



A force buildup on Guam anchors a broad US military strategy to keep China in check.

Pacific Push

By Richard Halloran

In its strategy to deter China from driving the US out of Asia and the Western Pacific, US Pacific Command has quietly shifted its focus from Northeast to Southeast Asia, especially the South China Sea and nations along its littoral areas.

To dissuade China, the US has begun positioning forces which could threaten China's supply lines through the South China Sea. The oil and raw materials transported through those shipping lanes are crucial to a surging Chinese economy—an economy paying for Beijing's swiftly expanding military power.

The pivot point of this emerging strategy is Guam, the US territory in the central Pacific within striking distance of the South China Sea. The island



USAF photo by A1C Jeffrey Schultze

At top: Near Guam, an F-22 from the 90th Fighter Squadron, JB Elmendorf, Alaska, lines up on a tanker. Above: At Andersen AFB, Guam, an F-16 in an aggressor paint scheme lands during joint exercise Valiant Shield 2010.



USAF photo by SSgt. Andy M. Kin



USN photo by Mass Comm. Spec. 2nd Class Matthew White

Vietnamese military officials greet US Navy Cmdr. H. B. Le (right) during his ship's port call to Vietnam. PACOM is shifting focus to Southeast Asia nations such as Vietnam.

That attitude was reflected in a somewhat testy exchange between Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Gen. Ma Xiaotian of the People's Liberation Army at the Shangri-La conference of Defense Ministers in Singapore in June.

With China, Gates said, the US wanted "sustained and reliable military-to-military contacts at all levels that reduce miscommunication, misunderstanding, and miscalculation. There is a real cost to the absence of military-to-military relations."

In rebuttal, Ma said: "If anyone has been setting up barriers to cooperation, it is certainly not us."

Territorial Overreach

The general asserted, "There are three main obstacles in the development of military relations: The first is the sales of arms to Taiwan, the second is the intense spy and patrol behaviors of US planes and ships in South China Sea and East China Sea."

The third, Ma said, was the 2000 National Defense Authorization Act and the amendment introduced by then-Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) that set restrictions on US military contact with the PLA.

DeLay sponsored another amendment the next year, prohibiting the US from paying the \$1 million demanded by China for repatriating the Navy reconnaissance aircraft and crew that landed on Hainan Island after the EP-3 and a Chinese fighter shadowing it collided in international airspace.

In addition to harassing US ships in international waters, the Chinese have

startled senior US officers with harsh rhetoric in private. Officers who analyze the PLA said Chinese military leaders have their own tactics, not controlled by the Communist Party or government, for dealing with Americans.

Despite their bluster, some Chinese appear to recognize that their swelling economic might has made them vulnerable. By the end of 2010, China will be importing about half the 8.2 million barrels of oil a day it consumes to keep the economy humming.

Some 80 percent of that will have come through the Strait of Malacca.

That lifeline could be cut with relative ease by air and sea power; a single B-52, for instance, can deliver a wide range of cruise missiles, torpedoes, and anti-ship mines. Thus, President Hu Jintao once pointed to Beijing's "Malacca dilemma" and during a visit to Malaysia went out to the strait to see for himself.

Within the last six months, China has elevated its territorial claim to most of the international waters of the South China Sea by calling the sea a "core interest."

In rebuttal, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said in Hanoi in July that the US "has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea."

If Chinese shipping in the South China Sea were disrupted, ships would be forced to navigate the tricky waters of the Arafura Sea between Indonesia and Australia or to sail around Australia, at enormous cost.

is also 1,800 miles from the coast of China, and therefore, within range of Chinese missiles.

Asked why the US was expanding Andersen Air Force Base and other bases on Guam, sites that could be hit by intermediate-range ballistic missiles, a senior US officer replied, "The message to China is that we are here and we mean to stay."

Despite North Korea's episodic provocations and fiery rhetoric, the primary objective of the new US focus is a China that has become more belligerent toward the US since the Beijing Olympics in August 2008. That event, especially its elaborate opening ceremony, is seen by some senior US officers now as a nationalistic declaration of China's sense of pre-eminence.



An F-15 approaches the boom of a KC-135 from the 168th Air Refueling Wing, Alaska Air National Guard.

Moreover, the shipping would still be vulnerable to attack on the long sea-lane north in what strategists call a “distant blockade.”

Some US naval thinkers have shown new interest in the “Heartland Theory” propounded by the British geographer Halford J. Mackinder more than a century ago. Mackinder argued that whoever controlled the heartland of Eastern Europe could control the “world island,” or Eurasian continent.

Applying that strategy to Asia, students of Mackinder contend that controlling the South China Sea would enable an air and naval power to control East Asia, including China, and therefore the “world island.”

In 2006, Maj. Lawrence Spinetta, a student at the Air War College, came to a similar conclusion. “To counter China’s growing naval power, the United States can exploit a critical vulnerability—China’s dependence on sea lines of communication,” notably the Strait of Malacca, he wrote.

Guam is critical to this strategy. The latest addition to Guam’s arsenal was the arrival in September of the first of three RQ-4 Global Hawk unmanned surveillance aircraft that will be based on the island by mid-2011.

Together, the three Global Hawks will be able to maintain a 24-hour watch, seven days a week, over the South China Sea or wherever Pacific Command deems necessary.

USAF Gen. Gary L. North, commander of Pacific Air Forces, flew from Hawaii in September to tell a crowd at Andersen that Global Hawk missions would include humanitarian,

anti-piracy, and if necessary, “combat operations.”

Global Hawk is packed with sensors that can cover 40,000 square miles in a day from an altitude of 60,000 feet.

The intelligence aircraft has a range of 10,900 miles, enough to recon the East Asian littoral from Seoul to Singapore. It operates day and night, in all weather, and produces high-resolution images that can be transmitted to a ground station at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, the Pacific Air Forces headquarters in Hawaii, and several others almost instantly.

Persistent Presence

While new to Andersen, Global Hawk provides a proven capability, North said. The general, who commanded the aircraft in the air war over Iraq for three years, said Global Hawk had flown 35,000 hours over Iraq and Af-

ghanistan—and another 10,000 hours elsewhere.

Lt. Gen. Herbert J. Carlisle, commander of 13th Air Force at Hickam, which oversees the operations on Guam, suggested an added benefit from Global Hawk: “People have a tendency to behave” when they know they are being watched.

Still to come on Guam are a wharf and maintenance facilities for transiting nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and escorting warships. This support unit is intended to keep the ships on station longer without having to return to Pearl Harbor or to rely on bases in Japan and Singapore.

An Army missile defense unit of 600 soldiers, plus families, is due to be stationed on Guam, according to an environmental impact statement (EIS), to be a direct counter to the Chinese missile threat.

Further, senior US officers said plans to move 8,600 marines, plus 9,000 dependents from Okinawa to Guam by 2014, were on track despite dithering by successive governments in Tokyo. (At least, that is the official view. Privately, US senior officers have expressed skepticism that the schedule will be maintained.)

The EIS disclosed that, in addition to building barracks, quarters, and ranges for the marines, additional training sites may be built on the island of Tinian, 100 miles north of Guam. Naval construction battalions (Seabees) built the world’s largest air base there during World War II, including the airfield from which B-29 bombers struck Japan, and carried out the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Senior Air Force officers said the Tinian airfields



SrA. Joshua Moreland drags SSgt. Doug Kessler—with simulated wounds—to safety during a combat readiness exercise at Andersen. The base is within range of Chinese ballistic missiles.

themselves had been surveyed for possible emergency use.

Already in place at Andersen is what the Air Force calls “persistence presence” of B-52 and B-2 bombers on continuous rotational deployment. They are frequently joined by F-15 and F-22 fighters that come to Guam for several months at a time from bases in the continental US.

Naval Base Guam at Apra Harbor is the homeport for three nuclear-powered fast-attack submarines and their tender. Others based at Pearl Harbor or on the US West Coast come in from patrol from time to time.

One day not long ago, a B-52 bomber thundered down the runway just as it would have during the Christmas bombing of North Vietnam in 1972. It almost disappeared from view in the dip for which this airfield is famous, then lifted off and turned west to do its part in an exercise called Valiant Shield.

Minutes later, two F-15 fighters followed the B-52. After that, three Navy P-3C patrol airplanes landed. Along the ramps under a blazing sun, mechanics tended to F-22 fighters, KC-135 tankers, E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft, and Marine Corps F/A-18s. Altogether, the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps had 106 aircraft on Guam for integrated training.

At sea between Guam and Palau to the southwest, the carrier *George Washington* launched and recovered her 85 fighters, attack aircraft, and electronic warfare airplanes, as the force trained to defend islands belonging to allies and friends from Japan through Taiwan to the Philippines and Indonesia. It was the largest joint exercise ever mounted from Guam.



Photo courtesy of Lockheed Martin

China blames poor military relations with the US on, among other causes, the 2001 incident where this US Navy EP-3 and a Chinese fighter aircraft collided.

Back at Hickam, the air war was controlled by the 613th Air and Space Operations Center in a dark cavern filled with several hundred computer monitors flashing a torrent of battle reports and sending out a stream of intelligence and orders. Col. Alan Kollien, then the 613th vice commander, said the drill tested “our ability to provide command and control” from more than 3,000 miles away.

The Indonesia Connection

After the week-long exercise, lessons learned were thrashed out, then written up in reports to Pacific Air Forces and the Pacific Fleet. Those assessments were sent to Washington, where Air Force and Navy staffs are devising a joint operational plan called AirSea Battle to guide combat operations in the event of hostilities.

At Andersen and other bases on Guam, plans are moving ahead to harden hangars, communications centers, fuel storage, and ammunition bunkers to withstand blasts from Chinese missiles.

Officers declined to identify the sites being reinforced but did say they would be strong enough to survive the worst typhoon Guam had experienced and to ride out an earthquake that registered seven on a Richter scale.

Guam is clearly a focal point of military activity, but the US is also reaching out to Asian nations with shared interests. Some of these new partnerships are not well-known.

Diplomatically, US leaders have for several years cultivated relations with Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim nation and a potential ally in the struggle against terror. The Indonesian archipelago, moreover, is situated alongside the southern flank and astride several passages into the South China Sea.

At the workaday level, the US sends Air Force pilots to take part in exercises with the Indonesian Air Force, deploys specialists to assist in training for force protection, and responds to requests for help on counterterror operations.

“We have to take it slow and not move too fast,” said a US officer. “They want to do it for themselves.”

The TNI, as the Indonesian armed forces are called, has done a good job of revamping itself, according to a knowledgeable US officer. The TNI in past years was much criticized at home and abroad for oppressive tactics and violations of human rights.

Even more intriguing has been the US reconciliation with Vietnam since 1995, when diplomatic relations were established after the bitter war that ended almost 36 years ago. Many Vietnamese fear China, for its thousand years of occupation of northern Vietnam (from the third century B.C. to 939) and repeated clashes since then. The latest was a brief skirmish in 1979.

USAF photo by SrA. Nichelle Anderson



Military personnel from South Korea arrive at Andersen this past November for a visit to strengthen ties with the US.



On a visit to Guam this fall, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton inspects a Global Hawk at Andersen Air Force Base. Three RQ-4 aircraft will be based there.

Hanoi has become a regular stop for US Secretaries of Defense. Gates noted in October, when he attended a meeting of Defense Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Hanoi, that he was the third US Secretary of Defense to visit Vietnam.

In an address at Vietnam National University, Gates said: “Think of the historical consequences of this relationship, and about how dramatically it has transformed in such a short period of time. A decade of conflict and bloodshed between our nations has given way to prospering bilateral relations now marking their 15th year.”

“Wars end,” Gates said. “Nations wise enough to put past bitterness and heartbreak behind them can find in each other future friends and partners.”

Similarly, Clinton told the press in Hanoi three weeks later that “this is my second visit to Hanoi this year, and it is a sign of the importance that the United States places on our relationship with Vietnam, with Southeast Asia, and with the entire Asia-Pacific region.”

“It is clear,” she said, “that our countries have reached a level of cooperation that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago.”

At the troop level, Americans have worked with the Vietnamese on maritime security and on search and rescue operations usually conducted by the coast guard.

Several US warships have made port calls in Vietnam, including the destroyer *Lassen* commanded by Cmdr. Hung Ba Le, the first Vietnamese-American to be skipper of a US warship.

In some contrast to Southeast Asia, US allies in Northeast Asia—Japan and South Korea—are no longer seen as the “linchpins” or “cornerstones” of the broader US security posture in Asia.

Only One Bright Spot

In Japan, political paralysis has turned the Tokyo government into a listless ally. “Japan has been marginalized,” said a Japanese diplomat, “and we have done it to ourselves.”

The most recent governments have reneged on an agreement to move a Marine Corps base in Okinawa. At the same time, the Chinese government successfully bullied Japan over a collision at sea.

Part of the paralysis can be attributed to having had 12 Prime Ministers and Cabinets since Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa left office in 1993. Only Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi served for any length of time, from April 2001 to September 2006. But he left little mark on Japanese politics.

The other 11 Japanese Prime Ministers have served for an average of a year. Some have come to office with little experience in governing or foreign policy.

By contrast, the US has had three Presidents (Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama) in the same 17-year period.

An American scholar who considers a working US-Japan alliance to be in

America’s best interests was equally pessimistic. “Japan is its own worst enemy,” he said. “In Washington, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans want to bypass Japan. But a partner must want to participate, and there’s little sign of that now.”

The political situation in Tokyo was deemed so sour that officers at US Forces Japan’s headquarters at Yokota Air Base, west of Tokyo, were not willing to discuss it, even on background.

The one bright spot, said American and Japanese military officers, was good working relations between the two forces. There remain 35,600 American military personnel in Japan.

In South Korea, military relations between the South Koreans and the US have been strained for several years. The US wants to withdraw many forces because South Korea’s military forces are better armed, equipped, trained, and fed than their North Korean adversaries. South Korean governments, however, whether left wing or conservative, have been reluctant to take full responsibility for the defense of their own country.

For example, US military leaders had informed South Korea that wartime operational control of their forces would be transferred to them in April 2012. President Lee Myung Bak, however, persuaded Obama to postpone that transfer to 2015.

The US has been drawing down its forces in South Korea gradually over the last 10 years, dropping from 36,200 in 2000 to 24,700 in 2008. When the South Koreans complained they were being abandoned, the US agreed to keep a floor of 28,500 troops in South Korea.

They are being formed into an expeditionary force with missions outside of Korea and will be concentrated at a large new Army post being constructed at Pyongtaek and a slightly expanded Air Force base nearby at Osan, 30 miles south of Seoul. Other moves will straighten command lines that have been tangled since the Korean War ended in 1953 and will nearly complete a process of integrating US forces in Alaska, Korea, Japan, Guam, and the South China Sea under PACOM in Hawaii. Even the US troops under constant threat of attack from North Korea are now part of the revamped posture in the Pacific. ■

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