

## US Security Policy in the Asia Pacific: Preparing the Next Decade

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### Abstract

For US foreign policy, the importance of the Asia-Pacific cannot be over stated; the value of regional trade, the need to preserve allied-nation sovereignty and a perceived containment policy towards China's growth mean that the eyes of US observers are, more than ever before, trained on the Asia Pacific. The Obama administration has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to the region despite economic crises existing domestically. With such value placed on the region this paper will explore how US security policy can most effectively insure its interests over the next decade. It assesses the changing context with consideration for the challenge of new super powers and the contemporary relevance of ongoing disputes. The paper then identifies areas for which new investment could take place and determines the risks and potential benefits of any such developments. It makes specific considerations for bilateral relations between the most significant regional players in the security theatre: China, Japan, the Koreas and the collective ASEAN members and explores likely policy directions for the near term future. It then concludes that, based on the assessments made, the continued move towards multilateral approaches stands the best chance of limiting regional conflict. It determines that while a containment policy to diminish Chinese presence is viable for the period considered, there remains considerable doubt over long-term practicality. As such, the US negotiating position with China is possibly at its strongest now and, if so, any moves at this time towards regional unity can best secure US interests for the future. The paper sets out that containment should not be viewed as a sustainable way of stemming China's challenge to US global presence; instead US security policy in the Asia Pacific would be most effective through multilateral cooperation which can be achieved through a careful balance of defensive military projection power and a greater capacity for humanitarian assistance.

**Keywords:** US; Foreign policy; China; Asia Pacific; Security.



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### 1. Introduction

Relations between the United States and the Asia Pacific date back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the US became an independent state. Today, US relations with many states in the Asia Pacific can be viewed as being positive. More than half of US exports are to this region (Aggarwal and Shujiro, 2013). In terms of security, five of the eight nuclear powers are in the Asia Pacific (Pant, 2007). Moreover, North Korea, South Korea, China, and Vietnam, all of them being Asia Pacific states, have some of the largest militaries, by troop numbers, in the world (Shambaugh, 2005). Additionally, the Asia Pacific has been a major focus of US security for its history of hosting major conflict zones during the Cold War (Korean, Taiwan, Vietnam etc.) (Ong, 2005). Finally, the US has a major stake in the outcomes of territorial disputes in this region including those in the South China Sea because they touch on the country's security interests; should allies lose territorial claims, US access to the region will be weakened and it is the promise of security that the US has been using to maintain influence.

The aim of this paper is to establish how US security policy in the Asia Pacific is likely to develop over the next decade. The paper will focus on emerging national security interests for the US in the Asia Pacific. It will also examine the risks, benefits, and opportunities for new security investment in this region. The need for new investment will be assessed given the fact that the security environment continues to undergo frequent changes in the contemporary world of globalization.

Next, a section on the strategic positioning of US security interests in the Asia Pacific is presented. In this regard, there is a focus upon China, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula for their ever-growing relevance to US security interests. Southeast Asian states that are less globally influential in the security domain will be considered collectively for their role within ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). While other states, especially India, may still be considered for their influence on specific topics, they broadly speaking remain beyond the scope of this paper. Lastly, the paper examines the strategic options that the US is confronted with as it prepares for the next decade in its security engagement within the region.

Based on this analysis, assessments and predictions for the next decade will be made. The window of accuracy taken in this regard is based on the assumption that the continuation of the US policy of maintaining its power projection capacity in influencing the shaping of regional security issues can only be guaranteed in the short term. While the paper will assess policy strategies, assessments of specific military actions are beyond the scope of this paper.

## 2. Emerging Us Security Interests in the Asia Pacific: Threats and Challenges

The emerging security interests of the US in the Asia Pacific are being shaped by issues such as the protection of American citizens and the expansion of economic opportunities. The US public sentiment is that the pursuit of these interests will also lead to a situation where the interests of Asia Pacific states are also safeguarded; in effect, it is offering the umbrella of its security to states that help it to achieve its regional ambitions. In order to offer such security to both itself and its allies, the US must continually assess the prevailing security situation in the region and make necessary adjustments in terms of military preparedness to enable it to contain emerging threats.

Today, China poses the most serious threat of being a hegemonic state in the Asia Pacific and is the main reason that US military dominance cannot be guaranteed for the long term future. Its growing influence, power, and assertiveness have become a major concern for the US. It is widely expected that it will rise to the position of regional and indeed, global pre-eminence during the next decade. Within the next 15 years, China's defense spending is expected to be on par with that of the United States (Chanlett-Avery and Bruce, 2008). These budgets are likely to be primarily directed at China's aggressive pursuit of numerous territorial claims in the South China Sea; motivated by the country's desire to reinforce its anti-access capabilities in disputed areas within this sea. By so doing, China will have started posing a serious threat to the US (Hemmer and K., 2002).

However, China's growth has meant that it and the United States have continued to establish an environment of economic interdependence in many areas (Kang, 2003). So far, China has continued to reject internal pressure to confront the US more openly by challenging its interests in the Asia Pacific. Although the US has far-reaching interests in this region that are not compatible with its own, China also stands to benefit a lot from interdependence with the US. On the other hand, the economic and security interests of the US are equally likely to suffer a major blow if China's economic growth was to be slowed or worse still reversed. Relations between the US and China are currently characterized by a complex blend of competition and interdependence. This has influenced the decision by the US to adopt a strategy that combines aspects of both dissuasion and assurance (Christensen, 2006). On the one hand, the United States continues to forge new areas of cooperation and to encourage China to continue playing a dominant role as a global economic player. On the other hand, the US is always keen to hedge against uncertainties that may arise from China's long-term intentions. A major concern is that if China perceives the US to be weak, this may lead to a new wave of Chinese assertiveness. The US must be careful not to create the perception that it seeks to weaken China, such a view would only force China to challenge the US more aggressively. Beijing's assessment now would be that the external security challenges of the US are not sustainable and, as such, we see limited reactions beyond frustration manifesting in China's own regional policy.

A number of factors motivate the US to encourage China to play a more critical role in the Asia Pacific. Most notably, China holds the strongest bargaining power with North Korea, and it is therefore in a position to influence the political direction of this Asian nation. Through economic sanctions and unity with the international community, China may succeed in discouraging North Korea from pursuing aggressive strategies and nuclear programs. Such a turn of events would unarguably be in the best interest of the US. China also plays a critical role in providing assistance to Asia Pacific countries whenever natural disasters strike (Heller, 2005). However, it is extremely difficult to draw a line of distinction between interdependence and competition in US-China relations. Although the US encourages China to assist weaker states in the region in times of disasters and political unrests, it is opposed to the idea of China's reliance on such actions to undermine the internal political legitimacy of the weaker states. Whenever the US perceives China's actions to be a destabilizing force in such states, it comes in as a competitor, thereby leading to a clash of interests.

The same blend of interdependence and competition can be said to exist in respect to the war on terrorism. Terrorism drives the US and China into adopting a cooperative approach in Asia Pacific relations. The economies of both countries could be severely impacted by the activities of terrorist networks. Therefore, economic and political ties with China are indispensable if the fight against terror is to be won. Such ties are essential in efforts to pool resources and exploit logistical resources in a bid to outmaneuver all terrorist networks in the region. During the next decade, the US faces the challenge of defeating terrorism while at the same time avoiding the impression that it is weak to the point of relying on China for critical logistical assistance.

Lastly, the leading economies in Asia, including China, Japan, and South Korea are highly dependent upon shared maritime resources (Ikenberry *et al.*, 2002). Additionally, they are becoming increasingly powerful in terms of technology adoption (Kim, 2014). If these countries were to become adversaries, their shared operational domains may be interrupted. Both the US and China are in a position to influence the future of this relationship.

However, uncertainty over the utility of these shared capabilities arises in regards to the possibility of cooperative security.

### 2.1. Emerging Security Demands

In the past, the US has enjoyed considerable economic and military advantage (Stubbs, 2002). Its capabilities have been fundamental for it to advance its national interests in the Asia Pacific and to influence the security environment. Despite a decline in American economic and military power in recent years, the US continues to possess advantages over potential adversaries. However, the US faces the need to make improvements to its military capabilities to avoid creating the impression that it has become weaker.

Now that China is growing more capable and thus more assertive, the diplomatic role of the US should be reassessed (Stuart and William, 2013). Until now, the odds have been more favorable to the US than to China as a

result of the way in which the other major maritime states in the Asia Pacific, South Korea and Japan, have aligned themselves. But, economic factors will weigh heavily on the future political environment.

In recent times, a new trend has emerged whereby the security requirements in this region are becoming increasingly diverse in both geographical and functional terms (Obama, 2010). To begin with, Northeast Asia has become a hotbed of aggression. In the rest of the region, China's hand is being felt mainly in the form of visible power and ambitions. This phenomenon has created an environment of uncertainty for the future of US security interests. Therefore, it is not surprising that the US has been keen to introduce new military capabilities to enable it to deal with potential adversaries. In South East Asia, there is a growing requirement for forces that are capable of sustaining peaceful engagements touching on a wide range of missions such as disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. Such missions are essential for the US because they help build transparency, partnership capacity, and overall state confidence.

In light of the evolving security environment, the US Department of Defense is compelled to come up with strategic plans aimed at enabling the country to respond to a wide range of threats. An in-depth understanding of the aspects of deterrence, assurance, dissuasion, and of defeating aggression is imperative for top US military strategists (Christensen, 2001). These strategists must know how to shift from one option to another depending on changes desired outcomes and the contextual environment. Such ability must go hand in hand with an accurate appreciation of the security and political environment of the Asia Pacific region. Nevertheless, conventional knowledge may also be applied as well. For instance, dissuasion and assurance strategies are typically adopted in non-crisis situations. In contrast, efforts to defeat aggression and to deter actions of enemies are normally resorted to during crises. In both instances, however, the best-case scenario is one where the military succeeds in peacefully shaping the decisions and actions of partners, allies, and adversaries. During the pursuit of deterrence objectives, the ability of the United States to portray more military capabilities than their adversaries is critical. As such the US must maintain projection power whilst providing the capabilities of humanitarian assistance that are welcomed in the region.

The US military is faced with the need to continue engaging with strategic partners in the Asia Pacific in the pursuit of both assurance and dissuasion objectives. Allies in this region are in growing need of assurance that the US will continue abiding by its existing security commitments. This is expected to create an environment of solidarity against threats and perceived enemies. It will also continue reducing the likelihood of the escalation of an all-out military crisis.

In the next decade, the vulnerabilities of some states in the region will continue to arouse serious concerns in Washington. Many weaker states in this region count on the US military presence to deal with the problem of violent extremists and the growing threat of relatively powerful neighbors (Goh, 2006). In the absence of military engagement by the US, China and Japan may tilt the outcomes of territorial disputes with these weaker states in their favor, thereby threatening US military and economic interests in the region. Such a situation would gradually lock the US out of Asia Pacific politics. The ideal situation for the US would be one where China is given assurances wherever possible through multilateral and bilateral security arrangements in efforts to fight common problems such as terrorism and the distribution of counterfeit products.

According to, Jisi (2005) 'all these security requirements call for a continuation of forward deployment of military forces by the US. Going forward into the next decade, these forces will demonstrate persistence in terms of setting the stage for better contingency capabilities and more effective deterrence and defeat-oriented objectives.' This means that the presence of military forces will allow the US to act directly as a participant in shaping the military norms of the region. This will make it easier for the US to identify potential strategic partners that are committed to shared strategies and policies and this will be of particular value as establishing longstanding and trustworthy relationships is likely to be the key to region stability; such relationships, which have historically been lacking in the region, would be the strongest deterrent to military confrontation for the cost of losing them would be incredibly damaging economically to any aggressor.

According to Frankel and Kahler 'the US has been networking with allies and partners in an ongoing project of positioning itself politically to enable it not only tap into the region's economic opportunities but also maintain military superiority' (Frankel and Miles, 1993). All indications are that this project will certainly go on during the next decade. This undertaking is essential in efforts by the US to establish familiarity with the region's immediate security environment.

The maintained presence of the US in the Asia Pacific creates a significant difficulty for adversaries who may otherwise look to leverage their power over other weaker states. Because of this, it is important for the US that its forces are deployed around the Asia Pacific rather than gathered in a centralized location. This has the added benefit of reducing the vulnerability of US forces as a whole to attack and provides greater capability for rapid deployment across the whole region. In addition to that, "safety valves" are created as a means for crisis management and de-escalation; in the case of direct military conflict, the risk conflagration is restricted and conflicts are kept limited in nature. Engagements only go as far as to create a sense of urgency on both sides to resolve the crisis.

### **3. Risks, Benefits, and Opportunities for New Security Investment in the Asia Pacific**

#### **3.1. Risks**

In the quest for dissuasion and deterrence of threats in the region, the US is confronted with a number of risks. These risks relate to the military capabilities of potential adversaries. Persistence by the US in its pursuit of efficiency in planning will greatly help to reduce these risks. At the outset, it is imperative for the US to continue

sustaining the existing defense budgetary allocations for the Asia Pacific particularly in light of China's emerging role as a global economic power and this has clearly been the agenda of the Obama administration.

Today, ballistic missiles pose a serious risk to US military bases in this region. China's possession of such missiles can significantly interfere with carrier operations and make deterrence efforts in Western Pacific extremely difficult (Blair *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, they represent the lengths China is willing to go in the pursuit of military and diplomatic instruments for counter-intervention during crisis and counter-containment in time of peace. This puts China in a position where it can easily coerce its neighbors in the region. It is highly likely that China will develop a tendency to undermine US security interests in the pursuit of its various national interests.

The nuclear program of North Korea also poses a major risk to US security interests in the region. The weapons of mass destruction North Korea is alleged to be stockpiling may easily be transferred to unstable or combative states. Moreover, Pyongyang may use these capabilities as a tool for provoking the US and imposing constraints on the present US security strategy for the Asia Pacific. As long as regime instability continues to prevail in the North, the continuing operations of US military bases in the region, particularly South Korea and Japan, will continue to be of central importance.

It is worth noting that while North Korea presents a serious risk to US military operations in the Asia Pacific, it also provides the much-needed justification for the US presence. Although the containment of China is possibly the highest regional priority for the US, the existence of the North Korean threat justifies a US presence that can be deployed in various parts of the region to secure a variety of US interests.

Lastly, in the event of simultaneous conflicts in the region, the US may put some of its forces at risk of being overwhelmed primarily because of shortcomings in force structure planning. The contingencies of Central Command may deprive the Pacific Command (PACOM) of much-needed resources, especially forces, in order to efficiently execute all plans in case of simultaneous wars. The relationship between defense spending and force posture requirements needs to be carefully managed to maintain confidence in the ability of American forces to sustain its current security commitments and to ensure that US military presence in the region is not undermined.

### 3.2. Benefits

America's continued presence in the Asia Pacific has a potential to bring about numerous economic benefits. The economic opportunities available in this region have been a major driving force behind America's centuries-long interest in the Asia Pacific. Given the growing importance of regional development to the US, the ability to dictate regional security arrangements must be viewed as a major tactical advantage (Rice, 2008).

In Japan, the deterrence factor and staging capabilities of the military base at Okinawa greatly reduces the likelihood of resource shortfalls in the event of two or more simultaneous armed conflicts. Going forward into the next decade, the US military is faced with the challenge of identifying similar aspects of strategic positioning aimed at enabling America take advantage of all the benefits that come with its continued military presence in the region.

Fortunately, public opinion for partnerships with different Asian countries has largely been favorable. This has enabled the US to forge military alliances with many countries, including Japan, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam. All these countries have already expressed their readiness to expand defense cooperation with the United States. In 2012, the US gave host-nation support amounting to \$765 million and \$2.37 billion to South Korea and Japan respectively (Emma Chanlett-Avery and Bruce Vaughn, ). America hopes to benefit immensely from strategic partnerships with these two Asian countries. The main area of strategic advantage arises from the enhanced position of the US in its quest to have its existing force structure retained in these two countries.

At the same time, the US has been expanding the scope of trilateral cooperation that brings on board Japan-Australia and US-Japan-South Korea relations. Similarly, allied military services seeking to have a foothold in the region have been actively enhancing their existing capabilities mainly by pursuing closer relations with US counterparts. For example, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) operating from Okinawa is in the process of evolving into different Marine Air Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs) that will be undertaking military drills in Okinawa, Australia, Hawaii, and Guam. In the meantime, ground forces operating in Australia, Japan, and Korea have been seeking to enhance their amphibious and expeditionary capabilities. The same trend has been unfolding in regards to ground, air, and naval forces across the Asia Pacific.

### 3.3. Opportunities for New Security Investment

An assessment of all contingencies is necessary if the US is to identify all emerging opportunities for security investment accurately. Although there are additional resources in the form of deploying more troops, more hardware, and rigorous training, it is imperative to focus on how the existing resources can be used more efficiently to deal with changing security requirements.

There are some questions over the efficiency of investment in the Asia Pacific. For example, it is unclear why the US is not enhancing airlift capabilities of the amphibious-ready group (ARG) stationed at Sasebo in Japan, which as it stands may prove to be insufficient in time of war (Xinbo, 2005). Instead, of investing in high-speed vessels that have to be grounded in time war for lack of maneuverability, it seems more logical to direct these financial resources towards enhancements on airlift capabilities. Such concerns raise questions about the nature of the long-term security environment. However, more detailed analysis of military decisions in this regard remains beyond the scope of this paper.

New investment in critical ammunition for use by US military forces in the event of a protracted tactical war is also needed (Ibid., p. 125). Presently, the US military counts on forward-deployment of ammunition in Hawaii, Guam, and the West Coast of the US. There is an even bigger problem because forward-deployed forces must rely

on equipment that would take weeks to transport from continental United States to military bases in the Asia Pacific. The US should invest in structures that would hasten the process of acquiring such equipment.

The question of replenishing pre-positioned equipment for use by the Pacific Command should also be highlighted. In dealing with this issue, military strategists need to look at likely scenarios, one of them being the simultaneous occurrence of multiple armed conflicts. An assessment of missile defense capabilities of allied forces may need to be carried out to determine precise requirements in terms of investment in new security apparatus. In these efforts, the ability to coordinate the activities of the Central Command and those of the Pacific Command in replenishing supplies and enhancing battlefield recovery capabilities should be emphasized.

Other important areas of new investment include counter WMD capabilities, attack submarines, and anti-submarine defense. The US may easily be outmaneuvered by China because of a lingering imbalance in its submarine fleet stationed in the region. There is a pressing need to catch up with China, which has, in recent times, invested heavily in attack submarines. According to, [Medeiros \(2008\)](#), this issue must be prioritized if the US is not to fall further behind China by 2020 when its nuclear attack submarines will be retired at a rate that is twice that of constructing new replacements. Efforts to enhance the combined capabilities of allied forces should also be taken. In China, there is a tendency for national defense budgets to prioritize costly indigenous programs instead of addressing immediate requirements such as maritime domain awareness, sustainment, and command and control ([Twining, 2007](#)).

The potential for allies and partners to enhance capacities for joint operations also creates many opportunities for new security investments. To illustrate this point, one may give the example of the recent agreement signed between South Korea and Japan to facilitate cross-servicing and sharing of military information. Such an agreement will provide impetus for more extensive joint military exercises bringing together the US, Japan, and South Korea. It would even be better if such joint exercises were directed towards ensuring that the redundancy of the Pacific Command is enhanced in various ports and airfields with a view to enhance access arrangements.

## **4. Shaping the Strategic Position with Partners Arrivals within the Asia Pacific**

### **4.1. China**

Concerns about China's growing influence will continue to direct US security policy for the foreseeable future. However, security policy will also need to allow for, and not threaten, rising level of interdependence between the US and China. Regardless of US strategy China will become an increasingly crucial contributor to problem-solving in the region; it is therefore likely that new areas of cooperation will develop.

In recent years, China's increased defense spending has put it in a position of a competitor to US interests rather than a partner in the pursuit of these interests. Evidence of this phenomenon is also discernible in the country's assertive behavior in recent years, a good example being the numerous territorial claims China has already made in the South China Sea. China's regional ambition have necessitated for the US a strategy of containment aimed at ensure that the new security environment doesn't shift the regional equilibrium of power. Of course, for China, the reverse is true and its counter-containment strategies have come as a direct challenge to the US' regional policy. China is opposed to domination of the Asia Pacific by the US which reinforces the interests of countries that China has disputes with. This counter-containment is not purely about creating a rival military capability but China is also seeking to propagate information, and leverage its economic and diplomatic strength. If China can weaken the links that the US is making with regional partners then it will be far harder for the US to achieve its regional ambitions.

For the time being, the US is sufficiently ahead of China in terms of military capabilities to see off any direct challenge, yet, China will continue to push at the limits of what influence it can have. One approach is to carefully manage the relations that it has with its neighbors. Broadly speaking, the economic development of many neighboring states depends heavily on China as a trading partner and large market for both imports and exports. Where China can assert itself as a necessary trading partner it can exclude the US from economic leverage.

In the process of advancing its military capabilities during the last two decades, China has been keen to analyze the US military capabilities that enabled the country to effectively project its power during different wars such as the Iraq War in 1991 and the recent counter-terrorism operations as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This has led the country to undertake measures aimed at widening its range of military operations. Consequently, China has begun to introduce long-range precision bombers and aircraft carriers.

### **4.2. Japan**

Japan is a major US ally, a source of access to Asia-Pacific, and the third largest economy in the world. Its position as one of America's leading trading partners has won the country recognition as a strategic ally. Therefore, it is not surprising that Japan is also among the largest hosts of US forces stationed overseas.

Japan's security strategy since the Second World War has been based heavily on its close ties to the US and since 1960, the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. Despite this strong tradition, Japan too is now evolving its security strategies to meet the new environment. In 2010, Japan set-out its National Defense Program Guidelines that is a first step in looking for cooperation with other maritime powers while reinforcing its partnership with the US. Of key importance was the emphasis on taking a multilateral approach to deterring the North Korean aggression that exists as the principal threat to its maritime security.

In addition to the North Korean threat, Japan is also concerned about China's encroachment on its maritime territories. Japan will need to maintain a high-level of preparedness in order to ensure the protection of Japanese

territory in the First Island Chain. And additionally, will need to make sure the US partnership is strong enough that the US will continue to support Japan in its claims and defense. A part of this will be increasing interoperability as a method for enhancing deterrence but Japan will have to be careful to balance its relationship with the US to avoid being pulled into wider conflicts in which the US is engaged.

For the US, Japan has proved a reliable partner in the local scope. The US military bases in Japan as well as Japan's close proximity to Korea and China mean that for the foreseeable future it will be central to US strategic capabilities and US security policy in the region. Further crises within the region are likely to push Japan into accepting a US request for forward deployment of forces in its Japanese base. Already, Japan and the US have cemented cooperation in many areas of joint command and missile defense requirements accompanied by increased levels of interoperability with the objective of defeating possible adversaries.

### 4.3. The Korean Peninsula

South Korea, officially referred to as the Republic of Korea (ROK), is the thirteenth largest economy in the world and is also a major trading partner of the United States. South Korea upholds democratic values, a feat that makes it a formidable US ally in the Asia Pacific. Unlike North Korea, South Korea has managed to establish a reputation for commitment to the rule of law and human rights. The US-South Korea alliance was conceived at the height of the Cold War. However, unlike Japan, South Korea has adopted a three pronged security strategy. The first aspect entails deepening of economic, political, and military ties with the US. The second aspect entails the promotion of growing economic ties with its powerful neighbor, China. The third element brings into perspective efforts to establish multilateral relations at both regional and global levels.

The origin of security cooperation between South Korea and the US may be traced back to the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953.<sup>1</sup> Today, the threat posed by North Korea continues to be the primary driver of US-South Korean alliance. Numerous provocative actions by the North Korean military have heightened threat perceptions in South Korea, thereby leading to continued support for strategy alliances with the US. In fact, this phenomenon has greatly contributed to the growing public support for military relations with the US. This state of affairs is expected to remain as long as the North Korean threat persists.

South Korea also seems to perceive China as a security threat in the long-term (Goldstein, 2001). These concerns are driven primarily by leniency on the part of China in reprimanding North Korea for engaging in militarily provocative behavior against South Korea. In regards to the conflict with the North, South Korea's bargaining power is greatly curtailed by China's position as an economic powerhouse. For instance, it provides South Korea with the largest export market while at the same time China continues to maintain considerable leverage over the fledgling and highly unstable government of North Korea.

The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) remains the most heavily armed zone demarcating two opposing ground forces in the world. Although the ability by the North to sustain an invasion has degraded considerably in the recent past, the country has already deployed thousands of artillery pieces within Seoul's range. North Korea's long-range missiles also have the capability to strike Japan. The presence of biological and chemical weapons in North Korea further complicates the security situation of the region. This threat creates a major driving force for Japan, South Korea, the US, together with their allies and partners to form a formidable defense pact.

Against this backdrop, the US, South Korea, and Japan have moved to begin conducting joint naval exercises. South Korea has started viewing Japan's strategic stance as being more malleable than that of China. This reality also seems to be easily reflected in popular public opinion in South Korea. According to, Acharya (2016) most citizens seem to think that forging tighter defense ties with their Japanese neighbor is the best way of dealing with China's rise. On the other hand, Japan is set to benefit from the participation of South Korea in this agreement since it enhances its relative political clout to that of China. Such a phenomenon is also advantageous to the US because it helps constrain China's ability to nurture hegemonic influence across the region and additionally, aligns its two most significant allies.

### 4.4. Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a strategic location for US interests in the Asia Pacific. The ASEAN member states provide a major trading bloc that the US is keen to target in the future as a launching pad for both economic and security interests. The growing importance of Southeast Asia arises from the fact that its seaports provide a gateway to the entire Asia Pacific region. To emphasize this point, it is necessary to point out that the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca facilitate the operations of vessels that handle 30 percent of global trade and 57 percent of total global shipping capacity respectively (Cole, 2017). This region is also significant because it is rich in hydrocarbon resources. These resources are a major driving force of territorial claims and conflicts among several states.

The US is interested in enabling states in this region to enhance their defense capabilities as a way of shielding them against China's assertive behavior and growing affinity for coercion. In this undertaking, the US faces numerous competing interests, meaning that the diversity of security challenges, opportunities, benefits, risks, and areas of investment must be put into consideration. Despite this diversity, security perceptions across Southeast Asia are more or less the same. For instance, all ASEAN member states share the strategic imperative of strengthening integration and cohesion as outlined in the 2008 ASEAN Charter. Moreover, all states in this region are preoccupied with internal security challenges ranging from maritime security to insurgencies. Lastly, all these states acknowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Ong, op. cit., p. 427.

that China's increased assertiveness compels them to seek engagement with the US while at the same ensuring that Beijing is not provoked.

## 5. Preparing the Next Decade: Main Policy Options For Us Security Strategists

Five policy options stand out in regards to the current position of the US in the Asia Pacific based on the existing security arrangements. The first option entails managing the troubled China-US relations. The second area of focus is multilateralism. The third option entails strengthening and expanding bilateral partnerships through diversification. The fourth option is troop rationalization in South Korea and Japan in response to changing security threats. Lastly, this paper examines the possibility of using unconventional approaches to defense thinking. US security policymakers and strategists need to weigh these options and set the right priorities while preparing for the next decade.

### 5.1 Managing the US–Chinese Relationship

During the next decade, the US will face a very big challenge of improving its diplomatic relations with Beijing. The difficulty arises because the US has to maintain a delicate balance between dissuasion and assurance. This undertaking is also complicated by the interconnectedness of these two leading economies. In pursuing dissuasion and assurance strategies, the US is attempting to hedge against unforeseen future intentions that may be made possible by China's expanding military capabilities. Unfortunately, efforts by China to expand its military capabilities are counterproductive to America's quest for deeper diplomatic relations.

Going forward, the US must look for effective ways of managing tension and competition with China over resources in the region (Friedberg, 2005). It must capitalize on areas where China has already agreed to cooperate such as the maintenance of open and safe sea lanes in South China Sea. It may also be beneficial for the US if China was encouraged to participate in regional organizations. This is an excellent way of mitigating the fear in Beijing that such organizations are being promoted as a way of curtailing its progress. For instance, presently, trade volume between the US and ASEAN member states is higher than the one between the US and China.

The US must tread carefully in the Asia Pacific region by adopting a low-key approach when launching joint military exercises with Southeast Asian countries. These countries have already expressed concerns that Beijing might be angered by such a show of allegiance to the US, something that may lead to a worsening of China's provocative behavior. Alternatively, Beijing may demand to be accorded a similar status in these states, which may be accompanied by threats of economic restrictions in the event of non-compliance.

Lastly, military-to-military dialogues constitute a major component of the overarching goal of fostering cordial and lasting US-China relations (Medeiros, 2006). Essentially, such dialogues should be undertaken against the backdrop of the notion of crisis management. Platforms for such dialogues may prove to be very helpful in the event of incidents at sea. The military and political leadership must get used to the idea of using hotlines to quell tensions between the two countries.

### 5.2. Multilateralism

Multilateralism will facilitate progress in the US security agenda in the region by creating a safety net for partnerships, engagements, and joint military exercises. Multilateral organizations are founded on the idea of shared interests. It is easier for the US to come in as a partner in a region where collective interests have already been defined than in a situation where every state is reluctant to reach out to the outside world, beyond its domestic challenges. Fortunately, the existing multilateral arrangements in the region are in a flux. New interests are being introduced and new members are coming in. This phenomenon gives the US an opportunity to invest in efforts to integrate and strengthen the institutional foundation of these institutions to form a single political-economic bloc similar to the European Union.

If an EU-like organization emerges in the Asia Pacific, the US would have a formidable platform on which to table its security agenda and sustain it in terms of implementation in the long run.<sup>2</sup> The union could also create an excellent platform for interacting, engaging, partnering, and generally paving the way for the emergence of a common frontier in the fight against regional threats such as North Korea. Moreover, if properly executed, the creation of such an institution would greatly reduce the hegemonic influence of China in the region. The US could play a critical role in the form of trade relations. Such relations could lead to the formation of a new centre of economic mobilization in the region, thereby reducing reliance on China's economic capabilities

### 5.3. Strengthening and Expanding Bilateral Partnerships Through Diversification

One may argue that the most obvious alternative to multilateralism is bilateralism. In most cases, this strategy is driven by the goal of diversification (Tow, 2017). It is also driven by the realization that different states are in the pursuit of national interests that may not necessarily be accommodated in a multilateral framework. This strategy may also be beneficial for the US because it increases maneuverability in regards to the choices that the US military may make. Moreover, this option would translate into the continuation of bilateral relations that the US has traditionally been pursuing, for example, relations with Singapore, South Korea, and Japan. It may be imperative for the US to rethink these partnerships in light of the emerging security environment, such that political and military

<sup>2</sup> Emma Chanlett-Avery and Bruce Vaughn, op. cit., p. 35.

strategists are able to think about not just increasing the number of allies and partners but also the breadth and quality of these partnerships.

It would be foolhardy for the US to abandon the existing bilateral military relations with South Korea and Japan in the name of creating a foundation for an EU-style multilateral framework in the region. Instead, efforts to create such a framework should be directed at harnessing the strategic potential of incorporating countries where the level of strategic cooperation has not reached advanced stages of shared military and logistical capabilities such as Vietnam and the Philippines.

#### **5.4. Balancing the US Troop Presence in the Asia Pacific**

A major challenge for the US in terms of its relationship with its staunch allies in the Asia Pacific is troop rationalization. The most important thing in this regard is to delink military capabilities from troop numbers. For decades, the US has maintained a constant number of troops in these countries. At the same time, the security environment has changed considerably. In the coming decade, ruling elites in South Korea and Japan expect troop numbers to increase in response to emerging threats (Hughes, 2013). The US must change this perception for it to succeed in its overall defense strategy in the region.

Instead of worrying about troop numbers, the elites in this region should be concerned about changing training tactics of the US military and advancements in military technology. The United States continues to claim the leading position in these two aspects. Going into the next decade, the US must demonstrate its ability to employing the latest technologies to deter enemies. This calls for extensive collaboration with allies and partners across the region. This collaboration should be directed primarily towards proof of troops' abilities to defeat adversaries and to neutralize multiple threats in coordinated fashion.

### **6. Conclusion**

The security situation in the Asia Pacific continues to change at an unprecedented rate. The rise of China as a global power threatens to tilt the existing balance of power in the region, thereby endangering US security interests. Instability in North Korea poses a serious security threats to US interests as well as those of its allies. During the next decade, the US must continue to adapt its policies to address new challenges while maintaining its existing commitments.

Today, Japan and the Republic of Korea continue to lead the way as US allies and some evidence to suggest a thawing in their own bilateral relations, while in its early stages, could present significant opportunities for the US. In the case of other states such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Singapore, more collaboration is required as a way of reassuring them that their security interests are best served through allegiance with the US and to foster a regional multilateral dialogue. This provides the US with not just a host of opportunities for new security investment but also some risks and constraints as well.

As it stands, the US is in a strategic position of needing to demonstrate its military strength as its only way of negating growing assertive behavior from China. This however, must be done with caution as the very act of sabre rattling could risk encouraging China to further aggressively pursue advancements in military technology. The US needs to strike a balance in its troop rationalization efforts to ensure that dissuasion and assurance strategies continue being used interchangeably depending on the positioning of key US security interests. While troops and equipment for the purposes of power projection remain important, new activities of humanitarian relief mean that there is a need for the forces in the Asia Pacific to be diversified to foster closer ties through security policy. As such, the balance needs to be found where neither side is being neglected.

The best way to achieve such a balance is to assess US strategic positioning in each of the areas discussed in this paper: China, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, and Southeast Asia. The US stands to benefit a lot from China's economic development. However, if this growth is used to develop counter-containment capabilities, US security interests may be threatened. Such concerns also need to be raised in light of China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. The most challenging task for the US during the next decade will be to contain China's growth process and shape the way in which the country influences the region's security environment. It may indeed be a mistake for the US to attempt to suppress China for if its rise proves to be inevitable then such actions would only alienate the US from the regional hegemon. As such, cooperation must be the primary focus of US strategy.

Japan is arguably America's most long-standing ally in the Asia-Pacific and continued collaboration between the states will benefit enhanced military capabilities to counter the regional threats such as a nuclear-armed North Korean regime. By defending Japan and enabling it retain the First Island Chain, which is under threat of occupation by China, the US military will be able to assert its military superiority and maintain its importance to Japan.

In the Korean Peninsula, the US has managed to forge an alliance with the Republic of Korea, which has continued to exist since the early days of the Cold War. During the next decade, the US will continue to be the guarantor of South Korea's security strategy. The US will have to continue to confront the challenge of leading the way in dealing with what is arguably South Korea's biggest threat: North Korea. Incidentally, the US must guard against any provocative behavior by North Korea as a way of protecting not just South Korea's security interests but also those of thousands of US expatriates living in Seoul. Such efforts may put the US at loggerheads with China, which continues to be the leading provider of support to North Korea. Again, the ability to deal with such a scenario depends largely on the ability by US strategists to switch between dissuasive tendencies and assurance. The stance that the US adopts must one that best serves its security interests and those of its allies in the long run.

Lastly, the main security issue that dominates the security environment of Southeast Asia today is territorial claims in the South China Sea. China remains the most powerful claimant in these disputes. During the next decade, the US will be compelled to adopt a blend of counter-containment and alliance-building strategies to somehow alienate China and curtail its ability to assert its power and coerce weaker Southeast Asian states into abandoning their claims to these territories. To do this, the US will need to engage in forward deployment of military resources, to increase joint military exercises, and to enhance its present military capabilities.

In conclusion, the United States has achieved many feats in its quest for military supremacy in the Asia Pacific. These efforts have gone a long way in cementing US security interests; however, these long-standing interests will continue to be even more sought-after during the next decade. The US Department of Defense will have to narrow down its list of priorities to five strategic options: managing the US–Chinese relationship, multilateralism, the strengthening and expanding of bilateral partnerships through diversification, and the balancing the US troop presence in the Asia Pacific. The US will also need to continue promoting the existing military partnerships with Japan and South Korea in order to contain the threats posed by China's assertiveness and North Korea's nuclear ambitions. In the meantime, the best way of securing US security interests is by adopting a blend of containment and alliance-building strategies with a view to somewhat alienate China in terms of its ability to influence security outcomes across the Asia Pacific

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