

A reality check in Asia By Brad Glosserman

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The hearts of Asia-Pacific strategists are all a flutter. The desire of Japan's new government to "rebalance" its foreign policy between East and West and the tensions between Tokyo and Washington that have followed in its wake are seen as portents of a shift in the regional balance of power. Propelled by a global recession that is widely seen as "made in the USA" and the striking contrast posed by China's resilience and rising confidence, there is a growing sense that we are witnesses to the first stages in a fundamental transition in the way the world works. This is a compelling portrait – but it is simplistic and the implications that many draw from the changes underway are way overdrawn. This is crude zero-sum thinking, and it doesn't capture the dynamics of contemporary Asia.

The case for change is straightforward. The Obama administration talks about a new commitment to Asia, but it is distracted by wars elsewhere and absorbed by bruising political fights at home. Its capacity for action is limited by rising debt and its dependence on other nations whose interests often differ from those of the U.S. or who prefer to see Washington humbled, if not humiliated, by foreign adversaries. The chief beneficiary of these constraints is China, which is eager to resume its place of prominence in Asia and whose economic dynamism has put itself at the very heart of a more deeply integrated regional order. China's appeal is increasing – and when seduction doesn't work, Beijing has shown little compunction about playing hardball to get its way.

The canary in this coalmine is Tokyo. New Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio has said that he seeks to "rebalance" relations with its ally and forge a new relationship with Asia as a whole and China in particular. The "meaning" of this shift is reputedly evident in rising tensions with Washington triggered by delays in the planned move of the Marine Air Station at Futenma to northern Okinawa, which is seen as part of a more general devaluing of the alliance as a whole. The visit of Democratic Party of Japan kingpin Ozawa Ichiro to Beijing with several hundred businessmen and politicians in tow and Ozawa's push to get visiting Chinese Vice President (and heir apparent) Xi Jinping a meeting with the emperor in Tokyo on short notice – a violation of protocol – are the pointed counterpoints to growing antagonism with Washington. Hatoyama's call for an East Asian community that excludes the U.S. is the final piece of evidence in the case for a shift in the global balance of power – advantage Beijing!

Not exactly. Yes, the world is changing. Asia is assuming a more prominent role in the global economy. Thus far, its political influence has lagged and the desire to fix that is

driving many – but not all – policy decisions in regional capitals. The creation of an East Asia Community is one expression of that desire. Yes, China is playing and will play a key role in that process and in any resulting community. And yes, Japan is debating its place in the region and the world, and that debate has taken on new intensity in the wake of changes since the end of the Cold War.

But once again, that isn't the whole story. China is rising, but there are real limits to its influence, strength, and allure. Economic growth is creating unprecedented strains in society and it isn't clear how the political system will cope – much less deliver on expectations of rising prosperity. China is a big presence in the region, but Asian governments have little faith or confidence in Beijing. Beijing is a stalwart defender of the principle of noninterference in domestic affairs, but it has shown little inclination to provide the international public goods – security and stability – that have made Asian prosperity possible.

Japan is debating national identity – but that discussion has been going on since the Meiji Restoration. Governments in Tokyo have always been tugged between East and West and compromises have been made, modified, and discarded since the country discarded the isolationism of the shogun era. That is exactly what any country should do as internal and external circumstances change. And while rapprochement between Tokyo and Beijing is a good thing – the region's two leading powers should be on good terms and no regional community is possible without some form of reconciliation– there are fundamental conflicts of interest, values, and perspective that limit those countries' room for diplomatic maneuver. It is telling that despite the "new look" in Tokyo, the two countries had another one of their periodic spats over disputed territory in the East China Sea earlier this year.

Similarly, Japan's call for respect and equality in the U.S.-Japan relationship is not new. Every Tokyo government has chafed at being the "junior partner" – what ally doesn't? Significantly, public support in Japan for the alliance is at historically high levels.

And this DPJ government, like other governments in the region, looks to the U.S. to provide regional security and stability. Washington's power may be diminished, but it remains an integral part of the Asian order. It provides international public goods to the Asia Pacific. It is the trusted "great power" in the region. Washington remains a key partner as Asia -- and the world -- undergoes a transformative period. We must prepare for those transitions, but we shouldn't be scared of them.