

© U.S. Naval Institute

America Must Be Careful Where it Pivots

What will the future hold in an atmosphere of rolling Arab crises and a U.S. shift of focus on the Pacific region?

By Captain Gerard D. Roncolato, U.S. Navy (Retired)
May 2012 | Proceedings | Vol. 138/5/1,311

In a January article published by *Foreign Affairs*, Lebanese-born Fouad Ajami, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, wrote the following:

It was a bleak landscape: terrible rulers, sullen populations, a terrorist fringe that hurled itself in frustration at an order bereft of any legitimacy. . . . Consent had drained out of public life; the only glue between ruler and ruled was suspicion and fear. . . . When consent and popular enthusiasm fell away the state rested on fear, and fear was defeated.¹

In the past year unprecedented and unexpected changes have taken place in the Middle East and north Africa.² The Syrian crisis is but the most recent swell in a torrential flood unleashed by the December 2010 self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor. Despite the obviously nascent nature of the Arab Spring's dynamics, the United States has cast its die in favor of a strategic shift to the Pacific, while at the same time reducing its military resources. At issue is whether or not the United States will be allowed to de-emphasize the Middle East in favor of this strategic choice. The tension between choices and demands will have stark implications for the U.S. Navy.

Ongoing Upheaval

In late spring 2011 Lebanese-American essayist and bestselling author Nassim Taleb and Mark Blyth, a faculty fellow at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies, wrote in *Foreign Affairs*: "Complex systems that have artificially suppressed volatility tend to become extremely fragile, while at the same time exhibiting no visible risks."³ The Arab Spring came as a surprise early in 2011. Seemingly stable regimes crumbled, one after another. Only in retrospect did their brittleness become clear. From the rubble of the old regimes comes the promise of spring. What began in Tunis will take decades to mature, and its ultimate shape and direction cannot yet be

discerned. What is certain is that the process will be dangerous, volatile, potentially violent, and will send ripples out across the global system.

Long-suppressed passions and political entities within the region will emerge and ask to have their voices heard. Extra-regional forces will be attracted and will play their part, for good or ill. Throughout, the multilayered complexities of the region will continue their historic interplay: Arab and non-Arab, Sunni and Shi'a, Jew and Muslim, elites and masses.

While it has spread across the region, the Arab Spring is not a pan-Arab movement or revolt. It is a series of popular uprisings stemming from conditions unique to each country: the nature of the opposition, the conditions in each country, the structure and strength of specific regime power centers, and the influence of competing forces (nations, groups, and ideas; internal to the region and beyond it). Consequently, from a policy standpoint, each demands its own singular consideration.⁴

Yet in this lies danger. U.S. Middle East policy has historically been based on relations with individual countries or groups. A more integrated and comprehensive regional and global view has too often been muted. As a consequence, decisions have been tactical, and U.S. policy has frequently run aground on sub-optimized actions. Now, more than ever, nuance is needed. Dealing with the specific aspects of each nation's journey through reform will be essential; yet so too will be the need to view the region as a whole as it evolves and as it interacts with the global system. Policies will have to be shaped accordingly.

'Both Historic and New'

From a regional context, the struggle that is emerging is at once both historic and new. Islam has long struggled with modernity: What does the Muslim man or woman look like in the modern world? How can the precepts of Islam and Islamic law fit into the modern world without surrendering Islam's core tenets? From the pan-Arab movements of the 19th century through Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's United Arab Republic of the 1960s, up to the recent Islamist-versus-traditional political structures, Islam has tried to modernize. It has largely failed.

The current struggle is but the latest variation on an old theme. New factors include the urban and more liberal middle classes on one hand, and the strongly traditional, even regressive Islamic forces on the other. Both sought the downfall of the status quo; but the former wants accommodation with the

modern world on new terms, while the latter, in its extreme variant, rejects that world.

Recent developments in the region have placed Islamists in parliamentary majorities in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Even Turkey, though thus far immune to the Arab Spring, has been moving increasingly away from its secular past toward a more Islamist state. Syria is not far behind. Yemen and Bahrain are on the cusp. This Islamist surge is perhaps the inevitable reaction to years of oppression and the anti-Americanism of the heretofore muzzled masses.

Left to its own devices, the Islamist wave could crest, just as its predecessors did. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party, serve as a good example. Now a parliamentary majority in Egypt, it is rumored that they will form a government in advance of the June transition. They presumably will establish a theocratic state based on Sunni law (Shari'a) and pursue a more radical foreign policy.⁵ This will tend to squelch personal freedoms, dry up tourist income, and repel foreign investment. The path to economic ruin will be set. Similar dynamics are at play in the other countries of the region. Given the demands of protestors—the educated middle class intent on democratic and economic reforms—this path cannot be sustained.

Instability, uncertainty, and the risk of conflict (not just internal, but also regional sectarian strife) will likely characterize the emerging era in the Middle East.⁶ Such highly fluid conditions will tend to attract outsiders. An increasingly powerful and confident China is already making moves into the region. A frail and resentful Russia has long standing there, while a distracted Europe cannot fulfill its historic role as a force of moderation. Terrorism of the al Qaeda brand may retrench and diminish (there is no love lost between al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, for example), but it may be supplanted by more radical foreign policies of the new governments. Regardless, U.S. leverage has been greatly reduced while its interests remain as vital as before.

We're Not the Only Ones With a Vote

Included in the new defense strategy announced in January is the following:

U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while

the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, *we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.*⁷

Thus, the United States has made a strategic choice to shift its focus to the Pacific. This makes for nice speeches, neatly written documents, and convenient policy. But that choice may well fly in the face of reality. Such a shift might be necessary to counter a rising China in the face of needed reductions in U.S. government spending, but that is not to say the Middle East and north Africa will allow us to do it. In fact, shifting to the Pacific relies heavily on burden-sharing with partners and allies in other regions. Our Middle East partners and allies are vanishing like sand castles in the surf. It has been said that nations fight where they must, not where they choose. The United States may be facing just such a reality.

America can no longer avoid the issue of democratization versus Islamists. And it will not be able to rely on the old pillars of its position in the region. New policies and strategies will have to be forged—ones that acknowledge a new set of realities. In fact, the United States would do well to embrace the changes, which are inevitable, and seek to regain some of its lost leverage, based not on military aid but on core American values of democracy, personal dignity, stability, and economic opportunity for all.⁸

The region is volatile and will remain so for several decades. The United States will not be able to turn its back on the problem, and in fact may discover that more rather than fewer resources must be applied there. This situation may well be exacerbated by external forces. The Russians could seek to play the spoiler role, if for no other reason than to assuage bruised post-Soviet Union pride and divert attention from severe domestic challenges. China will play an increasing role, one that will seek to secure natural-resource supplies while simultaneously seeking to draw U.S. focus away from the Pacific.

Implications for the U.S. Navy

The latest maritime strategy from 2007 laid out the objectives of projecting power from the sea:

Our challenge is to apply seapower in a manner that protects U.S. vital interests even as it promotes greater collective security, stability, and trust. While defending our homeland and defeating adversaries in war remain the indisputable ends of seapower, it must be applied more broadly if it is to serve the national interest.⁹

Overall, while the Navy stands to gain from the strategic shift to the Pacific, it will find itself hard-pressed to meet commitments there while continuing to support U.S. policy in the Middle East. This will be exacerbated by the

likelihood that U.S. naval support will be increasingly important in the Mediterranean littoral as well as in the Persian Gulf. Iranian antics notwithstanding, a broader arc of trouble is brewing that will stretch naval resources.

Three factors are at play here: the rise of maritime competitors, particularly China, but also Russia; the withdrawal of Europe into itself and the continued contraction of European military capacity; and the likely erosion of land-based support locations for U.S. military and naval operations. In short, it is entirely possible that the U.S. Navy will have to go it virtually alone.

Other naval implications include:

- Expanding missions. For example, as Israel sees itself increasingly surrounded by hostile Islamist regimes (potentially including a post-Assad Syria), the United States will be pressured to provide more security. This may well take the form of increased naval deployments to the eastern Mediterranean, including enhanced ballistic-missile defense patrols.
- Growing role for combined Navy–Marine Corps missions. Navy irregular warfare and Marine Corps capabilities will be ideally suited to supporting reformed militaries with low-end teaming, which would build confidence with newly established governments. In addition, the Navy–Marine Corps team may be called on to protect U.S. citizens and interests in unstable countries. In both cases, low-footprint operations will signal a new type of U.S. presence in the region, one well suited to reassuring populations and governments long accustomed to heavy American interventionism.
- The need to become more self-sustainable. The demise of shore-based infrastructure, from bases to places, including air heads, will put a higher premium on the Navy’s oft-touted ability to operate independently on the high seas. Such a capability is becoming increasingly important in the Pacific as well. But the cost will be high.
- Demands for U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf will not go away. In fact, as the old Arab order crumbles and as Turkey finds its putative leadership role thwarted in every direction, Iranian adventurism may well climb to new heights. The Navy will be looked to as the U.S. bulwark.

Hard Questions

All this suggests several questions that call for careful thought and analysis:

- How can the U.S. Navy position itself to meet likely emerging demands in the Middle East while continuing to honor America’s strategic shift to the Pacific? As a corollary to this question, how can the Navy’s irregular-warfare capabilities be fine-tuned to support U.S. interests in the Middle East and north Africa?
- What equipment, training, and doctrinal implications flow from this analysis?
- How will China behave in the region? Will it be a spoiler, intent on distracting the United States from the Pacific? Or can it be convinced to play a constructive role?
- How can the Navy influence and support U.S. policy in the region? In what way can it provide low-footprint engagement with new governments and their restructured militaries to encourage positive relationships?
- What should be the Navy’s comprehensive, region-based approach be to the Middle East and its navies?
- How can Navy strategic-communication efforts be harnessed to improve U.S. leverage in the region?

Though certainly warranted, the nation’s choice to shift focus to the Pacific may not be viable in the face of spreading change and instability in the Middle East and north Africa. The Navy will be placed in the position of executing that shift while also providing potentially greater presence from the western Mediterranean to the North Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. This reality suggests the need for thorough analysis and carefully crafted and integrated policies.

-
1. Fouad Ajami, “The Arab Spring at One,” *Foreign Affairs*, 24 January 2012.
 2. For the purposes of this article, the author defines the Middle East and north Africa as encompassing the swath from Morocco in the west and Oman in the east and from Turkey in the north to Yemen in the South.
 3. Nassim Taleb and Mark Blyth, “The Black Swan of Cairo,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011, p. 33.
 4. Lisa Anderson, “Demystifying the Arab Spring: Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011, p. 3.

5. Ajami, "The Arab Spring at One." See also "Tunisia: Ideology v Practicality," *The Economist*, 14 January 2012, and "Egypt's Turmoil: It Goes On and On," *The Economist*, 11 February 2012.
6. "Turkish Foreign Policy: The Problems with its Neighbours," *The Economist*, 28 January 2012.
7. Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," January 2012. Emphasis in original.
8. Wayne Porter and Mark Myleby (under the pseudonym Mr. Y), "A National Strategic Narrative," Woodrow Wilson Center, 2011.
9. GEN James T. Conway, USMC, ADM Gary Roughead, USN, and ADM Thad W. Allen, USCG, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, October 2007, p. 4.

Captain Roncolato is director of Studies & Analysis for E-Ring Consulting, Envisioneering Inc. in Alexandria, Virginia. He is a retired surface warfare officer.