

# *AJISS-Commentary*

**The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies**

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Institute for International  
Policy Studies



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International Affairs

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No.147. 25 April 2012

## **AMERICA'S "RETURN" TO ASIA REQUIRES JAPAN'S STRATEGIC RESPONSE**

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The US Department of Defense (DoD) released a new defense strategic guidance titled "Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense" on 5 January. The guidance notes that the US "*will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.*" It explains the reason for this change as "US economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia."

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

While welcoming this emphasis on the security of Asia, Japan may have to take three points into account. First, an increasing emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region has been a consistent part of the current administration's foreign policy since President Barack Obama took office in January 2009. In Japan, America's shift toward Asia was observed and welcomed from the very beginning of the Obama administration when Prime Minister Taro Aso was received as the first foreign guest to the White House in February and then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made her first official overseas trip to Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China in June.

In February 2010, the DoD released its Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR 2010). The report specifically pointed out the importance of America's alliances with Japan and the Republic of Korea for deterrence and defense in Northeast Asia. It also declared that the US would "transform Guam, the westernmost sovereign territory of the United States, into a hub for security activities in the region." The US' Asia-Pacific policy has been further elaborated since last fall. Secretary Clinton's article "America's Pacific Century" in the November 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy* was a comprehensive summary of the administration's policy focusing on the Asia-Pacific region. Her position was eloquently endorsed by President Obama's speeches in Australia last November and followed by the new strategic guidance quoted earlier that illustrates the way the strategy focused on the Asia-Pacific region should be implemented. In short, America's coming back to Asia is not a mere change in policy priorities based on recent developments in the strategic environment. Japan needs to take it as a policy reflecting the natural and immutable geo-strategic position of the United States.

The second point for serious consideration is that the shift toward the Asia-Pacific region may fundamentally represent demobilization from a wartime posture rather than a mere change in US policy priorities. Secretary Clinton in her article quoted above notes "as the war in Iraq winds down and America begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the United States stands at a pivot point." Disengaging from close combat in the two theaters, the US seems

to be ready to reestablish its natural posture in preparing for future security challenges.

If this is true, we may have to answer questions on what kind of normalcy we will face and how the US and its allies should deal with future challenges. It is obvious that we are not simply returning to the pre-9/11 world. The future will be made much more complicated by a set of unprecedented unknowns. China's rise alone, for example, will bring tremendous opportunities and serious challenges that require strategic coordination among allies and friends in the region. In this context it is a good time for Japan to start a discussion with the US on a mid- to long-term security strategy based on the US' QDR 2010 and the aforementioned strategic guidance and Japan's new Defense Program Guidelines adopted in late 2010. In fact the two countries have come to the same conclusion that they need to make their utmost efforts to engage and hedge China in seeking better relations while preparing for the worse. In military operational terms, there is considerable room for closer cooperation between the two countries. For example, Japan's dynamic defense posture focusing on the southwestern part of its territory will have significance for US operations that place a greater emphasis on Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities against possible opponents. If Japan establishes a modest but reliable defense posture for its territorial waters and airspace as well as islands in the theater, this will work well to reinforce US capabilities in overcoming A2/AD-related challenges in the western Pacific.

The third point for serious consideration may be contrary to the first point on the consistency of America's Asia-oriented policy. It should be noted that there are wildcards that might cause another drastic change in US foreign policy priorities. As discussed earlier, America's turning back to Asia is based on the assumption that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are winding down. If the situations in the two theaters were to seriously worsen, the US' focus might shift away from the Pacific. Japan has to make every effort to reconstruct post-war Iraq and Afghanistan and revitalize their economies so that those two countries do not become hotbeds of terrorism. Problems with Iran's nuclear program, too, may draw America's attention back to the Middle East. This is another area

where Japan has to work extremely hard to keep intact the preconditions for a US emphasis on Asia's security. The Self-Defense Forces' counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden will have greater implications in the greater picture of Middle East security. Ironically Japan has to pay keen attention to out-of-area security problems in order to secure peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region through the US' political commitment to, and military presence in, the region. 

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