

US and the Asia-Pacific: Future of the Alliance System and Regional Security

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Abstract

The article critically looks at relevance of the US alliance system in the Asia-Pacific in the context of the changing nature of threats and challenges that the U.S. is confronted with in the light of American military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. The paper argues that the American policy in Asia, which so far has been premised on bilateral alliances and forward deployment, is likely to undergo fundamental changes because the principal partners, South Korea and Japan, may not be very useful either in counter-terrorism efforts or low-intensity wars. This, in turn, may enhance India's importance to US policies in the Asia-Pacific.

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Two events in the recent past — the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the American attempt at regime change in Iraq through use of force — are major landmarks in contemporary international relations. They have ushered in a new era, an era that marks the end of the post-Cold War era and the beginning of a new, to use a Collin Powell phrase, 'post-post-Cold War era'; especially because it marks the start of the way the US is going to conduct its foreign policy. What these developments portend is that firstly, they bring into sharp focus the unfolding of a new unipolar movement in all its fury and vigour, and secondly, the uncertain future faced by the alliance system the US has built so assiduously in the last five decades in Asia and Europe. While America's closest allies in Asia — Japan and South Korea — proved to be of little use in counter-terrorism efforts or the war in Iraq, the other US-led European alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), remained badly divided when Washington decided

to dethrone Saddam Hussein. These developments, in turn, have given rise to an animated debate about the viability and relevance of alliance-based policy either because of the lack of shared strategic interests, or because the traditional allies of the US are simply helpless when it needs their support the most. While one scholar dubbed the changes as “New Order: the End of Alliances”, others have called as an “Age of Shifting Coalitions”¹

Are these such epochal changes that they would lead to an end of the era of alliances and begin a new era of less rigid, less institutionalised ‘arrangements’ and ‘strategic relationships?’ The following analysis tries to deal with the broad contours of the American Asia-Pacific security policy and assess its changing policies, especially the way it tries to grapple with the emergent security challenges, evaluate the role of the American alliance system and forward deployment of troops in the coming years, and finally the implications for India. It is argued that the Asia-Pacific region’s strategic landscape is complex and will witness fundamental changes; recent regional multilateral initiatives are yet to make a major mark, and the region continues to be a major area of enormous importance to the US. Further, the US however, will review the whole gamut of its policy, particularly with regard to its alliance system and troop deployment strategy. These developments are likely to enhance India’s significance in American policy calculations.

The US Factor

Amidst the complex maze of developments, a critical factor that needs greater attention is the nature of evolving US policies in the region within the larger framework of unipolarity. The US-led unipolar movement is well into the second decade and it is unlikely that this status will change in the next few decades. To elucidate the point of American preponderance a bit more, consider this: the defence expenditure of the US is more than the next nine countries put together; the dependence on the US market by the rest of the world is so great that it is one of the largest trading partners for most countries around the world. Its control over global currency and capital is unparalleled. The US continues to be the single largest source of new technologies and no country is more attractive than the US to attract the best and brightest from all nooks and corners of the world. Former Soviet Union was the only country that came close to challenge the US military might. The other power that appeared to threaten the American economic dominance for a brief while during the 1980s was Japan, but

more than a decade of stagnation ensured that it is no match. China may be fast emerging as a global power but its military power (notwithstanding its atomic weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles that can reach parts of the American mainland) is not even a patch when compared to the might of the US. Moreover, even as China makes phenomenal progress economically, it is nowhere near the US either in terms of generating capital or developing technologies or influencing the global markets, let alone other aspects of soft power, which have come to play a big part in augmenting a country's power.² No country can boast of a Hollywood or a CNN with such a global reach, let alone cola drinks, McDonald's, pop music, or its brand of democratic values. This is the reality that is likely to stay on for the foreseeable future.

Although a detailed theoretical discussion is beyond the purview of this paper, from a realist perspective, the current unipolarity is unsustainable for very long because of its intrinsically unstable condition and the US will invariably be balanced.³ However, it is denounced by a counter-argument that the unipolar movement led by the Roman Empire lasted for more than several centuries unchallenged, and the current situation can also last for a long time if the US adapts itself to the changes appropriately. According to others, a unipolar movement (at times brazenly unilateral actions) notwithstanding, the basic fact remains that the US has been instrumental in creating and sustaining a number of multilateral institutions, which it is not going to abandon. And that would impose limitations and constraints on stretching unilateralism beyond a point. The case in point is the current Iraq quagmire that the US is in and its attempts at getting the UN to bail it out. Moreover, unlike the ancient and medieval times, the world today is far more inter-linked and inter-dependent. Any major event or development would invariably affect the rest of the world in one form or the other. Although predicting the future is fraught with serious problems, the power, both hard and soft, that is at its disposal and the global reach that it has, are so enormous that there is not a single or a combination of powers that can pose a serious challenge to the current US status in the near to medium term.

In the context of the debate about unilateralism versus multilateralism, about isolationism versus internationalism, and about the growing drift between the US and its traditional ally, Europe, the nature and shape of US engagement in Asia acquires greater significance.

It is against the above backdrop that US policies in Asia are examined below because Asia has emerged strategically and economically the most important region for Washington, on the one hand, and, on the other, because the US-led alliance system continues to be the mainstay of American policy, its presence the most pervasive and by most perceptions, it is the most influential power. To be sure, much before the 9/11 events and the American war against terrorism, Asia presented enormous opportunities as well as challenges to the US. If the US is the largest economy in the world, the next three largest economic powers belong to Asia — China, Japan and India — in PPP terms in that order. American trans-Pacific trade is 35 per cent of its total, in contrast to 19 per cent with Europe. More than half-a-million Americans actually work in the Asia-Pacific region and many more millions of jobs are dependent on trade with this region. Some of the most dynamic, fastest growing and large markets are part of this region. By any definition, no one can deny the rise of new power centres in the Asia-Pacific with global ramifications. If Japan and the four Asian economic tigers earlier and now China represent the economic miracle in manufacturing with unprecedented growth rates, India's potential to emerge as the leader of new technologies cannot be underestimated, especially in information and biotechnologies. After being on the margins during much of the Cold War, these major Asian powers are fast emerging as the lead players. Moreover, the potential for a major conflict breaking out has also been probably the greatest in Asia. Aside from the three known flashpoints — Taiwan, South China and Korea — this region is home to the largest number of territorial and maritime boundary disputes. Historical legacies and mutual suspicions, particularly among great powers, continue to persist despite growing economic interdependence. There are a large number of small and weak states, which tend to be vulnerable to a variety of domestic and external pressures. Despite enormous progress, levels of economic bonds are still weak and security linkages between the two sub-regions, North-East Asia and South-East Asia, are tenuous. It is not necessary that Asia would have to go through the historical churning that went on in Europe before stability occurred⁴, but, notwithstanding the current peaceful transitory phase, no one can discount the possibility of clash of interests among the regional powers in the coming years.

Post-Cold War Asia-Pacific Security Setting

It becomes imperative to understand how the regional dynamics was

taking shape in the aftermath of the Cold War, in order to put recent developments in a perspective. It is well known that most of the bloodiest Cold War proxy battles were fought in the Asian theatre, starting from the Korean War and reaching a crescendo in the early 1970s in Indochina. During the heady days the US had committed more than half a million troops to this region, backed by a number of security arrangements and agreements. A major thrust of this policy was, forward deployment of troops. The bilateral arrangements and troop presence were two solid pillars on which the American policy toward the Asia-Pacific rested, known as the 'Francisco System'. And the primary objectives of this policy were containment of communism and to deter the Soviets and Chinese from spreading their influence to the rest of the region. After the end of the Indochina War in the mid-1970s, the Soviets managed a foothold in Vietnam, the first ever military presence overseas. What this meant was that firstly, Asia-Pacific security came to be dominated by the two Super-powers, and secondly, the regional great powers had very little role in shaping the regional security order. It needs to be mentioned here that the arrangement the Americans had worked out was not without its problems. This underwent considerable change once the Americans were defeated by the Vietnamese, leading to complete withdrawal not just from Indochina but also from Thailand. The end of the Cold War later also put enormous pressure on the US to vacate its base facilities in the Philippines in 1992 — the largest of the overseas bases that the US had were the Clark Air Base and the Subic Bay Naval Base. Gradually, pressure started mounting in North-East Asia too, especially by the Okinawas in Japan, to phase out the American troop presence. And more recently, especially the younger South Koreans are looking at American presence as an obstacle for peaceful reunification of the two Koreas.⁵ What was regarded as growing irrelevance of the alliances and stationing of troops in East Asia, certain events, in particular the contest around the South China Sea dispute in the early 1990s, China's growing belligerence over Taiwan (the 1995 missile exercises), the North Korean nuclear crisis (1994), and economic matters undermining political relations between the US and Japan, compelled the US to take another look at the whole issue.

Yet another issue that played a significant role in infusing new dynamism into the alliances was the challenge a rising power like China posed. If history is any indication, rise of any new power centre tends to invariably affect the existing equilibrium. If recent perceived notions,

especially in Tokyo and some South-East Asian capitals, that ASEAN has become more reverential to Beijing in every decision it takes, are to be believed, China has emerged as an important factor. Although it is argued that China-South-East Asian relations are mutually beneficial and ASEAN's engagement is directly linked to China's behaviour,⁶ growing Chinese influence is undeniable.⁷ The country that is likely to feel the change the most is Japan because it is at its cost that China is seen to be enhancing its influence. Its unnerving effect can already be seen in Tokyo.

Once it became clearer in the light of above developments that American presence was indispensable for regional stability and to hedge against the unexpected, attempts began to strengthen the alliances. The rationale advanced of course was that these were not threat-based any more but interest-based. Aside from the Revised Defence Guidelines Agreement that was signed between Washington and Tokyo in 1997 (which goes far beyond the earlier one in terms of geographic scope and Japan's role), the US has also signed the Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines (1998), has stationed over 1000-odd troops in Singapore, has entered into arrangements with a number of countries in South-East Asia, Australia and India on ship visits, greater defence cooperation and security dialogues.

Importantly, much before the 9/11 events, one could see a marked shift in the current Administration's strategic focus, moving away from Europe towards Asia. Richard Armitage, the Deputy Secretary of State said, "A lot more attention will be paid to Asia than was the case in the previous Administration."⁸ He earlier co-authored an influential study, better known as the *Nye-Armitage Report*, which had strongly argued in favour of re-strengthening the alliance with Japan as the cornerstone of regional security because of the existence of potentially destabilising tendencies.⁹ The supposed conclusions of the Pentagon's strategic review, as leaked to the press, demanded redirection of the main military effort from Europe to Asia. Forces and weapons are to be designed or reconfigured to project power across the Pacific. George W. Bush certainly started looking at relations with China differently from the way Clinton described—as "strategic partnership".¹⁰ In order to grapple with post-Cold War uncertainties, multilateral initiatives too were undertaken, leading to the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), but American conditional support to the ARF was to the degree that the Forum supplemented the existing arrangements than supplant them. The ARF so far has failed to

make a major mark as a viable framework to tackle regional security problems. Its tardy progress, waning influence of its prime mover ASEAN, and the lack of institutionalisation have led critics to dismiss it as nothing but a 'talk shop.'¹¹ Concurrently, the new Administration has also started shedding more light on India, a self-proclaimed nuclear power. All these events suggest that the Asia-Pacific region had already emerged as a prime area of US concern.

Although Washington was convinced of the need to continue to base its policy on the alliances, its most important ally, Japan, did not appear to be as enthusiastic despite being concerned about the rise of China. Japan went out of its way to assuage the Chinese over the Guidelines, which obviously will make Tokyo a firm and active partner if American military involvement was warranted in Taiwan. Some South-East Asian states were concerned about creeping assertiveness and growing influence of China and hence wanted American presence, even if symbolic, as an insurance policy. Every indication, thus, pointed that US alliances would remain robust and remain the cornerstone of American policy in the Asia-Pacific.

Post-9/11

All these happened before the 9/11 events and American involvement in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. What 9/11 has demonstrated is that Asia is the biggest source of terrorism that can seriously undermine American power and interests. If the South-West Asian and West Asian regions are epicenters of terrorism, recent revelations have made South-East Asia the second front of terrorism. Views appear to be vertically divided on the issue of terrorism dominating the US political and strategic agenda. There are those who strongly believe that terrorism and perpetrators of terrorism are not confined just to the North-West Asian region, although the Afghanistan-Pakistan region has been broadly recognised as the major centre for genesis and spread of terrorism. It has fairly widespread and established networks, backed by a highly committed cadre and strong financial muscle and hence will remain a global phenomenon. There are others who dismiss the very idea of terrorism dominating the US and therefore the global agenda, simply because once the biggest source of terrorism, which had been the erstwhile Taliban regime in Afghanistan with strong support from Pakistan, is tackled, terrorists are unlikely to pose such a serious threat. Thus, according to this argument, the present phase of counter-terrorism is temporary and very soon the Asian regional agenda would be dominated

by issues such as the BMD, American shift of strategic focus from Europe to Asia, emergent balance of power, future of regional multilateral institutions, the nature of intra-great power relations, etc. Whichever way one looks at it, Asia-Pacific security remains a crucial aspect of America's foreign policy. Although it is difficult to predict the top items of the agenda of American foreign policy, taken together, terrorism and the campaign in Iraq are two developments that will have far-reaching consequences to the way America would pursue its policy in Asia from a short to medium-term point of view.

At this stage, two aspects need to be kept in mind: (a) that the US is vulnerable to unconventional threats and unorthodox attacks at home and abroad; and (b) 9/11 events have in no way eroded America's preponderant role (in fact they have reinforced it). But, the terrorist attacks had such a tremendous impact on the US psyche that it has warranted a fundamental re-look at its policy in the Asia-Pacific, especially with regard to the future of stationing of troops, the fate of its traditional allies such as Japan and South Korea, and the likely new allies who can be incorporated to address the new kind of challenges.

Future of Alliance System in Asia-Pacific

As noted, the process of dispelling the uncertainties of the early 1990s and firming up of US presence began in the later period of the Clinton Administration; however the Bush Administration has been more forthcoming in recognising the destabilising tendencies that the Asia-Pacific region is beset with much before 911. Rhetoric on China aside, there was a broad recognition that it was Asia, as opposed to Europe, that had become politically unstable and hence well likely to spring many security challenges that might warrant American involvement or intervention. Though the attention was mostly rivetted to the dispute in the South China Sea, the Taiwan issue, and the Korean Peninsula, a host of other less serious problems such as East Timor, Myanmar, narcotics, piracy, security of sealanes of communication, proliferation of light weapons, etc., had been major concerns. While the former have the potential to fundamentally alter the regional balance and order, the latter were seen to be less consequential. The US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice's famous statement that: "Never again should an American president go to Beijing for nine days and refuse to stop in Tokyo or Seoul"¹² underscored the importance of these two allies. Simultaneously, attempts were also made to qualitatively

improve relations with India¹³ and interestingly, contrary to the past, for the first time, Washington began to strategically locate India in the larger framework of Asia rather than just South Asia.¹⁴

As a consequence of 9/11 and intervention in Iraq, one can discern two major strategic shifts. They are: (a) willingness to undertake unilateral actions (not just military alone but on a range of issues – withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol on climatic change and the ABM Treaty, for instance) and (b) the doctrine of pre-emptive action.¹⁵ Whether it amounts to dumping of its earlier doctrine of deterrence is a moot question at this stage. What it certainly does not mean, however, is that the US is about to abandon the multilateral way altogether. As Joseph Nye advocates, the future US strategy is likely to be a combination of both, i.e., support multilateralism wherever possible but without forgoing the unilateral option.¹⁶ It is against the above backdrop that one has to evaluate US policies toward the Asia-Pacific and the future alliance system.

Briefly, currently the US is bound to the Asia-Pacific by five (of the seven worldwide) mutual defence treaties – US-Philippines (1952), ANZUS (1952), US-South Korea (1954), South-East Asia Collective Defence (US, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and the Philippines, 1955), and US-Japan (1960). On an average, the US Pacific Command participates in over 1,500 military exercises and other engagements with the region. Among these, the most important ones are: *Team Challenge*, which has come into being recently after merging three bilateral exercises into a regional one with Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore; *Keen Sword/Keen Edge* with Japanese Self-Defense Forces; and the *Rim of the Pacific* biennial large-scale power projection/sea control exercises with Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Chile and the UK.¹⁷ With regard to the actual military strength that the US has deployed, it is about 47,000 and 37,500 military personnel respectively in Japan and South Korea. The US also stations about 1,200 troops each in Singapore and the Philippines. In the case of the Philippines, American Special Forces troops were deployed in Basilan, aimed to help the Filipino forces crush the Abu Sayyaf rebel group. Starting from about 160 in November 2002, the number has steadily gone up to over a thousand at present. It is believed that American presence has been very effective in curtailing the Abu Sayyaf's activities.

Although major pronouncements and a series of official documents on the Asia-Pacific both by the earlier administrations and the current one,

prominently the *East Asia Strategy Initiative* (EASI), *East Asia Strategy Reports* (EASR),¹⁸ September 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) and the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* of September 2002, have clearly underscored the crucial role of the alliances and the importance of multilateral initiatives,¹⁹ it is however, more recently that the talk of changing strategy has gained currency. The war in Afghanistan, the involvement in Iraq and the Filipino experience of fighting the Muslim separatists has prompted the US Administration to undertake a number of studies with a view to understand the kind of security problems that might arise and accordingly review the nature of American troop deployments in future. Much before the famous story broke out in *The Los Angeles Times* on May 29, 2003, giving some sketchy details, speculation had been rife especially in Japan, that the US would invariably reduce its presence there.

What stirred the hornet's nest was the growing American perception that the nature of threats it faces has undergone a remarkable change. Although American troops in Japan could be quickly redeployed to Afghanistan, it has not been without problems, especially because of the long distance and the weak logistical support system. Further, the inability of its traditional allies in fighting low-intensity wars is glaring; both Japanese and South Korean roles with regard to US fight in Afghanistan or in Iraq have been very little. Second, there has been mounting opposition to the American troop presence from the local people. Roh Moo Hyun won the presidential election early this year on a wave of rising anti-Americanism in South Korea (although he has since become much more pragmatic). Many Koreans feel that the State of Forces Agreement (SOFA) is heavily in favour of the Americans and that American troops are the biggest obstacle to unification with North Korea.²⁰ It is much less emotional in Japan though, but for a variety of reasons, people of Okinawa (which accommodates 27 thousand out of 47 thousand troops) have been opposed to American bases. Japanese and South Korean enthusiastic support to the American effort in Afghanistan and Iraq despite strong popular opposition especially to the Iraq war is because of the concern that their strategic significance to the US is waning. Fear has been mounting both in Japan and South Korea that the US might simply vacate its bases (or at least drastically reduce the numbers) as it did in the Philippines in 1992, which will force them to fend for themselves, which, in turn, will have its own political and economic ramifications. 'Places not bases' has been heard quite

frequently these days in American think tanks and policy circles. A series of steps that Japan has taken confirm its concerns about the alliance—deployment of ships in the Indian Ocean for the first time, attempts to give greater role for the Defence Agency, moves to make bilateral security treaty with the US less one-sided, repeated assertions that Tokyo would increase its security role in the Asia-Pacific, willingness to participate in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq, launching of military reconnaissance satellites, take a decisive step on the deployment of missile defence forces starting from 2006,²¹ and undertake other measures to remove legal hurdles to facilitate greater deployment of troops abroad. It can be argued that, unlike South Korea, which bears about 40 per cent of the cost of American troops, Japan's share is nearly 81 per cent. While it is an advantage, in the American view, alliance with Japan is not limited to protection of that country but also to check China's hegemonic designs, if any, and ensure that regional order remains in its favour. Incremental steps notwithstanding, Japan appears to be reticent to play the kind of larger role the US would want.

Despite all this, apart from their unwillingness (especially in the case of Japan) to take bold steps to countervail China's rise, there are serious limitations to both Japan and South Korea to contribute to the future American involvements in Afghanistan/Iraq-like situations. (After an initial enthusiastic announcement to send troops to Iraq, Japan is dragging its feet because of a couple of high-profile bombings and incessant attacks on American soldiers.) They are also not prepared to support pre-emptive action in North Korea despite being extremely concerned about the danger of North Korea going nuclear and emerging as a WMD proliferator. Recognition of this fact is reflected in the contents of a leak in *The Los Angeles Times*. According to this report, which quotes Douglas J. Feith, Undersecretary of Defence for Policy, and other unnamed senior Pentagon officials, extensively sweeping changes are in the offing to realign American troops in Asia. Feith is reported to have said: "Everything is going to move everywhere. There is not going to be a place in the world where it is going to be the same as it used to be. We are going to rationalize our posture everywhere – in Korea, in Japan, everywhere."²² The changes in South Korea of moving US troops away from the demilitarised zone have been underway already, but drastic reductions are also hinted at. Redeployment of forces to other regions, especially Central Asia and South-East Asia, are viewed as potential launching pads for quick and clandestine movement of

troops to future areas of conflict. What came as a surprise was the contention that “all but about 5,000 (out of about 20,000) of the Marines (based on Okinawa) would move....”²² This is in line with the thinking of Donald Rumsfeld who has been advocating for the creation of a more agile, rapid force, spread across several regions.

This has set off alarm bells ringing in Tokyo. Although it has been argued that the US would not take such a major decision without consulting Japan, it is no secret that more often than not it is the US that tells what it intends to do. As if to corroborate *The L.A. Times* story, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, while denying there were specific plans to move troops out of Okinawa, acknowledged that, as part of an overall review on its troops realignment, reduction of the burden on Okinawa was being considered.²³

In view of these developments, what becomes clearer is that the earlier principal rationale to station troops in a particular country was to protect that country from possible external threats – South Korea from North Korea and Japan from Soviet Union/China – is not valid anymore. The situation in the Korean Peninsula continues to be fluid because of North Korea’s intransigent attitude but an attack by the North is not seen to be imminent. It is widely believed that Pyongyang is using the only card it has, the nuclear card, to negotiate a deal. If an amicable solution is found for the current impasse, the US is likely to reduce its troops in the South. Similarly, Japan does not face any threat of external aggression, and its prime security concerns would be taken care of if stability returns to Korea. Some presence with a qualitative improvement in weaponry may be required in Japan to deter China from embarking on any military adventure in Taiwan. Thus, the proposed realignment is likely to witness shifting of emphasis from North-East Asia to South-East Asia,²⁴ which has already been touted as terrorism’s second front after Afghanistan.²⁵ This perception has been reinforced because of a strong network that has spread across the region through the religious extremist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah with known links to Al Qaida and the domestic turmoil that the world largest Muslim country Indonesia has been plagued with. Second, greater focus on South-East Asia would also help to counter growing Chinese influence in that region.

Implications for India

There is no question that any major shift in American strategy in the Asia-Pacific will have a direct implication for India. First, the gradual decline of Japan's strategic significance will enhance India's. India is probably the only country that continues to express concerns about China and probably the only Asian country that can counter-balance China. Hence, it makes a lot of strategic sense for Washington to befriend India especially because there is no direct clash of interest between the two after the nuclear issue has been removed from the way. India's credentials as a responsible power, particularly with regard to the proliferation of WMD capabilities, are impeccable. Second, India has been on the forefront of fighting terrorism much before it got the global attention and hence greater congruence of interests between New Delhi and Washington. Third, India too is a rising power and is increasing its profile politically and economically in the Asia-Pacific. Therefore, the realignment of forces that is taking place in the Asia-Pacific will make India an important partner and useful ally of the US if New Delhi decides to go along with the US. Persistent reports have speculated, given the recent bonhomie between the US and India, that a new loose arrangement sans a treaty, called the 'Asian NATO', comprising the US, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, etc, might be created.²⁶ The idea was apparently discussed in May 2003 when top Indian policy-makers visited the Pentagon, which expectedly drew strong reactions from China. "US Dreams of Asian NATO".

Conclusion

Post-Second World War American strategy in the Asia-Pacific has been largely based on the bilateral alliance system and forward deployment with the twin objectives of containment and deterrence. In the aftermath of the Cold War, although the US was willing to endorse multilateral initiatives, it wanted them to supplement its existing policy. The contradictions between the ARF and the continuation of US-led alliances are too apparent to be ignored. Waning interest in and declining influence of, multilateralism, in particular the ARF and its prime mover, ASEAN, starting from the late 1990s, augmented the significance of alliances.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has been faced with two sets of problems. While at the short term level, rise of terrorism, spread of WMD, and regional stability getting affected because of failed or failing states

continued to engage the US, at the long-term level, issues such as threats to unipolar movement, rise of new power centres, regional and global balance of power, and sustenance of American preponderance in the Asia-Pacific continued to loom large as part of its agenda. The alliances and troop presence in fact were seen to be acquiring greater credence. The US went to great lengths to dispel the post-Cold War uncertainties about its engagement in the region by reinvigorating the bilateral alliances and repeatedly reiterating the commitment to station troops despite growing odds.

The 9/11 events and the war in Iraq appear to have compelled the US to fundamentally review its strategy of large concentration of troops stationed in Japan and South Korea. While this presence so far has been seen as a major stabilising aspect, their usefulness to the US to face different kinds of contingencies is questioned. Based on the recent sketchy revelations, it can be surmised that American presence is likely to decline in North-East Asia and that will have direct bearing on bilateral alliances too. Japan is concerned and hence has been taking a series of steps to prove its strategic relevance to the US. 'Arrangements or Coalitions' instead of 'Alliances', 'Places' instead of 'Bases', and small, agile, rapid forces spread across a vast region rather than large concentration of troops in one or two countries, seems to be the new line of thinking. In this scenario, it is likely that India's strategic importance to the US will increase considerably. Despite these changes, alliances are unlikely to disappear because the role they play in the American strategic calculus is different. They are important in order to express its commitment to the region, and to ensure regional balance and stability. America always followed a twin strategy of tackling immediate problems at one level and addressing long-term issues at another. The former warrants realignment of American troop presence while the latter demands a robust alliance system. What shape the US policy is going to take in the coming years will to a large extent determine the nature of the regional security order in the Asia-Pacific.

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