

CHRONOLOGY OF ARTICLES AND REPORTS RELATING TO US INTEREST IN HMAS *STIRLING*

July 2006

Christopher J Pehrson, "String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenge of China's Rising Power Across the Asian Littoral", Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, July 2006. Available at: <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/PUB721.pdf>.

This was one of the early analyses of the "String of Pearls", which is an expression for China's geopolitical strategy in response to its dependence on foreign oil to satisfy its energy needs. The "string" consists of the sea lines of communication along the land mass of the Indo-Pacific region, as shown in Figure 1.¹

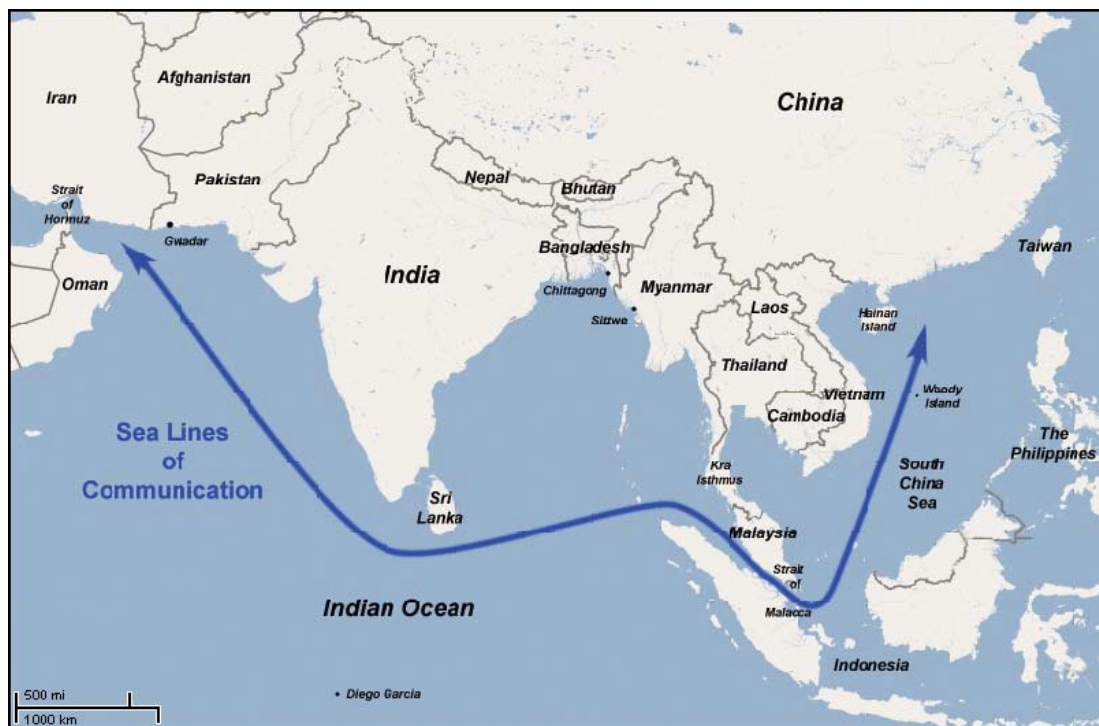


Figure 1. Sea Lines of Communication

The article examines the question implicit in the "String of Pearls" as to whether a rising China will continue to cede security guarantees to the United States, or if China will one day make a bid for regional primacy of the lines of communication. China's efforts to develop the "String of Pearls" not only supports "peaceful development, but also supports a hedging strategy if needed. By constantly assessing regional geopolitical developments as well as specific military challenges, the United States must remain vigilant for the indicators and warnings that will reveal the future direction of China's policy and strategy" (page 8). The author recommended an engagement policy of drawing China into the "community of

¹ The figure is reproduced from the article cited in the text box above and includes a statement that the publication is the work of the US Government as defined in Title 17, USC Section 101, and as such its contents are in the public domain.

nations” (page 22). Australia was not mentioned in the article, but the possible use of HMAS *Stirling* for the purpose of such a hedging strategy appears in subsequent discussions.

November 2011

Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, “America’s Pacific Century”, *Foreign Policy*, November 2011. Available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century?hidecomments=yes.

The article states, as a head note, that “the future of geopolitics will be decided in Asia, not in Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States should be at the centre of the action”. She defined the Asia-Pacific as the territory “stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas, the region spans two oceans – the Pacific and the Indian – that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy”.

29 January 2012

Geoff Wade, “The Emergence of ‘Offshore Asia’ as a Security Concept”, *East Asia Forum*, 29 January 2012. Available at: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/01/29/the-emergence-of-offshore-asia-as-a-security-concept/>.

Peter Drysdale, “Asian Security Strategy: One Hand Not Clapping”, *East Asia Forum*, 30 January 2012. Available at: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/01/30/asian-security-strategy-one-hand-not-clapping/>.

Both authors discuss aspects arising from the initial announcement (near the end of 2011 and not included in this chronology) of Obama’s “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific region and both indicate concerns that the strategy may increase rather than reduce tension within the region. As Drysdale stated:

Therein lies the crux of it. Playing one hand into “Offshore Asia” security might be a reasonable first move. But it is certainly not a viable long-term security strategy. Whether that hand will serve the preservation of peace or contribute to future tensions in East Asia will assuredly depend also on whether another hand can be extended to China, one that provides reassurance of its role and interests in regional security.

17 February 2011

Text of President Barack Obama’s address to the Australian Parliament on 17 February 2011 is available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/text-of-obamas-speech-to-parliament-20111117-1nkcw.html>. The video of the address in full is available at: <http://media.smh.com.au/news/national-news/in-full-obamas-address-to-parliament-2778964.html>.

This speech is said to be the first definition of the US “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific region, although that word did not appear in the speech:

As President, I have therefore made a deliberate and strategic decision - as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with allies and friends.

Let me tell you what this means.

First, we seek security, which is the foundation of peace and prosperity. We stand for an international order in which the rights and responsibilities of all nations and people are upheld. Where international law and norms are enforced. Where commerce and freedom of navigation are not impeded. Where emerging powers contribute to regional security, and where disagreements are resolved peacefully.

As a statement of intentions this is relatively clear, but the practical aspects of implementation are not so clear. How will the relevant international law and norms be established and how will they be enforced? Other, similar questions arise that we will return to later in this chronology.

19 March 2012

Michael J Green and Andrew Shearer, "Defining US Indian Ocean Strategy, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (first published 28 March 2012), pp. 175-189. Available by subscription or for single-article purchase at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2012.666925>.

The following paragraph appears on page 184 of the article written by Green and Shearer:²

HMAS *Stirling*,³ the major Australian Naval base in Western Australia, and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands (a strategically-located Australian territory 3,000 kilometres northwest of Perth, roughly midway between the Australian mainland and Sri Lanka), will also become more important for sustaining allied presence in the Indian Ocean. HMAS *Stirling* offers deep-water port facilities (capable of expansion to accommodate aircraft carriers), support facilities for surface vessels and submarines, and ready access to extensive naval exercising areas. In World War II, up to 30 US submarines were based in the same area. With an investment in additional facilities, HMAS *Stirling* could support expanded US surface and submarine operations in the Indian Ocean. This would present significant advantages in terms of defence-in-depth to protect sea lanes in the South China Sea, dispersal of increasingly vulnerable assets, and direct blue water access across to the Persian Gulf without the need to transit Southeast Asian chokepoints. A relatively modest investment in upgrading the existing Cocos Islands runway

² Michael J. Green is Senior Advisor and Japan Chair at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C., and Associate Professor at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. His name will appear in documents to be discussed shortly. Andrew Shearer is Director of Studies and a Senior Research Fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Australia and was foreign policy adviser to former Prime Minister John Howard.

³ HMAS *Stirling* has a name that was selected to honour the name of Captain James Stirling, Royal Navy, the naval officer who landed on Garden Island in 1827 and returned in June, 1829 to found not only the first European settlement in Western Australia, but also the first free colony anywhere in Australia. http://www.navy.gov.au/HMAS_Stirling. With HMAS preceding the name, the naval base is treated as one would treat a ship and put the name in Italics.

and facilities would provide a valuable staging point for long-range US aircraft operating into the Bay of Bengal and beyond.

28 March 2012

Mark E Manyin and six other specialists, "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's 'Rebalancing' Toward Asia", Congressional Research Service", 28 March 2012. Available at: www.fax.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf.

The report issued by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) is explicit in stating the fundamental goal underpinning the shift in strategy (as stated in the Summary of the report):

[T]o devote more effort to influencing the development of the Asia-Pacific's norms and rules, particularly as China emerges as an ever-more influential regional power. Given that one purpose of the "pivot" or "rebalancing" toward the Asia-Pacific is to deepen US credibility in the region at a time of fiscal constraint, Congress's oversight and appropriations roles, as well as its approval authority over free trade agreements, will help determine to what extent the Administration's plans are implemented and how various trade-offs are managed.

The increased emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region appears to have been prompted by four major developments (page 2):

- the growing economic importance of the Asia-Pacific region, and particularly China, to the United States' economic future;
- China's growing military capabilities and its increasing assertiveness of claims to disputed maritime territory, with implications for freedom of navigation and the sea and the United States' ability to project power in the region;
- the winding down of US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; and
- efforts to cut the US federal government's budget, particularly the defence budget, which threaten to create a perception in Asia that the US commitment to the region will wane.

This report indicated that discussions were taking place between the US and Australia for greater access by the US of a naval port in Western Australia (Figure 2 on the next page). Sources of information are shown on page 3 of the report but the sources relating to HMAS *Stirling* are either incomplete or are unavailable.

Of particular interest is the concern expressed in the report about creating a "hosts of risks" (page 8):

The "pivot" to the Pacific is seen by some in China in starker terms, as focused on dividing China from its neighbours and keeping China's military in check. Such an impression may strengthen the hand of China's military (the People's Liberation Army, or PLA), which has long been suspicious of US intentions in the region. The military could in turn become more determined to strengthen China's anti-access capabilities and more assertive about defending China's territorial claims, rather than less. The impression that the rebalancing is aimed at

containing China could potentially make it more difficult for the United States to gain China's cooperation on such issues of Iran and North Korea.

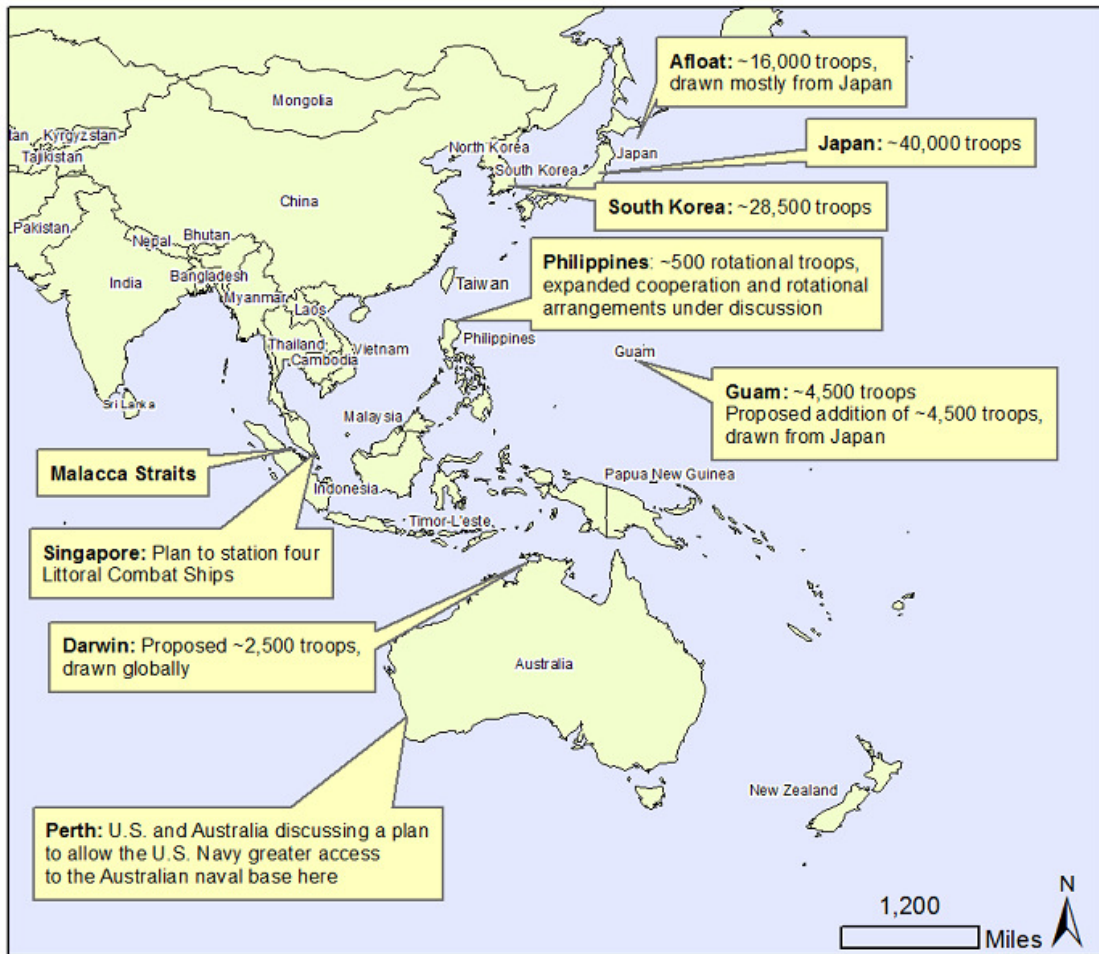


Figure 2. A Selection of Planned US Troop Movements in the Asia-Pacific Region

13 April 2012

Michael J. Green, "Rethinking US Military Presence in Asia and the Pacific, *2012 Global Forecast*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 13 April 2012. Available at: <http://csis.org/publication/rethinking-us-military-presence-asia-and-pacific>.

The following statement appears on page 20 of Green's article:

In Australia, polls show over half the public support hosting⁴ US bases, and agreement has been reached for the regular deployment of up to 2,500 Marines in the north. Further opportunities exist in western Australia and at HMAS *Stirling*, where US submarine operations were based in World War II.

No citation for this information is given in the report and no comments are made in relation to the nature of the further opportunities.

⁴ A degree of confusion exists in reference to the meaning of "hosting US bases". Does it mean that Australian naval bases are open to ships and personnel of the US Navy or does it mean that the US Navy has part ownership in the facilities of the base and therefore controls at least some of the operations at the base?

27 July 2012

Statement of Senators Levin, McCain and Webb on the report by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 27 July 2012. The report is available at:

<http://levin.senate.gov/download/?id=362f5324-bc5f-4d36-8ef5-31f1eaae9a46>.

The statement indicated that the Armed Forces Committee of the US Senate received the independent assessment by the CSIS of the US military force posture in the Pacific Command's area of responsibility that was required by Section 346 of the Fiscal Year 2012 National Defence Authorisation Act. The transmittal letter from the US Department of Defence indicated that the report included a confidential annex that was removed from the public version that is available through the Internet link shown above. This public version contained no statement about HMAS *Stirling*, or the Cocos Islands.

1 August 2012

US House of Representatives, Armed Forces Committee, Subcommittee on Readiness, "Hearings on United States Force Posture in the United States Pacific Command Area of Responsibility" 1 August 2012, video recording of prepared statement and questions from members of the committee is available at:

http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/hearings-display?ContentRecord_id=a8c4d4cd-9cfe-4671-947c-e990d4fb917e (2 hours and 19 minutes).

This was the subject of the first article by Nick O'Malley, John Garnaut and Dylan Welch, entitled "US Eyes Perth Naval Base"⁵. However, the hearing did not proceed in the way they anticipated. The report by CSIS was presented before the hearing to enable the members of the subcommittee to ask questions at the hearing. Additionally, the nature of US interest in HMAS *Stirling* did not emerge at all. No mention was made of it in the prepared statement by David J Berteau and Michael Green (<http://csis.org/testimony/us-force-posture-strategy-asia-pacific-region-independent-assessment>) or during the questioning at the hearing. It may have appeared in the annex to the report for which the link appears in the text box on the previous page, but we cannot know that. This matter was partly clarified by *The Sydney Morning Herald* in subsequent articles (refer to footnote 5 below), but several questions nevertheless remained unanswered.

⁵Nick O'Malley, John Garnaut and Dylan Welch, "US Eyes Perth Naval Base", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 2012. Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/political-news/us-eyes-perth-naval-base-20120801-23fy9.html>. For follow-up information see: "No WA Home for US Carrier Group", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 2012, at: <http://www.smh.com.au/wa-news/no-wa-home-for-us-carrier-group-20120802-23glz.html> and "Perth Naval Base 'Plan' Would Cost Too Much: Study Author", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 2012 at: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/political-news/perth-naval-base-plan-would-cost-too-much-study-author-20120802-23h3n.html>.

1 August 2012

Stephen Smith MP Minister for Defence, speech to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute “Australia’s Changing Strategic Circumstances”, 1 August 2012. Available at: <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/2012/08/01/minister-for-defence-to-the-australian-strategic-policy-institute-aspi-australias-changing-strategic-circumstances/>

The speech clarifies several of the unanswered question. The minister stated:

Down the track, it is also proposed to examine the possibility of increased US naval access to Australia’s Indian Ocean port, HMAS Stirling. [Italics were added for emphasis here.]

US force posture initiatives are an extension of our existing defence cooperation and defence arrangements.

Australia already hosts military exercises involving large numbers of US military personnel.

But the US does not have permanent military bases on Australian territory and this will not change. *The activities will take place in Australian facilities.*

Commentary

“The Fact Checker” page in *The Washington Post* tests the extent to which political candidates distort or alter the truth. It is called the Pinocchio test. That does not seem appropriate here, but perhaps we could borrow Pinocchio’s song, “When You Wish Upon a Star”, and consider the degree to which wishful thinking has seeped into the literature listed in this chronology. The belief that repeating something over and over will sooner or later result in others believing in that which is being repeated seems to come close to wishing upon a star.

“Our new strategy and rebalancing in Asia is not about containing China”, was reported to have been stated many times by the Chairman of the US Joint Chief Martin Dempsey while visiting Asian nations to discuss the new strategy.⁶ It was mentioned by other US Department of Defence representatives and applied with similar language at the hearings convened by the US House of Representatives, Armed Forces Committee, Subcommittee on Readiness. Having said that, however, the second part of “sooner-or-later” has probably not yet arrived, so perhaps we should postpone extending any Jiminy Cricket awards until later.

It is nevertheless worth commenting on evidence of the two-handed strategy mentioned by Peter Drysdale in reference to the document cited above at 29 January 2012. In response to a question at the House Subcommittee hearings, Michael Green drew a distinction between dissuasion and deterrence (at approximately 35 minutes into the video). The context of the former is to encourage China to operate “within the system” and focus on economic

⁶ Reported by James Kitfield, “Is Obama’s ‘Pivot to Asia’ Really a Hedge Against China”, *The Atlantic*, 8 June 2012. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/06/is-obamas-pivot-to-asia-really-a-hedge-against-china/258279/>.

development and trading relations. The latter would be used to “make certain” that if China’s leaders seriously consider military force, then the allies should have their resources positioned in such a way that PLA representatives would be likely to tell their national leaders that they may not be able to win. This represents a clear-cut distinction, but it is nevertheless a mixture with one hand welcoming China into the global community and the other hand holding a metaphorical cattle prod to make sure that China follows the accepted patterns of behaviour. The “cattle prod” is very much an item from the Cold War era, since, again in the metaphorical sense, it corresponds to the installation of inter-continental ballistic missile silos first in the UK, then in Italy and finally closer to the border of the Soviet Union, in Turkey. As is generally known this led to the installation of similar missile silos in Cuba, but these were aimed at the United States.

The members of the first panel of witnesses for the hearings were adamant that Cold War strategies must end, but at the present time they are ending only in part. To paraphrase the remainder of Peter Drysdale’s remark, the “mixed hands” may be a good start, but showing by doing, by being more engaged with the *people* in the “community of nations”, and by learning from them as much as they are expected to learn from America, is the only reasonable way to proceed toward long-term security in the region. It is possible to be tolerant of other cultures without renouncing one’s own culture, and the discovery of that is essential if we intend to allow globalisation to continue.

John Zerby
07/08/2012
j.zerby@bigpond.com