

Japan, Central Asia, and the US Rebalance to Asia-Pacific

by Jonathan Miller

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The least understood part of the Obama administration's policy to strengthen its role in the Asia-Pacific via "rebalancing" is that it is not built *for* its allies in the region, but that it is built *by* these partners. The US is committed to working with security allies and economic partners to ensure that the region follows a trajectory that benefits not only the US but also strengthens likeminded countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Thailand.

An essential element of the rebalance is the ability of the US to reduce commitments in other theaters to focus more resources on East Asia. The Obama administration will look to move assets from the Middle East and Central Asia as the US reduces its footprint in both areas. Indeed, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's November 2011 *Foreign Policy* article outlining the new policy began by noting the need for a new framework as the US withdrew from Iraq and drew down its forces in Afghanistan.

The US-Japan alliance is the foundation of US engagement in Asia and as the cornerstone of the rebalance, it should be leveraged by both sides to achieve mutually beneficial goals. The election of Abe Shinzo, who has made a stronger strategic partnership with the US a top priority of his new government, will enhance this relationship. There are several ways this relationship can contribute to the US rebalance and not all of them are in the Asia-Pacific region. One key area of cooperation is in Central Asia, precisely where the US is de-emphasizing its strategic priorities.

Last July, senior officials from more than 55 countries and 25 international organizations met in Tokyo to show their support for sustained development in Afghanistan. The pledging conference produced more than \$16 billion in promised assistance over the next three years. Of this sum, Japan indicated that it would earmark \$3 billion in aid to Afghanistan directed at areas such as infrastructure development, agricultural reform, and human resources training. This matches the Obama administration's continuing efforts to promote self-reliance in Afghanistan. Japan has proven to be a valuable partner in providing non-traditional security assistance, particularly in the areas of governance and regional security in Central Asia.

Japan's increased presence in Central Asia is welcomed by Washington, as it looks for more "players in the tent" to offset the influence of Russia and China. Japan pledged \$700 million in assistance to Central Asia Dialogue partners to

focus on economic reform, social development, relations with the international community, and the promotion of good governance. The Dialogue's focus on nontraditional security, environmental security development, climate change mitigation, and the spread of renewable energy sources supports Japan's influence in the region. For example, since 2009, Japan has been working with its Dialogue partners to support the introduction and use of renewable energy sources with low environmental load. These actions complement US efforts – both governmental and track-two – to promote sustainable energy development in the region. The Dialogue also promotes intra-regional trade – a goal Tokyo and Washington share as they try to develop the region's economic infrastructure.

Japan can also work with Russia – the dominant regional influence – to promote development, combat Islamic extremism, and fight drug flows. This has the additional benefit of promoting Japan-Russia cooperation, a much-needed confidence-building measure in a relationship that has long been hindered by a territorial dispute.

Tokyo's engagement in Central Asia is a key and underappreciated contribution to regional security. This effort takes on additional significance and value in the context of the US rebalance. As Japan continues to redefine its approach to the region, the US can leverage this support to add a new dimension to their partnership while simultaneously easing some of the burden in Central Asia. Ironically, Japan-US cooperation in Central Asia facilitates Obama's "rebalance" to East Asia, and demonstrates its potential.

For more on this subject, see *Issues & Insights*, Vol. 12 No. 14, "The US-Japan Alliance: New Direction in an Uncertain World" [<http://csis.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-12-no-14-us-japan-alliance-new-direction-uncertain-world>].

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