

Summary: The regional tensions in Asia are worrisome to the international community, which fears that any conflict may involve major military capabilities and be detrimental to the diversity of the relationships – especially economic – in the region. Therefore, NATO will have to take the fullest measure of these changes, face the security challenges in the neighborhood of Europe head on, and ask itself whether it can and wants to be an actor in Asia.

NATO and the U.S. Pivot to Asia: To Follow or Not to Follow?

by *Jamie Shea*

The reasons for the U.S. pivot or “rebalancing” to the Asia-Pacific region are clear. Although there are many other flashpoints and crises with regional spillover potential elsewhere (and especially in Syria and the broader Middle East), the dimensions of possible conflicts in Asia are of a different order of magnitude. North Korea, India, Pakistan, and China are all nuclear weapon states. The region plays host to most of the world’s largest and most modern armed forces, and the largest consumers of weapons (India) and producers of weapons.¹

Military budgets in the region are also growing consistently. Some estimates suggest that, at current growth rates, China will draw level with the United States in terms of total defense spending by the middle of the century, or even as early as 2040. The Asia-Pacific is not only a region that is “militarizing,” it also has a number of intractable territorial disputes and unresolved conflicts that have not dampened with the passage of time, and still generate nationalist passions and military tensions (Kashmir, the two Koreas, the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and Taiwan, to name the most obvious). Thus the region shows the classic push-pull cycle in which arms

rices both reflect and further exacerbate regional disputes in a way that makes miscalculation and escalation more possible and de-escalation less likely. In contrast to other areas of the world, an Asian conflict is more likely to be between major state powers, more likely to involve major military capabilities on all sides (in contrast to the asymmetric conflicts the NATO countries have been involved in for the past quarter century), and more likely to be catastrophic for global security and economic, trading, and investment relationships. This comes at a time when the NATO countries are already in severe and long-term economic and financial difficulties.

The United States, as a result, is likely to be as much drawn into the Asia-Pacific by a steady stream of erupting crises (the saber-rattling by Kim Jong-Un of North Korea is but the latest example) as it is engaging in the region as the consequence of a voluntary, strategic choice. With its constrained resources and defense budget cuts resulting from sequestration, the United States will simply be obliged by the threat urgency and existential interest to yield increasing priority to the Asia-Pacific. The United States will need to juggle crisis management with longer-term confidence and institu-

¹ China has just overtaken the U.K. as the fourth largest arms exporter.

Policy Brief

tion building. The pivot has started rather modestly, with just a 10 percent increase of naval forces (50 percent to 60 percent) in the region, greater use of port facilities in Singapore and Australia, a second missile defense site in Japan, and Marine Corps redeployments and training. But it will inevitably acquire momentum as the United States deploys additional force packages in response to mounting tensions² and rethinks its role and force posture in the region. The pivot will also become a political and economic tool, which will no longer be limited to military engagement.

NATO members will have to come to terms with these strategic game changes, obvious from the moment that China emerged as the first non-democratic global economic superpower for several centuries. The good news is that Europe does not face a major immediate threat that would make a U.S. pivot to Asia dangerous for European security in the way that occurred during the 1950-53 Korean War. At that time, Europeans feared that U.S. troop redeployments to Korea would encourage Stalin to put pressure on Berlin and to push for a united but neutral Germany. The United States is neither abandoning NATO nor its commitment to Article 5 NATO collective defense, as evidenced in missile defense deployments in Europe and the rotation of U.S. brigades in/out of Europe to maintain inter-operability with the Allies. The bad news, however, is that the U.S. pivot occurs at a time when the Europeans face a number of security headaches in their neighborhood (Mali, Sahel, Middle East, Balkans, Gulf of Guinea, Gulf of Aden, etc) that will certainly obligate European NATO members to preserve a certain number of operational forces in order to respond to these pressing challenges, instead of the temptation of restructuring their armed forces that could have been felt after 2014 and the end of the NATO operation in Afghanistan. The U.S. pivot also comes at a time when European defense integration has stalled and European threat assessments and solidarity have fragmented (Libya, Mali).

The pivot therefore raises a number of questions for Europeans to debate (first and foremost) and attempt to answer:

- If NATO's leading power has redefined its strategic priorities, are the Europeans ready to sustain NATO as an "out of area, or out of business" Alliance without

the United States always prodding them; or would they prefer that NATO revert to its former role as a Euro-centric collective defense insurance policy?

- Will NATO's global outlook and global network of partnerships survive its ISAF mission in Afghanistan? The Alliance's closest partners (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea) are all located in the Asia-Pacific and its two North American members are increasingly involved there. Will this be enough for NATO to aspire to play a role in this region? Can NATO retain its global relevance if it doesn't acquire an Asian-Pacific dimension?
- Very few European Allies have the economic clout or military capabilities to be serious players in the Asia-Pacific. Does this make the Alliance irrelevant, or can it still be taken seriously and play a role based on other assets: democratic values, defense cooperation/inter-operability among its members, partnerships, accumulation of experience/expertise in peacekeeping, multinational operations, arms control, know how, etc? If these less tangible assets are valuable in the region, how could they be brought to bear? Would the region's U.S. allies benefit in a way that they currently do not from their bilateral relations with the United States? In sum, is NATO only a model to be emulated, or could it serve as a vicarious security structure for the region as it has done in the Balkans and Eastern Europe after 1989?
- If NATO wanted to engage seriously in the Asia-Pacific, how should it go about it? Are NATO/China, NATO/India formats of cooperation a possibility, along with the idea of developing its current ISAF partnerships? Should NATO shadow the U.S. security presence or develop a distinct profile? Should the Alliance start taking positions on regional disputes, as South Korea

Very few European Allies have the economic clout or military capabilities to be serious players in the Asia-Pacific. Does this make the Alliance irrelevant?

² See, for instance, the recent dispatch of B2 bombers and F22 stealth fighters to South Korea and the temporary deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile defense system to Guam.

Policy Brief

and Japan are pushing it to do? Should NATO do regional contingency planning, as could be the case in the Korean peninsula? Are NATO's partnership activities attractive to China? If so, how can NATO make itself attractive to China?

While these questions look for answers, there are three immediate consequences of the U.S. pivot that the European NATO members cannot avoid.

First, they will have to work out how they are going to stabilize their own backyard with far less U.S. military assistance and economic aid than in the past. U.S. support, as in Libya, may well be critical but will also be limited. The Europeans will need to determine what they can reasonably expect the United States to provide (intelligence, logistics, etc.) and what they have to generate themselves, even if this means duplicating capabilities already possessed by the United States. Can the U.S. pivot counter-balance the European defense budget meltdown in stimulating a truly credible and operational European Security and Defense Policy? Or will the Europeans drift if they are no longer operating in a U.S.-defined (and dominated) framework?

Second, if NATO is to sustain its partnerships in the Asia-Pacific, it needs to overhaul its Partnership Concept. These partners cannot be treated like real allies only when they contribute to NATO's operations and put themselves under a NATO command structure. They will have to be given a real say in NATO business and be brought more regularly and closely into NATO's political consultations and initiatives. The Alliance will also need to develop cooperation with them on non-traditional threats, such as cyber attacks, terrorism, WMD proliferation, critical infrastructure resilience, and so on.

Finally, if NATO is to remain a global player and at least have some residual capability of relevance to the Asia-Pacific region, it will have to look at its defense planning and military requirements to ensure that they pay adequate attention to capabilities such as naval forces, special operation forces, cyber-defense capabilities, WMD detection, and protection, which will significantly enhance NATO's value as a security partner.

About the Author

Jamie Shea is deputy assistant secretary general for emerging security challenges at NATO HQ, and a non-resident senior fellow in the GMF's Foreign and Security Policy program.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, Warsaw, and Tunis. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

Contact

Dr. Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer
Director, Paris Office
German Marshall Fund of the United States
Tel: +33 1 47 23 47 18
Email: adehoopscheffer@gmfus.org