
The US Asia-Pacific Policy and Regional Response

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China's economic growth and military modernization have forced the US to shift its focus from the Middle-East to the Asia-Pacific region. The US Pivot to Asia Pacific policy aims to maintain the US hegemony by containing China in this region. This article is an attempt to gauge the responses of those regional countries which are having close economic and political relations with China and the US. It also tries to highlight the factors which increased the US military and diplomatic involvement in the region. This article tries to find the answer of research question that why the US has introduced Asia-Pacific policy and how the regional countries have responded to it. As per the nature of the research, secondary sources have been used to complete this research. Three qualitative approaches such as historical, descriptive and exploratory within the broader framework of post positivist paradigm have been used to find the answer of the research question. This study is conducted under the lens of Hegemonic Stability Theory. This study concludes with the argument that regional countries have shown mixed reactions to the US policy and geo-political competition is likely to grow between the US and China in future.

Keywords: Asia-Pacific, pivot, the rebalancing, the US, hegemonic stability theory

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Introduction

Asia-Pacific region is the center point of the world politics due to a number of factors such as terrorist activities, border disputes, piracies at sea, natural resources and proliferation of weapons. It is a home to more than half of the world population. It contains second and third largest economies like China and Japan. It is the second largest region of the world which extends from the Indian Subcontinent to American West Coast. There are around about fifty countries in this region. It is full of natural resources and also provides the availability of large markets (Chipeta, Whiteman, & Brooks, 1998). Strategically this region is very important for the US that's why it has signed strategic partnerships with many countries. Secondly, due to rapid political, economic and military developments happening in this region has caused the international community to shift its focus from the West to East (Swaine, et al., 2015). The busiest sea-lines of communications enhanced the importance of this region. These sea-lines are very important for both the US and China. China has acquired economic benefits from these business routes and enhanced its economy. Area and population of this region enhanced the economic feasibility but conflicts on the seas have also issued many security warnings. Due to this pertaining dynamism, the US announced the Pivot to Asia-Pacific policy and increased its military presence in this region (Sweijts, et al., 2010).

During the tenure of George W. Bush, many voices criticized the US engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan and it was said that due to these involvements the Asia-Pacific region has been ignored by the US. In the context of this criticism, Asia-Pacific region was termed by the Obama administration as a "pivot" (Xiao, 2017). It is true that the US never left Asia entirely since the 2nd World War but it was expected by Obama administration that geographically this area would become more important in the world due to its economic growth in the next 20 to 30 years. While sensing the importance of this region, the US President Barack Obama said that "*in the 21st century, the United States of America is all in this region*" (White House, 2011). Once then the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that "*America's future is linked to the Asia-Pacific and the future of the region depends on America*" (Clinton, 2010).

Rationale of the US Asia-Pacific Policy:

The US has been involved in Asia-Pacific region since the WWII and always increased its economic and military cooperation with many regional countries. In the last 20 years, the US was too much engaged in the Middle Eastern security issues and this vacuum made major countries of Asia-Pacific region to establish their relations with the future super power China. Meanwhile, China emerged economically and militarily as the most important country in this region. This factor forced the US to re-shape its policy towards the region (Dormandy & Kinane, 2014). The US felt threats to its hegemony from China and it started to consider it as biggest competitor in the region (Xiaosong, 2012).

Objectives of the US Asia-Pacific Policy:

Initially, this policy was pronounced by the Hillary Clinton. On many occasions, she said that to maintain hegemony, the US should expand its trade and investments in Asia-Pacific region. The basic purpose of the US policy is to establish strong relations with existing allies, to develop productive relations with new partners, to compete with the rising China, to use economic tools for future economic stability, to become a part of regional institutions, to promote democratic norms in Asia and to engage European partners in its strategy (Campbell, 2016).

Initiatives under the US Asia-Pacific Policy:

The main objective of the US policy is to maintain its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific because the economic growth of China and its diplomatic relations with other countries have changed the international power dynamics (Nabi, 2014). To gain its objectives, the US introduced its six point's agenda: alliances, relations with developed countries, economic partnership, enhance military power, promotion of democracy and human rights (Lumbers, 2015).

Diplomatic Initiatives:

In the late 2011, the US started to increase its influence in this region through a number of initiatives and the US hosted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' meeting. It also announced the rotation of Marines with Australia and for the very first time the US President Obama attended the East Asia Summit (EAS). These steps ensured the US hegemonic commitment and engagement with Asian region through "pivot" policy (Park, 2012). The US leadership visited Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan and Australia to create a hard ring around China and also approached the ASEAN countries for diplomatic purposes. To gain diplomatic goals, the US supported Taiwan's participation in organizations such as World Trade Organization, the Asian Development Bank, APEC, World Health Organization and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Wang, 2016). At the regional platforms such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), EAS and APEC, they have cooperated with each other for their common interests. The US has increased cooperation with New Zealand in the Pacific Island Forum because it is a fourth largest donor of these forums while the US is only a dialogue partner. The US also supported India when it entered into the G-20 and Nuclear Suppliers Group (Campbell, 2016, pp. 252,259). In July 2011, the US encouraged Vietnam in the South China Sea (SCS) dispute and highlighted this issue in the meeting of ARF held in Bali. In November 2011, President Obama also raised the SCS issue at the platform of EAS. It was emphasized by the President Obama that the US didn't take sides in the disputes but it has interests in the freedom of navigation (Emmers, 2013, p. 43). On 18th October 2012, during his visit to Thailand, Obama said that our desire to pivot was a response to a decade in which we understandably, as a country focused on the issues of terrorism and also the

situation in Iraq and Afghanistan and I think, we want to have the same kind of presence in a region that is growing faster than any place in the world (White House, 2012). In 2012, the US signed the infrastructure development agreement with Indonesia while earlier it announced the “comprehensive partnership” in 2010. As a treaty ally, in March 2014, the US held meeting on nuclear issues and invited both Japanese Prime Minister and South Korean President to sort out their tensions. In 2015, Indonesia and the US also declared to established strategic partnership.(Hamilton-Hart & McRae, 2015, pp. 12-14).

Economic Initiatives:

Economic strategy is an important ingredient of the “pivot” policy. Throughout the history, the US used economic tool to maintain its involvement in the Asia-Pacific. Obama administration also used economic tools to implement the rebalancing policy in a better way to secure its hegemony. Basically, economic motives of the ‘pivot’ policy are to promote rules for international trade and to support the US long-term presence and influence in the region. For this purpose, the US used TPP, APEC and G-20 forums at regional and global levels(Goodman, 2013).Initially, the US joined the EAS and formed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to secure its own economy (Manyin, et al., 2012).Further, it enhanced its economic relations with Australia and New Zealand and cooperated with them through multilateral forums like FTA and TPP (Dent, 2013). The US also provides economic assistance to South Korea. To enhance trade activities, it signed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with South Korea. So, in March 2012, 15% bilateral trade has been increased through this agreement. In October 2012, the US provided strategic opportunity as well as a challenge to Japan through TPP when it became a part of TPP. Accordingly, in March 2013 Japanese Prime Minister declared that the TPP is turning the Pacific Ocean into an island sea and a huge economic zone (Yoshida, 2013). As a third largest trading partner of New Zealand and Taiwan, the US also conducted meetings with New Zealand in 2013 and 2015 to increase economic relations while in 2013 it enhanced its trade with Taiwan from \$57.8 billion to \$63.6 billion. After that in 2014 and 2015, the US became thesecond largest trading partner of Taiwan(Rosier, O’Connor, & Cuevas, 2016). The US also has strong economic relations with Singapore because both states signed FTA agreement. In 2014, the US invested more than 180\$ billion in Singapore to effectSingapore’s positive relation with China and to get its support at the plate form of ASEAN. The SCS dispute brought Vietnam closer to the US so in 2013,both states announced the “comprehensive partnership” and enhanced their economic relations(Hayton, 2015).

Military Initiatives:

The ‘Pivot’ policy is all about the security policy and under this policy,the US has re-planned its military capabilities. From 2009 onwards, China’sincreased assertiveness in the SCS enhanced the concerns of the US and other regional states. In 2011, Pentagon announced its strategic guidance in a paper named “the Asia-Pacific region and the Persian Gulf” and considered these areas as nations’

geostrategic priorities. After that in 2012, strategic guidance document by Department of Defense (DOD) and Quadrennial Defense Review report by DOD's clearly declared that the US military strategy will emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region (O'Rourke, 2016).

In 2011, the US decided to station 2500 marines at the Australian naval post to have a close surveillance of the eastern Indian Ocean (Mahnken & Blumenthal, 2014). Both the US and Australia decided to work together against the A2/AD China's strategy on the SCS. After that, for the first time in 26 years, the US allowed, in 2012, to the Australian ships to access the US bases. There are no US permanent bases in Singapore but in late 2011, the US decided to deploy its littoral combat ships in Singapore (Emmers, 2013). In October 2011, during a House Foreign Affairs Committee on "Why Taiwan Matters" Kurt Campbell as the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs said that the US is trying to put forward the "rebalancing" strategy to Asia-Pacific region. He also stressed that comprehensive, durable and unofficial relations between the US and Taiwan are very important for the US "pivot" policy (Kan & Morrison, 2014). In same year, for the first time the US hosted military officers of Vietnam in staff colleges and other institutions. In 2012, the US Defense Secretary visited India and declared India the 'lynchpin' of the US military strategy in Asia. He further said that in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal India will act as a "swing state" along with the US Central Command military component for concerted action (Brewster, 2012). Further in this year, to increase military presence in the region the US conducted RIMPAC exercises and invited regional states to become a part of it. The US also reopened its naval ports for New Zealand watercraft and signed Visiting Force Agreement with Philippines. Through this agreement, the US rotated its forces in Philippines on a temporary bases. In 2013, the US made 90 navy ships ports in Manila and sold advanced weapons (Taegseon, 2014). Furthermore, it demonstrated its military commitment with South Korea to Northeast Asian security in the face of threats from North Korea. The US president also said that "America is fully prepared and capable to defend itself and its allies with the full range of available capabilities". In 2014, the US signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with Philippines. This agreement provided the permission to the US to rotate its troops on eight different Philippines bases. It also enhanced military relations with India and signed Defense Framework Agreement of 2015. Joint research and development of military technology, routine exercises and military sales are the dimensions of this agreement (McDevitt, 2016). The Congress approved \$425 million for Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative. In June 2015, the US signed defense agreement with Vietnam which highlighted 12 areas for defense cooperation (Hiebert, Poling, & Cronin, 2017, p. 107).

For the maritime security, the US defense department stated that 60 percent of the US naval and overseas air assets will be stationed in the Pacific region by 2020. The US Defense Department announced its Maritime Security Strategy for the Asia-Pacific in August 2015. The first objective of this policy was safeguarding

the freedom of the seas; second, deterring conflict and coercion and last, promoting adherence to international law and standards (Department of Defense, 2015). The US provided F-35 Joint Strike Fighters to Japan and enhanced cooperation on maritime security for the sake of containing China (Mahnken & Blumenthal, 2014, p. 83). In 2016, the US provided Aegis-equipped warships and Patriot missile batteries to South Korea to counter North Korean ballistic missiles. After the North Korean series of missiles tests, the US and South Korea officials announced that a THAAD battery would be deployed to South Korea by late 2017 (Sang-Hun, 2016).

Regional Response:

China:

China considered the US 'Asia Pacific' policy a strategy aimed to contain and check the growth of China's power and influence. So, China responded to the US rebalance strategy in a measured way. At different diplomatic forums, China responded to the US policy in a vigilant way while criticizing the military dimension of the US policy and declaring the policy a threat to the regional peace and stability at the same time (Einhorn & Sidhu, 2017). To respond, China has employed two-pronged strategy. Firstly, it has approached the Central Asia and Southeast Asia to sign different agreements through the OBOR initiative. Secondly, China increased its military budget and established overseas naval bases to strengthen its defense against any sort of containment (Szcudlik-Tatar, 2012).

Japan:

As a strategic ally, Japan welcomed the US policy and acknowledged the US intentions to enhance its military presence in Asia. It also shares concerns with the US over Chinese assertiveness in the territorial disputes. In March 2013, Japan formally joined TPP negotiations and Prime Minister Abe declared that the TPP is turning the Pacific Ocean into an island sea and a huge economic zone (Yoshida, 2013). Japan believes that the existence of the Japan-US alliance is a stabilizing factor which contributes to the peace and stability of the region (Sutter, Brown, Admson, Mochizuki, & Deepa, 2013, p. 20). In 2015, Japan's security legislation allowed Japan to become more active partner of the US in the regional security engagement. It also passed a law and lifted the ban on weapons exports, this step allowed Japan to cooperate with other regional states. In the response of Chinese military power and assertiveness, Japan purchased F-35 Joint Strike Fighters and enhanced its cooperation with the US on maritime security (Mahnken & Blumenthal, 2014, p. 83).

Indonesia:

Indonesia welcomed the US policy towards Asia. It has signed a "comprehensive partnership" with the US. In 2012, both states signed the infrastructure development agreement to strengthen their economic relations. Indonesia also supported the US inclusion in the regional institutions like EAS (Hamilton-Hart & McRae, 2015, pp. 12,13). It supported the security and economic engagements of

the US but at the same time it has established good relations with China. Indonesia believes that the US decision to establish marine base in Darwin would provoke China. It has cooperated with China in the defense and military spheres such as maritime security, joint military exercises and defense industry (The Asian Foundation, 2015, p. 101) In October 2013, Indonesia established “comprehensive-strategic partnership” with China and Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered the first speech as a foreign leader to the Indonesian legislature (Ross, 2014, p. 8).

Cambodia:

Cambodia acted like a cautious observer. It is enjoying a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership with China and military relations with the US. After the US policy in July 2012, as an acting chair of ASEAN, Cambodia refused to discuss territorial issues to support China’s position on SCS although Philippines insisted to discuss it (Emmers, 2013, p. 43). In 2013, it decided to suspend the US military cooperation because the US tried to influence in its internal affairs especially in its politics through military aid and assistance with strict conditions since 2006. In 2014, Cambodia received loans and military equipment including trucks, helicopters, aircraft, military training and medical facilities from China (Lum, 2015, p. 10). China’s strategic, economic and military influence over Cambodia has been growing. In early 2016, the US tried to establish good military relations with Cambodia by the opening of Angkor Sentinel but unexpectedly, Cambodia postponed this for the next two years and tried to decrease the US influence over it (Var, 2017, p. 2).

Philippines:

Initially, Philippines publically welcomed the US policy owing to its ongoing dispute with China in the SCS. In 2011, China put trade barriers on Philippines exports and in 2012, due to clashes on the Scarborough Shoal, Philippines relations with China became very intense (Ross, 2014, p. 7). In 2012, another incident happened when Philippines navy tried to arrest Chinese fishermen but then Chinese maritime surveillance ships intervened (Santos, 2012). After this tense situation, Philippines signed Visiting Force Agreement with the US to rotate US forces in Philippines on temporary bases. This agreement enhanced the US military influence in this region. In April 2014, Philippines signed Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the US. This agreement enhanced the rotational presence of the US forces in Philippines (Bradsher, 2014). In 2016, President Duterte decided to go diplomatically to earn Chinese goodwill and downplayed the SCS dispute in ASEAN summit meeting. After the meeting, he announced that Philippines would stop joining the US Navy in patrolling the SCS to avoid Beijing annoyance. Later on, Philippines increased 9.2% defense budget and ordered the US Special Forces to leave Philippines (Lunn & Ayres, 2016). On the other hand, in October 2016, President Duterte during his four-day trip to China emphasized on bilateral and diplomatic relations with China in order to solve disputes, particularly in the SCS (Perlez, 2016). The Duterte administration from the day first

was willing to increase cooperation with China but somehow China's assertiveness in the SCS has shattered Duterte's dream of good relations with China.

North Korea:

Since the announcement of the US policy, North Korea has behaved aggressively and carried out a series of nuclear and missile tests (Cha, et al., 2016). On 29th February 2012, North Korea decided to freeze nuclear program in order to get the US aid but in April 2012, it launched a rocket. On 9th October 2012, North Korea said that its missiles can reach the US mainland and its bases. North Korean offensive and aggressive actions have also exhausted Chinese tolerance (Ross, 2014, p. 6). North Korea has shown its aggressiveness by conducting two times nuclear tests (Kearney, 2017, p. 78).

South Korea:

South Korea welcomed the US policy because it has strong economic and military relations with the US. In March 2012, South Korea signed FTA with the US to enhance trade activities for its economic development. In 2013, South Korea received military support and collaboration from the US leadership due to the saber-rattling activity by North Korea. But dispute between South Korea and Japan over Dokdo/Takeshima islands in the Sea of Japan has frustrated the US efforts to the security policy in Northeast Asia. The US-ROK 123 Agreement has also put the U.S. and South Korean governments at odds because it is dealing with South Korea's desire to reprocess its nuclear waste (Sutter, Brown, Admson, Mochizuki, & Deepa, 2013, p. 21). On the other hand in 2013, due to the political and economic relations with China, Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-Jin described that we had no plans to join a US-led ballistic missile defense arrangement in the region. Due to the domestic financial crisis of the US, South Korea established strategic relations with China and enriched its existing "strategic cooperative partnership" with China. In the response of North Korea's aggressive attitude, in July 2016 South Korea announced with the support of the US that a THAAD battery would be deployed to South Korea by 2017.

Australia:

Australia publically welcomed the US Asia-Pacific policy especially the new rotational deployment of the US marines at Darwin port. It also acquired security equipment from the US to contain the rapidly growing China's power. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard had said once that "our alliance has been a bedrock of stability in our region" (White House, 2011). To enhance its defense in 2011, Australia has spent US \$27.7 billion on its defense while other all of the Southeast Asian states defense budget was US \$32.9 billion and also removed uranium export ban on India (Tan, 2011). In April 2014, Australia tried to establish political, economic and military relations with Japan and signed bilateral FTA with Japan. However it has not ignored China's power and influenced in the region and in

November 2014, it eventually vowed ties with China to a “comprehensive strategic partnership” (Rabena, 2015).

New Zealand:

New Zealand Prime Minister warmly welcomed the US policy. In 2012, New Zealand got permission from the US to access its bases. On the other hand, in 2013, very first time China became a largest export market for the New Zealand (Sutter, Brown, Admson, Mochizuki, & Deepa, 2013, p. 22). Instead of its small size, New Zealand was interested to share the burden of world peace and security operations through the coordination of America and United Nations. Furthermore, the docking of a New Zealand naval force vessel base in Hawaii and its interest in the 23-country Rim of the Pacific maritime activities symbolized the effective security ties between the US and New Zealand. For long term relations, in February 2015, New Zealand announced that it would deploy 143 military personal to train the security forces in Iraq to fight with the DAISH. (Hiebert, 2015, p. 5).

India:

India generally welcomed the US rebalance policy but it has been careful to embrace the US initiative. But in the context of the Chinese assertiveness, Indian officials clearly understood the US commitment in Asia-Pacific. (Sutter, Brown, Admson, Mochizuki, & Deepa, 2013, p. 25). So, after the US policy in 2013, India purchased weapons from the US and became a largest purchaser of the US weapons. Both the US and India have concerns about the implications of the Chinese military modernization. India is too much worried about the Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean because it has territorial disputes with China and Pakistan (Mahnken & Blumenthal, 2014, p. 86). India also announced its plans to enlarge its presence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to contain China’s influence in the region. In 2015, India signed Defense Framework Agreement with the US and enhanced its military capability. Joint research and development of military technology, routine exercises and military sales are the dimensions of this agreement (Campbell, 2016, pp. 252,253).

Vietnam:

Vietnam was the indirect supporter of the US strategy owing to its disputes with China in the SCS. Despite historical animosity between the US and Vietnam, both sates are opening towards each other for their mutual interests. They have started military exercises, information exchanges and Vietnam has allowed the US to visit its strategically located port of Da Nang (Armacost, et al., 2015, p. 97). In 2012, Vietnam also has agreed to host one US naval port visit per year. In 2013, Vietnam conducted high-level security meetings with the US and gave permission to the US ship only for commercial repairs (Slavin, 2014). In July 2013, Vietnam signed “comprehensive partnership” with the US and also maintains its “strategic partnership” with China. During a visit to China in 2013, Vietnamese President said that a major objective of this summit is to reinforce “confidence” between China

and Vietnamto sort out the territorial disputes through “friendly negotiations”. They also agreed to establish a naval hotline. In April 2014, Vietnam signed a “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership” with China (Rabena, 2015). Vietnam is hedging both states in order to secure its interests in the region. In June 2015, Vietnam signed defense agreement with the US(Kurlantzick, 2015).

Singapore:

As a strategic partner, Singapore warmly welcomed the US policy. Although there is no permanent base of the US in Singapore but it is enabled to provide a logistical support to maintain the US presence. In this way, it provides key facilities to the US air and naval forces to ensure the US presence in Southeast Asia and also it gave the intersection location of the Malacca Strait and SCS to the US (Mahnken & Blumenthal, 2014, p. 85). That’s why it receives military training facility and weapons of advance technology like F-15 and F-16 from the US. Singapore signed Defense Cooperation Agreement and FTA agreement with the US. Singapore has a positive relation with China as well and plays a vital role in ASEAN(Lohman, 2016).

Malaysia:

Malaysia showed less enthusiasm on the US policy owing to its strong economic relation in China. It has military-to-military relations with the US but it has not openly supported to the US broader strategy. (Berteau, Green , & Cooper, 2014, p. 30). In 2011, Malaysia became a participant in the “Cobra Gold” multilateral military exercises involving the US, and also participated in the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercises (Armocost, et al., 2015, p. 102). Malaysia has welcomed the US Marine Corps engagement in military exercises and training activities with it. It also planned to establish a new Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) base to host its marine corps in Bintulu(Parameswaran, 2015). In 2013, Malaysia improved its relations with China despite its sovereignty dispute over the Spratly Islands and signed “comprehensive strategic partnership” with China during the visit of Xi Jinping. Both countries also agreed to hold their first bilateral joint naval exercise (Ross, 2014, p. 8).

Conclusion:

In response to the US policy, some countries aggressively behaved and tried to establish their relations with China because they considered the US presence a threat for their national interests and sovereignty. Some countries supported to China at regional institutions to decrease the US influence. However, countries like Australia, Japan, Philippines and South Korea, New Zealand. India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam have supported this policy. Countries such as Brunei, Cambodia and Myanmar are the cautious observers of the US policy. The US faced opposition from China regarding its policy while North Korea was totally against this. With the change in the US administration, the policy of “Pivot to Asia-Pacific” is replaced by President Trump’s policy of “Indo-Pacific”. These

two policies more or less are same revolving around the theme of the containment of China. China increasing influence in the region is foretelling that the geopolitical competition is likely to grow between these two giants in the region.

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