



Response to PacNet #10 “Middle-Power Cooperation between South Korea and India: Hedging the Dominance of the Great Powers” by Ehsan Ahrari

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Middle power cooperation is always a good thing, but it can never be a substitute for the constraining role that the US continues to play in East Asia and China knows it. Thus, your notion of a “faltering US” is a little over the top. The Obama administration is doing a credible job sustaining a balance between America’s presence in the turbulent Middle East and South Asia and looking over the shoulders of a “risen” PRC.

It is increasingly fashionable to bemoan the faltering role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific, or even its decline. However, China knows that its assertions of “sovereignty” are monitored and challenged by the US Navy. Ultimately, those assertions have to be resolved through negotiations with its neighbors, and by building third-rate aircraft carriers. I see a China attempting to push the envelope to see how far it can go. Organski might be smiling about the accuracy of his power transition theory!

Moreover, while Pakistan is exchanging information on missile technology with North Korea, its source for such knowledge is the PRC. Iran is in the same boat. No middle power cooperation can change that fact.

Response to Ehsan Ahrari by Sukjoon Yoon

First, what will the US do after its pivot to the Asia-Pacific is completed? I think the US pivot strategy is essentially rhetoric to cover an exit strategy after Bush’s mistakes, which is difficult for regional allies, partners, and like-minded nations to acknowledge.

Second, what options will be available to China when this fact becomes clear? Beijing appears to realize that there is opportunity to declare a Chinese version of the Monroe Doctrine. Secretary Kerry seems to be much softer than his predecessor, Mrs. Clinton, who initiated the US pivot to Asia, and most Asians do not find him a convincing safeguard against Chinese domination.

The US Navy plans to shift 60 percent of its assets to Asia by 2020, but the US commitment to support middle powers in the Asia-Pacific is no longer plausible. The US is still a formidable power with significant interests in the region, but since January 2012 Washington has lost the goodwill it enjoyed in Asia or failed to demonstrate its goodwill toward Asia. This has been recognized by China, which dares to express its power through legal codes, for example the new fishing regulations implemented by Hainan province in January.

Third, although such power transitions are theoretically opaque, we expect the US to become a more normal power in Asia, while the ramifications of China’s dream could be devastating to its neighbors. The region is thoroughly Americanized in terms of politics and values, which the PRC finds uncomfortable, so there is significant pressure for other nations of the region to reorient toward Chinese standards.

The essential problem is that there is no fixed concept of power or hegemony in Asian politics: everything is up for grabs. The US is becoming more ambivalent about providing a strong commitment to its supporters in the region, and they are facing a dilemma that grows ever more serious. In my view, middle-power networking is the only viable strategy to resist being overwhelmed by China and to simultaneously remain on good terms with the US.

Response to Ehsan Ahrari and Sukjoon Yoon by Ralph Cossa

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Both commentators make valid points and demonstrate the wide range of views regarding the pivot and America’s continuing commitment to Asia. I would argue that the “exit strategy” associated with the pivot is the exit from Iraq and Afghanistan and back toward Asia, continuing the post-Cold War trend that started in the George H.W. Bush administration. The US has maintained a Pacific presence since before it had a west coast. What will Washington do after the pivot is completed? Whoever follows Obama will, in all likelihood, continue to focus on Asia, but will, of course, come up with a new phrase to describe the same thing. And Washington’s friends and allies will continue to seek reassurance that America will remain a Pacific power, which it will; US national interests demand nothing less.

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