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The 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review: Implications for Asian Security

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Barely three months after it was released, the impact of the US 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) is beginning to be felt. There is now talk of expanding NATO to include non-European partners such as Japan, South Korea and Australia. Japan and the United States have also concluded long-running negotiations concerning the relocation of United States military forces currently stationed in Okinawa to the Pacific island of Guam. There can be little doubt that the footprint of the United States military presence – indeed the entire configuration of military power in the Asia Pacific – will change. The question is whether or not this change will be for the better or for the worse for Asian security.

The US Military Presence in Asia

US Pacific Command has some 300,000 personnel under its command of which about 100,000 are forward deployed. Including Guam and everything else westwards, US military forces remain fairly impressive. At the forefront is the 7th Fleet, comprising one aircraft carrier, two Ticonderoga-class Aegis cruisers, five Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, two Perry-class frigates, two Los Angeles-class nuclear-powered attack submarines, the USS Essex which is the only forward-deployed amphibious assault ship, and three amphibious support vessels. 7th Fleet is home-ported in Yokosuka in Japan.

US Air Force deployments are divided primarily between Japan and South Korea. The 5th Air Force is stationed in Japan, deploying F-15s and F-16s of 18th Wing and 35th Fighter Wing as well as the air refuelling and airlift platforms dispersed around Kadena, Misawa and Yokota. The 7th Air Force, comprising 8th and 51st Fighter Wings, is stationed in Osan and Kunsan in South Korea. The strategic bombers of 35th Wing of 13th Air Force are stationed at Guam.

Finally, there are the US Army and Marine Corps units, principally 9th Theatre Army Command in Japan, 8th Army command stationed in South Korea, 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force comprising 3rd Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and the administrative centre of 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) located at Torii Station, Okinawa. While the majority of these units are administrative cells, what they provide for is the surge capacity to quickly inject a substantial amount of US combat personnel into the region when the need arises.

East of Guam, the 3rd Fleet, centred around five carrier battle groups and five amphibious ready groups, is home-ported at San Diego. In Alaska, there is the 11th Air Force comprising 3rd Wing and 34th Fighter Wing. There is also the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force comprising

1st Marine Division and 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. Although on the eastern Pacific, these military assets cannot be discounted in the event of a major contingency in the western Pacific.

The Changing Configuration of Military Power in the Asia Pacific

The changes proposed in the 2006 QDR are actually fairly minimal. There are currently about 40,000 US military personnel stationed in Japan. The recently-concluded agreement between Washington and Tokyo will see 8,000 Marines and about 9,000 of their dependents move from Okinawa to Guam by 2012. Some US forces will remain on Okinawa but will be moved from Futenma to a new location at Camp Schwab. At sea, the 2006 QDR envisages that six aircraft carrier strike groups will be maintained throughout the Pacific and Indian Oceans, along with 60% of the US Navy submarine fleet. While the strategic bomber fleet will be reduced, existing platforms will be fully modernised.

At the same time, however, Japan and Australia, as major regional strategic partners to the US, are now expected to carry a greater share of the security burden. The immediate question for Japan is whether or not she can bear this increased burden. The Japanese Self-Defence Forces is, at least on paper, a fairly impressive organisation. Its air wing maintains a fleet of 130 F-15s, supported by E-2C and E-767 airborne warning and command platforms that significantly add to its air combat capability. But the Japanese do not have their intrinsic mid-air refuelling platforms and this limits Japan's capacity to project air power very far beyond its shores. The Japanese maritime self-defence forces deploys 39 guided missile destroyers and nine guided missile frigates, and is supported by a small fleet of five logistics support vessels which further limits Japan's power projection capability.

Australian military power is similarly impressive, at least on paper. The Australian navy can deploy six Collins-class submarines and six Adelaide-class guided missile frigates, but they are supported by just two tankers with replenishment-at-sea capacity. Without friendly countries providing berthing and port facilities to resupply these vessels, the range of these platforms becomes severely limited. The Australian air force stills operate the FB-111, and has the largest fleet of F/A-18s outside of the US. Two squadrons of transport aircraft that can also serve as mid-air refuelling platforms can, on paper, extend the operating range of these platforms quite significantly.

Problems Ahead

What has been missing from the analysis thus far is the likely size of the US military ten years from now. In addition, when the ever-increasing costs of emerging combat platforms are factored in, the picture begins to look grim. Nowhere is this clearer than in combat aircraft. The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, for instance, has become virtually unaffordable. Its per unit cost has risen to US\$82 million, representing a 33% increase since 2001. The United States Air Force had initially envisaged acquiring 1763 F-35s, but based on the rate of cost increases, even before the aircraft is deployable, just how many the US military can eventually afford is anyone's guess.

If increasing cost is becoming a major problem for the US, it may become catastrophic for other countries. Moreover, turning to alternative non-US sources of modern weapons systems may not resolve the issue of spiralling costs. The Eurofighter, considered by many as second only to the F-22 Raptor, is not cheap. The UK's programme to acquire 232 Eurofighters,

originally estimated to cost US\$10 billion, has risen to US\$22.7 billion. The Dassault Rafale is estimated to cost \$66.5 million for the basic aircraft and almost \$145 million with its complete suite of sensors and weapons. Russian aircraft such as the MiG-35 or Su-37 claim to be comparable in performance and lethality to the latest US or NATO combat aircraft and cost significantly less, but going Russian entails other problems. For countries who have traditionally relied on NATO technological standards, migrating to Russian standards requires fundamental shifts in logistical practices and operational doctrines, among other things, to make taking on the cheaper Russian option militarily viable. So, for countries that want to maintain its reliance on NATO technological standards, this will likely mean shrinking armed forces at least in terms of the number of combat platforms that can eventually be deployed.

Furthermore, operational effectiveness may suffer from the inability to train effectively. These emerging combat systems are, of course, significantly more capable than the combat systems currently available. Due to the high cost of these new aircraft, the loss of a single combat aircraft represents not only a significant loss of overall combat capability but it also represents a significant financial loss. If one has a fleet of 100 aircraft, the military and financial pain of losing one aircraft is probably bearable. If one has a fleet of 10 aircraft, however, the operational and financial pain induced by the loss of a single platform becomes much greater. There is always an element of risk management in military training – one needs to train hard, to push the envelop as far as tolerable, while remaining at acceptable levels of risk. However, deploying increasingly expensive combat systems may lead to military organisations wanting to treat these platforms with kid gloves. Which results may be a military organisation that will look good on paper but may lack the operational effectiveness that comes from rigorous and tough training.

What all this means is that if the US military presence in the Asia Pacific shrinks significantly while regional strategic partners are expected to carry a bigger burden of maintaining regional security, these regional partners may be increasingly incapable of fulfilling this requirement. This may well result in a region where a strategic vacuum may emerge. How this vacuum becomes filled – since nature abhors a vacuum – remains anyone's guess.

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