



The “Obama Doctrine” and the Pivot by Ralph A. Cossa

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President Obama’s commencement address at West Point on May 28 appears to have been intended to send Americans and the international community a number of important messages. One of them was NOT that the US commitment to the Asia “pivot” or “rebalance” was waning. For some, especially in Asia, the failure to mention this much-touted Asia policy has kindled fears that it is being reconsidered, if not abandoned. Those who are reading it that way seem to be missing a few major points, although the administration must share the blame for the misinterpretation.

Let me say at the onset that as an Asia security wonk, I would have much preferred that the president had mentioned the Asia rebalance at least once in passing, if for no other reason than to avoid the silly ensuing debate about what its absence signifies. “Obama quiet on Asia ‘pivot,’” cried a headline in the *Bangkok Post*, providing a case in point. Yes, the pivot was not mentioned; but he did state that “regional aggression that goes unchecked – in southern Ukraine, the South China Sea, or anywhere else in the world – will ultimately impact our allies, and could draw in our military.” While putting Ukraine and the South China Sea in the same sentence seems like overkill, it certainly does not signal neglect or a downplaying of the challenges we face in Asia.

To conclude that Obama’s failure to mention the pivot reflects a lack of commitment to the region is nonsense. He did not just take a full week of his precious time traveling to Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and the Philippines to reinforce a policy that he had planned to downplay or abandon. And his very pointed references to China, to the South China Sea, and even to the necessity of the US finally ratifying the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) all demonstrate that the Obama administration’s commitment to Asia remains alive and well, as did his inclusion of defense of allies as a US “core interest”: “the United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it - when our people are threatened; when our livelihood is at stake; or when the security of our allies is in danger.” The only place where the security of our allies is threatened today is in Asia, on the Korean Peninsula, and in the East and South China Seas.

The real source of confusion regarding the president’s West Point speech was that, administration hype notwithstanding, this was not really a “major foreign policy address” to “outline a broad vision for America’s role in the world” or “to outline top national security goals.” As was appropriate to the immediate audience to which it was delivered, the address was primarily about military strategy, and more specifically about the use of military force; it was

not a broader statement of US foreign policy, which has important political and economic as well as military dimensions. There was no reference to APEC or the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but also no references to the Trans-Atlantic Free Trade Agreement or any other trade matters; other than a brief reference to support for democracy, human rights, and free and open economies, the speech was primarily about how best to combat challenges to US security.

In the most simplified terms, it was Obama’s version of the “Powell Doctrine,” in which then-General and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell famously laid out a list of questions that should be answered affirmatively before the US uses military force. These questions helped guide the George H.W. Bush administration as it prepared for the use of force to push the Iraqis out of Kuwait. Regrettably, his son ignored a number of them in returning to Iraq a decade or so later, creating a situation that overextended the US military, the US economy, and US credibility or “soft power”; i.e., the “costly mistakes,” at least from Obama’s perspective, that “came not from our restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventures – without thinking through the consequences; without building international support and legitimacy for our action, or leveling with the American people about the sacrifice required.”

The new “Obama Doctrine,” not unlike Powell’s, cautions against the use of force as the first or best alternative: “US military action cannot be the only – or even primary – component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail.” Recall one of Powell’s questions: “Have all other non-violent policy means been fully exhausted?” Not to overplay the similarity, Powell also asked: “Do we have genuine broad international support?” Obama takes this one step further, arguing that in instances when the use of force is necessary, “we should not go it alone. Instead, we must mobilize allies and partners to take collective action.... We must do so because collective action in these circumstances is more likely to succeed, more likely to be sustained, and less likely to lead to costly mistakes.”

There was at least one very good reason for not mentioning the pivot in this address. One major criticism of the pivot is that, while broadcast as a multidimensional approach, it seems too military-centric. Focusing on the pivot or rebalance in the West Point address would have reinforced this concern. One suspects – and I claim no insider knowledge into the thinking of this administration – that there is today greater concern that the rest of the world thinks Washington is too focused on Asia than there is that Asians think Washington is about to abandon them. The address was about America’s willingness to respond to global challenges and about how it should do just that. Asia is clearly a part of this

but singling out Asia would have unnecessarily stressed the military dimension of the pivot.

Obama also addressed head on the issue of “America’s relative decline.” Relative to what? As Obama correctly noted, “by most measures, America has rarely been stronger relative to the rest of the world. Those who argue otherwise – who suggest that America is in decline, or has seen its global leadership slip away – are either misreading history or engaged in partisan politics.” Compared to the height of the Cold War, today there remains no peer competitor to the US, militarily, politically, or economically. Whose economy would you rather have today: America’s or China’s? And whose economic challenges would you rather have to face or try to manage?

A reluctance to use force to settle problems is not a sign of US weakness but a sign of our strength and of our much-maligned soft power. Fareed Zakaria said it best: “What is needed from Washington is not a heroic exertion of American military power but rather a sustained effort to engage with allies, isolate enemies, support free markets and democratic values and push these positive trends forward.... An America that exaggerates threats, overreacts to problems and intervenes unilaterally would produce the very damage to its credibility that people are worried about.”

I would take one exception with President Obama’s message. He asserted, rightly, when discussing Syria that “as President, I made a decision that we should not put American troops into the middle of this increasingly sectarian civil war, and I believe that is the right decision.” Yes, that’s true and Asians in particular would have been distressed by another diversion of US military assets away from their region. But Obama missed a more important point. If it’s true, as he asserted, that US security interests are not directly involved to the degree that the application of military force is thus required, then he should not have established a “red line” in Syria regarding the use of chemical weapons in the first place. It was his failure to back up a red line in general, not the use of force in Syria *per se*, that had, and still has, Asians (and many Americans) concerned. President Obama failed to acknowledge or satisfactorily address this point.

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