



# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## E-NOTES

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### SIDEWAYS: AMERICA'S PIVOT AND ITS MILITARY BASES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

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The state of America's strategic "pivot" or "rebalancing" toward the Asia-Pacific has taken on a renewed importance with the recent North Korean military threats against not only its neighbors in Northeast Asia, but also the United States. Over the last half decade, Washington has trumpeted its foreign policy shift toward the region; but it has become increasingly clear that the military resources it has devoted to the region have not kept pace with its political engagement. As Admiral Samuel J. Locklear, the current commander of U.S. Pacific Command, flatly stated: he expects no new military bases in his theater.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, despite the seeming flurry of activity over American base structure and force posture in the region, one can track almost all of it back to strategic choices made over a decade ago, rather than any recent policy pivot or rebalance.

Though new technology has somewhat diminished their significance, military bases abroad are still important manifestations of national strategy. Politically, their presence can demonstrate the depth of solidarity between countries and deter potential adversaries in a way that occasional force deployments cannot. Militarily, they extend combat capabilities by serving as platforms from which a country can monitor threats and project power and influence. And because of these factors and the expense needed to build and sustain them, they can reveal more about the real intentions of national security policy.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, North Korean threats against specific American bases in South Korea, Japan, and Guam call attention to their importance to America's position in the Asia-Pacific. All three American armed services are present there in force. The Army's bases in South Korea are home to forward components of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division and

<sup>1</sup> Dzirhan Mahadzir, "PACOM chief says Asia-Pacific pivot won't lead to new US bases," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Feb. 1, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Kent E. Calder, *Embattled Garrisons: Comparative Base Politics and American Globalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 252-253.

other units. The Navy maintains a major presence in Japan with the U.S. Seventh Fleet at Sasebo and Yokosuka and the U.S. 3rd Marine Division on Okinawa. And the Air Force has long stationed several fighter and support squadrons in both countries as well as Guam. From these bases, the United States can rapidly respond to military challenges all along the Asia-Pacific periphery, as it has in the past. During the Korean Conflict, American bases in Japan were vital as staging and supply areas for forces fighting on the peninsula. During the Vietnam Conflict, Guam played a prominent role in America's long-range bombing campaigns (Operations Rolling Thunder and Linebacker).<sup>3</sup> But today, even these rear area bases may become the frontline, as North Korea's threats to launch ballistic missile strikes against them have underlined, potentially making their concentration and forward presence vulnerabilities, rather than strengths.



Throughout the Cold War, the United States maintained a network of military bases across the Asia-Pacific to support its interests in the western Pacific Ocean and defend its Asian allies. But as the threat of Soviet attack receded in the early 1990s, the United States began to reassess its need for many of those bases. Some policymakers sought to rapidly consolidate or close many of America's Asia-Pacific bases to reap the budgetary benefits of the "peace dividend" and reinvest those resources at home. Others argued that a continued American military presence in the region—coupled with engagement with China—would create the foundation for regional stability by reducing the tensions associated with a rising China, lowering the possibility of a regional arms buildup, and providing a hedge against future contingencies. The contentions of these two camps framed the debate over American base configuration in the region for much of the latter half of the 1990s.

But by the early 2000s, other factors started to influence the discussion, the biggest of which stemmed from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's desire to transform America's forward presence around the world—one facet of the so-called "revolution in military affairs"—and his need to support combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Rather than rigidly array troops, as they have been along the Korea's Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), he sought to create more deployable forces by maximizing the use of communications and technology. The United States would meet future threats with smaller "forward operating bases," which he envisioned would provide American forces with greater flexibility and mobility.<sup>4</sup> At about the same time, a second, more tactical, factor has influenced American basing considerations in the Asia-Pacific: the vulnerability of its forward bases to ballistic missile attack. Since the 1990s, China and North Korea have continued to develop their ballistic missile capabilities. China dramatically expanded its arsenal of conventionally-armed ballistic missiles over that time and demonstrated its willingness to use them in barrages during the Taiwan Strait crises in 1995 and 1996. Meanwhile, North Korea

<sup>3</sup> Operation Linebacker is credited with blunting much of North Vietnam's massive Easter Offensive against South Vietnam in 1972.

<sup>4</sup> "Patrolling the world," *Economist*, Mar. 7, 2003.

continues to test ballistic missiles with ever longer ranges; and in April 2013, it threatened to use them against the United States. With sufficient numbers of them (like those in China), such missiles could saturate American anti-ballistic missile defenses and put American bases at risk.

#### **SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN: THE DRAWDOWN**

Most American military bases in the Asia-Pacific are clustered in South Korea and Japan, a legacy of the Cold War. But since that time, those bases have come under increasing scrutiny from their host countries, as the repeated involvement of American servicemen in accidents and criminal activities have stirred local opposition to them. In one famous 2002 case a training mishap killed two South Korean girls and ignited widespread protests. While the need to soothe local resentments surely hastened negotiations, the realignment of American bases was already underway. In South Korea, Rumsfeld had chosen to shift most of the 36,000 American troops then stationed there away from the DMZ and remove one-third of them from the peninsula altogether. Doing so would put American forces beyond the immediate range of North Korean artillery and free up resources needed to support combat operations in the Middle East. Also during that period, Washington and Seoul agreed to transfer wartime operational control of their forces from the American-led Combined Forces Command to the South Korean military. And while the transfer has been delayed twice—first from 2007 to 2012 and then to 2015—this year’s major joint military exercise will fall under South Korean, rather than American, command for the first time.<sup>5</sup>

In the meantime, American bases in Japan have also become a hotly contentious issue. While Japan’s national government embraces a continued American presence (particularly in light of its ongoing row with China over the Senkaku Islands, or Diaoyu Islands if you are in China), the civilian population of Okinawa—the Japanese island where the majority of the 40,000 American troops stationed in Japan are based—is less sanguine. They resent the disruptions caused by military exercises and the occasional accidents, assaults, and rapes involving American servicemen. After one such incident in 1996, the Clinton administration offered to relocate the huge Futenma Marine Corps Air Station to another site on the island. But local opposition to any other site bogged down negotiations ever since. At one point, the United States even proposed to build a floating base offshore, but Japan turned it down over environmental grounds. Still, a resolution seemed at hand in 2005. Washington agreed to shift some of its forces on Okinawa and remove the rest. In exchange, Tokyo would assume a greater military role commensurate with its economic stature and gain local agreement for a new base. But local opposition has remained steadfast. As a result, American forces continue to use Futenma and their other bases on the island, albeit under increasingly restrictive conditions. Recently, those forces had their equipment upgraded to include MV-22 VTOL transport aircraft, sparking a new round of controversy.<sup>6</sup>

#### **GUAM AND AUSTRALIA: THE BUILDUP**

As discussions over how to trim American military bases in South Korea and Japan proceeded, Guam and Australia were considered as alternate basing options. The former is an American island territory in the central Pacific Ocean and the latter a long-time American ally. In fact, one could say that the current American military buildup on Guam started in 2000, when the U.S. Air Force transferred 64 of its most advanced AGM-86 air-launched cruise missiles to the island’s Andersen Air Base. A few years later, B-1 and B-52 bombers began to rotate through the base and billions were spent to upgrade and extend its facilities. Simultaneously, the U.S. Navy began to refurbish Naval Base Guam and permanently stationed three of its Los Angeles-class nuclear attack submarines there. From Guam the submarines could stay on station in the western Pacific Ocean twice as long as those based in Hawaii while lowering deployment costs. Further, the Navy prepared the base to host Ohio-class guided missile submarines—each armed with as many as 154 UGM-109 land-attack cruise missiles.

Over the course of the last decade, more forces arrived on Guam, including a helicopter squadron and supply ships, and preparations were made to accommodate the thousands of Marines expected to relocate from Okinawa. That included dredging Apra Harbor to accommodate deep-draft amphibious assault ships which provide mobility for

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<sup>5</sup> Jon Rabirow, “Exercise provides dry run for S. Korean wartime control of forces,” *Stars and Stripes*, Feb. 21, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Yuka Hayashi, “Marines Struggle as Tensions Rise in Okinawa,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 4, 2013, p. A8; Kosuke Takahashi, “First Ospreys arrive at Futenma,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, Oct. 1, 2012; Kosuke Takahashi, “US Navy to deploy MH-60R, MH-60S to Japan,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, Sep. 14, 2012; Martin Fackler, “With Its Eye on China, Japan Builds Up Military,” *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 2011.



the Marines. And recently, the Navy has begun to expand a wharf to accommodate at least one aircraft carrier. The Air Force constructed hangars for three RQ-4 unmanned long-range surveillance aircraft and has occasionally rotated F-22 fighters from Hawaii and Alaska to the island. Finally, in response to recent North Korean threats against the island, the Army is immediately deploying (two years ahead of schedule) a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense battery to Guam to defend it from intermediate-range ballistic missile attack.<sup>7</sup>

Farther south, Washington embarked on discussions with Canberra over a larger American military presence in Australia in anticipation of some resolution over its Okinawa bases. Australia and the United States have enjoyed a close alliance since the darkest days of World War II. That relationship drew closer still after the September 11 attacks when Australian commandos were among the first to see combat alongside American special forces in Afghanistan. Early to hedge China's rise, Australia has sought to strengthen its security cooperation with the United States (even as its mining industry does a brisk raw materials trade with China) over the last decade. And so, the two allies eventually selected Darwin to host a new joint training facility for Australian and American troops in late 2011. A few months later the first detachment of 200 Marines arrived; they were the first of some 2,500 who will periodically rotate through the facility. But unlike Guam, Darwin has barely begun to prepare its port infrastructure to support the Marines' amphibious assault ships. Once fully developed, the extended presence of American forces in Darwin—only 800 km from Indonesia and Timor-Leste—will enable the United States to respond more quickly to contingencies in Southeast Asia than it could from either Guam or Japan.<sup>8</sup>

#### SOUTHEAST ASIA: OPPORTUNISM REALIZED

As has been the case with the pace of its political engagement, the United States can only move as fast with its military relationships with the countries of Southeast Asia as the sentiments in those countries will permit. Certainly that has been true of America's post-Cold War experience with the Philippines. In 1991, the Philippine Senate abruptly voted to close America's two largest military bases in the Asia-Pacific: Clark Air Base and Naval Base Subic Bay. In a little over a year, the last American forces left (their departure accelerated by the Mount Pinatubo volcanic eruption that laid waste to much of Clark). The Mutual Defense Treaty between the Philippines and the United States remained, but became basically dormant as American and Filipino forces no longer exercised together.

But after Chinese occupation of Philippine-claimed Mischief Reef—one of the many disputed islets in the Spratly group—in 1995, Manila reconsidered its relationship with the United States. Ties were reestablished in the late 1990s and since 2002 several hundred American troops have maintained an extended presence near Zamboanga on the southern island of Mindinao, mainly to help defeat Al-Qaeda and other Islamic militants there. But after a months-long standoff over Scarborough Shoal between Chinese and Philippine patrol boats in early 2012, Manila drew even closer to the United States—not only welcoming more frequent American warship visits, but also permitting Subic Bay to warehouse American military materiel and provide logistics support to the U.S. Navy.<sup>9</sup>

In Singapore, the United States has long had a small military presence, mostly to handle logistics, but that has now grown with Singaporean concern for the region's stability. While Singapore hosts dozens of American warships every year, the U.S. Navy will homeport four of its new littoral combat ships at Singapore's Changi Naval Base. Conceived of in the early 2000s, the ships are designed to operate in shallow coastal waters, like those around the South China Sea. From Singapore, they would be well positioned to interdict the Malacca Strait, though for the

<sup>7</sup> Julian E. Barnes and Adam Entous, "With an Eye on Pyongyang, U.S. Sending Missile Defenses to Guam," *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 4, 2013; Kosuke Takahashi, "US, Japan consider deploying Global Hawk in Guam," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Aug. 10, 2012; Sam LaGrone, "US Navy plans new carrier berth in Guam," *Jane's Navy International*, Dec. 21, 2009; Eric Schmitt, "Secretary Gates Visits Guam Military Base," *New York Times*, May 30, 2008; Tim Fish, "Guam base ready to host Ohio-class submarine," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Jan. 30, 2008; "U.S. Sending B-52's To Pacific Air Base," Associated Press, Feb. 4, 2004; Brian E. Ray, "Home porting subs overseas makes sense," *Proceedings* 128:7 (Jul. 2002), pp. 82-84; "USAF moves cruise missiles to Guam," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Aug. 31, 2000.

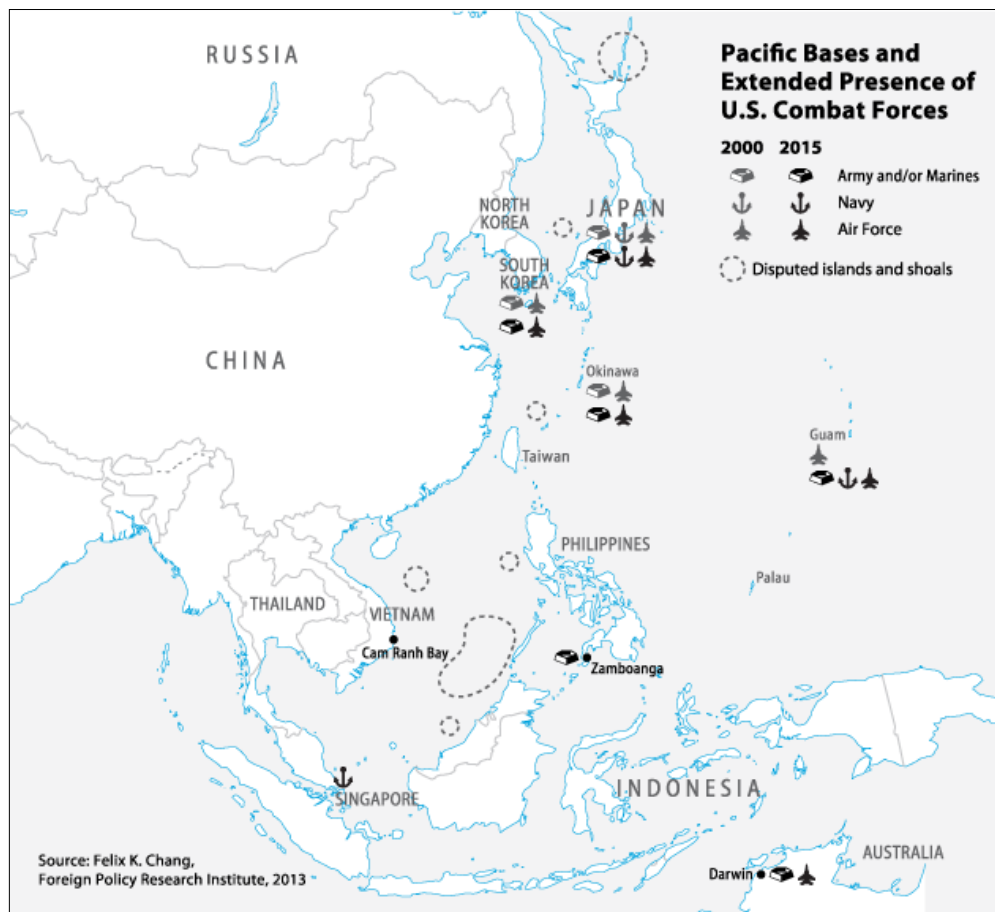
<sup>8</sup> "Darwin key to US security shield," *Northern Territory News*, Mar. 3, 2012, p. 18; Seth Robson, "Australia offers strong training opportunities for Marines," *Stars and Stripes*, Nov. 27, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Ina Alleco R. Silverio, "US military set to use Subic as naval base again," *Bulatlat*, Oct. 19, 2012, <http://bulatlat.com/main/2012/10/19/us-military-set-to-use-subic-as-naval-base-again>; Floyd Whaley, "Philippines Role May Expand as U.S. Adjusts Asia Strategy," *New York Times*, Apr. 30, 2012, p. A4, A8; Michael Satchell, "Back to the Philippines," *U.S. News and World Report*, Jan. 24, 2000, pp. 30-31.

time being they lack key combat capabilities and would have limited utility in high-intensity naval combat without the support of additional warships.<sup>10</sup>

Even Vietnam has warmed to the United States. China's recent assertive behavior in its South China Sea maritime disputes has put Vietnam on edge, especially because in 1988 China fought and won a naval skirmish against Vietnam in which 70 Vietnamese sailors were killed. And so, Vietnam took special notice when Chinese surveillance ships cut the seismic cables of two Vietnamese oil exploration ships in 2011 and 2012. In response, Vietnam has started a major recapitalization of its air and naval forces. That has included the renovation of its Cam Ranh Bay Naval Base, which Hanoi has opened to foreign navies, including that of the United States.<sup>11</sup>

For over a decade, Washington has been interested in forging deeper strategic relations with Southeast Asia. But it was not until China's assertiveness roused enough anxiety among Southeast Asian governments for them to welcome a more visible, if still small, American military presence in the region. Perhaps China's March 2013 naval exercise around James Shoal, at the southern end of its maritime claim near Brunei and Malaysia, will nudge those countries in a similar direction. Surely Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tried to capitalize on the opportunity by creating new political channels of engagement, such as the American-led Lower Mekong Initiative and American participation in several of the region's Association of Southeast Asian Nation forums. But even with the extended presence of American forces in the Philippines and Singapore, American capabilities in Southeast Asia remain limited. And so U.S. Pacific Command must make the most of what it has. As Admiral Locklear put it, his command does not expect to hold any new military exercises, but rather intends to make the ones it does hold more prominent.



<sup>10</sup> Ronald O'Rourke, Navy Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) Program: Background and Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service, Mar. 14, 2013; Sam LaGrone, "USS Freedom gears up for Singapore deployment," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Jan. 8, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Craig Whitlock, "Philippines may allow greater U.S. military presence in reaction to China's rise," *Washington Post*, Jan. 25, 2011; "Vietnam's Cam Ranh base to welcome foreign navies," Associated Press, Nov. 2, 2010.

## NATIONAL STRATEGY

From a military standpoint, it is clear that America's strategic shift toward the Asia-Pacific has been the product of a lengthy process of reconfiguration and consolidation of American basing structure and force posture, rather than any recent pivot or rebalancing. The U.S. Department of Defense's 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review supports that view when it already then stated that the Navy's "fleet will have greater presence in the Pacific Ocean, consistent with the global shift of trade and transport. Accordingly, the Navy plans to adjust its force posture and basing to provide at least six operationally available and sustainable carriers and 60% of its submarines in the Pacific to support engagement, presence and deterrence."<sup>12</sup>

But as successful as the United States has been in capitalizing on China's assertiveness to enhance its diplomatic profile in the Asia-Pacific, some are concerned that the continued consolidation of American bases in South Korea and Japan will give China more strategic space in the western Pacific Ocean and signal a weakening of long-term American commitment. Surely there will be fewer American forces in Northeast Asia, but those who favor the consolidation contend that those remaining forces will be better equipped and therefore have a comparable level of capabilities.

Still, parceling out American forces across the Asia-Pacific creates new challenges. The four littoral combat ships in Singapore, far from the U.S. Seventh Fleet in Japan, would be vulnerable in a crisis and could probably do little to delay a Chinese advance through the South China Sea. Meanwhile, the concentration of American forces on Guam, as the United States' only central Pacific base, raises the possibility that China will build more medium-range ballistic missiles to reach the island or target it with land-attack cruise missiles from its new nuclear attack submarines. The United States would do well to develop a secondary air base and anchorage in the central Pacific Ocean from which it could mount operations, should China successfully disrupt Guam or American surveillance satellites. Places like Palau and Chuuk (better known as Truk to historians) could assume a renewed importance for American military planners.

Today, America's strategic watchword in the Asia-Pacific is "rebalancing." While it may effectively telegraph to China and other countries in the region that the United States intends to devote more attention there, tracing the changes in American military presence across the region reveals less of a recent strategic realignment. The biggest changes to American posture have been in the works for well over a decade. So even though the Obama administration may wish to broadcast those changes in order to lend substance to its diplomatic efforts, its pivot or rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific has actually been more of a continuity with past American strategy than a departure from it.

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<sup>12</sup> *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington: U.S. Department of Defense, Feb. 6, 2006), p. 47.