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BRIEF

The US Pivot Towards Asia-Pacific Third Time's the Charm?

By Philip Chr. Ulrich, M.A. in American Studies

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Introduction

Once again, the United States is heading for the Asia-Pacific region. The new strategy announced by the Barack Obama Administration in January 2012 is the third attempt by a US administration to refocus US foreign policy on that region. The first two times, under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, events elsewhere in the world forced the United States to take its eyes off the Asia-Pacific region.

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are being wound down, the United States can once again focus on what was supposed to be its main focus area in 2001 – the Asia-Pacific region – and start conducting a proactive foreign policy rather than being reactive, which has characterized the past decade of US foreign policy.

The publication of the 2012 strategic guidance put US foreign policy back on a trajectory which had been contemplated since the mid-1990s and was about to be initiated in a second attempt as the terrorist attacks occurred on September 11, 2001.

For economic, diplomatic, and military reasons, the primary focus area of US foreign policy must necessarily be the Asia-Pacific region, but the previous administrations have not had the strategic room for maneuver necessary to focus primarily on the Asia-Pacific. While the United States has been bogged down in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, China has continued its impressive economic development and military modernization. This forces the United States to reassert itself as not only a regional power but also as the global leader which the United States sees itself as.

This brief will place the new Asia-Pacific-centered strategy in the context of the foreign policy of the Obama Administration as well as US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, and will show how it has been the overall strategic intention of previous administrations to refocus on the Asia-Pacific region.

The analysis will be based on policy documents presented by the Department of Defense (DoD), the previous administrations, and the Obama administration, which, when combined, give an insight into the ideas and assumptions behind US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War and the renewed focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

The brief will show how the new Asia-Pacific strategy follows the course of US foreign policy since the mid-1990s, and how the focus of previous administrations has been diverted due to unforeseen events. Thus the brief will also show that the Asia-Pacific pivot of the Obama Administration is not a new invention, and therefore not something which might easily be reversed. For two decades, the United States has been attempting to focus on this region. This means that its European allies should realize that unless a new unforeseen event occurs, like September 11, 2001 US foreign policy and military power will move its focus towards the Asia-Pacific region, meaning greater security responsibilities for the European allies.

The development in the approaches to making the shift in focus towards the Asia-Pacific region under the three presidents who have attempted to make the shift, shows not only a change in political ideology on the part of the presidents but also a shift in the international relations in this period of time. The approaches have developed from the policy of engagement and integration of the Clinton Administration, to the more firm policy of dissuasion of the Bush Administration, and finally to a policy which can be seen as a 21st century version of Harry Truman's containment policy forming a significant part of the Obama strategy.

These changes are founded on political ideology, as mentioned above, but also on the fact that China has had the opportunity to develop economically and militarily without US opposition as the United States has been distracted on various occasions. As a result, the United States has had to take a more and more assertive stance towards the Asia-Pacific region to counter the rising Chinese influence.

This change in the global political environment is a central reason for the renewed focus on the Asia-Pacific region as well as a central factor in the implementation of the strategy.

Starting to Turn the Wheel

As a consequence of the end of the Cold War, the United States was free to adopt a new security strategy and focus on new rising challenges. The new area of focus chosen by the Bill Clinton Administration was the Asia-Pacific region, and the rising China.

In his 1994 policy document, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, President Clinton launched a strategy called the 'New Pacific Community'. The new strategy was intended to emphasize US economic interests in the Asia-Pacific, as well as ensure that the United States kept a stabilizing military presence in the region "to deter regional aggression."¹ The new Asia-Pacific strategy was based on three pillars:

- Combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on the Korean Peninsula and in South Asia
- Developing multiple new arrangements to meet multiple threats and opportunities
- Supporting the wave of democratic reform sweeping the region.²

US policy towards China was aimed at integrating China and ensuring that China did not develop into a regional threat, causing instability in the region: "To that end,

(1) The White House, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, (Washington, D.C., July 1994), p. 23

(2) *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24

we are strongly promoting China's participation in regional security mechanisms to reassure its neighbors and assuage its own security concerns."³

The Clinton Administration's approach to the Asia-Pacific region in general and China in particular, represented a more liberal approach than the one presented in the final national security strategy written by the George H.W. Bush Administration published in 1993, in which the Bush Administration remained unsure of China's intentions and development. To meet the challenge of a rising China the United States should either "support, contain, or balance this emergence as necessary to protect U.S. interests."⁴

The intended refocus of US foreign policy did not take place, however, due to regional contingencies.

Under the Clinton Administration, the primary tasks for the US defense were defined from the mid-1990s as:

- Dealing with major regional contingencies
- Providing a credible overseas presence
- Countering weapons of mass destruction
- Contributing to multilateral peace operations
- Supporting counterterrorism efforts and other national security objectives.⁵

According to the national security strategy of 1994, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, the aim of pursuing these tasks was to "make America safer and more prosperous – by deterring aggression, by fostering the peaceful resolution of dangerous conflicts, by opening foreign markets, by helping democratic regimes and by tackling global problems. Without our active leadership and engagement abroad, threats will fester and our opportunities will narrow."⁶ Consequently, to ensure US safety, foreign policy was based on engaging abroad and spreading democratic values and commerce.

This engaging foreign policy of the Clinton Administration led to the United States being drawn into both humanitarian and military operations around the world. US armed forces were sent to Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, to just mention a few of the places where US armed forces were committed during the 1990s.

(3) Ibid., p. 24

(4) The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, (Washington, D.C., January 1993), p. 8

(5) The White House, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, (Washington, D.C., July 1994), pp. 6-7

(6) Ibid., p. 1

The conflicts in Africa and the Balkans were other examples of the way that the United States had to divert its strategic focus away from the overall strategic challenges and face unforeseen contingencies. Thus the United States was forced to lead a reactive foreign policy to contingencies which rose as a consequence of the rise of ethnic and political conflicts which surfaced after the end of the Cold War, rather than lead a proactive foreign policy aimed at the major strategic project defined by the Clinton Administration in 1994.

During the 1990s, the deployment of US armed forces to the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East were examples of US involvement and power projection. Another example, relevant to the new Asia-Pacific strategy, was the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996. In response to a Chinese military exercise held close to Taiwan, the United States deployed two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region in order to show support for Taiwan and deter Chinese aggression. This show of force by the United States is a classic example of how the United States projected power in international crises. Similarly, the United States deployed aircraft carrier battle groups to the Persian Gulf to make a show of force against Iraq and Iran.

The New Pacific Community strategy would have dominated the foreign policy of the Clinton Administration, but as already mentioned contingencies in other parts of the world diverted attention from the initiative, thus hindering it from taking a prominent position in the foreign policy of the Clinton Administration. Instead, US foreign policy under the Clinton Administration became focused on the operations in the Balkans which came to dominate Clinton's foreign policy agenda and also be a topic in the 2000 presidential campaign.

Asia-Pacific Back on the Agenda

In the 2000 presidential campaign between George W. Bush and Al Gore, Bush criticized the foreign policy of the 1990s under President Bill Clinton. On September 23, 1999, George W. Bush held a foreign policy speech at The Citadel in South Carolina. According to Bush, the US armed forces had been misused by the Clinton Administration because they were sent on “vague, aimless and endless deployments”⁷. Bush assured his audience that under his presidency, US armed forces would not be “permanent peacekeepers, dividing warring parties. This is not our strength or our calling.” This was not to be understood to mean that Bush wanted to retreat from US commitments around the world. Instead, Bush explained his reasoning for criticizing Clinton's foreign policy by stating that “if America is committed everywhere, our commitments are everywhere suspect. We must be selective in the use of

(7) George W. Bush, “A Period of Consequences”, (speech delivered at The Citadel, South Carolina on September 23, 1999). Available at: http://www3.citadel.edu/pao/addresses/pres_bush.html [Accessed on January 2, 2013].

our military, precisely because America has other great responsibilities that cannot be slighted or compromised.”

The incoming Bush Administration tried to once again emphasize the Asia-Pacific region, but followed the more realistic approach of dissuasion, trying to assert US dominance and thus force China to accept US supremacy in the region, compared to the more liberal inclusive approach of the Clinton Administration.

The new Bush Administration’s aim of limiting the use of US armed forces for contingencies abroad meant that US defense and diplomatic efforts could be diverted to the Asia-Pacific region.

In the Bush Administration’s 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, the Asia-Pacific region was singled out as the region with the greatest potential for fielding a future near competitor for the United States:

*Although the United States will not face a peer competitor in the near future, the potential exists for regional powers to develop sufficient capabilities to threaten stability in regions critical to U.S. interests. In particular, Asia is gradually emerging as a region susceptible to large-scale military competition. Along a broad arc of instability that stretches from the Middle East to Northeast Asia, the region contains a volatile mix of rising and declining regional powers.*⁸

According to the *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* of 2001, the United States should dissuade potential adversaries from initiating military competition through “the conduct of its research, development, test, and demonstration programs. It can do so by maintaining or enhancing advantages in key areas of military capability.”⁹ Basically, the United States should focus on dissuading potential confrontations and also work to develop US capabilities and make them too overwhelming for a potential adversary to compete against.

However, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 on New York and Washington, D.C., forcefully changed US foreign policy and threw the United States off the course set for US foreign policy, and as a result, US foreign policy was drawn in a different direction than originally intended by the Bush Administration.

The 2002 policy document, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, stated that the new threat to the United States was as follows: “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones. We are menaced less by fleets and armies than by catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few.”¹⁰ The United States had initiated the war on terror with the

(8) Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, (Washington, D.C., September 30, 2001), p. 4

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 12

(10) The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, D.C., September 2002), p. 1

invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, aimed at disabling the al-Qaeda network, to prevent new attacks on the United States. From this point onwards, US foreign policy was aimed at the Middle East, not the Asia-Pacific region as intended when Bush took office.

The US focus shifted to the fight against terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in rogue states. Thus, US foreign policy was sidetracked from the announced Asia-Pacific focus and had to focus on the immediate threat to US security, rather than the long term challenges.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq was aimed at a perceived threat which had arisen with a Saddam Hussein who might be willing and able to supply terrorist networks with weapons of mass destruction. The doctrine which dominated the Bush Administration's foreign policy dictated that the threat should be removed, which led to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Once again the Bush Administration reacted to a perceived threat instead of focusing on the long-term challenges to US security which it had analyzed in the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*.

From 2003, US attention was chiefly directed towards the operations in Iraq, which demanded massive commitments of men and equipment. The Department of Defense had to focus on developing new equipment suited for operations in Iraq, for example the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles. 28,000 MRAP vehicles were produced since 2007, 24,059 of which have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.¹¹ This is just one example of how the Department of Defense had to focus development efforts to deal with the situation on the ground in Iraq, and later Afghanistan.

The 2006 policy document, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, and especially the *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* from the same year were very much influenced by the situation in Iraq and the transition which was taking place in the US armed forces towards irregular warfare. This is evident from the introduction of the 2006 version of *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* which begins with the words: "America is at war. This is a wartime national security strategy required by the grave challenge we face – the rise of terrorism fueled by an aggressive ideology of hatred and murder, fully revealed to the American people on September 11, 2001."¹²

The full attention of the US military was aimed at the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and the needs which arose with the US armed forces committed to those conflicts. As a result, China's influence in the Asia-Pacific region grew as the United

(11) Karen Parrish, "Biden, Carter Applaud 'Team MRAP' as Production Ends" in *American Forces Press Service*, (Washington, October 1, 2012) Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=118066> [accessed on January 2, 2013].

(12) The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, D.C., March 2006), p. 1.

States was unable to divert resources and attention from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With the ending of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States will now be able to focus on other areas and prepare for the future rather than focus its efforts almost exclusively on ongoing conflicts.

Cleaning up the foreign policy agenda

The new Asia-Pacific focus of the Barack Obama Administration has come after a deliberate effort on the part of the administration to end US engagement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have drained US resources and diverted its foreign policy focus for more than a decade, making it impossible for the United States to focus anywhere else. By ending the engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States can once again focus on the long-term challenges to the United States, rather than the immediate threats which have dominated US foreign policy since September 11, 2001.

President Obama sent extra troops to Afghanistan to end the war in Afghanistan, and the new plan of the NATO allies became to withdraw by 2014. To be able to do this, the task of the allies in Afghanistan for the past several years has been to train Afghan national security forces to enable them to conduct operations independently of NATO forces.

The decision by President Obama to go against the military's advice and opt for a fast withdrawal of the extra troops sent to Afghanistan was founded on a desire to end the war in Afghanistan quickly. During a discussion of the planned deployment of the extra forces to Afghanistan between President Obama and his national security team, President Obama stated, "This needs to be a plan about how we're going to hand it off and get out of Afghanistan," Obama said. "Everything that we're doing has to be focused on how we're going to get to the point where we can reduce our footprint. It's in our national security interest."¹³

Politically, the Obama Administration needed to end the war in Afghanistan because it was becoming increasingly unpopular in America, and because ending the war would give more military flexibility by freeing up forces from Afghanistan.

The Arab Spring in early 2011 took the world by surprise, and the Western powers were unsure how to react to these public uprisings. When the people of Libya rose against Muammar Gaddafi in February 2011, the Western powers, supported by some Arab nations, conducted an air campaign with the initial aim of stopping the

(13) Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, September 2010), p. 301

killing of civilians and later with the aim of overthrowing Gaddafi. Rather than take the lead in the entire operation, the United States, appeared to be forced to take action, only took the lead in the initial phase of operations in Libya, in order to give the European allies time to get ready and take over control of operations. The phrase, to “lead from behind”, came to characterize the US approach to the war in Libya.

Once again, US foreign policy was hijacked by unforeseen events, but in this instance, the United States proved unwilling to commit to any large scale engagement in Libya. The focus was to end US engagement in long-term stability operations, not engage in further operations of this kind. Therefore, the US commitment to the operations in Libya was kept at a minimum.

The same kind of pragmatic use of military power can also be seen in the way that the Obama Administration has employed drones in its war against al-Qaeda throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. Rather than make large shows of force, the Obama Administration has decided to conduct its war against al-Qaeda at a low level. The Obama Administration has sought to avoid any large-scale engagement of US armed forces, and drone operations have proved an effective tool in that regard.

The Obama Administration has conducted a pragmatic foreign policy, seeking to clear the foreign policy agenda by diminishing al-Qaeda and setting a date for a withdrawal from Afghanistan, while restoring the domestic economic situation in the United States.

The domestic US economic situation has also influenced the Obama Administration’s foreign policy as it has put massive emphasis on alliances compared to the Bush Administration. The Obama Administration has sought to rebuild the United States’ reputation around the world, wanting to extend burden-sharing among allies.

Having accomplished a withdrawal from Iraq and having set a deadline for the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, the Obama Administration basically finds itself in the same kind of situation which the Bush Administration wanted to be in when it took office in 2000. US armed forces have been withdrawn from the most senior international operations, thus opening up the opportunity for the United States to once again face its long-term challenges.

This shift in focus would have taken place much earlier, had it not been for unforeseen contingencies, like the situation in the Balkans in the 1990s and the terrorist attacks on September 11 2001.

Back to Asia-Pacific – Once Again

On November 16, 2011, President Barack Obama announced a closer cooperation with Australia through rotational deployments of US Marines to Darwin in Australia's Northern Territory.¹⁴

This announcement was the first indication of a redirection of the US armed forces towards the Asia-Pacific region. The shift towards the Asia-Pacific region was made official government policy when it was announced on January 5, 2012, at the Pentagon by President Obama, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Dempsey with the publication of a new strategic guidance.

The shift towards the Asia-Pacific region is explained as resting on economic and political interests: "U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the U.S. military will continue to contribute globally, *we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.*"¹⁵ The task of the US armed forces is to "continue to make the necessary investments to ensure that we maintain regional access and the ability to operate freely in keeping with our treaty obligations and with international law."¹⁶

The new Asia-Pacific strategy has two elements, a military and a political element. Because of the scope of this brief, the analysis of the political part of the strategy will be limited to the diplomatic efforts on military issues. The military part of the strategy includes new operational concepts for a potential conflict in the region, and the political part involves closer cooperation with US regional allies.

The military part of the Asia-Pacific strategy rests on a larger military presence in the region. This increased military presence has already come to light through a number of initiatives. The first initiative was the already mentioned rotational deployment of Marines to Australia, which showed the beginning of an increased emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region. The second initiative was the announcement by Secretary Panetta that 60 per cent of the US Navy will be stationed in the Pacific by 2020, shifting from a 50/50 split between the Atlantic and the Pacific.¹⁷ The regional initiatives also include an effort to deploy littoral combat ships to Singapore, 12

(14) Donna Miles, "Obama Announces Expanded U.S. Military Presence in Australia", in *American Forces Press Service*, (Washington, November 16, 2011) Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=66098> [Accessed on January 2, 2013].

(15) Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, (Washington, D.C., January 2012), p. 2

(16) *Ibid.*, p. 2

(17) Jim Garamone, "Panetta Describes U.S. Shift in Asia-Pacific", in *American Forces Press Service*, (Singapore, June 1, 2012)

Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=116591> [Accessed on January 2, 2013].

MV-22 Ospreys aircraft to Japan, as well as efforts in the Philippines to widen the US “presence and access there.”¹⁸

These initiatives are clear indications of the new emphasis on making a notable presence in the Asia-Pacific region, both to ensure regional allies of the continued US dedication to the region, but also to make a show of force against China.

As part of the new Asia-Pacific strategy, a new focus area has also emerged in US strategic thinking – Area-Access and Area-Denial capabilities.

In January 2012 the Department of Defense published its new *Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC)*. The JOAC “proposes a concept for how joint forces will achieve operational access in the face of armed opposition by a variety of potential enemies and under a variety of conditions, as part of a broader national approach.”¹⁹ In other words, the objective of the JOAC is to secure US armed forces’ freedom of operation in an area of operation which an enemy force is trying to close off against US operations.

The JOAC defines anti-access, as “actions and capabilities usually long-range, designed to prevent an opposing force from entering an operational area. Antiaccess [*sic*] actions tend to target forces approaching by air and sea predominantly, but also can target cyber, space, and other forces that support them.”²⁰ Such capabilities are, in brief, designed to shut off an area completely from an enemy force. Area-denial actions and capabilities are defined as being, “usually of shorter range, designed not to keep an opposing force out, but to limit its freedom of action within the operational area. Area-denial capabilities target forces in all domains, including land forces.”²¹

In the Asia-Pacific context, these anti-access and area-denial weapons are part of China’s military development, and therefore the fear of the United States is that China, in time, will be able to shut off the Western Pacific to the United States, denying it access to its regional allies in Japan and Korea, but also to regional commerce. In its annual report to Congress on China’s military and security development, the Department of Defense writes:

China’s long-term comprehensive military modernization is improving the PLA’s [People’s Liberation Army] capacity to conduct high-intensity, regional military operations, including counter-intervention operations. For China ‘counter-intervention’ refers to a set of operationally-defined tasks designed to prevent

(18) Cheryl Pellerin, “Panetta: Rebalance to Asia-Pacific Region Shows Early Progress”, in *American Forces Press Service* (November 12, 2012). Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/news-article.aspx?id=118518> [Accessed on January 2, 2013].

(19) Department of Defense, *Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC)*, (Washington, D.C., January 17, 2012), p. 1

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 6

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 6

foreign (e.g. U.S.) military forces from intervening in a conflict and preventing China from accomplishing its military objectives. China employs anti-access / area-denial (A2/AD) weapons in support of this broader counter-intervention strategy – a strategy not bound by a set geographic area or domain.

The new JOAC and the new operational concept, the AirSea Battle Concept, which will be analyzed later, are meant to counter the A2/AD capabilities which the Chinese are developing.

The JOAC is also meant to provide an overarching concept for the US military to be able to act in an operating environment that is being complicated by three trends, “(1) the dramatic improvement and proliferation of weapons and other technologies capable of denying access to or freedom of action within an operational area, (2) changing U.S. overseas defense posture, and (3) the emergence of space and cyberspace as increasingly important and contested domains.”²²

Although the JOAC notes that Area-Access and Area-Denial capabilities, “once available only to powerful states, are now increasingly available to weaker states and even non-state actors”, it is obvious that the only state in the Asia-Pacific region currently with the potential to go against US supremacy is China.

Due to the geographic challenges present in the Asia-Pacific region, the US Navy and US Air Force will be the primary military actors in the new operational environment. A new operational challenge also requires a new operational concept. As a replacement for the AirLand Battle Concept from 1982, designed to stop a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, the US Navy and US Air Force are working on a new so-called ‘AirSea Battle Concept’.

The concept itself is highly classified, but the overall objectives of the concept can be found in a 2010 report from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA).

Rather than being an overall strategy, the AirSea Battle Concept is meant to be a specific *operational* concept to be followed in case hostilities break out. This becomes clear as the report presents the supposed operations in a second phase of hostilities as contributing “to the larger US strategy creating options to resolve a prolonged conventional conflict on favorable terms and reverse any initial military gains by the adversary.”²³

The AirSea Battle Concept is an operational concept designed to guide operations in the initial phases of a conflict with the aim of breaking through an adversary’s Area-Access/ Area-Denial capabilities, thus enabling the US military to conduct

(22) Ibid., p. 9

(23) Jan van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle. A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*, (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), p. 53

operations in an unchallenged environment where the US military can bring its overwhelming capabilities to bear on the adversary.

The new strategic guidance, the JOAC, and the AirSea Battle Concept are all aimed at asserting US presence in the Asia-Pacific region, and the role of the United States as a regional superpower.

As already mentioned, the political element of the Asia-Pacific strategy is focused on closer cooperation with US allies in the region. The rotational deployment of US Marines to Darwin, Australia, was the first of a series of initiatives to extend the US presence in the region while also leaning on regional allies to contribute. Another example of the closer relationship with Australia was announced on November 14, 2012, when Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Australian Defense Minister Stephen Smith announced that two space systems will be placed in Australia. One is a system which will “track space assets and debris, increase the security of space-based systems and increase coverage of space objects in the Southern Hemisphere.” The second system “is an advanced U.S. space surveillance telescope designed and built by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. In Australia, the system will help to leverage space surveillance capabilities for both nations.”²⁴

Through these efforts, Secretary Panetta has sought to increase US military presence in the region in a cost-effective manner which limits the strains on US armed forces.

The new Asia-Pacific strategy has the characteristics of a 21st century Truman Doctrine. The original Truman Doctrine dictated a global containment strategy trying to contain the spread of Communism.

The new Asia-Pacific strategy of the Obama Administration is aimed at containment of China through the deployment of military assets in the region, the renewed emphasis on existing alliances, and an expanding cooperation with other nations in the region. The new containment strategy also differs from the Truman Doctrine, however, since the United States is so interconnected with the country it is trying to contain.

In the first eight months of 2012, the United States exported goods to a value of \$69.9 billion to China, while at the same time importing goods worth \$273.1 billion from China. Thus, the two countries have become each other's second largest trading partners.²⁵

(24) Cheryl Pellerin, “U.S. to Locate Key Space Systems in Australia”, in *American Forces Press Service*, (Perth, November 14, 2012). Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=118537> [accessed on January 2, 2013].

(25) US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2012 Report to Congress*, (Washington, D.C., November 2012), p. 3 Statistics on US trade relations are available at: <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/highlights/top/top1209yr.html> [Accessed on November 21, 2012] Statistics on Chinese trade relations are available at: <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/china/balance-of-trade> [Accessed on November 21, 2012]

This means that the containment strategy of the Obama Administration will have to avoid a too confrontational approach, while still asserting the US position as a regional power and the US perception of itself as a global leader.

The strategy will have to present a more firm assertion of US predominance in the region compared to what the Bush Administration would have implemented according to its planned Asia-Pacific focus from 2001. For the past decade, China and the Asia-Pacific region have largely been left to their own devices, and therefore China has been able to assume a more and more dominant role in regional politics. Consequently, the United States has to assert its status as a military superpower and try to create a balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region which keeps a lid on Chinese regional dominance.

The frequency of official trips to the Asia-Pacific region by top US cabinet members, both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta (four times in 2012 alone), shows the great emphasis put on the Asia-Pacific region by the Obama Administration. Equally noteworthy, the first trip taken by President Obama after his reelection was a trip to the Asia-Pacific region.

Third Time's the Charm?

Since the mid-1990s, the United States has attempted to turn its strategic focus towards the Asia-Pacific region. The efforts of Presidents Clinton and Bush were interrupted by unforeseen events which came to dominate the foreign policy agenda of the two presidents. The 2012 strategic guidance is thus the third major attempt by a US administration to face the challenge to the US global leadership position caused by the rise of China.

In the mid-1990s, it became apparent that the economic development in the Asia-Pacific region warranted an increased US attention. On this basis, the Bill Clinton Administration coined a strategy towards the Asia-Pacific region called the New Pacific Community, which was aimed at balancing US military and economic efforts to assume a dominant role in the region, thus acting as a stabilizing factor.

Due to contingencies elsewhere in the world, the policy towards the Asia-Pacific region never assumed as prominent a role in the foreign policy of the Clinton Administration as was envisioned.

As the administration of President George W. Bush took office in 2001, it too attempted to launch a strategy focused on the Asia-Pacific region. In the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, the new strategic focus of the US military was to be on the Asia-Pacific region. The Bush Administration wanted to withdraw the US armed forces from the stability operations around the world which it had criticized the Clinton Administration for engaging in in the first place. This would enable the United States to focus its resources on the Asia-Pacific region.

However, the events of September 11, 2001, changed the priorities of US foreign policy, and the strategic focus shifted towards the Middle East and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, shifting the majority of US resources and development efforts towards these operations.

The foreign policy of the first presidency of President Barack Obama has been aimed at bringing these operations to an end by withdrawing the last combat forces from Iraq, setting an exit date for the engagement in Afghanistan, and diminishing al-Qaeda through the use of precision strikes from drones. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have for the past decade prevented the United States from leading a proactive foreign policy, because these wars have drained too much money, too many assets, and too much political will.

As these operations wind down, the US military is freed up to commit to the new Asia-Pacific strategy. The strategy can be called a 21st century Truman Doctrine, aimed at containing China, but it is very much affected by the intertwining of economic interests in the two countries. The United States seeks to reassert itself in a region it has largely abandoned for a decade due to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This absence of the United States from the region has meant that China's influence in the region has risen without the United States being able to respond.

The new strategy seeks to reassure US allies in the region of the sincerity of the United States by showing that the US wish to engage more in an Asia-Pacific context is genuine, thus giving the allies more leverage in their dealings with China.

This strategy will come to dominate US foreign policy in the years to come, unless a new fundamental game changer event occurs, such as September 11, 2001, and draws US attention elsewhere in the world. If that does not happen, the European allies in NATO will see a decreased US emphasis on Europe, as it turns a lot of its military, economic and diplomatic efforts towards the Asia-Pacific region.

The Obama Administration has shown itself willing to avoid new distractions rising from regional conflicts. An example of this determination to avoid involvement in new conflicts was the war in Libya leading to the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The United States chose to stay clear of a major commitment to the operation, letting the European allies take the lead. This policy is clearly aimed at avoiding another extensive, and expensive, US engagement in a regional conflict which has no immediate consequence for US national security.

The most likely event which might divert the new Asia-Pacific strategy would be another conflict in the Middle East, for example as a consequence of an Israeli attack on Iran, which would require a US response. Such a conflict would mean a diversion from the new Asia-Pacific strategy just as the wars in the Balkans had this effect for the Clinton Administration and September 11, 2001 resulted in a change in strategy for the Bush Administration. In this case, it would mean the third interrupted attempt in two decades by the United States to face the challenges of the military and economic rise of China.