



US Pivot-to-Asia strategy takes dangerous turn

We live in interesting times

Barrack Obama's "pivot-to-Asia", a major policy shift first outlined in 2011, was structured at rebalancing Asia. The question is: rebalancing in whose favor? It is obvious that the US is apprehensive of the rise of China, doubts its peaceful intentions and intends to increase US presence in Asia to checkmate China. To support its intentions, sometimes US think tanks are called upon to make recommendations based on their studies. The study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a leading Washington think tank, has called for America to flex its military muscle in the region by deploying extra nuclear attack submarines and developing advanced long-range missiles. CSIS also recommends exploiting the US undersea advantage; and augmenting space, cyber, and electronic warfare capabilities.

The US has meddled in the South China Sea disputes, which are destined to be resolved in accordance with the DOC (Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea) yet it goaded the Philippines to seek arbitration for the dispute at the International Court of Justice The Hague. The one sided and controversial arbitration resulted in Philippine's favour hence it is being touted by the US but has been rejected by China which seeks solutions in light of the DOC and UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of Seas) to which China is a signatory but the US is not.

It is not a quirk of fate that the Philippines has allowed the US to resume hosting military forces at the Subic Bay base for the first time in almost 20 years. The Philippines' Supreme Court recently endorsed a bilateral security cooperation agreement that will station US troops and weapons on a rotational basis at five Philippine military airfields and two naval bases. In recent years, Washington has been moving more troops and military assets into the region and strengthening security alliances with a number of ASEAN members.

If that were not enough, South Korean government officials sought to flaunt the need for deploying the US missile defense system, called Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), in its territory despite oppositions and controversies at home and abroad. President Park Geun-hye told a meeting with her senior advisors that the THAAD deployment would be a defensive measure to protect her country from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

(DPRK)'s nuclear and missile threats. Park said the US interceptors will neither target any third-party nations nor infringe on security interests of any other country.

North Korea's missile program is being used as an excuse to deploy THAAD missile defense system in South Korea, which is a serious threat to the peace and stability of East Asia. The THAAD, developed by the US-based defense company Lockheed Martin, is designed to shoot down missiles at an altitude of 40-150 km using a hit-to-kill approach. It comprises six mobile launchers, 48 interceptors and a radar and fire control system valued at about 1.5 trillion won (1.3 billion US dollars).

The Seongju County, some 300 km southeast of the capital Seoul, has been designated as the deployment site for the THAAD system. The decision enraged local residents, with some writing in blood to express strong opposition to the deployment of the THAAD, whose X-band radar is known to emit a super-strong microwave detrimental to the human body.

The decision by South Korea to toe the US Pivot-to-Asia Policy has caused serious concerns amongst South Korea's neighbours. China and Russia have expressed strong opposition to the THAAD deployment on the South Korean soil as its X-band radar can spot Chinese and Russian territories far beyond the DPRK.

The AN/TPY-2 radar can detect targets up to 600-800 km with a terminal mode, which South Korea plans to adopt, but it can be converted at any time, and takes less than a day to change, into a forward-based mode that ranges as far as 2,000 km because the two versions have the same hardware.

The THAAD battery will be operated by the US Forces Korea (USFK) and the radar operation will not be made transparent.

Pyongyang has slammed South Korea for its decision to deploy THAAD, saying that Seoul was "kowtowing to the U.S. brigandish demand." By doing so, the South Korean government "sold off the destiny and interests of the nation and harassed regional peace and stability," a spokesman for the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea said in a statement carried by the state-run news agency KCNA.

The DPRK on Monday vowed to take physical countermeasures against the THAAD deployment in South Korea, threatening "merciless retaliatory strikes to reduce South Korea to a sea of flames."

Rhetoric aside, it is a serious development, which unnecessarily endangers the region and must be taken cognisance of.

China has urged the US and South Korea/ Republic of Korea (ROK) to halt the deployment of the US anti-missile system in the ROK. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said deployment of the THAAD in South Korea will adversely impact the situation on the Korean Peninsula, regional stability and bilateral ties. When meeting with his South Korean counterpart Yun Byung-se on the sidelines of an ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in the Lao capital, Wang said the deployment of the advanced U.S. missile defense system will jeopardise mutual trust between the two countries. He urged the South Korean side to seriously address China's concerns and think twice over the THAAD deployment. The THAAD deployment would gravely damage the strategic balance in the region as well as the strategic security interests of countries in the region including China, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang told a routine press briefing.

The move also contravenes efforts to maintain peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula, he said, reaffirming China's strong opposition to it.

Besides strategic, there may be political considerations too. The ruling Saenuri Party was shockingly defeated by the main opposition Minju Party at the April 13 general elections as public dissatisfactions mounted with a soaring unemployment among college graduates and a widening income inequality between the rich and the poor and between the regular and irregular workers.

According to a local pollster Realmeter, Park's support rate continued to fall to 33.1 percent in the first week of this month after emotional disputes among people in the country's southeastern region, a traditional home turf for Park and the Saenuri Party, to build a new international airport in their hometown. To recover the lost support from conservative voters, Park may have sought to attract public attention into security issues by hurriedly announcing the THAAD deployment decision. According to analysts, Park is forecast to make an active use of the THAAD deployment as an engine to bring together her conservative supporters. South Korean citizens, politicians and news organisations are raising a dissenting voice over the decision between Seoul and Washington to deploy THAAD in their homeland. Villagers living in the site where one THAAD battery is scheduled to be installed by the end of next year continue their protest against the US missile defense system, while civic group activists and student groups who advocate peace and stability rally against the U.S. weapons program. Opposition lawmakers call for the retraction of the THAAD deployment decision, and in several TV programs, panelists are divided over pros and cons of the installation, which reflects the nationwide split between people over the untested, environmentally hazardous US anti-missile system. ROK opposition leaders have opined that the THAAD deployment was a decision causing more losses than gains from the perspective of national interests, calling for the issue to be re-examined and made open to the public debate.

On July 8 when Seoul and Washington announced the THAAD deployment decision, stocks in South Korean companies which heavily depend on Chinese consumers and tourists lost a deep ground. On the day alone, over 3 trillion won (2.6 billion US dollars) of market value was wiped out from stocks in cosmetics, tour agencies and so on. Cheong Seong-Chang, a senior researcher at the private Sejong Institute, said that the THAAD decision would cause a drop in Chinese tourists visiting South Korea, a cooling in the popularity of the so-called Korean Wave and the possible boycotting of South Korean products in China.

The US should think deep and reconsider. Its Pivot-to-Asia strategy is causing more concerns than comfort. The US itself would never approve of any other power snooping around its territorial waters and inciting its neighbours to raise tension. In a way it is lucky that it is dealing with China, which has no hegemonic designs but there are limits to one's patience.

By: *SULTAN M HALI*