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# The US Rebalance Policy and the Management of Power Politics in Asia Pacific

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## **Abstract**

*The policy was introduced by the U.S. President Barack Obama early in his first administration in 2010, marked specific changing to the U.S. foreign policy like never before. The U.S. continuously views South and South East Asia, including the Indian Ocean, as a crucial driver for America's economic growth and prosperity throughout the 21st century. Numerous numbers of cooperation and partnership have been done to enhance the ties between the U.S. and the regions. The U.S. presence and involvement in most essential regional meetings and summits can also be seen as an effort to seek opportunities, politically, economically, as well as security. This article tries to analyze how the U.S. rebalance towards Asia policy, a term used for the U.S.' foreign policy influenced the regional stability in Asia-Pacific region.*

Keywords: US Foreign Policy, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Mandala, Tributary System

## **Introduction**

Asia Pacific has recently been growing as the new emerging region that has successfully remained stable during the current global economic crisis. The rise of China is one of the most important factors that have triggered the countries in the region to be more powerful, not only in terms of economics, but also in military, and democracy. With its strategic position, Asia Pacific has become the region with the most growing main export markets for the United States and EU countries, and with two third of the U.S. market is Asia Pacific. Meanwhile, the region is also a home to major powers with nuclear weapons, half of the biggest six defense budgets in the

world, and six of the top ten strongest defense forces in the world (Berteau & Green, 2004).

The fact that Asia Pacific region is getting stronger and potential, then invited the U.S. under Obama administration, to shift its concern to the region, was marked with the announcement of the new foreign policy called "the U.S.Rebalance Policy". China's territorial claims in the South China Sea have also led several ASEAN members to welcome the increase of US military presence, produced joint military exercises, and even the purchasing of more advanced weaponry system to Southeast Asian allies and partners (Sheldon, 2014).

This paper discusses the shift of US foreign policy to Asia and its possible

impacts to the regional security. It divides into several parts. The first part is the origin of US Rebalance Policy to the region which highlights the rationales behind the shift of the policy. It then follows by the discussion on the question of who and what to balance in the region. The third part discusses the different reactions and possible future scenarios of the region due to the shift of US Rebalance policy to Asia.

### **The Origin of US Rebalance Policy**

During Bush Administration, the US had embraced a challenging international security environment of the post 9/11 attacks. This situation obviously led the US to pay more attention and efforts toward the Middle East, in its global war on terror. As the war in Afghanistan and Iraq becoming the highest agenda of US foreign policy, many countries in Asia Pacific, particularly in Southeast Asia, perceived that the US was lacking of concerned to the region. The US' allies and partners in the region consequently questioned US commitments to the regional security mechanism and cooperation in the region (Tsai, 2013).

After Barack Obama stepping into the Office on January 2009, he started his term with many new things on his foreign and defense policy agenda. Many questions can be raised, such as how President Obama would lead the US and more importantly, what would be the US national interests under the new administration.

Interestingly, Obama administration totally brought major changes and transformations, in terms of national interests as well as foreign and defense policies. Recognizing the under-weighted attention to Asia-Pacific region, while the region was emerging into stronger in terms of economics and security, the U.S. under President Obama finally made a shifting it

never had done before in the history of US foreign policy.

In the past, US propelled its relations with some of ASEAN members in number of different symbolic actions. The U.S. was among the first partners of ASEAN to set up its mission to ASEAN in Jakarta, and seriously strengthened its bilateral relations with most ASEAN states, particularly Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippine, and Indonesia. In addition to that, Obama has also stated clearly that the US would be more involved in the shaping of regional security architecture where ASEAN serves as the "fulcrum," (Clinton, 2012). The sign of rebalancing to Asia can also be seen from Secretary Clinton's remarks on "Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities" in Honolulu, 2010:

*"But for these reasons and more, we began last January to lay the foundation for a revitalized Asia-Pacific relationship. My first trip as Secretary of State was to Asia – in fact, this will be my fourth to the region in the last eleven months... We signed the Guam International Agreement that helps sustain a strong U.S. military presence in the region; and we signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation."*

In security-defense aspect, the U.S. focuses on the Asia-Pacific can be pictured by its numbers of deployments as well as the re-established numbers of military bases located within and along the region. Leon Panetta (2012), the U.S. Secretary of Defense stated on his speech delivered in Shangri-La Conference, Singapore, 2012, that:

*"Over the next few years we will increase the number and the size of our exercises in the Pacific. We will also increase and more widely distribute our port visits, including in*

*the important Indian Ocean region. And by 2020 the Navy will re-posture its forces from today's roughly 50/50 percent split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to about a 60/40 split between those oceans."*

After being introduced in early 2010, Obama and his administration made quick movements as the put major focus to the region. Obama and Secretary Clinton's first Asia trip marked the beginning of the policy implementation and actions.

On October 2010, US Foreign Minister, Clinton commenced her very first Asia trip for two weeks visiting Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, China, Cambodia, and Malaysia. The purposes of the visits were reflected in her opening remarks at her first stop in Honolulu, Hawaii. During her visit in Hawaii, Clinton met with Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara to discuss a wide range of issues, including the future U.S.-Japan relations and the US strong commitments to maintain the regional stability. That bilateral talk underscored the significance of the U.S.-Japan alliance as a cornerstone of the US involvement in Asia-Pacific (The U.S. Govt, 2012).

On the other hand, President Obama made a separate visits to India, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan. The main objective of Obama visit to those countries was to further increase economic, political and security relations between US and some of important countries in the region (U.S. Govt, 2010).

The most dramatic shift lies in the defense sector. As part of US plan to expand its presence in the region, President Obama has also enunciated new deployments or rotations of its troops and newer military equipment to Australia and Singapore. U.S. military officials have also argued that the future reductions in military spending will

not jeopardize its allies in the region. Additionally, underlying the "pivot" is an extended geo-strategic vision of the Asia-Pacific that includes the Indian Ocean (The U.S. Govt, 2012)

In mid-2011, the US Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta stated in Singapore that Washington would look up a "geographically distributed, operationally resilient and politically sustainable" for U.S. military posture in Asia pacific, particularly in Southeast Asia, with an emphasis on air superiority and mobility, an easier maritime security access, more control of air space and cyberspace, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities (Berteau & Green, 2012). The U.S. strategy in security was also pivoted to Asia, as President Obama stated in the U.S. Department of Defense Strategic Priorities (2012):

*"It will have global presence emphasizing the Asia-Pacific and the Middle-East while still ensuring out ability to maintain our defense commitments to Europe, and strengthening alliances and partnerships across the region."*

In mission to reach its goal to strengthen its military power in Asia Pacific, the U.S. assigned the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) to focus on the region more than it had ever been before.

The key aspects that the USPACOM focused on were: Homeland defense in the Asia-Pacific; Alliances; Partnerships; Shared sea, air, space and cyberspace domains; China; North Korea; Weapons of Mass Destruction; Terrorism and; All hazards including natural disasters.

According to the USPACOM strategy approach (USPACOM, 2013), the U.S. defense strategy in the Asia-Pacific focuses on bolstering the security architecture of

alliances and partnerships, including building new partnerships and enhancing regional security cooperation.

In Asia itself, there are over 67,000 US troops in at least 225 bases in Japan, South Korea, including in Philippines and in Darwin Marine Base in Australia (Zachary, 2009). Detailed amount of military personnel can be seen from the table 1.

Spreading more of its military power to Southeast Asia region, the U.S. also planned to deploy the latest littoral combat ships (LCS) to Singapore, as U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates disclosed in his speech at 2011's Shangri-La Dialogue on 4 June. US planned to give more naval deployment. This plans indicated the increased operational interest on behalf of the US to further monitor the growing Chinese military presence (Yee, 2011).

### **U.S. Rebalance Policy: What and Who to "Rebalance"**

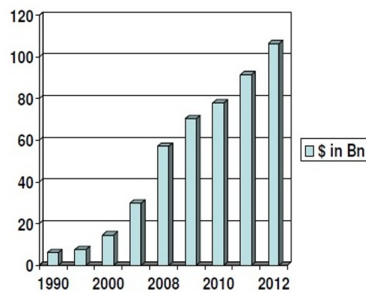
Many perceive that the term "rebalance" in the U.S. foreign and defense policies is referring to the emergence of China as the new global actor. In short, with the policies, the rebalance policy was made to contain China due to China's increase of economic and military power. The U.S. policymakers are certainly aware of China's peaceful rise, but Washington believed that the rebalance policy has been driven by strategic, economic, and political factors (Sutter, Brown & Adamson, 2013)

Table 1. US Military Personnel in Asia

<b>Bases</b>	<b>Number of Personnel</b>
Various Bases in South Korea	28000
Mainland Japan	4000
Kadane Air Base, Okinawa	18000
Camp Hansen, Okinawa	-
Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, Okinawa	4000
Various troops on rotation for training purposes in Philippines	111
Darwin Marine Base, Australia	2500

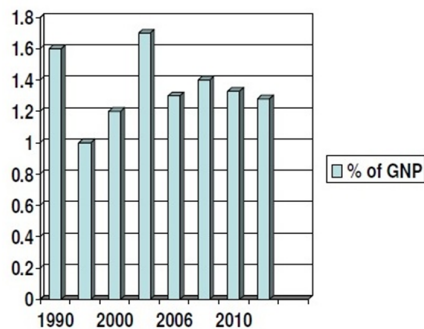
The first factor is China’s economic rise and domination in the region. China’s GDP has escalated from 7.3 trillion USD 2012. Chinese defense budget has also reached \$105 billion in 2012, the largest military expenditure in Asia and the second biggest in the world, although it was only one sixths that of the US defense budget (Yunzhu, 2012). China’s allocation on defense expenditure has also increased along with the increase of its GDP. The chart below shows the increase of China’s defense budget from 1990 to 2012.

Figure 1. China’s Defense Budget Increase (1990-2012)



According to figure 1, Chinese defense budget has increased significantly from 1990 to 2012 and it was US \$106.4 billion in 2012 (Xinhua, 2012). However, China argued the budget was 1.28 per cent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP), decreased from 1.33 per cent in 2008 Singh & Kumar, 2012).

Figure 2. China’s Defense Budget Increase (1990-2012)



With all the strengths that China had, the U.S. realized that it was necessary to get involved in the development in order to “balance” China’s dominance in the world, especially in Asia-Pacific. Moreover, the U.S. at that time was experiencing great recession and had its economy weakened. Another factor is Asia-Pacific’s dynamics. As has been mentioned before, all the ups and downs that took place in Asia were seen as opportunities as well as threats by the U.S. As a superpower state, the U.S. clearly wanted to be in the dynamics, taking chances, beating up challenges and expanding wider and bigger influences towards Asia, the region in which the U.S. had put less concern and attention.

Emerging economy in most Asian countries was an opportunity for the U.S. At that time, directing foreign investment to Asia was considered the best, noting that Europe, as the U.S. most foreign direct investment recipient fell due to Euro zone crisis.

Moreover, countries in Southeast Asia were emerging in economy but at the same time in needs of back up in many sectors as they are developing themselves. This condition attracted the U.S. to come to Southeast Asia within many missions and even pursued its allies from outside the region to come to Asia as well.

From security sectors, it seemed that the U.S. found more of threats rather than opportunities in Asia-Pacific. The U.S. also concerns on nuclear development in region. North Korea was one of the most threatening for the U.S.

Moreover, the military development of China was very rapid and had tendency to threaten the U.S. In addition, there were numbers of conflicts regarding security including the border disputes in which the U.S. tried to get involved in for resolutions, such as the South China Sea border dispute.

### **Reactions and Future Scenarios**

As the U.S. strategy of rebalancing began, the role of U.S. alliances in Asia Pacific has become more important. There are several countries in Asia which have been the U.S. closest allies such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, South Vietnam, Thailand and Australia which became the backbone of the US "hub and spoke strategy to contain China in the region (Aggarwal & Koo, 2008).

Australia continued to maintain enhanced relationship with the U.S by integrating the US into the multilateral architecture (Baker & Glosserman, 2013). Obama's decision to station U.S. marines in northern territory of Darwin and put rotations of U.S. Air Force planes also signaled a recognition of alliance really mattered during the implementation of U.S. rebalance to Asia policy. In addition, many also viewed this become a main component of the Obama's "Pacific Pivot" or strategic pivot to Asia (Vaughn, 2012).

Japan is one of the U.S. long-term allies in the region. Both countries' cooperation in defense in military has been very strong, compared to any other cooperation. The U.S. has been involved by stationing its military component in Okinawa, supporting Japan on its border disputes with China and assisting Japan in upgrading its defense preparedness (Xu, 2013).

In addition, South Korea has recognized the advantage of the having the U.S.' supports in promoting its national interests in regional and global level (Baker & Glosserman, 2013).

Moreover, the Philippines perceived itself as a main proponent of the US engagement in Southeast Asia, but its primary interest is using the bilateral alliance to assure national security agenda. Meanwhile, Thailand has been the most reluctant country in Southeast Asia to acknowledge the influence of military

alliance in shaping its defense policies (Baker & Glosserman, 2013). However, it appeared that Thailand's close relations with the U.S. was built in order to put Thailand in an advantageous position, rather than to get difficulties. Therefore, it seemed that Thailand only gave a little influence for the U.S. role in the region.

Besides the five countries mentioned above, another Asian country that is also the U.S. most loyal ally is Singapore. From Singapore's view, the U.S. rebalance to Asia policy is a reaffirmation of the U.S. long-standing interest in the region (Denmark, Xuotong & Yamaguchi, 2013).

In economic sector, Singapore and the U.S. are involved in Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations. TPP is a free trade agreement of nine countries, consists of: The United States, Australia, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Chile, Malaysia, and Vietnam (2014). The U.S. entered the negotiation by 2008, and since then, it has been taking major control and flow of the negotiation process. In this forum, the U.S. is aimed to develop a high-standard that will support the creation of jobs in the United States and promote economic growth (The U.S. Govt, 2014). Furthermore, Singapore benefited greatly from the U.S. rebalance to Asia policy as the strategy enhanced Singapore to play more important role in the region.

Just like a coin which has two sides, the U.S. military deployment to Singapore creates pros and contras, especially among Asia-Pacific countries. The positive ones mostly came from the U.S. major allies such as Singapore, Philippines, Japan and South Korea while the negative ones came from U.S.' rivalries such as China, North Korea.

### China's Perspective

As the deployment was announced, China was probably the most country that felt distracted by the plan. The Sino-U.S. relation has been dynamic through the years, especially when China started to rise and played larger role in the region (Yee, 2011). China did not attend the 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue, in which U.S. announced its military deployment plan to Singapore. However, in responding to the statement by Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta during Shangri-La Dialogue on U.S. plan to improve military presence in Asia-Pacific region, a spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry, Liu Weimin (2012) stated that:

*"Deliberate emphasis on military and security agendas, and strengthening military deployment and alliances are not in step with the times,"*

Liu Weimin warmly welcomed a U.S. role in the region, as long as Washington respects the interests of Beijing and other states in the region (Weimin, 2012). However, he then added that military buildup was not necessary since the current focus of Asia was peace and cooperation. Many policymakers, including Chinese Government, perceived that the U.S. deployment to Singapore was actually one of the U.S. strategies to contain China in the South China Sea territorial dispute.

The disputes between China with the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and Taiwan over the South China Sea are mainly due to oil and gas resources ownership. In 2012, China warned the U.S.-Philippines military joint exercises, believing the exercises raised the worsened clashes over South China Sea between Beijing and Manila (Wolf, 2012).

### ASEAN Countries' Perspectives

ASEAN countries received great influence from not only the U.S. military deployment to Singapore but also the U.S. rebalance towards Asia policy in general. This is caused by those countries' geographical locations which directly determine their regional security architecture.

Within ASEAN, some countries are the U.S. allies such as Philippines and Singapore, but there are also Indonesia and Myanmar which strategically are not the U.S. allies. However, most of ASEAN countries are still developing and the U.S. arrival to the region somehow has attracted them in many ways.

Indonesia, as one of the most influencing ASEAN states, always maintained to be over-dependent into one certain power country with its "Independent and Active" Foreign Policy concept. However, the U.S. presence in the region has somehow shaped the country's behavior to remain unclear.

Under President Yudhoyono, Indonesia shifted its foreign policy doctrine to "Thousand Friends, Zero Enemies". Given this changing, Indonesia started to receive and become more open from external influences. This situation was coincided with the U.S. rebalance to Asia foreign policy and has met with the U.S. national interests.

The U.S. rebalance towards Asia policy has engaged the U.S. and Indonesia in a more enhanced relationship than both have ever had. Currently both countries are tied in a bilateral agreement called the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership, launched in 2010. The partnership covered up broad sectors from education to security development. Given such close bilateral relationship, Indonesia's perspective towards the U.S. rebalance policy seemed to be unclear. Previously, Marty Natalegawa



(2011), Indonesia's Foreign Minister argued that the U.S. military deployment to Darwin was threatening the region by saying that:

*"What I would hate to see is that if such developments were to provoke reaction and counter reaction, precisely to create that reverse, a vicious circle or tensions and mistrust or distrust, and that's why it's very important when decision of this type is taken there is transparency of what the scenario being envisaged is or are and that there is no misunderstanding as a result."*

However, on the contrary, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia diplomatically argued that "Indonesia stance in declaring the stationing plans as non-threatening, pointing to normative constraints that would prevent the use of force in the region" (Sambhi, 2012). It seemed that President Yudhoyono tried to be very carefully consistent with his doctrine of "Thousand Friends, Zero Enemies".

Meanwhile, from Myanmar's perspective, the U.S. rebalance to Asia policy and the U.S. military deployment to Asia were perceived as something revolutionary. U.S.-Burmese ties had been unwell due to human rights violations issue, in specific was Aung San Suu Kyi's imprisonment. The U.S. responded by conducting embargo and downgrading diplomatic relations with Myanmar.

However, in accordance with the shifted foreign policy, the U.S. has tried to engage and enhance its bilateral relations with Myanmar. This could be reflected from how President Obama chose Myanmar as his first stop of his Asia trip in 2010. This improvement in bilateral relations with Myanmar has marked as one of the early successes of the U.S. pivot towards Asia. Meanwhile, the advancement of U.S.-

Burmese relations would be perceived differently by China. As the U.S. cut off its bilateral relations with Myanmar, China started to move in and gain greater influence from the country. China's relationship with Myanmar then has grown for strategic importance for both sides (Daga, 2012).

## Conclusion

Asia-Pacific is in now the phase of experiencing multiple dynamics in many sectors from economics to security. The U.S.' allies in the region also have important roles in supporting the U.S. presence and reaching its goals in order to engage in closer relationship with countries within the region.

The U.S. also used the allies in positioning itself to get involved in the region's dynamics. Most of U.S. allies in the region are involved in important issues that determine the region's stability: South Korea with North Korea regarding nuclear development; Japan with China regarding the disputed Senkaku/Diayou islands; Philippines and Singapore regarding the South China Sea; and Philippines with China over the Scarborough Shoal. By getting involved in those important issues, the U.S. seeks to gain greater power in Asia Pacific.

The U.S. presence in Asia Pacific has also leveled-up Asian countries' dependence on assistances that the U.S. offered. The assistances are formed in terms of cooperation, partnerships and aids. Most Asia countries are developing countries that need stronger back up in order to develop themselves.

Given that situation, the U.S. came in with many interesting offers that Asian countries finally decided to join in. This is a good opportunity for the U.S. in investing greater influences towards those countries.

However, the U.S. military deployment to some Southeast Asian countries has also triggered greater tensions between the U.S. and China in engaging Asian countries to gain more power in the region which made Asia-Pacific a stage of the two superpowers' competition. This situation, of course, may also lead to the unstable regional security architecture which has marked with the return of power politics in the regional and global level.

### About Author

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