

The Shift to the Pacific

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, FEB 17 2012

The new American security strategy involves a shift to the Pacific, but also the route home.

The Obama administration has featured a shift to the Pacific as the guidance for future military planning and the strategic rationale for defense budget decisions. Some US forces are to be leaving Europe and the Middle East while others are to be assigned to Australia. The buzz is good. The shift acknowledges the rise of China, supposedly a worrying prospect to its neighbors and clearly a potential challenge to American primacy. It also helps the American military to forget the unpleasant decade doing counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, there is the opportunity to think about a big ocean, a big rival, and how technology might overcome both.

But geography and politics do not allow the US to settle into Asia as it did into Europe after Vietnam. The American military forgot about Vietnam by worrying about the Fulda Gap and its naval equivalent, the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap. America's European allies might not have been enthralled with American leadership, but they did fear the Soviet Union sufficiently to make many accommodations for US forces, including those that upset their own populations. The focus on the Pacific is more rhetorical. China worries, but does not much frighten its neighbors. Mostly, the neighbors want to trade with, not contain China. Their publics are unwelcoming of additional or even a realigned of US forces. Witness Okinawa, the Philippines, and South Korea. The investments to be made are going to be in long range strike systems and forces afloat.

China may indeed become the next enemy, but mostly because of lost jobs, stolen intellectual property, and hurt pride as it seeks more of the global spotlight. The military gap is too large for China to close quickly even if it were inclined to try and US defense budgets were to drop faster than expected. And rather than rising to the military competition bait, China is likely to focus on internal security issues. The gaps that seem to count more there are the rural/urban and the Han vs. others.

Harsh economics and low threats will make the shift to the Pacific little more than a turning of the head. Forces are coming home, but the numbers are not large and big redeployments to the Pacific are unlikely. America's military will get smaller and more dependent upon its reserves after the drawdown in Afghanistan. We will find more ways to project more power from a distance and less reasons to be constantly on scene. It is a slow walk home, not a major change.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.

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