

## **China's Strategic Outlook: Challenges, Force Postures and the Future of Security in Pacific**

### **Majid Mahmood**

#### **Introduction:**

The strategic landscape of first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has largely been defined by four factors. First is the United States intervention and subsequent quagmire in the Islamic theatre i.e. the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, the resurgence of Russia's regional influence in the former Soviet space, third, the rise of China as regional power in Asia – Pacific region. Fourth is the global financial crisis which threatens the very basis of the international liberal order.

Trends in the last two decades suggest a sustained rise of China on the geopolitical map of the world. Recently, China with its \$ 5 trillion GDP has surpassed Japan as number two economy in the world. China has also embarked on a military modernization program and its symbolic, yet important expression was sea trials of an air craft carrier by People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). These and other economic developments have led some experts to believe that there is a "shift" of power from West to East.

The American strategic drive towards Asia –Pacific region has the potential to complicate China's regional position in the region. The system of alliances that United States has woven in the region spanning from North East Asia to South East Asia supplemented by forward carrier based military foot print enables it to limit the geography of Chinese regional power.

This United States strategic drive towards the Pacific is essentially a readjustment rather than the transformation of US policy in the region. Despite the constancy of the broader contours of this policy, however, there are few elements which are new in terms of strategy to meet the goals of containing China. The focus of this paper is to analyze the effect of these measures on the regional security architecture, how China views these developments in the contemporary geo political context of the region, and what is its strategic response to these developments.

China seeks a regional security order which is beneficial for its economic growth and political influence. It seeks to prevent the establishment of an "us versus them" environment in the region where China is isolated from the regional states.

This is the reason why China gives immense importance to regional cooperation mechanisms, such as Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asean regional forum (ARF) and Asia – Pacific Economic cooperation (APEC), and is actively engaged in different economic initiatives and defense dialogues.

China's official National Defense White Paper of 2010 elaborated China's regional vision. It states,

“China is still in the period of important strategic opportunities for its development. It has coped effectively with the impact of the international financial crisis, and sustained a steady and relatively rapid economic growth ...It has strengthened coordination and cooperation with major traditional powers and emerging countries, reinforced good-neighborly friendship and practical cooperation with neighboring countries”<sup>1</sup>.

On a strategic plane, China believes that defense modernization and investment in vital technologies such as anti satellite systems (ASAT), Anti-Ship Ballistic missiles, stealth air platforms, modernizing strategic nuclear forces, developing a carrier based navy etc. is vital for maintaining balance of strategic power and preventing the monopolization of power projection in the region. These developments are closely linked to China's perspective on United States Asia – Pacific posture.

On a political plane, China aims to build economic partnership and alliances so as to present itself as a viable economic partner as opposed to United States. Moreover, it is also evident that keeping United States out of resolving mechanisms, with regards to regional hot spots such as territorial disputes in South China Sea, is the core objective of China's strategy in the region.

This strategy, according to Chinese policy makers, will be instrumental in isolating US from its regional allies and encouraging regional states to join the cooperative arrangement developed by China. There are, however, limitations to this approach, which is duly recognized within China's policy making elite, as existing US alliance system in the region is fairly strong.

The paper also maps the future of security in the Pacific region by using the variables such as relative defense growth projections, constancy of current strategic relations between United States and China, their relative projected technological advancements, possibility of major US engagement in other parts of the world.

## **Regional security architecture**

In order to gauge the effects of contemporary adjustments by the US in the region; it would be pertinent to take a general overview of the regional security architecture, its basic components and nature and role of major powers. The regions considered for this purpose are ASEAN region, North East Asia and Australia in the South Pacific.

ASEAN's geopolitical importance emanates from both its economic potential and strategic location. The Association is an economic grouping of ten countries: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Countries comprising ASEAN are located on the key sea lanes that connect the energy rich Persian Gulf region with economic centers of East Asia. Vital choke points include Malacca, Sunda and Lombok. Untapped energy reserves in South China Sea have multiplied the importance of the region and also intensified the conflict.

North East Asia has countries such as North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China and Russia. Major seas include Sea of Japan, Yellow Sea and East China Sea. The region has seen multiple crises during the cold war and post cold war era. Contemporary issues driving the strategic realities of the region include North Korean nuclear and missile program and competing claims on the Islands in East China Sea by China, Japan and countries of South East Asia bordering South China Sea.

Australia is a key player in the politics of South West Pacific and South East Asia, especially with regards to US policy towards China. Australia being a militarily and economically advanced country in the region enables it to play an influential role in the politics of the region.

The security landscape of the region in the contemporary era is defined by United States, China and alignments of regional states. The first prominent feature of regional strategic landscape is the bilateral defense arrangements between United States and its allies in the region which includes Japan, South Korea, Thailand and Philippines along with important partners such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

The second prominent security feature of the region is the multilateral security dialogue based on ASEAN, ARF, APEC and ASEAN plus three. China is an active member of these processes along with US. The direction of these processes will be dictated by state of relationship in the region between these powers. For example, China has opposed any US or its allies move regarding the discussion on the South China Sea dispute in ARF and prefers bilateral negotiations with the state parties

involved. These multilayered processes also signify the fact that there is no collective treaty based organization on the lines of NATO that may be responsible for security of the region.

Third important security feature of the region is the military exercises being frequently held in and around the regional hot spots by US and its allies and China. These exercises, predominantly involving naval platforms, act as an influential factor in escalating the tensions in the region. The objective of these exercises is to gain political advantages in the region by regional actors.

United States has deployed a sizeable military foot print in the region after WWII that remains largely unchanged except for a few adjustments. In Japan, US forces, which include Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force units, are dispersed among 91 facilities located on Honshu, Kyushu, and Okinawa and total approximately 50,000 military personnel. Besides them, 52,000 family members and 5,500 Department of Defense (DOD) civilians are also stationed there<sup>2</sup>.

In South Korea, US has maintained over 35,000 active duty troops as a deterrent against North Korea and as symbol of defense commitment to South Korea. With the Republic of Philippines, United States is in a security agreement based upon the treaty of Mutual Defense since 1951. As reported in influential media quarters, Philippines, in recent months, was engaged in bilateral negotiations with US for the expansion of US military in the country.

The second major military force in the region is China. China's economic growth has enabled it to invest in advanced military capabilities such as anti-satellite systems (ASAT), Anti-Ship Ballistic missiles, stealth air platforms, modernizing strategic nuclear forces and developing a carrier based navy. China has, however, stressed that its military modernization is not directed against any other country in the region and is solely for defensive purposes. This said, however, China's military modernization does not exist in vacuum and is linked to the emerging realities in the region.

China's 2010 national defense white paper confirms these realities:

International military competition remains fierce. Major powers are stepping up the realignment of their security and military strategies, accelerating military reform... Some powers have worked out strategies for outer space, cyber space and the Polar regions, developed means for prompt global strikes, accelerated development of missile defense systems, enhanced cyber operations capabilities<sup>3</sup>

## **Challenges to China's strategic outlook: the US Pivot to Pacific**

Much is talked about the “return” of United States in the Pacific. It has raised the questions whether US and China will be able to coexist in the region, and most importantly what is the nature of challenge that China's strategic outlook will represent in the back drop of recent and future military adjustments by the US in the region. To answer these questions, it is pertinent to analyze the salient features and new elements of contemporary US strategic policies in the region.

In a classic sense, there is no real “return” of United States in the region as US has always been a Pacific power by virtue of its geography and global influence. Chinese experts view the move as mere adjustment of US previous policies in a way that looks overtly offensive and thereby generating political pressure. China's former Assistant Foreign Minister Le Yucheng in a seminar echoed his thinking on the US policy “shift” in these words:

“Recently, the United States has adjusted its policies toward the Asia-Pacific and increased its input in this region.... In my view, the US has never left the Asia-Pacific, so there is no "return" to speak of. China does not want to and cannot push the United States out of the Asia-Pacific<sup>4</sup>”

That said, however, there are certain aspects of the readjustment policy that are new in terms of strategy. These are listed below:

- Widening the geographical grid of policy i.e. linking Indian and Pacific Ocean.
- A broader distribution of forces and increasing their flexibility for deployment
- Enhancing allies capacities

First, widening the geographical zone of America's Pacific policy essentially means linking South Asia with South East Asia, North East Asia and South Pacific. In extension this also includes linking Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. This is precisely the reason why the contemporary literature terms US pivot to Pacific as America's Asia-Pacific policy. Linking these regions provides US the flexibility to increase the number of strategic partners, military bases and broadens the geographical arc of the alliance system to keep a check on China's power in the region.

On a geopolitical plane, the integration of India with other regional Asian powers such as Japan, Australia, Indonesia and Taiwan is consistent with broadening the geographical arc of US Asia – Pacific policy. Secondly, India is being freed from

regional strategic stress by US efforts which will be instrumental in shifting the focus on Indian diplomacy from South Asia to South East Asia.

Second prominent feature is the distribution of forces in the allied countries for more flexibility and maneuverability. As described in the section of regional security architecture, US since the end of World War II has kept its army and naval bases in the region. This force posture of US is largely unchanged. New developments include deployment of troops and resources in Singapore and Australia. Recently, US and Australia have agreed to station 2500 US marines in a phased approach. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin was quoted by AFP as:

“It may not be quite appropriate to intensify and expand military alliances and may not be in the interest of countries within this region<sup>5</sup>”

In Singapore, US plans to place a new class of coastal warships also known as “littoral combat ships” for a ten month deployment. The strategic importance of this move is linked to the geographical location of Singapore. It is strategically located along the straits of Malacca and links Indian and Pacific Ocean. This is the reason why US navy has placed an important logistical command unit in Singapore to coordinate warships deployment. According to reports, Changi naval base is the only facility in South East Asia that can dock a US Aircraft carrier<sup>6</sup>.

US and Philippines are engaged in talks for rotational deployment of US troops and surveillance aircrafts. Additionally, Philippines is also a part of American strategy to bolster defense capabilities of allies in the region through several programs such as military training and exercises. US is also placing troops withdrawn from Japan’s Okinawa Islands on Guam Island in the Pacific ocean<sup>7</sup>.

Building defense capabilities of allies in the region through military exchange programs, joint military exercises and exporting defense equipment is the third component of American strategy in the region.

The spreading of US military foot print in the region means that US strategy is to militarize the region to create an anxiety and generate a response from China that can potentially isolate China in the region. Moreover, the new strategy of expanding force deployments also aims to strengthen the control and oversight over regional hotspots and improve access to vital sea lanes of communications and choke points thereby oversighting China’s access to these strategic locations.

## **China's view of security in the Region**

China seeks a security order in the region that is conducive for its economic development and preventing an environment where China is isolated. China's five principles of mutual co existence give an interesting insight and explanation of the policy objectives mentioned above. These principles are:

- Non interference,
- Mutual respect for each other's territory integrity
- Mutual nonaggression
- Equality and mutual benefits
- Peaceful coexistence

Some western observers have interpreted China's recent behavior and military modernization contrary to these principles but a deeper look into the situation paints a different picture. If policy of mutual coexistence is adopted by the regional states, United States role as a major factor in regional politics will be diminished. This is due to the fact that US relevance in the region will remain only if the regional hot spots continue to exist. They can be stirred up when necessary with the potential to gravitate regional states towards US for protection.

Another important aspect of China's security viewpoint in the region is the rejection of third party mediation in the regional territorial disputes vital to Chinese national interests such as in South China Sea. Moreover, China has consistently opposed the naval exercises around the disputed Islands in the South China Sea organized by the US and its regional allies such as Philippines.

In recent years, China has been more vocal and assertive in its claims towards the disputed Islands of South and East China Sea. The September 2010 diplomatic crisis between China and Japan, over the interception of Chinese fishing boats by Japan's maritime authorities, was manifestation of Chinese sensitivities over the issue. Furthermore China recently laid claims to some of the Islands in East China Sea. This also signifies the importance of defending the maritime boundaries, claims over contested Islands and energy security in China's security perception in the region.

With regards to the American factor in the region, there is a general belief within China that United States has always been a Pacific power and is there to stay. What China ultimately wants is a relationship which is more balanced, recognizes China's regional role as a key driver of the political discourse and does not pose a threat to its energy supply line from Middle East and Africa.

Hu Jintao, former President of People Republic of China, expressed this line of thought of Chinese policy makers during his visit to US in 2011:

“The Asia-Pacific region is where China and the United States have the most overlapping interests. Cooperation between our two countries in the region is crucial to the regional situation and the growth of our bilateral relations.... China-US relationship is not one in which one side's gain means the other side's loss. Rather, it should be a relationship in which the two sides respect each other and endeavor to deepen strategic mutual trust<sup>8</sup>”

Given the optimism in bilateral relationship in the regional context, however, there is recognition within China that US regional arrangements and defense posture has the potential to create a security dilemma for China. China’s official national defense white paper cognizant of this fact has described the military modernization patterns in these words:

“International military competition remains fierce. Major Powers are stepping up the realignment of their security and military strategies.... Some powers have worked out strategies for outer space, cyber space and the polar regions, developed means for prompt global strikes, accelerated development of missile defense systems, enhanced cyber operations capabilities to occupy new strategic commanding heights<sup>9</sup>”.

China’s assessment of limits of US power in the region is also an important factor that defines its strategy. Chinese policy making elite believe that the drive towards multipolrization of global politics is irreversible. In particular, the global financial crisis and the resultant budgetary cuts in defense spending, Syrian issue and Arab Spring are seen as significant factors amongst others by China that will limit US maneuverability in Asia – Pacific.

In sum, China’s view of security in the region is predominantly shaped by the patterns of US strategic policies and its relations with China, US and its regional allies. China remains opposed to the formation of treaty based security architecture on the lines of NATO and is pessimistic about the possibility of its formation either. Mutual cooperation with regional countries in the form of bilateral trade and participating in regional defense forums is likely to remain the hall mark of China’s strategy to counter initiatives led by the United States.



### **The Chinese response to US “Pivot”:**

An analysis of China’s foreign policy actions and powerful stakeholders within China’s policy elite shows two distinct patterns.

One established line of thinking is the indispensability of global liberal order to China’s development. Important government documents show China’s desire of collective economic progress and collective security. This in essence is putting faith in liberal institutions regulating global monetary and strategic matters.

On the other hand, however, the pursuit of rapid military modernization and increasing defense budgets is also a consistent pattern.

From this perspective, China has increased its diplomatic activities in the region which is already the part of ongoing process of its strategy. The fundamental objective of China’s diplomatic drive and tilt towards regionalism is to guard against emergence of a “hostile China” image. In the backdrop of America’s shift of resources towards the Asia- Pacific region, China feels that its image needs to be presented as a constructive player in regional political discourse. In order to achieve this important strategic objective, it does not want to be seen as a threat to the interest of other states in the region.

This theme was echoed by China’s former Assistant Foreign Minister Le Yucheng in a December 2011 speech where he said:

“The Pacific Ocean is vast enough to accommodate the coexistence and cooperation between these two big countries...In the face of the changing situation; we should seek cooperation, not confrontation, to solve issues. We must be confident that as long as China is committed to peaceful development, openness and cooperation and can attend our own affairs well, nobody can encircle us or keep us out<sup>10</sup>”

This view was pursued by Chinese diplomacy in the region. Chinese former Premier Wen Jiabao attended the 14<sup>th</sup> China – ASEAN summit, 14th Summit of ASEAN and China, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) (10+3) and 6th East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali, Indonesia in November 2011 and proposed several important initiatives for deepening cooperation amongst the member states. Present Chinese Premier Li Keqiang is following up on these initiatives.

Free trade agreements and cultural exchanges with ASEAN constitute an important component of this strategy.

To meet military challenge to its interest, China has kept up the steady pace of defense modernization, consistent with the doctrinal conceptualization summed up in four points in 2010 national defense white paper<sup>11</sup>:

- Safeguarding national sovereignty, security and interests of national development. China's national defense is tasked to guard against and resist aggression, defend the security of China's lands, inland waters, territorial waters and airspace, safeguard its maritime rights and interests, and maintain its security interests in space, electromagnetic space and cyber space
- Maintaining social harmony and stability
- Accelerating the modernization of national defense and the armed forces to make it capable of fighting and winning “local wars under conditions of informatization.”
- Maintaining world peace and stability

This conceptual framework has led to the following developments.

- Investment in Area Denial and Anti-access technologies such as land based anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles and stealth aircraft.
- Increasing defense budgets.
- Modernizing strategic nuclear forces.
- Introducing the carrier based naval concept.
- Test deployment of its first air craft carrier in South China Sea.
- Increasing and improving presence in space.
- Investing in and operationalizing Anti Satellite weapons system (ASAT)

In addition to these developments, the existing naval, air and land doctrines of PLA have undergone the requisite changes to support the mentioned objectives of China’s military forces. US “readjustment” of force structure in the region, as noted earlier, will be facing an anti access environment at the end of this decade.

## **Future of security in Pacific**

The future remains as unpredictable as ever in a dynamic global scene. The factors that may shape the future security landscape, keeping in view the contemporary geostrategic and geopolitical realities explained in above sections, are considered to be as follows:

- Relative projected technological advancements in defense sector
- Growth projections in terms of defense spending
- Continuation of current strategic relations between United States, China and regional countries.
- Intensity of approach towards regional hotspots.
- The status of US as a global power and its possible engagement or falling into a quagmire in any other part of the world for example Afghanistan and Middle East.

On the basis of these factors, pattern of strategic developments in 2020 may emerge as follows:

- The overall strategic environment in the region will become increasingly competitive particularly with respect to access to energy resources and its transportation through sea routes.
- A stable strategic balance between United States and China in the region will emerge
- The regional hotspots or territorial disputes are unlikely to be resolved in this decade.
- China's breakthrough in the US alliance system will become dependent upon major US engagement in other parts of the world for example a conflict with Iran or more likely in Syria.
- A NATO type military alliance is unlikely to materialize in this decade.

## **Conclusion:**

China's strategic outlook in the contemporary geopolitical settings will be increasingly defined and shaped by its perceptions of United States intentions for shift of focus towards the Asia – Pacific region. China remains fully cognizant of the challenges posed by emerging trends and is fully engaged in the region diplomatically to avoid its isolation.

China's drive to maintain its sovereignty and protection of its national interests are purely defensive in nature as evident from official statements and documents which are consistent with China's diplomacy in the region. China promotes the concept of collective security and mutual win-win arrangements, instead of following a zero sum game in its foreign policy actions while staying vigilant of any hostile developments, and strengthening its military power to protect its national interests.

Given this trajectory of China's policy, however, US alliance architecture in the region will present a formidable challenge to China's strategic outlook and its interests in the region. China is ready to accept the role of the US in the region given that its nature is and not detrimental to its economic development.

China's capability to counter external power in the region is evolving over time as its military modernization program is transformed into actual operational capabilities. With regard to the political will, the dominant view within China is to engage America in the region so that regional states do not drift more towards US and prevent the establishment of a security environment in its neighborhood which may be problematic for it in future.

Although a major war in the region is unlikely to take place, the outcome of this competition, however, will be significant in shaping the future of political and strategic discourse of the world.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Information office of the state council of People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in 2010*, <[http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7114675.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7114675.htm)>, March 2011, p. 5, (accessed 12 July 2013)

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Vaughn, 'US strategic and defense relationships in Asia – Pacific region', *congressional research service report*,

<<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33821.pdf>>, 2007,( accessed 15 July, 2013)

<sup>1</sup> Information office of the state council of People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in 2010*,

<[http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7114675.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7114675.htm)>, March 2011, p. 4, (accessed 15 July 2013)

<sup>1</sup> Le Yucheng, 'Addressing China's Diplomacy in 2011', Seminar on *the rapid development of China's diplomacy in a volatile world*, Beijing, China, 18 December 2011

<sup>1</sup> Liu Weimin, November 16, 2011[ press statement]

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Vaughn, 'US strategic and defense relationships in Asia – Pacific region', *congressional research service report*,

<<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33821.pdf>>, 2007,( accessed 16 July, 2013)

<sup>1</sup> Mark E. Manyin, Stephen Daggett, Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, Michael F. Martin, Ronald O'Rourke and Bruce Vaughn, 'Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "Rebalancing" Toward Asia' *congressional research service report*, March 2012, ( accessed 16 July 2013)

<sup>1</sup> Hu Jintao, 'Addressing US – China cooperative partnership', welcoming luncheon hosted by friendly organizations in the United States, Washington DC, 20 January 2011

<sup>1</sup> Information office of the state council of People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in 2010*,

<[http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7114675.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7114675.htm)>, March 2011, p. 5, (accessed 16 July 2013)

<sup>1</sup> Le Yucheng, 'Addressing China's Diplomacy in 2011', Seminar on *the rapid development of China's diplomacy in a volatile world*, Beijing, China, 18 December 2011

<sup>1</sup> Information office of the state council of People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in 2010*,

<[http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7114675.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7114675.htm)>, March 2011, p. 6-8, (accessed 17 July 2013)