

Xenia Dormandy with Rory Kinane
April 2014

Asia-Pacific Security

A Changing Role for the United States

Executive Summary and Recommendations

America's role in the world is evolving. In part this is due to domestic factors such as rising economic constraints, a desire for 'nation-building at home', and war-weariness on the part of the public. But perhaps more profoundly, it results from changes in the broader international context and the types of external challenges the country faces. The range of policy instruments needed to respond to increasingly complex regional and global threats is also diversifying. At the same time, in contrast to the perception of the rise of new emerging economies (such as China, India and Brazil), in many parts of the world, including Asia, perceptions of the United States are that its power and leverage are in decline.

The United States has long maintained its leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. President Barack Obama made clear that America has every intention of continuing to sustain its leading role in this part of the world with the announcement in November 2011 of the 'rebalancing' (or 'pivot') of its foreign policy to Asia. However, what is less clear is how America's allies in the Asia-Pacific region see their own security interests changing and, given this, how they see the United States fitting into this new security framework. It is vital that both the demand for security (from Asia) and its supply (by the United States) are better understood in order to achieve a new status quo that meets the needs of all the players.

In 2012, a report entitled *Prepared for Future Threats? US Defence Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific Region*, also published by Chatham House, looked at whether the United States had the necessary relationships in the region to meet future challenges. This follow-up report considers six US allies or partners in Asia (Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore and South Korea) and asks how they perceive their security interests and emerging threats – and, consequently, how they are addressing them through domestic capabilities and regional or plurilateral groups, and what role this suggests for the United States.

The principal findings are as follows.

The current situation

- The six Asia-Pacific states considered in this report have a broadly similar assessment of the range of perceived threats to their security. These include traditional ones – conflict with China, a North Korean collapse or attack, terrorism and insurgency – and non-traditional ones – natural-resource limitations (for example, food, water, oil and gas), attacks in cyberspace or on military or communications satellites, and economic vulnerabilities. However, there are significant variations and nuances in the

size and nature of the threats, and how they are prioritized in each of these states.

- Current Asian institutions – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the East Asia Summit (EAS), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and others – are principally designed as venues for discussion. Their Asian members for the main part have no apparent desire for more active or action-oriented organizations. Asian leaders strongly value and endorse the current limited roles and functions of these entities. Western states, by contrast, often express a hope for more tangible outputs from them.
- Domestic and external perceptions of America's role in the world are changing. Despite President Obama's announcement of the US strategic rebalancing towards Asia, America's friends and allies are increasingly less confident of what position it will take in the region. Many of its regional allies and partners perceive it as becoming a less reliable partner (although one that is still far more reliable than others such as China). Each of its partners would like to see a slightly different role for the United States in the region, and thus there is no consensus position among them on this point.

The future

- As elsewhere, America's role in Asia will continue to change. Despite the rebalancing, cuts in US defence spending and greater political attention to domestic priorities are likely to lead to a less militarily assertive role in the region and perhaps, in time, a smaller permanent military presence there (possibly with more rotational troops, as is currently being seen in Japan and Australia). This will be partly compensated by ongoing improvements in US capabilities. The United States will, however, remain an Asia-Pacific power, and its continued focus should not be underestimated. Greater diplomatic resources are likely to be devoted to the region, and economic engagement (whether through trade agreements or development funds) is also likely to continue unabated or even increase over time.
- Over the next 15 years, non-traditional threats, whether natural or man-made, are likely to become more significant. Traditional state-driven conflicts are likely to play out initially in non-traditional ways, such as by constraining an adversary's economy or its access to natural resources, and through attacks in cyberspace or against military or communications

satellites. Only as conflicts escalate will more traditional means be engaged, such as air, maritime and, finally, ground forces. Non-state actors, such as terrorists or insurgent groups, are also likely to employ such non-traditional levers where their capabilities allow.

- The severity of the impacts of natural, rather than man-made disasters is also likely to increase. Demand for oil, gas, water and food is rising exponentially across the region and expanding consumption is, in many cases, creating a new vicious cycle of resource stress. Military force is unlikely to play a leading role in alleviating these tensions.
- With rising defence expenditure, the six countries examined in this study are enhancing their traditional military capabilities. However, this alone will not be sufficient to protect them against the complex array of future threats. Other assets will be needed, including greater diplomatic resources to manage interlocking relations with regional allies and partners, and the diversification of economic and trading links to minimize each country's vulnerability to the actions of any other single actor, principally China.
- The Asia-Pacific states are already building up their informal alliances and partnerships with one another and with other states. The number and the depth of these informal relationships are likely to endure, and they will play an important role in maintaining stability in the region. Where they are between countries with similar interests (as between the United States, Japan and India), such plurilateral groups could eventually become the catalyst for more formal groupings focused on particular issues (e.g. combating piracy or terrorism). Where these link less aligned nations (as between China, Japan and South Korea) they are useful groups for discussion of potentially sensitive issues and building trust.
- While the proliferation of formal alliances with little or no operational authority has come under much criticism in the West, they form an expanding web that plays an important part in maintaining security in the region. By providing their traditional function as a talking shop for discussion of sensitive issues, they create a 'sponge' to defuse and, potentially, manage regional tensions. In addition, as natural threats become more prominent, given their less sensitive (and less zero-sum) nature, these groups might find a new more active role in addressing the resulting challenges. Building cooperation and collaboration in these forums, could, in time, create a framework for resolving more traditional areas of conflict.
- America will continue to play a central role in the region for some time to come, but not indefinitely as the lead actor. It will be looking in Asia, as elsewhere, to share the burdens of leadership. In the next 15 years, Asians may well have to get used to a situation with which Europeans are only just coming to terms – a United States that is a very important regional actor, but not always the first or principal port of call for ensuring security.

About the US Programme

The US Programme at Chatham House in London provides analysis on the changing role of America in the world. Building on the independent, international reputation of Chatham House, the programme provides a unique external perspective on the United States. The programme aims to:

- develop a contextual understanding of the transformations taking place within the US and internationally, to analyse how they affect US foreign policy;
- offer predictions on America's likely future international direction;
- influence responses from allies and others towards the US;
- highlight to American policy-makers the intended, and unintended, impact of their policies overseas.

The programme comprises both in-house staff and an international network of Associate Fellows who together provide in-depth expertise in both geographical and thematic areas.

Independent thinking since 1920



The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710
contact@chathamhouse.org www.chathamhouse.org
Charity Registration Number: 208223