

US Rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific: Implications for West Asia

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States adopt postures and pursue policies in response to the global situation. As the global situation evolves, so do the strategic choices of the states. During the Cold War, the United States was completely focussed on the Soviet Union and constantly striving to contain – and if possible, to roll back - the Soviet presence from the Third World. The best and the brightest in the American academia studied the Soviet Union and the Kremlinologists occupied the best births among policy wonks.

The decline of Marxism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union changed all that. The ideologues of Marxism shifted their sights to the new ideology of Islam. Initially, the emergence of independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus received its share of international attention. The US interest in the large quantities of oil and gas and US concerns over nuclear proliferation and re-emergence of Islam dominated its foreign policy calculus. Very soon thereafter, West Asia acquired the status of the most crucial region. After the nine-eleven, the “Global War on Terrorism” led the US into long-drawn-out wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. In the process its military reach extended and deepened throughout West Asia and beyond.

It is China that now occupies the epicentre of US worldview. In 2011, the Obama administration made a series of pronouncements on a pivot to Asia-Pacific, identifying it as a priority region. The US would deploy greater naval assets, create new military capabilities and prepare to engage in a newly formulated “Air Sea Battle” in the region. The first demonstrative act of the pivot was the US-Japan announcement of the Dynamic Defence Force in October 2011 that would lead to a broadened military alliance.

A year after the initial pronouncements on pivot, the policy was rechristened “rebalancing”. It down played the military aspects of the pivot, emphasized economic cooperation and called for closer engagement with China. A Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) between the US and some twelve states in the region would create a free trade area. Simultaneously, the US would enhance its economic assistance and deepen its diplomatic involvement. Consequently, the attitude to China has moved from tacit confrontation to cautious accommodation.

The twenty-first century is widely expected to be the Asian Century. The economic growth in Asia is expected to outpace the West by a wide margin. At the same time, the Asia-

Pacific hosts a number of formidable problems - some long-standing and some of recent origin. The legal and political status of Taiwan is fraught with the potential of conflict. A defiant North Korea has acquired nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities. South China Sea has become a jumble of contesting territorial claims by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia. The islands in the East China Sea are disputed among China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. The recent Chinese announcement of an Air Defence Identification Zone over the East China Sea and the unhindered exploratory flights of two American B-52 bombers right through it may yet lead to an ugly situation in future.

These issues are central to the US concerns and directly impinge on the US security in the long run. In the circumstances, Asia-Pacific has become a hotbed of competition; mainly between the US and China. The US needs to stand firm with its Allies in the face of an assertive Chinese foreign policy. It also needs to demonstrate that the decade-long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have not sapped its will to lead the world, and that its economic downturn would not diminish its commitment to its Allies.

An interesting aspect of the pivot/rebalancing is that it has had a very short gestation period. Consequently, it has led to a lot of questioning among the US allies and adversaries. A vigorous public debate about its implications and fallouts has ensued. A bipartisan group of the US Congress has written to the National Security Advisor Susan Rice to conduct a formal strategy review of the Administration's approach to the US global military posture. The Europeans are unsure of what the pivot might bring to them. The US has had to placate the European Allies. The US vice president Joe Biden has had to reassure the Europeans that the US is not leaving them. "Europe remains the cornerstone of our engagement with the rest of the world. That is a fact. We are not going anywhere." In the Asia-Pacific itself, the sceptics view it as a lot of rhetoric and many fear destabilization and destruction as happened in West Asia during US decade of "democratization" there.

In West Asia, Israel and the Arab states in the Gulf are equally worried. The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is still insistent on the US strikes on Iran. Amitai Etzioni, an Israeli-American Sociologist at the George Washington University, argues that the pivot is premature. According to him, it will take decades before China's People's Liberation Army will be in a position to threaten the super power status of the US. In the meanwhile, turning away from West Asia where a number of urgent challenges remain, including the Syrian civil war, the ongoing struggle with the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and Iran's nuclear programme would undermine the US interests and needlessly antagonise China.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are diametrically opposite prescriptions from within the US think tanks calling for quietly downgrading involvement in the sorry mess of West Asia as the problems there can at best be managed, but never solved.

There is palpable fear among the Syrian rebels and their supporters inside the US establishment about the US distraction from West Asia. Senator John McCain, a leading Republican Senator and an advocate of greater US support to the Syrian rebels, threatened to hold up General Michael Dempsey's confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed

Services Committee as the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff on the issue of US commitment to Syria.

The US administration has sought to assuage the West Asian feelings that the ties with Asia-Pacific would not be at the expense of West Asia. The US Central Command has rolled out staggering statistics of US military presence deployed there: 125,000 American troops around Iran including 90,000 in and around Afghanistan, 20,000 in West Asia and 15,000 to 20,000 serving on warships. The Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel has pronounced the US ties to the region as unbreakable, but that they needed to be “renewed and reinvigorated after a decade of war.” At the same time, however, he has had to defend the US commitment to prioritize its posture, activity and investment in Asia-Pacific leaving the people in Europe, West Asia and Asia-Pacific thoroughly confused.

The situation on the ground, in the circumstances, remains a better guide to assess whether the US is retreating from West Asia. The US forces have withdrawn from Iraq and are in the process of withdrawing from Afghanistan. The US chose to lead from behind on the Libyan “Spring”. It refused to accept the French-Turkish proposal to set up a “No Fly Zone” in Syria and opted to work through the “Friends of Syria” instead. As of now, it has chosen to step back from a confrontation with Syria. And finally, it has signed an interim nuclear deal with Iran indicating its preference to work through multi-lateral diplomatic channel.

There are two factors that have facilitated the direction of perceptible US retreat from West Asia. One, the production of shale oil and gas has largely diminished US dependence on the imported energy from West Asia. In fact, the country may in future become an energy exporter. Two, the US economic turndown has put severe limitations on its power projection worldwide. The US federal government shutdown for over two weeks over budget allocations has rung alarm bells worldwide. The fact that President Obama had to call off his week-long visit to Asia to attend the APEC and ASEAN summits has raised serious questions regarding the US security assurances and economic contribution to Asia-Pacific as also to West Asia.

The soothing sounds to the European and West Asian Allies, in the circumstances, remain just sounds. A greater attention to Asia-Pacific would necessarily translate into that much lesser attention everywhere else. Asia-Pacific is bound to remain at the top of the US foreign policy agenda – till the international situation warrants a relook. In coming years, the US global posture may set less ambitious goals and allocate fewer resources to pursue them.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.