

China-US Relations: Washington's Asia Strategy Could Destabilize the Entire Asian Pacific Region

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Obama administration's Asia pivot strategy sows more seeds of suspicion than cooperation

By , WASHINGTON: The Obama administration ruffled a few feathers in the Asia-Pacific region in November with its high-profile trumpeting of the Pivot to Asia strategy, widely regarded as an attempt to consolidate U.S. predominance in the region in face of a rising China.

The U.S. shift of strategic focus is characterized by a more confrontational stance with China. Despite the U.S. public denial of containing China, there has been widespread suspicion that Washington has a hidden agenda behind the strategy, i.e., to counterbalance China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

"The United States is now signaling an intention to move back toward the pre-9/11 strategic focus on a rising China. That focus places a premium on explicitly balancing against and constraining Chinese power and influence across the region," wrote Michael Swaine, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in a recent article.

STRATEGIC SHIFT COMES WITH TOUGH RHETORIC, PROVOCATIVE MOVES

The Obama administration launched the strategic shift of pivoting to Asia with great fanfare in November when it was hosting the annual gathering of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

In a speech at the East-West Center in Hawaii ahead of the APEC summit, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared "The 21st century will be America's Pacific century," vowing that her country will stay in the region as a resident diplomatic, military and economic power.

At the APEC summit, U.S. President Obama actively promoted the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a U.S.-championed free trade agreement and a potential trans-Pacific security architecture.

The TPP, which pointedly excludes China, is widely seen as a thinly-disguised counterweight to free trade blocs in the region involving China and other Asian countries.

In rare tough rhetoric, Obama also pointed a finger at China for not playing by the rules in trade and economic relations, pledging to "continue to speak out and bring action" on issues such as currency and intellectual property rights.

Meanwhile, the United States has intensified its intervention in the territorial dispute over the South China Sea between China and several Southeast Asian countries, under the excuse of protecting freedom of navigation.

Immediately following the APEC meeting, Obama traveled for the first time to Indonesia to attend the East Asia summit, where he encouraged the participating countries to seek a multilateral solution to the South China Sea issue despite opposition from China, which advocates settling it through bilateral negotiations.

During his stay in Canberra, Obama signed a deal to station U.S. Marines in northwest Australia, with an eye on a potential contingency in the South China Sea.

While celebrating the 60th anniversary of the signing of the U.S.-Philippine mutual defense treaty, Hillary Clinton reaffirmed in Manila the U.S. commitment to the security of the Philippines, in a move regarded as a U.S. show of support to Manila in its dispute with China.

Furthermore, the U.S. government said it is considering plans to deploy advanced coastal combat ships in Singapore and perhaps the Philippines in the coming years to expand the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

OBAMA AIMS FOR DOMESTIC, INTERNATIONAL GAINS

U.S. experts believe that the U.S. strategic shift to Asia is driven not only by President Obama's need to win the reelection in 2012, but also by the growing perception of an America in decline due to China's fast rise.

Apparently, Obama counts on increased trade with the Asia-Pacific, the most dynamic economic region at the time of a global downturn, to create more jobs back at home to bring down the high unemployment rate that threatens to cost his own job.

This shift reflects "a recognition of the increasingly vital importance of that region for future American wealth, security and global influence," Swaine wrote in the article posted on Dec. 7 on the website of the magazine *The National Interest*.

Douglas Paal, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the economic factor of Obama's Pivot to Asia policy "is the justification because of the current need to restart the American economy and to deal with the stress on the defense budget."

Domestically, Obama also aims to refute the criticism from his Republican challengers who decry him for being too soft toward China, a convenient target for U.S. candidates in nearly every election year in the past decades.

"Obama has taken a pretty positive agenda with China in 2009, and he was seen as weak... Given the upcoming election, the Republican candidates are fighting against China. Obama did not want to put himself at a position of defending China against his opponents," Paal told Xinhua in an interview.

Meanwhile, the U.S. strategic shift was also motivated by fears about China's challenges to the U.S. status as the dominant power in the world, although China has made it clear that it has neither the strength nor intention to vie with the United States for dominance.

The decade-long anti-terrorism campaign, which diverted U.S. attention and resources to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, has fueled the perception of U.S. decline as the sole superpower, especially when it is suffering from a prolonged economic downturn and a worsening debt crisis.

U.S. MOVES HAVE POTENTIALLY DESTABILIZING EFFECTS

Obviously, the U.S. Asia pivot strategy doesn't bode well for China-U.S. relations, already soured in 2011 by a series of provocative U.S. moves, including its announcement of a massive arms sale package to China's Taiwan in September.

"We are going to have a distressful year" in 2012, Paal said.

U.S. experts are critical of the Obama administration's new posture in the Asia-Pacific region, especially its position on the South China Sea dispute, saying it has potentially destabilizing implications by emboldening certain countries to confront China.

Swaine expressed worries that the Obama administration's execution of this shift and China's reaction "are combining to deepen mutual suspicion and potentially destabilize the entire area."

The words and deeds by officials of the Obama administration are creating the impression in some Asian capitals that Washington is now supporting their disputes with Beijing over maritime territories, Swaine said.

Paal also criticized Hillary Clinton for her "inappropriate rhetoric" during her visit to Manila, where she referred to the South China Sea as the "West Philippine Sea," a phrase used solely by the Filipinos.

It "appeared in China's eyes to be taking the Philippines' position in a dispute where Clinton previously said the U.S. would not take sides," he said.

Analysts believe that as its economic and trade ties with China are becoming increasingly closer, United States [efforts] will only backfire if it still embraces the cold-war mentality and adopts policies to contain China.

The U.S. move to station troops in Australia also stirred up concerns in some capitals in the Asia-Pacific region, with Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa warning on Nov. 18 that such arrangements would lead to misunderstanding and provoke a "vicious circle of tension and mistrust."

Noting widespread doubts within the international community about whether the United States can sustain its leadership and predominance in the Asia-Pacific, Swaine said "Washington must rethink its basic assumptions about its role in the region."

The United States should "reexamine how best to address and when to accommodate China's most critical security concerns, especially along its maritime borders," Swaine wrote in his article.

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