

US policy shift towards Asia Pacific region

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After prolonged US engagement in Middle East and Afghanistan on War on Terror there appears to be a major policy shift of US about its global role. This is evident from US President Barack Obama's recent weeklong visit in the Asia Pacific region and Hillary Clinton's visit to the Philippines and Thailand. US policy makers have now decided to focus on Asia Pacific region where it has political, economic and security interest.

During the visit, President Barack Obama had announced an enhanced security agreement with Australia providing for up to 2,500 military personnel to be stationed in the country in the coming years. The deployment would help maintain what he described as the security architecture in Asia, assist with quick responses to humanitarian disasters and response to threats to the region's crucial shipping sea lanes. While in the Philippines, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed a declaration reaffirming a longstanding mutual defense treaty between the two countries. Later in Thailand, Clinton pledged \$10 million in aid and the assistance of a U.S. naval ship to help relief efforts in the flood-ravaged country.

In a speech to Australian parliament Mr. Obama said the US diplomatic focus would now shift from the war on terrorism to economic and security challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. Emphasizing bilateral security ties with Australia he said, "From the trenches of the First World War to the mountains of Afghanistan, Aussies and Americans have stood together. We have fought together; we have given lives together in every single major conflict of the past 100 years, every single one. The solidarity has sustained us through a difficult decade. We will never forget the attacks of 9/11 that took the lives not only of Americans but people from many nations including Australia".

President Barack Obama also said that the Asia Pacific Region is critical to achieving his highest priority as it is the world's fastest growing region and home to more than half the global economy. With most of the world's nuclear powers and some half of humanity Asia will largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or cooperation, he added.

Brigadier General Ronald Baczkowski of US Marine called the enhanced US Marine deployments consistent with a "geographically distributed, operationally resilient



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force posture in the Pacific" and includes combined arms training with Australian allies.

Upgrading of the 60 year Australian-American alliance is seen in this region as a clear message from Washington to Beijing, amid concerns about possible conflict over the South China Sea. White House Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes called the US-Australian agreement "perfectly appropriate" and supported by other nations in the region. "There is a demand signal from the nations of the region, and this is something that we're doing in concert with one of our closest allies," he said. "So we believe it's not just entirely appropriate, but an important step to dealing with the challenges of the future of the Asia-Pacific region" he added.

In the Philippines, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the US would boost the Philippine's naval defenses and work to ensure there isn't a "big thumb on the scale" that pushes development or strategic issue.

These events clearly indicate that the US is going to reenergize its activities in this region. So question may arise, what makes US to shift its focus from the oil rich Middle East region and Afghanistan to Asia Pacific region after so many years?

The US has been maintaining dominant military and economic posture in this region since after Second World War. After the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 the US

became the only dominant power in the world. After 9/11 the US and her allies got heavily engaged in ME and Afghanistan, fighting the war on terror under Bush-Blair leadership which not only cost them heavily in terms of men, material and resources but also cost the lives of millions of innocent civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Barak Obama, on assuming the office of White House continued US Global War on Terror and shifted his focus from Iraq to Afghanistan against Al Qaida and has been finally able to kill its top leader Osama Bin Laden through a contingency operation by special navy seal team. Despite killing many of the top ranking al Qaeda leaders the US is still stuck in fighting its global campaign against terror in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US and her allies must pay the price of such a prolonged war against humanity. The final result is US and European economy is now on the verge of collapse and going through a difficult period to generate new employments.

On the other hand China had started as an emerging economy after the Cultural Revolution under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. The subsequent Chinese leadership has been able to maintain impressive economic growth, as such today China has been able to raise its regional profile both economically and militarily. China is ASEAN's biggest trading partner, accounting for 11.6 percent of all commerce, compared with 9.7 percent for the U.S. in 2009, according to the latest available statistics.

To recover from the stagnant economy Obama has set a goal of doubling US exports to \$3.14 trillion a year by the end of 2014 and he said Asia is the key to that goal. The US this year has exported more to the Pacific Rim than to Europe.

Against these backdrops it might have led President to say forcefully that the US is an Asia Pacific power and it is here to stay.

Since long, the US has been trying to rein in China's influence and making effort to rally her smaller neighbors with whom she has disputes. The US has already come to strategic engagement/strategic relationship with India with whom China fought war in 1962. Currently, China is having disputes with her smaller neighbors around South China Sea. The assertion of China's sovereignty over the South China Sea is likely to become a flash point for future regional conflict. China's smaller neighbors like the Philippines and Vietnam have competing claims to the Spratly group of islands in the South China Sea that have caused some naval incidents blamed on China. China and Japan had been involved in skirmishes over maritime claims in East China Sea in the past.

The US is already having good relation with Australia, Japan and the Philippines and her forces are stationed there since after World War II. The current US initiative for closure political and military ties with Vietnam to the extent of reviving former military bases of Vietnam War and Hillary Clinton's visit to Myanmar gives a clear indication that the US is highly committed and will be deeply engaged in the Asia Pacific region in order to balance China's influence.

Besides, US appetite for energy is well known. Her deep engagement in ME oil rich region in the past is driven by her motivation of ensuring free flow of oil essentially required to boost her economy. The South China Sea contains oil reserves that may total as much as 213 billion barrels, according to Chinese studies cited in 2008 by the US Energy Information Agency.

With the departure of US from Vietnam in 1975 Asia Pacific region has been in peace for quite some time. Her reentry into this region and effort in reshaping it might lead to uncertain possibilities. The leaders of Asia Pacific nations have to make cautious calculations in order to maintain the peace and stability of this region.

The writer is a retired Brigadier General.

Is China nervous as Myanmar looks west?

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

A series of reforms by Myanmar's President, Thein Sein, a former prime minister and general in a previous military junta, have caught most Myanmar-watchers by surprise.

In late September, a senior official of Myanmar wrote a newspaper article urging foreign countries to be patient with President Thein Sein as he tried to resolve deeply entrenched political, economic and social problems while keeping at bay military hardliners unhappy with the reform program. "If Western countries continue to keep sanctions and even impose more it will only force Myanmar closer to China," the official warned. We do not want our country to become a satellite state of the Chinese government. "Western countries should not force us into a corner where we have no option but to increasingly reply on China."

On 30th November, United States Secretary of State arrived at the capital city Nay Pyi Taw, 460 km north of Yangon (Rangoon). This is the first visit to Myanmar by a US Secretary of State since 1955.

On 1st December, Burmese President Thein Sein has hailed a

was itself a measure of the changes that swept Myanmar since the new President took office. Suu Kyi endorsed the new US engagement with the Myanmar government and called on other countries including China to support the reforms to build a freer, more open society and economy.

Clinton's three-day visit has not only opened isolated Myanmar to intense international scrutiny but has placed the country at the centre of the competing regional interests of the US and China. The gentler face of Myanmar has helped win it a measure of confidence among foreign investors. It is reported that Yangon's 170 or so hotels are filled with potential investors. The country is seeking to privatise its railways and sell-off state-owned real estate including a dozen old government buildings in Yangon.

China's worry

Relations between China and Myanmar have waxed and waned since 1960s when the military took over in 1962. In mid-60s, Myanmar leaders were suspicious when China was trying to foment a Cultural Revolution-style in Myanmar.

Myanmar is China's biggest economic partner and the two countries did \$5.3 billion of trade last year. China has been the biggest foreign investor in the country, with \$15.8 billion worth of investments. Chinese other interests in Myanmar include oil, and natural gas, pipelines that are now under construction, access to the Indian Ocean. The population of many northern cities, such as Mandalay, is estimated to be 40% per cent Chinese.

Given the warm relations with Myanmar, China was stunned when the President suspended on 30th September a controversial Chinese-backed hydro-electric dam project on Irrawaddy River in northern Kachin State, saying the decision was to "respect the will of the people". It is reported that 90% per cent of the electricity generated at the Myitsone dam was to go across the border to China and Chinese investors have poured \$US3.6 billion into the project.

Chinese state media has reacted furiously to Mrs Clinton's visit to Myanmar. The Global Times, which often runs nationalistic editorials, warned the US not to impinge on China's interests. "China has no resistance toward Myanmar [Burma] seeking improved relationship with the West, but it will not accept this while seeing its interests stamped on," said a comment piece in the paper.

There is a view that many Chinese businesspeople think that they will gain from Myanmar opening up to the rest of the world in terms of better business environment.

It is reported that although Chinese influence in Myanmar is dominant, many observers believe that there is no special political dislike of China or Chinese culture in Myanmar. Rather there is the sense of the dangers of being next to an increasingly powerful neighbour and the most populous nation. It is like sleeping with an elephant, how friendly and even tempered the animal is, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.

Nay Zin Latt, a political adviser to Thein Sein, says the President is seeking to reconcile with political opponents in order to expand the economy and encourage the West to reduce sanctions that have hurt the country's poor.

Finally the reforms have impressed fellow ASEAN countries which have decided at the Bali Summit in November to elect Myanmar as the chairman of ASEAN in 2014. One of the jobs as chairman will be to guide the organisation's implementation of its plans for a single market. Observers believe that before 2014, Myanmar wants both political and economic reforms take place steadily and firmly.

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Suu Kyi and the Ethnic Minorities: Crackdown to compromise

FREEDOM TO LEAD



MEDHA CHATURVEDI

AUNG San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's 'super-woman' of democracy will be contesting the upcoming by-elections in the country in December. This statement from her publicist came soon after her party, the National League for Democracy, announced its decision to register itself as a political party and go the parliamentary way. She has not yet decided on the constituency she wants to contest the elections from, among the 48 available constituencies. This decision came after the civilian government in Myanmar scrapped the article in the 2008 Constitution which disqualified Suu Kyi from taking part in any parliamentary process in the country. What impact would this development have on the political future of Myanmar? Would Suu Kyi be able to provide a balance in the political structure of the country? What would this mean for the ethnic minorities in Myanmar? And, how would the west see this step?

Suu Kyi's decision

Since her release this year and subsequent meeting with President Thein Sein and the Union Labour Minister, Aung Kyi (who serves as a mediator between the USDP-led civilian government in Myanmar and Suu Kyi), she has toned down her opposition for the government. She has also expressed willingness to work with President Sein in integrating the ethnic minorities of the country.

Because of her father, Gen Aung San's legacy of the 1947 Panglong Agreement, Suu Kyi has always been seen by the ethnic minorities as someone who sympathizes with their cause and may be instrumental in solving the stalemate with the government. Now, her decision to contest the

upcoming by-elections may further strengthen the case of the ethnic minorities as they will find a strong supporter in Suu Kyi, should she get elected.

However, some ethnic minorities now feel that she is going soft and may not be able to help them in the way they want if she becomes a part of the system. Suu Kyi, since her release, has indicated her desire to convene a second Panglong-like conference with the ethnic minorities' representation, but so far, no concrete action has taken place on that. In addition, her open letter to the government and the ethnic armies in July, asking for an unconditional ceasefire, made some of the ethnic armies a little disappointed in her.

Ethnic Armies: The coming respite

President Sein's representative held a fresh round of talks with five ethnic armies to reach a compromise and put an end to the fighting which intensified since January this year. Reports suggest that the government is urging the insurgent groups to give up arms in return for economic development. Murmurs within the political circle suggest that if the talks materialize, the government may be willing to give up on its 2009 proposal of merging the ethnic armed groups with the Border Guard Forces, under direct military rule. Three ethnic armies The United Wa State Army which is the largest ethnic army, National Democratic Alliance Army and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army - have thus far signed formal ceasefire agreements with the government. The government is in talks with the others too.

As a step towards national reconciliation, President Sein has also suspended the US\$ 3.6 billion dam being built by a Chinese enterprise on River Irrawaddy in Myitsone, Kachin state. A government statement says that the dam was suspended to safeguard the interests of the ethnic minorities in the region.

However, reports suggest that fresh reinforcements are being sent to Kachin, Shan and Karen state in the frontier areas. This signifies that the while the government is calling upon the ethnic armies to come to the table, the dialogue will be initiated by Nay Pyi Taw from a position of authority.

West hopeful

The west is hopeful that this crisis would be solved in the near future. A sign of faith towards the present government is US state secretary, Hillary Clinton's ongoing visit to the country. One of the primary US condition for any future engagement with Myanmar is for the government to resolve the six decades old ethnic conflict, thus, putting an end to the longest running civil war in the world. Clinton also met Suu Kyi and leaders from the major ethnic minorities to push for a compromise.

While, it is too early to tell if these efforts will bear some concrete results, this is the first time that the government is taking proactive measures to solve the ethnic conflict in the country rather than just repressing it. May be, it is time to view the future developments with cautious optimism and patience as they unfold.

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