

U.S. “Rebalancing” as an Opportunity for a NWFZ in Northeast Asia

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There is great potential for the United States and its allies to reduce their reliance on U.S. nuclear assets. This potential reduction enables a Northeast Asian NWFZ to gain more political support and strategic relevance for the peace and stability of Northeast Asia. If implemented appropriately, U.S. “rebalancing” toward the Asia-Pacific region will provide a tremendous opportunity for allied deterrence and defense to become less reliant on nuclear weapons. U.S. “rebalancing” should strengthen U.S. conventional deterrence while the defense posture maintained by its allies should be consonant with such US efforts. This convergence will result in a more reliable allied deterrence posture, and thus U.S. extended deterrence may not have to rely much, if at all, on nuclear weapons to dissuade possible opponents in the region from being aggressive.

U.S. allies and friends in the Asia Pacific region have the potential to cooperate with the U.S. to enhance allied deterrence and defense capabilities. For example, Japan’s efforts to enhance its defense posture in its southwestern region also provide defensive cover for U.S. forces deployed on Okinawa and in the western part of Japan. ROK military forces’ increased readiness to respond to North Korea’s provocation, as well as its robust conventional deterrent posture, may reinforce U.S. capabilities for deterrence and defense for the Peninsula and the surrounding maritime areas to a remarkable extent. Taiwan’s efforts towards both modernization of its modest but reliable armed forces and for more resilient social infrastructure and community may also support U.S. efforts for deterrence and defense in this region.

More precisely, Japan’s conventional defense capabilities will reinforce U.S. endeavors to operate in an Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) environment. Japan’s own territorial defense efforts such as air defense, ballistic missile defense (BMD), anti-submarine warfare (ASW), and mine counter-measures (MCM) around the Southwestern Islands including Okinawa will provide U.S. military forces deployed there with defensive cover that will reduce concerns over the vulnerabilities of forces operating in such forward areas. This will make U.S. reinforcement of Japan’s defense safer and smoother, providing in turn a better environment for U.S. operations under A2/AD conditions. A good example was seen in April 2012 when North Korea was about to launch a long-range missile. The JSDF deployed Patriot batteries to the Southwestern Islands including Okinawa, Miyako and Ishigaki, along with BMD-capable AEGIS destroyers in the surrounding seas that provided Japan’s missile defense umbrella to U.S. forces deployed there.

In addition to the abovementioned efforts to increase own defense capabilities, U.S. allies such as Japan and Korea should continue to manage the alliance on issues such as the base-realignment for Japan, including

those related to Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in particular, and the OPCON transition for Korea. In this context, it should be noted while deployment of the MV-22 Osprey aircraft to western Japan is causing serious safety concerns among Japanese people, the deployment will not only provide the alliance with an opportunity to greatly enhance operational resilience, but also to geographically distribute aviation training throughout Japan, thus increasing the political sustainability of the U.S. military presence in Okinawa. This is exactly what U.S. policy has been aimed at since Defense Secretary Robert Gates declared in June 2010 in Singapore that the U.S. was going to make its forward presence in the Asia Pacific region more “geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable”. For example, with the Ospreys’ longer range and greater speed, it is not hard for their crews to fly to Hokkaido, the northernmost major island of Japan, staying at SDF bases for a week or so for their training to acclimatize to various areas’ terrain and weather. Although a certain number of Ospreys should remain in Okinawa along with helicopters with shorter range and slower speed in order to support marines there, and to receive sophisticated maintenance support at their mother base, there is a big possibility to reduce the footprint of Marine Corps aviation in Okinawa. This may make the stationing of U.S. forces more politically sustainable, which is critically important because Okinawa has been hosting 75% of U.S. military facilities and around half of all U.S. military personnel.

For U.S. allies in this region, it is also important to look at key security issues outside of the Pacific. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated in her article in *Foreign Policy* in November 2011 that “as the war in Iraq winds down and America begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the United States stands at a pivot point.” This implies that the end of the Global War on Terror is the precondition of US “rebalancing” toward Asia-Pacific region. In other words, this policy is based on assumptions that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are winding down, that the U.S. could withdraw its 190,000 service members from those regions, and that the Middle East will not require a robust and US military presence pinned down there. U.S. “rebalancing” would be easily cancelled when these conditions are no longer met. For example, if the situations in Iraq or Afghanistan get seriously worse, or crises became apparent over the Arab Spring or the Iranian nuclear problem, the U.S. may have to return and its political commitment and military presence in Asia will become less significant. It is important for U.S. allies to note that there are number of policies for them to take in order to mitigate problems in important areas throughout the world such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Gulf of Aden. Such out-of-area military, paramilitary and non-military peace building/keeping activities of U.S. allies become more relevant to ensure U.S. “rebalancing” will be successfully implemented, thereby enabling the creation of a NWFZ in Northeast Asia.