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# Op-Ed: The Need For A "Half-Pivot to the Americas"

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## Op-Ed: The Need For A "Half-Pivot to the Americas"

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January 10, 2013 | Dr. Robert J. Bunker

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Much discussion has been generated over the still relatively new U.S. strategic “Pivot to Asia” and what this will mean for our national defense policy and force structure. This pivot represents what will become a multi-year shift from the legacy of 9-11, with over a decade’s focus on ground and counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, to a rebalancing of national effort, emphasizing air, naval, and space (both orbital and cyber) forces, focused on a rising China. Concern now exists that China, with the world’s largest population of over 1.3 billion people and the world’s second largest economy, will potentially emerge as a peer competitor to the United States.

As a result, a pragmatic policy of “engagement and containment” drawing upon both theories of neo-liberalism (win-win economic) and of realism (win-lose power) is at play in the U.S. foreign and defense policies supporting the strategic pivot. The intent of the new “China first” focus is not to prepare for the next war but, instead, engage in a shaping operation promoting good global citizenship on the part of an ascendant China mixed in with a bit of traditional offshore balancing (with a nod to Mearsheimer) just in case things do not quite work out as planned.

An additional benefit of the pivot is that it helps to get U.S. ground forces out of the quagmire of Afghanistan. While the performance of the Army, Marine, and Special Forces units is not in question, their mission tasking simply no longer supports the new U.S. global strategic requirements. Further, rather than the initial render safe for the U.S. homeland mission, operations in Afghanistan had shifted into an ill-fated nation-building debacle which, along with earlier operations in Iraq prior to the drawdown, had degraded into an unsustainable economic ‘sucking chest wound’ for our nation.

While at first glance this rebalancing of national effort appears to be strategically mature, it should still only be considered partially articulated and not yet complete. While the “Pivot to Asia” is fundamentally sound and represents an evolution of the foreign and defense policies of the present administration, by itself it ignores important emerging security issues in the Western

Hemisphere.[1] Those issues, driven primarily by the rise and expansion of an assortment of nonstate threats—represented by gangs, cartels, insurgents, organized criminals, mercenaries, and even an odd assortment of terrorists—and an increase in the size of the illicit economies that sustain them, have resulted in the rise of private armies, the corruption of state institutions, the development of areas of impunity and criminal enclaves, acts of barbarism and unspeakable cruelty, deviant forms of spirituality, and a host of other deleterious effects.

Those security issues, because they are derived from nonstate and network based entities and changing economic patterns, defy our modern statist perceptions of “crime” and “war,” theories of international relations (e.g., realism et al.), and metrics of formal international political economy (IPE). They also currently defy U.S. national defense policy much like the issues related to al-Qaeda and its affiliated network did prior to the 9-11 attack. The difference is that al-Qaeda openly and violently showed its hand about a dozen years after it came into existence with just short of 3,000 U.S. dead—the networks represented by the gangs, cartels, and other entities in the Americas have been evolving for about half a century now with a threat trajectory far more subtle in nature. On balance, however, that banner day for al-Qaeda could be multiplied a hundred-fold and still would not approach the casualties produced by the gang and cartel wars in the Americas. Mexico, for instance, during Calderón’s recent 6-year term alone, likely has deaths and disappearances attributed to such violence somewhere in the neighborhood of 80,000 to 100,000.[2]

Given that the Americas have an aggregate population in the one billion range and is host to the world’s first and sixth largest economies (the U.S. and Brazil), it would behoove the United States to get its hemispheric house in order now. If the trends taking place in Mexico, Central America, and some of the major urban centers of Brazil and Colombia are any indication, failure to do so will result in an increasing nonstate threat metastasis taking place. What such a response will entail is that of a “Half-Pivot to the Americas,” based on its own combination of “engagement and containment” directed at the gangs, cartels, and other belligerent nonstate entities which now exist.

This strategy, while subordinate to the one now focusing on China, would represent a critical component in further bolstering the U.S. defense posture. It would specifically utilize Army, Marine, and Special Forces units in a supportive and advisory role to the military forces of our hemispheric allies. These allied military forces by themselves, however, are of course also insufficient for the task at hand. They would be integrated into a more encompassing holistic approach that draws upon allied, local, state, and federal police forces that are, in turn, supported by U.S. federal policing and investigative agencies. The intent would be to layer and integrate both policing and military capabilities of the allies and the U.S. on top of one another to create a combined forces approach. Policing responses would be emphasized, but the reality for an increasing number of regions in the Americas is that local, and even state-level, law enforcement agencies are either outclassed by the opposing nonstate forces they are up against or have been co-opted by them and become part of the growing problem.[3]

For emerging U.S. national defense policy requirements, such a half-pivot to the Americas, as a component of a larger pivot to Asia, makes immense strategic sense as U.S. ground forces are withdrawn from Afghanistan. Furthermore, freed up Army units and personnel—outside of this new SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM tasking to bolster our vulnerable hemisphere—would be available for other dedicated combatant command and global response missions and to provide the nucleus of a future experimental Army force likely integrated with robotic, replicator, and other 5th dimensional technologies.[4]

## Endnotes

1. This perception very much supports the earlier op-ed published at this site by Dr. Max G. Manwaring, "The New Security Reality: Not Business as Usual," August 20, 2012, available from [www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/index.cfm/articles/The-New-Security-Reality-Not-Business-as-Usual/2012/08/20](http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/index.cfm/articles/The-New-Security-Reality-Not-Business-as-Usual/2012/08/20).

2. The official Mexican state figure is 47,515 as of January 2012. See Damien Cave, "Mexico Updates Death Toll in Drug War to 47,515, but Critics Dispute the Data." *New York Times*, January 11, 2012, available from [www.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/world/americas/mexico-updates-drug-war-death-toll-but-critics-dispute-data.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/world/americas/mexico-updates-drug-war-death-toll-but-critics-dispute-data.html). More reliable and less politically biased estimates suggest a much larger figure.

3. Other elements of U.S. national power and that of our hemispheric allies would also be required to be involved in this holistic approach. Specifically, the growing illicit economy that sustains these nonstate threat groups would have to be addressed and mechanisms to bring disenfranchised groups into the formal economy explored.

4. Regional alignment of U.S. Army forces to various combatant commands and U.S. Army modernization focusing on Soldiers at the squad level were mentioned by General Raymond T. Odierno, Chief of Staff of the Army, in remarks during the Eisenhower Lunch during the 2012 Association of the United States Army Annual Meeting and Exposition in Washington, DC. See C. Todd Lopez, "Army will prepare for future with regionally aligned forces." *Army News Service*, October 23, 2012, available from [www.army.mil/article/89819/Army\\_will\\_prepare\\_for\\_future\\_with\\_regionally\\_aligned\\_forces/](http://www.army.mil/article/89819/Army_will_prepare_for_future_with_regionally_aligned_forces/).

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