



## Rebalancing, China and Asian Dynamics – Obama’s Good Fit by Robert Sutter

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While New Year assessments of Asia often stress US policy challenges, the Obama administration’s rebalancing actually fits well with Asian regional dynamics. US strengths look even stronger when compared with China’s recent approaches.

### Asian dynamics

There are five sets of determinants:

1. Changing power relationships among Asia’s leading countries (e.g., the rise of China and India; changes in Japan; rising or reviving middle powers – South Korea, Indonesia, and Australia);
2. Growing impact of economic globalization and related international information interchange;
3. Ebb and flow of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, southwestern Asia, and the broader US-backed efforts against terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
4. Rise of Asian multilateralism;
5. Changing US engagement and withdrawal from Asian matters.

Leadership debates over foreign policy among Asia-Pacific leaders show movement toward realism in international relations (IR) theory in the United States, China, Japan, Russia, India, and several middle and smaller powers including Indonesia, Australia, South Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore. Such perspectives help determine how leaders view changing power dynamics and security issues, seen notably in factors 1, 3, and 5.

While vigilant regarding changes that could upset security, sovereignty, and other important interests, government leaders also see economic development (factor 2) as the lynch pin of their political legitimacy. They use the liberal international economic order in ways that benefit them and their countries, and thereby subscribe in various ways and to varying degree to aspects of liberalism in IR theory.

Regional leaders also support aspects of the IR theory of constructivism. They build regional and international organizations (factor 4) and support international norms as means to manage interstate differences and to promote interstate cooperation. Domestically, most Asia-Pacific governments foster a strong identity for their nation as an independent actor in regional and global affairs. Supporting

such an identity is an important element in their continued political legitimacy.

### The US fits well; China not so much

The United States has a proven record of bearing costs and risks to sustain regional stability that is essential for the development and nation building sought by the regional government leaders. There is little perceived danger of offensive US military, economic, or other policy actions amid repeated stress by American leaders against unilateral change in the status quo. By contrast, China has accompanied its rise in regional prominence with a conflicted message. Closer economic cooperation on a mutually beneficial “win-win” basis mixes poorly with strident Chinese threats and coercive actions against neighbors that disagree with China, especially on issues of sovereignty and security. The fact that China’s stridency on these matters has grown with the expansion of coercive civilian and military power alarms many Asian neighbors; they seek reassurance in developing closer relations with the United States, strengthening US integration with the region.

Meanwhile, Chinese leaders sustain a narrow win-set of Chinese interests. They avoid the kinds of costs and risks borne by the United States in support of the broader regional order that are well recognized by regional governments. Asian leaders watch closely for signs of US military withdrawal or flagging interest in sustaining regional stability. The Obama rebalance advances the robust security presence and close military cooperation with the vast majority of Asia-Pacific governments, built notably during the Clinton and Bush administrations, which has enjoyed bipartisan support in Congress. It offers a sound forecast of steady, strong, and durable engagement based on the rising importance of the region for US security, economic, and political interests.

China’s role as a trader, site for investment, and increasing important foreign investor will grow in regional affairs. The location and advancing infrastructure that connects China to its neighbors support closer Chinese relations with neighboring states. Unlike the United States, China has a great deal of money that could be used to the benefit of its neighbors. Those governments engage in sometimes protracted talks with Chinese counterparts to find ways to use money consistent with China’s ubiquitous win-win formula. In general, China will part with its money only if there is assurance that it will be paid back and the endeavor will support China’s narrow win-set.

Of course, half the trade remains dependent on foreign investment and access to markets outside developing Asia, notably the United States. The US almost certainly will not quickly reverse the large trade deficit that undergirds the export-oriented economies of the region. Asian leaders are watchful for signs of protectionism, but the steady US

economic recovery reinforces support for enhanced free trade initiatives of the Obama government.

By contrast, China's commitment to free trade remains very selective. Beijing's tendency to go well beyond international norms in retaliating against others over trade and other issues has grown with the advance of China's economic influence. Its cyber theft of trade and economic information and intellectual property is enormous. Its industrial policies and neo-mercantilist practices are used deliberately to advance China's economy (China consistently runs a trade surplus) without much consideration of how they disadvantage neighboring economies along with the United States. China's recent extraordinary pressure on Japan for the sake of territorial claims risks large-scale negative consequences for regional economic growth. In contrast, the United States endeavors to calm the tensions and play a role of stabilizer highly valued by most regional governments.

Overall, the growing security, economic, and political relationships with the wide range of Asia-Pacific governments built by recent US administrations have the effect of strengthening these governments and countries, reinforcing their independence and identity. Robust, broad-ranging, and carefully calibrated US engagement reassures regional leaders ever vigilant for possible negative changes in regional dynamics, including those that could be prompted by US decline or withdrawal. And, while many of these governments disagree with US policies regarding the Middle East peace process, electronic spying, and other issues, the US interest in preserving a favorable balance of power in the region is supported by the prevalence of such stronger independent actors. By contrast, China's assertiveness shows its neighbors that Beijing expects them to accommodate a growing range of Chinese concerns, even to the point of sacrificing territory. The range of Chinese demands probably will broaden with the growth of Chinese military, economic, and other coercive power.

Strengthening those in the region that resist China's pressure is seen in Beijing as a hostile act. It is important to reiterate here that most Asia-Pacific governments expect the US government to improve relations in the region in ways that do not exacerbate China-US tensions and thereby disrupt the region. A continuation of the kinds of adjustments in the Obama rebalance policy, giving less public emphasis to competition with China and military dimensions while stressing and carrying out an extraordinary series of top-level engagement efforts with China, manage tensions in line with regional concerns.

Finally, the Obama rebalance has advanced markedly US relations with the regional organizations valued by Asian governments as part of their efforts to create and build institutions to ease interstate rivalries and promote cooperative relations. The Obama government seems sincere in pursuing interchange that is respectful of regional bodies. These initiatives enjoy bipartisan support in the Congress and are likely to continue. China also calls for close alignment with these groups, though China's more assertive ambitions regarding disputed territories have seen Chinese leaders grossly manipulate these bodies or resort to coercion and intimidation.

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