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# Security and Defense Dimensions of the Asia Pivot

By Peter Brookes

#### Briefing Highlights

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is developing an increasingly capable conventional ballistic missile force, testing a stealth fighter, and making advances in the space and cyber battle domains.

It is certainly possible that the United States could find itself embroiled in a Sino-Japanese conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, if the nationalism-charged disagreement crosses over from heated rhetoric to a hot war.

Some speculate that North Korea under new leader Kim Jong Un is equally, if not more dangerous than the reclusive country was under his father, Kim Jong II... The possibility of misperception, miscalculations, and mistakes that could lead to another large-scale armed conflict on the [Korean] Peninsula arguably seems closer.

N. Korean medium-range missile No-Dong ballistic missile threatens regional targets including US bases in Japan, and the intermediate-range Musudan threatens U.S. military facilities in Guam and the Aleutian islands, according to some estimates.

It is particularly important that we not only address changes to our conventional posture in the Pacific but also keep our growing need for strategic defenses—that is, missile defense—in mind. In 2011, the Obama administration announced with great fanfare that it would be undertaking a strategic "rebalancing"—what would later be dubbed a "pivot"—to the Asia-Pacific. The thinking behind the move was that, as American involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan diminished, the United States would be shifting its "engagement, activities, and resources toward this vital region."<sup>1</sup>

That same year in Australia, President Barack Obama outlined his vision for American involvement in the Asia-Pacific. According to the President:

> [T]he United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with our allies and friends. Our approach is grounded in the proposition that the United States is a historic Pacific power whose economy, strength, and interests are inextricably linked with Asia's economic, security, and political order... and we are here to stay.<sup>2</sup>

The Obama administration was and remains careful to note that the new policy embodied in the pivot was not directed at any one country (e.g., China) and would involve not only security, but diplomatic and economic, among other efforts to improve America's position in the Pacific. But security analysts-both in the U.S. and abroad—have predictably focused on the military dimension of the new approach. This includes commitments to "strengthening security links with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Australia and the Philippines,"<sup>3</sup> reported shifts in naval assets to the Pacific fleet from the Atlantic fleet,4 and rotational deployments of U.S. forces to Australia<sup>5</sup> and the Philippines.6

But is such a policy sustainable? Some analysts have asserted that we are on a defense trajectory that will result in the smallest navy since World War I, the smallest army since before World War II and the smallest air force ever. Indeed, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta lamented exactly that in 2011 congressional testimony.<sup>7</sup> This makes the viability of the Administration's strategy a real question, in practical terms. In the meantime, the risks to American security interests from the region are growing,

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propelled by a rising China, an often-unpredictable North Korea, and ongoing territorial disputes that involve major powers.

### The Challenge from China

It is practically a certainty that China will be the greatest strategic challenge confronting the United States in the twenty-first century. Whether Beijing proves to be a force for stability or instability will likely determine how historians characterize at least the first half of this century.

The past two decades have seen impressive growth in Chinese defense spending, growing at double-digit rates nearly every year. This year has proven no different; in March, China announced a 12.2 percent growth in its military budget.<sup>8</sup>

But while defense budgets can be informative, they only tell you so much. For instance, mere numbers on a spreadsheet will not provide much insight into the type of platforms or weapons systems that a certain defense budget supports. In the case of China, Beijing's defense budget is fielding a modern military that is increasingly capable of protecting, contesting, and advancing Chinese regional—and increasingly—global interests.

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For example, China launched its first aircraft carrier, is diversifying its strategic capabilities by sending its nuclear deterrent to sea aboard submarines, and adding mobility to its land-based nuclear force. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is developing an increasingly capable conventional ballistic missile force, testing a stealth fighter, and makings advances in the space and cyber battle domains. The list goes on.

China is also increasingly assertive in the Asia-Pacific region on issues of territorial sovereignty. The question of Taiwan is quiet at the moment, due to some accommodations on economic and political matters between Beijing and Taipei. However, there has been little progress on security questions across the Strait—a state of affairs which leaves the situation volatile. And while the United States has no formal commitment to Taiwan's defense enshrined in a defense treaty, the provisions of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act make it a strong possibility that if Beijing were to try to unilaterally alter the status quo across the Taiwan Strait, Washington might become involved militarily.

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Added to the long-standing question of Taiwan's political future are the newest areas of Chinese assertiveness: the territorial disputes with Japan in the East China Sea and with the Filipinos and others in the South China Sea. Importantly, Beijing considers these disputed East and South China Sea territories to be "core interests," an oftused Chinese phrase that accompanies an issue that China may see as worth fighting over. Indeed, during a press conference with U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in April, Chinese Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan said:

> ... China's position on South China Sea and East China Sea issue is clear and consistent. China has indisputable sovereignty over Diaoyu Islands, Nansha Islands, and their adjacent waters. As to sovereignty dispute over islands and reefs, and the sea boater *sic* [border] delimitation issue, China stands ready to resolve the issue through negotiation with the countries directly involved.... I will actually reiterate that territorial sovereignty issue is China's core interest. On this issue, we will make no compromise, no concession, no trading, not even a tiny bit of violation is allowed.<sup>9</sup>

While the United States makes no assertions regarding the ultimate sovereignty of the disputed territories, it has said publicly that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are under the "administration" of Japan and as such fall under the

U.S.-Japan Mutual Cooperation and Security Treaty. Indeed, President Obama, while in Tokyo in April 2014, reiterated this point, making it the first time the President has corroborated the previous assertions of his administration's Defense and State Departments.<sup>10</sup>

"Beijing's defense budget is buying a modern military that is increasingly capable of protecting, contesting, and advancing Chinese regional—and increasingly—global interests."

It is certainly possible that the United States could find itself embroiled in a Sino-Japanese conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, if the nationalism-charged disagreement crosses over from heated rhetoric to a hot war. Considering that the potential participants in such a conflict would be some of the world's most capable militaries and largest global economies, the repercussions would be widespread.

While the United States has not been as specific about territorial disputes between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea to the extent it has been with Japan, Washington and Manila are nonetheless defense treaty partners. By some estimates, Beijing now claims about 80 percent of the South China Sea as "indisputable" sovereign territory within a "9-dash line" which now appears on any number of official and unofficial Chinese maps.<sup>11</sup>

The point here is that, beyond the longstanding issues related to Taiwan, additional (and significant) flashpoints have developed in the Sino-American relationship in the past few years. But there are other daunting challenges to U.S. security in the Pacific as well.

#### North Korea Conundrum

The wild card that is North Korea provides its own set of challenges to peace and stability and American interests in Asia. Some speculate that North Korea under new leader Kim Jong Un is equally-- if not more-- dangerous than the reclusive country was under his father, Kim Jong Il, who ruled the nation when it joined the once-exclusive nuclear weapons club.<sup>12</sup> With a new, young, and untested leader in charge and seemingly endless senior Korean Workers' Party political leadership positions changing, the longstanding challenge of preventing another war on the Korean Peninsula stands undiminished. As Kim continues to consolidate power in Pyongyang, the prospects of political and economic reform or the collapse of the regime seem more distant. But the possibility of misperception and miscalculation that could lead to another large-scale armed conflict on the Peninsula is arguably greater.

While there is plenty of focus on North Korea's ballistic missile and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, the (North) Korean People's Army remains a deadly force should a major conflict ensue between North and South Korea. Though there are questions about the wartime endurance and training of North Korean forces, with its forward deployed posture (toward the DMZ) and South Korea's capital, Seoul, so close to the 38th parallel, even a short, high-intensity engagement could have a devastating effect. In such a scenario, it is likely that American forces would be involved considering the U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) Mutual Defense Treaty and the ongoing presence of American forces in South Korea. Of great importance—and an arguably open question—is what China might do in a Korean Peninsula conflict, especially if Beijing were to perceive a potential victory for U.S.-ROK forces and a major geopolitical shift toward Seoul and Washington on the Peninsula.

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The bottom line is that there are significant security challenges for the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, it might be argued that the challenges are increasing significantly considering the rise of China as a major military power.

### The Role of Missiles

As we consider our efforts to address these challenges, it is particularly important that we not only address changes to our conventional military posture in the Pacific but also keep our growing need for strategic defenses—that is, missile defense—in mind. It is fair to say that the ballistic missile threat to the United States and its allies and friends in the Pacific is increasing.

In the view of the U.S. Air Force, China "...has the most active and diverse ballistic missile development program in the world. It is developing and testing offensive missiles, forming additional missile units, qualitatively upgrading missile systems, and developing methods to counter ballistic missile defenses."<sup>13</sup> To threaten its rival and American partner Taiwan, China has reportedly deployed

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1,100 short-range ballistic missiles with "improved ranges, accuracies, and payloads" across the Taiwan Strait.<sup>14</sup> The medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM), the DF-16, will allow Beijing to project power against more distant, regional targets.<sup>15</sup> China is also reportedly deploying the conventional CSS-5 MRBM to "hold at-risk or strike logistic nodes, regional military bases, including airfields and ports, and naval assets."<sup>16</sup> Of particular concern to U.S. forces in the Pacific, especially the navy, is the CSS-5 variant, the DF-21 anti-ship ballistic missile, due to its reported ability to strike moving ships at sea (e.g., aircraft carriers), enhancing China's anti-access/area-denial strategy and operations.<sup>17</sup> The Pentagon reports that the DF-21 has a range of 1,500 km and is equipped with a maneuverable warhead.<sup>18</sup>

China is also improving its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) force. Beijing is updating its silo-

based DF-31/31A and adding road mobile ICBMs with multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) capability to the Second Artillery, enhancing the survivability and flexibility of its strategic forces.<sup>19</sup>

"[the U.S.] has said publicly that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are under the "administration" of Japan and as such fall under the U.S.-Japan Mutual Cooperation and Security Treaty."

Beijing's nuclear forces are further strengthened by the introduction of the JIN-class ballistic missile submarine. When equipped with the JL-2 sea-launched ballistic missile, JIN submarines will give China an at-sea nuclear deterrent and "will, for the first time, allow Chinese SSBNs [fleet ballistic missile submarines] to target portions of the United States from operating areas located near the Chinese coast."<sup>20</sup> The JIN may make its first nuclear deterrence patrol this year.<sup>21</sup>

There is little doubt that, along with China's conventional capabilities, that the People's Liberation Army's nuclear capabilities have improved and diversified significantly in recent years. Another question is possible evolutions in China's nuclear doctrine. While Beijing has publicly embraced a "No First Use" policy based on a minimal deterrence, second-strike nuclear force, there are questions as to whether there could be internal changes in China's policies due to improvements in the PLA's strategic capabilities. The old question thus applies: Does doctrine drive capability or does capability drive doctrine?

North Korea's ballistic missile capabilities are also a concern. Pyongyang continues to maintain a short-range SCUD missile force which can range the length of the Korean Peninsula. Its medium-range No-Dong ballistic missile threatens regional targets including U.S. bases in Japan, and the intermediate-range Musudan threatens U.S. military facilities in Guam and the Aleutian Islands, according to some estimates. Of particular concern, according to the commander of U.S. Forces Korea, is that North Korea can launch missiles "on short notice, with very little warning."<sup>22</sup>

Arguably, the immediate worry is the development of a nuclear-capable North Korean ICBM. In 2012, North Korea demonstrated its ability to successfully launch into orbit a payload in the form of a rudimentary satellite aboard a Taepo-Dong 2 (TD-2) space launch vehicle. While not decisive in showcasing an ability to successfully launch an ICBM with a meaningful military warhead at an adversary such as the United States with precision, this demonstration certainly puts Pyongyang on a trajectory to do so at some point in the future.

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The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) likewise reports that North Korea "seeks to develop longer-range ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons to the United States, and continues efforts to bring its KN-08 road mobile ICBM, which it paraded in July 2013, to operational capability."<sup>23</sup> And Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies' (SAIS) *38 North* blog notes:

One and maybe more engine tests of what is probably the first stage of a KN-08 road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) were conducted in late March/early April 2014. With this latest activity, three KN-08 rocket engine test series have been identified for the first and possibly second stages dating back to mid 2013. As this effort progresses, the next technically logical step in the missile's development would be a flight test of the entire system.<sup>24</sup>

As it has done for the Chinese nuclear forces, a roadmobile ICBM will enhance North Korean strategic force's flexibility, mobility, and survivability, increasing both its deterrence and strike capabilities.

Moreover, while North Korea has conducted at least three nuclear tests—the last in 2013—it is believed that Pyongyang has varied its fissile material production capability beyond plutonium to uranium. Not only will this provide North Korea dual pathways to producing a nuclear weapon, it will provide additional fissile material for testing nuclear devices, especially the development of a nuclear warhead—if it has not done so already. Indeed, last fall, then-South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin told the South Korean National Assembly: "We evaluate that North Korea can build a nuclear weapon using uranium."<sup>25</sup> And recent North Korean rhetoric and observer speculation indicates that Pyongyang intends to be active on both the nuclear and long-range missile fronts, as evidenced by press reports surrounding President Obama's recent trip to Asia.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Responding to the Missile Threat**

If the Obama administration is indeed going to pivot or rebalance to Asia to meet growing challenges from the likes of China and North Korea, it is important that it do so with the policies, resources, and resolve necessary to ensure it is seen as credible. After all, in politics, perception *is* reality.

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The concern is that the effort to pivot to the Pacific will be under-funded and under-resourced, resulting in little more than occasional rhetorical flourishes that will serve as a poor substitute for the robust deployment of U.S. forces in Asia. As a group of scholars wrote recently: "By overdramatizing and overselling an evolutionary development of U.S. foreign policy, the Obama administration risks providing false reassurances to allies of Washington's ability to deliver on its promises."<sup>27</sup>

It is unclear how the United States can expect to continue to slash the defense budget and presume to project

power into the vast Pacific with the goal of deterring, dissuading, and or denying, if necessary, existing and future threats to American interests. Likewise, in order to counter the regional ballistic missile threat, it is critical that Washington end cuts in missile defense programs.

Notably, the Obama administration has reversed some earlier missile defense decisions, arguably based on an acceptance of the evolving challenges in the Pacific. This includes expanding the number of ground-based interceptors (GBI) in Alaska from 30 to 44 missiles,<sup>28</sup> stationing two more Aegis class ships to Japan by 2017,<sup>29</sup> temporarily deploying Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to the Pacific to meet increased threat scenarios,<sup>30</sup> and looking at new kill vehicles for GBIs.<sup>31</sup> However, the United States needs to go further. As has been widely noted, our current capabilities provide a "limited" defense for a missile attack coming from Asia. Yet the threat seems to be expanding exponentially.

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For instance, it makes sense to restore funding for boostphase missile defense programs. During this phase of flight, ballistic missiles are particularly vulnerable due to their relatively slow speed of ascent and their inability to deploy decoys or maneuver.<sup>32</sup> More advanced versions of the SM-3 missile should be pursued to improve current capabilities, new kill vehicles should be developed and deployed aboard GBIs to increase their lethality, and space-based sensors such as the Space Tracking and Surveillance System should be updated.

The United States should also cooperate with allies like Japan and South Korea to mitigate the regional missile threat. To date, progress on Japanese-South Korean information sharing as well as the development of a regional missile defense system has been halting.<sup>33</sup> More trilateral missile defense cooperation, led by Washington,

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would be beneficial to all three countries in light of existing threats.

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Washington and Tokyo have had a long-standing relationship on missile defense, dating back to the late 1990s. Today, besides co-development efforts with the United States, Japan has the sea-based Aegis system with the SM-3 missile, the land-based PAC-3 system and hosts a U.S. X-band radar (with plans to deploy another).<sup>34</sup> Collaboration between South Korea and the United States is not as advanced. The United States currently deploys PAC-3 batteries to Korea, but the ROK military is less capable when it comes to missile defense. The Korean Air and Missile Defense system consists largely of PAC-2 missile defense batteries but reportedly will upgrade to PAC-3 in the coming years.<sup>35</sup> At sea, Seoul has KDX-III Aegis class destroyers and is expected to deploy SM-6 missiles for point defense by 2016,<sup>36</sup> but there does not appear to be any public plans to upgrade to SM-3 to replace the current shipboard SM-2 missiles.

#### Giving Substance to the Pivot

There is no question that the United States faces significant and increasing security challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, including the growing threat posed by ballistic missiles and their payloads. It is fair to argue that China is increasingly confident and assertive in addressing its perceived national interests, supported by its expanding military might and power projection capabilities. From appearances, it is also reasonable to assert that North Korea is not on a path to openness, reform, and reconciliation with its neighbors.

As such, it is critical that the United States provide for its national defense in the Pacific. Missile defense is clearly one of those requirements for American security. A robust, multi-layered missile defense system will improve America's security and protect and advance U.S. interests

against the growing challenge of ballistic missiles and unconventional payloads in the Asia-Pacific. It is an important—indeed, critical—step in any pivot to the Pacific as well as towards defending our homeland in an increasingly dangerous and proliferated world.

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### About The Defense Technology Program

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