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The Asia Pivot and US Motivations

By Jane Powers

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In 2011, the Obama administration formally introduced an offensive strategy designed to contain China's rise to power, termed the "Asia-Pivot." In a November 2011 speech to the Australian Parliament, Obama described the Asia-Pacific as a "top priority," explaining that, "as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future... The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay."

As a part of this strategy, the US has made plans to substantially increase its military presence in the Asia Pacific. By 2020, the US is to have 60 percent of its naval forces stationed in the Pacific, up 10 percent from today. In terms of troops, the US already has 320,000 stationed in the Pacific region, and this number is set to increase. By 2016, the US will station 2,500 marines in northern Australia. The US is working to build and strengthen its military relationships with a host of Asian Pacific countries in order to counter China's influence (more on this below). The US has also taken diplomatic action by siding with China's neighbors in a number of territorial disputes (China v. Japan, Vietnam, Philippines). This has exacerbated tensions between these countries and worked to destabilize the region.

As the 2012 presidential election showed, there is near consensus within the US political establishment that the Asia Pivot is a wise strategy. There is a debate on the extent to which the US should pursue "balancing" as opposed to "engagement" with China, but there's general agreement that some level of balancing is a good idea. The question of why China requires balancing at all is rarely posed.

In a speech delivered in Mongolia in July 2012, Secretary of State Clinton gave an answer to this question. Commenting on the US pivot to Asia, Clinton asserted that the "heart of the strategy" is "our support for democracy and human rights." She explained that "[democracy and human rights] are not only my nation's most cherished values; they are the birthright of every person born in the world. They are the values that speak to the dignity of every human being." The *Washington Post* noted approvingly that "Although she never mentioned China, Ms. Clinton warned that China's model of authoritarian capitalism cannot be sustained, and she beckoned other nations to take a different path."

So the Obama administration claims that the Asia Pivot is ultimately about promoting democracy and human rights, and that China, as an authoritarian country, needs to be challenged. This reasoning sounds good, but unfortunately, it's not true.

The problem with this reasoning is that it contradicts a key tactic of the Asia Pivot- building and strengthening relationships with authoritarian regimes. A strategy that's end is to promote democracy and human rights can't include tactics that promote brutality and authoritarianism, as the Asia Pivot does. A few brief examples:

As part of the Asia Pivot, the US has strengthened its military ties with Vietnam. In late 2010, the US and Vietnam carried out the first joint naval training since the Vietnam War. In 2011, the US and Vietnam signed a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation. Vietnam is a country where the majority of death sentences are imposed on drug traffickers. Under the law, Vietnamese officials have the power to arrest and detain citizens without a trial. This authority is often used to jail religious and political dissidents. Prisons are filthy and overcrowded. Inmates are often beat up, tortured, and forced to do hard labor.

In recent years, the US has been offering the Philippines military equipment and funding in exchange for greater military access to the country. In late 2012, it was reported that the US is planning on substantially increasing its presence in the Philippines, in terms of troops, aircrafts, and ships. A 2012 Human Rights Watch report on the Philippines faulted the Aquino regime for allowing the security forces to continue extrajudicial killings ("hundreds of leftist activists, journalists, and clergy" killed in the past decade), forced disappearances, and torture.

US Special Forces have been training Cambodia's military in "counterterrorism" tactics. In recent years, Cambodia has taken part in a series of US-led naval exercises called the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training. In late 2012, President Obama visited a number of South East Asian countries, and attended ASEAS Summit in Cambodia. Amnesty International urged Obama to use his trip as an opportunity to condemn the human rights situation in Cambodia under Prime Minister Hun Sen, former Khmer Rouge commander. Amnesty International cited the land crisis in Cambodia in which thousands have been forcefully evicted to make way for big corporations. Activists against the land crisis (and others) are abused, and often killed, with no recourse in the corrupt government-run courts. Unfortunately, Obama did not take Amnesty International's advice and kept silent on human rights.

Myanmar has received much praise for its supposed political reforms of the last couple years. Obama joined the choir of praise during his visit to the country last November. Besides

appointing a permanent ambassador to Myanmar, the Obama administration has lifted several sanctions against the country and promised more investment. This is clearly part of the Asia Pivot strategy, as human rights conditions still remain atrocious in Myanmar. Human Rights Watch acknowledges some progress in reform, but reports that "hundreds of political prisoners remain, ethnic civil war and inter-ethnic conflict has escalated, and Burmese security forces continue to use forced labor and commit extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians."

Supporting authoritarian countries like Vietnam, Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, and others will only promote authoritarianism in the Asia Pacific. Therefore, a strategy that includes building relationships with these countries cannot be aimed at supporting "democracy and human rights," as the Obama administration claims. What then is the real purpose of the Asia Pivot and countering China's rise?

In an essay in *Foreign Affairs* entitled "Bucking Beijing," Princeton Professor, and former Bush administration official Aaron Friedberg presents arguments for increased "balancing" of China. One argument is particularly informative for understanding US motivations in the Asia Pivot. Friedberg writes: "*What China's current leaders ultimately want – regional hegemony – is not something their counterparts in Washington are willing to give. That would run counter to an axiomatic goal of U.S. grand strategy: to prevent the domination of either end of the Eurasian landmass by one or more potentially hostile powers.*"

Friedberg goes on to explain the dangers of a "potentially hostile" power, such as China, dominating its region: "*Within China's expanding sphere of influence, U.S. firms could find their access to markets, products, and natural resources constricted by trade agreements dictated by Beijing.*" (Friedberg also warns about the threat to democracy a dominant China will pose, but this reasoning can be dismissed, as proved above).

It would be a historical anomaly for the US to plan its foreign policy around democracy promotion and human rights, as the US has a long history of supporting authoritarian governments and undermining democracy. It would, however, be highly typical, for the US to use its comparative advantage, its military, to gain access to markets and control over resources. These motives explain the reason that the US is working to counter China's rise and has therefore pivoted to Asia. And given the "axiomatic" nature of these objectives, the Asia Pivot will continue to be a prominent strategy in the years to come.