

**AMERICA'S GLOBAL DEFENCE PREDICAMENT –
WHY THE ASIA 'REBALANCING' HAS LITTLE SIGNIFICANCE
FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY**

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SUMMARY

This paper argues that the Obama Administration's Asia 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' is mainly a rhetorical construct that has very little substantive effect on US security policy. In contrast to the widely held belief that a renewed emphasis on Asia would place meaningful restrictions on America's willingness and ability to deal with European security problems there is little evidence to support this argument nor is it well-grounded conceptually. Furthermore, undue emphasis on this aspect of American policy has detracted attention from more important developments in Washington's capacity to effectively project military power.

INTRODUCTION

In late 2011, the Obama Administration announced a 'pivot' to Asia. This announcement followed shortly after Washington's unexpectedly limited participation in NATO's Libya campaign. Thereafter, senior US officials repeatedly emphasized in their public statements America's need to prioritize its relationship with Asia. In Europe, a belief emerged that the Administration's rhetoric constituted a major new development in US policy and would actually place meaningful restrictions on America's willingness and capability to deal with European security problems. This belief has now become dogma, and its institutionalization is evident in the mainstream political, bureaucratic and expert discourse. Moreover, the 'pivot' was not only accepted as a fact in its own right, but it became the prism through which US foreign policy behaviour has been viewed more generally. Unfortunately, as is the case with most accepted wisdom, it is rarely challenged, despite the existence of considerable evidence and credible alternative interpretations that would call it into question. This paper will argue that in contrast to the mainstream interpretation, the Asia 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' is mostly a rhetorical construct that has very little meaning for US security policy, and it has served to mislead analysts trying to understand that policy.

Typically, in the aftermath of a government announcement of a new or enhanced focus on a particular issue, there are two responses on the part of the bureaucracy. The first response is that the rhetoric is viewed simply as rhetoric and no action is taken other than to repeat the rhetoric, possibly to include the relabeling of current activities and institutions. The second response involves slight adjustments to the bureaucracy beyond mere relabeling, such as providing more funding, setting up a new office within the existing structure, appointing a senior official to be responsible for that issue, and increasing the number of personnel dealing with it. Often it will be the case that the choice of response is directly correlated to the amount of funding that is to be dedicated to the issue. In those instances where little or no additional funding is involved, the political rhetoric is unlikely to be institutionalized from a bureaucratic perspective. On the other hand, when considerable amounts of funding are allocated, bureaucratic interest in the matter increases remarkably. And as bureaucratic interest increases, fostering a need to acquire expertise on an issue, a cottage industry of outside analysts will also miraculously appear, thereby creating a self-sustaining interest in keeping the issue alive. But regardless of which response is adopted, the impact bureaucratic institutionalization has for the issues themselves remains relatively uniform. Following the initial increase in activity and sense of urgency, especially on the part of senior officials, interest in the issue gradually fades. This is because the issue will often get overtaken by other events whilst the reality of the grinding and debilitating nature of bureaucratic routine makes itself felt, particu-

larly as lower-level officials have to deal with the practical problems and minutiae inherent in trying to operationalize vague political guidance into workable programs.

Since it was first announced, the Asia 'pivot' has essentially followed this course. At best, or worst, depending on one's point of view, the actual substance of Obama's policy has amounted to little more than raising the profile of Asia in terms of political and bureaucratic interest, relative to any number of other issues regularly dealt with by policymakers. Its most visible component consists of the numerous speeches and media commentary of senior officials that emphasize America's 'enduring commitment to this critical region'. There has also been a marginal increase in the number of high-level visits to Asia compared with earlier administrations, as well as minor adjustments in the US force posture and funding priorities. This amount of substance is unlikely to increase in the near-term due to attention and resources being focused on so many other international crises.

Of perhaps greater significance than these limited US actions are the perceptions, or as argued here, the misperceptions, of other governments with respect to what they believe the rebalancing means for them, and the anxiety this has caused. Many Europeans remain wedded to the Obama Administration's original rhetoric on the subject, and to the idea that the 'pivot' is to blame for what is perceived to be American disinterest in its security affairs. To some extent this belief has been deliberately fostered by European leaders in order to make the case for increasing investment in European defence and greater strategic autonomy, particularly in Europe's immediate neighbourhood. According to this argument, America's focus on Asia means that Europeans must become more self-reliant. Similarly, many Asian countries have also taken Obama's words at face value, and are now viewing US commitment to the region through the prism of the 'pivot'. Ironically, this has become increasingly problematic for Washington as it cannot meet the unrealistic expectations which have been inadvertently created as a result of its own rhetoric.

At the end of the day actions tend to speak louder than words, and as with any rhetorical trend that is devoid of substantive value, it will gradually lose its appeal, though this may be a long drawn out process. In the meantime, it will remain important as a frame for discussing and interpreting US policy, and for the actions that follow from this. Interestingly, since it was first announced, the tone of the American rhetoric has been lowered somewhat, providing an additional indicator that the Obama Administration has sought to dampen its earlier enthusiasm. When it was initially discussed, the word used was 'pivot', and to a large extent this term continues to be used, despite the fact that US policy was quickly rebranded as 'rebalancing'. In terms of its connotations, 'pivot' was deemed too strong a word, suggesting a major new commitment to Asia that would detract from commitments in other regions. By contrast, 'rebalancing' had less dramatic impact. Additionally, whereas the military dimension of the 'pivot' was often highlighted in official state-

ments, at least initially, there has been an increasing emphasis on its diplomatic and economic dimensions.

Irrespective of the precise terminology or the amount of rhetoric employed to describe it, the military substance of the Obama Administration's policy never amounted to more than a small increase over existing commitments in the region, nor is there any evidence that this policy has inhibited the US armed forces from conducting operations elsewhere. To the extent Washington has refrained from certain actions the reasons for this have more to do with the changing character of American power projection. Unless this broader context is understood, Obama's Asia policy will continue to receive more credit than it is due, whilst more important factors driving US policy will be overlooked. Therefore, this paper is not principally focused on evaluating the Asia 'rebalancing' for its own sake. Instead, it seeks to analyse the global predicament of American defence policy, and in so doing, demonstrate the relative insignificance of the 'rebalancing' in relation to current and future US military interventions. Four key themes will be covered. The paper will begin with a short discussion about the importance of recognizing the trendiness of contemporary US defence policy. Second, it will question the conceptual value of a strategic or regional shift as applied to a policy outlook dominated by short-termism and a military system designed for global power projection. Third, it will discuss the reasons why US military intervention in Asia is highly unlikely and therefore will not take precedence over operations elsewhere. Finally, it will examine several important assumptions, drivers, and structural limitations of recent interventions that will almost certainly underpin future US defence policy as well. Although diplomacy and economics are both important features of the Administration's 'rebalancing' policy, they will not be the focus here, largely because the military component is the most controversial aspect of the policy and has greater relevance for contemporary security debates, especially in Europe.

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ON TRENDINESS IN US DEFENCE POLICY

To understand US defence policy, it is essential to distinguish between that which is *trendy* and that which is considered the *norm*. It is also necessary to distinguish that which is the norm but presented as though it were trendy. And at the same time it must be recognized that it is a norm in the defence community *to be* trendy. Reinventing the wheel and the relabeling of old concepts are both common practices. So too is the practice of elevating *challenges* to *threats*, and of relabeling *old* challenges as *new* threats. Within the US military, crises often create a demand which can then lead to a trend. For example, after 9/11, the US military focused enormous resources on 'counter-terrorism', and after the Iraq 'insurgency' began in 2003, 'counter-insurgency' became the prominent theme. Neither of these issues was new to the US military, but such was the sense of crisis at the time that their importance was elevated relative to other defence priorities, funds were allocated for research, doctrine was rewritten, justifications for weapons procurement shifted accordingly, and both individuals and bureaucracies jumped on the bandwagon. After 'counterinsurgency', or at least the large-scale version of it as practiced in Iraq and Afghanistan was recognized as unsustainable and less than 'successful', the concept has quietly disappeared from the mainstream defence discourse. As of 2014, 'counterinsurgency' is no longer trendy; indeed it is increasingly viewed as a dirty word. Consequently, funding has diminished, it became a career dead-end, and ambitious officers and scholars quietly abandoned a subject that was 'all the rage' several years earlier.

The problem with so many of these types of trends, and the language in which they are couched, is that they distort objective analysis of the issues themselves. During the 1990s, the US military was said to be undergoing a 'revolution in military affairs', which by the 2000s had become a 'transformation'. This sort of language was a far cry from more traditional notions of 'modernization' and 'reform', particularly as these less emotive terms suggested 'evolution' rather than 'revolution'. Once the terminology of 'revolution' and 'transformation' was adopted, reproduced in the expert discourse, and subsequently legitimized and institutionalized, it served to mislead many observers into thinking that more radical shifts were occurring than was actually the case. In point of fact, most of the significant conceptual and technological developments that occurred in the US military since the end of the Cold War merely reflected the evolution of intellectual, technological and structural developments that had been underway much earlier.

It is possible to identify many of these trends, and to recognize how many of the concepts that are currently popular have existed for quite some time, even if they have not always received as much attention. In the late 2000s, the term 'cyberwar' became quite popular, yet substantively there is little difference from 'information

warfare', which was the term used in the 1990s. Throughout the post-Cold War period many terms became trendy, such as 'military operations other than war', 'network centric warfare', 'hybrid warfare', despite the longstanding nature of the issues they were addressing. The highly touted 'Air-Sea Battle' concept, often associated with the Asia 'rebalancing', also bears a remarkable resemblance to much older efforts to increase interoperability, or 'jointness', among the individual services. Though there is little that is substantively new to any of these concepts, they are often presented as though they are new and exciting, whereas the only thing that is new is not the concept but the label.

All military concepts represent a constituency that exists within the defence structure, be it an individual service, a branch of that service, or a particular platform, and all have reinvented themselves in one guise or other, yet this reinvention actually reflects the evolution of old structures and institutions in the context of changing political priorities and technological developments. Thus it was that in the 1980s attack submarines were justified as a means of countering the Soviet Union. A decade later, procurement of this same platform was justified as being necessary for countering a rising Chinese Navy. In the 2000s, the justification had switched again, so that attack submarines were the US Navy's premier 'counter-terrorism' tool. And in the 2010's attack submarines are increasingly refocused once again on the 'China threat'. Justifications may come and go but the evolution of the institutions and technology continues regardless.

Unfortunately, both the institutions themselves, and the analysts that observe them, typically become absorbed in the changing justifications rather than focusing on the continuities. Hardly any attention at all is placed on the standing military tasks and commitments that remain in the background rather than the forefront. It must also be recognized that procurement of any major new piece of equipment occurs over a decades-long timeline during which crises come and go. Rarely are new systems scrapped. They may evolve technologically, more or fewer may be purchased, and the justifications may change given the types of security challenges that emerge, but the systems themselves are still procured, often because it is impossible to stop the procurement process once it has started.

When Obama came into office in 2009, he was quite keen to reduce the policy emphasis on 'counter-terrorism' that he inherited from Bush, and the 'Global War on Terrorism' was quickly rebranded as 'Overseas Contingency Operations'. Apart from the rebranding, his ability to substantively reduce the 'counter-terrorism' policy priority was significantly hamstrung by his decision to increase the US military role in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, in contrast to Bush's almost exclusive focus on 'terrorism', a policy opening emerged under Obama in which policymakers and bureaucrats increasingly engaged with the question of what role the US military would play after the eventual withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Within the US military, the reason why Obama's Asia 'rebalancing' became trendy and was actively supported had more to do with bureaucratic opportunism, rather than reflecting some newfound strategic concern about US security interests in that region. One of the unintended consequences of the large-scale US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan was the perceived diminution of the importance of the Navy and Air Force relative to the Army and Marine Corps. After years of relative neglect, and amidst a more conducive political atmosphere under Obama, the Navy and Air Force, as well as the US Pacific Command more generally, were better able to promote the 'China threat' and their potential role in countering it. This is not to say that the Chinese military build-up in recent years, as well as Beijing's aggressive behaviour and rhetoric, did not provide a legitimate concern for US policymakers. Clearly there were legitimate security concerns. Nevertheless, the timing of the US 'rebalancing' and the highly publicized 'Air-Sea Battle' concept suggest that these security concerns were of less relevance than political convenience and bureaucratic opportunism.

Amidst the threat of budget cuts, both the Navy and Air Force have used the Asia 'rebalancing' as a means to secure themselves from significant funding cuts. This opportunism is also reflected in the efforts of both the Army and Marine Corps to create a role for themselves in conflict scenarios involving Asia due to the fear they will be marginalized if they are unable to. For these two services, the projected withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan threatened to leave them with a less substantial role to play, and this fear was substantiated with the budget and personnel cuts that hit the Army and Marines the hardest in the last couple of years. Being associated with the 'rebalancing', however remotely, became viewed as a means to be ring-fenced from future cuts. To this end, the Army has recently *rediscovered* its role as a coastal defence force, and is exploring other opportunities to demonstrate its relevance in Asia scenarios.

A similar trendiness can be observed with respect to threat prioritization and the means adopted to deal with threats. For instance, before 9/11, counter-terrorism was not a new role for the US military, though it was one that was handled mainly by the Special Forces community rather than the mainstream military. If one goes back to the late 1990s, the US defence discourse was heavily focused on China as a rising peer competitor that would seek to deny American access to the region. However, after 9/11, counter-terrorism became the top priority and the 'China threat' receded despite the Chinese military growing that much more powerful during this period. This is not to say the 'China threat' went away completely in the list of US priorities. It remained as background music relative to the terrorism problem and was bound to reappear once the terrorism problem itself inevitably receded as a priority.

To some extent, one could say that the 'China threat' had a brief revival after Obama's 'pivot' announcement, but amidst so many other international crises, it is

receding into the background yet again. Although there may have been the expectation several years ago of a post-Afghanistan 'peace dividend', in which the US armed forces would not be involved in any new major conflicts, could marginalize its remaining 'war on terrorism' commitments, and focus its main attention on the rise of China, this expectation never materialized. One must therefore view the recognition of China as a top priority threat not as something new but as something that is trendy at a particular moment in time. When the moment is ripe, the 'China threat' will no doubt become trendy again. In the meantime, when the moment is not ripe, it becomes *just another* security challenge. Indeed, many other standing military tasks all over the world continue to be carried out, even if they receive little attention, but the reasons why they occur at all usually has to do with a problem that once had a higher priority, was subsequently downgraded, but did not go away. The US 'War on Drugs' is one example of this. In the early 1990s, drugs were considered more of a threat than terrorism. Since then, military efforts to stem the drug trade have continued, but they receive little attention. That they receive little attention has less to do with any success they have had in countering drug trafficking, than it does that other problems gained a higher priority.

One final type of trendiness that is relevant to this discussion can be observed in the US relationship with its friends. In the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously referred to 'old Europe' and 'new Europe'. This rhetoric became famous because of the precise circumstances in which it was uttered, but as a serious analytical construct it left much to be desired. In this specific instance, 'old Europe' referred principally to the opposition of France and Germany over US plans to topple Saddam Hussein. In contrast, 'new Europe' referred to countries in Central and Eastern Europe who were more supportive of these plans, though presumably it also included the United Kingdom and Spain. That US relations with 'old Europe' temporarily came under strain reflected a *basic* problem of American foreign policy though this case was generally treated as somehow being *exceptional*. For the US, foreign countries it does not overtly class as adversaries can be 'in fashion', 'out of fashion', or simply 'irrelevant', and diplomatic, trade, military and intelligence relationships will continue to function regardless. Thus, even if a conflict arises on a single issue, there will usually still be fairly good cooperation on a dozen other issues. Such is the nature of international relations that disagreements often occur even among the best of friends. The history of America's relations with many of its closest 'friends' provide ample cases in which US leaders have treated these countries with outright contempt, disrespect, and ingratitude for services rendered. For instance, despite its significant role in the Iraq and Afghan wars, the United Kingdom has received little recognition or reward for its efforts. To the extent its military contributions have translated into political influence in Washington it might not have bothered participating at all.

For many countries, trying to deepen relations with the US is somewhat akin to the proverbial bank that lends you an umbrella when it is sunny and then asks for it back when it rains. In many respects, the degree to which countries become 'in fashion', 'out of fashion', or 'irrelevant' has to do with what it is considered expedient in Washington at a particular moment, rather than reflecting the bonds that are built up as a result of years or decades of attempts to foster closer relations. The close military relations the US and France currently maintain, which would have been unthinkable a decade ago, provide merely one illustration of this phenomenon. American policymakers also recognize, though they are not keen to admit it, that European countries provide their main external source of power projection capabilities. When these policymakers contemplate significant military interventions, as they did with Syria in 2013, they first turn to Europe, rather than Asia, for support. Despite declining European defence budgets and capabilities, this unconscious reflex is likely to continue for the simple reason that the US has nowhere else to turn. Paradoxically, the US remains unwilling to deal with Europeans on a quid pro quo basis. European support for American security priorities will not automatically translate into American support for European priorities. The limited US role in both the Libya and Ukraine crises provide important evidence of this. In Washington, policymakers' memories are very short indeed, and whatever lip service is paid about its desire to 'return favours' is rarely translated into action on those rainy days when American support is needed.

THE GLOBAL PREDICAMENT

One aspect of Obama's 'rebalancing' that has received extensive commentary is the lack of attention the President and other senior officials have been able to commit to it given their preoccupation with other crises. Much of this commentary presupposes that the Administration's fixation on other crises represents an anomaly in the sense that American leaders are *normally* capable of focusing on and prioritizing particular issues for an extended period of time. Put another way, it is believed that in the absence of having to react to constant crises, the Obama Administration would devote considerably more attention to Asia. Such a view reflects an idealized rather than a realistic notion of US foreign policy. In practice, US leaders are simply unable to retain a long-term focus on any foreign policy issue, and are constantly reacting to the 'crisis du jour'.

Promoting a stable and prosperous Asia has been standard American policy for a very long time, even if the means to achieve this have naturally varied depending on the circumstances. Indeed, attempting to evaluate the significance and sense of urgency regarding the 'rebalancing' is made all the more difficult because there is so little new about it in substantive policy terms despite all the alarmist 'China threat' rhetoric about why it was required in the first place. Within the US defence community, the implications of China's rise are often discussed in a zero-sum fashion. Fears of China removing US influence from the region, or that the US will no longer remain a Pacific power, are typically heard and used as justification for a demonstration of America's 'enduring commitment'. Apart from such a zero-sum attitude reflecting a highly oversimplified, if not outright misleading prognosis, the nature of the suggested remedy also leaves much to be desired.

Not only has the US been a major player in Asian affairs throughout the last century, but its diplomatic and military presence, as well as its economic interconnectedness with the region, have long been firmly established, and are not set to suddenly change due to China's rise. Therefore, how much more of an enduring commitment can the US presumably make to ensure it remains a powerful Asian player? Is the US supposed to be giving more aid, keeping more troops, ships and planes in Asia, increasing the number of diplomats, and/or doing more business? As official announcements indicate, all of the above is considered necessary if the US is to remain a Pacific power, and to enjoy the benefits deriving from the 'Pacific Century'. But is this about simply doing more of what the US has always been up to in the region anyway, or is there something qualitatively different about the 'rebalancing'? Moreover, is there any precedent for what this sort of strategic shift amounts to in practice, and what it means for US policy in other regions?

During the Second World War, it might have been possible to understand the notion of a regional strategic *emphasis* in which the European theatre had a higher priority than the Pacific in terms of the resources the US allocated to it, but it would be impossible to argue that the region was ever ignored. Likewise, throughout the Cold War, the US was intimately involved in Asian affairs in its effort to stop what it perceived to be the 'menace' of Communism. Yet at the same time it was intimately involved diplomatically, militarily and economically in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. The amount of resources devoted to a particular region may have increased or decreased depending on the time period and the nature of the crises that were being faced, but these shifts were rarely dramatic. Even during the Vietnam War, when significant attention and resources were devoted to Southeast Asia, often at the expense of other areas of the world, these additional commitments were always viewed as temporary, with the balance to be restored once hostilities concluded. In any event, the Vietnam commitment was always seen as an addition to a *global* Cold War burden that was ongoing throughout the period, but may not have grabbed nearly so much media spotlight.

In the late 1970s, the Carter Administration wrestled with the problem of increasing US security commitments to the Persian Gulf, eventually to be enunciated as the Carter Doctrine. It is notable that despite all the attention this Doctrine received, at least from a rhetorical point of view, there was very little substantive change to US policy towards the region. From a military perspective, the US Central Command would later be set-up, albeit in many respects this new institution merely demonstrated a higher level of interest in a region that the US military had already been involved with for decades anyway. By the same token, the creation of US Africa Command at the end of the Bush Administration might have been viewed as a new commitment to African affairs, though in practice it simply created a new bureaucracy headed by a four-star general to take charge of the US military's pre-existing activities on that continent, which then gave these activities a higher profile.

Revealingly, unlike in Western Europe or East Asia, the US military has not maintained a large forward presence in the Middle East, Africa, or Latin America. In the event of a serious conflict erupting, US military forces can be transferred to these regions, either from its other overseas bases in the event of small crises, or directly from the US itself if the conflict were a large one. One of the key problems of so much of the current discourse about the reduction of the American military presence in Europe is that it fundamentally misreads the way the US conceptualizes power projection. For American planners, especially after the Cold War, the utility of maintaining a significant forward presence in Europe was not considered as essential as being able to use European facilities, especially air bases and ports, to project power elsewhere. Unfortunately, most analysts who focus on these issues examine the eye-catching headlines that refer to US troop withdrawals, whereas more time spent studying America's global system for providing logistical support to its

deployed forces, such as the US Transportation Command's 'En Route System' and its prepositioned supply bases, would place these moves into a much different and less dramatic perspective.

Serious analytical shortcomings are also apparent in relation to the military aspects of Obama's Asia 'rebalancing'. Its key component is the stationing of a greater percentage of US naval vessels in the Pacific than in the Atlantic (from 50-50 to 60-40). Though not widely discussed, this shift of naval assets was for the most part previously enunciated in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, which stipulated that the US Navy would maintain at least 6 carriers (and presumably all the support vessels that compose a carrier strike group) and 60 percent of its submarines in the Pacific. The other military components associated with the 'rebalancing' are the stationing of several thousand US Marines in Australia, an increasing number of port visits to Singapore, and bolstering the US military presence in Guam. Omitted from the discussion of the 'rebalancing' is the ongoing drawdown and relocation of some 9,000 US Marines stationed in Okinawa due to local pressure. Thus, in purely numerical terms, there is a redistribution of mainly existing forces, partially out of necessity, rather than any significant increase of new forces as might otherwise be surmised from official statements.

In theory, this redistribution of naval assets would serve to increase the US deterrent capability in the region, as well as enhance the speed and flexibility with which US leaders could deploy their forces. The military logic for moving these assets is that in the event of a significant conflict breaking out, the sailing time to the region for a larger number of Navy vessels would be reduced by a matter of days if not weeks. In the absence of a conflict in Asia that would require their presence, these ships and troops would be available to be deployed elsewhere. However, there is no historical precedent, at least none in recent memory, in which large numbers of Navy vessels have not been deployed at any one time, and therefore are not readily at hand to execute a pre-existing contingency plan. Crucially, as with all military plans and scenarios involving rapid response to a major crisis, there is quite a wide gap between the ideal and the actual.

If history is any guide, there is usually a considerable time lag after a crisis begins before a political decision is even made to commit military forces in the first place. Thus, the problems of force readiness and proximity to the conflict zone, whilst important, are always secondary to the political decision-making. Furthermore, in some scenarios involving a conflict on the Korean peninsula, the need to commit hundreds of thousands of US military personnel is one that would take many months to assemble from forces based all over the world. In other words, for large-scale operations, leaving aside the political considerations and focusing purely on military-technical matters, maintaining a forward presence is mostly irrelevant, because such is the slow nature of military mobilization and deployment that the notion of a 'rapid

response' is not technically feasible under such circumstances. The 1991 and 2003 wars against Iraq provide a perfect illustration of this point. In both cases, the deployment of hundreds of thousands of US and non-US troops took many months. What was crucial to that deployment was the pre-existing logistical infrastructure that allowed these military build-ups to occur.

Therefore, in any discussion of power projection the issue of forward presence is far less important than the existence and maintenance of a global logistical system that can facilitate a military build-up in the event of conflict. It follows that for any attempt to gauge US commitment to European security, the presence of forward deployed forces is not a useful indicator. Instead, a more relevant indicator will be whether or not the US has plans to dismantle its logistical infrastructure in Europe, and there is no sign this is the case, not for the least of reasons that this infrastructure serves a dual purpose. Not only does it allow American forces to be brought into Europe, but it is also an essential part of a global logistics system that facilitates military deployments to the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia.

The Obama Administration's response to the Ukraine crisis, which some commentators have viewed as being lacklustre, have attributed this, at least in part, to the 'rebalancing'. Such a view is misleading. According to this logic, one could have attributed a similar lacklustre response by the Bush Administration to Russia's actions in the 2008 Georgia conflict. In both cases, the lacklustre response is linked to the US being distracted by other priorities – in today's context the priority is Asia, in 2008 it was Iraq and Afghanistan. Whilst there is some merit to this view, it fails to take account of a more fundamental problem, and one that has its roots during the Cold War. The US has consistently been unwilling to confront the Soviet (now Russian) military with its nuclear arsenal in crises located in what is effectively perceived as Moscow's sphere of influence, or those areas where it would have a high likelihood of fighting back.

In official policy declarations, the US does not subscribe to the concept of a sphere of influence, but in practice it always has. During the Cold War, the states that comprised the Warsaw Pact were considered off-limits for US military action, despite such crises as Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. In each of these cases, the US chose not to risk a military intervention for the simple reason that there has never been sufficient political appetite in Washington to risk an escalation to a great power or nuclear war for a peripheral interest, whereas in each of these crises Moscow believed that its core interests were at stake and would have fought back. Instead, the US restricted its actions to political and diplomatic efforts, as well as covert action, but refrained from military intervention, and it should come as little surprise that this was the favoured approach taken during the Georgia and Ukraine crises. Should a similar crisis emerge in some other non-NATO former Soviet state, even at a time when the US had no other significant military commitments, it is still

highly unlikely, if not unthinkable, that US military action would be seriously contemplated.

For most of NATO's European members, concern about the Ukraine crisis and the US 'rebalancing' has more to do with a general trepidation about the credibility of Article V commitments, especially in relation to the Baltic States. This trepidation is certainly not new, though it has been exacerbated recently. Throughout the Cold War, there was considerable concern in Western European capitals that if the US was at serious risk of its own destruction then it would be unwilling to come to their aid in the event of a Soviet attack. Regardless of US efforts to reassure its allies, the question remained a live one precisely because no one could be sure of the answer. One sees traces of these longstanding concerns today with respect to the Baltic States. These days, the question often asked is: in the event a more assertive Russia attacked at least one of the Baltic States, would the US (and NATO more broadly), adhere to its Article V commitments and come to their aid? Once again, the answer is not certain, but at least two reasonable assumptions can be made. First, the prospect of a US/NATO response would be more likely if there was an expectation of the conflict remaining conventional and limited to the immediate zone where it was being waged, rather than expand further afield or to escalate to the nuclear level. Second, the prospect of a US/NATO response would be more likely in the case of the Baltic States than with some other non-NATO member in the region.

This latter assumption is predicated on the belief that the existence of a Treaty commitment would oblige NATO countries to come to the military aid of one of its members, a belief that itself is predicated on the further assumption that a Treaty commitment actually holds considerable value and meaning for the decision-makers of NATO members. Beyond the Treaty commitment, which in some respects can be regarded as a political tripwire, is the existence of a military tripwire. During the Cold War, the US military presence in Europe was regarded as a key tripwire that, if attacked by the Soviets as part of a broader attack on NATO, would automatically commit Washington to a defence of Western Europe. These political and military tripwires were supposed to work in tandem, one supporting the other, to act as a sufficient deterrent forestalling any Soviet adventurism. A similar combination has also been in place in South Korea to deter North Korea. However, with the admission of the Baltic States, combined with NATO's unwillingness to augment the conventional defence of those countries, the traditional military tripwire is no longer a significant factor. Instead, the political tripwire has been deemed a sufficient deterrent in its own right, even if it only provides marginal reassurance in those countries bordering Russia. At the very least, a political tripwire provides a greater degree of ambiguity for a potential aggressor than not having one. One noteworthy feature of America's relationships with most Asian countries is that no such comparable political and military tripwires exist, nor are they likely to. Very few Asian countries want US bases in their countries, and even joint military exercises and port visits can be

highly controversial. Nor has the rise of China elicited any effort to form a new collective defence organization similar to what SEATO once provided.

In the absence of political and military tripwires, US intervention might also be predicated on an economic tripwire. To the extent that the US economy would be seriously undermined by an attack on one of its friends, this might also trigger intervention. One case of an economic tripwire that is often cited is the 1991 Persian Gulf War, with US fear of Saddam Hussein threatening Middle East oil supplies being the key reason for intervention. Of course, this view of US motives is just one of many, and there have been many threats to the US economy that did not trigger a military intervention. Needless to say, a key limitation of the economic tripwire is that rarely is it the case that the economic threat to one's own country outweighs the economic cost of intervention. As will be discussed in the next section, when contemplating various military scenarios that would involve a confrontation with China, it is hard to conceive of any conflict with Beijing in which the economic costs of intervention did not far outweigh the costs of non-intervention.

LIMITED PROSPECTS FOR MILITARY INTERVENTION IN ASIA

The US military plays many roles in Asia and will continue to do so irrespective of the 'rebalancing'. These roles include: facilitating logistical support for deployed forces, conducting maritime security operations, collecting intelligence, engaging in defence diplomacy, and so on. Perhaps the most significant role it is supposed to play is reassuring allies and dissuading potential aggressors. It is the credibility of this deterrent role that the rise of China has increasingly called into question. In many respects, the underlying purpose of the 'rebalancing' is to demonstrate that Washington remains committed to maintaining the credibility of its deterrent. As will be discussed, the military aspects of the 'rebalancing' are too insignificant to add much value to this role. Additionally, those military forces that are based in Asia are more likely to be employed in a combat role outside the region than within it.

One of the great contradictions of American policy towards China is that it sees it as both friend and foe simultaneously, though to a great extent this has to do with the competing cultures and priorities of different institutions within the US Government, rather than simply reflecting schizophrenia. On an economic level, China is an enormous powerhouse, and one whose health must be maintained for the sake of the global economy. From this perspective, it is in America's national interest to cooperate with China and not provoke it unnecessarily. That China also holds a great deal of US debt ensures that both countries' economies are that much more interdependent. Therefore, from an economic perspective any conflict between the US and China would be an economic equivalent of mutually assured destruction and cannot be allowed to happen.

A quite different response towards China's rise is advocated by the US security community. Much of the discussion about a US-China confrontation revolves around two groups within this community. The first group consists of those individuals and organizations that have a direct stake in promoting the idea that such a confrontation is possible, if not inevitable, and argue that preparations need to be made to deal with it. In the first instance, this entails developing and maintaining weapons systems that are more technologically advanced and numerous than the nearest peer competitor or set of competitors. It is from this group that references are often made to the technical attributes of Chinese air and naval systems relative to their US counterparts. They also insist on developing military plans and scenarios in which the Chinese adversary is predetermined and recognized, if not actually named. The second group consists of those individuals who view international relations through a geopolitical prism of competing great powers. In this mind-set, it is only natural for emerging powers to expand, for other great powers to oppose this expansion, and for weaker powers caught in the middle to either balance or bandwagon.

The key shortcoming of this confrontational outlook is that it is rarely appreciated that great power confrontation need not be of a military nature and result in an actual war, particularly when both powers possess nuclear arsenals, strong conventional armed forces, and more recently, impressive cyber capabilities. As during the Cold War, confrontation occurred across many non-military fields and on many continents. However, the discourse within the US security community on 'rivalry' with China omits key issues such as politics, ideology and economics, in favour of a near-exclusive focus on the military balance. In fact, it is precisely because of these and many other non-military issues that any US-China confrontation would almost certainly be confined to the political and economic realm. To the extent military power plays any useful role, it is in the nature of maintaining forces purely to deter a direct attack.

In this regard, a discussion of intervention triggers is particularly important for assessing the utility, and perceived utility, of the current and projected US military role in Asia. There are three types of conflict in the region that could theoretically provoke US military intervention. The first is a war between North Korea and South Korea. The second is a war involving China and one of its neighbours. The third is a war that doesn't involve China, such as a war between two other nations, or an internal conflict in a single nation. Of the three types, intervention in a conflict on the Korean peninsula is almost certainly more likely relative to the others given Washington's longstanding political and military commitments to South Korea. However, of the other two types, one is hard pressed to determine which is *less likely*.

It is difficult to conceptualize a conflict between the US and China that did not develop in reaction to a conflict over a third country. In other words, the idea that the US and China would come to military blows over a purely bilateral dispute, such as over a trade issue, is pretty much unthinkable. The best-known scenarios involve a US confrontation with China that derives from a dispute between China and one of its neighbours, particularly Japan or Taiwan. Yet even in these two cases, which are highly unlikely for all sorts of reasons, it is far from certain that US military forces would need to be directly involved. Both Japan and Taiwan have significant military capabilities of their own, and might not even require direct US military intervention. For instance, were the Chinese to attempt a military invasion of Taiwan they would need to conduct an amphibious assault to subdue a defending force of hundreds of thousands that could expand rapidly with a mobilization of reserves. As the massing of a large amphibious armada cannot be kept hidden, a mobilization of reserves would be a certainty. To overcome such a strong defence would require an amphibious force several times larger than the largest ever employed in the history of warfare. Not even the most extreme projections of Chinese military power bring them anywhere remotely near having the sort of force that would be required. As for a naval contest between China and Japan, Beijing would be taking a significant risk

putting its relatively inexperienced naval forces against Tokyo's much more formidable naval power. For Japan to prevail in such a contest, it is not immediately apparent that an overt intervention by US naval power would be required.

Ultimately, it does not really matter which of its neighbours China might potentially come into conflict with. US intervention in any of these cases would be predicated on selling this intervention in terms of containing an expansionist power. This would be a very hard sell indeed to a population that does not identify China's move as constituting a clear and present danger, particularly if the conflict was recognized as an isolated case arising from unique circumstances or an accident rather than as part of a grand plan of regional conquest. There are also other important mitigating factors that would limit any US military intervention. For instance, an even less likely scenario involving US intervention is one in which a conflict erupts between China and Vietnam or China and Burma, if for no other reason than the prospect of risking American lives to defend the regimes in Hanoi or Rangoon would hold little appeal for the American public. It is also difficult to conceive what role the US military could possibly play in a conflict between China and Russia, China and India, China and Mongolia, China and Laos, and so forth.

The third type of intervention trigger is a war between two Asian nations that does not involve China, or an internal conflict within an Asian country. Similar to a US-China military confrontation, it is difficult to conceptualize a scenario in which American forces would become significantly involved. The most likely state-on-state conflict would be a war between India and Pakistan, and were a war to break out between these two countries, the US would avoid military intervention, just as it has avoided intervention during previous India-Pakistan conflicts. Instead, it would limit its actions to diplomacy. Other state-on-state scenarios one could devise would suffer from the problem of how the US could justify involving itself militarily. As for internal conflict, unlike in the Vietnam war, in which the US committed forces to the defence of South Vietnam as part of what it perceived at the time as a larger war against the expansion of Communism in Southeast Asia, and specifically the fear of Chinese expansionism, no similar ideological conflict exists today. The only ideological concern of the United States for the foreseeable future is the spread of radical Islam. Even leaving aside the improbability of a strong Islamist insurgency threatening the overthrow of an Asian country, the US would not send any significant military forces to assist that government. Traditional US practice, both in the Cold War to combat 'Communist subversive insurgency', and after 9/11 to 'counter terrorism', has been to send small numbers of advisors and Special Forces, provide military and non-military aid, and in the present era, to launch the occasional drone strike. The three large-scale interventions – Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan – were exceptions to the small-scale rule.

Therefore, in terms of the three possible triggers for future US military intervention in Asian conflicts, there is likely to be more continuity than change, and it is doubtful

that any addition of US military forces to the region will serve a significant practical military purpose. As for serving a political purpose, the prospect for additional military deployments to have a positive psychological impact on reassuring allies and dissuading Chinese adventurism will be largely dependent on how the move is interpreted in the region itself, and what actions are taken in response to it. For example, if China feels threatened, or sees a need to demonstrate its own ability to escalate for face-saving reasons, the US move may accelerate an arms race that is already underway in the region. Admittedly, China will continue to bolster its armed forces regardless of any new military deployments made by the US, with other countries in the region also increasing their military capabilities in response to China's actions.

In terms of reassuring allies, it is notable that the Asia 'rebalancing' was a unilateral initiative both in its conception and in the timing of its announcement. There is little evidence that other countries in the region were consulted in advance. To the contrary, as with many US foreign policy initiatives such as this, the region itself is merely expected to fit into a scheme that is devised in Washington DC. That these countries may hold other ideas and may choose to resist the US efforts is not a likelihood that seems to have been given much thought, not for the least of reasons that it would have dampened enthusiasm for the policy. Nor do American policymakers ever consider that just because the US Government suddenly chooses to focus on a particular region or issue that it had previously shown less interest in, that local governments will see matters in quite the same way or with the same sense of urgency. Furthermore, it is doubtful that even those countries that welcome a stronger American presence in the region to balance China will be reassured in the absence of the sort of political, military, and economic tripwires referred to earlier.

For the US, the absence of these tripwires raises the problem of how to reassure its friends in the region that the US would come to their aid militarily if it had to. Beyond mere rhetorical reassurances, a key means of demonstrating commitment is to engage in serious bilateral defence planning in which military experts from both countries discuss how they would work together in the event of a conflict erupting, what the military requirements would likely consist of, and what practical measures could be taken in advance to facilitate cooperation. When undertaking this sort of planning it is essential that the plans are plausible and that any subsequent military cooperation derives from those plans. Unfortunately, much of the current American thinking about a conflict with China suffers from serious conceptual limitations. In addition, the military measures undertaken as part of the 'rebalancing' do not seem to bear any relation to how the US would respond in a crisis, thereby limiting their utility as a means of reassurance.

To the extent the matter of a US military response to potential Chinese aggression is thought about at all, as well as being planned for, this is principally limited to two main scenarios. The preferred response is the type in which the US holds a strong advantage, namely a discrete naval clash that does not include attacks on the

Chinese mainland. Despite a growing concern about the prospect of a Chinese 'blue water' fleet centred around its two carriers, there is actually little risk of such a clash occurring. Beijing is well aware of the near certainty that in purely operational terms such a clash would result in a catastrophic defeat for the Chinese Navy. One of the problems resulting from the hype about the potential threat posed by Chinese carriers, which at a technical level are far less sophisticated and carry fewer aircraft than a US carrier, nor do they have adequate logistical support, is that US planners automatically assume that Chinese leaders would be willing to risk their most prized naval assets against a much larger and advanced US fleet. Whereas US planners might emphasize only those US assets that could be brought to bear within the first days and weeks of a conflict, Chinese planners have to assume that they would confront the bulk of US naval assets over a much longer period. As such, the Chinese would have to calculate the US could deploy all of its carrier assets, rather than the one or two it might have on hand at any given moment. In actual fact, the Chinese would no doubt be wary of risking these naval assets against the Taiwanese or Japanese navies, much less the US Navy. 'Anti-access' and 'area denial' are not military concepts that belong exclusively to China. Chinese vessels can just as easily be excluded from encroaching elsewhere in the region as they can try to limit others from encroaching on their own preserve. It is worth remembering that were the Chinese Navy to be humiliated by a 'lesser' power, this would be considerably more embarrassing than being humiliated by the US.

The second major scenario of a US-China military confrontation would involve any conflict at a level above a discrete naval clash. This type of scenario is impossible to seriously prepare for, if for no other reason than even if one assumes there would be no nuclear weapons involved, it would still be on a size, scale and duration far exceeding anything defence planners are currently contemplating. Indeed, for such a scenario to unfold, planners would have to 'think the unthinkable' about the political goals involved, war duration, mobilization potential, the role of space and cyber weapons, how US and Chinese leaders' attitudes towards political and economic risk would radically change, how such a conflict could be resolved, and so on. In short, there are so many variables to consider that no serious defence planning can occur. Incidentally, many of these same variables also apply in the case of a limited naval clash. However, such has been the focus on the purely military aspects of this scenario in the US defence discourse, such as on Air-Sea Battle and how to keep ahead of the Chinese technologically, that the wider context of how a conflict would develop has been completely ignored. For example, there is little discussion about the limits that would almost certainly be placed on any US military action against the Chinese mainland. Similarly, there is no discussion about how the US could prosecute a conflict in such a way that the damage to the global economy could be minimized, or how a conflict would end so that a return to a peaceful status quo and resumption of trade relations would follow.

In any non-nuclear conflict between the US and China, the most important consideration for American policymakers would be to see that it was fought in such a way that it did not seriously interfere with trade, or escalate to the waging of economic warfare. As fighting a war in this manner would be highly implausible, this would act as an important constraint on conflict erupting to begin with. Just as US policymakers during the Cold War were extremely wary of a conflict escalation with the Soviets that would cross the nuclear threshold, policymakers today are similarly concerned about a conflict with China crossing the economic threshold. Though most discussion of a US-China confrontation is principally concerned with military responses to Chinese action, the US would much more likely use non-military means to bring pressure to bear on Beijing. That the US would engage in combat as a first resort to counter Chinese aggression seems a highly unlikely response, especially if the stakes in the conflict were quite small. If the US is unwilling to use military force to defend Ukraine, it seems improbable that they would risk a major conflict with China in response to a seizure of disputed islands. More realistically, the US would employ non-military pressure as a first resort.

Though it is possible to devise any number of scenarios in which some sort of conflict might erupt between the US and China, for these scenarios to have any plausibility requires that some attempt is made to consider what factors would shape how such a conflict would be waged. For instance, there is little reason why the US Navy would even need to take the risk of putting its ships in harm's way close to China's immediate vicinity as a first response. A more effective means of putting pressure on the Chinese leadership might be to enforce a naval blockade to prevent Middle East energy supplies and other commercial vessels from reaching China, though even this option presupposes the US would be willing to contend with the economic consequences this action would likely precipitate. As argued here, the military-technical aspects of these scenarios are of at least secondary importance compared with the non-military aspects. If there is one point that is generally agreed, it is that for such a conflict to begin, the leaders of at least one side would have to seriously miscalculate or be completely irrational. Of course, leaders miscalculating or acting irrationally are a constant of history and small conflicts can easily get out of hand. Therefore, one cannot automatically rule out conflict. What can be ruled out is a 'rational' conflict of the sort that presently serves as the basis for all US military thinking on the issue.

As even this limited discussion highlights, a focus on the military aspects of the Asia 'rebalancing' does not serve as a useful basis for any serious contemplation about how the US would deter, or if necessary wage, a conflict with China. Nevertheless, a number of general conclusions can be reached that can assist how analysts conceptualize the problem, both in its own right, as well as in relation to the implications for US military operations elsewhere. Looking ahead, the US will continue to speak about the perceived need to develop military capabilities to deter, or possibly defeat,

the Chinese. However, underpinning most of these discussions will be motives other than the stated ones, such as reassuring allies, and promoting certain weapons programmes and bureaucratic interests. If this subtext is taken into account, then the implications of the 'rebalancing' for Europe, and in the region itself, can be recognized as being much less significant than would otherwise be assumed.

THE DECLINING UTILITY OF AMERICAN POWER PROJECTION

A regrettable outcome of the undue discursive emphasis on the Asia ‘rebalancing’ has been to detract attention from more meaningful developments in Washington’s willingness and ability to effectively project military power. The experience of the US military in recent years provides many clues about their strengths and weaknesses, and perhaps more importantly, about the political leadership that decides when and how to employ them. When attempting to determine the likelihood of future American military interventions it is these clues that provide a much more reliable guide than the rhetoric of US leaders.

In the absence of a conflict with China, which as noted in the previous section is very unlikely indeed, for the foreseeable future the US military will continue to be preoccupied with lesser conflicts (i.e. conflicts other than great power war), of which there are no imminent shortage. Given the prevalence of the ‘use it or lose it mentality’, it is hard to justify large defence expenditures for a military that has no role play. Also, US policymakers do not like to be seen doing nothing to deal with international crises as this would make the ‘superpower’ appear to be a ‘helpless giant’ in the eyes of both foreigners and its own population. This being the case, the US military will be quite keen to remain active on the world stage in one form or another, and will argue it needs to be prepared to deal with the ‘full spectrum’ of conflict.

Unlike in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the maximum sustainable level of US military power was deployed for an extended period, in the years ahead there will be increasing limits to the amount of power that can be projected. In the aftermath of the withdrawal of large-scale combat forces from these two countries amidst little or no success in building sustainable states in effective control of their territories, a ‘syndrome’ similar to the one that occurred after Vietnam has made deployments of a similar scale in the future an extremely hazardous prospect politically. In addition, the sheer cost of these deployments and their adverse impact on the US economy has placed further constraints on the ability and willingness of politicians to undertake them. From a military doctrine perspective, the idea that the US military could stabilize countries beset with insurgencies was completely undermined by the Iraq and Afghan wars, and the earlier enthusiasm for mainstream counterinsurgency doctrine has now vanished. Of key concern is that US political and military leaders have not attempted to understand the reasons for the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan and look for new ideas about how to deal with similar challenges in the future. Instead, they have merely been content to claim a degree of partial success, quickly forget the matter, and then move on to the next crisis without making any major reforms.

In this sense, the US political and military system is suffering from an intellectual and identity crisis, overloaded with an unending series of complicated crises, trying to be everywhere at once, whilst the military tools it has at its disposal are of decreasing utility in managing, much less solving them. Though ostensibly reluctant about authorizing military interventions, President Obama has nonetheless done so, or considered doing so, albeit consistently in a half-hearted manner, and with little or no prospect that such interventions could resolve any of the underlying problems that were causing the conflict in the first place. In 2009, he supported two separate 'surges' of American forces to Afghanistan, but reportedly spent considerable time haggling over the precise numbers to be sent and the duration of their deployment, rather than focusing on the more fundamental policy problem of what these extra troops could realistically be expected to achieve. In 2011, Obama supported military action against Libya, but then chose to 'lead from behind'. In 2013, US military power was almost used against Syria, but then this option was effectively ruled out in favour of diplomacy. In 2014, the US military response to the Ukraine crisis did not deter Russian actions and provided little reassurance to European allies. Also in 2014, US actions in response to the Islamic State's conquest of large parts of Iraq and Syria failed to facilitate any significant successes against it.

Whilst many commentators have blamed Obama for taking fatal *half-measures*, and though there may be a great deal of merit in this criticism, it must also be recognized that there are important limitations to US power, and that *full-measures* would most likely have been just as unsuccessful. In Afghanistan, sending more US troops would probably have deepened the quagmire, rather than actually produced any sustainable successes. The fundamental political, administrative and economic weaknesses of the Afghan state were not problems that could have been solved with more US forces, at least not without creating additional problems. In Libya, additional US airpower might have shortened the war by a few months, but even in this case, airpower played a supporting role, whereas the key fighting that led to the fall of Tripoli occurred on the ground. In response to Syria's alleged use of WMD against rebel forces, thus crossing Obama's 'red line', no military action was taken, but to be fair, the military options available carried more risks of escalating that crisis rather than de-escalating it. Furthermore, the Obama Administration's policy towards Syria more generally could be characterized as schizophrenic in that it needs the cooperation of the Assad regime to fight the Islamic State and ensure the continued destruction of Syria's WMD, but at the same time Washington has a stated policy of trying to overthrow the regime, and is working with rebel forces, albeit again somewhat half-heartedly, to do so. In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, it is hard to conceptualize any military actions taken by the US that could have reversed the situation. Dispatching US forces to Ukraine would almost certainly have provoked a direct military confrontation with Russia. Nor could any US actions reverse the structural weaknesses of the Ukrainian state. At best, the dispatch of larger numbers of

military personnel and aircraft to Poland and the Baltic states might have provided greater reassurance to its NATO allies, but this would not have addressed the fundamental problem in Ukraine itself.

Of all the present crises, the problem of countering the Islamic State is the most complicated, as well as the most important for the US given the threat to its regional interests, especially if the problem cannot be contained. It is a problem that will not be solved anytime soon, and at best, will only be managed over many years. Although the potential terrorism threat to the US homeland posed by the Islamic State remains unclear, the American worst-case popular perception of that threat will ensure US leaders are forced to remain focused on this issue. Consequently, US interest in the region is unlikely to wane, and it will almost certainly have a higher priority in terms of the political attention and resources devoted to it than might otherwise be devoted to Asia. This conflict is also one that is likely to further undermine confidence in what the tools of US power can achieve.

To date, and in the absence of an imminent threat to the city of Baghdad, US leaders have avoided large military commitments, if for no other reason than they are unsure whether additional military actions would improve the security situation or worsen it. No doubt Iraqi leaders are also quite reluctant to request US ground forces and wish to keep any American intervention as limited as possible. Nevertheless, there is only so much the US air campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria can achieve. It may have the effect of slowing down or stopping the Islamic State at a tactical level, and possibly of reassuring US allies, but ultimately ground forces are required to hold the present line, to retake lost territory, and then to 'stabilize' it over the longer term.

When contemplating a larger intervention in Iraq, and possibly Syria, US decision-makers must try to answer a number of difficult questions. Should US ground forces be sent? If so, how many and what would their mission be? Would they be limited to Iraq, or would they be given authority to cross into Syria and to capture territory there as well? For how long after they have captured the territory from the Islamic State would they need to occupy it before the Iraqi government could take control? And if the Islamic State forces chose to go underground and wage a long-term guerrilla war, how many more troops might be needed, and for how long? It is precisely this degree of complexity, combined with the probable risk of creating another quagmire that hinders the formation of a clear and consistent policy. As with any issue in which all the options for taking action are certain to result in some degree of loss, having to determine which is the least bad option can cause paralysis, since taking no decision may be seen as preferable.

Were the US to send ground troops to Iraq, and then keep them there indefinitely, this would undermine any possibility Washington could focus on Asia. On the other hand, not sending ground troops will also leave the Islamic State as a simmering

problem with the potential to boil over. Having captured so much territory so quickly, a race is now underway between the Islamic State and the Iraqi government. The Islamic State must consolidate its gains and continue to expand or risk withering away, whereas the Iraqi state must rebuild its shattered military capabilities or face a total collapse. Needless to say, as much as Iraq is now receiving more attention, the problem of Afghanistan has not entirely receded either. With the recent signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement, significant US military forces will remain in Afghanistan for several more years at the very least. In many respects, the prospects for Afghanistan after 2015 will be gloomier than the prospects in Iraq after the US military completed its withdrawal in 2011. As the Taliban and other anti-government groups take advantage of the security vacuum created by the withdrawal of most foreign troops, the situation is likely to worsen considerably, so much so that in the next few years, if not sooner, the US Government might have to contemplate returning in force to defend Kabul, just as it is presently contemplating defending Baghdad. This too will have negative implications for the Asia 'rebalancing'. Apart from the political embarrassment a Taliban victory would cause, as well as potentially requiring a large-scale return of US combat troops to reverse the situation, it would also reflect poorly on American power more generally.

If there is one central observation to make about the influence of American power after 9/11, and its prospects for the future, it is that the tools the US has at its disposal are increasingly perceived as being dysfunctional and irrelevant. The failure of these tools in Iraq and Afghanistan are merely the tip of the iceberg. In the aftermath of Gaddafi's fall in 2011, Libya plunged into chaos, with the US and European powers refusing to seriously contemplate military action to 'stabilize' the situation on the grounds that such action would be too costly and have little chance of success. When the Middle East was rocked by the Arab Spring, the US was largely forced to sit on the side-lines as the Mubarak regime in Egypt, its key ally in the region, was overthrown. In the aftermath of Mubarak's fall, the US played a much less substantive role than Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in promoting a counter-revolution given that its financial aid to Egypt was only a fraction of that compared to these regional players. Both these countries found it more advantageous to take matters into their own hands instead of deferring to a US lead. Yet Egypt is not an isolated case of regional powers playing an increasingly assertive role to compensate for what they perceive to be American weakness. Countless other recent instances can be found in which neither US 'hard', 'soft' or 'smart' power has played any meaningful role in resolving regional conflicts or reassuring longstanding allies.

Despite this reality, the prevailing culture among the US 'national security managers' remains one that stresses the importance of acting globally and strategically, but rarely are the limits of American power appreciated. Policymakers may be forced to accept these limits as a matter of day-to-day practice, but the ideology of the all-powerful superpower remains dominant. It is a culture that lives and breathes in an

atmosphere of daily international crises, in which it is always assumed the US has some role to play. In part, this global outlook simply reflects the global presence and outlook of the bureaucracy and the global nature of American interests. For instance, within both the State Department and Defense Department there are numerous sub-bureaucracies responsible for developing and instituting policies covering every region of the world, and these sub-bureaucracies are in constant competition for attention and influence. Unlike the foreign services and military systems of other great powers, the US is the only one with sufficient resources to maintain a significant diplomatic and military presence in all regions of the world rather than being limited to one or two regions. Therefore, in contrast to the French Government which might prioritize its former colonial empire, or the Chinese who focus mainly on Asia, the US bureaucracy is constantly dealing with crises everywhere. Apart from internal bureaucratic drivers, the media and domestic and international lobbying groups also play a crucial role in generating high-level attention on particular issues.

For US leaders, there are no objective criteria for what constitutes a 'crisis'. An issue is recognized as a 'crisis' merely because it has percolated to the top of policymakers' agendas, though the reasons for this are typically random and unpredictable. The problem for US leaders is that there are only so many hours in the day, and only so many crises that can be handled simultaneously. Therefore only a small selection of issues will be considered as crises. In many respects crises resemble the front page of a newspaper. Just as editors must select a small percentage of the news to put on the front page every day of the week, so too must an unending stream of crises be provided to policymakers. The effect this has on the US policymaking system is to ensure that it is perpetually reacting to events, and therefore constantly at risk of being distracted and overcommitted to dealing with relatively minor problems whilst unable to concentrate on more important issues when they arise.

The American penchant for playing a role in so many armed conflicts around the world often reflects a 'can-do' mentality, an extremely broad definition of what constitutes US national security, and a somewhat uncritical belief in the altruism of American power. Also, largely for domestic political reasons, American leaders are inclined to commit themselves to conflicts without thinking through the policy ends beforehand and whether or not they are achievable with the means allocated to them. Achievable political ends, which are a prerequisite for developing an achievable strategy, have been particularly notable by their absence in recent conflicts. The US political culture has become so partisan that American leaders are now more prompted to take military action regardless of whether or not this is sensible, rather than face accusations of inaction and appearing weak.

All of this is not to say that the system is completely unrestrained and that US presidents will always approve the use of military force. American leaders may consistently display a 'superpower mentality', and appear loathe to accept limitations to their power, yet they still do. The list of significant conflicts where the US has not

played a role is a long one. There are a number of reasons for this. First and foremost, US leaders are constrained by money. They may have access to enormous sums of funding but it is not an unlimited amount and therefore tough choices need to be made. On occasion, local countries will reject what they see as US interference and deny Washington any practical means of becoming meaningfully involved. In many cases, US attention and military resources are spread too thin, and cannot be everywhere at once. In other cases, the scale of the problem and the risks of involvement are simply too great. Sometimes another power or international organization, such as the UN or EU, will take the lead. Also, there may be no public support for taking military action, especially if there is no threat – real, imagined or exaggerated – that can justify the costs involved. Regrettably too much analytical attention has been placed on those US interventions that have occurred, whereas too little interest has been shown in the reasons why the US does not intervene. This is probably inevitable, as the dog that barks will always attract more attention than the dog that remains silent. An important consequence of this lack of interest has been that the reasons for US inaction are often misconstrued and the wrong conclusions are drawn about the actual strengths and weaknesses of American power.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the ad hoc nature of US military action and inaction is important if for no other reason than it undermines the notion that American policy can be assessed and predicted on the basis of publicly declared strategic priorities and foreign policy doctrine. Unfortunately, a focus on official rhetoric to the exclusion of substance and context is a poor guide to analysing policy. As with any government policy, it must be recognized that there are usually structural factors that place limits on policy implementation, and when analysing official rhetoric it is crucial to account for subtext. Even a superficial examination of the history of US foreign policy would immediately reveal a wide gap between rhetoric and action. That US political rhetoric should still be accepted at face value, thereby ignoring this exhausting history, is perhaps the most astonishing reality of all.

The very real but unspoken predicament the US armed forces find themselves in today is that they are overcommitted and quite limited in what they can realistically be expected to achieve. In this, the US is hardly alone, and many of the limits associated with the 'utility of force' that have been identified in this paper can just as easily be applied to other armed forces as well. Arguably the most significant 'transformation' in US defence policy that occurred after 9/11 was a radical shift in the willingness of US policymakers to undertake high-risk and costly military interventions of the sort that would have been unthinkable during the Clinton Administration. When comparing the US defence debate in that earlier decade with that of today, especially in relation to many of the same types of security challenges that are still referred to as *new*, it is quite apparent that interventions that would previously have been rejected as a matter of course, and for very good reasons, are now accepted as normal, with little debate at all. The recent track record of the US military resolving international disputes and defeating insurgencies is pretty poor, and their ability to do so in the future does not look set to improve. Even those politicians and generals with a strong grounding in history and military theory who ought to know better about the limits of such interventions proceed with them regardless. Not even the rise of isolationist tendencies among the US public in recent years has led to any reduction in the number of foreign military activities, though it does seem to have been partially responsible, along with fiscal constraints, for scaling-down the size of those activities.

In the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, the Asia 'rebalancing' is likely to recede into the background of American political discourse. On the topic of foreign policy, two issues will probably dominate Republican criticism of the Democrats: the 'loss' of Iraq and the 'loss' of Ukraine. Any number of other crises may occur during this period as well, such as a major defeat for the Afghan government, and this will cause Asia to recede that much further into the background. But short of China taking

any large-scale aggressive military action against one of its neighbours, or a North Korean attack on South Korea, there is unlikely to be much debate or serious thinking about the US military role in Asia during this period. As Republicans criticize Democrats over their handling of the Ukraine crisis there will be more attention paid to the problem of how the US deals with the 'Russia threat'. Since both parties will wish to appear tough on this issue, there will almost certainly be numerous calls for reversing the American military 'decline' in Europe and reinvigorating NATO. It is virtually unthinkable that there will be any appetite for arguing that the US needs to devote fewer resources to Europe. Thus, when the next president takes office, countering the 'Russia threat' will probably be just as high, if not higher, on his/her defence policy agenda than the 'China threat'. By default, European security and the future US role in NATO will be high on this agenda as well.

As this paper has argued, it may be the case that the US takes less interest in European security, loosely defined, but this is not for the reasons commonly given, and it most certainly has little to do with the Asia 'rebalancing'. At the end of the day, the US remains a global actor with global interests and therefore thinks in *global* rather than *regional* terms. Since the Second World War, the US has maintained diplomatic, military, and intelligence bureaucracies that have been continually present and engaged in activities around the world. Slight shifts in regional priorities were a notable feature of the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, but it must be stressed that these shifts were relatively minor when the global whole is taken into consideration. To the extent the US becomes embroiled in conflicts, this has more to do with a concatenation of factors, such as the nature of the stakes involved, the degree of domestic political pressure being applied at the time, how many other crises are ongoing simultaneously, and the perceived ability of the US military to actually achieve the goals it has been set by the politicians at an acceptable cost. Analysts and political leaders who make predictions about US policy but fail to recognize the centrality of the 'crisis du jour', the attention deficit disorder that characterizes American policymaking, and the structural limits to strategic action, will likely continue to act on the basis of misperception. In this sense, if America's global defence predicament can be better understood, the sort of highly questionable concern expressed in Europe since 2011 about being abandoned by the US in favour of Asia might be less likely to arise in the future.

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