

The Real Rebalance of Power by Mr. Pacific

Mr. Pacific is a pseudonym for the author – a former US government official and consultant to senior US civilian and military leaders in the region – to ensure the views expressed are regarded solely as his own.

Most critiques of the US ‘Rebalance to Asia’ have concluded it is more rhetoric than reality. In fact, it was never a new strategy toward the region so much as a reaction to a rebalancing of power that was occurring within the region. Asia is on the rise and *that* rebalance of power is of profound importance. What can be done to assure an active and constructive US role in shaping the future of the Indo-Asia Pacific?

Rhetoric and Reality

First, we must separate rhetoric from reality. There was applause for the 2011 announcement of the ‘Pivot to Asia’ and President Obama’s “Canberra Address” on the growing importance of the region. Now, some years into that strategic shift – relabeled a rebalance – the president has completed six trips to the region.

The most objective assessment of his approach to Asia is that there have been positive steps forward, a lot of standing in place, and some unfortunate steps back. Progress includes the diplomatic breakthrough with Burma, negotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (a work-in-progress) and the newly concluded defense cooperation agreement with the Philippines.

Setbacks include the impression that Washington’s renewed commitment to Asia lacks political will and adequate resources. US spending in the Pacific has been cut less than in other regions (and increased slightly in some areas) but that doesn’t add up to ‘greater commitment’ in a convincing way. The State Department Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs FY 2015 budget request seeks a modest 5 percent increase, the addition of three new positions, and \$69.6 million in added assistance (half the cost of a single F-35). In an era of plummeting spending, any increase is considered a good thing, but a real rebalancing of resources it is not.

In another setback, Asian partners took umbrage when Obama followed up his declaration about the importance of Asia by missing key regional summits due to the government shutdown and other domestic political concerns, events widely perceived as evidence of a US in political gridlock and economic decline. Secretary of State John Kerry further muddied the message about the primacy of Asia by giving the impression he is more interested in making his mark on Mideast diplomatic history.

Too much has been made of both the US rebalance and lack thereof. Expectations were too high. Mainly, it has been

resoundingly similar to the US posture, presence, and policies that preceded it. Washington’s fundamental diplomatic stance has not changed. Successive US administrations made America the most important contributor to regional stability and prosperity. Current efforts stand on the shoulders of those accomplishments. America’s priorities in the Pacific are focused correctly on the five regional security alliances (to which the US remains committed) and on building the best partnerships possible with China and other Asian countries.

The US approach to China, and its stance on maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, has been tweaked to sound a little tougher (to China) and a little more reassuring (to allies and partners), but the overall policy is unchanged. There is even less change to talk about when it comes to the US policy of ‘Strategic Patience’ toward North Korea – the one aspect of US Asia policy that most needs to change. Elsewhere in the region, progress has been made on strengthening relations with ASEAN member states, but there are no game-changers. US-India relations have been set back over the past year. That situation may improve as Washington and New Delhi attempt a fresh start, but don’t look for radical change there either.

So the rebalance really amounts to a continuation of established policies. Unfortunately, that isn’t enough to maintain US dominance in Asia and shape the future it desires given the historic rebalancing of power underway.

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Washington has more than ample resources to shape that future. The problem is that the administration’s priorities lay elsewhere and, since Asia is not on fire, US political will is otherwise engaged. That will change quickly when North Korean and/or Chinese actions create a crisis and, if the past is any precedent, the US will be caught off-guard when that happens.

How then can the US prevent such crises from occurring? The answer depends on whether Washington can incorporate the growing influences of China and India into the established order; modifying it, to be sure, but not replacing it. Who would dare bet against a club of great powers truly devoted to the maintenance of stability? Sufficient commonality of interest exists to make that possible, but not without wise US leadership. Without such leadership, a far less attractive future will emerge in which rising Asian powers develop an alternative order that competes with the US-led system. Much will depend on whether China and India are truly welcomed into the club.

That is where the rebalance has not been helpful. The Obama administration deserves credit for focusing more on Asia, but it announced the pivot without a real increase in diplomatic presence or development dollars. In the absence of

any significant ‘soft power’ element, the rebalance was quickly colored by US military activity in the region, raising suspicions that the real intent was to contain China. Perceptions that the rebalance is not about China are false because greater US attention to Asia is primarily driven by the rise of Chinese power. So the question is not whether the rebalance is about China, but what it is intended to achieve in regard to China. Meanwhile, there are suspicions that the US may attempt to add India as a strategic ally against China, a geostrategic shift that fiercely independent New Delhi will not entertain. Even US allies don’t wish to choose sides.

How can the president and his successor do better in Asia? First, be *the* leader in the region. The Chinese communist party is unfit to play that role, and we will all grow old waiting for leadership to emerge from multilateralism.

Second, drop cryptic labels like ‘pivot’ and ‘rebalance.’ Instead, clearly articulate true and principled US intentions toward the region. There will be continued support for the US-led system as long as it continues to deliver on its promises of stability and prosperity. Those who complain that foreign countries get more out of trade with the US than Americans fail to understand that support for US leadership has always been tied to the benefits others receive from it.

Third, stop talking about rebalancing US power to Asia (which fuels Chinese suspicion and aggressiveness) and start acknowledging the real rebalancing of power within the region (including China’s right to play a greater role in it). That will require negotiating a new model of major power relations.

Most importantly, Washington must make it clear that behavior which runs counter to regional stability has consequences. That means being prepared to inflict real costs the next time North Korea kills allied forces, or China gets too in-the-face of a regional ally or partner. Beijing is likely to inflict whatever short-term costs it can on any challenger, but the long-term benefits to the US of standing up to aggressive challenges to regional stability are far more important. Those who believe peace can be maintained without demonstrations of strength, or that the US can safeguard its interests by being an off-shore balancer, don’t live in the real world. The president was right to point out the folly of military overreach in his West Point commencement address, but in the Pacific, the US is in danger of failing to do enough to shape the future. Obama warned us (wisely) not to get embroiled in lower priority concerns, but failed to make the case for what the US will do when it comes to our highest ones.

Fifth and finally, since the region *is* a top priority, President Obama or his successor should carry out a true rebalance of diplomatic, development, and defense resources to Asia. That requires championing legislation to more actively shape the future of the region, and putting together a bi-partisan coalition of Congressional leaders who understand the importance of US leadership in Asia and support it. This begins with White House efforts to gather support for Fast-Track Authority and passage of the TPP (after the mid-term elections). We need a dialogue on programs to be included in legislation to strengthen the US role in Asia: building a bigger cadre of Asia experts in the government, expanding engagement and exchange programs of proven value, and

appointing a personal representative of the president (perhaps based in Hawaii) to raise the level, frequency, and attendance record of US leadership in the region.

A greater US focus on Asia makes strategic sense but success will depend on whether the US can demonstrate to Asians the benefits to them of a US-led regional order. While the president’s hesitation to over-commit internationally is understandable when it comes to quagmires like Syria, lack of real commitment to a region he has prioritized makes no sense. While there is concern over how China will react, the inescapable fact is there cannot be two “most-dominant powers” in the region. Asia will either become divided into spheres of influence (and the US loses ground) or one power will become most dominant, like Germany within Europe.

There is no reason why the US cannot and should not remain the leading power in the Pacific. It still has the world’s largest economy and most powerful diplomacy; both are backed by military capabilities and presence that are second to none. In addition, the US is widely perceived as a cooperative partner with no extra-sovereign ambitions and a great source of economic opportunity, innovation, and education. Even after China becomes the largest economy, it will not match the United States in those other ways until after it has reformed itself.

If the US demonstrates leadership and genuine commitment, the future of the Pacific will likely be akin to this summer’s remakes of Hollywood blockbusters – a US-led system that builds on the successful original, some new actors and elements, and which people will still want to see due to its enduring appeal.

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