



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

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A NEW US MARITIME SECURITY STRATEGY FOR ASIA-PACIFIC

Capt HPS Sodhi
Senior Fellow, CAPS

After the release of White Paper on China's military strategy on 26 May 2015, it was expected that the US may come out with a document outlining their line of approach. Recently, the US Department of Defence has released a document called 'Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy' highlighting their plans for this region. The report has been made public to let the world know their priorities and importance of Asia-Pacific region in the US strategic framework. The origin of this report can be attributed to the US rebalance strategy for Asia-Pacific, initiated four years ago.

Being a maritime nation, United States of America lays great stress on announcing its policies & priorities for the Navy, Coast Guard and Marine Corps. Promulgation of an earlier policy document "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower" in March 2015 was meant to give strategic directions to the US maritime forces, based on prevalent security scenario. The current strategy document lists three clear

objectives for the US DoD to focus in the Asia-Pacific region. These are: ensuring freedom of the seas; deter conflict and coercion; and promote adherence to international law and standards¹. There is no doubt that the document is directed towards China's military rise and its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea. In fact, more than the US maritime strategy, the Paper explains in depth the maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, the land reclamation activities and China's military buildup.

Once again, the US government has reinforced its support to Japan's control over the Senkaku Islands and reiterates that they do not recognize declaration of ADIZ by China in the East China Sea and will also oppose any such move in the South China Sea. While reaffirming their support for the Japanese, it says that the US will continue to oppose any unilateral action that seeks to undermine Japan's administration over these islands. On the South China Sea scenario,

the report says that China, by sending two Notes Verbales along with a map depicting Nine-dash line to the UN Secretary General, has not clearly defined the scope of its maritime claims. Time and again, US government has clarified that it does not agree with Chinese claims over disputed territories in the Western Pacific and urges all stakeholders to resolve their disputes by peaceful means, including third party help. It is surprising to note that the report recommends adherence to UNCLOS by the concerned states in the ongoing maritime disputes, whereas the US itself has not yet ratified the convention.

As per the report, US DoD is very much concerned about modernization of PLA Navy and Coast Guard. It admits that Taiwan conflict remains a priority for the Chinese, but adequate emphasis is being placed by the Chinese leadership on contingencies developing in the East and South China Seas. Although, PLA Navy operates about 300 frontline ships and submarines but US does not seem to be much impressed with the quality of PLA Navy equipment and platforms. China has also taken bold steps in modernization of its premier Maritime Law Enforcement agency: the China Coast Guard (CCG). It has been using the policy of 'low-intensity coercion' to enforce its maritime jurisdiction in the ECS & SCS.² For this purpose, and to avoid any possibility of military confrontation, CCG ships are deployed on patrol in the disputed waters in the 'near seas'. In this game of coercion, the PLA Navy acts as a

deterrent thereby avoiding direct involvement in maritime disputes.

The Paper asserts that in the near future, United States will increase its military presence and force projection by re assigning units to Asia-Pacific from other regions. Various actions taken in this regard include: strengthening the military capacity, investing in new cutting-edge capabilities and relocating these capabilities at appropriate places in the region. On parallel tracks, efforts are being made to build military diplomacy with other countries of the region, strengthen regional security institutions and cooperatively develop collective capacity for maritime domain awareness and security capabilities. In order to enhance its presence and to meet future eventualities, US DoD has decided to increase number of ships assigned to the Pacific Fleet by approximately 30 %.³

Okinawa in Japan will remain a major US base in this region hosting the US Navy's Seventh Fleet and a Carrier Strike group. The existing aircraft carrier USS George Washington will be replaced by the newer USS Ronald Reagan, and two additional Aegis class destroyers will join the fleet in Japan. In addition, USS America, the latest amphibious assault ship will be based in this region by 2020. Further, in order to avoid concentration at one base, other US Navy/ Air force/ Marine assets will be scattered in Guam, Hawaii, mainland Japan and Australia. Guam is being developed as a strategic hub for US military forces with additional attack submarine,

high speed vessels and MQ-4C Triton UAVs. In a big strategic move, four Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) will be based at Singapore by 2017, on rotational basis. To enhance its maritime surveillance, ISR and air defence capabilities, 24 E-2D Hawkeye AEW&C and 47 P-8A Poseidon aircraft are being procured by the US Navy in the near future, with a majority of them based in the Asia-Pacific region. New cutting edge technologies are being indentified to develop appropriate systems to counter China's A2/ AD weapons deployment in the Western Pacific.

A big initiative has been taken to enhance the maritime security capacity of US allies and partners. Necessary infrastructure and logistic support is being extended to these countries to not only respond to threats but also help in generating common maritime operating picture. Establishment of a common maritime domain awareness network with the help of coastal states of Asia-Pacific region is on top of the agenda for the US. The Singapore Maritime Information-Sharing Working Group has been established for information sharing on maritime matters.

India plays a significant role in this region with its "Act East" policy which US sees as a move in line with its rebalance strategy. The report reaffirms India's future role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Does it mean that US wants to see India playing an active role in the maritime affairs in the South China Sea? The document lists three areas of maritime

cooperation with India which includes maintaining a shared vision on maritime security, upgrading the bilateral maritime security partnership and improvement in regional maritime domain awareness. India's participation in RIMPAC and Malabar exercises, and various initiatives taken under the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) have further strengthened the mutual relationship. It is apparent that US wants to take India along in management of any future crisis in the Asia-Pacific.

Taking into account the current geo political scenario in the East & South China Seas, US is taking steps to mitigate possible risks. The approach in this regard includes introducing various risk reduction measures to improve operational safety at sea/ in air as well as building bilateral relationship with China. In 2014, a MoU was signed with China on Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters. It will act as a risk reduction mechanism like the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) adopted in April 2014 at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in Qingdao, China. Regular maritime exercises are being conducted with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam to enhance combined capabilities to counter future security threats and provocations. Participation of China in RIMPAC 2014 and an invitation for the next edition in 2016 will provide an opportunity to the member states of the region

understanding each other's tactical procedures resulting in mutual trust and crisis management.

To sum up, the strategic document turns out to be a detailed commentary on the situation in the East and South China Seas. It brings out broad US maritime plan of action for the Asia-Pacific region covering details of allocation of US forces. On the doctrine front, no new thought process or concepts have been included in the report. Surprisingly, no mention has been made about the Air Sea battle (ASB) doctrine or the latest Joint Concept for Access and Manoeuvre in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) to counter the A2/AD strategy of the PLA in the Asia-Pacific.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy, Dept of defense USA, 27 July 2015, available on http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/ND_AA%20A-P_Maritime_Security_Strategy-08142015-1300-FINALFORMAT.PDF accessed on 15 Sep 2015.

² Dean Cheng, Sea Power and the Chinese State: Chinese Maritime Ambitions, July 2011, accessed on 14 August 2015. <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/07/sea-power-and-the-chinese-state-chinas-maritime-ambitions>

³ Ibid, Note 1.