

THE US PIVOT TO ASIA – AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Admiral Arun Prakash PVSM, AVSM, VrC, VSM (Retd)

Interpreting the Pivot

“As the war in Iraq winds down and America begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the United States stands at a pivot point,” wrote (then) US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in the November 2011 issue of Foreign Policy magazine. She went on to declare, ‘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.’¹

It was President Obama’s announcement, thereafter, of a shift in America’s geopolitical emphasis from Europe, the Atlantic and the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific that added a new phrase to the geo-political lexicon: ‘US pivot to Asia.’ A subsequent change to ‘rebalance’ has not helped to dispel the haze of ambiguity surrounding this concept. Many wonder if the ‘pivot to Asia’ is merely a foreign policy course-correction or does it represent an Obama Doctrine; and if so, is it a part of a considered US Grand Strategy?

These questions are not just of academic significance. The ‘pivot’ obviously contains the ingredients of a comprehensive plan with political, economic and military connotations, which promise to have a far-reaching impact on the Indo-Pacific. Since the future geo-political environment of the region is involved, it is vital to understand the motivations that undergird America’s policies. If India fails to ‘read the tea leaves’ properly, it may frame inappropriate policies, with unhappy consequences.

The first step in the process is to understand what the US is attempting to achieve, and why. While exploring the motivation and objectives of sovereign nations a reference to International Relations (IR) theory helps put things in perspective.

¹Clinton, Hillary (November 2011). ‘America’s Pacific Century’. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved 7 June 2013.

An IR Perspective

Political-scientist George Modelski has theorized that the international system seeks a hegemon, or a dominant single state, in order to maintain stability. Quoting historical precedents of Portugal, the Dutch Republic, Britain and USA, Modelski says that global hegemonic dominance is a cyclical phenomenon lasting about a century, after which the title of ‘most powerful nation in the world’ changes hands. Change is accompanied by conflict, with naval power and economic dominance playing important roles.² Modelski has suggested that the 1970s marked the beginning of America’s decline, and that a new cycle could now be under way wherein a competitor (read ‘China’) would progressively seek to gain more authority in the global system, aiming to accomplish a transition in hegemony by mid-century.

On current trends, China’s rapidly growing economy promises to endow it with all the attributes of a great power by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic. This is the date by which President Xi Jinping has declared China’s intent to become a ‘fully developed nation’ and thus to attain strategic equivalence with the US. Once this happens, a bipolar world is certainly on the cards and so may be the demise of US primacy.³

Critics of this theory point out that it does not take into account imponderables, such as strength of institutions, national character, resilience and the ability of nations to re-invent themselves. These could help them defy such predictions and stay on an extended upward trajectory. It is in this context that one needs to look at America’s ability to create policy initiatives, doctrines and grand-strategies to meet emerging challenges head on.

The policy of non-interventionism established by President George Washington was maintained by the USA throughout most of the nineteenth century, and right up to WW II, with WW I being termed an ‘unavoidable exception.’ But despite isolationism being the accepted ‘American way,’ US leadership has always produced strategic grand-designs to protect national interests and meet foreign policy challenges; including global conflicts, regional

²George Modelski, “The Evolution of Global Politics,” *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Vol. 1, No. 7, 1995, <http://jwsr.ucr.edu>.

³Tellis, Ashley J, *Balancing Without Containment*, (Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), pp 2-4.

insurgencies and the Cold War. Concepts such as the 19th century Manifest Destiny, the Monroe Doctrine and later Containment and the Reagan Doctrines are examples of strategic innovation.

The post-WW II period has actually been one of active US interventionism ranging from military campaigns to covert operations. Neither the bitter Vietnam experience nor the demise of Communism seems to have done much to dampen this ardour. However, the long drawn out, expensive and inconclusive Middle East conflicts of the past decade may have served to push the pendulum of US public opinion back towards isolationism.

At this moment, America remains the world's pre-eminent power combining military strength and global technological leadership with the world's largest economy. Yet, in China there is a potentially powerful state, clearly revisionist in outlook, which threatens America's pre-eminence and could pose a danger to peace and stability. The expectation is that the US would try to preserve and extend its dominant position as far into the future as possible in the face of a resurgent China. As far back as 2001, Henry Kissinger had articulated the US dilemma: 'Was China a partner or adversary? Was the future to be cooperation or confrontation? Was the American mission to democratise China or cooperate with China for world peace?'⁴

It is against the background of an impending flux in geo-politics as well as a possible balance of power struggle that we must view a new strategy such as the pivot to Asia. Let us start by addressing the motivations that may underpin this US strategy.

Economic Rise of the East

In the mid-18th century Asia had more than half of the world's population and represented more than half its product. Just a hundred and fifty years later, European mercantilism and the industrial revolution had reduced Asia's share of products to 1/5th of the world total. Current predictions are that the 21st century will witness the restoration of Asia to its historical position of economic prominence.

⁴*Kissinger, Henry, On China, (London, Penguin Books, 2012), p 486.*

This ‘steady shift of power, as well as of productive base, from the old Anglo-Saxon world to the new peripheries of Asia,’⁵ is prompting the Indo-Pacific to demand its rightful place on the high table. At the same time, there is acute awareness that regional stability and prosperity for the past six decades have been underwritten by US military presence. Talk of America’s ‘relative decline’, therefore, causes anxiety, especially if reluctance is noted in its readiness to aid allies.

At such a juncture, the US needed to send out signals of reassurance to partners and to lay stress upon the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific. The ‘re-balance’ is, thus, an acknowledgment of Asia’s growing importance and the gradual shift of the focus of economic and political activity to this part of the world.

Let us, then, come to the second, and far more pressing, reason for the pivot, one which often remains understated: the spectacular rise of China.

A Resurgent China

As the most focused and vibrant Asian power, which is now within striking distance of global stature, China presents a complex set of dynamics. Underpinned by massive foreign capital inflows and phenomenal low-cost productivity, the Chinese economy has grown at around 10% for an unprecedented 30 years. This economic boom has been complemented on the one hand by modernisation and up-gradation of all components of the military and, on the other, by carefully orchestrated diplomacy to buttress economic interests across the world.

In its quest for securing strategic resources, China has cast its net world-wide and is building a navy which will safeguard its far flung economic interests and extended sea lines of communication. Chinese shipyards are rapidly adding to its fleet of modern destroyers, frigates and diesel submarines. Its force of homebuilt nuclear submarines is now ready for operational deployment, and its first aircraft carrier is at sea, with more on the way. The extended anti-piracy

⁵Tellis, Ashley J, *Pivot or Pirouette: the US Rebalance to Asia*, (Bangalore, National Institute of Advance Studies, 2014), p.3.

deployments off the Horn of Africa have helped hone its skills for operations in distant waters.⁶

Every nation has the right to acquire capabilities it considers necessary to safeguard national interests. Responsible nations, however, remain sensitive to the distinct possibility of creating 'security dilemmas', whereby actions by a state intended to heighten its own security can lead other states to respond with similar measures, producing an action-reaction cycle and heightening tensions. In this context, China's secrecy-obsessed Communist regime has offered no rationale or reassurance to neighbours for its huge military expansion. On the contrary, its words and deeds have served to send a disturbing message from the Pacific to the Himalayas. Let me give you an Indian viewpoint.

India's View of China

As two of the world's largest geographic, demographic and military entities, each in quest of scarce resources to fuel its growing economy, China and India make uneasy nuclear-armed neighbours. In Indian eyes, China's intentions remain highly suspect for a number of reasons. It has indulged in nuclear and missile proliferation in our neighbourhood, and is known to have handed over nuclear bomb designs and expertise, as well as a whole family of ballistic missiles, to neighbouring Pakistan. Having amicably settled boundary disputes with 15 of its other neighbours, China has not only been in adverse occupation of a large chunk of Indian territory in Aksai Chin, but also stakes serious claim to the entire north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Chinese and the Indian armies are ranged against each other on the icy Himalayan wastes; often in eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations. China has wrought dramatic improvements to enhance its military posture on the Tibetan plateau. Given the location of missile sites, air-bases and army formations - all connected with a rail and road network - the military equation in the Himalayas is heavily loaded against India's ground and air forces. In case of conflict, where Pakistan may act in concert with China, the best that the Indian forces can hope to achieve is a precarious stalemate. Against this backdrop, navalists are urging that India needs to look seawards for a countervailing maritime strategy. India's peninsular configuration, its island territories and its growing maritime power invest it with

⁶Arun Prakash, China's "Maritime Challenge in the Indian Ocean", *Maritime Affairs* 7, No.1 (Summer 2011), 31.

the potential to dominate Indian Ocean sea lanes and possibly exploit what has been termed as China's 'Malacca dilemma'.

For the present, however, India remains engaged with China; trade is rapidly burgeoning and diplomats and soldiers meet regularly for consultations.

Indian Interests in the Pacific

As the contours of a Chinese grand-strategy, based on the acquisition of substantive maritime power, emerge, India needs to worry about the conflict-potential of overlapping interests. While China's neurosis about its Indian Ocean trade and energy lifelines, manifesting itself in the 'string of pearls strategy', receives much attention, less well-known are the rapidly growing Indian interests in the Pacific.

Almost, 55% of India's trade with the greater Asia Pacific area transits through the South China Sea. In 1996, Indian oil major, ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL), joined a consortium of US, Russian and Japanese companies for drilling and production-sharing on Russia's Sakhalin Island in the Okhotsk Sea. This oil is shipped by tanker to refineries on India's west coast. OVL has also been awarded offshore oil exploration rights in Vietnam's Phu Khanh Basin. It has, so far, invested \$ 110 million in this venture, but work has been suspended due to a Chinese claim over the Vietnamese EEZ.

Given these interests, it is essential for India to have unfettered access to the region, and continued Chinese attempts to dominate these waters represent an impediment to India's trade and energy supplies. This is one of the reasons that India initiated an energetic 'Look East' policy in the early 1990s, which has received warm support from SE Asia, and has resulted in a strategic ASEAN-India partnership. A new development, which could have far-reaching implications for the Indo-Pacific region, is the rapidly warming ties between India and Japan. This budding relationship is underpinned by two motives. One is common economic interest, driven by India's high growth and need for technology, and Japan's need for overseas options for its economy. The other key driver is a shared sense of apprehension about China's increasingly vociferous claims to both Indian and Japanese territory.

In a related context, Indo-Australian security ties, too, have received a boost in recent months. Theoretically, a US-India-Japan-Australia quadrilateral

could form the core of a larger Asian alliance, in which other nations may join as equal partners. However, such an initiative is likely to ring alarm bells in Beijing and there is need for circumspection. At this juncture, it is useful to explore the possibilities and limitations of the US Pivot, and what its contours are likely to be.

Contours of the Pivot

Chairman Deng Xiaoping's ideological somersault of 1978, the trigger for China's dramatic transformation, was seen by the USA as an opportunity to integrate this newly awakened giant into the international system. This was a process that had begun with President Nixon's path-breaking visit to China in 1973. In the ensuing four decades, it has served to create extensive Sino-US trading links and a deep economic inter-dependence. Today, US-China trade amounts to half a trillion dollars and China happens to be the largest foreign holder of US public debt.

Even till as late as the turn of the century, it was not appreciated that the meteoric trajectory of China's economic and military power would enable it to pose a challenge to US supremacy and cause deep anxiety amongst its Asia-Pacific allies. By the time the truth began to sink in, the 9/11 trauma and its decade-long aftermath had deflected attention from this emerging challenge. It was not till end-2012 that the US took full cognizance of the credible military, nuclear, space and cyber capabilities China had developed and the hegemonic ambitions that they had aroused in Beijing.⁷

Hegemonic competition is a zero-sum game and the prospect that China may, one day, achieve its ambition of becoming America's peer, or even superceding it in economic and military power, is unnerving, not only for the US but for friends and allies. China, its part, far from offering reassurance, has reinforced everyone's worst fears by its belligerent conduct with neighbours.

As far as the Indo-Pacific stakeholders are concerned, the stated motives underlying America's Pivot to Asia are unexceptionable. It is in everyone's interest to ensure that international norms and laws are respected, commerce and navigation remain unimpeded, and disagreements are resolved without coercion. The question that looms large is: what are the options available for its implementation or execution?

⁷Tellis, *Pivot or Pirouette*, p. 12.

Let us start with the assumption that neither China, delicately poised on the verge of attaining great-power status, nor the US, still recovering from the after-effects of two major conflicts and an economic crisis, nor any Indo-Pacific nation would want an expensive and destructive ‘hot war’ to take place.

That throws up the option of Containment; a strategy successfully pursued by the USA to vanquish an earlier hegemonic rival: the USSR. Containment demanded the complete isolation of Soviet Russia; it resulted in polarization of the world into two power-blocs, which faced off for decades before its collapse could be brought about. Given China’s deep economic and trade linkages with the US as well as other Asian countries, containment is clearly infeasible because of the collateral damage it will cause all round. For the USA, the problem boils down to the harsh dilemma of ‘how do you go to war with your own banker?’⁸

The Pivot must, therefore, encompass a basket of policies or strategies combining active engagement with robust deterrence. At one level, even as nations continue to have trade and economic engagement with a rising China, they must retain sufficient leverage to ensure that it remains within the bounds of normative behaviour. At another level, a dominant component of the ‘pivot’ would be sustained US military presence in the region, continuously calibrated to offset China’s ‘anti-access’ and ‘area denial’ (commonly termed ‘A2AD’) strategies and to check its hegemonic ambitions.

The situation requires that countries on China’s periphery, and vulnerable to strong-arm tactics being exhibited by Beijing, especially in the East and South China Seas, must bolster their economic and military capabilities, with US assistance if necessary. Such nations must also consider coming together in an Indo-Pacific maritime partnership, informal or formal, which can become a forum for addressing areas of mutual concern. ASEAN leaders have already shown the way by establishing an ASEAN Maritime Forum in 2010. The 2012 East Asia Summit upgraded it to an Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) with the objective of ‘utilizing opportunities and addressing common challenges on maritime issues.’

⁸Tellis, *Pivot or Pirouette*, p. 10

An important issue, which had awaited discussion and approval in the Indo-Pacific region, was the proposed Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES). This proposal sought an agreement on signals and procedures for conduct of naval and auxiliary vessels in case of an un-scheduled encounter or sighting at sea. In April 2014, on the opening day of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in the Chinese city of Qingdao, chiefs of Indo-Pacific navies gave their approval to the CUES.⁹ The code is not legally binding but would help in preventing a small incident at sea from snowballing into a confrontation. It may also open the doors to a broader code of conduct in the South China Sea.

Conclusion

Even as the US modifies and fine-tunes its ‘pivot to Asia’ to serve its own policy objectives, nations of the Indo-Pacific must find ways to safeguard their individual interests. India is in the unusual position of being a developing nation as well as a rising power. While its delicately poised economy requires peace and stability for growth, its rise to great power status will depend on adroit management of geopolitical challenges.

The inexorable rise of China’s economic and military power remains a dominant concern for a laggard India. China’s seaward push on both India’s flanks, its quest for resources and strident territorial claims have combined to bring intense pressure to bear on India. While it may not be able to stand up to China on its own, India, as a nuclear weapon state and a significant military and economic power, is seen by others as the only credible counterpoise to China.

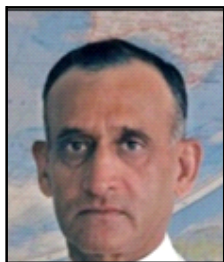
In this context, it is encouraging to see India’s new leadership reaching out to the Indo-Pacific neighbourhood to create partnerships and alliances for mutual benefit. China is very much a part of this new economic and strategic outreach. PM Modi’s forthcoming parleys with President Obama in Washington may provide an opportunity to ascertain the actual contours of the ‘US pivot’ and its implications for India.

⁹Wall Street Journal, April 22, 2014, online edition. “Pacific Navies Agree on Code of Conduct for Unplanned Encounters.” <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304049045795173427791100078>(accessed on 9th September 2014).

In the ultimate analysis, as India's policy-makers and diplomats learn to play hardball and practice realpolitik in national interest, they must constantly remind themselves of 19th century British PM Lord Palmerston's famous saying, "*Nations have no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies, only interests that are perpetual and eternal.*"



About the Author



Admiral Arun Prakash retired as the 20th naval Chief and Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee in end-2006. A naval aviator by specialisation, he has held appointments in command of ships, air squadrons and a naval air station. In flag rank he commanded the Eastern Fleet, National Defence Academy, Andaman and Nicobar Command and the Western Naval Command. His staff appointments include ACNS (Air), ACOP (HRD), COP and VCNS. Post-retirement he served as Chairman of the National Maritime Foundation and as a two-term member of the National Security Advisory Board. He lives in Goa and writes and speaks on maritime and strategic issues. The author can be reached at arunp2810@yahoo.com