

## Militarisation of Asia-Pacific : Emerging Scenario

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### **Background**

**D**ue to the tectonic shift in the balance of power from West to East, the geopolitical scene in the Asia-Pacific has undergone profound change since the turn of the century, deeply impacting its security fabric. There are multiple factors which have contributed to redefining the strategic landscape. Far too many structures and organisations are competing for influence in the limited space. The US, a traditional Pacific power seeks to prevent emergence of competitors at the global level, while People's Republic of China (PRC) harbours similar design in the regional perspective.

Asia-Pacific was the arena of conflict for over two decades from 1970-90, involving the US, Soviet Union and China. The US dual strategy of 'hub and spokes' and 'regional pivot' have been effectively countered by China through asymmetric stratagem and soft balancing. The tensions have escalated in the area due to increased friction over rival territorial claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea. With more stakeholders jumping into the fray, scope of these disputes has enlarged, assuming multilateral complexion, resulting in rapid militarisation of the region. Remarkable economic growth notwithstanding, the Asia-Pacific continues to be unstable, primarily due to lack of integration in the absence of an effective institutional mechanism and trust deficit.

Since 2011, the term 'Indo-Pacific' has found increasing usage at various global forums. It signifies fusion of two geopolitically sensitive and economically vibrant regions.<sup>1</sup> Given the strategic location and enhanced clout, India is being seen as an important player by the US. Delhi's maritime interests demand review of its role; beyond being seen merely as a balancer. This paper

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undertakes an overview of the prevailing strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific, analyses the dynamics of its militarisation and profiles the emerging architecture.

### **Strategic Landscape**

President Obama during his address to the Australian Parliament on 17 Nov 2011 announced 'Pivot to Asia' strategy in view of the immense importance of Asia-Pacific.<sup>2</sup> It implies 'rebalancing to Asia' by deploying additional military assets in the region. Besides bolstering military presence, the new US strategy seeks to engage in greater geo-economic cooperation from its allies so as to synergise their collective power through major initiatives like the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). The US Defence Doctrine is in a state of transition; marking a shift from the position of pre-eminence to multilateralism.<sup>3</sup> America's regional strategic framework encompasses the following :-<sup>4</sup>

- (a) Ensure stability of the region and counter emergence of any dominant power or coalition that would threaten or impede its interests or that of its allies.
- (b) Prosperity and promotion of the regional free trade and market access.
- (c) Freedom of navigation and maintenance of status quo.
- (d) Peace time engagement including forward presence and crisis response, based on forward stationed forces.
- (e) Fight and win a local conflict, if the situation so warrants.

Asia-Pacific is of vital strategic significance for China. Historically, it wielded considerable influence in the area and even today considers the region as its under belly. The crux of China's Asia policy has always been to prevent a competitor who could challenge its domination. Beijing's policy towards the nations of South East Asia over the last decade was to underplay outstanding regional disputes, engage in multilateral dialogue and project an attitude of good neighbourliness. However, off late, PRC has scaled up its activities in South China Sea. Belligerent moves by China have raised serious concerns in the neighbourhood. Beijing's strategic vision of 'peaceful rise' is premised on conducive

periphery, regional stability, territorial integrity and sustained economic growth. China's broad objectives in Asia-Pacific are:-

- (a) Work towards diminution of US influence in the region.
- (b) Ensure strategically passive, neutral Japan.
- (c) Promote concept of Asian Security, managed by Asians.
- (d) Sustain economic development and work for prosperous South East Asia.
- (e) Seek sovereign authority over South China Sea.

Japan views PRC's rapid military modernisation and North Korea's nuclear programme very seriously; lingering dispute over Senkaku Islands further complicating the situation. Prime Minister Abe has paved the way for Japan adopting 'New Defence Policy Guidelines' aimed to re-craft its military strategy. He has also proposed that Australia, India, Japan and the US form a 'diamond' to safeguard maritime space stretching from Indian Ocean to Western Pacific.<sup>5</sup> Having removed one per cent GDP cap on defence spending, Japan's defence budget for the fiscal year 2016 stands at US \$ 44 billion, registering 4.7 per cent increase.<sup>6</sup>

Due to turbulent environment on the Korean Peninsula, Seoul remains deeply concerned about its security. It is also sceptical about the limitations of the US support in the event of a showdown. Consequently, it has undertaken a strategic defence review and allocated US \$ 550 bn over 15 years for the military modernisation.

Given the imperatives of geostrategic shift, Australia has realigned its national priorities accordingly. Liberal order in Asia-Pacific best serves Canberra's interests. It has always been wary of new institutions which could sideline its allies. It regards Indian and Pacific Oceans as one strategic arc, envisioning India's special role. Australia is also investing in building trilateral partnership with the US, Japan and South Korea. To cope with the emerging security challenges, it has proposed a substantial increase of US \$ 72 bn in the defence expenditure in the coming two decades.<sup>7</sup>

The nations of South East Asia have taken a pragmatic view of the geopolitical realities in the region. They have made efforts to build consensus and evolve formal mechanisms to address internal disputes. Mistrust between China and ASEAN has grown

due to the South China Sea disputes as Philippines and Vietnam are directly involved. To check Beijing's growing influence, they have scaled up cooperation with the USA. There is a strong evidence of ensuing arms race in the region, evident from the weapon acquisitions by various nations.<sup>8</sup>

Russia is becoming markedly more visible player in the regional security. It plans to bolster the Pacific Fleet. However, Moscow appears uncertain on its strategic role in the Asia-Pacific. It has the option of seeking closer partnership with China to pursue its strategic interests.

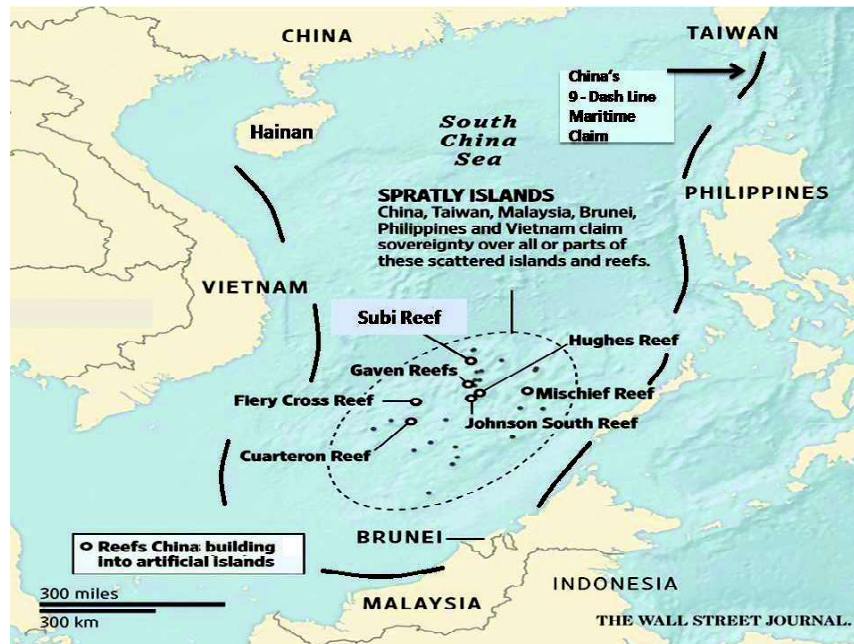
Conflicting national interests, quest for strategic space and unresolved territorial disputes have led to intense competition in Asia-Pacific and have seriously impacted the balance of power equations. Consequently, the USA has also expanded scope of military cooperation with its allies and partners. "US-India Joint Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region" issued in January 2015, is an extension of President Obama's 'Rebalancing to Asia' doctrine.

### **Militarisation Dynamics**

In 1974, China surreptitiously annexed Parcel Islands, disputed by Vietnam and Taiwan. Reclamation of Spratly and Scarborough Shoal has been an ongoing process by various claimants. China took the lead by building an air base on Woody Island, part of Paracel group. Malaysia followed suit by reclaiming Swallow Reef in 2003 to build a runway. Soon Vietnam built 500m runway on the Big Spratly Island. In 2006, Taiwan constructed over one km long runway on Itu Iba Island and in 2014 Philippines constructed a runway on the Thitu Island. All these runways are capable of handling both cargo and fighter aircraft.

In the recent past, China's efforts in reclaiming the islands in South China Sea have increased dramatically. Please refer to **Map 1**. Its construction activities are concentrated around Gaven, Mischief, Fiery Cross, Hughes and Johnson South Reefs. These islands are large enough to support essential infrastructure for the military installations. It has also dug deep channels for handling larger vessels. China declaring an 'Air Defence Identification Zone' (ADIZ) in the East China Sea has led to heightened tensions in the region. As per the 'US Department of Defence China Report',

PRC is actively engaged in developing 'Anti Access' and 'Area Denial' (A2/AD) capabilities.<sup>9</sup>



Map 1

China is also upgrading its strategic arsenal both in qualitative and quantitative terms. Its naval strategy is to counter the US aircraft carrier based assets. It is concentrating on the nuclear powered stealth submarines, littoral class surface ships and land based anti ship cruise missiles (DF 21D – high precision heavy warhead aircraft carrier killer) alongside Fourth Generation warplanes. It is also known to have developed D 26 Missile, 'Guam Killer' with a range of 5500 km. Besides Liaoning, three more aircraft carriers are due join the PLA Navy (PLAN) by the end of the decade. PLAN has a fleet of 62 submarines and is expected to add another 15 in the coming years.

After redefining earlier 'periphery policy' incorporating the concept of extended neighbourhood, there has been marked increase in PRC's activities in the region. China's recent path breaking military reforms coupled with new maritime strategy marks a shift from its earlier "offshore water defence" to include "open sea protection"; indicate its proactive design.<sup>10</sup> Its recent forays

into Spratly and creating military infrastructure there have given impetus to the militarisation of the region. Lately there were reports of China deploying HQ 9 Air Defence systems at Woody Island for the first time.<sup>11</sup>

Post World War II, USA emerged as a major Pacific power and assumed the role of security guarantor in respect of large number of countries in the region. It has continued to maintain a strong presence in Okinawa, Guam and South Korea. In consonance with its 'rebalancing strategy', the US will be redeploying 60 per cent of its naval assets in the Asia-Pacific by 2020. It implies induction more submarines and surface vessels to strengthen its forward presence and adopting counter measures against the PLA's missile threat. The US is expected to go in for a flexible military posture, ensuring both deterrence and punitive capability. Maintenance of generational lead in military technology over China remains an inherent component of the US strategy.<sup>12</sup> The US will also be investing in revamping the network of traditional alliances besides according priority to strengthening military ties with countries like India as also look for new partnerships in South East Asia.

While American focus is on the defence of South Western Islands, Japan has ensured that the US complements its deployment at Okinawa. This will be significant for the US operational strategy which lays emphasis on the 'anti access-area denial' environment. Between 2011 and 2015, Japan had earmarked US \$ 284 billion to modernise its Self Defence Force. Japan is in the process of acquiring five submarines, three destroyers, 12 fighter jets, 10 reconnaissance planes and 39 helicopters.<sup>13</sup>

Washington and Canberra have signed a 25 year agreement to boost the US troops in Australia from 1500 to 2500 by 2017. Arrangements have also been made to create larger ballistic missile defence shield in Asia-Pacific.<sup>14</sup> Australia also plans to acquire new submarines, air warfare destroyers, frigates, cruise missiles and 100 Lockheed Martin Joint Strike Fighters.<sup>15</sup>

To counter China, in 2014, Manila signed a 10 year pact with the Washington, which expands the scope of US military presence in Philippines. In November 2015, Philippines and Vietnam signed "strategic partnership" that deepens 'defence, trade and maritime cooperation'. The same month, Japan and Philippines signed an

agreement to strengthen military cooperation, including transfer of military equipment.<sup>16</sup>

### Emerging Scenario

Political, economic, security and socio-cultural factors which are concurrently at play in the Asia-Pacific have led to intense rivalry between the competing powers, destabilising the regional equilibrium. The USA is vigorously engaged in its quest to remain a dominant player in the region, although not as a security guarantor. Given China's enlarged strategic interests as an aspiring super power, Asia-Pacific Region willy-nilly figures high on the list of its core national interests. Beijing has adopted more traditional realpolitik approach to address its security concerns.

The overlapping Strategic interests of the US and China, the two key players in the region have led to increased military build-up. China seeks to bolster its claim to entire South China Sea by undertaking hectic military infrastructure developmental activities. However, the USA refuses to recognise the reclaimed features and insists on the right of all nations to freely sail and fly through the disputed area. The emerging security situation bears high risk of confrontation, which is not in the larger interest of the region. There is an urgent need for effective mechanism to be put in place to obviate a conflict situation.

The other important players in the region are Japan, South Korea, Australia and ASEAN; allies and partners of the US. Many of them doubt Washington's commitment to allocate required resources to effectively defend their national interests. They are addressing their security concerns, primarily to counter China through multiple means; encompassing new alliances and enhancing respective military capabilities. The possibility of Russia seeking even closer partnership with China remains a possibility, which could further complicate regional 'balance of power' matrix. The diversified security dynamics has narrowed the strategic space of ASEAN; besides curtailing its role. As per Richard Heydrain, Professor De la Salle University, the Philippines; "while American military posturing could help ASEAN to push back China, diplomacy and international law represent best hope to peacefully manage, if not resolve the dispute."<sup>17</sup>

Being a vital link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Delhi cannot afford to under play the strategic importance of South

China Sea. Evident from the “US-India Joint Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region”; India is being perceived by America as a key player. Recent offer of joint patrolling by the two navies from Admiral Harry B Harris, Commander of the US Pacific Command and American Ambassador to India Mr Richard Verma has been prudently rejected as India seeks to maintain strategic autonomy. While scaling up military cooperation with the US, Japan, Australia and ASEAN; India would not want to be seen, even inadvertently, a counter to China. Amongst ASEAN, India enjoys high credibility which can be effectively leveraged by integrating Northeast and Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the framework of ‘Act East Policy’.

Security scenario in the Asia-Pacific Region is playing out on the expected lines. Beijing’s assurances of peaceful rise are not in sync with its actions, making the neighbourhood highly suspicious of Communist leadership intent, further widening the trust deficit. Given the divergent and clashing interests of the numerous key players, the area is emerging as a potential flash point. High stakes in protecting prosperity and economic interdependency may stand out as region’s most effective safeguard towards conflict prevention. Multilateralism, transparency, adherence to international law and restraining adventurism could go a long way in de-escalating and discouraging militarisation of Asia-Pacific.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Shinzo Abe “*Confluence of Two Seas*”, Speech Indian Parliament on 22 August 2007, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan web site <http://www.nofa.go.jp/region/asia-pacific/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

<sup>2</sup> President Obama’s Remarks to the Australian Parliament on 17 November 2011. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-Obama-Australian-parliament>. Accessed 10 May 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Tow, (March 2012) “*Centre for Defence & Strategic Studies Guide 2.3.1,*” Canberra.

<sup>4</sup> Mohamed Ali S (2012) “*Asia Pacific Security Dynamics in Obama Era*” Routledge London p 8.

<sup>5</sup> Arvind Gupta (2014) “*India’s Approach to Asia Pacific*” Asian Strategic Review, Pentagon Press New Delhi, p 214.



<sup>6</sup> <http://www.usa/today.com/story/news/world2016/03/29/japan-government-defence-budget-economic-recovery/82376314/> accessed on 13 May 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Australian White Paper 2013.*

<sup>8</sup> *“The Military Balance 2014”* International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, Routledge, London PP 261-75.

<sup>9</sup> Annual Report to congress; Military and Security Developments In valuing PRC (2013) Office of Security of Defence p 32. <http://www.defence.gov/pubs /2013 China- Report- final pdf>, accessed 14.05.2016.

<sup>10</sup> White Paper China National Defence 2015, Beijing.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis C Blacer and Jeffrey W Horning (2 March 2016) *“China’s Self Defeating Provocations in South China Sea”*, Washington Post.

<sup>13</sup> SD Muni (2014), *“Asian Strategic Review”* Pentagon press, New Delhi pp-10-11. *Japanese New Defence Guidelines 2010.*

<sup>14</sup> Melissa Hellmann (12 August 2014), *Time Inc.*, World Press.com

<sup>15</sup> *Op cit 7.*

<sup>16</sup> Adam Hudson (06 February 2016) *“In Pivot to Asia, US Military Reinforces its Foothold in the Asia Pacific”* Washington Post.

<sup>17</sup> *Op cit 11.*