

In praise of Obama's pivot to Asia by Rosemary Foot

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Intemperate remarks by Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, stating that he is on the verge of a "separation" from the United States, together with the failure of the executive branch to convince the Congress to ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement have sparked a series of statements reporting that the US "pivot to Asia" is in real trouble. Supposedly, these developments underline that the policy should be seen as a major failure of the Obama presidency.

If we step back for a moment, however, we might conclude that there has been much to praise in the US pivot or "rebalance" to Asia and several reasons to applaud the Obama administration for its attempts to deal with difficult strategic problems at a time of transition in a region that is recognized as the engine of global economic growth. In thinking through these problems, this administration has made some predictable moves. However, more unusually it has tried to be responsive to the central messages coming from Asia-Pacific states, and to focus not simply on the issues that separate it from China but also to attempt to move forward on those that can form some basis for cooperation.

The pivot has three main components associated with it: the political, economic, and military. In terms of diplomatic engagement, officials at the highest levels have spent large amounts of time in the region, particularly in support of the region's multilateral organizations. ASEAN member states and ASEAN-related institutions have received a level of attention that is as unusual as it has been welcome. Increased dialogue with the Chinese government has also taken place with Obama having held 17 or more meetings with Chinese presidents during his period in office.

Economically, the TPP has been successfully negotiated and signed, and attracted the support of very different Asian governments – from Vietnam, to Japan, to Singapore. It is the Congress that is holding up ratification, and the US presidential candidates are also undermining it. In the meantime, the important free trade agreement signed with the Republic of Korea and ratified in 2011 remains in place.

To advance deterrence of a militarily more powerful China and provide reassurance to formal and informal allies, the US is working to improve these allies' maritime domain awareness, enhance joint training, and strengthen access in countries such as Australia and Vietnam.

However, the US has deliberately given prominence to the political and economic dimensions of the rebalance and worked in a measured way to promote its military goals. In this, it is responding to regional states, many of which frequently tell Washington that they do not want to live in a region that is polarized, that China will forever be their important neighbor, and their search for a modus vivendi with Beijing is a constant preoccupation. So too is their emphasis on a stable region to further promote economic development, which for many governments is the source of their political legitimacy.

In response to these perspectives, the US has not trumpeted the results of the Arbitral Ruling on the South China Sea, which conclusively went against China; it has not drawn undue attention to its freedom of navigation operations; it has invited China to participate in its biennial RIMPAC naval exercises; and it has enhanced military-to-military relations with China's armed forces. In addition, it has pointed regularly to those collective, shared-fate issues – such as the Iran deal, the post-conflict situation in Afghanistan, and climate change – where these two singularly important states have been able to work together.

The Obama administration recognizes there is a transition in the Asia-Pacific regional order in train and that for the US to retain its prominent role in that order it must work with the grain of regional opinion and not against it. Not everything has worked out in the way intended, and tensions remain high. We should recognize and applaud any US administration that is as sensitive as this one has been to the complexities involved, however. For now, at least, the issues in dispute are being managed and not exacerbated. We shall be fortunate if whoever comes after President Obama is as attuned as he has been to understanding how influence is best promoted in the context of strategic transition. And the Duterte debacle has a long way to go before we should attribute too much significance to that.

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