the western Pacific for alternative airfields for its aircraft, harbors for its ships and bases for its troops.... The plan to spread the U.S. military's presence across the region accelerated in late April as President Barack Obama visited the Philippines. Although Manila asked the U.S. to vacate its longstanding bases in the country [in 1991 after mass protests], Chinese assertiveness has generated a change of heart: the U.S. and the Philippines signed a new agreement today that will allow more visits by U.S. aircraft and ships and a rotating presence of marines....

"The U.S. military has been quietly putting in place arrangements that will give it a much broader geographic presence in the Asia-Pacific region to deal with the growing challenge from China.... One part of that new approach has been to boost [military] co-operation with longstanding allies.... The other approach has been to revamp older facilities on the many small islands further out into the Pacific, most of which are at the outer edge of China's missile range."

Incidentally, the U.S. and Japan have both agreed not to respect China's establishment of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea that includes the Diaoyu islands. Beijing's zone overlaps that of Tokyo (which has existed since 1969), reflecting differences over territorial rights. Beijing's zone extends 81 miles from China, exactly the length of Tokyo's zone from Japan. The ADIZ, in accordance with international rules, requires aircraft to be identified when entering the zone. The day after China's move last November, a U.S. plane entered the

zone intentionally not identifying itself, a practice that has continued without any Chinese retaliation. Should an airplane enter the U.S. ADIZ refusing to identify itself, warplanes would force the offending aircraft to the ground one way or another.

It could fill a book to list and describe all the military preparations the U.S. is taking vis-à-vis China. If Beijing just took one similar step, such as sending a surveillance ship into the Caribbean, as the U.S. does routinely in the China Sea, there would be a threatening outcry from Washington to desist or face military action.

The point is that while aspects of the pivot may have slowed down somewhat, the military part is developing rapidly. Reports about the buildup appear in the press from time to time, but the great majority of the American people have no idea what's happening, and many who do are misled.

It's probably understandable why President Obama refused to mention the pivot, much less the details, in his speech. But if he did it would only be in superficial generalities about America's good intentions. As yet there has not been an honest national discussion of the purpose behind the military buildup, the defense treaties, the TPP, the effort to contain China and the dedication to continue American leadership (global hegemony) for the rest of the century. To do so, in a nationwide speech no less, would make it appear that a serious future confrontation may be on the horizon. And that, of course, is impossible — isn't it?