



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

MES Insights • Volume 4, Issue 1

January 2013

U.S. Strategy Pivot to Asia. But Where in Asia?

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With over a decade of military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States is in the midst of reshaping its military and redefining its strategy overseas. During President Obama's November 2011 trip through Asia, he announced his Administration's "pivot to Asia." The Secretaries of State and Defense shortly afterward reinforced this shift in U.S. strategic focus to Asia as did U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns in December 2012.[1] Yet *where* in Asia is the focus of this pivot in strategy? With China's growing economy and with its expansion of its military, it is assumed that the U.S. pivot would focus on the region where China is in such close proximity with its Pacific neighbors, some who are strong U.S. allies: Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and the Koreas. Though this area of Asia is important, it is not where future U.S. strategy should myopically focus. The pivot of future U.S. strategy in Asia needs to include a focus on Southwest Asia, specifically the area along the Makran Coast. This region, stretching from the Straits of Hormuz in the Gulf of Oman eastward to the outskirts of Karachi, possesses many volatile elements that provide a strong probability that this area will be a future friction point among countries impacting not only regional powers, but potentially influencing and destabilizing international relations to the point of military conflict.

THE MAKRAN COAST

Expanding eastward from the Straits of Hormuz to the west side of Karachi, the Makran Coast traverses both Iran and Pakistan. With roughly 400 miles of this coastline falling within Pakistan, it contains such prominent Pakistani ports as Ormara, Pasni, and Gwadar, with Gwadar potentially becoming one of the key regional friction points in the future. Roughly 44 miles west of Gwadar, also along the Makran Coastline is the Iranian port of Chabahar. This is important to note since the port of Chabahar is being developed with

MES Notes

MES Lecture Series 2012-13 Upcoming Dates

In the month of February MES at MCU will be hosting two speakers as part of the AY 2012-13 MES Lecture Series.

7 February 2013

Professor Meir Litvak, Director,
The Alliance Center for Iranian Studies,
Tel Aviv University
"The Palestinians and the 'Arab Spring.'"

27 February 2013

Ambassador Seyed Hussain Mousavian,
Associate Research Scholar,
Princeton University
"Iran's Nuclear Dossier and
Relations with the U.S."

POC for the lecture series is Adam Seitz at
(703) 432-5260 or seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu.

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assistance of the Indian Government. Also of interest is that the port at Gwadar is under development primarily by the Chinese. Investment by both China and India in ports so close to the Straits of Hormuz, where 40 percent of the world's seaborne oil passes, combined with each country's growing need for natural resources to fuel their expanding markets, makes it imperative that future U.S. strategy include this region in its "pivot to Asia."

The Region

Development of both Gwadar and Chabahar ports are billed as commercial endeavors. Gwadar potentially gives China the future means to extract natural resources out of Central Asia, while gaining an alternate route to access its western provinces. Likewise, the development of Chabahar gives India potential access to these same Central Asian resources, while circumventing their regional nemesis Pakistan. Yet this same development can easily serve the future strategic military desires of both countries. Having ports in such close proximity to the Straits of Hormuz provides either country the ability to have their respective navies closely monitor activity passing through such a vital sea-lane and potentially inhibit or block transit of ships through this area if tensions escalate. This is important given that China and India are both rapidly advancing industrial nations, requiring increasingly more natural resources to fuel their economic progress. With the Straits of Hormuz providing such a geographically narrow area for ships to traverse, along with both countries competing for the same natural resources, not only amongst each other but with other countries as well, these ports provide immediate access to an area that is sure to be leveraged in time of conflict. To complicate matters, the countries that host each of these ports, Iran and Pakistan respectively, could potentially be drawn into any future conflict if any military action were taken against foreign ships utilizing their ports.

The Port of Gwadar, Pakistan

Pakistani officials envision the deep-water port of Gwadar as being a future economic rival to Dubai. It has been, and continues to be, under Chinese development since 2002. China has other strategic investments in the region. For example, China is negotiating to upgrade the Karakorum Highway, which links China's Xinjiang Province to Northern Pakistan. This project is seen as not only expanding the highway to accommodate more traffic, but also providing a link from the Chinese region that contains its largest natural gas and oil reserves to the Arabian Sea through the port of Gwadar. Though the port falls within Pakistan, it is being developed primarily by the Chinese with the Chinese importing not only the materials and machinery for the project, but also their own work force. This has left many locals, who may have benefited economically from the project, totally excluded. Instead of helping what is the most impoverished province in Pakistan, the project has only fueled the rage and disillusionment of those who have traditionally lived in this region, the ethnic Baluch. The Baluch are further enraged by the Pakistani military's selling of land in the region that has historically belonged to the Baluch. The Pakistani military, which is dominated by the ethnic Punjabis, and the ethnic Baluch have had several armed conflicts over the years (1948, 1958, 1962, 1973-1977), and there is an ongoing campaign by the Pakistani government to quell any potential uprising.

MES Notes (cont.)

December 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi published "Islam and Constitutionalism in Afghanistan," in the *Journal of Persian Studies* 5 (2012), pp. 205-243.

December 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi published "Taliban" in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, edited by Gerhard Bowering et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

8 November 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a paper entitled "Threats and Opportunities for the United States in Afghanistan between 2014 and 2030," at the U.S. Central Command's Academic Consortium "Scanning the Horizon" organized by the University of South Florida, Tampa, FL.

11 January 2013

Mr. Adam Seitz presented a paper entitled "The 'Arab Spring' and Yemeni Civil-Military Relations," at the international conference "Yemen: Challenges for the Future" hosted by the British-Yemeni Society and London Middle East Institute, at the University of London SOAS, UK.

The Baluch

Populating the harsh and barren region along and inland to the Makran coast, Baluch tribes have historically inhabited an area known as Baluchistan, which includes sections of southwest Pakistan, southeast Iran, and southern Afghanistan. According to estimates, approximately 3.65 million Baluch live within Pakistan, with another 1 million living within Iran and an approximate 90,000 living in the southern Afghan border region.[2] Within Pakistan the majority of Baluch are found in the Pakistani province aptly named Baluchistan, where a violent conflict between the Baluch and Pakistani security forces smolders and occasionally flares. In spite of the violence, the Baluch provide a more secular counter-weight to the uneasy détente that Pakistan has with the radical Islamists that inhabit the northern tribal regions.

The Port of Chabahar, Iran

Forty-four miles west along the Makran Coast is the Iranian port of Chabahar. Developed in collaboration with the Indian government, this port is useful to the Indians in helping to marginalize Pakistan, expanding trade with Iran, and gaining access to Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries. The strategic plan India has for the region is seen beyond the port and is found in the development and financing of the 134 mile/215km Delaram-Zaranj Highway (Route 606). Constructed by the Indian Border Roads Organization (BRO), this highway was completed in January 2009 at an estimated cost of \$135 million U.S. Dollars. It not only links the remote city of Zaranj to other parts of Afghanistan, it also serves as a link from Zabol, Iran, which sits adjacent to Zaranj, and links directly to the Port of Chabahar to the south.

Iran-Pakistan-India Pipeline (IPI)

The IPI was envisioned over fifty years ago as a natural gas pipeline running from the South Pars gas field, in the Persian Gulf to New Delhi. This pipeline is to begin in Asaluyeh, Iran, traverse Pakistan (with an offshoot feeding the energy needs of Karachi), while terminating in New Delhi, India. Though the pipeline is planned to begin in Asaluyeh, Iran, it is currently seen running due east through the volatile Baluch region of Pakistan as it makes its way toward India. With the port of Chabahar being developed in collaboration with the Indian Government, this port could provide a viable option to divert the pipeline to, if the Baluch in Pakistan choose to hinder such a project running through their territory. Furthermore, with Iran having the natural resources that India as well as other countries desire, it is conceivable that a pipeline would terminate at the port to help facilitate access to foreign markets.

Asia Friction Points

Friction points abound in Asia. The most common are land disputes among several countries laying claim to the same territory, for example, the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, Taiwan, or China's current dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (Japan and China's name respectively) in the East China Sea. Disputes over these islands are viewed as issues of national sovereignty and power in the region and are amplified by the changing politics within China and Japan. This is illustrated by the newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe desiring to redefine the Japanese military by seeking to amend the country's constitution. Such an amendment would allow the military to participate in matters beyond those of national defense and humanitarian assistance. Abe's hawkish views are inflamed by the Chinese government's continuing build up and modernization of its military and the increase in Chinese patrols around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Japan's concerns of a rising naval force are further reinforced by the Chinese government's emphasis on expanding and modernizing its navy more rapidly than the rest of the Chinese military. Of additional concern, China has increased its drone development, unveiling eight new models during an air show in November 2012 and planning to construct 11 drone bases along its coastline, with construction completed by 2015.[3] Though this activity is taking place in the area that currently dominates U.S. Asian strategy, they are relationships that most likely will influence actions along the Makran Coast, as both powers compete for resources as current/future tensions escalate.

With the Chinese developing the port of Gwadar, while simultaneously modernizing and expanding their

navy, it is highly possible that the port will have both commercial and military applications. This may or may not be a stabilizing factor for Pakistan, given the Baluch unrest in the south, unrest with the Pashtuns in the northern tribal region (to include the infiltration of radical Islamists there as well), and the long standing conflict with India over Kashmir. However, the Chinese investment in the area may provoke Pakistan into action to ensure stability in the region. Yet it is sure to alarm some, if not many, in the Pakistani military that India is working with Iran to develop the port of Chabahar, less than 50 miles west of Gwadar. Potentially serving both commercial and military capabilities, Chabahar is ideally located to counter the port of Gwadar. Maintaining a naval presence out of Gwadar negates the need to navigate around their regional competitor India; yet this same strategy could force India to maintain a forward presence out of Chabahar. Each port could serve as a hub for forward Indian (Chabahar) and Chinese (Gwadar) naval presence in the region, escalating tensions.

With the U.S. refocusing its strategy overseas while drawing down its military strength and with that its capabilities, it needs to have regional allies assume a greater role in patrolling vital sea-lanes. The U.S. Navy cannot be everywhere, all the time. U.S. allies need to understand and begin to assist with such missions in their respective regions. Though the U.S. Navy is sure to continue patrols within the Persian Gulf, and have a presence in the Makran Coast as they transits to and from the Persian Gulf, U.S. strategists need be cognizant of the many factors at work within this region, such as Chinese strategists having the view that "the United States and its would deny supplies of oil and metal ores to China during a military or economic crisis and that the U.S. Navy could block China's access to strategically crucial sea-lanes."^[4] Having the ports of Gwadar and Chabahar in such close proximity to the Straits of Hormuz is going to increase the likelihood of a potential clash not only among military ships, but also among the aircraft and drones that are sure to operate in conjunction with any naval contingent in the area. As future competition and tensions escalate among nations, U.S. strategists need to keep a close eye on the Makran Coast so that the U.S. is prepared to act in its strategic interest should conflicts arise in the region.

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Bahrain's New Security State Notes:

[1] Burns, William. "The U.S. Role in the Middle East - William Burns." *Manama Dialogue 2012*. Bahrain: International Institute for Strategic Studies Manama Dialogue regional security summit, 2012.

[2] Harrison, Selig S. *In Afghanistan's Shadow: Baluch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations*. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981): 1.

[3] Kaiman, Jonathan, and Justin McCurry. "Japan and China step up drone race as tension builds over disputed islands." *The Guardian*. January 8, 2013.

[4] Nathan, Andrew J. and Andrew Scobell. "How China Sees America; The Sum of Beijing's Fears." *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 5 (September/October 2012): 38.