The United States' Premature Pivot to "Asia"

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Published online: 21 August 2012
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The Obama administration has shifted its focus of strategic concerns from the Middle East to the Far East. (Although the term "Asia" is often used, reference is clearly to China, as there is no other power in that region the U.S. holds it must contend with.) The shift reminds one of the old parable about a child who was looking for his lost dime next to the lamp post, not because it was there that the dime went missing—but because it was there that the light made searching easy.

Responding to challenges posed by Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Arab Awakening is extremely taxing and frustrating. Countering China for now does not entail sacrificing the lives of young Americans, no surges are called for (the U.S. plans to send 250 Marines to Australia for now, and up to 2,500 over the next 10 years, and two aircraft carriers—of which the U.S. has eleven—are maneuvering in the area), and no large outlay of funds is needed. Moreover, one can readily point to achievements: several of the nations that border China have chosen to strengthen their ties with the U.S., including Vietnam, the Philippines, and even Burma. And these nations are following the U.S. lead to deal with China as a group, rather than on a one-on-one basis, as China sought. And the region is mainly peaceful and stable. Moreover, the Pentagon has a strong innate preference for preparing for a war with conventional troops: fighting an enemy with fighter planes, ships, artillery, and tanks—rather than dealing with irregular forces, of the sort it faces in the Middle East. The same holds for the lobbies that represent the American corporations that build the hardware. There is much more money to be made by building F-22 s and F-35 s and hundreds more

ships to counter China, than by adding Special Forces and manufacturing whatever meager means their warfare requires: snub handguns, sharp knives, and robes.

True, China may one day become a major power that will challenge the global role of the U.S. However, if such a development is to take place, it will be decades down the road—while the U.S. is challenged in the Middle East right now. Moreover, the way the U.S. deals with the Middle East has major consequences extending far beyond the region, including for the global stature of the U.S. and—its position in the Far East. The article proceeds by outlining the Middle East challenge and its implications, and then examines several reasons most (albeit not all) of the power moves to contain China can be delayed. Indeed, it might be beneficial to defer them.

Middle East: The Arena in which the U.S. is Now Tested

At first it might seem like the U.S. is closing shop in the Middle East. The U.S. has completed the withdrawal of its troops from Iraq and announced that it will withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 and has already started the draw down. Actually, the U.S. fears that a Shia dominated Iraq will fall into Iran's sphere of influence. It hence is seeking ways to maintain a foothold in that country. As these lines are being written, the U.S. embassy in Iraq has a staff of 15,000, many who used to wear uniforms. Fearing that Afghanistan may provide again a haven and training ground for terrorists, the U.S. is seeking to keep permanent bases in Afghanistan. The U.S. is engaging al-Qaeda, and affiliated groups or groups with similar goals and tactics, in Yemen and Somalia. All of these are current challenges, in contrast to the Far East ones.

The Arab Awakening has destabilized one of the United States' major allies in the Middle East, Egypt, and is

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threatening to destabilize several others, including Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, and ultimately Saudi Arabia. American observers tend to welcome the Awakening on the grounds that the support of authoritarian regimes could not and should not continue and that new democracies will arise, which are assumed to be pro-Western. However, so far, the awakening countries seem to be moving in an Islamist direction. And although the leaders of some of these governments, political parties, and movements make statements that are moderate and neutral toward the West, there are reasons not to presume that the U.S., Western ideals, or democracy will be embraced by either the new Arab governments or their people.

Proclaiming the arrival of the “Arab Winter,” Daniel Byman points out that in Egypt, where “Brotherhood leaders have learned to mouth a commitment to pluralism and tolerance, but it is unclear that they would act on it when in power,” only one in five Egyptians viewed the U.S. favorably after Mubarak fell.

In November 2011, Abdel Hakim Belhadj, a military leader prominent in post-Qaddafi Libya, was quoted as saying, “There is nothing to fear, there is no extremism in Libya. Libyans are Muslims, they are moderate, their Islam is moderate ... There is no al Qaeda in Libya and there is no connection between the revolutionaries and al Qaeda.” He also indicated Libya and the NTC would aspire to match the successful example of Turkey: “We hope for a democratic environment and part of that is having different points of view.”

Despite these types of statements by Belhadj and others on the commitment of Libya’s Islamists to the protection of democracy, some Western powers remain skeptical. A November 2011 story on BBC News Online reflects this concern: “Recent statements by National Transitional Council (NTC) leaders on Islam being the principal basis for legislation in the new Libya, coupled with the increased prominence of former jihadist figures, have led some to believe that Libya’s new political reality may be decidedly less liberal and closer to Gaddafi’s scenario than initially anticipated.” The article goes on to point out that, in an October 23 speech, NTC Chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil said that sharia would be “the basic source of legislation, and so any law which contradicts Islamic principles is void.”

This holds even for Turkey. Turkey was considered solidly in the Western camp: a secularized state, a staunch member of NATO, a nation keen to join the EU, and one with considerable commercial and even military ties to Israel. However, since the election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, Turkey has become more Islamist, moved away from the West, and moved closer to Iran. In the first five years of AKP rule, trade between Turkey and Iran increased six-fold, as Turkey became Iran’s most important regional trading

partner. Turkey is also replacing Dubai as Iran’s financial conduit, allowing Turkish banks to help Iran circumvent UN sanctions and additional ones imposed by the United States and EU.

This increased economic cooperation has translated into better political ties. After Iran’s highly controversial 2009 elections, President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan were among the first international leaders to congratulate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his victory. Turkey’s Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, later argued that the election results were an internal Iranian matter and described the elections as “dynamic and well-attended.” In June 2010, just before the United States finally succeeded in convincing Russia and even China to support the imposition of additional sanctions against Iran, Turkey (working with Brazil) came up with a deal it had negotiated with Iran regarding the treatment of uranium. Many observers viewed it as merely a stalling tactic intended to derail the sanction vote. And when the vote did take place, Turkey voted against sanctions. True, sometimes Turkey sees itself as competing with Iran over who will be a major Middle Eastern power. However, this is a limited rivalry between two nations that have become much closer to one another as Turkey has moved away from the U.S.

All these challenges, which are current and pressing, are limited in importance compared to two major challenges the U.S. faces in the Middle East. One concerns Iran and the other Pakistan. Most observers hold that Iran is close to developing nuclear arms. Hence the U.S. must figure out how to deal with such a development—not two decades from now, but in the near future.

The Challenges Posed by Iran and Pakistan

Some hold that the West can allow Iran to develop nuclear arms because it can be contained, by threatening retaliation in kind should it use its nuclear weapons. Although the Obama administration has not formally embraced this position, several observers believe that this is the direction it is headed. Retired Gen. John Abizaid, former head of U.S. Central Command, put it as follows: “We need to make it very clear to the Iranians, the same way we made it clear to the Soviet Union and China that their first use of nuclear weapons would result in the devastation of their nation. I don’t believe Iran is a suicide state. Deterrence will work with Iran.”

Fareed Zakaria argues that Iran’s religious leaders comprise a “canny (and ruthlessly pragmatic) clerical elite” and that military dictatorships like the one that is now forming in Iran “are calculating. They act in ways that keep themselves alive and in power. That instinct for self-preservation is what will make a containment strategy work.” Kenneth Waltz

writes that “deterrence has worked 100 % of the time. After all, we have deterred big nuclear powers like the Soviet Union and China. So sleep well.”

One of the few points on which there is wide agreement is that for deterrence to work, the leaders of the nations that command nuclear arms must be rational. The champions of deterrence defend their position by suggesting that the only alternative to being rational is to be irrational, which is tantamount to being crazy. They then argue that Iran’s leaders are not insane people, which they demonstrate by showing that these leaders react, in sensible ways, to changes in the world around them. For instance, by far the most conciliatory offer made by Iran regarding its nuclear program was made in May 2003, after the U.S. military wiped out Saddam’s army within a few weeks with few casualties. It is also when Iran was told by the president of the United States that it was on the very short list of members of the “Axis of Evil.” In short, Iran had reason to expect to be attacked. Because, according to proponents of deterrence, actors can act only either purely rationally or purely irrationally, showing that the leaders of Iran and other rogue states respond to changes in facts and are thus not insane seems to prove their assertion that they are rational.

However, sociologists point out that there is a third category of decision-making and behavior, which they call “non-rational.” They point to a major category of human behavior, where people act in response to deeply held beliefs that cannot be proven or disproven—for instance, their sense that God commanded them to act in a particular manner. People have long shown that they are willing to kill for their beliefs, even if they will die as a result. True, they respond to facts and pressures, but only as long as those factors affect the ways they implement their beliefs—not the beliefs themselves. Thus, a religious fanatic Iranian leader who believes that God commands him to wipe out Tel Aviv may calculate whether to use missiles or bombers and in what season to attack, but not whether or not to heed God’s command to kill the infidels.

Even rational heads of states have in the past shown themselves to be very capable of making gross miscalculations that cost them their lives, their regimes, and all they were fighting for—take Hitler, for instance. Similarly, the Japanese, when they attacked Pearl Harbor, believed that they would be able at least to drive the U.S. out of their part of the world. And both the Germans and the French completely misjudged the course of World War I. History is littered with numerous, albeit less grand, miscalculations, from Bernard Montgomery’s “a bridge too far,” to Lord Cardigan’s Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War, to Pickett’s Charge in the American Civil War.

Even if Iran never drops its nukes on anybody, once it demonstrates that it has acquired them—say, by testing them—these weapons would have considerable consequences for

our security and that of our allies. Michael C. Desch correctly reports, “The concern is that once Iran develops a nuclear capability, it would become even more aggressive in supporting terrorist groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Gaza . . . Finally, many Americans fear that once Iran fields a nuclear weapon, it will become ever more meddlesome in Iraq.” The side effects of allowing Iran to obtain nukes are well spelled out by Emanuele Ottolenghi, the executive director of the Transatlantic Institute in Brussels. I hence paraphrase his words here: The fact is that an Iranian bomb would enable Tehran to fulfill the goals of the revolution without using it. Under an Iranian nuclear umbrella, terrorists will be able to act with impunity, and its neighbors will enter into a dangerous arms race.

It matters little that Tehran may act rationally. If Iran goes nuclear, the Western world will have to negotiate a Middle East Yalta with Tehran—one that may entail a U.S. withdrawal, an unpleasant bargain for the smaller principalities of the Gulf’s shores and an unacceptable one for Israel and Lebanon’s Christians. Last but not least is the risk that Iran, or some other rogue nation, will slip a nuke or two to terrorists, or they will obtain one without consent of the leaders of Iran with the help of one group or another, such as the Revolutionary Guard.

The champions of deterrence argue that, to deter such nations from sharing nukes with terrorists, it is sufficient for us to declare that if terrorists use such weapons, we will hold responsible the nation that provided them. However, this argument assumes a much more reliable level of nuclear forensics than we command so far. We may well be unable to determine the source of a bomb, or it could take months, after which point striking a nation with nuclear bombs in cold blood may well not seem a very credible counter threat. One hardly needs to elaborate any further that even if Iran can be deterred from employing its nukes directly, there are strong reasons to favor an Iran without nukes. It has already threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz and is considered a major threat by Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The challenges posed by Pakistan are particularly well known. They too are current and pressing. These include the fact that Pakistan is escalating the construction of nuclear bombs and has the fastest growing nuclear arsenal in the world. Having doubled in the past several years, estimates now put Pakistan’s current stockpile at 90–110 warheads, and it could reach 150–200 in the next decade.¹ These arms are not well secured. According to Michele Bachmann, member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, “We have to recognize that 15 of the sites, nuclear sites are available or are potentially penetrable by jihadists. Six attempts have already been made on nuclear

¹ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, “Nuclear Notebook: Pakistan’s nuclear forces, 2011.”

sites. This is more than an existential threat. We have to take this very seriously.” It is widely agreed that the greatest threat to U.S. security is posed by terrorists who gain access to WMD. The most likely place in which they may gain such access is Pakistan.

The ways the U.S. deals with the challenges in the Middle East, its allies in the region, and those who seek to dominate it and are hostile to the U.S. will not only greatly affect American security in the region and in the homeland, but also will deeply affect the extent to which the U.S. is considered a trustworthy, reliable ally. This is a question raised by many in the Far East.

Far East: A Futuristic Threat

Few, if any, question the observation that U.S. power is declining and that of China is rising. However, one should not overlook the fact that the U.S. decline starts from a very high level and China’s rise from a very low one. Hence, even if China’s economy continues to grow at a rapid pace, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace projects that, in 2050, the U.S. GDP per capita will still be nearly three times larger than that of China, despite the fact that China’s total GDP will be 20 % larger. Moreover, given that China has a population four times larger than that of the U.S., a population that is demanding and gaining a share of the affluence so far limited to a small fraction, and that the legitimacy of the regime is based on such economic well-being, the income per capita is the more relevant figure. According to the World Bank, in 2010, China’s income per capita was a mere \$4,260 to America’s \$47,240, placing it behind Ecuador and Algeria. While exact estimates and calculations vary, the wide per capita gap is expected to persist in the coming decades. And this assumes no political and environmental upheavals and disregards the demographic deterioration of China and the relative youthfulness of the U.S.

There are great differences in the assessments of the scope of the military buildup of China, as well as its intentions. However, so far its scope has been rather small. The U.S. is spending six times more on defense than China. It has thousands of nuclear arms compared to China’s hundreds. It has eleven aircraft carriers compared to China’s one, which only began sea trials in August 2011. Even hawks state that they merely expect China to be able to counter the U.S. in the region, not to become a global force. Robert Kaplan in his “How We Would Fight China,” concludes, “China has committed itself to significant military spending, but its navy and air force will not be able to match ours for some decades.” Robert Ross also finds, “The transformation of the PLA into a region-wide strategic power will require many decades... The transformation of the PLA

into a global strategic power is an even more distant prospect.” Hence there is ample time to seek to engage China in the ways Kissinger suggested, rather than allowing “both sides [to] analyze themselves into self-fulfilling prophecies.”

Hawks argue that in order to match China two decades from now, the U.S. needs to develop and build now the weapons that will be needed then, and especially should increase the strength of the Navy. The American Enterprise Institute, Foreign Policy Initiative, and Heritage Foundation 2011 report calls for “the deployment of more submarines and surface combatants, more 5th generation aircraft like the F-22 Raptor and F-35 Lightning, hardened air and naval bases, enhanced anti-submarine and anti-mining capabilities, additional missile and cruise-missile defense systems, [and] redundant communication and reconnaissance platforms...”² Max Boot writes, “We desperately need a ship-building and plane-building program to match China’s.”³ Dan Blumenthal and Michael Mazza warn of disastrous consequences for all of Asia: “Should American military power further erode, the region would face one of two unhappy futures. China could successfully pacify its neighbors and dominate Asia. America would thus fail to maintain a longstanding objective—the prevention of a hostile hegemon dominating Asia. Alternatively, Asian countries might find ways to resist Chinese pressure themselves. In this scenario, countries would arm to the teeth and form ever-shifting constellations of power. Many would develop weapons of mass destruction. Asia would look something like Europe did before World War I—but with nuclear weapons. Confronting either future tomorrow could be more expensive than properly resourcing our Pacific forces today.”

However, it is far from obvious that one can predict what kinds of weapons will be needed two decades from now (and beyond) and that those kinds under discussion—mainly a variety of WWII weapons (ships and planes)—are the most suitable ones. Note that two decades ago, few anticipated the importance of drones and cyber warfare. Hence, premature commitments are particularly damaging, especially in an age of tight budgets. Even if one accepts that some such development needs to proceed now, it hardly follows that making the Far East the front and pivoting away from the Middle East is appropriate.

One may argue that the U.S. could cover both theaters. After all, the U.S. has followed a two-war doctrine. But this argument disregards that the U.S. defense budget is about to be cut, according to most observers, by at least \$450 billion

² AEI, Foreign Policy Institute, and Heritage Foundation, “China’s Military Buildup.”

³ Max Boot, “We Need Military Buildup to Match China’s,” *Commentary*, July 26 2011, accessed December 16, 2011, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/07/26/we-need-military-buildup-to-match-chinas/>

over the next decade (an amount Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta offered), if not by a trillion (as demanded by Congressional sequestration requirements). Indeed, one of the first changes among those expected is to give up on being able to fight on two fronts at the same time, which one must assume also holds for building up arms and troops for two wars at the same time.

Even if one disregards the budgetary pressures and the thesis that the most important measures the U.S. has to undertake to shore up its power is to put its economic house in order, one should not disregard the leadership and political capital issues. Theoretically there seems to be no reason the White House, National Security Council, and DOD planners could not pay full attention to two fronts or even more. However, the historical record shows that preoccupation with one front tends to shortchange the other. The Bush administration, it has often been noted, focused on Iraq and neglected Afghanistan.

The challenges in the Middle East are very taxing. The U.S. has not developed a strategy for dealing with Pakistan, a way to stabilize Afghanistan or, arguably, Iraq, is flailing in its dealings with Iran, and is confused about how to deal with a Middle East that is trending toward Islamic majori-

ties. Pivoting to the Far East will prove a major distraction at this point in time. It may be tempting to score diplomatic victories by wooing Vietnam and Burma away from China, but it will do little for U.S. stature as a global power if, meanwhile, its allies in the Middle East feel betrayed because Iran is pushing them around. The U.S. may view it as a sign of prowess that it has a naval presence in the South China Sea and keeps it free to international navigation (although nobody ever sought to restrict it), but this presence will not secure the future flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. And the fact that the U.S. will help India develop its nuclear program as part of courting it to balance China will do little to protect Americans from the ultimate threat of the decade—terrorists getting nuclear arms in Pakistan or the threats of Iran.

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