

U.S. 'rebalancing' in Mideast doesn't add up

Anthony Bubalo

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The Middle East is in turmoil. America's national security budget is shrinking. Yet at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore this June the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta reiterated the Administration's intention to 'rebalance' America's military towards the Asia Pacific.

It does not add up. How can the Obama administration increase the time and resources it devotes to Asia at a time when the Middle East? The short answer is, it cannot.

In isolation, 'rebalancing' makes good geo-strategic sense. Global power is shifting to Asia, and the relationship between China and America will be a defining feature of the global strategic landscape.

'Rebalancing' also makes political sense, allowing the Obama administration to ease America out of a miserable and materially ruinous decade in the Middle East without being accused of prematurely capitulating to predictions of American decline.

But if it is possible to understand why America needs and wants to shift its focus to Asia, it is much more difficult to understand how it will do so given the range of crises it currently faces in the Middle East.

In Syria, there is a deepening humanitarian crisis and a civil conflict at the strategic heart of the Middle East. Neighboring countries are funding and arming their proxies. As the recent shooting down of a Turkish fighter aircraft showed, there is even a risk that the conflict could spill beyond Syria's borders.

Syria will, therefore, absorb a lot of America's diplomatic attention, probably for a few years to come. Sooner or later it may even require limited doses of American military power, to either relieve the humanitarian crisis or to ensure that Syria's considerable arsenal of chemical and biological weapons does not fall into extremist hands.

Meanwhile, in the Persian Gulf, America is engaged in a difficult negotiation with Iran over its nuclear program. If these talks fail, a war, while not inevitable, is certainly more likely. But even if these talks succeed, significant American diplomatic and military attention will be needed to ensure that any deal holds, and to reassure regional allies.

And let's not forget Egypt. Its new Muslim Brotherhood president raises concerns about the future of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel – the crown jewel of American diplomacy in the Middle East.

Whilst the Muslim Brotherhood is probably not as keen on conflict with Israel as some fear, managing crises in the relationship will not be easy. Sinai will be particular challenge where years of political neglect and recent increases in extremist activism have allowed a dangerous security vacuum to emerge.

In August 2011 Israeli retaliation for a cross-border attack by militants inflamed popular feelings in Egypt and saw the Israeli embassy besieged. More serious incidents of this type can be expected – not least, given reports that sophisticated weapons are flowing into the region from looted Libyan armories.

In fact, Sinai is just one of a number of places in the region where new political and security vacuums are being exploited by extremists. Parts of Yemen, Libya, Mali, Syria and Iraq can also be added to a list that already included Somalia, and parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The temptation may be to manage these new semi-governed spaces remotely, via circling Predator drones. But relying on such strikes will create as many extremists as they kill. And drone strikes are no substitute for hard graft diplomacy and intelligence work, that requires long term American engagement and resources. It is noteworthy that, against the background of these challenges, there has already been some readjustment of the Administration's geo-strategic rhetoric. 'Rebalancing' now seems to be the favored description for America's refocusing on the Asia Pacific, rather than 'pivot', the term initially used by Secretary of State Clinton.

But as Secretary of Defense Panetta talks of moving much of the US fleet from the Atlantic to the Pacific, you still wonder how much balance there will be to any rebalancing.

It is true that none of the current crises in the Middle East will require the kind of massive intervention America made in Iraq or Afghanistan, and that, in any event, it can no longer afford. But they will still keep key military assets like aircraft carriers tied up in the Persian Gulf rather than the Pacific. More importantly, they will preoccupy the finite time and attention of key policymakers in Washington and their advisors.

In fact, there is a danger that the Administration's rebalancing rhetoric will raise and disappoint expectations in both regions.

In the Middle East, talk of rebalancing will unnerve allies and embolden adversaries. Why should, for example, Tehran make, or stick to, any deal with America over its nuclear program if it assumes, even incorrectly, that America is drifting from the region?

In Asia, meanwhile, Beijing sees 'rebalancing' as soft code for containment, although many of China's neighbors are worried by its rising power. But if the reality is that America cannot drag itself from the Middle East then Washington's rebalancing rhetoric will only aggravate its relations with Beijing without providing the real geo-strategic reassurance its allies in the region need.

Anthony Bubalo is the Director of the West Asia Program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney.