

Cold War Redux: Washington Turbo-Militarizes China's Backyard

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Global Research, October 01, 2013

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

While the Middle East teeters on the brink of another prolonged conflict that would engender some form of US involvement, the Obama's administration's shift away from the region and toward East Asia is easier said than done. Though the *"Pivot to Asia"* policy of the Obama administration may not be stealing all the headlines, US military presence around the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca is quietly building up, giving rise to increased American muscle in Southeast Asia. Obama announced the pivot policy during a visit to Australia in 2011, declaring a fully equipped 2,500-strong Marine task force operating from Darwin by 2016. The pivot to Asia is anything but an empty catchphrase, as the US Air Force is beginning to bolster its presence in bases in Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, [with plans](#) to move 60 percent of US warships to the region by 2020. It's no secret that these developments are the Pentagon's response to China's ever-increasing military and economic clout, and Uncle Sam is boldly sending the message that he's coming to town.

Washington's objective is to build a Cold War-style security ring around China by deepening military partnerships with American allies in Southeast Asia while broadening its capacity to police vital trade and energy chokepoints. Around 80 percent of China's oil imports pass through the Straits of Malacca in addition to much of its freight trade, and the deepening US presence being established by the Pentagon is designed to limit China's access to energy and raw material in the event of a major conflict or political crisis. Washington also aims to rope Southeast Asia into its economic sphere through the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) (TPP) agreement, a plurilateral free trade agreement currently being negotiated between the US and a handful of Pacific-rim states with China distinctively excluded. Ongoing TPP trade negotiations have been hampered time and time again due to growing public disapproval and the reluctance of some participatory nations to accept broadened intellectual property rights legislation that would benefit US firms, as well as drastic deregulation of financial sectors and measures that would undermine existing laws in participating countries.

Herbert Carlisle, Chief of US Air Force operations in the Pacific, was frank enough [to tell reporters](#) in late July that, *"Back in the late, great days of the Cold War, we had a thing called Checkered Flag: We rotated almost every CONUS [Continental United States] unit to Europe. Every two years, every unit would go and work out of a collateral operating base in Europe. We're turning to that in the Pacific."* Another feature of the US pivot is Washington's stance on contentious territorial disputes in the South China Sea, which lack neutrality and clearly favor the claims of US littoral allies despite claims of neutrality. Beijing interprets American measures in the region as hostile, and in addition to the unprecedented NSA spying revelations that demonstrably have more to do with economics than security, China is concerned with Washington promoting dissent and separatism within its borders, and that the Obama administration is playing up Beijing's so-called *"hegemonic intentions,"* despite

having just a fraction of Washington's military budget and a long history as a non-interventionist power.

Beijing is also uneasy that Washington may actively challenge China's model of development as an alternative, and it suspects the TPP is designed to reduce the scope for internationalization of the yuan. As the US permanently stations its littoral warships in Singapore and hastens its turbo-pivot, the strategic rebalancing is "essential" to sustaining "America's global leadership" in the words of Hilary Clinton, in her 2011 article titled "[America's Pacific Century](#)." In what many would consider a counter to the nascent 'Asian NATO' softly emerging, China held its largest ever air and naval military drills with another country – Russia – off the coast of Vladivostok in July 2013. The naval exercises simulated submarine strikes on Chinese and Russian vessels, which appeared to be drills aimed at countering hostiles from another state's naval forces, rather than piracy or counter-terrorism. As Russia and China enhance their military and economic cooperation, a closer examination of the shifting dynamics of US policy in Southeast Asia is required.

Myanmar: Mr. Sein goes to Washington

Myanmar was firmly in Beijing's camp for decades while it was (and still is) ruled by an ethno-Buddhist military junta, but since 2010 when the country [embarked on](#) market-liberalizing reforms with the intention to transition to "democracy," this long-isolated and impoverished country has become the gem in Obama's Asia-pivot crown. The justification for the West's reengagement with Myanmar rest on a series of modest political reforms, but the substance of the relationship is both commercial and strategic. Myanmar is considered the last "frontier market" in Asia, and holds abundant natural resources, from gold, gas, and oil, to uranium and precious gems, and the country is a huge potential energy exporter and a vital trade and energy crossroads for Beijing, which is keen to keep Myanmar in its economic orbit. Obama was the first US President to visit Myanmar in November 2012 in a largely ceremonial move that signified that the country was now "open for business." Myanmar's President Thein Sein followed with a visit to the White House in May 2013, where he boldly called for [direct military-to-military training](#).

Although US lawmakers feel military engagement is too premature, the Obama administration, along with Britain and Australia, are all [pushing for it](#). Washington is pledging \$75.4 million in aid for 2014, while London is offering \$45.6 million and a resumption of arms sales. Meanwhile, the West has been deafeningly silent over the state-sanctioned persecution of the Rohingya ethnic minority in the country's western Rakhine state, which can convincingly be classified as "ethnic cleansing." Beijing, Myanmar's traditional source of investment and diplomatic backer, feels shunned by Myanmar over its foreign policy flip to Washington – Thein Sein even announced that China's state-owned US\$3.6 billion Myitsone Dam project in Myanmar's Kachin State would be suspended for environmental reasons, but logic suggests he ceded to Western pressure. As a country that shares a significant land border with China, authorities in Beijing will look at expanding US-Myanmar military ties as a threat, a provocation, and an increasingly contentious flashpoint. For Myanmar's generals, their pivot to Washington is about regime continuity and becoming the main beneficiaries of transnational plundering.

Malaysia: A mouse among elephants

Malaysia has a long history as a non-aligned state, and while the incumbent administration of Prime Minister Najib Razak has warm ties with China, the country is also moving closer

into the US sphere than ever before. Malaysia was the first non-Communist ASEAN state to establish ties with Beijing, and with a significant ethnic Chinese minority, partnership between Kuala Lumpur and Beijing has been mutually beneficial and plenty. As a Muslim-majority country, many are suspicious of Washington over its history in the Middle East and its support for Israel, while ties were at historic lows during the 22-year tenure of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who was (and still is) critical of Washington. US ties are deeper now more than ever, with a growing security relationship and Malaysia participating in the TPP, which Beijing views as *'anti-Chinese.'* US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel recently visited Malaysia and met with PM Najib, resulting in announcements that the two countries would conduct more than 75 military exercises, and that the US military would navigate security off the coast of the eastern state of Sabah nearby the Philippines. In October, Obama will visit KL during a four-nation tour of Southeast Asia, the first visit by a US President to Malaysia since 1966, and bolstering security ties is reportedly high on the agenda.

When Beijing's People's Liberation Army Navy conducted a major naval exercise in the South China Sea some 80 kilometres away from Malaysia territory in March 2013, there was little reaction from the public or from the government, a stark contrast from the outcry seen from the Philippines and Vietnam. This is partly because China is Malaysia's largest trading partner and the two countries attempt to maintain a positive atmosphere. PM Najib and the ruling party are increasingly unpopular, and they likely feel political pressure to play ball with Washington, as the US has openly supported opposition parties and anti-government NGOs throughout Mahathir's tenure until today. Malaysia has voiced dissent over the TPP regime, and has [called on](#) China to be included in the agreement to increase the deal's fairness, while specifying that it [wouldn't sign onto](#) the deal if it failed to further national interests. Obama's visit will likely see him pressure Najib to sign the TPP and accept greater US security presence in the region – failure to concede to arm-twisting will result in more overt backing of opposition groups that frequently stage protests and accuse the government of corruption.

The Philippines: A US colony once more?

America's former colonial holding is at the forefront of the US pivot, and many Filipino nationalists are deeply opposed to the recently announced spike in US military presence in the country. The establishment of foreign military bases is unconstitutional under Filipino law, but hundreds of US soldiers remain in the country on a rotational basis and legal loopholes are being pursued under the guise of a *'base-sharing plan'* to unofficially normalize a permanent American presence. Manila is sharply at odds with Beijing over territorial disputes in waters some 135 nautical miles from the Philippine mainland. Beijing argues that the territory has been claimed on Chinese maps as far back as the 13th century, and that the area was not part of the Philippines when the US was granted sovereignty over the country in 1898. China has called on the Philippines to partake in bilateral negotiations to resolve the issue, and has condemned Manila for calling on the US and other ASEAN non-claimants to support its territorial claim.

China's position is that the US is militarizing the ASEAN region under the guise of securing *"freedom of navigation"* while playing up Beijing's *"aggressive stance,"* and that Manila is fueling a military confrontation by bringing in foreign troops and closing the door for dialogue. Although China's official stance is more-or-less accurate, many view Beijing's far-off territorial claims as excessive; therefore China would be better off proposing a mutually conducive framework for joint-development of contested regions to thwart allegations that it is pursuing hegemony. Obama will be visiting Manila in October to build

support for the TPP and talk of boosting security. President Aquino's peace plan with separatist Islamist rebels is in tatters as al-Qaeda linked rebels vie for control of Zamboanga City on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. Further instability will likely see a larger US role in the region, and multiple sources credit Washington's major ally – Saudi Arabia – [with funding](#) radical terrorist cells in the Philippines through a network of Islamic charities and madrassas. Few would be surprised if Obama turned the other cheek on the House of Saud in a deliberate policy to destabilize the Philippines to give Washington a tangible reason to fortify its unpopular presence in the country.

Vietnam: "We're back!"

Hanoi has long and complicated histories with both China and the United States, but its decision to move closer to Washington to hedge its territorial claims in the South China Sea is certainly a questionable rapprochement – the last time the US "*pivoted*" to Asia, it came at the expense of millions of Vietnamese lives. Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang visited the White House in July 2013, calling for a strategic partnership with the US. A month earlier, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung spoke alongside US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in Singapore [calling on](#) the US to play a larger military role in the region, a stark contrast to Vietnam's stance in 2012 when it rejected former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's proposal to host rotations of US troops and warships. This may be a result of stalled Vietnam-China bilateral negotiation of claims to the Paracels islets in the South China Sea. Vietnam is doing its best to sell itself as a lynchpin in the US pivot arsenal.

Hanoi wants the US to drop its long-held arms embargo against it, and Vietnam's rulers may feel that a deep strategic partnership with Washington would allow them to avoid genuine political reform. Although China remains Vietnam's top trade partner, Hanoi is taking part in the TPP negotiations and has called for a hasty implementation of the agreement. The Pentagon [has pushed](#) for a more extensive and persistent military presence that would allow the US to move back into its old Vietnam War bases it was evicted from decades earlier. Asia's new strategic realignments have deepened traditional relationships and brought together strange bedfellows, moves that Beijing sees as counterproductive and excessively provocative. Beijing's long-term response to this regional shift could involve concessions, carrot-and-stick maneuvers, or joint development of potentially oil-and-gas rich seas – its answer to the nascent US pivot has yet to fully present itself. As Washington spin-masters are eager to paint Beijing as the hegemon, it's posturing as a '*benign superpower*' is merely cover for the Pentagon's full spectrum dominance agenda in Asia.

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