

CHALLENGES TO THE US ASIA PIVOT STRATEGY

Tahir Mahmood Azad*

Muhammad Sadiq†

Majid Ali Noonari‡

Abstract

The US introduced the Asia Pivot Strategy / Rebalance Asia policy in 2011 which was also known as Asia Pivot Strategy which focuses on the maintaining equilibrium in Asia particularly in Asia Pacific region. The main architect of the policy were the Hillary Clinton and Curt Campbell. The policy is designed to contain the China in the region, and in this policy they have designed to forge close links with the US allies in the region, and the role of India has been highlighted to be the key player in its policy. The Asia Pivot Strategy is accompanied by the US Strategic Guidance Programme of 2012 which focuses on the allies concerns regarding the US commitment in the region. The policy since its implementation has faced various challenges such as the difference among the US allies on the historical issues of Japan-South Korea relations as well as the concerns over the US commitments and their reservations on the Chinese military build-up and the assertive role it has posed in the South China Sea, as well as the growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region under the Strings of Pearl, and the impact of the OBOR over the US Asia Pivot Strategy.

Keywords: Asia Pivot strategy, containment, Cooperation, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

The Asia Pacific region is considered one of the vital regions of the globe. It expands from India to Australia, and covers the vital sea

*Doctoral Research Fellow, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Reading, UK. Email: t.m.azad@pgr.reading.ac.uk

†Assistant Professor, Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. Email: msadiq@qau.edu.pk

‡Lecturer, Area Study Centre, Far East & Southeast Asia, University of Sindh, Jamshoro. Email: majid.noonari@usindh.edu.pk

lanes, and the most hostile regions of the Korean Peninsula as well the South China Sea, and the growing markets of ASEAN, China and India, and the vital US allies of Japan, Australia, and South Korea. The politics of the 21st century has shifted its attention from the Middle East to the Asia Pacific region due to the rise of India and China. China becoming the biggest competitor and concern for the US policymakers that Washington has perceived the China as a most immediate threat to the US designs and interest in the region. With the expanding trade and military clout of the Beijing it is perceived that China will adopt the aggressive posture in the region in the coming years, and their policies on Taiwan, South China Sea and One Belt One Road Initiative highlight the confidence of Beijing power in the region. Beijing sees the Asia Pivot Strategy with the concerns as it is directly aimed towards the Beijing in the region and the growing nexus between India-US-Japan-South Korea and Australia is focused towards the Chinese policies.

Realizing the significance of China as emerging power in Asia in general and in East Asia in particular, we have attempted to critically review the US Asia Pivot strategy while addressing the following questions:

1. What is the significance of Asia Pivot Strategy in maintaining the US's supremacy in the region?
2. Did emergence of China as economic power compel US for revisiting her relations and strengthening political alliance with East Asian countries in order to maintain her influence in the region?
3. What are the major challenges for US Asia Pivot strategy?

In the following sections, we will first critically review the US policies in the Asia Pacific region, and then the political and economic conditions which made US for revisiting its policies concerning the region and launching Asia Pivot strategy. Following it, we will critically review the potential challenges for Asia Pivot strategy.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE US POLICY IN ASIA PACIFIC

The end of the cold war has presented the new challenges to the US policy in global affairs, as new events have changed its foreign policy such as Iraq invasion of Kuwait in the early 1990s has brought the Gulf War-I, which has demonstrated the US military superiority over the other states, and has stamped the position of the sole superpower. In order to maintain the US superiority in post-cold war era the US administration has tried to prevent any US rival/alliances dominating the Eurasian region (Jake 2013). US during this period believed their superiority due to the fact that Soviet Union has collapsed at the end of the cold war and China was not as powerful as it is today.

Since the turn of the century the US has faced various challenges as a sole superpower who was engaged in various wars during the first decade of the 21st century such as Afghan war of 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and accompanied by the 2008 financial crisis which has weakened the US economy. During this period the US has focused mainly on Middle East and Afghanistan, and Northeast Asia particularly over the North Korea due to its nuclear crisis and ignored the major region of Southeast Asia the booming region of Asia. This presented the perception that the US influence in the region was diminishing due to the rise of new powers. On the other hand, the other powers particularly China were developing their economy and building the infrastructures in the region as well as growing their influence over the ASEAN and South Asia region due to its trade ties with the region.

The US power was reduced in the region due to lack of interest by the US administration at the end of the cold war, and their focus has been diverted towards other events around the world. This reduction has been witnessed on the foundation of East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 when US was not even invited to attend the summit mainly because of the Chinese influence as Beijing did not want to indulge any foreign power in the region's issues.

The main idea of the Asia Pivot policy was floated by the Hillary Clinton in her article of 2011 in Foreign policy on “America’s Pacific Century” writes down that the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action (Clinton, 2011). The policy was followed by the US president’s Barack Obama’s official revealing of the Asia Pivot strategy in 2011 during an address to the Australian parliament. Although the Obama administration has realized the loss of its influence and in the 2012 when the Israel and Gaza fight broke out the President Obama unlike his predecessor has attended the EAS summit to show his commitment to the region (Bonnie, 2012; Manyin, M. et al., 2012). Obama focused on the region due to two purposes that were to develop relations with the Chinese on various issues faced by the region, and to contain the growing influence of China in the region through the various strategies formed in the Asia Pivot (Hsu, 2015).

THE US ASIA PIVOT STRATEGY

US is deeply connected with the region for its security, and economics due to the fact that Asia Pacific region is one of the growing region of the global economies, and it has traditional alliances with the regions. There were two major objectives of the Asia Pivot Strategy:

1. To connect the region with the single economic hub such as the proposed agreement of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) which was initiated to connect the economies of the region, and it excluded the China which is a great concern for the China.
2. To contain the influence of China in the region and rebalance it with the US power as US holds a traditional ally of the most of the region’s states, and occupies the central place in the politics of the region.

However, with the end of the Cold War era, the US involvement in the Middle East region, and at the turn of the century the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have shifted all attention towards the other region. The attention and the downfall of the US economy have further strained the US policymakers approach towards the region which has created a huge vacuum in the region. And with the rise of the China as a booming economy the most of the Southeast Asian states have tilted towards the China to gain the benefits of economic rise in the region (Sultan, 2013). Chinese investments in the region and the opening of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), as well as the Belt and Road Initiative known as One Belt One Road (OBOR), and their growing trade highlight some of the key issues that remain the major concerns to the US rebalance policy.

CHALLENGES FOR ASIA PIVOT STRATEGY

The challenges for the US Asia Pivot strategy have been immense due to the fact that Asia Pivot strategy focuses on shifting of 60% of US naval forces to the region until 2020 and forming alliances with key states like Australia, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea and most important of them is the India. The 2014 Defense Pact with Philippines for stationing of US forces in the military bases as well as Japan and South Korea's plan to install US missile system in the East China Sea have provoked the Chinese policymakers as it presents a direct threat to the Chinese interests in the region.

The major challenge for the US remains the maritime security in the region particularly the South China Sea disputes over the claims on the islands between ASEAN members, and China as well as Japan, Republic of China (RoC or Taiwan), and other states of the region. To curb the Chinese interests in the region particularly in the South China Sea (SCS) as China has major claims over the region and the Chinese Nine Dash Line incorporates the islands in the SCS as the Chinese. The Chinese approach in the disputed area spread vibration to the surrounding countries particularly the Vietnamese and

Philippines directly encounter this. Thus the Asia-Pacific region gradually moves toward a hot boiling point (Clement, 2016).

The US activities in the SCS against the Chinese in the region in the name of the freedom of navigation has raised concerns in China. Australia has provided a base in Darwin (Australia) from where the US forces patrol the region, and Australian close security cooperation draws concerns to Beijing due to its close economic relations with the Canberra. The US has shown its commitment in the strategic Guidance Programme of 2012 by announcing that US will shift its 60% of the military resources to the region.

The threat from the allies of the US Japan and South Korea as both these states host the 80,000 US troops, and both have not so much friendly relations due to the Japanese past role particularly during the World War-II. In 2012 the relations were once again reached to its low due to the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's nationalistic views, and South Korea's concerns over the Sex (comfort) women during the World War-II who were taken captive from South Korea. But the president Obama has been successful in resolving their issues and in 2015 Tokyo and Seoul reached on consensus when Tokyo agreed to pay US\$ 9.9 million to an organization who are supporting the Sex slaves of World war-II.

The US alliance with Japan has been established after the World War-II, and have provided the mutual security to the Japanese but with the rise of Chinese economy and their assertive role for the claims in the SCS and East China Sea (ECS) has created the concerns among the policy makers in Tokyo, and the US attention and resources has been shifted towards Middle East and Afghanistan. But with the unveiling of Asia Pivot strategy, and the US commitment to the region has send the clear message to its allies that US is here and will spend the military and economic assistance to achieve their interests despite of US constraints in budget.

The Nuclear proliferation is a serious concern and remains a challenge for the US particularly the North Korean communist regime nuclear programme since their withdrawal from the NPT in 2003 and the testing of Nuclear weapons since 2006, and the development of their missile programme. The most important of them all is their threat to the US allies Japan and South Korea to face the grave consequences of nuclear war, which highlights the biggest concern of its allies in the region and US 80, 000 troops in Japan and South Korea have been stationed in both the states to defend the threat of North Korea since 1950s. The US deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD) in South Korea to deal with the North Korean aggression. Although Six Party Talks are in progress over the North Korean issue, but the major challenge remains for the US as its commitment towards its partners Japan and South Korea will boost their confidence in dealing with the North Korea, and working on to continue with the US over the Asia Pivot strategy.

The US cooperation with Vietnam has increased ever since its restoration of diplomatic relations since 1995, and the Asia Pivot strategy has been a real benefit for the Vietnam due to its search for the allies against Chinese policies and have welcome4d the US commitment, and as result US lifted the ban on sale of arms to Vietnam in 2016 by the Obama administration. They have not only developed friendly relations with the Vietnam, but with Myanmar also as they have lifted the sanctions over Myanmar, but with the developments in the Rohingya issue presents a challenge to the US policies regarding Myanmar as US remains to be the champion of the human rights around the world.

India is the key strategic partner in the Asia Pivot strategy and US way back in 2000 has identified the New Delhi as natural ally, and its actions have seen during the Kargil crisis of 1999 when it supported the Indian opinion against the Pakistan, and Clinton's visit of India in 2000 has further strengthened the relations. The relations continued to flourish despite of the US alliance with the war on terror since 2001.

The policy shift in US has changed during the Bush administration as in her 2005 visit to India of US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice where she said the United States would alter its long held framework that tied and balanced its relations with India-Pakistan (Burns, 2007).

The relations have reached to a strategic partnership due to the signing of different agreements with India such as 2006 Indo-US Nuclear Deal, as well as joint manufacturing through the sharing of technology by the US, 2016 Logistics Exchange agreement and the US support for New Delhi's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Permanent seat. Despite these cooperation India is still reluctant due to its influence of Nehru's policy over the Indian politics and the role of the India in tackling with China despite of the differences with China over the border issues since 1960s.

With the unveiling of Chinese project of One Belt One Road (OBOR) project in 2013 (the name was later changed to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)) by the Chinese president Xi Jinping to connect the Asia, Europe and Africa with the land and sea routes to increase the commerce and trade and cooperation among the states of the three continents. The project plan to build new ports, roads, railways, power plants, and special economic zones across Asia and Africa in an attempt to integrate the entire region into a massive market spanning 60 countries and a third of the world's GDP (Shepard, 2017).

The idea of the "String of Pearls" strategy became popular at the beginning of the 21st century. The strategy includes and is maintained by the use of economic, diplomatic, political and military means. By following this strategy, the dragon is trying to achieve maritime dominance in the IOR. The String of Pearls will be especially important in the 21st century since China is trying to accomplish maritime superiority, thus challenging the United States (US) and its position as a global superpower (Pejic, 2016).

The project has also highlighted the military significance and US perceived the threat to the Chinese built up of the String of Pearls which is aimed to build the ports in Hambantota (Srilanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Gwadar (Pakistan). The main idea behind building these ports is securing the maritime routes for the Chinese trade and commerce, and protect it from different threat including piracy as well as reduce the distance through using various routes of OBOR such as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which reduced the distance for more than 4000 km between Persian Gulf to Chinese ports.

Figure 1: Shows strings of Pearls



Source: <https://southfront.org/chinas-string-of-pearls-project/>

US commitments in the region has been questioned from time to time as can be witnessed in the TPP agreement where initially US agreed to participate in the 12 member economic bloc against the Chinese One Belt One Road (OBOR), and due to the pledge of Obama of US central in the TPP but later US has pulled out of the TPP due to the reservations over the impact it had on the US manufacturing sector under the Trump administration, but the other 11 member states initially were dis-appointed but later they committed to continue the agreement even without US.

CONCLUSION

The region of the Asia Pacific has been a traditional sphere of influence of the US since the end of the World War-II. Its relations with major powers of the region such as Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Australia as well as China since 1970s and with India since the end of cold war reveal her influence and power in the region. The 21st century has brought the dramatic changes to the geo-political scenario of the region due to the decline in the US power. Further, the lack of interest shown by the US in the region and the economic crisis in 1997-98 has led the realization among the regions' states particularly the ASEAN members to build cooperative and economic relations with China and resolve the issues through peaceful ways. This has led the serious implications for the US policymakers in Washington as the US traditional allies have moved closer towards Beijing due to the Chinese rise, and US lack of understanding of regional problems in the changing circumstances. Ex-President Obama's Asia Pivot strategy has been announced to address the issues region is facing, and the challenge of Chinese rise as a competitor and challenger in the region.

REFERENCES

- Bonnie S. G (2012). *Pivot to Asia: Prepare for Unintended Consequences*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available from: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pivot-asia-prepare-unintended-consequences> (Accessed: 25 November 2017).
- Burns, N. (2007). America's strategic opportunity with India: The New US-India Partnership, *Foreign Affairs*, (November / December Issue) [online] Available from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2007-11-01/americas-strategic-opportunity-india> (Accessed: 15 December 2017).

- Clement, A. (2016). The US Pivot Asia-Pacific Strategy requires India and Australia, *Modern Diplomacy*, 28 April, [online] Available from: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2016/04/28/the-us-pivot-asia-pacific-strategy-requires-india-and-australia/> (Accessed: 15 December 2017).
- Clinton, H. (2011). America's Pacific Century, *Foreign Policy*, [online] <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/> (Accessed: 20 December 2017).
- Hsu, S. (2015). China and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, *The Diplomat*, Available from: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/china-and-the-trans-pacific-partnership/> (Accessed: 11 November 2017).
- Jake (2013). *Historical Analogies in the Pivot to Asia*. Charles Center Summer Research and Scholarship. Available from: <http://ccsummerresearch.blogs.wm.edu/2013/04/21/historical-analogiesin-the-pivot-to-asia/> (Accessed on: 20 November 2017)
- Manyin, M. et al. (2012). Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "rebalancing" toward Asia, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 7-5700, March 28.
- Pejic, I. (2016). China's Strings of Pearl' Project, *South Front*, Available from: <https://southfront.org/chinas-string-of-pearls-project/> (Accessed: 10 December 2017).
- Shepard, W. (2017). Beijing to the world: Don't call the Belt and the Road Initiative OBOR, *Forbes*, Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/08/01/beijing-to-the-world-please-stop-saying-obor/1#4be83f5f6056> (Accessed: 10 December 2017).
- Sultan, B. (2013) US Asia Pivot Strategy: Implications for the Regional States, *ISSRA Papers*, pp. 135-150.