

Asia, the Pacific, and the US Air Force's Contribution to the Future of US National Security

After a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, in blood and treasure, the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region.

—Pres. Barack Obama, 2011

On 17 November 2011, President Obama announced before the Australian parliament that he had made a “deliberate and strategic decision—as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with our allies and friends;” that the region is a “top priority” of US security policy; and that the United States is “here to stay.”¹

That same month, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton published an article in *Foreign Policy* entitled “America’s Pacific Century,” in which she wrote:

Over the last 10 years, we have allocated immense resources to those two theaters [Iraq and Afghanistan]. In the next 10 years, we need to be smart and systematic about where we invest time and energy, so that we put ourselves in the best position to sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values. One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region.²

Shortly after those remarks, and in concert with the president’s statements recognizing the importance of the region to US national security, then-USAF chief of staff (CSAF), Gen Norton A. Schwartz, directed the Air Force Research Institute (AFRI) to undertake a year-long study focused on the role airpower will play in achieving national objectives in the Pacific region through the year 2020. In this context, *airpower* is inclusive in the sense that it is not entirely service-specific and it encompasses air, space, and cyber.

The AFRI team began its research by considering the ideas of Michèle Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, published in *Joint Force Quarterly*, on strategic planning and national security. Flournoy and Brimley asserted that the United States “lacks a comprehensive interagency process that takes into account both the character of the international security environment and its

own ability to deal with future challenges and opportunities.” In proposing a structured approach to develop a comprehensive national strategy, they called for a new “Solarium Project,” inspired by Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower’s discussions in the White House solarium that produced the Cold War containment policy used against the Soviet Union.³ Since the United States has embarked on a major policy shift—as it had in 1952—AFRI considered the Eisenhower-era process proposed by Fournoy and Brimley appropriate to ensure the greatest likelihood of success.⁴

We initiated the study using a three-case approach, much like the Solarium Project in 1953: best case, worst case, and most likely case. Further, the research team used the DIME construct (diplomacy, information, military, and economic) as the framework for exploring potential solution sets. The study relied on the May 2010 *National Security Strategy*, the *National Military Strategy*, and the January 2012 White House document, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for US 21st Century Defense*, as conceptual documents which define enduring US national interests and assumptions.⁵ This study was not about establishing a detailed prediction of the future. Rather, it was about projecting reality forward from 2012 and attempting to determine what recommendations provide the US Air Force the greatest opportunity for success. The three-case scenario creates a range of future events, realizing that what will occur most likely exists somewhere between the extremes. Consequently, the three cases—best, worst, and most likely—establish the construct for conducting an analysis and determining recommendations. The best case is a region with nations following international agreements and the rule of law. Conflict exists but falls short of direct military engagement. China, India, and Russia continue a peaceful rise, integrating more fully into the global economic order. The worst case is regional strife with economic and military conflict, where free and open access to critical lines of communication is in jeopardy and protective tariffs restrict trade. A low probability of direct military engagement exists between the United States and one of the three rising powers, but it could also occur between one of the lesser nations. It is within this scenario that potential conflict involving US forces resides. In the most-likely case, competition for natural resources within the region is intense, and “shows of force” are used to obtain political gains—but fall short of hostile, aggressive actions leading to state-on-state warfare. International norms provide regional guidance, and acquisition of arms continues as an “arms stroll” rather than an “arms race.” Each case requires that the Air Force be prepared to meet US national security

needs. The differences in each case dictate how and through what means specific capabilities are required.

The three cases and supporting documentation provided the essential elements necessary to develop an analysis and provide recommendations based upon the DIME approach. What follows is a summary of the analysis and recommendations.

The AFRI study identified several factors that stand out as having the most impact on the Asia-Pacific. The first is the economic dynamics of the region. By 2020, the six largest Asia-Pacific economies—Australia, India, Japan, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), South Korea, and the United States—will comprise about 30 percent of both the world’s output and input. These countries are economically integrated, have already formed a “regionalized economy,” and this trend will continue through the current decade. Australia is one example of the increasingly delicate interconnectedness of security and economics. In 2010, China’s share of Australia’s bilateral trade was 22.5 percent. By 2020, that value is predicted to more than double, perhaps reaching 48.7 percent. Despite its economic dependence on China, Australia has been one of the United States’ most dependable friends, participating as an ally in every major war since World War I.⁶

A second factor is that generally the nations in the Asia-Pacific region prefer bilateral over multilateral agreements, particularly when dealing with the United States. This is symptomatic in that these nations have and will continue to employ a hedging strategy. Whether due to recent history, geographical location, influences of an ancient past, or lack of material capability, many nations of this region choose bilateral approaches and prefer not to become involved in any future hegemonic struggles.⁷

A third factor is, despite all the dire warnings about a coming hegemonic conflict between the United States and China, *both* the PRC and the United States are playing in the same game—an economic game. China, like every other state, wants to prosper. Unlike the Cold War’s conflict of ideologies reflected in the differing economic systems, the United States and China are operating within the capitalist system. Governmental constructs may differ, but the goal to achieving power is the same: acquisition of wealth reflected in gross domestic product (GDP). Thus, unlike the Cold War—where forces on each side of the Iron Curtin were united by a common ideology, economic systems, and security arrangements—today, and through 2020, the environment is much more complex.

Fortunately, we have a window of opportunity to not only help shape the Asia-Pacific region to advance US interests, but to do so in a way

that is mutually beneficial to all Asia-Pacific states. Unlike 1953 when the United States faced an openly hostile adversary, the Asia-Pacific states do not pose this immediate threat. Time exists to develop viable mechanisms to resolve potential conflict, unlike the Cold War where an approach of mutually assured destruction overshadowed every confrontation. While recognizing that states look after their own interests, we suggest the United States pursue a strategy of “Transitional Engagement,” or rather, a course of action predicated upon the uncertainty caused by the tectonic shifts in international politics since the Cold War. Transitional Engagement leverages the aforementioned factors to create an international regime based upon the emerging regionalized economy.⁸ This construct, in turn, can moderate state behavior. Norms, principles, and decision-making procedures follow material interest and serve to informally change behavior and relationships. This approach is in sharp contrast to the Cold War containment strategy. Because the top six economies are increasingly integrated—thereby bringing along their smaller neighbors to further integrate the region—each state has a vested interest in prospering under this same economic system. Leveraging each state’s economic self-interest, the United States has an opportunity to establish certain informal contacts—as opposed to multilateral agreements—where the “objectives . . . seek to structure their relationships in stable and mutually beneficial ways.”⁹ The US leaders must understand that a “one-size-fits-all” strategic approach is unlikely to work. They must not rule out using formal regional and even multilateral agreements when appropriate, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).¹⁰

A national “grand strategy” of Transitional Engagement provides an overarching construct for the services to perform their functions of ensuring national security. Specifically, for the US Air Force this means leveraging kinetic and nonkinetic capabilities. It must maintain credible nuclear and conventional capability sufficient to protect and defend US national interests. These capabilities must be seen by allies in the region as sufficient to protect them under a deterrence umbrella. This stabilizes the region from the standpoint of nuclear proliferation or a new arms race. Further, it frees all to operate absent of the threat of impending military action. The strategy proposed by AFRI is one of engagement occurring at every level throughout the region but first and foremost predicated from a position of US national power. From a foundation of strength, other avenues become possible. As cyberspace and space capabilities—obvious USAF concerns—continue to grow in importance throughout the region, the Air Force must dedicate itself to obtaining

and maintaining superiority in these domains, much as it does in air superiority today.

Additional capabilities exist within the Air Force to support Transitional Engagement. Through building partnerships and building partnership capacity (BPC), it can play an increasingly significant role in supporting the strategy of Transitional Engagement. The Air Force defines BPC as “Airmen interacting with international airmen and other relevant actors to develop, guide, and sustain relationships for mutual benefit and security. . . . It includes both foreign partners as well as domestic partners and emphasizes collaboration with foreign governments, militaries and populations as well as US government departments, agencies, industry, and NGOs.”¹¹ The Air Force’s role in BPC, by its very definition, can take many forms and is essential for creating international regimes. Even the simplest and least expensive BPC measures can have a profound impact. Military educational exchanges, for instance, are but one aspect of engagement “whereby states come to adopt new norms and institutions” and where “over time, close social interactions promote patterns of trust and convergence of identities.”¹² Significant capabilities exist within the US Air Force but lack a coherent approach. Due to numerous organizations having certain mission sets within BPC, the service sends mixed messages, such as denying an aircraft sale while at the same time attempting to obtain new basing rights.

One example of leveraging BPC is in providing and sharing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. ISR is critical in the region due to its vastness and the simple fact that transporting goods from and within the Asia-Pacific takes place across thousands of miles of unpredictable and often violent oceans. ISR will play a key role in ensuring that lines of communication—to include sea, air, and cyber—remain open for commerce and the free flow of ideas. Using its own capabilities, the USAF could help establish norms for using “uniformed” and professional military assets that can be viewed as a positive commitment to maintaining law and order at sea and in the other domains.¹³ ISR can be equally important in providing situational awareness to ascertain intent of action. Much like in the Cold War, the greatest danger is not direct confrontation but miscalculations that could result in escalating military action. Disputes over resources, often reflected as territorial issues, could unwittingly draw the region into conflict. Situational awareness enabled by ISR can assist in defusing situations before they become too volatile.

The Air Force has a unique opportunity to support President Obama’s vision for engaging with the Asia-Pacific region. However, it will involve

a combination of traditional roles and missions as well as newer ones; *both sets* will play a decisive role. To be sure, it will include such traditional roles as deterrence, along with newer but perhaps even more important roles such as building partnerships. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel recently reaffirmed the so-called pivot during his confirmation hearings: “As we emerge from this decade of war, we must also broaden our nation’s focus overseas as we look at future threats and challenges. . . . [T]hat’s why DOD is rebalancing its resources toward the Asia-Pacific region.”¹⁴ The US Air Force can be the vanguard of this vision. Its capabilities include global vigilance, reach, and power. It represents the best the United States has to offer. By taking the lead in creating institutions that help bring order out of the dynamic growth of the Asia-Pacific region, by seizing the mantle of a transitional leader, the US Air Force can play a key role in making this “America’s Pacific Century.”

Gen John A. Shaud, USAF, Retired

Former Director, AFRI

Kevin C. Holzimmer

AFRI Researcher

Editor’s note: The complete AFRI Asia-Pacific study can be accessed online at http://www.au.af.mil/au/research/up_research.asp.

The following AFRI researchers contributed materially to the study: Dr. Dale L. Hayden, Dr. John P. Geis II, Mr. John L. Conway III, Dr. Karen W. Currie, Dr. Chad L. Dacus, Mr. Stephen J. Hagel, Mr. Jeffrey B. Hukill, Dr. Kevin C. Holzimmer, and Dr. Panayotis Yannakogeorgos.

Notes

1. The White House, “Remarks by President Obama before the Australian Parliament, 17 November 11,” Office of the Press Secretary.
2. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century.
3. Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn W. Brimley, “Strategic Planning for National Security: A New Project Solarium,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 41 (2nd Quarter 2006): 80–81.
4. The definitive account of the Solarium Project and its impact on US strategy during the Cold War is Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Robert Richardson Bowie contributed to the Solarium Project as director of policy planning, US Department of State, from 1953 to 1957.
5. *National Security Strategy* (Washington: The White House, May 2010; Joint Chiefs of Staff, *National Military Strategy of the United States of America*, 8 February 2011; and *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for US 21st Century Defense* (Washington: DoD, 5 January 2012).

6. Brooks B. Robinson, "Top Five Asia-Pacific Economies: Integration, Conflict, Vulnerability, and Crisis, 2010–2020," paper presented at the Air Force Research Institute's Asia-Pacific Conference, 6–7 December 2011, 2–3.

7. This conclusion comes from discussions with various members of Asia-Pacific think tanks and members of PACAF and PACOM.

8. The classic definition of *international regimes* comes from Stephen D. Krasner: the existence of many "sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge." As quoted in Robert O. Keohane, "The Demand of International Regimes," *International Organizations* 36, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 325.

9. Keohane, "Demand for International Regimes," 330. Keohane's works form the foundation of our argument on moving forward to 2020. See also Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, rev. ed. (1984; Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

10. For a positive portrait of ASEAN, see Yoram Z. Haftel, "Conflict, Regional Cooperation, and Foreign Capital: Indonesian Foreign Policy and the Formation of ASEAN," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6 (2010): 87–106. In a recent paper, Deborah Elms suggests that the way in which US officials negotiated in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) talks—in which the participants attempted to open markets—had more to do with the lack of a deal than the actual proposal. The United States suggested the multilateral venue and then proceeded to negotiate bilaterally with some nations while insisting to negotiate multilaterally with others. Deborah Elms, "Getting from Here to There: Stitching Together Goods Agreements in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP) Agreement," paper presented for the International Studies Association Annual Meeting, 2 April 2012, 15–17.

11. Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine, Organization, and Command*, 14 October 2011, 53.

12. Carol Atkinson, "Constructivist Implications of Material Power: Military Engagement and the Socialization of States, 1972–2000," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (September 2006): 510.

13. Christian Le Miére, "Policing the Waves: Maritime Paramilitaries in the Asia-Pacific," *Survival* 53, no. 1 (February/March 2011): 134.

14. US Senate Armed Services Committee, "To Conduct a Confirmation Hearing on the Expected Nomination of: Honorable Charles T. Hagel to be Secretary of Defense," transcript, 31 January 3013, 73, <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/Transcripts/2013/01%20January/13-01%20-%201-31-13.pdf>.

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