



Global Power Shift

A Marshall Center Senior Executive Seminar examines the strategic reorientation toward the Asia Pacific

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At first thought, “the global shift of power” is a self-explanatory phrase often used in reference to the shift of power from “The West” — represented mainly by the United States — to emerging powers, especially China. But what exactly is meant by power? How will this power shift take place? Are there winners and losers? What are the consequences, and how should global leaders respond to the opportunities and challenges created by changes in the international system?

Seventy-three senior government and military leaders from 48 countries assembled at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies to discuss these questions at “The Global Shift of Power: Challenges, Opportunities and Security Implications for the U.S.,

Europe and the World” Senior Executive Seminar (SES). The International Senior Enlisted Seminar (ISES) also addressed these issues parallel to and in cooperation with the SES and consisted of 47 military attendees from 33 countries. Participants examined different aspects of power and how they relate to Asia’s growing international role.

The value of soft power

The global shift of power includes a shift from an exclusive reliance on hard power to one also reliant on soft power. Soft power emanates from the attractiveness of a country’s ideas and way of life. Despite the continued importance of economic and military power, the skillful



exercise of soft power is increasingly crucial in global politics. Military power alone can't deliver intended outcomes in the world. In the long term, cultural diplomacy can play a significant role in maintaining a country's security, despite a relative decline in economic and military power.

Nevertheless, soft power must be backed by hard power to be effective. The effectiveness of soft power as a policy tool is limited by the lack of ability to compel. For example, when facing security challenges such as terrorism, it is crucial to strike a smart balance between hard and soft power. Recognizing that terrorism will never completely disappear and is not the highest threat to most states, participants suggested that states treat terrorism as a law enforcement issue rather than a national security matter.

Soft power plays a significant role in delegitimizing terrorism as a political tool, in part by focusing on engaging with moderates to weaken extremists and empowering people to prevent them from turning to terrorism. SES participants considered nonmilitary measures as fundamental, but noted that many governments lack the means to use soft power effectively.

Power diffusion and convergence

Soft power is difficult to build, control and apply, especially today, as power is diffused among a myriad of nongovernmental actors. Large international companies, media and even individuals can influence world politics using technology, money, popularity or other assets. The increasing diffusion of power is considered one of the driving factors for change. While SES participants did not judge this trend to be a threat, they agreed that it is crucial to strengthen weak states — militarily, economically and especially socially — and international institutions and build close cooperation between states to limit the power of potentially malign private actors.

“Convergence” — in this context, between terrorism and transnational crime — is another term often applied to the global shift of power. Acknowledging that the scale of illicit activities is increasing and often presents an important funding source for terrorists, the SES-participants also recognized that as the size of the overall economy is increasing, no relative growth of illicit activities is noticeable. Illicit activities directly challenge national security when

criminal groups successfully capture a state or are sponsored and directed by a state. SES participants determined that efforts to curtail illicit activities should thus be directed toward destroying critical links between organizations.

Pivot to Asia

In November 2011, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a foreign policy “pivot” toward Asia. The announcement, combined with an increased U.S. military presence in the region (and decreasing numbers of troops in other regions, such as Europe) and a growing Chinese defense budget and national assertiveness, are evidence of the power shift toward the Asia-Pacific region.

The region is a hub of investment and development, and its youthful, growing population highlights the reality of the power shift away from the U.S. and Europe to the Asia Pacific. However, the rise of this region is not synonymous with American decline. The U.S. still has enormous assets in terms of social cohesion and newly exploitable energy resources, while the Asia Pacific faces severe social and environmental challenges.

Most SES participants favored an enlarged U.S. presence in the region, believing that the U.S. helps balance China’s power, protects other countries in the region and forces China to conduct itself peacefully as a global power. But seminar attendees felt that China, like India, has no interest in large-scale conflict, but rather wants to be accepted as a regional power and focus on domestic growth and stability.

However, the region bears the potential for serious conflict. Some potential sparks include Indian-Chinese border demarcation, territorial-waters disputes combined with natural gas discoveries, increased water scarcity in river basins shared by several countries, cross-border pollution and environmental degradation, and rapid population growth leading to diasporas. The Asia-Pacific region is far from stable, and experience shows that disputes among smaller states can lead to wars among powerful states.

An enduring U.S.-Chinese relationship is essential for stability, SES participants agreed. A positive relationship would establish behavioral norms for other states and significantly

contribute to peace in the region. Building this relationship requires strategic patience on both sides to foster mutual cultural understanding. The international community, and the U.S. in particular, must accept China as a regional power; while China must accept a U.S. military presence in the region.

Going forward

SES participants concluded that the global shift of power breeds the potential for conflict between major powers and is hence the greatest threat to international security. It should be the focus of security discussions. Participants accentuated the importance of education as a preventive measure against conflict of all sizes. Education yields prosperity, promotes tolerance and helps to counteract propaganda. Furthermore, education is a basic foundation for technological progress, which in turn can help to alleviate many of the world’s problems. Information sharing should not be seen as a disadvantage by any country.

Nations are responsible not just for their own security but for the world’s. In light of considerable cuts in defense spending, particularly in many European Union countries, it is more critical than ever to determine which

forces are indispensable and which can be reasonably left to allies. Collective security agreements — combined with increasing economic interdependence — counterbalance the security gap from decreasing defense capabilities. Accordingly, the EU and NATO need to define specific roles in maintaining international security. SES participants pointed to greater EU involvement in the neighboring Mediterranean-North African, Eastern



Above and right: Participants in the Marshall Center's Senior Executive Seminar examine various aspects of power.

European and Balkan regions as possibilities. Continued NATO participation in Central Asia following the withdrawal from Afghanistan was encouraged, with a priority placed on exchanging best practices and information, and providing technical support to maintain stability in the face of persistent extremism, terrorism and drug trafficking.

Cooperation within international institutions, especially the United Nations, is essential to stability. In the case of unforeseeable, high-impact events — so-called black swans — trust in international institutions, in combination with pre-existing capabilities, can prevent the greatest harm.



Therefore, reform of the UN is indispensable. But this reform should not overburden the UN with tasks it cannot fulfill. The frequent inability of the UN Security Council to make decisions does not mean that any UN action, including military, is necessarily illegal.

In addition, exchange and interaction among governmental leaders and decision-makers is crucial to prevent large-scale conflict. SES participants underscored the significance of face-to-face interaction in building trust and personal networks, which can have decisive impacts in avoiding conflict in critical situations. Institutions such as the Marshall Center play a vital role in facilitating such exchanges, and their relevance should not be underestimated.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) also play a vital role in facilitating dialogue and networking and should be supported in their work by host and provider countries. NGOs are able to reach out to ethnic and religious groups and build grass-roots initiatives that empower people.

Participants at the Marshall Center's SES succeeded in shedding light on important aspects of the global shift of power and exchanging views on how best to prepare for the future. Moreover, the international seminar facilitated face-to-face interaction among decision-makers from around the world. Such interactions build trust and stability. □