

The Pacific Pivot Why America's Strategic Rebalance is Really Just Retreat

Posted by Joan Russow

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By [John Feffer](#)

<http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175799/>In a future update of [The Devil's Dictionary](#), the famed Ambrose Bierce dissection of the linguistic hypocrisies of modern life, a single word will accompany the entry for "Pacific pivot": retreat.

It might seem a strange way to characterize the Obama administration's energetic attempt to reorient its foreign and military policy toward Asia. After all, the president's team has insisted that the Pacific pivot will be a forceful reassertion of American power in a strategic part of the world and a deliberate reassurance to our allies that we have their backs vis-à-vis China.

Indeed, sometimes the pivot seems like little less than a panacea for all that ails U.S. foreign policy. Upset about the fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan? Then just light out for more pacific waters. Worried that our adversaries are all melting away and the Pentagon has lost its *raison d'être*? Then how about going toe to toe with China, the only conceivable future superpower on the horizon these days. And if you're concerned about the state of the U.S. economy, then the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the regional free-trade deal Washington is trying to negotiate, might be just the shot in the arm that U.S. corporations crave.

In reality, however, the "strategic rebalancing" the Obama administration has been promoting as a mid-course correction to its foreign policy remains strong on rhetoric and remarkably weak on content. Think of it as a clever fiction for whose promotion many audiences are willing to suspend their disbelief. After all, in the upcoming era of Pentagon belt-tightening and domestic public backlash, Washington is likely to find it difficult to move any significant extra resources into Asia. Even the TPP is an acknowledgment of how much economic ground in the region has been lost to China.

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There's also the longer arc of history to consider. The U.S. retreat from Asia has been underway since the 1970s, although this "strategic movement to the rear" -- as the famous military euphemism goes -- has been neither rapid nor accompanied by "mission accomplished" photo ops.

The administration's much-vaunted pivot looks ever more like a divot -- a swing, a miss, and a hole in the ground rather than anything approaching a hole-in-one.

The Slowly Shrinking Footprint

During the Cold War, the United States fought more battles and shed more blood in Asia than anywhere else on Earth. From 1950 to 1953, under a U.N. flag, U.S. forces struggled for control of the Korean peninsula, ending up without a peace treaty and with a stalemate at roughly the same dividing line where the war began. At one point, as the Vietnam War expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. troop levels in Asia swelled to more than 800,000.

Since the disastrous end of that war, however, Washington has been very slowly and fitfully retreating from the region. U.S. military personnel there have by now dropped under 100,000. The low point was arguably during the George W. Bush years when the U.S. military sank into the quicksand of Iraq and Afghanistan, and critics began to accuse his administration of "losing Asia" to a rising China.

Looking at the numbers, it's hard not to come to the conclusion that Washington's attention had indeed drifted from the Pacific. Consider Korea. Peace has hardly broken out on the peninsula. In fact, the North's nuclear weapons and the South's extensive military modernization have only had the effect of heightening tensions.

The United States, however, has repeatedly reduced both the size and the significance of its forces in South Korea in a process of punctuated devolution. On three occasions over the last 45 years, Washington has unilaterally withdrawn forces from the peninsula -- each time over the objections of the South Korean government. There were nearly 70,000 U.S. troops in South Korea in the early 1970s when the Nixon administration first recalled an entire division of 20,000 troops. Later, the Carter administration, initially keen to withdraw all U.S. forces, settled for another limited reduction. In 1991, in response to the collapse of Communism in much of the

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world (but not North Korea), the George H.W. Bush administration [unilaterally withdrew](#) tactical nuclear weapons from the peninsula.

In the twenty-first century, the U.S. military footprint shrank yet again from approximately 37,000 troops to the current level of 28,500, this time thanks to negotiations between Washington and Seoul. (A small contingent of 800 troops has just been [dispatched](#) to South Korea to send a signal of U.S. "resolve" to the North, but it's only for a nine-month rotation.) In addition, the American troops near the de-militarized zone that separates north from south, long meant as a "tripwire" that would ensure U.S. involvement in any future war between the two countries, are being relocated further south. However, Pentagon officials have [recently hinted](#) at leaving behind a residual force. The two countries are still negotiating the transfer of what, six decades after the Korean War ended, is still referred to as "wartime operational control," a long overdue step. The reduction of forces has been accompanied by the closure and consolidation of U.S. bases, including the massive Yongsan garrison in the middle of the South Korean capital, Seoul. It will revert entirely to Korean control over the next few years.

It's not just Korea where the U.S. "footprint" is shrinking. A quieter set of redeployments has reduced U.S. ground forces in Japan, too, from approximately 46,000 personnel in 1990 to the 38,000-strong contingent today. Even larger changes are underway.

In 2000, on a visit to Okinawa, Japan's southern-most prefecture, President Bill Clinton [promised to shrink](#) the staggering American military footprint on that island. At the time, Okinawans were furious over a series of [murders](#) and [rapes](#) committed by U.S. soldiers as well as military-related accidents that had claimed Okinawan lives and health threats from [various kinds of pollution](#) generated by more than 30 U.S. bases. Ever since, Washington has been pursuing a plan to close the Futenma Marine Air Force Base -- an old facility dangerously located in the middle of a modern city -- and build a replacement elsewhere on the island. That plan also involves the relocation of 9,000 Marines from the island to U.S. bases elsewhere in the Pacific. If it goes forward, U.S. forces in Japan will be reduced by up to 25%.

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THEY WERE SOLDIERS



ANN JONES

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