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OFFSHORE BALANCER US Role in Asia's Emerging Security Architecture

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THE first East Asia Summit (EAS) was held in Kuala Lumpur on December 14 when leaders from the ten Southeast Asian nations met with their counterparts from China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. According to the Kuala Lumpur Declaration, the EAS has been set up as a forum to discuss broad political, economic, and strategic issues of common interest and concern. Russia attended the inaugural summit as an invited observer and is lobbying for full membership. The sole global power, the United States, was conspicuously absent from this Asian gathering. Many analysts argue that this grouping is laying the foundations for an economic (and even political) alliance that one day might rival those of Europe and North America. They further add that Washington is losing the influence it once enjoyed in East Asia.

At the other end of Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that was launched in 2001 is evolving into a broad-based entity revolving around the issues of border control, economic cooperation, and security. The SCO, which is largely driven by China, also includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Earlier this year, the SCO granted observer status to India, Iran, and Pakistan, while Mongolia was granted observer status in 2004. In what seemed like another instance of the US losing its influence in Asia, this time in Central Asia, the SCO called on the US and its coalition partners in the region to specify a timeframe to withdraw their forces from the region after its 2005 summit in Astana.

The emerging wisdom among many strategists and Asia-watchers is that American power is slowly waning in Asia at a time when China is fast emerging as a great power in Asia. Moreover, it is argued that China is fast creating a modern version of the Sino-centric regional order that was first created under the T'ang dynasty (AD 618 – 906) in East and Central Asia by reassuming its historically self-declared role as the "Middle Kingdom." But is the rise of China's power in the early 21st century tantamount to the decline of American power in the region?

The US as an Offshore Balancer

According to the American political scientist John Mearsheimer, the foremost goal of a great power is *regional* hegemony, while preventing other great powers from achieving hegemony in their own regions. As the most powerful state in the system, the hegemon dominates all

the ‘lesser’ states in its region economically and militarily, and no other state (or group of states) in its region has the military capability to put up a serious fight against it.

The US is the only regional hegemon in modern history as it dominates the Western Hemisphere. Throughout the 21st century, the US preferred local great powers to contain or balance the emergence of a potential hegemon in Europe and Northeast Asia. However, when local great powers were unable to do the job, as was the case with Imperial Japan, Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union, the US took appropriate steps (such as the use of force and military alliances) to deal with the potential hegemon. This has led many analysts, including Mearsheimer, to term America as an “offshore balancer.”

The US and Asia’s Emerging Security Architecture

Today, the US is reverting to its traditional role as an offshore balancer in Asia. China’s phenomenal economic rise over the past two decades and its rising military expenditure is giving it the capabilities to emerge as a potential hegemon in East and Central Asia. As in the past, the US wants local great powers – Japan and India – to prevent the emergence of a potential regional hegemon – China. However, given China’s sheer size and rapid rise, the US is not taking any chances. It is in the process of putting in place a politico-military security architecture in the Pacific to prevent the emergence of China as a regional hegemon if the Asian great powers are unable to do the job.

Japan’s defence and security policies have undergone a significant transformation and it is fast becoming a “normal” state, albeit one closely allied with the US. Then President Clinton and Prime Minister Hashimoto in Tokyo reaffirmed the US-Japan security alliance in 1996 when the two leaders signed the Japan-US Joint Declaration on Security. In February 2005, the two countries included the Taiwan question as an element of their “common strategic objectives”. China is very uneasy about the proactive role Japan is beginning to play in the security dimension of its international relations.

Indo-US relations have also undergone a significant transformation since India’s May 1998 nuclear tests. The second Bush administration enunciated its new grand strategy towards India on March 25, 2005, when the State Department announced that America had reached a decision “to help India become a major world-power in the twenty-first century”. Significantly, it further added, “we understand fully the implications, including the military implications of that statement”. Since early 2002, the US and India have held numerous and unprecedented joint exercises involving all military branches. Both India and the US are concerned about the rise of China and a possible Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Some American strategists are of the opinion that America should aid the rise of Indian power even if it eschews a formal alliance as the two sides share similar strategic goals.

Spreading America’s Eggs

However, America is not putting all its eggs in the Japanese and Indian baskets. The US is in the process of setting up a politico-military security architecture centered on the US Pacific Command (PACOM) in Honolulu to deter a rising China from turning aggressive. PACOM, which is the largest of US military area commands, is fast establishing defence-diplomatic ties with traditional allies like Japan, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand, while also cultivating links with new friends like India and Vietnam.

The US now conducts regular military exercises with many of these countries' militaries to promote interoperability. Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly* a few months ago, the American journalist Robert Kaplan mentioned that the US territory of Guam in the Pacific represents the future of US military strategy in the region. The Andersen Air Force base in Guam is the largest repository of weaponry and jet-fuel in the Pacific, and consequently a perfect platform for the projection of American power.

Guam, which is already home to a submarine squadron, is also expanding its naval base. Notably, a carrier battle group from Guam would also be able to reach the coast of Taiwan in just two days. Kaplan also speculated that America could build up a military base in Palau, an archipelago to the south-east of the Philippines that relies upon a defence agreement with the US for its financial aid. As a result of its "war on terror", America has also established its military presence in Central Asia. Moreover, the US is in the process of establishing "cooperative security locations" (CSLs), in East Africa and Asia. CSLs are military bases that the US intends to use in the event of a crisis even without formal basing rights. They represent an informal arrangement between the US military and host governments with private contractors acting as intermediaries.

The contours of a new security architecture are becoming visible in Asia. America is beginning to respond to the rise of China by assuming its historically preferred role as an "offshore balancer."

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