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## US Arms Fuel Asian Tension

By Richard Javad Heydarian

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MANILA, Feb 11 2013 (IPS) – After a year of intense diplomatic standoff and territorial brinkmanship among disputing states in the South and East China Seas, the U.S. military ‘pivot’ to the region appears to be in full swing – a move that could further aggravate an already combustible regional dynamic.

Against the backdrop of Chinese territorial assertiveness, the year started off with the bang of big-ticket U.S. arms sales to treaty allies and strategic partners across the region, including an expanded package of sophisticated military hardware featuring state-of-the-art anti-missile systems and warplanes. On top of this, Washington has also stepped-up its joint military exercises with Asian allies perched on the forefront of ongoing territorial spats.

Building on its earlier promise of greater commitment to the freedom of navigation in the Western Pacific, an artery for global trade and energy transport, Washington aims to improve its allies’ military capabilities in a bid to rein in Beijing’s strong-willed territorial posturing.

Facing a stubborn economic downturn at home, the dramatic boost in U.S. defence sales to the region underlines Washington’s growing emphasis on a primarily military-oriented (as opposed to trade-and-investment-driven) approach to re-asserting its position as an ‘anchor of peace and stability’ in the region.

Among the biggest beneficiaries of growing U.S. military commitment to the region is the Aerospace Industries Association (AIA), a massive trade group that includes top Pentagon suppliers such as Lockheed Martin Corp, Boeing Co and Northrop Grumman Corp. It underscores the extent to which the U.S. 'pivot' has energised the American industrial-military complex, further dimming the prospects for a peaceful resolution of the ongoing disputes.

“(The pivot) will result in growing opportunities for our industry to help equip our friends,” says Fred Downey, vice-president for national security at the AIA.

Since the formal commencement of the U.S. pivot, after U.S. President Barack Obama's fateful speech to the Australian Parliament in November 2011, Washington has come under tremendous pressure to reassure troubled allies such as Japan and the Philippines against Beijing's assertiveness. In response, the U.S. has beefed up its rotational military presence across the Pacific, while expanding joint exercises – focusing on maritime defence – with and military aid to Pacific partners.

To calm China's fears of a U.S.-led regional containment strategy, Washington has also focused on deepening economic integration within the Pacific Rim, specifically through the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trading agreement, which aims to facilitate the flow of investments and goods among partner-nations. In addition, the U.S. has also – at least in principle – underlined its support for diplomatic resolution of ongoing territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas.

However, the U.S. pronouncements have failed to appease regional partners and deter Chinese assertiveness. Beijing continues to accuse Washington of staging a concerted effort to deny China its (perceived) legitimate interests, while allies have raised doubts as to Washington's ability – given its dire fiscal woes – to maintain regional ascendancy.

Reflecting on fragile U.S. finances, Ken Lieberthal, director of the Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institute and former president Bill Clinton's top China adviser, has stated, “The most important single element to our (U.S.) success in Asia will be whether domestically we get our house in order, whether domestically we're able to adopt and integrate a set of policies that will effectively address our fiscal problems over time.”

Given TPP's failure to gain traction among major Pacific economies, and in the absence of any substantial American investments and economic aid to strategic partners, Washington seems to have instead opted for a full military pivot. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) inability to forge ahead with an effective diplomatic mechanism to settle the disputes has only encouraged this trend.

Since 2011, the U.S. worldwide military sales have hovered above 60 billion dollars. In 2011, India alone accounted for a 6.9 billion dollar acquisition deal, underscoring New Delhi's growing anxieties with China's massive naval buildup, especially in light of its substantial energy-related investments in South China Sea. Last year, overall sales to Pacific partners topped 13.7 billion dollars.

Building on its earlier arms bonanza, the U.S. defence industry has started off the year with a large package of flashy, cutting-edge arms sales to key partners in Northeast Asia: a 5 billion dollar Lockheed Martin radar-evading F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft deal with Japan, a 1.85 billion dollar Lockheed Martin-led retrofitting of Taiwan's 145 F-16A/B fighters with advanced radars and electronic warfare suits, and a 1.2 billion dollar Northrop Grumman high-flying RQ-4 "Global Hawk" spy drone deal with South Korea.

Beyond propping up allies' military capabilities to deal with a wide array of challenges, including China, Washington has also encouraged further self-reliance and inter-operability among regional allies, creating a so-called "inversed wall of China" across the Western Pacific.

As a result, the newly-elected Japanese government, under the hawkish Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, has supported Washington's call for a more assertive Japanese regional role. Mr. Abe has pushed for revitalised defence ties with Asian partners, enhanced inter-operability with major naval powers in the Pacific such as Australia and India, and expanded military aid to countries such as the Philippines. He has also pushed for a so-called Asian "security diamond", bringing together likeminded Pacific powers concerned with a perceived Chinese "threat".

With Japan locked in a brewing conflict with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, Washington has conducted a series of high-profile joint naval exercises with Tokyo. In November, 47,000 Japanese and American military personnel took part in the biennial Keen Sword exercise off Okinawa islands, which was originally planned to act out the re-capture of disputed islands off the southern coast of Japan. This was followed by a five-day joint air exercise in January, just days after Japanese jets fended off Chinese aircraft surveying the disputed islands.

Overall, the U.S. seems to be gradually passing the buck to Asian partners, prodding them to bear a growing share of defense costs vis-à-vis China's perceived expansionism. Meanwhile, there is little indication of a renewed push for a diplomatic resolution of the territorial disputes.