

# WebMemo



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## The Missing Asia Pivot in Obama's Defense Strategy

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President Obama's new defense strategy is long on rhetoric but bereft of details on how it will actually be implemented. The President boldly promised to maintain or augment U.S. military capabilities against a spectrum of global threats, but planned draconian defense cuts of \$1 trillion would undermine the U.S.'s ability to achieve its national interests and defend allies. Despite a new U.S. prioritization on Asia, significant questions remain on how security policies will be implemented.

The extent to which the Administration delivers—or fails to do so—on its promises depends on force levels to be revealed in the forthcoming defense budget. President Obama asserted that he would “keep faith with those who serve, by making sure our troops have the equipment and capabilities they need to succeed.” Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said that “we will be taking on some level of additional but acceptable risk.”

If the Obama Administration pledges that Washington will fulfill each of its missions even as the resources to do so shrink, the U.S. will be sending its men and women in uniform into harm's way without the necessary military means to achieve their objectives. Congress should consider what level of risk it is willing to accept on behalf of the mothers and fathers of U.S. service members.

**Bold Promises.** President Obama's new defense strategy is replete with pledges to “continue,” “maintain,” and “strengthen” U.S. commitment to a broad

array of missions. Yet, despite expected drastic cuts in U.S. defense forces, there were no identified reductions, abandonments, or defined assumption of greater risks of existing missions and commitments.

The new strategy appears to be reliant on increased efficiencies and forces that are “agile, flexible and ready for the full range of contingencies and threats.” Yet such forces require substantial investment. Operating in “environments where adversaries try to deny us access” is itself dependent on the U.S. retaining extensive naval, air, and expeditionary ground forces.

The President envisions that “the tide of war is receding” and foresees “the end of long-term nation-building with large military footprints.” Will the future comply with these predictions? How will the nation's allies react to a new U.S. unwillingness to commit to sustained operations as it did in the past? Will future ground operations be bungee jumping into missions abandoned after initial hostilities are over?

President Obama was disingenuous in claiming that the “size and the structure of our military

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and defense budgets have to be driven by a strategy, not the other way around.” The challenging global security environment has not improved since the Administration issued its 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR); nevertheless, the Administration will now deploy lower force levels than its own QDR called for.

The single precipitating catalyst for the new strategy was the 2011 Budget Control Act mandating \$450 billion in defense cuts. The President’s new plan does not incorporate the additional \$500 billion in sequestered cuts mandated after the failure of the congressional “super committee.” Indeed, Panetta reiterated his warning that the “capability, readiness and agility of the force will not be sustained” if the military is forced to accept far deeper cuts under sequestration. “That would force us to shed missions, commitments, and capabilities necessary to protect core U.S. national security interests, resulting in a demoralized and hollow force.” Each of the U.S. military service chiefs testified in November 2011 about the catastrophic impact that such cuts would have on U.S. national interests.<sup>1</sup>

**Asia Pivot or Asia Divot?** President Obama pledged during his trip to Australia that the U.S. “will be strengthening our presence in the Asia Pacific, and budget reductions will not come at the expense of that critical region.” Panetta pledged that the U.S. would “increase its institutional weight and focus on enhanced presence, power projection, and deterrence in the Asia–Pacific.”

But, other than a promise for augmented rotational training of U.S. Marine and air forces in Australia, the Administration has not articulated any permanent increased U.S. military forces in Asia.

U.S. officials privately comment that those forces will be “globally sourced” and not redeployed from existing forces in Okinawa.

**Allies to Shoulder Larger Burdens.** The revised U.S. strategy makes frequent reference to “working with allies and partners” and “expanding our networks of cooperation with emerging partners.” However, the U.S. has found its allies reluctant to assume a large role in international combat operations. Germany refrained from NATO’s recent Libyan mission, and other European nations quickly ran low on munitions due to previous under-funding of their defense requirements.

South Korea is preparing to assume wartime operational command by 2015, but its much-needed Defense Reform Plan 307 has been bogged down by legislative resistance. Japan has resisted assuming a larger overseas role and remains hindered by overly restrictive rules of engagement and rules against collective self-defense.

The new defense strategy could prevent the U.S. from fulfilling its existing treaty requirements. For example, the current war plan responding to a North Korean invasion (OPLAN 5027) calls for the U.S. to deploy 690,000 ground troops, 160 destroyers, and 2,000 aircraft within 90 days. Doing so would require the entire U.S. Army and Marine Corps after the budget cuts. The Obama Administration should make clear to South Korea that future U.S. force levels will not support the current war plan.

However, preliminary discussions with Asian allies indicate a belief that the President’s strongly worded speech does not portend any changes in existing allied commitments.

1. Admiral Jonathan Greenert, “The Future of the Military Services and Consequences of Defense Sequestration,” statement before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, November 2, 2011, at [http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File\\_id=57509469-d31e-48ac-9c95-0c4c2be42da0](http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=57509469-d31e-48ac-9c95-0c4c2be42da0) (November 21, 2011); General Raymond T. Odierno, “The Future of the Military Services and Consequences of Defense Sequestration,” statement before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, November 2, 2011, at [http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File\\_id=124f067d-3a7e-47f4-bd6f-611270abc890](http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=124f067d-3a7e-47f4-bd6f-611270abc890) (November 21, 2011); General James F. Amos, “The Future of the Military Services and Consequences of Defense Sequestration,” statement before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, November 2, 2011, at [http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File\\_id=08eaf78f-203b-4804-ad15-8593b91a86e2](http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=08eaf78f-203b-4804-ad15-8593b91a86e2) (November 21, 2011); General Norton A. Schwartz, “The Future of the Military Services and Consequences of Defense Sequestration,” statement before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, November 2, 2011, at [http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File\\_id=18235368-5f93-4bf3-8a83-5b2d9e19336f](http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=18235368-5f93-4bf3-8a83-5b2d9e19336f) (November 21, 2011).

### What President Obama Should Do

- **Fully fund U.S. defense requirements.** Short-changing U.S. defense spending may appear to provide short-term budgetary gains, but such gains will come at an unacceptable risk to America's armed forces, allies, and national interests in the Asia-Pacific.
- **Be truthful with the American public.** If the Obama Administration and Congress decide not to fully fund this nation's defense requirements, then it is their responsibility to explain the consequences and increased risks of such spending cuts to the American people.
- **Articulate U.S. expectations for enhanced allied contributions.** To what degree does Washington envision offloading U.S. missions to Asian and European allies, and to what degree are those allies expected to augment their existing forces and defense budgets to assume these additional responsibilities?
- **Define the much-vaunted "Asia Pivot."** Will Washington permanently deploy additional units

in Asia or augment the existing U.S. forward-deployed military presence with additional forces or capabilities? Where would additional forces be located? Existing plans for realigning U.S. forces in Japan and South Korea are uncertain due to resistance by the Senate Armed Services Committee.

**The World's Surest Barometer.** President Obama has correctly emphasized that "we have to remember the lessons of history. We can't afford to repeat the mistakes that have been made in the past—after World War II, after Vietnam—when our military was left ill prepared for the future."

American pundit Will Rogers said in 1933 that "if you want to know when a war is coming, you just watch the U.S. and see when it starts cutting down its defenses. It's the surest barometer in the world." Unfortunately, Rogers may again prove prescient.

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