

*By Joseph Gerson (American Friends Service Committee - Peace Economic Security Program) - [Z Magazine](#)*

With Obama's reelection, we avoided the worst possible outcome, a catastrophic return to the neoconservative unilateralist militarism of the Bush II years. There will be change in the composition of the Cabinet, but as President Obama signaled with his first post-election visit being to Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia, the militarist and economic "pivot" to Asia and the Pacific will remain Washington's highest foreign policy priority. The immediate dangers of this approach were all too visible in September and October when, encouraged by the increased U.S. military commitment, Tokyo's right-wing Governor Shintaro Ishihara sparked the Diaoyu/Senkaku island crisis that brought Japan and China to the brink of war.

To understand the Obama pivot, it may be helpful to know what and how senior Obama officials understood their inheritance from the Bush administration and how they sought to build on that legacy. Jeffrey Bader, who served as Obama's senior director for East Asian affairs on the National Security Council, recently published his self-serving memoir. He reminds us that President George W. Bush and company began in 2000 by promising to "diversify" U.S. Asia-Pacific military bases, reducing their concentration in Northeast Asia in order to distribute them more widely along China's periphery.

The September 11 attacks led Bush and Cheney to turn their focus away from containing China to their wars in Central Asia and the Middle East. Their goal was not only to prevent future terrorist attacks, but to reconsolidate dominance in those oil-rich regions as they imposed what Cheney termed "the arrangement for the 21st century." The Bush administration also extended its so-called "war on terror" to Indonesia, the Philippines, and southern Thailand, but otherwise it largely neglected Asia and the Pacific. This opened the way for growing Chinese influence, including the acceleration of the integration of ASEAN and other Asian nations into China's surging economic orbit.

Obama's Asia policies have been largely designed to compensate for China's rise. Bader listed the Administration's priorities this way: "Devote a higher priority to the Asia-Pacific Region. React in a balanced way to the rise of China. Strengthen alliances and develop new partnerships. Expand the overall U.S. presence in the Western Pacific and maintain its forward regional deployment....and join regional institutions." Which is to say return to multilateral, rather than unilateral, enforcement of Empire.

With the pivot, the Obama administration signaled its determination "to beat back any Chinese bid for hegemony in the Asia-Pacific," even at the expense of a new Cold War. As General Martin Dempsey, Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, put it, "the U.S. military may be obliged to overtly confront China just as it faced down the Soviet Union." As we enter this era – Asia-Pacific arms races which include Japan and Korea as well as the great powers – none of the players seeks war, although tensions in the South China Sea could certainly spin out of control – especially between China and Vietnam. Instead, in the tradition of strategic theater, there is shadow play as new

alliances are created, new bases built, new weapons deployed, new joint military exercises, and new military doctrines announced, all with the goal of demonstrating overwhelming power or the ability to inflict unacceptable damage in order to assert regional dominance.

With its deepening military alliances, expansion and diversification of military bases and negotiations for new free trade agreements, the U.S. is reinforcing what Chinese leaders see as a “Great Wall in reverse,” with the equivalent of guard towers stretching from Japan to Australia, all potentially blocking China’s access to the larger ocean” and serving Washington’s air-sea battle doctrine.

### **Rationales & Strategy**

This is not the first time that the U.S. has pivoted to Asia and the Pacific. In the 1850s, shortly before U.S. warships first called at Korean ports, U.S. Secretary of State William Seward argued that if the U.S. were to replace Britain as the world’s dominant power, it would first have to dominate Asia. With the Pacific island stepping stones to Asia already controlled by European colonial powers, Seward settled for purchasing Alaska from Russia to provide a northern bridge to Asia.

By the 1890s, Washington had finally assembled the navy needed to challenge Britain’s mastery of the seas. Meanwhile, amidst an economic depression and related domestic turmoil across the U.S., policymakers saw access to the Chinese market as the way to put the unemployed to work and thus create “social peace,” while increasing corporate profits and establishing the United States as a global power. The still unexplained turn-of-the-century sinking of the USS Maine in Havana harbor provided an excuse for the United States to declare war on Spain, seize the Philippines and Guam (as well as Puerto Rico and Cuba), and annex Hawaii to secure the refueling stations needed to reach China.

With Japan’s defeat in the Second World War, the Pacific became an “American Lake.” Hundreds of new U.S. military bases were established in Korea, Japan, Australia, the Marshall Islands, and other Pacific nations to reinforce those in the Philippines, Guam, and Hawaii, which were greatly expanded. Together these bases “contained” Beijing and Moscow throughout the Cold War and served as launching pads for the Korean and Vietnam Wars as well as for military interventions and political subversion from the Philippines and Indonesia to the Persian Gulf.

Central to U.S. post-Cold War strategy has been the analysis of Joseph Nye, President Clinton’s Deputy Secretary of Defense and a primary author of the U.S. Asia-Pacific policy since the end of the Cold War. Nye has long warned about the potential dangers of rivalry between rising and declining powers. Twice during the 20th century, he argues, the United States and Britain failed to integrate Germany and Japan into their world order, resulting in two catastrophic world wars. To avoid an apocalyptic repeat of this history, he urged the U.S. to adopt policies that simultaneously engage and contained China, even as the word “containment,” with its Cold War echoes, was studiously avoided in official discourse in order not to crystallize antagonistic U.S.-Chinese relations.

Then, months before the pivot was launched, in words reminiscent of the Mafia theory of international relations and the ambitions that launched U.S. global empire in the 1890s, Nye wrote that, "Asia will return to its historic status, with more than half of the world's population and half of the world's economic output. America must be present there. Markets and economic power rest on political frameworks and American military power provides that framework."

Consistent with Nye's framework and the realities of U.S.-Chinese competitive interdependence, the Obama administration concluded from the beginning that by engaging China, the Middle Kingdom can be led to play a more "constructive role than it would by sitting outside of that system." The Obama administration has repeated that "a thriving China is good for America" and has pursued engagement via various diplomatic channels. But it is hedging its bets.

Obama's goal is not to repeat the U.S.-Soviet Cold War. Yet, with imperial arrogance it is ignoring the devastating consequences of the "forward deployed" U.S. military in Korea, Okinawa, and communities across Japan and elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific. As Bader reports, the Obama administration resolved not to err on the side of "a policy of indulgence and accommodation of assertive Chinese conduct...[that] could embolden bad behavior and frighten U.S. allies and partners" in Tokyo, Seoul, and across southeast Asia.

Thus, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the pivot as the major transformation in U.S. foreign and military policies, she insisted that, "One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade," will be "to lock in a substantially increased investment – diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise – in the Asia-Pacific region." The increased engagement, she wrote, would be underwritten in part by "forging a broad-based military presence."

Shortly thereafter, the Pentagon published its new "strategic guidance," reinforcing the pivot away from Iraq and Central Asia and naming the Asia-Pacific region and the Persian Gulf as the Washington's two geostrategic priorities. To emphasize these ostensibly new commitments (recall that the first state visit arranged by the Obama administration was that of Indian Prime Minister Singh, signaling the commitment to surround and isolate China), Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and President Obama made high-profile visits to allied Asian and Pacific nations. Following the APEC summit in Hawaii, President Obama told members of Australia's Parliament that "As a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future." And that U.S. Asia-Pacific forward deployments would be "more broadly distributed...more flexible – with new capabilities to ensure that our forces can operate freely."

Thus we have the revitalization of military alliances with South Korea, Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand, which serve as "the fulcrum for our strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific." Having adopted an air-sea battle doctrine, the Pentagon has committed to deploying 60 percent of its nuclear-armed and high-tech navy to the Asia-Pacific. This includes "six aircraft carriers and a majority of the Navy's cruisers, destroyers, littoral combat ships, and submarines, [and] an

accelerated pace of naval exercises and port calls in the Pacific.” Meanwhile, the Pentagon is moving ahead with plans to surround China with stealthy B-2 bombers and F-22 and F-35 fighter-bombers by 2017. And, as Koreans know all too well, in order to reinforce the northeast keystone of U.S. Asia-Pacific power, it has pressed Korea and Japan to transcend the deep wounds of history and continuing territorial disputes to formalize and deepen their military cooperation.

Recognizing that relying on military power alone is not a winning strategy, especially given the influences of economic power, the Obama administration has also pressed to go beyond the U.S.-ROK Free Trade Agreement with negotiations for a “Trans-Pacific Partnership.” The goal is to create the world’s largest and most demanding free-trade area in ways that deepen the economic integration of the U.S. and its Asia-Pacific allies while simultaneously reducing their economic dependence on China. Hardly defenseless, China has responded with a campaign to create a 16-nation East Asia free trade bloc.

It should also be noted that despite its denials, consistent with the precedents of tensions between rising and declining powers, there are many in the U.S. Establishment who view the U.S.-Chinese strategic competition as a zero-sum game. Yet, the reality is that – given its need for regional peace to ensure continued economic growth and thus political stability – it is China more than the U.S. whose policies are more rooted in classical deterrence theory. Consistent with its tradition of tributary empire, it is aggressively expanding into the disputed South China Sea. And, like Japan, South Korea and India it is modernizing its Navy. It is also developing missiles designed to sink inherently offensive U.S. aircraft carriers and its space and cyberspace capabilities are of increasing concern to the U.S. national security elite.

The realpolitik U.S. analyst Robert D. Kaplan explains why: “China is a rising and still immature power, obsessed with the territorial humiliations it suffered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. [It] is developing asymmetric and anti-access niche capabilities designed to deny the U.S. Navy easy entry into the East China Sea and other coastal waters...China is not remotely capable of directly challenging the U.S. militarily. The aim...is dissuasion...that the U.S. Navy will in the future think twice as it expands, and three times about getting between the First Island Chain and the Chinese coast.”

### **Impacts**

In addition to increasing the risks of war, the pivot and the expansions of U.S., allied and Chinese military power have come at a price for the region’s people. In Korea this has come at the expense of the continued undermining of sovereignty with the extension of U.S. wartime control of the ROK military. The World Heritage Site of Jeju Island, along with its communities, is being assaulted in order to take the U.S. naval challenge closer to China’s coast. The massive, ostensibly Korean naval base being built there is to “accommodate submarines and up to 20 warships, including U.S. Aegis-equipped destroyers and their missile defense systems.” And the U.S. is pressing Korea to deepen its alliance with Japan, even as Tokyo’s rising political leaders continue to deny its history of war

crimes and state responsibility for the sexual slavery of “comfort women,” and continues to certify schoolbooks minimizing the impacts of Japan’s Fifteen Year War of aggression.

There is also the matter of the U.S. imperious response to China at the height of the Yeonpyeong Island crisis a year and a half ago. Following China’s warning that the U.S. not conduct military exercises with the USS George Washington in the Yellow Sea, which serves as the gateway to Beijing, the U.S. did just that. As former U.S. ambassador to China R. Stapleton Roy put it, “We poked China in the eye because we could.”

In Japan, the pivot has meant reaffirming the nuclear alliance, reinforcing U.S. military power in Okinawa and across Japan and expanded joint intelligence operations targeted against China and North Korea. It is also worth remembering Prime Minister Hatoyama’s commitments to winning the withdrawal of all U.S. Marines from Okinawa to a more “balanced” foreign policy “less dependent” on the United States to ending U.S. first strike nuclear policies, and his vision of an East Asia Community excluding the United States. He failed to develop the political and diplomatic strategies needed to implement these changes, making possible the Obama administration’s contributions to his downfall.

Looking to Southeast Asia, the Obama administration has transformed competition for hegemony over the oil and mineral rich and geostrategically vital South China Sea into what many analysts in the U.S. see as the most dangerous tinder box for the coming decade, or longer. By responding to China’s increasingly militarized claims to nearly all of the disputed territorial waters – across which 40 percent of the world’s commerce and, most importantly, the Middle East oil essential to East Asia’s economies passes – with its declaration that (U.S.-enforced) free navigation is a U.S. strategic priority, it has undermined ASEAN-Chinese conflict resolution diplomacy. Reinforcing Philippine claims to the “West Philippine Sea,” the Pentagon has increased weapons sales to Manila, accelerated joint military exercises, and is exploring the return of military bases. The pivot also entails strengthening U.S. military relationships with Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and Vietnam, with the latter engaging in joint military exercises. Hanoi, under its “friends with all nations” policy, is also providing access for U.S. and allied navies at Cam Rahn Bay.

Further west, President Obama’s visit and Washington’s renewed ties and military-to-military contacts with Myanmar threaten to restrict China’s access to the Indian Ocean and thus threatens related economic development plans for south central China.

Completing China’s encirclement, the Obama administration has established a new Indian Ocean base in Darwin, Australia, has pursued a tacit alliance with India, is expanding its “partnerships” with New Zealand and Mongolia, and has extracted an agreement to keep a yet-to-be-determined number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan through 2024. Closer to home, the Chamorro people are being clobbered as Guam is being transformed into a primary military hub, and Hawaii is to host nearly 3,000 more Marines, Osprey warplanes, and further base expansions.

## **Toward Common & Human Security**

We are responsible not only to identify injustice, dangers and their sources, but to overcome them. The concepts and strategies that can lead to state oriented common and more fundamental human security in Northeast Asia will be born and nurtured by Korean and other regional nations' political cultures.

This leads me to suggest that we should think about the possibilities of Common Security, seeking win-win rather than zero-sum resolutions to the region's conflicts. Common Security, initiated by Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme, provided the paradigm that facilitated the end of the Cold War in Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even as it cannot serve as the ultimate foundation for human and people's security, it recognizes that nations, as well as individuals, respond to fear, that when one side augments its military arsenal and actions to respond to perceived threats from the other, that this will be seen as a threat by the other side, resulting in the enemy augmenting its arsenal and actions in a defensive but frightening response. This leads to a mutually reinforcing and spiraling arms race, not unlike what we now have in Asia and the Pacific, not only between the U.S. and China, but Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and a host of other Asia-Pacific nations. Common Security's response is hard headed negotiations in which each side names its fears and diplomatic solutions are found which address the anxieties of all involved.

Common Security is inconsistent with the pursuit of empire, which ultimately can be overcome only by people's will and as a result of contradictions including, in the case of the United States, misplaced priorities and imperial over reach.

In East Asia, while not ignoring the painful legacies of history, Common Security could put people's needs ahead of nationalism, exploring ways to develop the region's resources and trade relations in ways that serve all the peoples and nations of the region. An East Asian Common Security framework, built in part on the foundation of the Six-Party Talks, would require new rounds of negotiations focused on Taiwan and Korea to ensure that the currents toward peaceful resolution of these conflicts have the support, time and diplomatic space needed to mature into fulfillment.

A related Common Security approach would be for the region's nations to explore what lessons can be taken from the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe. The patient and difficult diplomacy that created the treaty resulted in significant reductions of non-nuclear forces across the European continent, led to reduced tensions and to today's environment in which fears of a U.S./NATO vs. Russia war are no longer taken seriously.

If it is found that Europe's experience with negotiated and trust-building conventional reductions has applications in Asia – it is a path that could be explored. It may be helpful to know that the Chinese Arms Control and Disarmament Association, has held workshops about reducing production and sales of conventional weapons. While some Chinese scholars are open to the idea, they stress that, given the imbalance of terror, any agreement would likely necessitate drastic cuts by Western states before China might be able to reciprocate.

Third, we know that there is no need to wait for research, workshops, and negotiations to create what people need for security. Steadfast and courageous protestors on Jeju Island are pointing the way. Across the sea, Okinawan struggles for the withdrawal of U.S. bases have become the central contradiction in the U.S.-Japan alliance. The growing solidarity between anti-bases struggles in Korea, the Philippines, Guam, and other Asia-Pacific nations are the most powerful force in overcoming the “abuses and usurpations” inherent to these foreign military occupations.

Similarly, there is the importance of teaching how the U.S. Mutual Security and Military Cooperation treaties with Korea and Japan, the Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines, and other arrangements reminiscent of the unequal treaties of the 19th century undermine the security and negatively impact people’s lives.

Fourth, in the 1990s, when the Clinton administration became preoccupied with China’s rise and initiated Washington’s Post-Cold War containment strategy, I asked an extraordinary Asia scholar how war could be prevented. His answer was wise, simple, and direct: build webs of human relations across nations that make the idea of going to war impossible. In this regard, the growing ties between the Korean and other Asia-Pacific peace movements, organizations, and activists should be celebrated and built on. And, we shouldn’t underestimate the importance of the peace-making soft power of K-Pop and South Korea’s cultural diplomacy.

In terms of solidarity, the newly created U.S. Working Group for Peace and Demilitarization in Asia and the Pacific should be noted. It brings together leading U.S. peace movement figures, Asian-Americans (especially Korean-Americans,) religious leaders, and engaged scholars with the goal of providing vision, resources, and initiatives to help build a U.S. peace movement capable of challenging the pivot and U.S. Asia-Pacific militarization in its comprehensive contexts. We are building strategies focusing on solidarity, policy changes, networking and education. We have called for 2013, the 60th anniversary of the Korean armistice agreement, to be marked as The Year of Peace and Demilitarization in Asia and the Pacific.

The path to common and human security is long. We make our road by walking it.