

# The US Military Alliances Supporting the Asia-Pacific Rebalance Strategy<sup>\*</sup>

*Li Chen*<sup>†</sup>

In June 2015, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced at the Shangri-La Dialogue that the implementation of the Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy had entered a new stage, and that the US Department of Defense would focus on deepening alliances and partnerships, optimizing military deployments, and strengthening the development of weapons platforms and capacities.<sup>1</sup> The military alliance system should also readjust during this stage. First, US foreign and military strategies need to align with the interests of the allies in order to ensure full political recognition and support. Second, the deployment of US forces mainly relies on the allies' bases and corresponding logistics support. Finally, due to current political and economic bottlenecks within the US, and various global security threats, the US can only deploy a limited capacity of military forces in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, the US needs its allies to increase military investment, strengthen combat readiness and cooperative combat capabilities, and assume more related obligations.

As the North Korean nuclear program, disputes in the East and South China Seas, and other sensitive issues in the Western Pacific, heat up, the US has accelerated the pace of improving its alliance system. In 2015, the US and Japan revised the Guidelines for US-

---

\* This article is originally written in Chinese.

† Li Chen is Lecturer at the School of International Studies, Renmin University of China.

Japan Defense Cooperation, and Japan also amended relevant national security bills, which further strengthened the US-Japan alliance and expanded US-Japan military security cooperation. After the Philippines officially approved the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, the US once again obtained the right to use the military base in the Philippines. After the US organized the “shoulder to shoulder” exercise with the Philippines in 2016, the US A-10 attack aircraft and HH-60 helicopters involved in the exercise were stationed at the Clark Air Base, and began to cruise around the Huangyan Island in the South China Sea.<sup>2</sup> US Defense Secretary Carter announced that the naval forces of the US would launch a joint cruise in the South China Sea together with the Philippine navy in March 2016, and provide the Philippines with aid worth US\$42.5 million in accordance with the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative for the purposes of information sharing, threat identification and collaboration to address related challenges in relevant maritime areas.<sup>3</sup> Through integration, US military cooperation with its allies in the Asia-Pacific region has gone beyond the traditional framework of bilateral military alliance. Provoked by North Korea’s new round of nuclear, satellite launch and ballistic missile tests, the US, Japan and South Korea have formed a mechanism of trilateral cooperation. US-Japan-Australia cooperation or US-Japan-Philippines cooperation in the South China Sea is realized through joint exercises, training and exchange visits of warships and warplanes.

China and the US have engaged in partial military competition in the Asia-Pacific region, and some US allies have maritime territorial disputes with China. Therefore, the trend and influence of the US military alliance, especially its strategic adjustment and preparation for high-tech conventional warfare, is noteworthy. Either underestimation or overestimation of the strategic adjustment and combat readiness of the US alliance system will lead China to a somewhat

---

Either underestimation or overestimation of the strategic adjustment and combat readiness of US alliance system will lead to a disadvantageous position for China.

disadvantageous position. Only by taking into account the historical experience, geographical environment, and strategic and operational momentum and constraints can China better grasp the tendency and influence of the US military alliance system.

### I. A PRODUCT OF THE COLD WAR

The current US Asia-Pacific military alliance system is closely related to the Cold War. The US-Soviet confrontation, as well as the resulting changes, crises and local conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region, led to the military alliance between the US and some Asia-Pacific countries. However, to further study the origin and characteristics of the US Asia-Pacific military alliance system, one should not only focus on the perspective of the Cold War.

International alliances have formed repeatedly throughout modern history mainly due to international anarchy, international competition, strength disparity, coincidence and conflicts of interest. Before the 20th century, when Europe dominated the world, traditional military alliances were influenced by two factors. The first was the changes to the nature of warfare. A great power needed a conversion from peacetime to wartime before getting involved in any dynasty wars of the modern era or any industrialized warfare in the mid-19th century and the early 20th century. The second was the geographical environment of Europe. The geographic proximity between the European powers was conducive to the rapid wartime coordination, cooperation and formation of military alliances. The allies, based on these two factors, maintained their standing army sizes and equipment levels during peacetime whilst conducting strategic or operational coordination and cooperation during wartime.

The two world wars fought in the 20th century, especially the Second World War, had a huge impact on post-war military alliances. World War II saw fully mechanized warfare. Under given conditions, the pace of warfare was accelerated, coupled with correspondingly increasing destructiveness. For example, Germany launched an all-round offensive on Western Europe in May 1940, defeating France in June. It turned on the Soviet Union in June

1941, approaching Moscow in winter the same year. Japan initiated the Pacific War in December 1941. By spring 1942, it inflicted heavy casualties on the naval and air forces of the US and the UK while capturing the major parts of Southeast Asia. Lessons the US learned in World War II included the concept of global security and prevention of reoccurring strategic raids. Against the background of the Cold War, the US further strengthened its military cooperation with its allies, including strategic planning, military force deployment and operations even in times of peace, in order to effectively deter the Soviet Union and make rapid responses to possible attacks and other threats.

The geographical differences between the Asia-Pacific region and Europe had also some impact on the alliance policy. Due to the geographic proximity among the European allies, prior to mechanized warfare, their respective military buildup provided some sort of safeguard to their allies and generated some sort of deterrence to their potential opponents. However, great powers outside the Asia-Pacific focusing on the region, in order to maintain their alliances with countries in the region, had to rely on remote power projection and reliable military presence in the region. For example, in the late 19th century the UK deployed the China Station with battleships in the Far East through its naval bases in Singapore and Hong Kong. The Russian Pacific Fleet and the Trans-Siberian Railway enabled Russia to truly establish a solid military presence and power projection capability in the Far East. Before and after the First Sino-Japanese War, policy-makers of the late Qing Dynasty, including Li Hongzhang, realized this and began seeking alliance with the UK and Tsarist Russia to counterbalance Japan. In the early 20th century, Japan, to contend against Russia, allied with the UK because of the British military presence in the Far East. Different from the UK in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the US after World War II could not support its frontier presence through colonial defense and deployment. After the independence of the Philippines, the US lacked the base supporting its military deployment and presence in the western Pacific. As a result, especially in regard to the first island chain, the US could only rely on the military allies in the western

Pacific region for the use of military bases, so as to maintain the military presence, fulfill the alliance obligations and win the true trust of its allies.

Thus, the US Asia-Pacific military alliance system formed in the Cold War was subject to the influence of three factors. First, the background of the Cold War provided the strategic need for the US to form alliances with its allies. Second, the development of military technology and the evolution of warfare, especially the need to effectively deter the Soviet Union and prevent strategic raids, necessitated the US to assume peacetime alliance obligations and maintain close military cooperation with its allies. Third, due to the influence of geographical factors, the US had to station troops in the territories of its allies and use their bases for its forward deployment and presence to support the allies. Although the Soviet Union disappeared after the Cold War, traditional security issues, such as military competition, geopolitics and maritime territorial disputes in the international relations of the Asia-Pacific, remain for a long time to come, and they provide the political atmosphere for the US to maintain its alliance system. The geographical environment and military technology determine the way of existence and operation of the US military alliance system. In other words, the US assumes the obligations to its allies in peacetime, maintains close military cooperation with them, and keeps military presence and forward deployment in their territories and bases.

## II. COLD WAR EXPERIENCE: GEOGRAPHICAL ENVIRONMENT, THREATS AND MILITARY ALLIANCE

In the early stage of the Cold War, the US established two military alliance systems, namely, the bilateral military alliance system for the Asia-Pacific region and the European multilateral military alliance system of NATO. By comparing the organizational and operational differences between the two systems, we can get a further understanding of the characteristics of the Asia-Pacific military alliance system. The Asia-Pacific alliance system is mainly for coastal or maritime war zones, while NATO is designed more for land-based terrestrial warfare. Faced with different threats, the

two alliance systems bring about different combat readiness and assignment of rights and obligations between the allies.

During the Cold War, NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organization were at a stalemate in Central Europe. The most serious military threat to NATO came from the ground forces and tactical air forces of the Warsaw Treaty Organization. NATO gave top priority to the “Central Front” on the borders of East and West Germany in military strategic planning. The Soviet Union and other member states of the Warsaw Treaty Organization maintained an absolute superiority over NATO in terms of ground forces. In the prolonged arms race between them, the ground weaponry of the Soviet Union could be on a par with that of the NATO which gave emphasis to advanced technology. During the Cold War, the US pursued two offset strategies, i.e. the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the 1950s and the emphasis on technology application and tactical innovation at the operational level in the 1970s. Nevertheless, both failed to fundamentally shift the balance of military power in Europe. During World War II, the US, the UK and the Soviet Union all conducted large-scale armored and mechanized operations in Europe. In the Cold War, the major ground forces of the two military blocs were mechanized troops and tactical air forces, with continuous improvement in their weapons’ firepower, maneuverability and protection performance, in addition to rapid upgrading in their command and control systems and intelligence gathering and analysis systems. The two sides’ theories on ground combat, especially the Grand Depth Operational theory of the Soviet Union and the AirLand Battle theory of NATO in the 1980s, were constantly revised and perfected in line with the changes in future battlefield situations. Therefore, the two military blocs estimated the possibility of large-scale armored and mechanized operations in Europe before a nuclear war. European allies of NATO held, due to limited territory, they would all face a life-and-death situation once a war broke out.

To adapt to Europe’s strategic situation on land, NATO’s military system attached great importance to combat readiness, deterrence and operation. At the strategic level, NATO laid great store by the investigation and mobilization of the strategic

resources of the member states. Besides, it established a top-down command system like that of the armed forces of a single nation and formed a joint operational command chain starting from the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) to the joint operation commands and further down to the combat troops. Forces from different countries, such as the US Army (the Fifth and Seventh Armies) and the British Army of the Rhine, were deployed in the first or second line or rear areas according to actual strategic needs and unified operational plans. The existing command systems of the forces of the members states were weakened at the strategic and operational levels. In terms of daily combat readiness, NATO allies unified the weaponry systems to facilitate logistical support and joint operations; the combat theories and regulations of the various countries were also revised according to the needs of alliance combat. In the 1970s, the US hoped for more maneuvering space for defensive operations, which was inconsistent with the homeland defense tactics of West German forces. Hence, the US army decided to help defend West Germany and unify the operational doctrine with it, which weakened US combat maneuverability.<sup>4</sup>

For better combat readiness, NATO constantly revised all levels of combat plans and organized battlefield preparation, joint exercises and training. During the Cold War, European allies of NATO continuously cut their military spending for economic development and social improvement in view of the US security commitments. This restricted the overall military strength of NATO. Nevertheless, in the face of the threat from the Soviet Union, NATO maintained a relatively high level of combat readiness in peacetime.

During the Cold War, the Asia-Pacific security environment was markedly different from that of Europe. First of all, except South Korea and South Vietnam, the majority of the Asia-Pacific allies of the US were not linked to the Soviet Union and its allies by land; nor were most of its Asia-Pacific allies connected by land. As a result, the US Asia-Pacific allies, unlike their European counterparts, suffered less strategic pressure from the rivaling camp thanks to separation by sea. For example, even when North Korea had had the chance to unite the Korean Peninsula during

the Korean War, it did not mean that Japan's defense system would collapse. Second, the absolute superiority of the US naval and air forces and its naval supremacy further prevented its allies from being threatened. The Soviet Union and the member states of the Warsaw Treaty Organization could launch large-scale land attacks against NATO's European allies. Due to the long-standing shortcomings of naval and air forces of the Soviet Union and its allies in terms of technology, arms of services and cooperative combat, the Soviet Union and its allies could not possibly win the command of the seas from their rivals and hardly transport their land forces to most allies of the US in the Asia-Pacific region. In the 1950s, the Soviet Union had relatively limited strategic objectives for the Asia-Pacific region. It partially supported North Korea in the Korean War and China during the Taiwan Straits crises, both indicating that it did not want to trigger large direct conflicts with the US in the Asia-Pacific.

Although South Korea, South Vietnam and some other Asia-Pacific allies of the US faced rather serious external threats in certain periods, the greatest challenge they encountered during the Cold War came from home. For example, Japan, South Korea and South Vietnam undertook the arduous task of all-round post-war reconstruction. Other US allies, like the Philippines, as newly independent nation states just after World War II, were made to undertake primarily the tasks of establishing domestic institutions and developing the economy. The different development trajectories of Japan, South Korea and South Vietnam during the Cold War, indicated that, once the promise of the US in relation to security was fulfilled, domestic construction and development served as the basis for responding to domestic and external threats and tests. Of course, the US was also aware of this. It not only provided military protection to its allies, but also offered aids and created favorable conditions for their economic development. When also taking into consideration the advantages unique to the maritime war zones, the bilateral alliance system of the US in the Asia-Pacific region featured one-way obligation and limited combat readiness. In other words, the US not only provided military protection to but also safeguarded the sea power of its allies in an attempt to maintain the



maritime ties between itself and its allies. On the part of the allies, what they did was only to provide the conditions necessary for the US to station troops and perform garrison duties; the duties of their militaries were limited to self-defense, and their forces maintained a low level of combat readiness. Due to the serious threats from North Korea, South Korea has realized operational command integration with the US, maintaining a high state of combat readiness, a case unique among the Asia-Pacific allies of the US.

It should be noted that the Asia-Pacific bilateral military alliance system is relatively more sensitive to changes in the security environment. For example, the impact of the Korean War laid a foundation for the establishment of the Asia-Pacific military alliance system of the US. The US-Taiwan military alliance was officially formed during the first Taiwan Straits crisis in the 1950s and ended in the 1970s when Sino-US relations thawed. It was under the shadow of defeat in the Vietnam War and increasing military threat from the Soviet Union, particularly the intensifying efforts made by the latter to develop an ocean-going navy, the US felt it lacked the power to take the challenge all by itself in the Asia-Pacific region. Eventually, such development of the events helped the birth of the first Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation and the extension of the activities and tasks of the Japanese maritime self-defense forces.

### III. NEED OF “REBALANCE” STRATEGY” FOR MILITARY ALLIANCE

In the twenty years since end of the Cold War, changes in the security climate of the Asia-Pacific region caused the launch of the Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy. With the conclusion of the Cold War, the US became the sole superpower; it has been working on building an international order under its leadership, without any intention to change its Asia-Pacific alliance system whatsoever. The long-standing traditional security problems in the Asia-Pacific region, including the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Straits, did not disappear along with the end of the Cold War. Rather, they began to turn salient in the mid-1990s. Hence, the US changed its Asia-Pacific strategic focus to addressing the above-mentioned

regional security issues. Thanks to the bonus it reaped in its arms expansion to offset the threat from the Soviet Union in the late stage of the Cold War, the US enjoyed absolute advantage over all Asia-Pacific countries, including China, in terms of military forces, particularly naval and air forces.” In December 2000, Jiang Zemin pointed out in a speech at an enlarged meeting of the Central Military Commission that “Developing countries have again fallen far behind developed countries in military technology. The former military-technical superiority that Western countries, with their guns and cannons, had over the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, which had only broadswords and long spears, has been replaced by a new military-technical superiority that the developed countries, with their informatized armies, have over developing countries, with their mechanized or semi-mechanized armies. A serious new imbalance in military power has thus developed.”<sup>5</sup> Due to the “era gap”, the US forces stationed in the Asia-Pacific region could easily manage regional security issues, needing limited military help from its local allies. In 1997, although the US and Japan amended the Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation and added relevant clauses on “peripheral events”, they mainly emphasized Japan’s obligations in logistics support, information gathering, mine clearance, etc.<sup>6</sup> The US was fully involved in the Afghanistan War and Iraq War after the September 11 attacks and mired in the 2007 financial crisis, both of which reduced its attention to the affairs in the Asia-Pacific region and the modernization of its naval and air forces in the region. On the part of China, thanks to long-term economic growth, it has seen quick increase of its influence in the Asia-Pacific, widely known as the “charm offensive”. Steady progress has also been observed in its military modernization, and the capability of its naval and air forces has been continuously strengthened. In the early 21st century, US strategic circles began to worry about the so-called anti-access and area-denial threat from China.<sup>7</sup> It is thus clear that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the financial crisis and China’s rise all had certain impact on the political, economic and military influence of the US in the Asia-Pacific region.

After the Obama administration took office, the US strengthened

its leadership and influence in the Asia-Pacific to reverse its passive situation in international strategy; it implemented the Asia-Pacific “rebalance” strategy in order to respond to China’s rise and get more benefit from the development of the Asia-Pacific. Current US strategic planning and implementation indicates that the US pursues diverse objectives by multiple means. On April 28, 2016, US Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken said at a hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives that the “rebalance” aims at deepening US strategic, economic and diplomatic ties with the Asia-Pacific region commensurate with its importance to the US. The US implements the “rebalance” strategy mainly by bolstering its treaty allies, deepening engagement with emerging powers including China, strengthening ASEAN and other regional institutions, enhancing its military posture, promoting trade and investment, advancing democratic reform, and creating new networks of trilateral and multilateral partnerships.<sup>8</sup>

So far, the Asia-Pacific “rebalance” strategy, going beyond a pure diplomatic or military strategy, aims at precaution and deterrence against China, rather than a reproduction of the “containment” strategy employed against the Soviet Union in the Cold War, or comprehensive military confrontation with China and preparation for a large-scale war with China. The US “rebalance” strategy requires its military alliances to cooperate mainly in the following three aspects:

First, the US hopes to strengthen its leadership in the Asia-Pacific through military alliances. The US keeps military alliance relations with major Asia-Pacific countries such as Japan, South Korea and Australia, which play a major role in their bilateral relations. Because of the military alliances, the US and its allies have stronger and firmer bilateral relations. As the starting point and pillar of the “rebalance” strategy, the military alliance itself needs to be upgraded. In addition, the allies’ worries about the rise of China and the escalation of maritime territorial disputes have been taken advantage of by the US to consolidate its military alliances. By consolidating military alliances and bilateral relations with its allies, the US gains more support from its allies in dealing with regional, multilateral, and even global issues.

Second, the US military alliance is also related to its economic and trade arrangements in the Asia-Pacific region. In the course to promote the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the US faces huge pressure from its domestic politics and allies in the Asia-Pacific, which can be relieved only through efforts consolidating the military alliances. For their worries about China, the allies of the US in the Asia-Pacific believe that it is necessary for them to further strengthen the alliance relations with the US and repay it with certain concessions. Against the background of the economic crisis, US public opinion holds a tough stance in trade negotiations. Regarding the issue of security, the mainstream public opinion is inclined to believe that it is morally and politically right to support the allies. Hence, in mobilizing domestic support, US policymakers stress the need to hold in the hands of the US the rule-making power in the Asia-Pacific region, and keep pointing out the geopolitical impact of the TPP.

Finally, the US Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy emphasizes multiple military requirements for its alliance. Japan, Australia and other allies with stronger military capabilities can support the US in its global strategy. By consolidating military alliance relations with its allies and helping them improve their military capabilities, the US can gain more military support outside the Asia-Pacific region. Second, the US has to respond to a variety of threats even in the Asia-Pacific region, including the North Korean nuclear weapon program and long-range missiles, natural disasters and other non-traditional security threats; this calls its allies to enhance military strength and assume more responsibilities. Currently, the US is sparing no effort to promote trilateral cooperation among the US, Japan and South Korea, aiming at addressing the North Korean issues. Third, in the face of the growing military strength of China, the US needs not only to enhance its military deployment but also to help its allies develop their military forces so as to ensure overall superiority, ensure the deterrence against China and better cope with possible conflicts due to the escalation of crises. The foundation of all these is the alliance system.

The system of military alliance is one of the pillars and means of the US Asia-Pacific strategy and the “rebalance” strategy. The

---

An all-round confrontation with China is not the strategic objective of the US and its allies, and the US military alliance system will not become a tool of comprehensively confronting China.

military alliance system should not only serve the US political, economic and trade strategies for the Asia-Pacific region, but also meet diverse military needs of the US in the region. The US needs to consolidate the alliance partnerships to exert military pressure on China by taking advantage of the Asia-Pacific countries' concerns over China. Nevertheless, an all-round confrontation with China is not the strategic objective of the US and its allies, and the military alliance system of the US will not become a tool of

comprehensively confronting China like NATO had during the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

#### IV. MILITARY PRESSURE ON CHINA

Since the implementation of the rebalance strategy, the US has consolidated military alliance relations with its major allies in the Asia-Pacific region by means of reaffirming alliance obligations, adjusting force deployment, helping its allies upgrade their military capabilities and enhancing combat readiness through joint planning, exercise, training and patrolling. This has imposed certain strategic pressure on China. However, whether the growing pressure can completely change the military strategic situation in the Asia-Pacific region needs to be further examined.

The current military situation in the Asia-Pacific has two features. First, a certain relationship of military competition exists between China on the one hand and the US and its allies on the other. However, instead of regarding military forces as the only means of achieving the designed objectives and resolving disputes, all relevant parties, including China and the US, also have worked hard to prevent any practical conflict from occurring. Second, the gap between China and the US in military technology has been gradually narrowing towards a "generation gap" from the past

“era gap”, signifying the end of the “absolute dominance” of the US in the 1990s has disappeared. Yet, the military superiority of the US in naval and air force as well as technological capability remains, giving rise to a situation of relative military superiority in the western Pacific, i.e. China enjoying relative military superiority over the major allies of the US while the US or the US and its allies enjoying relative superiority over China. Due to such relative superiority in naval and air operations under the conditions of high technology and widespread IT application, it is possible for either of the two sides to strike a heavy blow to the other, and even seize the initiative. In the 1982 war over the Falkland Islands between Argentina and the UK, quite a number of major warships of the UK were destroyed or damaged by the Argentinian forces despite the relative naval and air superiority Britain held around the islands. This shows that the Argentinian forces had the ability to hit the British aircraft carriers. Once the carriers were damaged or lost fighting capacity, it would be possible that the British forces completely lost the initiative in the war. Therefore, if any naval and air conflict breaks out in the western Pacific, all parties involved would be subject to extremely grave strategic risks. Such strategic risks would compel all the parties to pay serious attention to crisis management and conflict prevention.

It is hard for the US to break the existing situation by consolidating the Asia-Pacific military alliance. First of all, as said above due to the influence from geographical environment and Cold War, the bilateral military alliances the US established in the Asia-Pacific, including the US-Japan alliance, on which the US relies in many sensitive areas, have, for quite a long time, concentrated on local defense. They are not fit for trans-regional and long-range offensive and defensive operations in terms of strategy, command coordination and weaponry. In accordance with the Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation revised in April 2015, in case Japan encounters any maritime attack, Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) will be commissioned mainly to defend Japan’s major ports and straits, and ships and vessels in the surrounding waters, while the US forces will extend support to Japan’s military operations. If the US and Japan decide to respond to an armed attack against a

country other than Japan, the two countries will cooperate mainly in mine sweeping, escort operations and attack of enemies' sea lines of communication.<sup>9</sup> In an article published in *The Washington Quarterly* (spring 2016), two US strategists pointed out that, after the revision of the Security Bill, Japan, in contrast with other "middle power" allies of the US, is more restricted in the scenarios that permit use of force, the legislative intervention in military force deployment and execution of relevant decisions, the long-range delivery capacity and the export of weaponry. Japan will not fight side by side with the US unless its survival is threatened, so the US should not have very high expectations upon Japan.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the US-Japan alliance, which started from a low base, is still inferior to NATO in strategy and collective security guarantees.

Second, although the US military alliances may further strengthen combat readiness against China, they will not resort to an all-round confrontation with China due to a variety of constraints. First of all, the US military strategy is subject to its overall strategy towards China. At a hearing held by the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on April 27, 2016, Tony Blinken stressed that the US policy towards China consists of three parts: 1) deepening and expanding pragmatic cooperation based on common interests; 2) facing, resolving and reducing divergences; and 3) controlling serious conflicts of interest.<sup>11</sup> The US military strategy towards China is also an integral part of its global military strategy. According to the US National Military Strategy for 2015, the US faces major military challenges from Russia, China, Iran, North Korea and terrorism. The military challenge from China is not even the first traditional great-power challenge. At the hearing on February 2017 defense budget held by the Senate Committee on Appropriations on April 27, 2016, Joseph F. Dunford Jr., Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, pointed out that the Russian military "presents the greatest array of threats to U.S. interests". He also pointed out that China's military modernization and growing military presence "weaken our comparative military superiority" and "increase the possibility of misunderstanding and misjudgment".<sup>12</sup> Besides, although the major Asia-Pacific allies of the US have competitive relations and territorial disputes with

China, they do not intend to confront China comprehensively. In 2014, China and Japan resumed high-level contacts and the maritime and air liaison mechanism. When visiting China in April 2016, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida stressed: 1) China's peaceful development is an opportunity for Japan; 2) Japan and China, as the world's third and second largest economies, assume important responsibilities for the development and prosperity of Asia and the world; and 3) Japan is willing to reaffirm the consensus that "Japan and China are partners, and do not pose a threat to each other," and to make joint efforts with China to enhance mutual understanding and trust, expand exchanges and cooperation in various fields, properly control problems and divergences, continuously consolidate positive aspects, and build new bilateral relations.<sup>13</sup> Finally, China attaches importance to developing bilateral relations with the US and its Asia-Pacific allies, and sticks to the strategic principle of active defense, namely, the principle of defense, self-defense and posterior counterattack, or the principle of "we will not attack unless we are attacked; if we are attacked, we will certainly counterattack".<sup>14</sup> China safeguards national sovereignty and stability in the handling of maritime territorial disputes.

If an all-round confrontation is unfolded at the strategic level, the US could hardly break the constraints arising in its current foreign policy and domestic politics and economy even by improving the military alliance system. For example, the US military deployment in the Asia-Pacific region and its military assistance to its allies shall be limited by the governments' budgets. If the overall size of the Navy remains unchanged, the US shall have limited room for global adjustment of its forces. At the end of the Cold War, the Reagan administration increased the number of naval vessels from 479 to 600, greatly enhancing its sea power. On the contrary, the US plans to only increase its navy vessels from 278 in 2009 to 308 in 2021 due to budgetary constraints.<sup>15</sup> Due to limited size and slow growth, the US Navy has almost completed the task of deploying 60 percent of its forces in the Asia-Pacific region. On May 6, 2016, Scott H. Swift, commander of the Pacific Fleet, pointed out that the US Navy had deployed 57-58 percent of its total forces in the Asia-Pacific



region, with the remaining part under construction.<sup>16</sup> According to the US Council on Foreign Relations, due to budgetary constraints and security assistance to Europe and the Middle East, the actual maritime security aid to the US Southeast Asian allies and partners was even less than that before the implementation of the “rebalance” strategy five years ago, with a 19-percent drop from 2010 to 2015. If inflation during those five years is taken into account, the downward trend of the aid will be more prominent.<sup>17</sup> Although Japan has obtained more domestic legal mandate for the use of armed forces through the amendment of the Security Bill, the development and use of its actual military capabilities are effectively restricted by domestic problems such as an aging population.<sup>18</sup> Even if all countries maintain a steady rise in military investment and strategy, the current military strategic pattern in the Asia-Pacific region remains difficult to be broken.

At the operational level, the US Asia-Pacific alliance system based on the assumption of maritime and air conflicts with China also has defects. First of all, of the multiple bilateral alliances the US has established in the Asia-Pacific region, only the US-Japan alliance shows potential and willingness to get involved in competition in all areas between the US and China. In the Asia-Pacific region, the US armed forces have obvious advantages over China in combat experience, training level, overall technical level of weapon platforms, and cyber and electronic warfare. But, it is also subject to some limitations. Due to the limited force deployed in the front, there will be hardly any opportunity for the US to engage in symmetric fighting with China’s corresponding arms of the military, such as surface-to-surface or air-to-air combats in China’s surrounding waters and airspace. Rather, the US force has to face the “anti-access” and “area denial” joint operations of all the arms of the Chinese military. Take the US Navy for example. What is deployed in the western Pacific is mainly the Seventh Fleet; its main force includes one nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, 10-14 *Aegis* cruisers and destroyers, eight to twelve nuclear submarines, four amphibious assault ships, and four minesweepers.<sup>19</sup> According to the “Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2016” released by the US Department of

Defense, the East Sea Fleet and South Sea Fleet of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy have in total 16 destroyers, 40 frigates (excluding Type 056 light frigates), six nuclear submarines, and 38 conventional submarines.<sup>20</sup> Within the first island chain, the Seventh Fleet has no obvious advantage over China's naval and air forces should a conflict break out. Although Japanese naval and air forces have fairly strong defensive and combat capabilities, their offensive capability is limited without the long-range precision strike weapons, such as the Tomahawk cruise missiles. Japan's naval and air forces can enhance the combat effectiveness of the US operational group, but do not have the capability of opening up the second battlefield independently. Being pessimistic about the combat capability of the US-Japan alliance in the western Pacific, the US strategic academics put forward a variety of proposals, including the sale of Tomahawk cruise missiles to Japan, achieve distributed destruction among allies, or making Japan enhance deployment around the southwest island chain to passively contain China's naval and air forces from opening up a second battlefield.<sup>21</sup> The US scholars who were even more pessimistic about the comparison of conventional power proposed to enable the NATO's "tripwire" strategy from the early Cold War period. That is, once encountering an attack, the US should pretend to use nuclear weapons and counterattack in the case of losing the western Pacific battlefield.<sup>22</sup> As the discussion in the US strategic and military circles on China's "anti-access" capacity, China's military capabilities and threats are overestimated. However, such discussion helps give expression to the operational defects of the US and its alliance system, which have not yet been effectively offset.

An important intention to strengthen the US Asia-Pacific alliance system is to increase military pressure on China. It has not brought about any change to the strategic pattern between China and the US. From the strategic perspective, the strengthening of the alliance system has started from low combat readiness; it has not changed the existing pattern of military competition in any way, and all parties have no intention to engage in overall mobilization and confrontation. Due to the constraints of strategic choice, the US has a limited space to strengthen the Asia-Pacific military alliance.

The current military balance of power in the Asia-Pacific shall not change even taking into consideration China's efforts being made to strengthen and develop its military forces. In such a context, the various parties need to make preparations for possible conflicts for the worst scenario; they also have to further enhance crisis management.

## V. CONCLUSION

The military alliance system is an important pillar on which the US maintains its leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. The Asia-Pacific geographical environment, technological development, great power competition, and traditional security issues determine the long-term existence of the US alliance system and forward deployment. In the implementation of the Asia-Pacific "rebalance" strategy, the objectives of the US to strengthen the military alliance system include strengthening its influence over its major allies and regional affairs, advance its own trade and investment agenda, and respond to diversified global and regional security challenges. Guarding against and deterring China is only one of the objectives. It is undeniable that the US initiative to strengthen its alliance system in the Asia-Pacific to guard against and deter China includes such components as increasing the deployment of military forces, reaffirming its security commitments, giving aid to its allies to strengthen military forces, and carrying out joint strategic planning, exercises, training and patrolling with its allies, all of which inevitably have aggravated military competition between China and the US and the security dilemma in the Asia-Pacific, increased the probability of misjudgment and accidents, and brought new challenges to China's military strategy of active defense as well as its efforts in safeguarding its sovereignty and maintaining stability. Meanwhile, it is necessary to point out that the steps of the US to strengthen its Asia-Pacific alliances have been subject to limits from the domestic development and strategic choices of the US and its Asia-Pacific allies, which makes it difficult to bring any major change to the comparison of military force and strategic pattern in the Asia-Pacific now.

The US plunges into a strategic dilemma in the process of strengthening the military alliances. In order to exert greater influence over its allies and win their trust, the US needs to respond to its allies' worries about China in both words and deeds. However, such response cannot remove any of the relevant security problems. On the contrary, it is likely to make Sino-US relations more vulnerable to disturbance and impact of "third-party factors", which may possibly result in continuous escalation and fermentation of the security issues concerned, the allies putting forward higher requirements to the US, and Sino-US relations suffering more. Such a spiral escalation may produce a huge impact on the Asia-Pacific strategic pattern.

The behavioral norms and dialogue mechanism at the operational level cannot effectively prevent and control the spiral escalation mentioned above. Instead of avoiding the basic strategic issues, both parties, i.e. China and the Asia-Pacific alliance led by the US, should work to prevent any irreversible confrontation and give up the paradigm that it is impossible to realize strategic mutual trust. Sino-US military and strategic relations are components and subject to constraints of the basic framework of their bilateral relations. China adheres to a defensive national defense policy and the strategic concept of active defense. The US alliance system is, to a large extent, also a defensive system aimed at maintaining the status quo. The territorial disputes existing between China and some allies of the US do not pose a threat to the survival of any party involved. Despite competition and differences, it is still necessary for all parties involved to take it as a strategic objective to maintain peace and avoid conflict in the region.

Although the US hopes to further refine the obligations and rights of its Asia-Pacific allies and enable them to improve military strength and play a greater role, the US, in the near future, will still play the dominant role in that it not only determines on its own initiative the adjustment of the direction and intensity of the military deployments in the Asia-Pacific, but also decides the growth of the military forces of its allies by way of the aid and support it supplies. Its domestic political and economic status quo is not favorable for the US to vigorously mobilize its domestic resources to strengthen

the military, unless drastic changes occur in the international arena. Therefore, in the face of challenges from the US Asia-Pacific alliance, China should make necessary military preparations for the worst. Now, the US has been adjusting its deployment in the Asia-Pacific region and consolidating the military advantages of itself and its allies, striving to overcome operational and technical shortcomings, and strengthening long-range strike and sea control operations. So, in the coming years, China will face a more symmetrical combat environment. It is necessary that it be prepared in weapon development, combat theory research, joint operation planning and battlefield construction. Moreover, China should not oversee the influence of its strategic choice and implementation on other parties. As long as Sino-US relations remain relatively stable, and the US and its allies continue to get benefit from the development of China, the US alliance system will have a lasting impact on the evolution of Sino-US relations, to hardly become a destructive force.

---

<sup>1</sup> “A Regional Security Architecture Where Everyone Rises”, May 30, 2015, US Department of Defense, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606676/iiss-shangri-la-dialogue-a-regional-security-architecture-where-everyone-rises>, accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “Pacific Air Forces A-10s, HH-60s Fly First Air Contingent Missions in Philippines”, April 22, 2016, US Pacific Command, <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/tabid/5693/Article/741238/pacific-air-forces-a-10s-hh-60s-fly-first-air-contingent-missions-in-philippines.aspx>, accessed June 4, 2016.

## *The US Military Alliances Supporting the Asia-Pacific Rebalance Strategy*

<sup>3</sup> “Joint Press Conference by Secretary Carter and Secretary Gazmin in Manila, Philippines”, April 14, 2016, US Department of Defense, <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/721687/joint-press-conference-by-secretary-carter-and-secretary-gazmin-in-manila-phili>, accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Romie L. Brownlee and William J. Mullen III, *Changing an Army: An Oral History of William E. DePuy*, Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1988, pp. 190-193.

<sup>5</sup> “Mechanization and Informatization Are Dual Historical Tasks of Army Building”, December 11, 2000, Jiang Zemin, Vol. III, *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin* (English edition), Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2013, p.157.

<sup>6</sup> The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation, September 23, 1997, Ministry of Defense, [http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d\\_act/anpo/19970923.html](http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/19970923.html), accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Krepinevich, Barry Watts, and Robert Work, *Meeting the Anti-Access and Area-Denial Challenge*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, May 2003, <http://csbaonline.org/publications/2003/05/a2ad-anti-access-area-denial/>, accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> “Obama Administration Policy in the Asia-Pacific”, April 28, 2016, US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2016d/256694.htm>, accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation, April 27, 2015, US Department of Defense, [http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/20150427--GUIDELINES\\_FOR\\_US-JAPAN\\_DEFENSE\\_COOPERATION.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/20150427--GUIDELINES_FOR_US-JAPAN_DEFENSE_COOPERATION.pdf), accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey W. Hornung and Mike M. Mochizuki, “Japan: Still an Exceptional US Ally”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 39:1, Spring 2016, pp. 95-116.

<sup>11</sup> “US-China Relations: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities”, April 27, 2016, US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2016d/256657.htm>, accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Posture Statement of General Joseph Dunford Jr., April 26, 2016, US Senate Committee on Appropriations, <http://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/042716%20-%20General%20Dunford%20Testimony.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> “Wang Yi Put Forward Four Requirements for Improving China-Japan Relations”, April 30, 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1360009.shtml>, accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Information Office of the State Council of China: *China's Military Strategy*, May 2015, the Ministry of National Defense of China, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/regulatory/2015-05/26/content\\_4617812\\_4.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/regulatory/2015-05/26/content_4617812_4.htm), accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> “Statement on Department of the Navy Shipbuilding Programs”, April 6, 2016, [http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Stackley-Mulloy-Walsh\\_04-06-16.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Stackley-Mulloy-Walsh_04-06-16.pdf), accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Sasakawa USA Third Annual Security Forum, May 6, 2016, Commander, US Pacific Fleet, <http://www.cpf.navy.mil/leaders/scott-swift/speeches/2016/05/sasakawa-forum.pdf>, accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> “Rebalance to Asia Led to Drop in Security Assistance for Southeast Asia”, April 22, 2016, Council on Foreign Relations, [http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/rebalance-asia/p37516?cid=nlc-public-the\\_world\\_this\\_week--link8-20160429&csp\\_mid=51268757&csp\\_rid=bGljaGVuMTk4NEBnbWFpbC5jb20S1#!/](http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/rebalance-asia/p37516?cid=nlc-public-the_world_this_week--link8-20160429&csp_mid=51268757&csp_rid=bGljaGVuMTk4NEBnbWFpbC5jb20S1#!/), accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Yoichi Funabashi, “Why Japan’s Elderly Are Endangering Its Military”, *The National Interest*, January-February 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-japans-elderly-are-endangering-its-military-14632>, accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> “The United States Seventh Fleet”, Commander, US 7th Fleet, <http://www.c7f.navy.mil/Portals/8/documents/7thFleetTwoPagerFactsheet.pdf?ver=2016-01-27-061248-087>, accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2016, Office

of the Secretary of Defense, May 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016%20China%20Military%20Power%20Report.pdf>, accessed June 4, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, "How to Deter China: The Case for Archipelagic Defense", *Foreign Affairs*, March-April, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, "Alternative Approaches to Defense Strategy," CSBA, October 30, 2015, <http://csbaonline.org/publications/2015/10/alternative-approaches-to-defense-strategy/>, accessed June 4, 2016.