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Rebalancing the US Army Towards Asia

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Paul Lushenko, Captain in the US Army, explains that “Unfortunately, poor messaging has obscured understanding of how the US Army intends to achieve its security goals in Asia which are primarily to avoid major armed conflict.”

Domestic political gamesmanship recently caused President Barack Obama to cancel his participation in the APEC forum and the East Asia Summit. Consequently, many Asian and American pundits lament that Washington’s “rebalance” towards the Asia-Pacific is atrophying. In addition to diminishing of US “soft power,” Obama’s absence was seen to frustrate negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the flagship economic pillar of US regional engagement. From a hard security perspective, however, the United States is well postured to provide for regional security. Unfortunately, poor messaging has obscured understanding of how the US Army intends to achieve its security goals in Asia which are primarily to avoid major armed conflict. To shepherd a “globally responsive” yet “regionally aligned” force, however, the US Army Chief of Staff—General Raymond Odierno—has in fact pursued several strategic, operational, and tactical initiatives.

Even amid sequestration, US Army leaders have channeled resources to the US Army Pacific (USARPAC). To shield this component from intra- and inter-service jockeying, USARPAC is now consigned as a four-star command on par with the Air Force and Navy. While this move indubitably resonates with US allies, partners, and potential adversaries, US Army leaders will further husband USARPAC’s reactionary capability by certifying one of the US Army’s three active Corps headquarters, I Corps, as a Joint Task Force assigned to the US Pacific Command.

Key to USARPAC’s response to and management of a raft of threats and vulnerabilities is refinement of a Theater Campaign Plan. This articulates the “ways” and “means” towards maintenance of regional peace and stability or “Phase 0” operations. Here, planners and analysts have traditionally focused only on aligning training, capabilities, and task organization to Operations Plans—dubbed “OPLANS”—without first contextualizing the region’s flashpoints in historical and sociological terms. US Army leaders have become increasingly aware of such misguided planning. They now seek to equip especially junior intelligence analysts and officers with a nuanced understanding of the impediments of regionalization. This will allow USARPAC to better execute key “Phase 0” tasks including communication and dialogue. It will also capitalize on the holistic reasoning that informed at least the latter phases of America’s counter-insurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. More importantly, such analysis will redound positively on USARPAC’s intent to respond to regional challenges with greater regional buy-in.

Operationally, therefore, USARPAC has articulated a Regional Campaign Plan. Nested under the Theater Campaign Plan, this plan resolves the factious nature of operations between the United States and its regional allies and partners. Although the US-centered “hub and spokes” alliance system has provided security throughout Asia since WWII, it has frayed slightly since 2001 given America’s preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan. Actions pursued by “spokes”—allies and partners—are often not coordinated with the “hub”—the United States—resulting in duplication and profligacy. Thailand is a good example. Unbeknownst to one another, the United States and Australia have separately pursued redundant counter-mine training with the Thai Army. To streamline operations,

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the Regional Campaign Plan institutes a region-wide “battle-rhythm” to foster unprecedented partnerships. Not only will USARPAC synchronize training, exchanges, exercises, and rotational forces across its allies and partners, it will also accord greater influence to its allies. An Australian officer, for example, now serves as USARPAC’s Deputy Commanding General for Operations or DCG-O. These moves are mutually reinforcing: greater interoperability encourages greater partnership and vice-versa.

These advances are important for other reasons, not least of which is expanded burden-sharing. A broader distribution of security responsibilities not only reduces redundancy, saves money, and ensures greater efficiency between the United States and its allies and partners; it also capitalizes on comparative advantages deriving from responsiveness, proximity, capability, or some combination thereof. For instance, a bilateral training exercise such as “Rising Thunder” empowers capability within the Japanese Self Defense Force to manage the consequences of competing irredentist claims in the East China Sea over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands. “Talisman Saber,” a biennial US-Australia training exercise involving upwards of 30,000 personnel, refreshes skills required for a spectrum of operations.

Exercises are only one feature of USARPAC’s tactical investments. Perhaps the most significant shifts include greater intelligence sharing and a Contingency Reaction Force designed to manage threats and vulnerabilities epitomized by North Korea’s nuclearization and natural disasters, respectively. Intelligence sharing between the United States and its allies occurs predominately at the Corps-level. Given US rebalancing, USARPAC has attempted to engender collaboration at lower levels. Based on the recent US-Japan Security Consultative Committee, for example, it is only a matter of time until a “normalizing” Japan receives more tactically-oriented intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms such as Predator drones to facilitate a common operating picture across its Self Defense Force and USARPAC units stationed in Alaska, Hawai‘i, and Korea. Additionally, USARPAC is dispatching multi-discipline, “Acquisition, Protection, and Exploitation” teams to orchestrate, among other things, human intelligence operations across allied and partnered armies. Meanwhile, USARPAC is adopting a model similar to the 18th Airborne Corps Quick Response Force. The force’s size and capabilities are conditioned by the type and scope of threat and/or vulnerability. Regional alignment also allows the force to respond to a challenge but not at the expense of others.

Nevertheless, the US Army’s rebalance to the Asia-Pacific does have some challenges. Four are particularly salient. First, analysts are confronted with a cacophony of threats and vulnerabilities. The result is that they have yet to position USARPAC’s shift within a lucid framework that prioritizes training, capabilities, and task organization against threats, vulnerabilities, or some middle-ground between the two distinct challenges. Practitioners often contend USARPAC must prepare to respond to everything. In a fiscally constrained environment, such reasoning is not only quixotic, it is irresponsible. Second, should USARPAC be concerned about the potential for greater risk taking on the part of Japan in particular, or is this merely the byproduct of expanded deputation? At the same time, how should USARPAC best attenuate China’s fears of “encirclement” based on such deputation? Appreciation of these questions will allow USARPAC to temper suspicions that could, for example, lead to a regional arms-race. Third, it is unclear exactly how the Army will remain “globally responsive” while “regionally engaged.” In other words, US Army Forces Command must determine how to generate and cycle forces to facilitate USARPAC’s ambitions. Finally, while the US Army’s rebalancing does attempt to transcend red-tape that prevents interoperability, USARPAC must do more. Months after embedding with USARPAC, for instance, the DCG-O still does not have access to the US Army’s secret networks.

Even given these obstacles, it is clear that the US Army is recalibrating towards the Asia-Pacific. To reassure regional allies and partners, as well as balance against potential foes, however, the force must better enumerate its shift through more transparent messaging, both at home and abroad.

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