



U.S. 'Pivots' In Fits And Starts

By Angus Batey

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Since late 2011, the U.S. government has been touting an “Asia pivot” concept. This suggests that American defense, political and economic policy is undergoing a refocus towards the East, following decades of engagement in central Asia.

The plan to increase from 50% to 60% the proportion of the U.S. Navy’s fleet deployed in the Pacific has yet to be achieved. At the time of the initial announcement, more than 50% were in the Pacific already; the 60% figure will not be reached until 2020. Plans to garrison 2,500 U.S. Marines in Darwin are still proceeding, but those numbers are unlikely to be met until at least 2016, with, thus far, only several hundred troops rotating through the northern Australian city for training. A proposed growth to the size of U.S. forces based in the Philippines is still awaiting host government approval.

“The Obama administration’s pivot doesn’t really exist,” argued the Cato Institute’s research fellow in defense and homeland security, Benjamin H. Friedman, in an article published by China-U.S. Focus last November. Nevertheless, some increases in force presence and the potential to expand regional force projection have taken place.

The first littoral combat ship (LCS), the USS Freedom, began a 10-month deployment to Singapore in April 2013; in November, the ship delivered aid to the Philippines following typhoon Haiyan. A second LCS is expected to rotate into the region this year, for a deployment that may last up to 16 months.

The U.S. Navy announced last month that the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan will replace the USS George Washington as flagship of the 7th Fleet forward-deployed naval force, based at Yokosuka, Japan. George Washington, which is 11 years older than Ronald Reagan, is due to undergo its mid-life refueling complex overhaul and will sail to Newport News, Virginia. The Navy’s statement announcing the redeployment notes that: “The security environment in the Indo-Asia-Pacific requires that the U.S. Navy station the most capable ships forward.” No date has yet been disclosed for the rotation.

While it is tempting to see China’s expanding military as the key challenge prompting renewed American focus on the region, commanders highlight North Korea as their main source of concern. Speaking to media from the destroyer USS Spruance in Singapore last month, the U.S. Pacific Fleet commander, Admiral Harry B. Harris, Jr., described North Korea as the USA’s “number one security concern” in the region.

“I am concerned as a commander for the provocations that come from North Korea,” he said. “I don’t understand them, I don’t understand their leadership, and I don’t understand their intent.”

Despite China's announcement of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) covering the Japanese-administered Senkaku islands, which Harris described as "an unfortunate imposition" which "has not affected our military operations at all," the U.S. attitude towards China appears one of carefully calibrated politesse.

"We welcome, quite frankly, the growth of China as a military power in the Pacific," Harris said, noting that the Chinese will participate for the first time this year in RIMPAC – the biennial Rim of the Pacific maritime military exercise, which will involve forces from 23 nations and takes place in June near Hawaii.