

US planing a new East Asia pivot

Written by Parris Chang 000
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US President Barack Obama and many US officials have said, on several occasions, that the US' strategy of pivoting — rebalancing — in the Asia-Pacific is not aimed at China. This diplomatic language has not convinced Beijing, nor has it effectively curtailed China's military expansionism. With China's insatiable territorial claims in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, and in particular the land reclamation and island building in the South China Sea — aimed at establishing military bases and altering the regional military situation — the US cannot but change tack and adopt a fresh approach.

The major pivot of the US rebalancing strategy demonstrates its emphasis on military power, and the urgency with which it has deployed its forces to show its own military might and reinforced its joint defense arrangements with its diplomatic allies has been aimed at bolstering their unified strength in mitigation of China's hegemonic machinations.

One very interesting aspect of this is how India has seemingly abandoned its former approach of merely sitting back and observing the situation, and has given up its policy of non-alignment. It is now sidling up to the US, hoping to work with it to contain China.

In April, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter visited India and signed a US-India military cooperation agreement with Indian Minister of Defense Manohar Parrikar to enhance cooperation between the two countries in the fields of the military, logistics and national defense. Carter is the first US defense secretary to have stepped aboard an Indian aircraft carrier, and he revealed at the time to the media that the US would help upgrade the functions of the Indian aircraft carrier fleet.

India has been given little choice but to seek a joint approach with the US and Japan to guard against and counter what China terms its "string of pearls" strategy, in which the People's Republic of China navy has been establishing for itself bases in the Indian Ocean.

In recent years, India, the US and Japan have been conducting joint military exercises in the Indian Ocean. In May, four Indian Navy ships joined the US Navy in the South China Sea for joint military exercises. The two current political leaders also have a good relationship with each other. Since taking office in May 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has had seven summits with Obama. Obama also invited Modi to visit the US, and on June 8 Modi addressed a joint meeting of the US Congress, a real boost to the Indian prime minister's

standing.

In addition to India, Vietnam and the Philippines have clearly moved further into alignment with the US, increasing military cooperation with the US in an effort to combat China's expansionist intentions and militarization of the South China Sea. In the second half of May, Obama visited Vietnam and announced his intention to abolish the embargo on US weapons exports to that country. The two nations' military cooperation is to include joint drills, enabling Vietnam to enhance its military capability while also giving the US military access to Vietnamese harbors and airport facilities such as Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang, improving the US' logistical abilities in the South China Sea.

On May 24, in an address he gave in Hanoi, Obama said that he respected Vietnam's territorial claims and that large countries should not push smaller countries around. In response, China's official media accused the US and Vietnam of laying siege to China, saying that scrapping the prohibition on US arms sales to Vietnam would only increase tensions between China and the US.

The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between the US and the Philippines signed in 2014 to strengthen their military alliance could be said to have something of "locking the stable door after the horse has bolted" about it. In return for providing the US with military bases, the US promises to assist in defense by providing new military equipment and enhancing the Philippines' military capability.

There are all kinds of indications that China's People's Liberation Army is planning land reclamation and island building on the Scarborough Shoal (Huangyan Island, 黄岩岛) and building a runway there, and this is a matter of serious concern for both the US and the Philippines. After all, the Scarborough Shoal is less than 200 nautical miles (370km) from Manila, and well within the exclusive economic zone that the Philippines government is keen to promote. Beijing's plan to militarize the area constitutes a huge threat to the Philippines. US Secretary of State John Kerry, before his June 5 trip to Beijing, cautioned China that establishing an air defense identification zone in the South China Sea would be both provocative and likely to lead to regional instability.

It is no coincidence that the USS John C. Stennis and USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier battle groups were in the western Pacific — east of the Philippines — conducting military exercises in the middle of last month.

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The New York Times quoted a US official who said that the timing and location of military exercises including two aircraft carriers, 140 fighter jets and 12,000 military personnel was unmistakably intended to send a clear message to Beijing.

The US has intentionally chosen to mount a show of its military might on the eve of the International Court of Arbitration ruling on China's territorial claims in the South China Sea in anticipation of an irrational response from Beijing, and to warn China's leaders not to underestimate or mistake the US' resolve to maintain regional peace and security.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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