

PART TWO: MAJOR ACTORS, EVOLVING PRINCIPLES AND REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Chapter Nine

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United States and the Asia-Pacific: Balancing Rhetoric and Action

Executive Summary

- The Obama administration's new major initiatives in the Asia-Pacific signal a recognition of the dramatic shift of economic and, inevitably, political and strategic power toward the region. They also emphasize the significant impact of the shift on America's economic growth and international leadership.
- The announcement of a US "pivot" or "rebalancing" toward Asia has led to heated debates and mixed reactions in the region with regard to its drivers and intentions. While Washington's long-term interest and involvement in regional affairs are generally welcomed, the rhetoric emanating from Washington has created certain confusion and led to misperceptions, especially in relation to China.
- Contrasting assertions that Washington's new regional initiatives are all about China or that they have nothing to do with China are ironically mutually inclusive. Given that China is the main, but surely not the only, driver of Asia's rise, any enhanced attention to the region, whether it is caused by emerging opportunities or challenges, is bound to have something to do with China.
- Interestingly, one of the most visible results of America's more pragmatic and less ideological approach to the region

has been democratization in Burma and the country's opening to the West.

- In the past, the US rhetoric on the importance of the Asia-Pacific was not always supported by adequate action. It is vital to be more consistent this time and equally important to prevent a reverse scenario when pragmatic and reasonable actions are misperceived due to a not-so-well-tuned rhetoric.

Introduction

In the fall of 2011 and early 2012, Barack Obama's administration announced it would be intensifying the US role in the Asia-Pacific region. As the American president stated in a November 2011 address to the Australian parliament, "The United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region [the Asia-Pacific] and its future."¹ The announcement of a US "pivot" toward Asia has led to heated debates and mixed reactions in the region with regard to its motives and intentions. While Washington's long-term interest and involvement in regional affairs are generally welcomed, a streak of skepticism has set in as well. Ralph Cossa and Brad Glosserman from the Hawaiian-based Pacific Forum CSIS, argue that the only thing new about the US pivot toward Asia is the word "pivot." They find the "America is back" rhetoric troubling. First, there is the insinuation that a nation which "returns" has either left or might leave again, that its commitment comes and goes. Second, it confuses other governments in the region. Those who never questioned the US commitment still wonder what is behind this language. They also worry that a "surge" in the US presence is a cover for more aggressive and potentially destabilizing policies. They worry, too, that the US is preparing a more confrontational policy toward China.²

¹ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament" (November 17, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

² Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman, "Return to Asia: It's Not (All) About China," *PacNet* (January 30, 2012), no. 7, <http://csis.org/publication/pacnet-7-return-asia-its-not-all-about-china>.

Is It All About China?

Over the past several years, China's growing capabilities and assertive behavior, particularly in the South China Sea, have been a source of anxiety in the Asia-Pacific and, over the long term, could pose serious security challenges to US national interests. The US government accepts that, given the two decades of neglect of its military following the initiation of its reform period in 1979, it was quite natural for China to modernize its military beginning in the mid-1990s. However, the lack of transparency, both in terms of capabilities and intentions, about the nature of its modernization program is a cause of concern. Washington urges Beijing to overcome its reluctance to forge a durable military-to-military dialogue and strengthen the Strategic Security Dialogue, which brings together military and civilian leaders to discuss sensitive issues such as maritime security and cybersecurity. The US leadership appreciates that Beijing has raised its international and regional profiles toward becoming a responsible stakeholder, but criticizes China for doing it selectively by picking and choosing when to participate constructively and when to stand apart from the international system. Overall, the Obama administration's perspective on China is, however, more optimistic than pessimistic, as recently confirmed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks:

"Today's China is not the Soviet Union. We are not on the brink of a new Cold War in Asia... That requires adjustments in thinking and approaches on both sides. Geopolitics today cannot afford to be a zero-sum game. A thriving China is good for America and a thriving America is good for China, so long as we both thrive in a way that contributes to the regional and global good... We will only succeed in building a peaceful, prosperous Asia-Pacific if we succeed in building an effective US-China relationship."³

³ Forrestal Lecture at the Naval Academy, Remarks by Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State (Annapolis, April 10, 2012), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/04/187693.htm>.

Do Republicans Have a Different Plan?

Despite a polarized political debate in the United States on a range of issues, there seems to be a very strong bipartisan core of support for American engagement in the Asia-Pacific region to include strong bilateral alliances, robust economic engagement, and forward deployed military and security commitments. Even on China, despite using a tougher rhetoric than the Obama administration can afford, the Republicans are not offering any alternatives to the current engagement policies. The Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney's foreign-policy program states, for example, that "while the potential for conflict with an authoritarian China could rise as its power grows, the United States must pursue policies designed to encourage Beijing to embark on a course that makes conflict less likely and continues to allow cooperation with the United States, economic opportunity, and democratic freedom to flourish across East Asia. Mitt Romney will implement a strategy that makes the path of regional hegemony for China far more costly than the alternative path of becoming a responsible partner in the international system."⁴

Continuity and Change

The debate on the Obama administration's regional initiatives is useful but tends to lean to one or the other extreme, such as "there is nothing new in it" or "it is all about China." The reality is more balanced than the rhetoric. Much of the pivot to the Asia-Pacific is a continuation and expansion of policies already undertaken by previous administrations, as well as earlier in Obama's term. At the same time, the shift to the Asia-Pacific has new features.

As part of a plan to expand the US presence in the southwestern Pacific and make it more flexible, the Obama administration has announced new deployments or rotations of troops and equip-

⁴ Fact Sheet: Mitt Romney's Strategy to Ensure an American Century, (October 7, 2011), <http://www.mittromney.com/blogs/mitts-view/2011/10/fact-sheet-mitt-romneys-strategy-ensure-american-century>.

ment to Australia and Singapore. US officials have also pledged that planned and future reductions in defense spending will not come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific. Additionally, underlying the pivot is a broader geographic vision of the Asia-Pacific region that includes the Indian Ocean and many of its coastal states.

In sum, the Obama administration's increased emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region appears to have been prompted by four major developments:

- Growing economic importance of the Asia-Pacific region, 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 United States' ability to project power in the region;
- The winding down of US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan;
- Efforts to cut the US federal government's budget, particularly the defense budget, which threaten to create a perception in Asia that the US commitment to the region will wane.⁵

Six Lines of Action

One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will be to lock in a substantially increased investment, diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise, in the Asia-Pacific region. With this in mind, the Obama administration has announced six key lines of action: strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening working relationships with emerging powers, including China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.⁶

⁵ Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "Rebalancing" Toward Asia, *Congressional Research Service* (March 28, 2012), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>.

⁶ "America's Pacific Century" Op-Ed, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, *Foreign Policy Magazine* (October 11, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/10/175215.htm>.

Strengthening Bilateral Security Alliances

America's treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand will remain the fulcrum for its strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific. The alliances have leveraged the United States' regional presence and leadership, but need to be updated for a changing world. In this effort, the Obama administration is guided by three core principles: maintain political consensus on the core objectives of the alliances, ensure that the alliances are nimble and adaptive so they can successfully address new challenges and seize new opportunities, and guarantee that the defense capabilities and communications infrastructure of the alliances are operationally and materially capable of deterring provocation from the full spectrum of state and non-state actors.

The United States and Japan have agreed to a new arrangement, including a contribution from the Japanese government of more than \$5 billion, to ensure the continued, enduring presence of American forces in Japan, while expanding joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities to deter and react quickly to regional security challenges, as well as information sharing to address cyber threats. The most acute problem in US-Japan relations is in Okinawa, which hosts 80 percent of the US military facilities in Japan. Efforts by the US and Japanese governments to reduce that footprint have been problematic and are in the process of difficult negotiations.

The United States and the Republic of Korea have agreed on a plan to ensure the successful transition of operational control to Seoul during wartime and have ensured a successful passage of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement. The United States welcomes South Korea's growing regional and international role and the ROK government's efforts to realize the "Global Korea" vision of expanding its global reach to be commensurate with its economic status. Washington and Seoul continue to hold regular joint military exercises to enhance extended deterrence, interoperability, and the readiness of alliance forces. In budgetary terms, the number of US troops sustained both in Japan and Korea, may, over time, prove to be more of a drain on US flexibility. In the case

of South Korea, there have been concerns in the United States about the high cost of measures to move US military units to more defensible facilities away from the demilitarized zone.

The alliance with Australia has been evolving from a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one. Washington and Canberra closely consult with each other on key regional issues and ways to strengthen the regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific. They are also considering an increased combined naval presence and capabilities to respond more readily to humanitarian disasters; improved Indian Ocean facilities and expanded training exercises for amphibious and land operations. Within Australia itself, there is a vigorous debate on increased military cooperation with the United States, and particularly on the deployment of 2,500 US Marines in Australia. The critics believe that the US Marines' deployment decision will have deep consequences for Australia's relations with China, and that, in Washington and in Beijing, this will be seen as Australia aligning itself with an American strategy to contain China.

Alliances with the Philippines and Thailand are also being enhanced, but pose more serious challenges. Washington is increasing the number of ship visits to the Philippines, assisting Manila in naval modernization and working to ensure the successful training of Filipino counterterrorism forces. In Thailand, America's oldest treaty partner in Asia, the two countries are working to establish a hub of regional humanitarian and disaster relief efforts.

The United States could be drawn into a China-Philippines conflict because of its 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines. American officials insist that Washington does not take sides in the territorial dispute in the South China Sea and refuse to comment on how the United States might respond to Chinese aggression in contested waters. An apparent gap exists between American views of US obligations and Manila's expectations. Senior Filipino politicians publicly criticized the United States over its "silence" on the Scarborough Shoal standoff between Philippine Navy and Chinese fishing vessels on April 8, 2012.

The political instability in Thailand and diverging strategic priorities have contributed to some degree of drift in the overall US-Thailand relationship. Although the alliance remains central to Thailand's foreign policy, and the United States reiterates the strategic value of Thailand's military facilities, observers on both sides point to unease. The Obama administration's emphasis on building stronger relations with Indonesia signals to some Thai observers that Thailand is being displaced as the chief US partner in the region. Differing threat perceptions about China, and Thailand's increased military cooperation with Beijing, also contribute to a sense that the alliance, while institutionally sound, suffers from a lack of strategic alignment.⁷

Overall, the "hub-and-spoke" alliance structure has served the United States and its allies well for the past six decades. Yet the transnational nature of current Asia-Pacific security challenges highlights the limitations of bilateral US-ally relationships to handle regional security threats, particularly when relations between the allies are far from smooth. This is why the United States is promoting unilateral and multilateral networking between the allies. Some commentators are even proposing an informal Alliance Caucus that could address concerns relevant not just to the United States and its allies, but to the region as a whole.⁸

Deepening Working Relationships with Emerging Powers

America's outreach to China, India, Indonesia, Singapore, New Zealand, Malaysia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Brunei, and the Pacific Island countries is all part of a broader effort to ensure a more comprehensive approach to American strategy and engagement in the region. Increased interactions with India and Indonesia are particularly notable, given the rapidly rising regional influence of the two nations.

⁷ Thailand: Background and US Relations, Congressional Research Service (February 8, 2012), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32593.pdf>.

⁸ See, for example, Nicole Forrester, "Time for an Alliance Caucus," *PacNet*, (March 27, 2012), no. 20, <http://csis.org/publication/pacnet-21-time-alliance-caucus>.

The Obama administration has expanded its bilateral partnerships with India, actively supports India's Look East efforts, and has outlined a new vision for a more economically integrated and politically stable South and Central Asia with India as a linchpin. In recent years, the United States and India have significantly broadened their defense cooperation, as demonstrated by a robust engagement in bilateral dialogues, military exercises, and personnel exchanges, as well as nearly \$9 billion in defense trade since 2008. There is, however, strong feeling in Washington that India has made no corresponding gesture in return for the big vision that presidents Obama and Bush have offered the Indian leadership and that India is still quite ambiguous about the priority it places on its future with the United States. India is expected to be more supportive on difficult issues, such as Iran, and also on Afghanistan, where key differences seem to have emerged between the United States and India regarding the political endgame.⁹

The United States and Indonesia have resumed joint training of Indonesian special forces and signed a number of agreements on health, educational exchanges, science and technology, and defense. Indonesia's adoption of a new democratic foreign policy plank creates opportunities for the US and Indonesia to cooperate on democracy promotion efforts. However, the two countries are still caught up in bureaucratic impediments, lingering historical suspicions, and gaps in understanding each other's perspectives and interests.¹⁰ Human rights activists voice worries about alleged abuses by Kopassus, particularly in West Papua, and challenge Washington's assertion that the special forces have undergone, as the new Pacific Command Commander Admiral Samuel Locklear put it, a "near-complete transformation."¹¹

⁹ R. Nicholas Burns, "India Lets U.S. Down on Iran," *Indian Defence*, February 20, 2012), <http://www.indiandefence.com/forums/f5/india-lets-u-s-down-iran-14968>.

¹⁰ Ann Marie Murphy, "Democratization and Indonesian Foreign Policy: Implications for the United States," *Asia Policy* 13 (January 2012), <http://nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=573>.

¹¹ Nomination of Admiral Samuel J. Locklear to be Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate (February 9, 2012), <http://armed-services.senate.gov/Transcripts/2012/02%20February/12-01%20-%202-9-12.pdf>.

Engaging with Regional Multilateral Institutions

One of the most visible changes in the United States' regional policies has been the Obama administration's decision to fully engage the region's multilateral institutions as a way of supplementing, but not supplanting, America's important bilateral ties. The United States has opened a new US mission to ASEAN in Jakarta and signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN. The United States joined the East Asia Summit, and president Obama participated in its November 2011 meeting. While Washington is displaying more patience with the regional pace of regionalism, it continues to focus on developing a more results-oriented agenda, especially in efforts to address disputes in the South China Sea. The United States considers APEC the Asia-Pacific's premier regional economic institution, which has become even more important in terms of helping expand US exports and create and support high-quality jobs in the United States.

At the same time, the increased interest in regional multilateralism poses new challenges for the United States in terms of prioritizing its level of participation in these organizations, as well as allaying emerging fears that the major powers are likely to undermine the ASEAN's current central role in regional institution building. The United States' absence in some of the regional groupings and organizations, such as ASEAN+3 (APT) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, is seen by some as potentially problematic and marginalizing the United States' role in time.

Expanding Trade and Investment

Economics and trade are both causes of and instruments for the pivot toward the Asia-Pacific. The region plays a crucial role in president Obama's National Export Initiative. Four of the ten emerging export markets targeted in the 2011 National Export Strategy, particularly China, Indonesia, India, and Vietnam, are part of the Asia-Pacific region. In 2011, American exports to the Pacific Rim totaled \$320 billion, supporting 850,000 American jobs.

The United States' regional trade policy combines promotion of bilateral free agreements with participation in the multilateral Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which brings together economies from across the Pacific, developed and developing alike, into a single trading community. The United States' leadership role in TPP is an important element of its reassurance of being a major force in the region's economic and geopolitical dynamics.

The negotiation process for the TPP is, however, facing serious challenges, with the United States encountering resistance to its proposals regarding intellectual property rights and investor-state disputes. Some of the countries are pushing the United States to offer greater access to US markets, particularly agricultural markets, such as dairy products and sugar. It is also unclear what impact the TPP will have on US interest and participation in APEC. It appears that the administration regards the former as the lead entity, with the latter a forum for exploring topics that traditionally have not been part of trade agreements.¹²

One of the most glaring things about TPP is that it does not include China, Asia's biggest trading nation. That could be, as US officials say, because China, with its state-owned enterprises, piratical tendencies and questionable currency policy, is not yet ready to join such a high-level agreement. The critics, however, counter-argue that Vietnam, hardly a paragon of free-market capitalism, is one of nine negotiating countries. They assert that America's design for Asian trade is inspired by the goal of containing China, and the TPP template effectively excludes its membership.¹³

Forging a Broad-based Military Presence

Despite the reductions in planned levels of US defense spending, the United States intends to maintain and strengthen its military presence in the Asia-Pacific. This element of the pivot to Asia has understandably been the most controversial. China and many re-

¹² Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "Rebalancing" Toward Asia, *Congressional Research Service* (March 28, 2012), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>.

¹³ Jagdish Bhagwati, "America's Threat to Trans-Pacific Trade," *Project-Syndicate* (December 30, 2011), <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/america-s-threat-to-trans-pacific-trade>.

gional experts see it as primarily driven by the rise of China's military power. Washington's interpretation of the new defense strategy is much broader. It is argued, for example, that the importance of US economic interests in the Asia-Pacific region has significant security and military implications. With an increasing volume of US exports and imports flowing in and out of the region, it has become critical that the United States maintain free navigation from the Arabian Sea across to the eastern edge of the Pacific Ocean.

The US defense posture in Asia is shifting to one that is more geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable. For example:

- More geographically distributed in the Asia-Pacific means to enhance US presence throughout the region by capitalizing on opportunities in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to help better protect sea lines of communication.
- Operationally resilient means that the US has an advantage across a range of contingencies through greater hardening, redundancy, responsiveness, and dispersal of capabilities as well as by having more flexible defense agreements and more predictable and sustainable basing arrangements that enable greater protection of military capabilities.
- Political sustainability means ensuring that the US presence is acceptable to host nations and local populations in the region over the long term.¹⁴

Advancing Democracy and Human Rights

This line of action is the last on the list of priorities but has been one of the most effective so far. Publicly, the Obama administration has been assuring the region that, even more than America's military might or the size of its economy, the United States' most potent asset is its "steadfast support for democracy and human rights." However, the current US administration's more

¹⁴ Written Statement of R. Michael Schiffer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, East Asia, Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness (15 March 2011), <http://www.dod.mil/dodge/olc/docs/test/Schiffer03152011.pdf>.

pragmatic and less ideological international and regional stance, compared to the previous US administration's, has toned down Washington's rhetoric in support of democracy and human rights. The changed style also confirms that the United States does not want to complicate its bilateral relations with China, a notorious violator of human rights. At the same time, as the recent, unprecedented developments in Burma indicate, a more subtle support of democracy and human rights in conjunction with geopolitical calculations, such as leveraging the Burmese military junta's fear of overdependence on China, as well as improved consultations with regional actors, such as ASEAN, can be much more effective in promoting democracy and human rights. While managing democratic aspirations in Burma and in the region broadly will continue to present challenges to current and future US administrations, there are already signs of a possible "domino effect" of Burma's opening. The Vietnamese leadership, for example, seems to be disturbed by developments in Burma. With Burma looking less and less like a police state, Hanoi fears unwanted scrutiny. If Burma improves on human rights and gets rewarded, Vietnam would need to meet the same standards," notes Carl Thayer, a Vietnam expert at the Australian Defense Force Academy.¹⁵

Conclusion

The relationship between rhetoric and action is always complex and unpredictable. In the case of Burma, it has clearly demonstrated the advantage of region-sensitive actions over ideological inflexibility. The future will show how many of the Obama administration's stated Asian goals will become a reality and how many will be remembered as mostly rhetorical.

¹⁵ Dustin Roasa, "The 'Terrible Tiger,'" *Foreign Policy* (April 17, 2012), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/17/the_terrible_tiger#.T5DESdPssm0.email.