

GEOPOLITICS AND US ENERGY POLICY

America's Perilous Pivot

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The Pacific or the Middle East? For the United States, that is now the primary strategic question. The violence in Gaza, coming as President Barack Obama was meeting Asia's leaders in Phnom Penh, perfectly encapsulates America's dilemma. Instead of being able to focus on US foreign policy's 'pivot' to Asia, Obama was forced to spend many hours in conversation with the leaders of Egypt and Israel, and to dispatch Secretary of State Hillary Clinton from Asia, in order to facilitate a cease-fire in Gaza.

Of the two geopolitical focal points demanding America's attention, one represents the future and the other the past. Whereas Asia played an important role in a US presidential election campaign that was marked by often-heated references to China's rise, the Middle East has kept the USA bogged down for decades. In addition to the eternal Israel-Palestine conflict, Iraq's instability, the Arab Spring, Syria's civil war, and the ongoing nuclear standoff with Iran all demand America's attention.

Indeed, the revolution in non-conventional hydrocarbons, particularly shale gas and oil, which the International Energy Agency recently predicted would make the USA the world's largest oil producer by 2020, and the top energy producer overall by 2030, will have enormous global repercussions. For the USA, energy self-sufficiency is the perfect excuse for a phased withdrawal from the Middle East; freed from energy dependency, America should be able to concentrate on the Pacific.

Although maintaining stable global energy prices and its alliance with Israel means that the USA cannot cut itself off completely from the Middle East's troubles, the shift in focus to Asia began early in Obama's first administration, with Clinton announcing America's strategic reorientation even before US troops began withdrawing from Iraq. Following his re-election, Obama's first foreign visit was to Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia – a choice that cannot have pleased China, as all three are ASEAN members, while

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Myanmar was, until it began its democratic transition, a close Chinese ally.

Asia is, of course, experiencing rapid economic growth, but managing the region's strong nationalist tensions calls for the creation of regional security structures, together with closer economic integration. Complicating matters even more is what US scholar Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, the dean of international studies at Peking University, called in a recent paper for the Brookings Institution 'strategic distrust'.

Cultivating strategic trust between the twenty-first century's leading powers will be fundamental to the international system's harmonious functioning. But how can this be achieved? As China will be importing three-quarters of its oil from the Middle East by 2020, one step forward would be China's cooperation in finding solutions to the region's problems.

After the January 2013 Israeli elections, Iran will again move to the top of Obama's foreign-policy agenda. Military intervention in Iran – which itself will be holding a presidential election in June – would incite not only regional, but global, instability. The Arab world, Russia, and China would be forced to take sides, straining global relations between the different poles of power and raising tensions in the Pacific. So China has a large strategic interest in working with the USA to avoid a showdown.

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Beyond Iran, the volatile situation throughout the Middle East urgently demands solutions. The latest eruption of violent conflict between Hamas and Israel underscores the importance of reviving the peace process. Syria's civil war, in which a growing number of regional players have become involved, is beginning to look increasingly like a trial run for all-out war between Sunni Muslims (Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States, Turkey, and Egypt) and Shia Muslims (Iran and Hezbollah) for regional dominance.

Iran's leaders appear to believe that the USA, having incurred extremely high economic and human costs from more than a decade of war, would rather avoid another military intervention. US public opinion seems to confirm this. A recent survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs indicated that 67% of Americans believe that the Iraq war was not worthwhile. Moreover, 69% do not believe that the USA is safer from terrorism since the war in Afghanistan, and 71% say that the experience in Iraq shows that the USA should take greater care in how it uses force.

But, if Americans seem unlikely to be willing to invest billions of dollars in another dead-end foreign adventure, Iran's leaders, for their part, are increasingly hemmed in by international sanctions, which are beginning to wreak havoc on the country's economy. Both sides may believe that their best option – at least for now – is to negotiate.

Peaceful resolution of the Iranian question would help the USA to complete its shift toward Asia. China may not wish for that outcome, but its own vital interest in the security of Middle East energy supplies should compel it to cooperate. After all, another Middle East conflict would poison and distort relations in the region for decades, which would be the worst of all possible consequences – for the USA and China alike. ■

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