

## **Report from the 1st FES Tiergartenconference 2012 A Fundamental Geostrategic Shift?**

### **Consequences of US Rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific Region for Regional and Global Security Policy**

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#### **1. Background and Aim of the Conference**

International relations scholars and analysts alike have been discussing the coming of an Asian Century for decades, predicting a shift of the centre of gravity from Transatlantic to Asia-Pacific. Until last year, however, the notion remained contested, despite the new economic dynamics unfolding in the Asia-Pacific region at the turn of the twenty-first century. With last year's strategy statements from US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, however, there is a renewed and pressing sense of a fundamental strategic shift in international relations and global governance.

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<sup>1</sup> This report is a personal reflection by the authors of the debates and contributions during the conference.

While in earlier debates the emphasis was often on economic dynamics, this latest adjustment of US policy clearly demonstrates a geostrategic move with, potentially, very significant implications for security policy at the national, regional and global levels. In light of recent armaments dynamics and territorial disputes in the wider Asia-Pacific region, the US Defense Review in January 2012 explicitly stated:

Accordingly, while the US military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region. Our relationships with Asian allies and key partners are critical to the future stability and growth of the region.<sup>2</sup>

Against this background, FES wants to assess the significance of this supposed shift for global peace and security governance. Primarily, we want to reflect on the origin and depth of this latest dynamic in the United States and assess the consequences for traditional alliances (namely, Europe and the wider Transatlantic world), as well as for the supposed new centre of geostrategic gravity in the Asia-Pacific region. Germany's current role and responsibilities in this regard will be given special attention. In addition, we also wanted to look beyond the supposed old and new centres of gravity and discuss the consequences and interdependencies of a fundamental geostrategic shift for other regions as well, in order to provide a more comprehensive picture for our partners in Germany and around the world. Finally, we wanted to introduce a critical non-mainstream perspective on the supposed geostrategic shift: Critical Geopolitics should help us to frame this crucial debate in a way that reflects on the limitations and pitfalls of the strong geostrategic and geopolitical narratives that influence foreign policy decision-making.

## **2. The Broad Patterns of the Strategic Shift towards Asia-Pacific**

The main rationale for the US rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific obviously stems from the analysis that the region is becoming more and more important for international affairs and global governance, economically as well as in terms of security policy. However, one telling characterisation in the debate identified that in Asia-Pacific »21st century economic structures« were set up on the basis of »a nineteenth century security architecture«. It was stressed from different sides that this trend is a sustainable one, an assertion that remained undisputed during the conference. The hitherto peaceful rise of China was interpreted as being one of the three most important global trends and the overall dynamics in the discussion might lead to the question of whether the US rebalancing is really about the broader Asia-Pacific region or whether it is »merely« about more attention being paid to the rise of China. Especially in comparison to the increasingly less visible regional role of Japan, which used to be at the center-stage of regional security policy considerations, now all roads seem to lead to Beijing, as one participant put it.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: 2012 Strategic Guidance for the Department of Defence ([http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense\\_Strategic\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf)).

Against this background it was repeatedly stressed that understanding of the aims and objectives of Chinese foreign and security policy in the region will be crucial in coming to conclusions on how to deal with this central actor in the region. Additionally, it was noted that in parallel to this shift of attention towards the West in Washington a corresponding shift of attention in Moscow towards the East largely remains unnoticed. The Asia-Pacific policy of Moscow and the Russian role in this region were also characterised as embryonic, however.

### **3. US Policy towards Asia-Pacific – Rebalancing Not Pivoting**

At the outset of the conference a critical geopolitics perspective was introduced that puts the current narrative of rebalancing or pivoting towards the Asia Pacific into perspective.<sup>3</sup> From this point of view, the shifts under way are less dramatic than narratives and policy announcements might suggest. Consequently, this perspective suggests that it is more adequate to speak of rebalancing rather than of pivoting, a reframing that is currently being pursued by the US administration. Nevertheless, it was also noted in the course of the conference that in the end only the concrete decisions to be taken by the US in the coming years will enable a more substantial assessment than the current recourse to policy statements.

Looking back, it was argued that during the Bush administration US policy towards Asia-Pacific did not neglect the security dynamics in East Asia but paid too little attention to its relations with South East Asian states. The US ignorance of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) was cited as one clear indication of this lack of US attention towards that region. In addition, it was argued by one participant that Asian states also perceived the US tendency to act unilaterally and preemptively as a potential threat to regional stability. Especially in terms of broader diplomatic engagement by the US it was stressed that the Obama administration came into office with the clear perception that the US is underinvested in Asia-Pacific. As a consequence, the administration revitalised the US diplomatic profile in regional forums, catching up with China.

One aspect of the current bilateral dynamics between the US and China, on one hand, and the other states in the region, on the other hand, was portrayed in a rather benign light: whenever China acts more assertively with regard to regional neighbors, the argument goes, these neighbors look to the US, which in turn imposes some restraint on China's foreign policy. Seemingly, this observation was shared by the Chinese leadership and triggered a critical debate within Beijing. As a consequence, it was said that China also opens up to regional dialogue. At the same time, the new openness of regional states to strengthen ties with the US must be careful not to neglect the aspirations of ASEAN and its members in terms of regional leadership.

<sup>3</sup> John A. Agnew: Is US Security Policy »Pivoting« from the Atlantic to Asia-Pacific? A Critical Geopolitical Perspective, September 2012, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/global/09318.pdf>.

#### **4. Focus on China – All Roads Lead to Beijing?**

With regard to the special relationship between the US and China, one participant stressed that the next decade would be decisive for their future bilateral relations. The US and China needed to find a way to block what was described as a drift toward strategic rivalry. This is probably one of the reasons why the US currently aspires to measured rhetoric – as one participant noted – and to finding a positive framing for its policy towards China. All in all, it was said that the US and China are both quite aware of the lessons of history. Nevertheless, they were described as still struggling with the question of what to do when a great power and a rising power »meet«. A stable and mutually acceptable relationship would need to be developed that could break the historical pattern that established powers and rising powers go to war (hot or cold) over their rivalry. The search for such a new sort of relationship has still not experienced any breakthrough, but one participant appreciated the establishment of military-to-military relationships between the US and China as small steps of progress in this regard.

One broader thread of the debate also discussed the potential role of China in international relations and the current global governance architecture. There was agreement among participants that predictions are rather difficult: while the existing system has served Chinese interests well during its rise, the fact that it was not involved in setting up and structuring this system was cited as one potential motivation to try to revise the international order according to China's own preferences. This consideration also underlines the importance of obtaining a profound assessment of China's intentions. It was also argued by one participant that China's rise will lead to the unprecedented situation that soon the world's biggest economy will be run by what essentially is still a Leninist state.

But in contradistinction to the focus on China that dominated the debates during the conference, the critical geopolitics perspective argued that the heavy focus on great powers and their relations might also distort the analysis, since regional dynamics are more complex. Great Powers are not always the drivers of regional dynamics and sometimes are rather reactive than proactive in shaping security relations, as for example in the conflict on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>4</sup>

#### **5. No Easy Solution for Regional Conflicts Ahead – Preventing Violent Escalation Is a Priority**

From the larger picture of the region's strategic relevance and the potential for US–China rivalry, the discussion shifted focus to the current conflicts in the South China Sea that feature prominently in day-to-day media coverage. It was repeatedly stressed by participants that a code of conduct – which has been under discussion for quite

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<sup>4</sup> See also Agnew (2012), p. 8.

some time but is not yet agreed – was necessary to help avoid any further escalation in the South China Sea. One participant noted that a non-binding statement of the relevant actors dating from 2002 already contains all the necessary elements but China and regional neighbors have not abided by its terms (otherwise recent escalations would not have happened). There was a broadly shared perception that under the current circumstances the conflicting claims probably cannot be resolved. The idea of a joint development of resources in contested areas was seen as a fairly attractive option, but the terms suggested by China for such joint development were characterised as unacceptable for ASEAN states by one participant.

While not discussed in relation to the other territorial disputes in the region, it became evident that this assessment probably holds true on a more general level: many of the conflicts in Asia-Pacific with high stakes for the relevant actors can in the short term at best be prevented from violent escalation, while a resolution of these conflicts requires new and innovative diplomatic and political answers which are not yet on the horizon.

## **6. Consequences for Other (Regional) Contexts**

One particular aim of the conference was to try to look specifically at the consequences of the rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific (intended as well as unintended) for different regional and global security policy contexts. The following paragraphs highlight the insights derived from the corresponding breakout sessions.<sup>5</sup>

### **6.1 NATO and Transatlantic Relations**

In the plenary as well as in the breakout session it was repeatedly emphasised that rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific does not necessarily mean a downgrading of the importance of transatlantic relations. The current rebalancing in that perspective should not be interpreted in terms of a zero-sum game. At the same time, it was cautioned that – while the importance of the transatlantic relationship will remain – Germany and Europe would have to accept that European security concerns no longer remain the top US priority. The enduring strategic relevance of the transatlantic partnership notwithstanding it was admitted that the posture of US forces will change. Europe is already witnessing a drawdown of troops in Germany and a reorientation towards Asia-Pacific with a new base in Australia and a planned force presence of 60 per cent of US naval forces in the Pacific by 2020, up from the current 50 per cent. Against this background a lack of debate in Europe about the role of NATO (not only as a military alliance) was perceived. It was also stressed that Europe perhaps has been relying on US leadership for too long. In view of the discussed shift, the need for a more coherent strategy was stressed. Even if the corresponding democratic processes to define such a strategic approach sometimes appear a burden, they provide the necessary legitimacy for such strategic reorientations in the long run.

<sup>5</sup> The following insights are based on feedback and contributions from the respective colleagues, resource persons and participants of the corresponding Breakout Sessions. A more detailed documentation of the discussions in the breakout session has been provided by Live-Blog coverage on the Homepage of the Tiergartenkonferenz: <http://www.tiergarten-konferenz.de/blog>

## 6.2 The Asia-Pacific Region

With China assuming a more assertive role in their neighborhood and the United States re-focusing on Asia the implications of the shifting balance of power for the region itself were discussed. As the security governance institutions in Asia have seen a remarkable development since the end of the Cold War, the debate revolved around their future role. For instance, will the ASEAN Regional Forum become the centre stage for conflict management and dispute settlement in the region? Will multilateral institutions set the rules for Chinese–US engagement pertaining to security and trade issues? Current tensions in Asian multilateral security institutions underscore that the unfolding power dynamics in Asia are everything but certain. Caught between the options of security cooperation with the United States, on one hand, and economic bandwagoning with China, on the other, (notably Southeast) Asian states will find it difficult to side too much with either the United States or China for their future development. Pessimistic voices hinted at the failure of the latest ASEAN summit in Phnom Penh as a sign that ASEANs future will be increasingly affected by US–Chinese competition. There is a risk that the rivalry is going to further split South East Asia into a pro-China and pro-US camp. On the other hand, optimists were ready to underline that ASEAN provided a sufficiently effective institutional framework for addressing and helping to solve regional issues. Notwithstanding, the institutional deficits of ASEAN in terms of lack of personnel and resources were clearly mentioned. Finally, everyone agreed that Europe needs to formulate a coherent foreign policy strategy for Asia-Pacific, especially towards ASEAN. This policy needs to include a better regard of *Realpolitik* aspects and establish high-ranking meetings as a reliable basis for future consultations.

## 6.3 Middle East and North Africa

It was discussed controversially whether the US shift towards Asia-Pacific has already had some consequences in particular countries or conflicts in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it was widely argued that this rebalancing will probably not have substantial consequences with regard to the *overall* level of US engagement in the wider Middle East, due to the fundamental economic, political, social, security and value-oriented issues at stake in a variety of policy areas. Fairly unsurprisingly the presence of vast natural – and in particular energy – resources, the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian Conflict and the relevance of the region in the war against terrorism figured prominently when it came to explaining the logic of a continued strong US presence in the Middle East, despite a strategic rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific. In addition, the unpredictable dynamics and potential risks coming along with the Arab Spring were cited as reasons for a continuing strategic presence in the region. Finally, the potential for hegemonic conflicts in the region was brought to the fore and the role of regional powers in current conflicts such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the case of Syria was discussed. All of these issues, it was argued, would necessitate a continuing involvement of the US in the region.

#### 6.4 Latin America

With regard to Latin America it was argued that the US has lost political influence in Latin America, especially in South America. The Latin American political context evolved in the 2000s with the elections in several South American countries of center-left governments. In addition, the rejection of a Free Trade Area of the Americas in 2005 left no substantive common content to US–Latin American relations, leading to a pragmatic readjustment. Furthermore, regional integration and cooperation projects such as UNASUR and MERCOSUR have gained in relevance. While Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean still have a high strategic importance for US security policy because of their geographical position, the South American countries have become more independent of the US. The discussion focused in particular on the Latin American turn towards China. Latin America has become increasingly important for Chinese investment and trade between Latin America and China has grown quickly during the past decade. It was controversially debated whether there is a lack of strategy defining this reorientation. All in all, it is unlikely that the region will seek closer ties with the US in the near future.

#### 6.5 Sub-Saharan Africa

Globally, three key global trends shaping Africa's strategic environment were discerned. These are the emergence of a recalibrated American strategic approach to Africa; the weakening European global position due to the Eurozone crisis; and the growing presence of China in Africa. In struggling to adjust to the rise of China and the shift of global power to East Asia, America is flexing one of its remaining muscles – the military. It uses this tool to control oil supplies as a means to counter power shifts within the global economy. Against this background, we need to understand the establishment in 2007 of the Unified Combatant Command for Africa (AFRICOM): »Africa's role in the Global War on Terror and the potential threats posed by ungoverned spaces; the growing importance of Africa's natural resources, particularly energy; and ongoing concern for the continent's many humanitarian crises, armed conflicts, and more general challenges, such as HIV/Aids.«

Current US strategy towards sub-Saharan Africa is captured in President Obama's June 2012 Presidential Policy Directive. Three issues drive US policy on Africa: commercial interests, security interests and democracy promotion. The heightened US interest in Africa is a result of recent dramatic changes on the continent, such as rapid economic growth and improved governance, which have made Africa a much better place to do business. The perceived threat posed by terrorist groups, such as Al Shabab in East Africa, shapes the American security view. Finally, America is seeking to engage African leaders in strengthening democracy, protecting human rights and increasing transparency on the continent.

Africans, via the APSA, should improve their ability to propose realistic policy options and implementation strategies. Sadly, a prevailing trend is for many African elites to put national interests and sovereignty before shared responsibility. Under such conditions Africa will not be able to develop a common approach to China, the EU or America, or indeed any of the current global trends impacting on the continent.

## 6.6 Russia, CSTO, SCO

In the discussions it was stressed that, from a Russian perspective, both important economic and security policy issues are linked with developments in East and Central Asia. Especially the rise of China was singled out as a key strategic variable that holds new opportunities for the (Russian) Far East and Siberia. The current trends, it was argued, might lead to a new balance/equilibrium between the European and the Asia-Pacific parts of Russia. In addition, the discussion focused on the Central Asian region, which is perceived to be extremely prone to instability. In particular, the NATO intervention in Afghanistan has unsettled Moscow and was a crucial factor in the Russian decision to establish its own regional security system with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). But CSTO lacks the integrated military structures that would enable it to deal with significant military threats to stability. Participants noted that in this region, China so far is only engaged in the economic but not in the military sphere, pursuing a double strategy of economic stabilization and penetration. Finally, it was stressed that the regional dynamics would require new forms of coordination between NATO/EU and the CSTO. Parts of the Russian foreign policy elites have fears that Russia might be left alone to deal with the regional spillover effects of NATO retreat from Afghanistan and a potential takeover by the Taliban.

## 6.7 Emerging Powers

With regard to the so-called emerging powers it was concluded that there will probably be no common reaction on the part of the BRICS states or similar »rising power formats« to the rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific due to the significantly differing interests of the emerging powers. They differ not only in terms of their interests, but also in their respective perceptions of the role of the US. Apart from China, the role of the US in Asia-Pacific is historically that of a relatively benign offshore balancer. It remains to be seen to what extent the rebalancing is going to change that perception. However, all BRICS states have an interest in a rules-based international order and formats such as BRICS that tie together emerging powers from within and from outside Asia-Pacific might become important alternative venues for dialogue besides the institutions and dialogue formats in the region. With regard to the emerging powers within the wider Asia-Pacific region it was discussed whether India would end up as a »balancer« towards China, a role that Indian foreign policy so far does not see for itself. With regard to emerging powers outside the region, the rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific might open

up space and room for maneuver for Brazil to play a stronger role in global security governance. Past initiatives and engagement from the Brazil–Turkey nuclear deal for Iran, through Brazilian leadership in MINUSTAH to its chairmanship of the Guinea-Bissau configuration of the UN Peacebuilding Commission were interpreted as a trajectory that might be supported by the US rebalancing effort. The impact of the strategic rebalancing on other emerging powers with regard to a changing role in security governance remains elusive. In the end, however, it was stressed that all emerging powers – and China in particular – are limited in their global security policy role by various internal challenges that require substantial resources and political attention.

## **7. Potential Role for Germany and the EU in Asia-Pacific**

There was no question about whether the EU can play a role in shaping the strategic environment in Asia-Pacific. While EU engagement with the region would most certainly not involve any significant military dimension, participants strongly urged the EU not to underestimate its potential. Especially when Europeans manage to come up with a common approach that is supported by all member states, the voice of the EU will be heard and taken seriously. There were no illusions about the difficulties involved in defining such a joint approach to Asia-Pacific, however.

Indeed, concerning the role of European and German foreign and security policy hitherto, the assessment of non-European participants has been rather unequivocal: Europe so far has been perceived to be fairly complacent with regard to the rising strategic relevance of Asia-Pacific for global peace and stability, as well as for the global economy. While this has been rhetorically emphasised over and over again, apart from fine words political engagement with the broader region has remained underdeveloped. One prominent example repeatedly cited was the lack of sustained high-level European engagement in the ASEM format.

However, participants broadly embraced the notion that the EU has a strategic interest in stability in Asia-Pacific. Europeans in particular have no interest in seeing the rivalry between China and the US increasing. Therefore it was concluded that the EU should thoroughly reflect on ways to strengthen stability in Asia-Pacific. This in all probability can have no substantial military element but must focus on the diplomatic realm. Indeed, with all the focus currently on the military posture of the US and Chinese armed forces, several participants called for a thorough formulation of a farsighted foreign policy. Such engagement does not necessarily mean – as became evident in the debates – that Europe has to uncritically follow in the footsteps of the US. Nevertheless, a common diplomatic approach to the region such as the recent joint statement of the EU and the US on the Asia-Pacific region – which was issued by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and the European Union (EU) High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton in Phnom Penh on 12 July 2012<sup>6</sup> – were cited as steps in the right direction.

<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131709.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131709.pdf)

With regard to the German role in a new approach towards Asia-Pacific the German participants in the conference asserted self-critically that Germany cannot simply wait for a coherent European approach to Asia-Pacific to come from Brussels out of the blue. As an important EU member state with a strong diplomatic presence in the region and good standing with regional partner states, Berlin needs to play a more proactive role in facilitating and contributing to a strategic approach toward Asia-Pacific that adequately reflects the US rebalancing towards the region. As one participant pointed out, at present Beijing basically looks towards Berlin when analysing European policies. German politics do not always reflect its rather new paramount position and, as a consequence, Germany punches below its weight.

## **8. Conclusions and Outlook**

Finally, we offer five conclusions that we at FES took from the first Tiergarten Conference. These thematic conclusions shall provide input for further policy debates in Germany and our partner countries, as well as orientation for future FES engagement on this issue and potential follow-up activities, such as the next Tiergarten Conference in September 2013.

**1. Rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific is no hype:** Against the background of the strategic importance of the bilateral US–China relationship, US alliance commitments in the region and the multidimensional conflict patterns it seems assured that the announced rebalancing of the US towards Asia-Pacific will be implemented.

**2. Rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific will have differentiated consequences for other regions:** The Middle East and Northern Africa have been at the centre of US attention for a long time and will continue to rank high on Washington’s foreign policy agenda, with a corresponding military posture. Europe and the transatlantic relationship will remain important but the US force posture will shift away from Europe. In Latin America, US influence and presence has already been decreasing for some time and will continue to do so, leaving regional powers in general – and Brazil in particular – more room to maneuver with regard to regional and global governance. The comparatively modest strategic presence of the US in Africa will probably remain and even increase, as will Chinese and other BRICS states’ engagement in the region due to resource competition and non-traditional security threats. Finally, the rebalancing might significantly alter the strategic relationship between Moscow and Washington with a particular role for Central Asia, and the CSTO and SCO security frameworks.

**3. More attention to and awareness of Asia-Pacific in Europe is necessary:** The first conclusion is that the focus on Asia-Pacific seems to be no hype. The developments in the region merit a close scrutiny of evolving conflict dynamics. At the same time, a far more differentiated awareness of the regional dynamics in Berlin and Brussels seems to be urgently necessary. Even if all roads seem to lead to Beijing a better understanding of the wider region must appreciate the potential and limitations of multilateralism in Asia-Pacific and the role of middle powers and small states, as well.

**4. More political engagement and commitment is required on the part of Europe and Germany:** Against the background of the strategic and economic interest of Europe and Germany in the stability of Asia-Pacific a more sustained and high-level political engagement in the region is necessary. While there are of course limitations to the room for manoeuvre for Europe and Germany, especially their credibility as honest brokers could be seized more proactively. In addition to such particular role, a broader engagement would be feasible with existing regional institutions and in the context of regional dialogue formats in Asia-Pacific<sup>7</sup>.

**5. The need for a coherent and up-to-date foreign policy:** At various points during the conference a call was heard for a foreign policy that looks beyond the current narrow focus on military postures and that pursues a »whole of government« approach. Basically this leads to the question of how a foreign policy for the twenty-first century could and should look like. The discussion at the first Tiergarten Conference about US rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific pointed to many of the emerging trends and uncertainties in the field of foreign policy, such as:

- the right balance between hard and soft power;
- the role of state and non-state actors;
- the right balance between summitry and track-two initiatives;
- the right balance between bilateral relations and multilateral frameworks;
- the right balance between institutions of collective defense and those of collective security;
- the right balance and relationship between global and regional institutions.

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<sup>7</sup> See also the recommendations put forward by Professor Amitav Acharya in his recent FES International Policy Analysis on: Common Security with Asia Changing Europe's Role from »Model« to »Partner« (<http://www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=09525&ty=pdf>), p. 6 ff.

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