

Asia's Real "America Problem"

by Elbridge Colby and Brad Glosserman

Elbridge Colby [elbridgecolby@yahoo.com] is a principal analyst at CNA. Brad Glosserman [brad@pacforum.org] is executive director of Pacific Forum CSIS.

A week of discussions in February with the United States' Northeast Asian allies sent one very important message: there are no doubts about the credibility of the US extended deterrent in that region of the world. Neither North Korea's provocations and fire-breathing rhetoric nor China's recent flexing of its foreign policy muscles has shaken our allies' faith in the US commitment to their defense.

At least, not yet.

While our Japanese and Korean interlocutors signaled confidence in Washington for the near term, they made it clear — echoing comments we've heard throughout the region over the last year — that they worry about the long-term ability of the United States to meet its commitments. Intentions are not the problem: there are few doubts about the sincerity of commitment across the US political spectrum to a strong presence in Asia. No, these concerns are deeper, and go to the very will and even *ability* of the United States to address profound problems in its political and economic system. Capability isn't the problem — it's will. And it's in large part the will to tackle problems at home that worries our friends.

Asian leaders and experts worry that failure to confront and at least to start solving the titanic economic and structural challenges facing the US will mean that Washington — whatever its intentions — will find it much harder to maintain its position as guarantor of stability and liberal order in the Pacific basin. In particular, Asian audiences focus on Americans' inability or refusal to address our budgetary woes, to revitalize an economy that has had its worst decade in generations, and to overcome the seemingly intractable political gridlock that prevents meaningful governmental action even on issues for which broad agreement exists.

While we have reservations about the Obama administration's description of its Asia policy as a "pivot" — the US never "left" the region — renewed attention on Asia is encouraging and assuring. But it is only a modest start. Diplomatic, trade, and military initiatives show a seriousness of purpose. But placing a relatively small number of Marines in northern Australia can't alleviate anxiety about broader, structural problems. A *real* pivot — and the one that Asian leaders are hoping for — is one that involves a change in US attitudes about these basic challenges — and, more than that, action that demonstrates that the United States is addressing these problems and in doing so, restoring the foundations of its strength. That strength is what these allies rely on for their security and prosperity. The roots of a stronger external

posture, then, lie in a reinvigorated effort to address America's internal problems.

This is what most Americans want, too: a political system that starts grappling with the big problems that could mean the difference between solvency and insolvency, and an economic system that regains the vigor that Americans took for granted in the 20th century. Addressing these challenges is especially important as, above all in the Pacific and Asia, increasingly competitive and assertive nations are rising. We cannot afford to fixate on secondary problems and allow our economic and ultimately military advantages to be overtaken.

A real pivot toward Asia, then, would simultaneously be a pivot toward our real challenges and responsibilities. But we need to do these two things simultaneously — *both* restore our national strength *and* augment our presence in Asia. Indeed, these two efforts are inextricably interlinked: our presence in Asia depends on a strong economy at home, and a safe, secure, and prosperously trading United States depends on a stable and accommodating Asian environment.

To be fair, political leaders across the spectrum have made this point; as a general principle it is not a point of controversy. The Obama administration highlighted this issue in its *National Security Strategy*, which "starts by recognizing that our strength and influence abroad begins with the steps we take at home." Republican candidates all call for addressing our structural problems and restoring American economic vitality in part to strengthen US international leadership.

But the American political system needs to turn this rhetoric into reality. The task is tough — very tough — but not insurmountable, and will only become both more necessary and more painful as time passes. It requires genuine political commitment. Above all, it demands a willingness to find solutions to deep structural problems the US faces. What should be done? Take up serious discussion of the Bowles-Simpson Commission's recommendations or Paul Ryan's plan, and pursue with seriousness the kinds of negotiations Speaker Boehner, the Senate leadership, and the White House had last summer. This would show a *real* pivot to Asia.

Right now, though, from a long-term Asian perspective US strategy looks a lot like small ball. The US forward presence is adjusted to meet political and economic exigencies — move one army unit, rotate a Marine unit, shift destroyers and submarines from one theater to another. Meanwhile, the ability to pay for those forces and sustain our advantages could, absent corrective action, erode.

The US and its Asian allies face produce challenges as they work to ensure stability in the coming century. These challenges must be addressed. That said, genuine and meaningful political disagreements exist and should continue to be fought over by the US body politic. But conceding

something from each of our ideals is necessary to get our finances and political structure in order. We should do this for our own sake. But others are counting on us too.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.

Applications are now being accepted for the 2012 SPF Fellowship position. Details, including an application form, can be found at the Pacific Forum web site [<http://csis.org/program/spf-fellowship>].