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Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia-Pacific and India's Role¹

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Abstract

US strategy to extricate itself from unwinnable conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and 'rebalance' its position in the Asia-Pacific region was announced by President Obama in November 2011. Under this strategy the significance of the Asia-pacific region, particularly China, as a fast growing and speedily rising region, is emphasised to underline US re-engagement with the region. India, because of its impressive economic growth and strategic position in the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait areas, is seen as a key partner in this strategy. India looks favourably towards this strategy owing to its own concerns about an assertive and militarily powerful China. The extent and pace of India's participation in the US strategy would, however, be defined by the considerations of India's own strategic autonomy in the region and China's behaviour towards its border dispute and India's strategic priorities in the immediate neighbourhood.

¹ This paper by Professor S D Muni is based on his comments during the first session of panel discussion at the Singapore Symposium, organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, and Aspen Institute India in New Delhi on 12 July 2012. The session was chaired by Professor Tan Tai Yong, Director of ISAS.

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The US President Barack Obama, in an address to the Australian parliament on 17 November 2011, announced a new strategic approach to make Asia-Pacific region as the new ‘pivot’ of the US global engagement. The core of this announcement was, as he said: “as President, I have therefore made a deliberate and strategic decision – as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with allies and friends”.³ Explaining the new strategic approach, Obama emphasised “security, which is the foundation of peace and prosperity” and added, “as we end today’s wars, I have directed my national security team to make our presence and mission in the Asia-Pacific a top priority. As a result, reduction in US defence spending will not – I repeat, will not come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific”. This announcement was given a defence doctrinarian orientation by President Obama a couple of months later when in January 2012 he unveiled new US strategic plan. Reiterating the thrust of the ‘pivot’, he said “We will of necessity rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region”.⁴ The Obama doctrine, if it can be so called, was further elaborated, explained, even redefined and projected by Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, Leon Panetta, US Secretary of Defence, and their junior colleagues in their subsequent visits to Asia and interactions with the Asian leaders and policy-makers.

New Elements

Since the end of the Second World War, the US has maintained a dominant strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Through this presence it has built and nursed military alliances, ensured free flow of trade, promoted its investments and markets, and defended democracy and human rights. What is therefore new in President Obama’s doctrine? To begin with, the newness of the doctrine lies in the overall strategic context and the timing of the announcement of policy shift. During the late forties and the early fifties, the US entered and expanded its presence in the Asia-Pacific, as elsewhere in the world, to establish itself as the predominant global power, and institutionalise the outcome of the Second World War. The present policy looks like an attempt to preserve and reinforce that predominance which seems to be sliding down in the face of China’s rise, difficulties in the US economy both at home and abroad, and the unwinnable involvement in the war against “global terror” in Afghanistan. It looks like an attempt to extricate the US from the vicious conflicts in Afghanistan and the Middle East without giving an impression that the US can no longer afford such involvements. Obama’s National Security Advisor Tom Donilon said: “by elevating this dynamic region to one of our top strategic priorities, Obama is showing his determination not to let our ship of state be pushed off course

³ The text of the speech is available at <http://www.smh.com.au/national/text-of-obamas-speech-to-parliament-2011...> (accessed on July 06, 2012).

⁴ The document is named as “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities For 21st Century Defense”, Department of Defense, United States of America, January 2012. P.2.

by prevailing crises”.⁵ China’s faster military modernisation in the fields of anti-access and sea denial capabilities as well as in the space and cyber domains have repeatedly been underlined as matters of concern by the US Defence Department.⁶ The pressure of declining domestic economy was unmistakable when Obama said in his Australian address:

The World’s fastest growing region – home to more than half the global economy – the Asia-Pacific is critical to achieving my highest priority and that is creating jobs and opportunities for the American people. With most of the world’s nuclear powers and some half of humanity, Asia will largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or cooperation, needless suffering or human progress.

Besides the context and the timing, the new policy is broad based in its reach and comprehensive in its approach. In its reach, the region Asia-Pacific is being viewed as stretched from South Asia to the Pacific and senior US policy-makers like Hillary Clinton and Panetta have been referring to this region as “Indo-Pacific”. If one recalls the 1971 war in the Indian sub-continent, it was the US Pacific Fleet that sailed towards India to deter it from liberating Bangladesh. To that extent, India could be seen as falling within the US Pacific perspective. But that was not really the case. Asia-Pacific, that included East and Southeast Asian segments, were not integrated into the US strategy for South Asia and the eastern stretch of the Indian Ocean as is reflected in the “pivot” doctrine.⁷

It is also more comprehensive since the approach has three clearly defined dimensions, namely, of (i) reinforcing traditional alliances, (ii) building new partnerships and capabilities and (iii) shaping a new regional strategic architecture. On reinforcing traditional alliances, Obama named Japan, Australia and South Korea in his speech and also mentioned Philippines and Thailand.⁸ On building new partnerships and capabilities, Obama said:

⁵ As quoted in Joseph S. Nye, “Obama’s Pacific Pivot”, December 06, 2011, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/print/obama-s-pacific-pivot> (Accessed on July 5, 2012). Nye also referred to China’s rise and assertion as being one of the considerations behind the shift in strategy. Donilon had mentioned Iran, Afghanistan, terrorism, non-proliferation, North Korea and the Arab Spring as the issues that have “buffeted” the US foreign policy in recent years.

⁶ See the Defense Department’s Annual Report to the US Congress submitted in May 2012 http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2012_MPR_Final.pdf . (Accessed on August 27, 2012). Also see, Ronald O Rourke, China Naval Modernisation: Implications for US Navy Capabilities- Background and Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service Report No. 7-5700 www.crs.gov RL33153, August 10, 2012.

⁷ The Congressional research service report Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s “Rebalancing” Towards Asia (7-5700 www.crs.gov R42448). The Report in its summary says that “underlying the “pivot” is a broader geographic vision of the Asia-Pacific region that includes the India Ocean and many of its coastal states”.

⁸ Text of the address in Australian Parliament, op.cit.

We see America's enhanced presence across Southeast Asia. In our partnership with Indonesia against piracy and violent extremism and in our work with Malaysia to prevent proliferation. In the ships we will deploy to Singapore, and in our closer cooperation with Vietnam and Cambodia. And in our welcome of India as it "looks east" and plays a larger role as an Asian power.⁹

Towards shaping the new regional architecture, Obama highlighted his three meetings with the ASEAN leaders in quick succession and took pride in the fact that he was the first "American president to attend the East Asia Summit". "Proliferation and maritime security, including cooperation in the South China Sea" were identified as the main challenges that the US proposed to address together with the countries of the region and through the regional strategic architecture.¹⁰ Other senior associates of the President in the Obama administration have elaborated on all these issues.

President Obama was careful in not ignoring China, primarily to camouflage the hard fact that the 'pivot' strategy had been driven by China's rise and assertiveness in the region as being one of the most critical factors. His take on China was that:

the United States will continue our efforts to build a cooperative relationship with China. All our nations – Australia, the United States, all of our nations – have a profound interest in the rise of a peaceful and prosperous China...We have seen that China can be a partner, from reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula to preventing proliferation. And we will seek more opportunities for cooperation with Beijing, including greater communication between our militaries to promote understanding and avoid miscalculation. We will do this, even as we continue to speak candidly to Beijing about the importance of upholding international norms and respecting the universal human rights of the Chinese people.¹¹

This clearly brings out the dilemma that the US faces in dealing with China in the Asia-Pacific region and also in its 'pivot' strategy.

There is an identifiable thrust in the new US strategy with regard to security of the region. Redeployment of the US forces in the region therefore constitutes a critical dimension of this strategy and the new US military presence will have a greater thrust on navy. The reinforcing of the Australian military facility at Darwin by placing "2500 US Marine Corps personnel, or a full

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Khanh Vu Duc, "A New Security Order in the Pacific", in Asia Sentinel , 01 June 2012. http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content &task=view&id=455&Itemid=213 (Accessed on June 6, 2012).

¹¹ Text of the Address in Australian Parliament. Op.cit.

Marine Air Ground Task Force” and also the planned “greater access by U.S. military aircraft to the Royal Australian Air Force facilities” are the initial features of the US re-deployment. Military cooperation with Singapore and Philippines will also be stepped up.¹² The US Defense Department has explained broad contours of the redeployment which is expected to be completed by 2020, when 60 per cent of the US naval strength will be stationed in the Asia-Pacific region. Robert Scher, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Plans, and David F. Helvey, Acting Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary for East Asia, disclosed in Washington on 1 August 2012 that:

The realignment plan sustains a US Marine force presence in the Asia-Pacific region, establishes multiple, fully capable Marine air-ground task forces and importantly increases our ability over time to train and exercise with allies and partners throughout the region...This approach maintains our forward capabilities, reduces our footprint in Okinawa, and in combination with other measures, should reduce the political pressures associated with our presence there, all while sustaining robust government-of-Japan financial support for the Marine Corps move to Guam.¹³

US is now planning to raise missile defence shield in Asia in view of the reported Chinese development of a new generation of missiles that can carry 10 nuclear warheads.¹⁴

India is responsive to the ‘Pivot’

India is seen as an important part of the ‘pivot’ strategy. Nudging of India towards a greater Asia-Pacific role had started even before the ‘pivot’ strategy was defined and articulated. President Obama’s statement to the Indian parliamentarians during his first state visit in 2010 may be recalled here when he asked India not only to “look east” but ‘engage east’. The Indo-US strategic partnership was also then projected as the “defining partnership of the 21st century”.¹⁵ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterated the same theme when she said in Chennai, India in July 2011 that “India’s leadership will help to shape positively the future of the Asia-Pacific. That’s why the United States supports India’s Look East policy, and we encourage India not just

¹² “Pivot to the Pacific”, Congressional Research Service, op.cit, p.4-5.

¹³ Defence.professionals, August 6, 2012. <http://www.defpro.com/news/details/38212/print/?SID=4a892fbf8d9cea4786877b6ebb...> (Accessed on August 7, 2012).

¹⁴ A Press Trust of India story quoting the Global Times, as reported in Times of India, August 25, 2012.

¹⁵ S.D. Muni, “President Obama’s India Visit: Substance in Symbolism”, ISAS Brief No. 176 – 16 November 2010. Also see the text of President Obama’s address to the Indian parliament, Times of India, November 8, 2010.

to look east but to engage East and act East as well”.¹⁶ She again underlined the importance of India’s role in the Asia-Pacific during her visit to India in May 2012.¹⁷

One of the most powerful statements in this respect from the US side has come from Defense Secretary Leon Panetta during his visit to India in June 2012. After discussing a wide range of issues related to the US “rebalancing strategy” towards the Asia-Pacific region ranging from Afghan security, freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, proliferation in the Korean Peninsula and regional stability in East Asia with the Indian leaders, he declared in a public address at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi:

After a decade of war, we are developing a new defense strategy – a central feature of which is a “rebalancing” towards the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, we will expand our military partnership and our presence in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia. Defense cooperation with India is a linchpin in this strategy (emphasis added). India is one of the largest and most dynamic countries in the region and the world, with one of the most capable militaries. India also shares with the United States a strong commitment to a set of principles that help maintain international security and prosperity.¹⁸

To get India into joining hands with the U.S. in the ‘pivot’ strategy, Panetta promised to upgrade the defence trade relations between the two countries from a buyer-seller level to that of joint research, development and production in the defence field. He also assured India that the US was committed to “providing best defence technology possible to India”. There was also a clear encouragement to India to play a larger role in Afghanistan and help its security forces, and also to raise its voice in the “Southeast Asian multilateral forums”.¹⁹

India seems quite responsive to the US ‘pivot’ strategy which converges with its “Look East” policy. It was long before the US ‘pivot’ strategy’s announcement that India initiated and vigorously pursued its “Look East” policy. This policy has a centuries old cultural and historical heritage.²⁰ India has also been having active cooperative relations with the countries of South China Sea like Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos since the early 1950s, when the US was pitted against these countries. Therefore, many Indian policy-makers and strategic analysts fail to appreciate the repeated US assertion that India should not only ‘look’ towards East but also

¹⁶ Text of Mrs. Clinton’s address at the Anna Centenary Library on July 20, 2011. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/07/168840.htm> .

¹⁷ S.D. Muni, “Hillary Clinton Visits India: Understanding the Unstated”, ISAS Insights No. 164, May 15, 2012.

¹⁸ Text of secretary Panetta’s speech at the IDSA on IDSA website, June 6, 2012.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ S.D. Muni, “India’s ‘Look East’ Policy: The Strategic Dimension”, ISAS Working Paper No. 121, 1, February 2011. Also his “Look East Policy: Beyond Myths” in Amar Nath Ram (Edited), Two Decades of India’s Look East Policy: Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity, ICWA and Manohar , New Delhi 2012, pp.205-220.

‘engage’ with it and ‘act’ East. Not only in relation to East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, but at a much wider level, India is also keen to strengthen its strategic partnership with the US. Defence cooperation between India and the US has been put on firmer footing since the conclusion of “Framework Agreement” on the subject between the two countries in 2005. Since then, India’s military exercises have also acquired greater strategic substance.²¹ India’s positive response to the US ‘pivot’ strategy will surely help India bargain better with the US on a number of issues such as: military, civilian and nuclear technology transfers, securing a deserving place in global decision-making including in the United Nation Security Council and high tables of nuclear decision-making, strengthening its trade and investment flows and for support on regional security issues related to Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is considerable synergy between India’s approach and that of the US ‘pivot’ on preserving and reinforcing global norms such as freedom of navigation, democracy and human rights in the Asia-Pacific region.

The US ‘pivot’ is driven by the concern arising out of China’s rise in the Asia-Pacific region, though this aspect is being carefully underplayed in the official projections of the new strategy. India’s is equally concerned in this respect and welcomes the ‘pivot’ strategy because the enhanced and active presence of the US in the region will go a long way in keeping a stable regional balance and in deterring China’s inclination to assert and dominate the Asia-Pacific strategic affairs. Even before the enunciation of the ‘pivot’ strategy, Indian policy-makers have been emphasising the value of a stable regional balance in East Asia. Speaking at the Fifth Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2006, India’s then Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee had said:

India is one of the important legs of the Asian juggernaut along with China, Japan and Indonesia. In the Asia-Pacific region, India’s growing ties with the United States and other countries in North and South America brings with it a commensurate role in the region...India’s role is crucial for ensuring and maintaining long-term peace, stable balance of power, economic growth and security in Asia...It straddles the land and maritime space between east and west, and provides potential energy and trade corridors to Central Asia and Indian Ocean region. Responding to the challenges of globalisation is one of the key issues faced by all nations today. As a pluralistic, democratic and English-speaking society, India is well placed to respond.²²

²¹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Report to Congress on U.S.-India Security Cooperation”, November 2011. Robert S Metzger, “US-India Defence Cooperation towards an Enduring Relationship”, *Indian Defence Review*, Vol. 27, No.2, April-Jun 2012. <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/print/?print_post_id=5063> (Accessed on August 28, 2012).

²² Text of the speech (3 June 2006), www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2006/2006-plenary-session-speeches/second-plenary-session--pranab-mukherjee (Accessed on 25 January 2011).

India is also of the view, on the lines of the US, that regional strategic architecture in the Asia-Pacific region be strengthened and streamlined. Outlining India's preferences in this regard, National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon addressing the Southeast Asian strategic community said:

We need to build structures that are inclusive and flexible enough to avoid the inadequacies of international organisations. Logically speaking, they would need to counter the nature of threats we face... (and added referring to security in the region) The security situation in the Strait of Malacca offers a striking example of the success that results from like-minded countries working together, and most important, we need to build the habits and experience of cooperation that will enable us to deal with the unpredictable challenges that will certainly confront us. Our navies have made a beginning, showing us the way. We in Asia today are learning as we go. India is ready to participate actively and constructively in the process.²³

It may be relevant to keep in mind here that Indian navy had escorted US ships in the Malacca Strait in 2002. India also decided in 2001 to establish a 'tri-service command' structure in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands as they strategically overlook the Malacca Strait. This command is expected to become a "major amphibious warfare hub" by 2020. India in the recent years has also moved to strengthen its strategic relations with the US allies in the region like Japan, Korea and Australia and is working to evolve triangular strategic equations with each one of them, with the United States. This will considerably facilitate India's positive response to the US 'pivot' strategy as it evolves in the coming years. Constraints of space and time do not permit us to undertake a detailed discussion of these newly emerging strategic triangles of India in the region. India has also positively responded to the idea of US-India-China trilateral consultations in the interest of stability and peace in the Asia-Pacific region.²⁴

India's Reservations

India's positive response to the US 'pivot', however, has not been made public and formal except in the official bilateral discussions between the two countries. There has been no statement either explicitly endorsing or welcoming the US strategic shift or disapproving it otherwise. There is an intense debate within India's policy portals and its strategic community on the 'pivot' strategy as, besides its positive aspects, there are reservations on a number of counts

²³ The text of the speech, delivered on June 5, 2010, was provided by the organisers, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London. <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2010/plenary-session-speeches/second-plenary-session/shivshankar-menon/>. (Accessed on August 25, 2012).

²⁴ S.D. Muni, "Trilateral Consultations: US for 'Constructive Ties with India and China'", The Tribune (Chandigarh) May 19, 2012.

as well. There are questions of form and extent to which India should be seen to be going along with the US 'pivot'. Most of these questions arise out of uncertainties hovering around the 'pivot' strategy which will take nearly a decade to unfold fully.

One area of uncertainty is about the US-China strategic equation. The prospects in this equation range from a US-China 'G.2', where the two powers may mark out their specific areas of influence in the Asia-Pacific region compelling other countries in the region to join with either side and adjust with the reality, to an intensified new cold war, leading even to a conflict which might also force other countries to take side in the conflict or and/or suffer its consequences.²⁵ India abhors the idea of a US-China 'G.2' and it is not prepared also to cope with an intensification of the US-China tensions and a new cold war in the region that may degenerate into a full-fledged conflict. The economic interdependence between the US and China is formidable and has no prospects to be undone in the foreseeable future, but at the same time China is fast trying to develop military capabilities that may deter and weaken the US dominance in the region and the latter's adversarial moves against China on behalf of its numerous allies in Asia. Strategic analysts even in some of the key US allied countries in the region like Japan and South Korea are careful in pointing towards the gap between the actual US moves and rhetoric vis-a-vis China, particularly in the military field. While strong language is being used in mutual accusations, US and China are also actively pursuing mutual confidence-building through closer military to military exchanges.²⁶

The other area of uncertainty in India about the evolving 'pivot' strategy is the prospect of enhanced US presence in the Indian Ocean and in its immediate neighbourhood. There is institutionalised strategic dialogue between India and the US on the affairs of the South Asian region but India is cautious to ensure that enhanced US military and strategic presence in the countries of the region like Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh and also Myanmar, as an imperative of the 'pivot' strategy, does not curtail its own strategic space and priorities in the long run. In this respect, the US Secretary of Defense Panetta tried to assure the Indian leaders during his visit in June 2012 that:

We are not setting up any new bases. We are not in the process of what we did in the Cold War that is power projection. We want to develop capabilities of neighbouring countries in the Asia-Pacific region through rotational presence and that is the better way of ensuring security.²⁷

²⁵ Hugh White, *The China Choice – Why America Should Share Power*, Black Inc, Melbourne (Australia), 2012.

²⁶ These views were expressed by the Japanese and Korean experts in a trilateral '1.5 track' meeting between India, Japan and Korea in New Delhi in July 2012.

²⁷ *The Daily Pioneer* June 7, 2012 <http://dailypioneer.com/home/online-channel/360-todays-newspaper/71193-india-...> (Accessed on June 8, 2012).

India welcomes better understanding on the US part about India's security interests in Afghanistan and greater role in stabilising the country after the US and NATO forces have completed their 'downsizing' by July 2014. There is also some uncertainty about what role the US will continue to play in keeping Afghanistan stable and terror-free after its withdrawal. However, any US pressure and repeated pleas to India to accommodate Pakistan ignoring its track record on abetting 'cross-border terrorism' are unacceptable. So also is the continued US supply of weapons systems to Pakistan that bear no relevance to its expected role in the 'war on terrorism'.

The pursuing of 'pivot' strategy has precipitated renewed and enhanced tensions in the region, particularly between China and its South China Sea neighbours. The US support for its allies like Philippines and 'partners' like Vietnam has infuriated China and in return China has moved to augment its naval presence in the area by setting up a garrison in Sansha city of tiny Yongxing (Woody) Island, some 350 km off the disputed Paracel Islands chain. This has resulted in the exchange of harsh words between the two countries through media and official channels.²⁸ In the wake of these tensions, the 'pivot' strategy has come under criticism both within and outside the US.²⁹ Even some of the partners and allies of the US seem to be uneasy about this development. The Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen for instance underlined the need in Asia "to avoid arms race, and to reduce the potential for strategic miscalculations and misunderstandings..."³⁰. The Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith has ruled out any possibility of providing a base for the US Carrier Strike Group being explored under the 'pivot' strategy.³¹ The dilemma of the Asia-Pacific countries arise from the fact that while they are having profitable economic relations with China, the Chinese military assertiveness is a matter of concern for them and they do not want to take sides in the rising tensions between US and China.

²⁸ For some reports on the South China Sea disputes, see Michael Auslin, "Beijing Crosses a Line", *The Wall Street Journal* July 30, 2012; Zhang Yunbi, "US military swings to Asia-Pacific region" *China Daily* August 6, 2012; "Beijing tells US to 'shut up' over South China Sea tensions", *Telegraph* (London) August 6, 2012; Peter Symonds, "US stokes disputes in South China Sea" *World Socialist Website* August 7, 2012 <<http://www.wsws.org/tools/index.php?page=print&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ws...>> (Accessed on August 27, 2012). Jane Perlez, "China flexes its muscle to reassert sea claims", *New York Times* (Global Edition) August 13, 2012.

²⁹ John Glaser "Washington Aggravating Asian Territorial Disputes", *News from Antiwar.com* August 11, 2012 <http://news.antiwar.com/2012/08/11/washington-aggravating-asian-territorial-disputes/>. (Accessed on August 13, 2012). Morton Abramowitz; Stephen Bosworth, "The Pivot and its Discontents", *The National Interest*, July 27, 2012 <http://nationalinterest.org/print/commentary/the-pivot-its-discontents-7250>. Greg Earl, "US wrong on China: Keating", *The Australian Financial Review* August 7, 2012 http://www.afr.com/p/national/us_wrong_on_china_keating_Bjp2FY9i9j5ahuD7iGsQBP (Accessed on August 7, 2012). Tom Shanker, "Study Criticizes Pentagon Over Its Plans for a Greater Focus on Asia", *The New York Times* July 31, 2012.

³⁰ *TODAY* August 8, 2012.

³¹ *The Information Daily* (Formerly eGovmonitor), August 6, 2012 <http://www.egovmonitor.com/node/53149> (Accessed on August 8, 2012).

Caught in the same dilemma, India has also cautioned a slow pace in the 'pivot' strategy. In his discussions with Leon Panetta in June 2012, India's Defence Minister underlined India's position that in international waters, "It is desirable that the parties concerned themselves should settle contentious matters in accordance with international law". He also laid greater emphasis on "strengthening multilateral security architecture in the Asia-Pacific" and against arming the nations in the dispute, and in doing so he preferred to "move at a pace comfortable to all countries concerned".³² While India has continued to engage itself with the South China Sea nations, like Vietnam, it cannot afford to antagonise China and precipitate a conflict which can halt or slow down its own pace of economic development and military modernisation.

In the context of rising tensions in Asia, questions are raised in India's strategic community if the "rebalancing" of US' Asia strategy will in reality put Asians against the Asians and if, by keeping Asia divided thus, the US leadership will be sustained. The US balance of power strategy in Europe, which precipitated the Second World War by keeping France and Germany divided, is recalled for broad comparisons. If that is the real intention of the 'pivot' strategy, then India, while also opposing Chinese intentions to dominate Asia, cannot be a party to perpetuating US leadership of Asia. India also cannot compromise on its strategic and foreign policy autonomy by doing anything that makes it blindly follow the US moves in Asia.³³ It has diversity of engagements in Asia and the world, institutionalised in the form of triangular and multilateral groupings like BRICS, IBSA, India-China-Russia and those with Japan, Australia, and the US. India, therefore, cannot become just a "spike" in the US 'pivot' where any of these engagements are compromised or jeopardised.

Prospects

What then is expected out of India in relation to the US 'pivot'? Some analysts compared the evolving strategic partnership between India and the US to the complex affair between the Egyptian queen Cleopatra and the Roman General Mark Antony, which was masterfully portrayed by Shakespeare. They were both charmed by and longed for each other but were not prepared to compromise with each other on their respective turfs, imperial possessions and areas of influences. Likewise India and the US have found their strategic partnership valuable and are trying their best to expand and reinforce it, but would not like to compromise on their respective autonomy (India), leadership (US) and strategic spaces. This would likely be the bench mark guiding their engagement in relation to the US 'pivot'.

³² The Daily Pioneer June 7, 2012 <http://www.dailypioneer.com/home/online-channel/360-todays-newspaper/71193-india-...> (Accessed on June 8, 2012).

³³ Robert M. Hathaway, "India and the US Pivot to Asia", YALEGLOBAL ONLINE February 24, 2012 <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/print/7638> . (Accessed on August 24, 2012).

India would, therefore, continue to build its capabilities and outreach in the Asia-Pacific region. And in doing so, seek US support and help as much as possible without militarily aligning itself with the US. South China Sea region is important for India not only because China is caught in a conflict there but also because India's trade through these waterways is growing at an impressive pace. It is necessary for India to uphold the international norms of freedom of navigation and to ensure that, it will support the US or any other regional initiative. India's upgrading of military facilities in Andaman and Nicobar Islands must be seen in the context of protecting its burgeoning security and commercial interests in the region. The commissioning of the INS Baaz, an air surveillance base at Campbell Bay on the Greater Nicobar Island that strategically overlooks the Malacca Strait is an important step in the direction of building the 'tri-service command' in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.³⁴

India will also continue to strengthen its strategic cooperation with key regional players in the Asia-Pacific region like Japan, Korea, Australia, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam. India will be cautious to avoid any impression that these relationships are based on any anti-China premise. India, as already mentioned, cannot afford any conflict with China at the present stage of development, nor can it match Chinese economic clout and growing military capabilities. But it must always be prepared to face the potential challenge of a conflict if it is thrust on it from the Chinese side either as design or miscalculation and accident. India will also continue to strengthen its Look East policy through increased engagement with the countries and regional groupings of East and Southeast Asia like ASEAN, EAS, BIMSTEC and Ganga-Mekong Initiative. In East Asia, India's clear preference is for ASEAN leadership and keeping these organisations open and inclusive without making them compact negotiating forums. India may also be happy if invited to become a member of APEC.

The tenor and thrust of India's response to the US 'pivot' will, to a significant extent, also depend upon how China conducts itself in the region as also in relation to its bilateral issues with India. Chinese undue assertiveness and inclination to dominate the region will naturally drive all others in the region closer to each other and to the US. China's persisting reluctance to resolve the boundary question with India and the Tibetan question with the Dalai Lama and his representatives will also keep India-China tensions live pushing India towards the US in regional affairs. China has always been supporting Pakistan and its increased active involvement with other South Asian countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh will also encourage a greater responsiveness on India's part towards the US 'pivot'. Contrary to this, if China leaves India's sensitivities in its immediate neighbourhood unruffled and makes concrete moves to

³⁴ "INS Baaz commissioned as first Naval Air Station in Nicobar Islands", Indian Defence Review August 1, 2012 http://www.indiadefencereview.com/print/?print_post_id=7259 (Accessed on August 28, 2012). Also Rajat Pandit, "India Commissions INS Baaz to counter China's moves in the India Ocean" The Times of India August 1, 2012.

stabilise the border region between the two countries, then India will be calculative and calibrated in its support for the US initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region.

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