

Mr. Pacific: Don't ignore regional middle powers by Sukjoon Yoon

Dr. Sukjoon Yoon (sjyoon6680@sejong.ac.kr), a retired Navy Captain, is a senior research fellow in the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy, and visiting professor of the Department of Defence Systems Engineering in Sejong University, Seoul, Korea.

In *PacNet* 41A, 'Mr. Pacific' adheres to a narrow view of power politics. He makes a sketchy argument about a new kind of great power relations, identified as a 'rebalance of power,' but provides little explanation of how this could deal with the rise of China. The author outlines what the US might seek to achieve in the Indo-Pacific (or Asia-Pacific) region, but his focus is limited to US interests, and gives us no idea of how US policies in this region can be distinguished from those in any other part of the world. Asia is undergoing a comprehensive transition in which entirely new power relations are emerging. The rebalance of power that the author advocates is just an attempt to prop up the status quo, an approach that is inadequate to those of us living in Asia.

'Rebalance of power' is a half-baked concept

Mr. Pacific assumes the US, through its rebalance to Asia, is the only power capable of preventing the rise of China from destabilizing the Indo-Pacific region. He seems to see other countries of the region as bit players. This is made all the more problematic by the fact that the US is modernizing its security relationships with allies and partners, and with coalitions like ASEAN: it is likely that the US will form similar relationships across a wider region, so there will surely be increased rivalry with China and Russia in the form of great power politics.

The author denies evidence of US decline, but what if the US becomes so weak *vis-à-vis* China and Russia that it can no longer be an effective stabilizing force? Can the US rebalance of power, by itself, counter growing Chinese and Russian assertiveness?

A related issue is the author's assumption that it is possible to "incorporate ... China and India into the established order." If the US tries to rebalance forces to retain its position as the sole dominant power without "greater commitment," then China and Russia will not sit idly by. Moreover, it is unclear how the US is going to promote regional peace and stability from its rebalanced position. Is it through mediation, counter-balancing, supporting multilateralism, or what?

The *PacNet* does not explain why the US should be motivated to rebalance power toward Asia to secure regional peace and stability. Indeed, it argues that the US administration's priorities lie elsewhere and US political will is otherwise engaged, presumably with Ukraine and Iran. Yet it also suggests that the US has sufficient resources to shape

Asia's future, and that the US will understand the importance of taking the lead in new security structures for the Indo-Pacific region. But, how will this change come about? It remains unclear what strategic incentive the US has to rebalance its power to protect regional development and prosperity in the face of growing Sino-US rivalry.

The third problem is that the author gives us no indication of how the US is qualified to make a decisive contribution to resolving the complex regional issues. How does a US intention to rebalance its power translate into sufficient leverage to shape security outcomes in ways conducive to its advantage? Is the US going to resolve regional confrontations and conflicts by sharing the leading role it formerly held with rivals like China and Russia?

A more pervasive problem is the sweeping generalizations presented as statements of fact. For example: "Even US allies don't wish to choose sides," and "A greater US focus on Asia makes strategic sense but success will depend on whether the US can demonstrate to Asians the benefits to them of a US-led regional order." These arguments regarding US decline and increasing Sino-US rivalry appear too simplistic.

The region needs middle powers

Mr. Pacific gives scant consideration to alternative approaches to the maintenance of peace and order in the region: "we will all grow old waiting for leadership to emerge from multilateralism." But the era of the kind of great power politics he describes is drawing to a close, and the emergence of a new type of regional power structure is getting harder to ignore. We are interested, of course, to hear the views of a prominent American on the rebalance of power; but we need to hear how it will make a difference, not to the US, but to nations of the region.

A growing body of opinion argues that while there may be some sort of new type of great power relationship emerging between the US and China, the role of a new set of actors relevant to regional security concerns, those known as "middle powers," has been underestimated.

The US has long been the self-appointed great power of Asia, though even before any serious challenge by China, there were intractable problems arising from this arrangement. Mr. Pacific offers no specifics on how the US rebalance can help to solve the regional security problems; nor is it obvious why regional nations should clearly be on the US side. The deepest mystery concerns how the US intends to rebalance its power without support of the region's middle powers, which have grown increasingly capable and significant over the last two decades. His article seems stuck on the logic of great power relations: the US needs some kind of grand new regional strategy, and rebalancing is part of this, but mere adherence to old patterns is outdated. There will be new kinds

of power relationships among the great, but the importance of the middle powers can no longer be overlooked.

Acknowledge middle powers in the rebalance

Since the end of World War II, the US-led security regime has preserved regional stability in Asia, but this is no longer seen as enough by many nations of the region, China in particular. Several middle powers, including South Korea, have been playing a larger role on the regional stage. A number of new trends in the Indo-Pacific region are undercutting the dominance of the great powers. These include creation of a variety of strategic institutions and groups, the developing prominence of multilateral events and forums, and the growth of integrated technologies that are leveraging the value of such activities. Many nations are seeking alternative solutions to ongoing regional challenges like overcoming inequality, implementing the rule of law, preserving freedom of action, and securing prosperity.

The US claims to be implementing a “whole-of-government” approach in its pivot to Asia, but the effects have been limited, and have not been felt always and everywhere. This has resulted in a marked deterioration in US credibility, with its regional influence suffering a corresponding decline, and this process continues. US allies and partners in the region are asking difficult questions: Should we continue to base our security solely upon the commitment of the US – how much strategic autonomy can we exercise? Which other nations share our values and recognize a mutual interest in preserving peace and stability? How can we make use of such concepts as the ‘Asian way’ and an ‘Asian security framework’ to bind nations cooperatively, and can this encompass the rehabilitation of China as the traditional power in the region?

It is in the US interest to rethink and rebalance its strategic interactions with regional middle powers. There is evidence of this in President Obama’s recent visits to Japan, South Korea, and some members of ASEAN, but there is also a more general process underway in which middle powers are adapting their strategic profiles. For instance, Vietnam and the Philippines are now working together to counter assertive Chinese behavior in disputed maritime areas; and even India is trying, through multilateral cooperation, to get involved in South China Sea issues. There is arising middle-power awareness throughout the region, with powerful economies making significant defense acquisitions and making a growing contribution to regional power structures and security dynamics. These middle powers represent much more capable partners and allies for the great powers than ever before, especially when they cooperate in coalitions. Any rebalance of power undertaken by the US needs to acknowledge this reality: simply continuing with great power rivalry will serve no one effectively, neither the US, nor nations of the region.

What can middle powers do for the US rebalance?

For regional middle powers, great power rivalry is disruptive, producing new threats and unpredictable challenges. But the dynamic instability that results presents an opportunity for middle powers to cooperate, which gives them a better chance of revealing the great powers’ purposes and clarifying ambiguous actions. By combining the considerable capabilities of several nation-states, and by taking a

nonaligned stance between great powers, middle powers can force more attention to their purposes and interests than is currently the case.

We are entering an era in which middle powers can no longer be disregarded: the combination of greater strategic autonomy and more powerful individual capabilities will redefine the strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific. The US shares many interests with middle powers, who also seek to uphold the rule of law and continued economic development. So however it is labeled – as a pivot or as a rebalance of power – when the US rethinks its approach to the Indo-Pacific region, it needs to get over this obsession with great power rivalry and acknowledge the role of middle powers: a dynamic framework is required to deal with a dynamic region.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.