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**THE ASIA PIVOT:
AVOIDING GREAT POWER WAR IN ASIA**



by

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Introduction

China's peaceful economic rise and recent military buildup raise serious strategic questions for US leaders. The Obama administration's Asia Pivot, or rebalancing, focuses the country's diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of power on the Asia Pacific region. To successfully make this transition, US military leaders must first understand the president's intentions in order to produce a supporting military strategy for the region. By carefully aligning strategies, the United States can provide security in the region while also ensuring that economic prosperity continues.

The US military strategy in the Asia Pacific region must support Asian economic development without threatening regional security. Successfully implementing this strategy requires three broad areas of concentration that match President Obama's goals for the Asia Pivot: stable commerce, reliable international institutions, and regional security. First, the United States must shift from its recent emphasis on promoting democracy as a primary goal and instead support economic development regardless of the type of government. Promoting economic development will take advantage of past successes in the region while allowing Asian states to develop on their own terms. Second, the United States must actively engage regional institutions to secure legitimacy without appearing overbearing. An emphasis on regional institutions will help the Asia Pivot appear as a viable national strategy instead of merely a counter to rising Chinese capabilities. Finally, the US military must develop capabilities and basing to counter potential Asia Pacific threats (including Chinese military capabilities) without directly threatening China or creating a security dilemma. A clear and transparent military strategy in Asia combined with actions that match the strategy can best achieve that goal.

Through these three broad areas, the United States can rebalance to the Asia Pacific region and lay the foundation for future regional security.

The Essence of the Asia Pivot

Although much has been written recently on the Asia Pivot, little details have emerged to concretely define the US political and military intentions. Statements from President Obama and Vice President Biden provide the best source for determining what the United States hopes to achieve in its rebalancing. Understanding their national strategic vision will help guide the military strategy in Asia.

President Obama outlined his priorities for the Asia Pivot in a November 2011 address to the Australian Parliament. He highlighted three broad areas in which the United States would concentrate: prosperity through unimpeded commerce, international order, and security.¹ The President reiterated that the United States has been a Pacific power, and enduring US interests in the area still demand our presence.² While broad in its message, the President's address highlighted the importance of military capabilities in the Pacific as well as the need for strong, stable economies.

Following up on the President's comments, Vice President Biden further refined the country's approach to Asia in a February 2013 speech at the Munich Security Conference. In his remarks he concentrated on the United States' relationship with China. He stressed that the United States did not view China as a threat and stated that "we can cooperate and compete simultaneously."³ Additionally, Vice President Biden commented that the most dangerous part of the rebalancing would be a misunderstanding between the two nations that would lead to conflict.⁴ He used this opportunity to clarify the US relationship and intentions with regards to China.

Both speeches hint at America's plan for the Asia Pivot but lack detailed direction. President Obama's speech seems to indicate the importance of a strong military presence while Vice President Biden's speech shows the need to refrain from appearing threatening toward China. The Vice President pointed out one of the most complex issues with the Asia Pivot in that the United States and China must simultaneously work together while competing economically. With this limited strategic direction, military leaders can embark upon a plan to support the national strategic direction while maintaining regional security.

Supporting Economic Development

Before delving into the proper military strategy for the Asia Pacific, Washington must first decide upon an acceptable national level strategy. The President's statements above heavily favor security in the region while briefly mentioning the importance of economic ties. Vice President Biden mentions economic competition but biases his statements toward China while ignoring other important actors in the region. To truly be successful during the Asia Pivot, the United States must foster economic growth as its first priority and de-emphasize the insistence on promoting democracy in the region. While concentrating on the economic aspect, the United States must also downplay its role in the security of the region while simultaneously preparing for any conflicts that may occur.

One major focus of recent US foreign policy has been the promotion of democracy throughout the world. The 2006 US National Security Strategy (NSS) from the Bush administration highlighted that promoting democracy served as "the most effective long-term measure" for bringing about international security.⁵ In East Asia specifically, the 2006 NSS sought to support economic integration by promoting democracy.⁶ Although prior to the Obama administration's Asia Pivot, the 2006 NSS set the stage for resistance from Asia Pacific states to

directly tie economic development to democratic principles. Directly linking democracy to economic success made it appear as though the United States placed more importance on the type of government in a country than its contribution to the global economy.

While the 2010 NSS softens the link between democracy and economic success, the theme of promoting democracy throughout the world still exists. With respect to the Asia region, the 2010 NSS concentrates more on engagement and less on specific requirements like democratic tendencies.⁷ However, the 2010 NSS also actively “supports the expansion of democracy and human rights abroad because governments that respect these values are more just, peaceful, and legitimate.”⁸ Such language appears threatening to non-democratic countries in the region like China that must determine whether the United States will place emphasis on economic ties or the advancement of democracy. While the Obama administration favors engagement in its NSS, conflicting language in America’s security strategy and leaders’ comments on the Asia Pivot may cause countries in the region to question Washington’s true intentions.

William Overholt documents the positive benefits in the Asia Pacific region that resulted from the United States concentrating on economic progress without tying it to democratic reforms. The early US Cold War strategy treated economic development as its core, used the military to support the process, and only then supported democratization.⁹ The result was that countries which found economic success later adopted democratic principles. In countries that had limited economic success, democracy was slow to take hold. The US concentration on economic growth without tying it to democracy created the conditions for both economic success and democratic governments.

Today, however, the United States holds to the post-Vietnam War notion of ideological divides (i.e. democracy vs. communism) instead of the economic lesson that should have been learned. As evidenced from the 2006 and 2010 NSS documents, the US favors democracies and uses them as a discriminator for support. Especially with regard to China, Americans often view nations with differing ideologies as a competitor instead of an ally (as evidenced by the President and Vice President's Asia Pivot remarks) as a hold-over from US-Soviet tensions during the Cold War. However, Overholt shows that the true lesson to be learned from the Cold War was that economic aid produced greater success in Asia than any other form of persuasion used by the United States. Additionally, America's insistence on promoting democracy first is "inconsistent with the Asian experience" and fails to learn the proper lesson from the past.¹⁰

In order to set a consistent military strategy, the United States must first determine the appropriate national strategy to use with regard to the Asia Pivot. Washington has consistently trumpeted for democratic principles since the Vietnam War as a precursor to economic ties. This trend continued through the Bush administration and, although somewhat softened, into the Obama administration as well. Instead, the United States should encourage economic growth in the Asia Pacific region regardless of ideological differences. America risks alienating China by allowing ideological differences to influence economics. Additionally, the US may lose important growth opportunities with smaller nations to China (who does not necessarily require political allegiances). A national strategy that promotes economic growth above all else sets clear guidance to an accompanying military strategy for the region.

Advantages of International Order and Relationships

The next pillar of the Obama administration's Asia Pivot strategy is to strengthen security and commerce in the region through an emphasis on international institutions and regional

relationships. In order for the Asia Pivot to be successful, the United States must focus on being a partner in the Asia Pacific instead of a hegemon. First, the United States should continue its involvement in established regional institutions such as ASEAN, APEC, and the East Asia Summit. Second, rising Japanese nationalism is creating stress on the US relationship with South Korea and also affecting growing ties with China. The United States must use bi-lateral and multi-lateral discussions to balance relations between those three nations. Finally, the United States must not forget smaller nations in the region, such as Thailand and the Philippines, in order to de-emphasize the Asia Pivot as a counter to China's growing power. Relationships in the Asia Pacific remain complicated but are still important to finding success with the Asia Pivot strategy.

Active engagement in regional institutions will help US legitimacy in the Asia Pacific without creating an overbearing presence. In the late 1990s, several factors weakened ASEAN's political role and subsequently created a broad ASEAN disillusionment with the United States as a patron and protector.¹¹ Because Washington was so influential in ASEAN policies, the weakening of ASEAN was seen as a reflection on the United States. However, Asian nations still view US presence as important in order to balance the influence of countries like Japan and China.¹² To be effective in the Asia Pivot, the United States must remain active in Asian institutions but avoid the overbearing presence that was present before the Asian economic crisis. Remaining active provides US influence while allowing ASEAN nations more control and can avoid negative associations with the United States like those that were encountered after the Asian economic crisis.

Along with existing regional institutions, the United States must carefully balance relations between China, South Korea, and Japan. Cold War alliances may not provide the same

benefits in a post-Cold War world. Rising nationalism in Japan threatens existing US alliances with South Korea and emerging alliances with China.¹³ As an important partner, the United States cannot completely abandon Japan as an ally. But the United States should re-evaluate its relationship with Japan and make adjustments to help strengthen its alliance with South Korea and China. A subtle shift away from Japan can send a message to Japanese leaders to reduce their nationalist rhetoric without severely threatening the alliance that has been built. Chinese and South Korean leaders will also see that the United States is committed to rising Asian powers and not stuck in an outdated Cold War mindset.

Finally, the United States should seek cooperation with smaller Asian nations such as Thailand and the Philippines. As seen in Vice President Biden's speech, some may view the Asia Pivot as a counter to a rising China. By engaging smaller nations, the United States can de-emphasize the Asia Pivot as a counter to China. Smaller nations may not provide large economic incentives but they remain important partners in counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief operations. Additionally, balanced relations with smaller nations can shift the perceived focus of the Asia Pivot away from hegemonic US intentions toward the United States as a true partner in Asian affairs. Through these three ideas, the United States can leverage regional institutions and relationships to help ensure success in the Asia Pivot.

Enhancing Pacific Security

With a national strategic emphasis in the Asia Pacific focused on economic development and regional institutions, the United States should pursue a military strategy that maintains a clear presence in the region, retains the capability to quickly respond to crises, and avoids a security dilemma with major powers such as China. A clear presence in the region must balance basing requirements that can respond to issues in the region while reducing the perceived threat

to specific states from the US Air-Sea Battle concept. Quick crisis response builds upon the basing and Air-Sea Battle concepts but must also address the possibly destabilizing effect of Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS) in the Asia Pacific. Finally, in order to avoid a security dilemma in the region, the United States should avoid conventional arms control, maintain a minimal nuclear arsenal, and pursue limits on space and cyber capabilities.

The United States should employ a signaling strategy in the Asia Pacific region that clearly conveys the accepted military strategy. A military strategy modeled on the national strategy that accepts economic development in the region and accepts China as a potential partner provides the greatest chance for success. A US military strategy modeled somewhat after China's strategy could provide the environment that would foster cooperation while quietly hedging against a possible conflict.¹⁴ In other words, the United States should seek to foster economic cooperation yet ensure military capabilities in the least threatening way possible. The implementation of this strategy will significantly differ from other countries in the region but still reach the same end state.

Basing of US assets in the Asia Pacific region should remain relatively unchanged due to ongoing threats in the area and budget issues. Overholt highlights that the US-Japan alliance creates tensions in the region especially with regard to China and South Korea.¹⁵ On the military front, the United States could reduce the number of assets or bases in Japan to signal a reduced emphasis on the US-Japanese relationship. However, ongoing tensions with North Korea require bases close to that area for deterrence and adequate response time. Removing those bases with no adequate substitutes could have severe negative consequences. Current defense budget issues also reduce the likelihood that proper funding would be available to move assets to other bases in the region outside of Japan. South Korea, China, and Japan all benefit from stability on the

Korean peninsula. Reducing basing near Korea in order to appease anti-Japanese sentiments would most likely produce a net decrease in regional security and bolster North Korean rhetoric. A better method to provide reassurance in the region is to reduce Washington's emphasis on the Air-Sea Battle concept.

The US Air-Sea Battle concept significantly threatens stability in the region as long as it remains geared toward specific countries like China. While US officials continue to claim that Air-Sea Battle is a strategy and not a tactic aimed at any one country, review of the concept itself cannot help but point to China as the motivation behind the idea. As one example, a recent journal article attempts to argue that Air-Sea Battle has a stabilizing effect that makes a major war less likely and deters potential adversaries.¹⁶ The article argues that without Air-Sea Battle, advanced adversaries could deny secure land and sea basing for assets at very long ranges and complicate US abilities to project power.¹⁷ However, with regard to the Asia Pivot, proponents have a difficult time identifying an advanced adversary with those capabilities besides China. For the military to continue to support Air-Sea Battle while simultaneously denying that the potential "adversary" is China sends the exact mixed-message that the United States should avoid. The United States claims to seek increased cooperation with China but instead signals a military strategy that clearly identifies China as a major threat. The capabilities of Air-Sea Battle are certainly important, but the United States will never be able to convince the Asia Pacific region that the concept is not directly related to countering Chinese military capabilities.

As an alternative to Air-Sea Battle, the United States should seek other means to achieve what Air-Sea Battle proposes. The heart of the Air-Sea Battle concept is to counter an adversary's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities.¹⁸ Assuming that the adversary in mind is actually China, the United States should seek less threatening methods to counter A2/AD.

Washington should make it clear that any nation, not just China, that attacks military bases in Asia risks immediate escalation. The United States could deter anti-access strategies without Air-Sea Battle by making the consequences of an A2 attack too costly for the aggressor. Likewise, the United States can adopt a less threatening method for countering area-denial capabilities. US ships currently operate throughout the world's international waters with little to no interference from other nations. Using Air-Sea Battle as an additional measure to ensure access to areas in which the United States already operates clearly sends a threatening message to the international community. Current methods are adequate to counter what little A2/AD strategies against the United States may be in place.

Along with ensuring security in the Asia Pacific region, the US military must also ensure that adequate capabilities exist to quickly respond to any crises that may arise while not appearing overly threatening. Presence in the region with the basing that is already established provides most of the quick response that may be required. Some capabilities of Air-Sea Battle such as increased joint integration are also important to retain in order to reduce response time in the region. However, as mentioned above, the United States must separate those capabilities from the perceived offensive nature of the Air-Sea Battle concept. Finally, the United States should resist the temptation to further reduce the response time through ideas like the CPGS.

If the United States pursues a Conventional Prompt Global Strike capability, Washington should be careful to downplay its role in the Asia Pacific region. CPGS in Asia could serve to destabilize the region and add little positive additional capability. Much like the Air-Sea Battle concept, few scenarios exist in the Asia Pacific region where the CPGS capability provides advantages over already existing technologies. For instance, one argument for CPGS is that it could allow the destruction of a nuclear weapon in a rogue state threatening the United States.¹⁹

Any Asian state for the foreseeable future, besides China, is susceptible to existing US systems such as low-observable cruise missiles and stealth aircraft that could execute precision strike. The shortened response time of CPGS adds little to deter this type of threat but decreases overall stability in the region. With a robust integrated aircraft defense system, China has enough capabilities to possibly warrant the use of CPGS instead of currently available technology. An attack against China is the only situation in this region that may benefit from a CPGS capability but the risks outweigh the benefits. A CPGS attack would be difficult to distinguish between nuclear and conventional, and would increase the likelihood of escalation.²⁰ Even without its use, this capability in Asia clearly signals to China that the United States seeks a non-nuclear first strike capability. CPGS capabilities should be avoided in the Asia Pacific region due to their threatening and destabilizing characteristics.

Another method for the United States to avoid escalation during the Asia Pivot is to reduce the factors that would lead to a security dilemma in the region. Conventional arms control is the first factor that should be avoided. Smoke points out that when one nation feels threatened by another, one way for that nation to feel secure is to become and remain at least as able as its opponent to use force.²¹ With regard to China, the United States today has clear “advantages in critical military technologies and conventional forces.”²² Current US military and economic advantages combined with threatening capabilities such as Air-Sea Battle and CPGS demonstrate reasons why China would want to modernize their military in order to reach some parity with the United States. Introducing arms control with China while they attempt to reduce the gap with the United States would again appear as a threat to Chinese security. China and allies in the region would interpret this move as an attempt by Washington to maintain its hegemonic status against growing Asian capabilities. Instead of appearing as a cooperative

move, the Asia Pivot would instead turn into the United States attempting to exert unwelcomed influence in the Asia Pacific region.

Instead of seeking reciprocal arms control with China, the United States should instead limit military export and support to Taiwan in order to reduce the influence of that potential conflict in the Chinese decision to modernize militarily. Arms exports to Taiwan at the beginning of the Bush administration created friction in the region and negatively impacted US-Sino relations.²³ Since then, the United States has maintained a clear political stance on Taiwan and already possesses significant military assets to deter Chinese aggression. Experts agree that part of the Chinese military modernization has occurred in response to tensions in the Taiwan Strait but also acknowledge that a conflict over Taiwan will become less and less likely over the next several decades.²⁴ Chinese military modernization will ensure any conflict in the region, including one involving Taiwan, will have devastating consequences. Therefore, the United States should ensure it maintains relative military superiority in the region but accept China's peaceful military modernization. In the end, a more capable China would decrease the likelihood of conflict in the area due to the possible devastating effects of hostilities on both the United States and China.

Nuclear arms control, on the other hand, could provide a stabilizing effect in the region. With the Asia Pivot showing US intent to remain in the Pacific, Japan and South Korea can remain non-nuclear and rely upon US capabilities to deter North Korean aggression. The nuclear strategy in Asia then becomes a matter of reassuring China and deterring North Korea. Nuclear arms control could provide additional reassurance to China that the United States does not seek further first or second strike capabilities. Arms control should be geared toward limiting new capabilities and not necessarily limiting the amount of nuclear weapons. As Brodie points out,

stability comes from the balance between nuclear arsenals and not the symmetry or asymmetry between the two sides.²⁵ The United States and China can balance capabilities through arms control but allow each country to maintain the amount of weapons they feel are required with little detrimental effect on stability.

North Korea, on the other hand, presents additional challenges to US nuclear strategy in the area. North Korea has yet to create a weaponized nuclear device but continues to actively seek that capability. The choice for the United States and allies in the region is whether to accept a nuclear North Korea or seek to prevent them from gaining the capability. Assuming that diplomatic attempts at denuclearizing North Korea fail, a military strike would be required to slow or stop their progress. Any action against North Korea would undoubtedly risk retaliation from the North that could escalate to a large scale conflict on the Korean peninsula. South Korea, Japan, and China would most likely rather avoid a conflict at almost all costs as long as North Korea stops short of unambiguously planning for either a nuclear strike or conventional conflict.

Instead, the United States can rely upon deterrence against North Korea while using allies in the Asia Pacific region to enter into dialogue. A North Korean regime that acquires deliverable nuclear weapons will feel more secure than a regime without. As Brodie points out, “stability is achieved when each nation believes that the strategic advantage of striking first is overshadowed by the tremendous cost of doing so.”²⁶ A North Korea with nuclear weapons feels as though the United States no longer has a first strike capability since the North can retaliate. Likewise, the United States is assured that North Korea will not strike first because of the robust US retaliatory capability. But to prevent a larger build-up by North Korea, US allies in the

region must engage with North Korea in some form of arms control. The situation on the Korean peninsula is complicated but stable options exist for a nuclear armed North Korea.

One area where the United States must engage is China's unconventional capabilities in both space and cyberspace. China is rapidly developing capabilities to counter US space capabilities and emphasizes an integrated information warfare strategy for use with other instruments of national power.²⁷ As opposed to the conventional and nuclear capabilities mentioned above, China is able to use its unconventional capabilities in peacetime with a level of anonymity that makes it difficult for the international community to hold them accountable. These capabilities aren't just limited to China. Any country in the region that is tied to the Internet, including the United States, can participate in cyber activities against both allies and adversaries. The United States should lead efforts at "arms control" for unconventional capabilities such as space and cyber. In the same style as Cold War arms control, countries in Asia must seek methods to reassure space and cyber security while allowing transparency into these operations that can verify they remain within agreed upon limits. Although a monumental undertaking, unconventional "arms control" combined with increased space and cyber defense methods can reduce threats to the United States while increasing cooperation and security during the Asia Pivot.

Conclusion

In order to best support the Asia Pivot, US military strategy must support economic development in Asia without threatening regional security or stability. US military leaders must first consider the national strategy in order to properly shape the military strategy. Through President Obama and Vice President Biden's initial speeches, military leaders should understand that the Asia Pivot relies upon three pillars of stable economies, international order, and security.

The US national strategy during the Asia Pivot can be most successful by returning to effective past policies with updates for the 21st century. First, the United States must support economic development in the Asia Pacific without tying it directly to democratic values. The Asian economic miracle of the 20th century serves as a prime example that stressing economic development over a democratic government leads to more stable development altogether. Additionally, US leaders must realize that an economically successful China provides more benefits for the United States than harm.

International order and regional alliances also play a major role in ensuring the success of the Asia Pivot. The United States must embrace regional institutions such as ASEAN and APEC without becoming an overbearing presence in the region. The United States should support these institutions even if their policies don't always match US policies. While Japan was an important US ally during the Cold War, the United States must not let outdated Cold War alliances harm emerging 21st century opportunities. With rising Japanese nationalism, the United States should seek out new opportunities with South Korea and China in order to distance itself from Japan. Finally, smaller Asian nations such as Thailand and the Philippines present promising opportunities for bilateralism and help ensure the Asia Pivot isn't solely viewed as a counter to a rising China.

Once the national strategy is understood, military leaders can establish a firm military strategy that ensures regional security while minimizing the chance for a major conflict. Given China's rapid and ongoing rise, the United States must make the country a major focus of its strategy without ignoring other important nations in the region. The United States should maintain a presence in the region including permanent military bases. However, the Air-Sea Battle concept in its present form should be abandoned as it directly threatens China and creates

the possibility of escalation. The underlying capabilities should be maintained in case of conflict, but the concept itself can only be interpreted as a military strategy against China. Conventional Prompt Global Strike also contains little benefits over current strike methods when paired against any Asian nation besides China. This capability may be useful in other areas of the world but, at least in Asia, directly threatens China and leaves open the possibility of escalation. Finally, any attempts at conventional arms control in the region would be viewed as more favorable to the United States and should be avoided. Because of the relatively small nuclear arsenals of China and North Korea, the United States needs only minimal nuclear weapons as well in order to ensure stability. The assurance of US nuclear support to allies in the region can also serve to keep South Korea and Japan from developing nuclear weapons. One area of “arms control” that should be pursued concerns the space and cyber domains. Because of emerging threats in these areas, the United States can help ensure security for itself and its allies by negotiating and monitoring limits on their use. Both space and cyber present grave security concerns for the future. In the end, a focus on the Asia Pacific region must encourage economic development while ensuring, and not threatening, regional security.

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 6. Ibid., 40.
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 8. Ibid., 37.
 9. Overholt, *Asia, America, and the Transformation of Geopolitics*, 24.
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 11. Ibid., 175.
 12. Ibid., 181.
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 21. Smoke, *National Security and the Nuclear Dilemma*, 125.
 22. Geis et al., *Discord or “Harmonious Society”?*, 87.
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