Assessing the US "Pivot" to Asia

There has been much commentary since President Obama's tour of the Asia-Pacific region in November 2011 of a US "return," strategic "pivot," or "rebalancing" to Asia.[1] Much of this commentary comes from Asian and European commentators—Asians have been generally welcoming, while many Europeans express fears that the new strategic emphasis will downgrade the traditional importance of transatlantic ties. Despite widespread endorsement of the strategic shift within Asia, China has been notably critical of the new policy—as virtually all Chinese strategists and pundits see the initiative as thinly veiled "containment" of China. While there has been much commentary abroad, there has been surprisingly less in US media, academic, think-tank, or government circles. Much of the domestic commentary has been critical of the use of the term *pivot* for signaling a downgrading of other regions (notably Southwest Asia, the Middle East, and Europe) in US strategic priorities—and this criticism put the Obama administration on the defensive. The administration tried to recast the new initiative as a rebalancing without "abandoning" long-standing commitments elsewhere in the world. This essay goes beyond this reactive commentary, taking stock of Washington's new strategic initiative by viewing it historically, describing its different components, and assessing the positive possibilities and potential pitfalls.

Is the Policy Really New?

The new Asia pivot is both new and not new. That is, the Asia-Pacific region has long been a high priority for the United States, but not always the *highest* priority.

On the one hand, with the new so-called pivot, the United States *has* embarked on a qualitatively new strategic prioritization by emphasizing and increasing resources devoted to diplomacy, commerce, and security in the Asia-Pacific region. The Obama administration is the first administration ever to explicitly elevate Asia to the primary global regional strategic priority. This *is new* for the United States, which has long prioritized its transatlantic ties, the Middle East, or previously, Latin America. Even at the height of the Vietnam War and the Cold War containment of China during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, Washington still maintained its overall priority on the western front—the Cold War confrontation in Europe versus the Soviet Union.[2] Since

2001, the main strategic orientation during the "war(s) on terrorism" has been Southwest Asia. The Middle East has also been a long-standing strategic priority for the United States.

On the other hand, it is important to note that what we are witnessing is a *relative* shift, not a fundamental one. This is because of the well-established involvement of the United States in Asia that dates back many decades, indeed centuries. The United States has been a Pacific power since the turn of the last century—in the wake of the Spanish-American War of 1898 and Secretary of State John Hay's "Open Door Notes" of 1899–1900. Even more than a century before, with the sailing of the clipper ship *Empress of China* in 1784 from New York to Guangzhou, China, the United States established itself as a major commercial actor in the region. Thereafter, during the nineteenth century, a US diplomatic, cultural, and religious (missionary) presence was established in East Asia. This, in turn, triggered growing Asian immigration to the United States.

Since then, the United States has long been an Asia-Pacific nation by virtue of geography, ethnicity, commerce, culture, diplomacy, and security engagements. Its post–Korean War involvement in the Asia-Pacific region has been both deep and sustained. It is anchored on five enduring bilateral alliances, a series of strong strategic partnerships, intensive bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, deep cultural ties, enormous "soft power," and a growing Asian-American population. Thus, if viewed historically, the pivot is not so new—as US ties to, and roots in, the region run deep. Consider some of these elements in a more contemporary context.

Economic Interests

Asia is the United States' most important economic partner and has been for more than three decades. The region surpassed Europe as our leading trade partner in 1977. Today the United States has more than twice as much trade with Asia as with Europe. In 2012, US trade with Asia totaled a stunning $14.2 trillion.[3] Since 2000, Asia has become our largest source of imports and second largest export market (outside North America). By 2010, Asia accounted for 32.2 percent of US total merchandise trade worldwide. US exports to Asia totaled $457.2 billion in 2012. Today, the United States trades more with South Korea than with Germany, more with Singapore than with France, and more with Japan than with the United Kingdom, Germany, and France combined. China and Japan are the second and third largest trade partners for the United States. Asia is also our most important export market—nine of

the United States' top 20 national export markets are now in Asia, and approximately one-third of all US overseas sales go to Asia. Growth in exports to China has been the fastest worldwide for the past five years. If East Asia continues to post only 5.5 percent growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), US exports to Asia are estimated to contribute 5 percent to US GDP. According to US government statistics, this translates into 4.6 million jobs domestically per annum.

The flipside of this, of course, is the huge trade *deficits* the United States accumulates with the region—particularly with China ($282 billion in 2011 alone). Overall, the United States imported $966.4 billion from Asia in 2012, leaving a whopping $509.2 billion trade deficit.[4]

US economic and commercial ties to the Asia-Pacific region are growing deeper by the day. Bilateral free trade areas (FTA) and the prospect of the multinational Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) will bind the United States even more deeply with partner economies in the region (currently, 11 nations are negotiating to bring the TPP into force).

Cultural Interests

We should also note the significant cultural impact across Asia. US culture—films, sports, authors, musicians, fashion, dance, innovation, and so forth—has long attracted Asian interest. One recent indication of US impact in Asia is the 2008 Chicago Council on Global Affairs unprecedented survey of "soft power in Asia."[5] The council developed a complex set of 70+ metrics to measure a soft power index in five categories. Many interesting findings emerged from this survey—conducted in the United States, South Korea, Japan, China, Indonesia, and Vietnam—but one of the most important concerned the overall strength of US soft power in the region (see table below).

Relative soft power in Asia (2008)

Survey Countries	United States soft power	China soft power	Japan soft power	South Korea soft power
United States	—	.47	.67	.49
China	.71	—	.62	.65
Japan	.69	.51	—	.56
South Korea	.72	.55	.65	—
Indonesia	.72	.70	.72	.63
Vietnam	.76	.74	.79	.73

Reprinted from Chicago Council on Global Affairs, ***Soft Power in Asia: Results of a 2008 Multinational Survey of Public Opinion.***

Of course, a long-standing and key element of US cultural engagement with Asia has been higher education, with US efforts spanning a century to build modern universities, medical, and other professional schools. Even more important, particularly in the post–World War II era, has been US university training of generations of Asians in a wide variety of fields, many of whom have become private and public sector leaders in their native countries. In the 2011–12 academic year, 489,970 Asian students were enrolled in US universities. The People's Republic of China led the way with 194,029, followed by 100,270 Indian students and 72,295 South Koreans.[6] US educators also fan out across Asia, teaching in a wide range of Asian universities and vocational schools. The Fulbright Program remains the flagship sponsor, sending US professors and students to Asia and bringing Asians to the United States to teach and study.[7]

One can offer many other examples of US cultural and intellectual engagement with Asia (not the least of which is film, literature, arts, and sports). But this is not to say all has been positive, as a distinct paternalism and cultural arrogance has sometimes been apparent on the part of Americans in Asia. On the whole, the United States is deeply and positively culturally engaged in Asia.

Diplomacy

Generally speaking, despite the importance of Asia to the United States, our diplomatic attention to the region has often been highly episodic, sometimes neglectful, and not always deeply engaged—particularly in Southeast Asia. US presidents have been infrequent visitors to Asia, while cabinet secretaries have been slightly more engaged but not as regularly with their counterparts as they could or should be. Before President Obama took office, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders and publics complained about the relative lack of interest from Washington. But the Obama administration has made this a high priority and thus alleviated some of the sense of neglect. The administration has tried hard to reverse this perception. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was, by far, the best traveled ever in the region, having visited virtually every country across the vast Asia-Pacific. Significantly, Secretary Clinton took her first trip abroad to Asia and returned more than a dozen times in four years. This included resuming regular and symbolically important attendance by the secretary of state at the ASEAN Regional Forum Annual Meeting.

President Obama himself has made Asia *the top* US foreign policy priority. As he said in his speech unveiling the pivot to the Australian

Parliament on 17 November 2011, "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." President Obama has visited the region at least annually since taking office. This includes the first-ever attendance by a US president at the East Asian Summit and the ASEAN leaders meeting, hosting the 17th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders meeting, and paying individual visits to Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, Indonesia, Singapore, and India. At a more local level, US embassies and diplomats throughout the region are—after a long dormancy—beginning to display a new proactivity, even if the embassies themselves remain fortresses.

Secretary Clinton described this new diplomatic engagement as "forward deployed diplomacy." In a key *Foreign Policy* magazine article, she outlined six elements of this regional diplomacy:

- strengthening bilateral security alliances;
- deepening working relationships with emerging powers, including China;
- engaging regional multilateral institutions;
- expanding trade and investment;
- forging a broad-based military presence; and
- advancing democracy and human rights.[8]

We have seen the Obama administration work to strengthen bilateral relations with just about every country in the region since entering office. Nations long neglected by Washington—like New Zealand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and small Pacific island states—have received high-ranking US official visits. Perhaps the most noteworthy is Burma (Myanmar), where the administration has fundamentally shifted from a policy of isolation to engagement.

Regional powers India and China have also received sustained US diplomatic attention. There is literally no country in the world with which the US government and society is more deeply engaged than the People's Republic of China. Reflecting this, the United States and China maintain more than 60 annual official dialogue mechanisms, while the US Embassy in Beijing now has the largest staff in the world—1,400. Building comprehensive and deep relations with India has also become a significant priority for the United States. President Obama has described the US relationship with India as a "defining partnership of the 21st

century." Washington and New Delhi are now engaged in deepening and expanding a variety of bilateral, regional, and global interactions.

At the same time, an intensification of US engagement in multilateral diplomacy throughout the Asia-Pacific region is also apparent. By signing and acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the United States is now a full participant in the East Asian Summit, and we have witnessed a new surge of US participation in the "spaghetti bowl" of regional intergovernmental and Track II organizations. Previously, Washington was frequently (and appropriately) criticized for "not showing up" at regional multilateral and "minilateral" forums—but the Obama administration has tried to reverse this perception.

While the new thrust of US diplomacy in the region is to be welcomed, it cannot be taken for granted. It requires constant attention, diplomats knowledgeable of regional and national dynamics, and sustained allocation of resources. It also requires subtlety—something at which US diplomacy has not always excelled. Because Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and Austral-Asia all have very different dynamics, ethnicities, subregional institutions, traditions, and relations with each other, different parts of the region require nuanced and differentiated policies.

One of the big stories of recent years in Asian international relations is the increasing *integration* across and among these five subregions. They used to act quite autonomously, but no longer. Today, they are increasingly tied together via an intricate web of interstate and substate relations.[9] Despite these increasing intraregional interactions, Asia remains remarkably diverse in all respects—politically, economically, religiously, ethnically, culturally, and militarily. To be effective in the years ahead, US diplomacy must both grasp the integrative forces—and become part of them—as well as appreciate and respect intraregional differences.

Security Engagement

Finally, let us consider the security dimension of US engagement with the region. It may seem obvious or even trite, but maintaining regional security and stability is absolutely fundamental to advancing the totality of US interests in the region—economic, cultural, and diplomatic—as well as advancing the broader public goods of regional interactions. As Joseph Nye astutely observed, the US contribution to regional security is the "oxygen" that permits the region to "breathe" and thrive. Without it, quite simply, the Asia-Pacific would very likely not have developed so dramatically over the past quarter century.

Providing security and stability has at least four dimensions:

1. preventing the rise of a regional hegemon hostile to US interests;
2. preventing major power rivalry and polarization of the region;
3. preventing internal political-socioeconomic crises from spilling outside national borders, thus causing destabilizing effects in the region; and
4. enabling working relationships with others to jointly manage an increasing range of transnational nontraditional security challenges.

In each of these areas, the United States maintains a "hub-and-spoke" regional security architecture that includes at least five levels of security:

1. A unilateral, forward-deployed military presence including approximately 325,000 military and civilian personnel in the Pacific theater. The Pacific Fleet alone includes six aircraft carrier battle groups (CVBG), approximately 180 ships and submarines, 1,500 aircraft, and 100,000 personnel. The US military stations 16,000 personnel at sea, 40,000 in Japan, 28,500 in South Korea, 500 (rotationally) in the Philippines, 4,500 in Guam (to grow to 9,000), and 250 Marines in Australia (to grow to 2,500). US forces are forward deployed in Hawaii, Guam, the Mariana Islands, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Kyrgyzstan. Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated the United States will now keep 60 percent of its naval assets in Asia.
2. Five long-standing bilateral alliances with Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia.
3. Nonallied but strong "security partnerships" with Singapore, New Zealand,[10] and India (and increasingly with Malaysia, Mongolia, and Vietnam).
4. Participation in a wide range of multilateral security arrangements, multinational exercises, intelligence sharing, and professional military education (such as IMET and the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies).
5. Bilateral security and military exchanges with countries that are neither allies nor strategic partners, such as the People's Republic of China.

Through these means, the United States contributes to a robust set of security engagements throughout the region. Moreover, the US Pacific Command (PACOM) maintains a strong forward presence and wide range of interregional cooperative programs it calls "presence with a purpose."[11] Its five specific missions are somewhat duplicative of those above and include (1) strengthening advancing alliances and partnerships, (2) maturing the US-China military relationship, (3) developing the US-India strategic partnership, (4) remaining prepared to respond to a Korean Peninsula contingency, and (5) countering transnational threats.

Meeting these challenges and fulfilling these missions will require resources and sustained effort. Although we can expect US defense spending to contract over the coming years, President Obama himself has made it clear that cuts will not come from the Asia-Pacific theatre, pointing out in his address to the Australian Parliament:

> So, here is what this region should know. As we end today's wars, I have directed my national security team to make our presence and mission in the Asia-Pacific a top priority. As a result, reductions in U.S. defense spending will not—I repeat, will not—come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific. My guidance is clear.[12]

Thus, we see a clear continued US commitment to undergird the security architecture in the region. However, it is important to emphasize that this robust and multifaceted set of security commitments should not be viewed in isolation. They are important, but they are only part of the more comprehensive economic, cultural, and diplomatic engagement the United States has with Asia.

Concluding Perspectives

The pivot—or rebalancing—is *not* a new policy; it is a deepening and broadening of previous commitments. Part of this broadening includes a geographic expansion of sorts—by including India and the Indian Ocean in the broader Asia initiative. Thus, it is not just an East Asia initiative: US-India relations are growing very robustly and positively even though the five bilateral alliances remain the bedrock of US relations in the region. Engagement of China also continues as a central element in US strategy and diplomacy.

Despite the continuation and deepening of these previous commitments, the new pivot policy nonetheless *does* illustrate a new level of commitment—and it also indicates a new level of strategy. The resources devoted to the Asia-Pacific are being increased—both absolutely and relatively vis-à-vis other regions of the world, with Southeast Asia and the

South Pacific receiving new attention. It is also very important to recognize that the new pivot policy is *not* being unilaterally thrust upon Asian nations by the United States—quite the contrary. Although the Obama administration began planning the reorientation as soon as it entered office in 2009, with an eye toward winding down the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was the 2009–10 "year of assertiveness" by China that triggered many Asian states to grow sharply concerned about Beijing and therefore ask Washington to increase its presence and attention to the region. Thus, to the extent China is an element of focus in the pivot strategy (and it is), Beijing's own assertive behavior is the cause.

The new strategic reorientation to the Asia-Pacific should work well as long as the United States does several things:

- Allocates sustained resources necessary to the effort;
- Maintains sustained diplomatic attention to the effort;
- Balances bilateral ties with multilateral ones;
- Does not premise the policy on countering China (although, to be sure, "balancing" China—which is different from "containing" China) and continues to engage the PRC in a comprehensive fashion. No Asian nation wishes to be drawn into an anti-China coalition or be put in the position of "choosing" between Washington and Beijing. The pivot must, therefore, be an inclusive effort that tries to involve and integrate China into the regional order. Any US regional policy premised *against* China will fail.

As long as the United States takes care of these points, it should achieve a successful strategy which will work not only to its own benefit, but also the broad stability, security, and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region.

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Notes

1. All three of these terms have been used to describe the new (re)prioritization in US foreign and national security policy.

2. See Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, ed., *The Cold War in East Asia, 1945–1991* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

3. "2012: U.S. Trade in Goods with Asia," http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0016.html.

4. Ibid.

5. Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Soft Power in Asia: Results of a 2008 Multinational Survey of Public Opinion*, http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS_Topline%20Reports/Asia%20Soft%20Power%202008/Chicago%20Council%20Soft%20Power%20Report-%20Final%206-11-08.pdf.

6. Institute for International Education, *Open Doors 2011–2012*, http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fact-Sheets-by-Region/2012.

7. The author spent the 2009–10 academic year as a Senior Fulbright Research Scholar in China.

8. Hillary Rodham Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011.

9. See David Shambaugh, "International Relations in Asia: The Two-Level Game," in *International Relations of Asia*, eds. Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

10. Technically New Zealand and the United States remain members of ANZUS, but the military component of this alliance has been attenuated since 1976.

11. See http://www.pacom.mil/about-uspacom/presence-with-a-purpose/index.shtml.

12. The White House, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament," 17 November 2011.