

FORUM 006 SPECIAL REPORT

## The U.S. military presence in Japan in the context of the “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific

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The U.S. military presence in the Asia Pacific is going through a transition. A new pattern of deployment—“rotational presence”—is emerging. It is a way to implement the military aspect of the U.S. rebalance to Asia, especially in countries where permanent presence is not politically attainable and sustainable. The deployments of new Littoral Combat Ships (LCSs) in Singapore, and the Marine Rotational Force in Darwin, Australia are the prime examples. The most recent addition is the agreement between the Philippines and the United States to increase the rotational presence of U.S. forces in the Philippines. Along with the modernization of the permanent presence in Japan and South Korea, the U.S. military presence in the Asia Pacific region is becoming more flexible in its structure, geographically more expansive, and politically more resilient. The main purpose of this enhancement is to protect and maintain the credibility of U.S. power projection capabilities in the face of growing anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) challenges from China. The rotational presence is an effective policy tool to provide more counter-A2/AD capabilities; however, it is by no means sufficient. Doubts about the implementability and sustainability of the rebalance itself outweigh the positive effects that the rotational presence creates. And if U.S. dependence on the rotational presence further increases, it may even create new a dilemma for the United States by triggering some false expectations in Japan for a reduction of the permanent presence. This would weaken the political resilience for the largest permanent U.S. presence in the region, which has already been experiencing a tough challenge of overburdening hosting communities.

### Rotational Presence of U.S. forces

The first published document that articulated the “pivot” to Asia was an article in the November 2011 issue of Foreign Policy magazine, written by then-Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. It explained the future plan for the military presence as follows:

We are modernizing our basing arrangements with traditional allies in Northeast Asia while enhancing our presence in Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean. For example, the United States will be deploying littoral combat ships to Singapore. And the United States and Australia agreed this year to explore a greater American military presence in Australia to enhance opportunities for more joint training and exercises. We are also looking at how we can increase our operational access in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region and deepen our contacts with allies and partners.



Clinton went on to write, “How we translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into an operational concept is a question that we need to answer if we are to adapt to new challenges in the region. Against this backdrop, a more broadly distributed military presence across the region will provide vital advantages.” This article did not directly mention “rotational presence,” but it laid out the conceptual groundwork for this new initiative.

Following Clinton’s article, then-Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta rolled out an official strategic document; “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense” in January 2012, commonly known as “Defense Strategic Guidance.” It explained how the U.S. military would play its role in implementing the “pivot,” or “rebalance” as it was later re-named. In the section titled “Primary Missions of the U.S. Armed Forces,” rotational presence is mentioned as follows:

U.S. forces will conduct a sustainable pace of presence operations abroad, including rotational deployments and bilateral and multilateral training exercises. These activities reinforce deterrence, help to build the capacity and competence of U.S., allied, and partner forces for internal and external defense, strengthen alliance cohesion, and increase U.S. influence. A reduction in resources will require innovative and creative solutions to maintain our support for allied and partner interoperability and building partner capacity.

A few months later in a speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, who succeeded Panetta in February that year, explained how to implement the military aspect of the rebalance: “The United States military is not only shifting more of its assets to the Pacific—we are using these assets in new ways to enhance our posture and partnerships. For example, we are pushing forward with plans for innovative rotational [deployments] in the region.”

The actual beginning of the rotational presence in the Asia Pacific region predates the formal roll-out of “pivot.” More than five months before the publication of the article by Hillary Clinton, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates disclosed the plan to deploy the LCSs to Singapore in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, 2011, based on the Strategic Framework Agreement that the United States and Singapore concluded in 2005. The first actual deployment started in April 2013 with the arrival of the USS Freedom (LCS1).

The rotational deployment of amphibious-capable units is represented by the Marine Rotational Force in Darwin (MRF-D). This deployment is based on the agreement between U.S. president Barack Obama and then-Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard in November 2011, right after the publication of Clinton’s article on the “pivot.” Both governments agreed to start the deployment of U.S. Marine Corps in the Northern Territory of Australia from 2012 with a company-size rotation of 200 to 250 Marines for about six months at a time. And over the years both countries intend to build up the presence in a staged way to around 2,500 troops that amounts to a full-force Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF).

As of the summer of 2014, MRF-D has the third deployment with a strength of around 1,100 troops. This year an Aviation Combat Element (ACE) has been added for the first time, making the make-up and the scale of this rotational deployment much closer to a full MAGTF. ACE consists of four CH-53 Super Stallions from Marine Corps Air Station Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii.

The agreement between the United States and Australia has a second component, which is a greater access by U.S. military aircraft to Royal Australian Air Force facilities. According to the announcement that Prime Minister Gillard made, this will involve more frequent movements of U.S. military aircraft into and out of northern Australia. The first deployment of ACE is based on this agreement.

General Herbert “Hawk” Carlisle, Commander of U.S. Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), is known for having coined the term “places not bases” to explain the basic concept of rotational presence. He elaborated on his idea in an interview with the author in April 2014: “When I talk about rotational presence, I’m not talking about building any more bases. I’m talking greater capability with the newest systems coming out here. So, whether it’s exercises, it’s theater security packages and rotating units out here for either weeks or months at a time, we will continue to see a robust rotational presence throughout the Pacific.” He made reference to the deployment of F-16s on the Korean Peninsula, F-22s at Kadena, bombers and tankers in Guam and F-16s in Australia as examples of rotational deployment of air assets.

The U.S. PACAF has devised a totally new rotational deployment of its most capable fighters, F-22s. It is a concept called the “Rapid Raptor Package.” The idea is to create a rapid deployment package with four F-22s and one C-17 transport. The cargo plane, which carries maintenance and ground crews along with necessary equipment and weapons, will fly with the F-22s to places that are not within the reach of traditional deployment. The F-22s are currently based in Hawaii and Alaska outside the range of China’s A2/AD capabilities. The idea of the “Rapid Raptor Package” is to send these most advanced stealth fighters inside of this A2/AD perimeter with minimal risks. By the time they were found by the Chinese, they would

have completed their mission and left for the home base.

Following the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Air Force, the U.S. Army started its rotational deployment to the region in September 2013. A 380-strong Army Attack Reconnaissance Squadron with thirty OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopters deployed to South Korea as the first rotational land force in the Asia Pacific region. Thus all four military services of the United States now conduct rotational deployment in support of the U.S. strategic rebalance.

### **Impact of the rotational presence on the strategic balance in the region**

According to Admiral Samuel Locklear, commander of U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), the A2/AD capabilities that are being pursued by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) "go after what they perceive as potential U.S. vulnerabilities," and the concern is "these technologies will proliferate and they will further complicate the global security environment."

The rotational presence is intended to compensate for such U.S. vulnerabilities in terms of the geographically uneven distribution of its military capabilities. The U.S. forward presence has been concentrated in Northeast Asia, after the Air Force and Naval bases in the Philippines were closed in 1991. With tensions rising over the territorial disputes in the South China Sea there was a distinct mismatch between the strategic need for U.S. military deployment and the actual presence in the South East Asia and the Pacific.

The U.S. decision to implement rotational deployments of the U.S. forces in the Asia Pacific region seems to be based on consideration of the following elements:

1. The need to further implement the U.S. rebalance, which the entire region welcomes except for China.
2. The need to deploy U.S. forces to locations where currently no substantial presence is in place, but such presence is strategically needed to counter-balance China. Southeast Asia is the case in point.
3. The need to deploy U.S. forces to places where a permanent presence is not politically possible for the foreseeable future.
4. The need to expand the U.S. presence throughout the Asia Pacific region when available assets and resources are getting scarcer and limited due to defense budget constraints in the United States.

The rotational presence can meet all these needs and therefore can be described as a logical choice for the United States under these circumstances. That is the reason why some of the regional states, such as Singapore, the Philippines, and Australia decided to host the rotational presence of U.S. forces. It serves their interests as well.

The basic framework of Sino-U.S. strategic competition can be described as "U.S. power projection capabilities vs. China's A2/AD." Most of the regional states depend on the U.S. to counter China's growing A2/AD capabilities, which can deny the U.S. access to the region if not totally neutralize U.S. power projection capabilities. The rotational presence is a credible enhancement of U.S. military infrastructure from the region's point of view. But the messages the region has recently been hearing from the United States regarding the sustainability of the U.S. presence in the region and also the implementation of the rebalance are not encouraging, to say the least. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel made the following remarks on the fiscal year 2015 budget preview on February 24: "We are entering an era where American dominance on the seas, in the skies, and in space can no longer be taken for granted." Then came a shocking admission by the sitting assistant secretary of defense for acquisition Katrina McFarland on March 4. She reportedly said at a conference, "Right now the pivot [to the Asia Pacific] is being looked at again, because candidly it can't happen [owing to budget pressures]." She later retracted this statement, but the region got the message. The next day Admiral Locklear testified in the House of Representatives that "The ability for the services to provide the type of maritime coverage, the air coverage of some of the key elements that we've historically needed in this part of the world for crisis response, have not been available to the level that I would consider acceptable risk [owing to recent budget cutbacks]." This statement was interpreted and reported as "the resources currently at our disposal are insufficient to meet operational requirements."

These statements were made in the midst of the implementation of the rebalance and the expansion of rotational presence. As a result they called the fundamental credibility of the rebalance into question. This lack of credibility is the most serious challenge that the U.S. rebalance strategy faces from the regional point of view. Without trust in the rebalance, the series of rotational deployments would not create any reassurance among regional states nor deterrence against China.

## Impact on Japan

The increasing U.S. rotational presence in the region serves Japanese interests in the sense that it could maintain the power balance between the United States and China, which is shifting toward China by every indication. It enhances the credibility of U.S. power projection capabilities, which are called into question in the face of China's growing A2/AD capabilities. In Japan there could be a need for such a beefing-up of the U.S. regional presence on top of the maintenance of the permanent deployment in Japan if China's aggressive actions around the Senkaku Islands continue to escalate. In fact, recent public opinion polls by the Okinawa Prefectural Government, which has the Senkakus within its administrative area, showed that the people of Okinawa are more concerned about potential military conflicts with China in the East China Sea than are mainlanders. The polls also demonstrated that the Okinawan people feel a stronger affinity to the United States than do mainlanders.

In Japan, however, the rotational presence of U.S. forces has gotten little attention, if any. It is not widely discussed in the government or the National Diet. The media attention is limited as well. This is probably because Japan has already been hosting a large-scale permanent presence of U.S. forces on its soil, and the emergence of rotational presence elsewhere has little relevance to Japan's public policy debate. The major issue for the U.S. presence in Japan is the over-burden on hosting communities, especially the ones in Okinawa prefecture where approximately 75% of all U.S. military facilities in Japan are concentrated. The relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, which is now located in a densely populated area in the central section of Okinawa island, to a less populated area in the northern part of the island is the central issue for alliance management between the United States and Japan. The rotational presence in South East Asia or Australia gets public attention only in the context of reducing the existing burden in Japan through the potential redeployment of military units and weapon systems out of the country. The only case in which Japan receives rotational presence is the deployment of F-22s to Kadena Air Base in Okinawa. However, this is regarded and discussed more as an additional burden for the hosting community, rather than as an additional U.S. commitment to the stability of this region much less Japan.

What is actually talked about as "rotational presence" in Japan is the rotational deployment of U.S. military assets within the country to reduce the burden on the Okinawan people, which is caused by an uneven distribution of the U.S. military presence in Japan. The relocation of MV-22 transport aircraft, which had recently been deployed to Futenma Air Station, to mainland Japan, is the case in point.

Another reason may be the peculiar nature of the national security policy debate in Japan, which tends to avoid the discussion of high-intensity military contingencies. The underlying perception is that such a policy discussion itself could heighten tensions with the neighboring states and that diplomacy should be given higher priority to avoid such an eventuality.

In the policy debate in Japan national security policy is not fully distinguished from diplomacy. They are often discussed in a mixed manner. This is a deep-rooted problem of Japan's policy discussion, or more broadly the weakness of Japan's strategic culture.

Even though the U.S. rotational presence has not yet been discussed in its true sense in Japan, the recognition of the increase of such deployments may have a serious impact on public expectations. The general public in Japan, especially those who feel victimized by being forced to carry the heavy burden of hosting U.S. forces, may raise an expectation that the permanent presence in Japan be replaced by a rotational presence. They may ask why only Japan has to bear the heavy burden of hosting the permanent presence of U.S. Forces.

This way of thinking may gain political momentum if and when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) comes back to power. The DPJ once advocated "alliance without presence" when they were in power a few years ago. The idea was to reduce the burden of hosting the U.S. forces by asking the United States to deploy forces only when there is a real contingency. The actual operation is similar to rotational presence. It could be described as "rotational presence in time of contingency." This idea was discarded once the current leading party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, retook power a couple of years ago. However, it has not totally disappeared as an alternative plan for the Japan-U.S. alliance in the future. An increased use of rotational presence in the region could resurrect it.



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