



Talk of a U.S.-Asia 'Pivot' Is Overblown

By: MALOU INNOCENT - December 13, 2012

The greatest misperception surrounding Washington's "pivot" to Asia is that America's dominant presence is not already felt there on a regular basis. It is.

The United States plays a considerable role in the Far East, despite the Obama administration's proclamations last autumn that it would "pivot" or "rebalance" there in the future. For one, the United States maintains forward-deployed forces in South Korea, with 28,500 U.S. troops; Guam, with 4,500 U.S. troops; and Japan, with 40,000 U.S. troops. Guam, of course, is part of America as a non-self-governing, unincorporated territory. South Korea and Japan, however, after decades of proven internal stability and peaceful democratic transitions, are equipped to defend themselves.

Once upon a time, South Korea was incapable of surviving without America's support. That began to change in the 1980s. Today, its economy ranks around 13th in the world, it has twice the North's population, and, if South Korea's leaders chose to, could be spending on defense the equivalent of the North's entire annual GDP.

As for Japan, despite its recent economic woes, it had the fifth highest defense budget in the world in 2011, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Japan surpassed Russia, India, and Brazil, and fell only behind the United States, China, the United Kingdom, and France. Moreover, as scholars Shinichi Ogawa and Michael Schiffer have pointed out, in criticism of its policy, Japan possesses a nuclear "breakout" capacity, meaning its civilian nuclear fuel cycle is so advanced "that, at the flip of the switch, [it] could be militarized."

Save for a planned contingent of 2,500 U.S. Marines in Australia, four littoral combat ships stationed in Singapore, and rotating troops and surveillance aircraft in the Philippines, it is unclear whether U.S. troop deployments will grow more robust in Japan and South Korea. They should not. Such prosperous allies can live without the generous welfare of American taxpayers.

Aside from these forward-deployed forces, the Far East feels Washington's constant presence with the United States Pacific Command. This regional unified military structure consists of about one-fifth of total U.S. military strength. It includes six aircraft carrier strike groups, about two-thirds of U.S. Marine Corps combat strength, and the U.S. Pacific Fleet, which goes on frequent patrols conducting joint, military-training exercises with America's allies and partners.

Talking about partners, Uncle Sam has a lot of them in a region home to over 50 percent of the world's population. The United States has been cultivating warmer relations with

India, most especially after accommodating New Delhi's nuclear expansion with a symbolic, 2008 agreement facilitating civilian nuclear cooperation between them. Moreover, despite recent hand wringing over U.S.-Russia relations, Washington's so-called "reset" has rebounded ties from their 2008 low, particularly with regard to Moscow's help supplying NATO's war effort in Afghanistan.

Elsewhere, the United States has forged better relations with Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines, and has embraced existing multilateral organizations and trade agreements, like the East Asia Summit, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

In the end, Washington's obsessive fixation on the Middle East and North Africa should warrant serious reconsideration. More of America's attention should be paid to the future of the Asia-Pacific, since maintaining peace in that region will be the challenge of the 21st century. However, what foreign policy planners in Washington should be asking themselves is what the United States should be willing to defend in this region, and at what cost? What implicit commitments should Washington make to prosperous, populous countries eminently capable of defending themselves? Allies are intended to supplement a nation-state's power, not hinder or jeopardize it.

Primarily, America's deepening involvement in Asia is meant to reassure allies nervous over China's growing assertiveness and increased military spending. However, the United States can both value being a strong military power *and* allow other countries in the Far East to assert a greater leadership role. These policies are neither zero-sum nor mutually exclusive.

For more than half a century, the United States has played a prominent military and economic role in the Asia-Pacific. The American people should not be led to believe that their country was a never a force to be reckoned with there. Indeed, the biggest tale proponents of U.S. prominence in Asia ever sold was the intimation that we do not already have it.