
Global Security After the Pivot

The Strategic Necessity of a More Integrated Transatlantic Area

Mitch Yoshida

Last year, the Obama Administration embarked on a “pivot” or “rebalancing” toward the Asia-Pacific. Prompted by growing economic interests in the region, an increasingly assertive China, and a deteriorating fiscal outlook, the pivot signifies America’s intent to allocate a larger share of its resources to maintaining Asia-Pacific security. While doing so, it still plans to fulfill its broader repertoire of global security responsibilities in cooperation with allies and partner states.

At first, this strategy is likely to succeed. The U.S. remains the primary guarantor of global security, and its allies – particularly those in Europe – are among the world’s most significant security providers. From counterinsurgency in Afghanistan to countering piracy off the coast of Somalia and promoting stability from Africa to the Pacific, the U.S. and Europe remain politically willing and materially able to maintain the security of states, entire regions and the open seas.

In the next two decades, however, the pivot risks opening a global security gap as America’s growing preoccupation with the Asia-Pacific and several other trends become more pronounced. This includes the rise of new powers, the proliferation of destructive capabilities, tighter constraints on energy and other resources, and rapid population growth in some regions – all of which are set to intensify the demands of the security environment. Within the U.S. and Europe, high levels of debt, aging populations and other trends are on course to undermine political support for necessary levels of defense spending.

Trends and Consequences

One of these trends, the rise of new powers, was a major driver of the pivot. The rapid growth of economies and defense budgets in the Asia-Pacific are projected to continue for the foreseeable future, but territorial disputes and underdeveloped institutional frameworks for resolving differences risk undermining the security of the region and world. This challenge, while formidable on its own,

will be compounded by another: the diffusion of destructive capabilities across a broader set of state and non-state actors. This includes weapons of mass destruction, ballistic and cruise missiles, and cyber espionage and attack technologies.¹ Add to these developments tighter constraints on energy and other critical resources, climate change’s role in exacerbating resource constraints, and rapid population growth in regions projected to be hardest hit by these pressures, and it is clear that the challenges of the future security environment will be greater than they are today.²

Will the U.S. and Europe be willing and able to rise to the challenge? Here too, the picture is bleak. After more than a decade of war, a financial and economic crisis, and stimulus spending, the U.S. has accumulated a debt burden that is larger than it has been in sixty years. Even though interest rates on U.S. borrowing fell to record lows this year, they are set to rise as the economy recovers and would rise further still in the increasingly likely event that the euro and the renminbi increase their share of global currency reserves. Together with an aging population and rising entitlement costs, these trends are on course to steer Congress away from defense spending and toward domestic priorities in the coming decades.

Europe is arguably worse shape. As euro zone members inch toward political union to complete their monetary union, economic growth within the common currency area and the rest of the EU remains anemic. This has led to fiscal belt tightening across the region, and defense budgets have been among the first casualties. While British, French and German defense spending have declined only modestly in recent years, elsewhere in Europe the cuts have been deeper. As the region’s economic troubles drag on and future defense cuts are considered, European states may not even be able to contribute as much to operations on the scale of Libya, where they already relied heavily on the U.S. for adequate intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, and munitions.³ Even when Europe moves beyond its current financial and

economic challenges, high levels of debt and the growing needs of a rapidly aging population are likely to crowd out defense spending for decades to come.

In combination, these trends will force the U.S. and Europe to face a more dangerous threat environment with greater resource constraints. Yet they may not even convey the full magnitude of future security challenges. History has shown us that strategic surprises can disrupt even the best laid plans. The fall of the Soviet Union, the 9/11 attacks, the global financial crisis and political upheaval across the Middle East and North Africa are just a few unanticipated developments that irrevocably altered the global security landscape – in some cases, for the worse. Although the U.S. and Europe did not anticipate these events, they did have the resources needed to address the threats they presented. In the coming decades, this may not be the case.

Mind the Gap

The U.S. pivot to the Asia-Pacific represents a sensible rethink of strategic priorities, but it must be accompanied by policies that minimize the risk of a global security gap. Domestic and foreign policy both have roles to play in generating the material resources and political support needed to revitalize the U.S. and Europe and allow them to adapt to the emerging security environment, as well as the surprises it may bring. In the context of these broader efforts, transatlantic initiatives can have a major impact.

Unleash Transatlantic Trade

At the time of this writing, political momentum behind a transatlantic free trade agreement is building as U.S. and EU officials openly discuss the possibility of a new deal.⁴ The precise impact of an agreement will be unclear until more details are released, but it is expected that it would boost economic growth, innovation and competitiveness on both sides of the Atlantic. By contributing to the economic revitalization of the transatlantic area, the implications of this step would be far-reaching and extend to many policy areas, including defense spending. The success or failure of this initiative rests on the will of leaders on both sides, and its realization will require a deeper and more broad-

based commitment among stakeholders than it has garnered since it first received significant attention in the mid-1990s.

American and European leaders must also strengthen their commitment to freeing the market for defense goods and services within the transatlantic area. The Obama Administration took a decisive step in this direction in 2009 when it initiated a top-level review of U.S. defense export controls and launched a reform program to streamline the export approval process. The EU has also made progress in reducing defense trade barriers in recent years, although concerns about national autonomy, technology transfers and jobs have limited progress. These concerns have also surfaced at the transatlantic level; the difference now is that success in this regard is becoming a matter of strategic necessity.

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Deepen Transatlantic Defense Cooperation

Freer commercial and defense markets in the transatlantic area would augment economic resources and reduce the cost of defense, but adapting to the emerging security environment will also require a sustained political effort to pool, share, specialize and prioritize defense capabilities. Not only would this reduce duplication and the cost of defense, it would also improve the effectiveness of U.S. and European militaries by focusing them on the most pressing current and future needs. NATO, the EU and other bilateral and multilateral frameworks have pursued these objectives, but have achieved limited success due to concerns about their impact on national autonomy. Given the prospect of a global security gap, however, it is time for American and European leaders to replace piecemeal steps with more substantial progress. NATO's Smart Defense initiative is a step in the right direction, but it must be better coordinated with similar efforts taking place under the umbrella of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and other frameworks to maximize their effect.

American and European leaders must also make a long-term commitment to preserving and enhancing the interoperability of their forces in the wake of NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 and the departure of two U.S. brigades from Europe. This entails regular joint exercises, investing in relevant technologies, and standardizing in many different ways – all of which impact the ability of

U.S. and European forces to work together. Again, NATO, EU and other efforts in this area must be better coordinated.

Forge Ahead with Partnerships

Finally, the transatlantic area must renew its commitment to forming partnerships with external states and other organizations to help it address the threats of the future. The value of this approach was demonstrated by NATO in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Libya. In the case of Libya, non-NATO members were among the main drivers and legitimizers of action against the Qaddafi regime. NATO has clearly led the way in this respect, but there are signs that political support for these partnerships is waning.⁵ This is the opposite of what is needed. Faced with a genuine shift in the global security environment, American and European leaders must converge on an outward-looking vision for the alliance and forge ahead in this area.

Conclusion

By deepening transatlantic integration in the aforementioned ways, the U.S. and Europe can

augment and make better use of current and future defense resources. In an era of more constrained defense budgets and rising threats, as well as the persistent risks posed by strategic surprise, these steps would help ensure that the U.S. and European states are materially able and politically willing to prevent the emergence of a global security gap after the pivot – for the sake of their own security, that of the global commons and the international order. For many American and European leaders, this will be a politically daunting task. But the consequences of inaction could be far more difficult to address. As NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen warned last year: “...if you think security is expensive, remember – it’s cheaper than insecurity.”⁶ □

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NOTES

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