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Some worry 'new' U.S. military focus on Asia is a muddle

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WASHINGTON — The Obama administration pledge to shift American military strategy toward Asia overlooks a key fact: The U.S. never really dropped its focus on the region.

But the current budget proposal that might flow from that pledge contains a potentially crippling contradiction: The plan might include big-ticket items the United States needs to increase its presence in Asia and counter China's growing military capability.

The result, some analysts fear, is a muddled approach that could end up with a tough-talking United States saying it will do more than it is committing the resources needed. That, they say, could leave America and its allies in the region exposed if China's military becomes more aggressive in the future.

An examination of the current U.S. posture in Asia, matched to China's own strategic positioning, underscores just how perplexing and complicated the new U.S. military strategy is.

For instance, American officials talk on the one hand about a growing Chinese threat. On the other hand, however, the U.S. intelligence assessments show that China is years away from developing the kinds of weapons that would challenge American dominance in the region.

Less than a week after President Barack Obama's announcement of a fundamental change in American military focus, Adm. Jo E. Greenert, the chief of naval operations, said Tuesday that the new defense strategy would not affect operations in East Asia.

Speaking to security experts and journalists at an event sponsored by the Center for a New American Security, a Washington think tank, Greenert said the Navy would take the strategic guidance just issued and "adjust accordingly." But he said he didn't expect much change.

"My first assessment is we're in good shape in the Navy where we stand in the western Pacific," Greenert said.

The security challenges in the region are as tangled as they are vast.

At the core of current tensions is the South China Sea, which stretches across more than 1 million square miles and is home to busy shipping lanes and untapped reserves of oil, gas and minerals. It is also the setting of competing claims between China and several other nations, including Vietnam and the Philippines — both of which have drawn closer to the United States.

To the north, there is a lingering dispute between China and Japan, a core American ally, over the Senkaku chain of islands in the East China Sea (China calls the islands the Diaoyu). Nearby, the leadership of South Korea, which hosts a string of U.S. military bases, has expressed dismay that China is unwilling to condemn the erratic behavior of its neighbors in North Korea.

America keeps 28,000 troops in South Korea as well as about 38,000 ashore and 11,000 afloat in Japan.

U.S. alliances in the region have caused some in China, particularly in military circles, to charge that the United States is working to contain China's rise. The phrase harkens back to the Cold War and the globe-as-chessboard strategy of "containment" toward the Soviet Union.

U.S. officials counter that they are only continuing longstanding relationships and hope to forge stronger bonds with China.

Those tensions underline the delicacy of an evolving relationship between two nations that do \$450 billion-plus in annual trade but harbor deep suspicions of one another's long-term intentions.

Even as it fought wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States kept nearly half of all U.S. F-22s based in Asia; the jet, known as the Raptor, is among the most advanced stealth fighters in the world.

Two aircraft carriers, which not only provide key air power in the region but are the most powerful way the United States projects its presence anywhere in the world, routinely are posted in Asia or the Pacific.

The United States also has steadily provided weapons to its closest allies, including Taiwan, which China considers part of its territory.

What the U.S. now promises to do, however, is cut weapons systems that some analysts say would be exactly the kinds needed to counter China's growing military capability.

interests and allies in the event of Chinese military action.

At the Pentagon announcement of the new strategy last week, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said the department would be spending on "Cold War-era" programs like nuclear submarines, missile defense and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter — a stealth fighter jet still in development that, when deployed, would be the most potent tactical aircraft in existence.

Some argue, however, that those are the very sorts of weapons needed to check Chinese military ambitions. Rather than cut the United States should keep them and add more drones and air power, said Dan Blumenthal, a China expert at the Washington American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank.

"We are beating our chest about our defense strategy but not resourcing it," Blumenthal said, noting that China has spent on an increased 10 percent on defense every year for at least 15 years, while U.S. spending in the region has remained stagnant. "It's not we have to take the pain of China complaining. But they are complaining anyway."

Critics of increased defense spending in the region note that the U.S. military is far more sophisticated than China's — and will be at least a generation. They argue that after a record 14 consecutive years of increased defense spending, including for the wars in Afghanistan, the United States needs to cut back or risk the health of its own economy — all for an unknown threat.

"How much are we going to allow worst-case scenarios to dictate our posture?" asked Christopher Preble, the vice president for foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian research center.

Will Beijing at some point insist on an Asian version of the Monroe Doctrine — the equivalent of the United States' 19th century non-interference in the Americas? Might it in the future want to back up overseas investment in oil and other natural resources with gunboats?

The Pentagon noted in an August 2011 report to Congress that "it is unlikely that China will be able to project and sustain large high-intensity combat operations far from China prior to 2020."

For now, China's announced developments in military technology seem focused on what is commonly referred to as "anti-access denial" systems, which seek to deter other nations' militaries, such as America's, from entering areas it seeks to control.

The news in 2010 that the DongFeng 21-D anti-aircraft carrier missile system had reached initial operational capacity was widely seen as a step toward limiting the range of U.S. forces and their allies in the South China Sea. Chinese media say the missile is designed to reach a range of more than 1,600 miles; a Pentagon assessment pegs its reach at "in excess" of 900 miles.

The same could be said for China's J-20 stealth fighter, which once it is deployed, something the Pentagon does not expect before 2015, would allow the Chinese to more easily strike targets such as regional air bases.

There are also the ongoing sea trials of the Varyag, a Soviet-era aircraft carrier bought and revamped by the Chinese. In itself, the ship does not represent any advance in naval technology, and the Chinese military likely faces steep challenges in learning to land jets. The Pentagon, in its 2011 report on Chinese military capabilities, said that "it will take several years" before China has "a minimum combat capability on an aircraft carrier."

Pentagon officials fear the bigger threat will come if China begins to manufacture its own carriers, a development that could leave China capable of parking its carrier fleet off the shores of weaker nations or discouraging U.S. naval activity.

Beijing has responded to the American presence in the region with a cautious tone folded around a warning: The United States must be careful but if it goes too far, there will be trouble.

In comments posted to China's Defense Ministry website on Monday, military spokesman Geng Yansheng said, "China's peaceful development presents opportunities rather than challenges for the international community, which also includes the U.S."

Geng added: "We hope that the United States will flow with the tide of the era, and deal with China and the Chinese military in an open and rational way, will be careful in its words and actions, and do more that is beneficial to the development of relations between the two countries and their militaries and the peace and stability of the region."

Most in the United States believe China in the short term is seeking to establish a "green water" navy capable of exerting considerable influence in the region and curbing international access to Taiwan.

But there is no consensus on what it aspires to beyond that, or even when China can achieve its immediate aims.

China already has a potent mixture of capabilities stacked toward the Taiwan Strait, the epicenter of Beijing's desire to block what it calls American military interference in the region. China asserts that Taiwan is part of its sovereign territory. After Washington's sale of more than \$6 billion of arms to Taiwan in 2010, Beijing suspended military exchanges that year.

China maintains between 1,000 and 1,200 short-range ballistic missiles, according to the Pentagon. Their estimated ranges could put Taiwan in the crosshairs.

The Pentagon report also pointed out, in a table titled "Taiwan Strait Military Balance," that of China's 49 diesel attack submarines, their small size and ability to operate quietly would make a potent swarm against lumbering aircraft carriers — 33 are based with the East and South Sea Fleets. Those two fleets are headquartered to the north and southwest of Taiwan on China's coast.

Chinese officials have said repeatedly that the United States misunderstands its military aims. After growing to the second-largest in the world, they say, it's only natural that China would want to update its armed forces for strictly defensive aims.

"I think that America should understand that the rising economic power and rising military power of China contribute to regional stability and peace. ... America and China have common interests in the region," said Su Hao, director of a strategy and conflict management center at China Foreign Affairs University, which is overseen by the nation's Foreign Affairs Ministry.

But speaking by phone this week, Su said that the United States must give the situation more breathing room.

"The way that America is going about this issue is going to create an escalation in tensions in this region. ... It will encourage China to become more assertive toward China," he said. "At the moment, I think it will be confined to the diplomatic domain, but if America becomes more involved in a high-profile manner, there will likely be a military confrontation" between China and a neighboring state.

Analysts and officials in Beijing frequently point out that China's official defense budget is less than \$100 billion. Even with high projections from the West — the Pentagon recently put China's military-related spending at more than \$160 billion for 2010 — a mere fraction of the \$556 billion baseline budget the Pentagon is expected to spend in 2012.

The last time U.S. defense expenditures were as low as China's was in 1949, when Pentagon spending, expressed in 2010 dollars, was \$10 billion, according to the Project on Defense Alternatives, a think tank in Cambridge, Mass.

China also spends a smaller percentage of its total economic output on defense than does the U.S.: 2 percent of gross domestic product compared with 3.2 percent for the United States, according to Lawrence Korb, a budget expert at the Washington-based Center for Budget and Programs Priorities.

But Pentagon officials argue that such comparisons overlook the rapid increase in China's defense spending, which grew by 54 percent between 2006 and 2010, while U.S. expenditures rose by 24 percent.

That rapid growth is what unnerves U.S. allies in the region.

"We provide a good security blanket, and the Chinese have managed to poke big holes in that security blanket" over the past 20 years, Blumenthal said. The result, he said, is "diluting U.S. capabilities."

(Youssef reported from Washington, Lasseter reported from Beijing.)

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