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## US Pivot Heightens Asian Disputes

By Richard Javad Heydarian

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With newly re-elected President Barack Obama having chosen Southeast Asia as his first foreign destination, where he also attended the much-anticipated pan-Pacific East Asia Summit, the U.S. has underscored its commitment to its so-called strategic ‘pivot’ to the Asia-Pacific region.

Months after the 2011 U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, President Obama signaled the formal launch of the pivot in a November speech to the Australian parliament: “As a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future.”

The U.S. already has around 320,000 troops stationed in the region, as well as 50 percent of its formidable global naval assets. Under the pivot strategy, the U.S. is set to commit several thousand additional troops and increase its naval strength by another ten percent in the coming few years.

The Obama administration has repeatedly denied that the pivot is a containment strategy aimed at Beijing, arguing it is simply a logical ‘rebalancing’ towards the region in light of Asia’s stunning economic growth and the increasing importance of maintaining U.S. interests there.

However, more than two years into the so-called U.S. pivot, many strategic commentators across the Pacific have raised major questions as to its real intentions, actual impact, and practicability, given the United States’ deep fiscal constraints ahead of scheduled defence-spending cuts.

Reacting to lingering uncertainties over the U.S. strategy, China, which views the pivot as an act of provocation, as well as other countries in the region such as Vietnam, Philippines, and Japan,

have stepped up their territorial claims in the Western Pacific – indirectly testing America’s resolve to uphold its strategic commitments.

In this sense, the pivot – purportedly to reinforce the United States’ role as an ‘anchor of stability and prosperity’ in the Pacific – has ironically contributed to greater uncertainty, turbulence, and belligerence vis-à-vis the festering maritime disputes.

In a recent op-ed for the Singapore-based daily The Straits Times, Barry Desker, the dean of the Singapore-based S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), called for ‘mutual restraint’ by all disputing littoral states to ‘diffuse’ tensions, while contending that all parties are “guilty of occupying uninhabited islands and land features.”

And a recent report by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group says: “With tensions on the rise, Manila is eager to pursue closer military cooperation with the U.S., and Hanoi (as a strategic partner) is keen to carefully bring in and balance U.S. influence in the region.

“If these countries frame any U.S. assistance as being directed against China, it will be harder for the former to persuade the latter that it will not get involved in territorial disputes.”

The pivot can be traced as far back as the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Hanoi, where Secretary of State Hillary Clinton injected the U.S. into the centre of decades-long territorial disputes in the South China Sea by announcing that her country had a ‘national interest’ in the freedom of navigation across the Western Pacific, including the South China Sea.

As a result, allies such as Japan and the Philippines have repeatedly sought U.S. re-assurance vis-à-vis existing bilateral mutual defence treaties, especially in the event of military confrontation with China over disputed maritime features in the Western Pacific.

The Philippines and Vietnam are mired in bitter maritime disputes with China over a whole host of features in the Spratly and Paracel chains of islands in the South China Sea, while Japan is contesting China’s claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu chain of islands in the East China Sea.

Meanwhile, Washington’s allies in Northeast Asia, Japan and South Korea, are locked in a separate territorial dispute over the Takeshima/Dokdo islands in the Sea of Japan.

In last month’s Australia-U.S. Ministerial Meeting, Clinton sought to calm Chinese nerves by stating, “We (the U.S.) welcomed a strong, prosperous and peaceful China, which plays a constructive role in promoting regional security and prosperity... We do not take a position on competing territorial claims in the South China Sea.”

The U.S. Navy also invited China to join the large-scale, U.S.-led ‘Rim of the Pacific Exercise’ by 2014.

Yet an unconvinced China, under its new leadership, has nudged up its claims. Recently, authorities in the southern Chinese Island of Hainan have issued new laws, whereby beginning

next year, they will have the authority to intercept and board any foreign vessel seen to violate China's 'sovereignty' over all claimed features in the South China Sea.

In response, Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Surin Pitsuwan warned that such a decision "...has increased a level of concern and a level of great anxiety among all parties, particularly parties that would need the access, the passage and the freedom to go through." Beijing subsequently insisted that the new authority was not aimed against sea-borne commercial traffic.

China's new passport design, incorporating disputed territories in the South China Sea under the country's official map, has also sparked renewed concerns among some of its southern neighbours.

In the face of what it sees as Chinese provocations, however, a deeply divided ASEAN has failed to make any meaningful progress in crafting a legally-binding regional Code of Conduct to resolve disputes, as strongly urged by Washington.

If the pivot is seen in Beijing as a provocation, it has also encouraged greater assertiveness on the part of some of its neighbours.

While the Vietnamese have stepped up their energy exploration projects in disputed territories, and the Japanese government decided to purchase from its private owner one of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, the Philippines has pushed to upgrade its military ties with the U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Korea to defend its own claims.

"While we are all aware that the U.S. does not take sides in disputes, they do have a strategic stake in the freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce, and the maintenance of peace and stability in the South China Sea," Filipino President Benigno Aquino stated at last month's East Asian Summit, prodding further U.S. involvement in the South China Sea disputes.

How Washington will react to these kinds of pressures, particularly given its own fiscal challenges that have already resulted in nearly 500 billion dollars in cuts to its projected military budgets over the next ten years, adds yet another level of uncertainty to the calculations of the contending parties in the region.

Already, the pivot is being attacked by the U.S. right as insufficient. "This reallocation of military and diplomatic resources was supposed to guarantee stability in a region seeking to balance China's rise. In reality, this strategic shift is less than it appears," argued Michael Auslin in an op-ed for the Wall Street Journal. "In reality...it won't solve Asia's problems and may even add to the region's uncertainty by over-promising and under-delivering."