

Missed opportunities in the Pentagon's new maritime strategy by Dennis Blair and Jeffrey W. Hornung

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The Department of Defense recently released its *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy*. Because of rapid security changes in the maritime realm, the document is a welcome declaration, providing much greater clarity on Washington's strategy in the region. While concentrating on the military elements of US policies and actions in the region, the paper is set in the large context of overall US strategy, and includes frequent references to the complementary actions of the Department of State and the Coast Guard. While not detracting from the strength of the document, there are a number of key areas receiving little-to-no mention, resulting in missed opportunities.

The *Strategy* lays out Washington's three maritime objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. These include safeguarding the freedom of the seas; deterring conflict and coercion; and promoting adherence to international law and standards. To achieve these objectives, a detailed strategy follows that includes strengthening US military capacity and stationing more of it in the Asia-Pacific region, working together with US allies and partners to build their military capacities, leveraging military diplomacy, strengthening regional security institutions, and developing regional security architecture.

The strategy is sound. The comprehensive listing of US actions in the region leaves no question as to Washington's commitment. This is welcome given the concerns about whether the US rebalance strategy – first unveiled in 2011 – has been overshadowed by Washington's focus on ISIS, Iran, and Russia. This document demonstrates that the military aspect of the rebalance is alive and well. Whether it be new capabilities or concepts that are specific to the maritime domain, an enhanced forward presence, or a vast array of operations, exercises and training with regional actors, the document explicitly demonstrates a continued US commitment to underwrite regional security and stability while maintaining operational flexibility in spite of the tyranny of distance that comes from not being a resident power. Yet, there are areas where the *Strategy* can use further development.

First, an opportunity was missed in expanding a focus of maritime concerns beyond China. In laying out the strategic context against which the strategy is aimed, China is at the center of practically everything. This includes competing

territorial and maritime claims in the East and South China Seas, military and maritime law enforcement modernization, expanded use of non-military assets to coerce rivals, unsafe air and maritime maneuvers, and land reclamation on disputed features. Understandably, the attention given to China is due to the fact that its actions loom large in the region. Absent, however, is any mention of territorial disputes that do not involve China in the East China Sea (i.e. Japan-South Korea, Russia-Japan), regional piracy, natural disasters, or weapons proliferation. Including these would have provided a much more comprehensive view of the strategic context, in which China is one actor, albeit an important one.

Second, the document misses an opportunity to emphasize the idea of utilizing the US military forces and Coast Guard as engagement tools rather than only deterrence tools. Washington's overall strategy toward China is heavily based on cooperation. For example, in February, Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken said "strengthening our relationship with China is also part and parcel of the rebalance. We seek a relationship with China defined by practical and tangible cooperation on challenges that face both of our nations. The more we can work together, and be seen as working together, the more we can avoid the trap of inevitable rivalry." Although there is an acknowledgement of the importance of working with China, the *Strategy* essentially focuses on ways to hedge against a possible future conflict. This reinforces the view that when the DOD looks at the region, it is planning for the worst. Given the concentration of challenges stemming from China (as outlined in the section on the strategic context), it is hard not to imagine that Beijing is the intended target. What is missing is how the US can engage China (and others) with its military or Coast Guard in ways that reinforce cooperation: in other words, a focus on Phase-1. Toward this end, it would have been helpful to highlight efforts of engagement in common missions via military and Coast Guard assets, like HA/DR, the Pacific Partnership, North Pacific Coast Guard Agencies Forum, or Combined Maritime Forces.

Third, Pacific Island states only exist as basing for US assets. Apart from Guam, there is no mention of the other island states. This is largely a function of the *Strategy* focusing primarily on traditional security concerns. Yet, noticeably lacking are the host of nontraditional security concerns that these states, including the US, are seriously concerned about. This includes trafficking of all sorts, money laundering, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Had the aperture of analysis been broader, the inclusion of these types of security concerns would have demonstrated a greater understanding of the region's security challenges and, in so doing, help dilute the focus on China while giving much-needed attention to the Pacific Island states.

Finally, the Arctic is never mentioned. While it is true that the Department of State is the driver of America's Arctic

policy, the Asia-Pacific is now home to five observer states to the Arctic Council (China, India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea). These countries have stated interests in the Arctic and varying degrees of capabilities to pursue those interests. As Arctic ice continues to melt, assuring cheaper and quicker routes from Asia to Europe, maritime traffic transiting to the Arctic and competition over Arctic affairs will increase. It is extremely shortsighted that the DOD continues to lack an Arctic policy given that the next frontier of maritime challenges will involve the Arctic and these Asia-Pacific states.

Make no mistake, the *Strategy* is a sound document. However, a more comprehensive treatment of the full range of maritime issues would improve US engagement in the region.

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