**The US “Pivot” to Asia Pacific: an Assessment of the Chinese Element**

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**Introduction**

The US occupies a unique position in world affairs, with its second to none economic, political and military power. Never in history has a country dominated the international scene to the extent that the US does today[[1]](#footnote-1). However, as “an indispensible nation whose work never stops”[[2]](#footnote-2), the US has not always experienced plain sailing in the process of designing its foreign policy. While for almost half a century immersed in the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union, the US saw the world in a clear-cut way, with its foreign policy revolving around a zero-sum relationship with its number one enemy; the first years of the post Cold War world somehow left the US at a loss. The biggest foreign policy question for The Bush Senior’s administration was to define the US’s role in the new world order, and although G.H. Bush rejected the idea that the US should become the world policeman, he claimed that it was the US’s responsibility to lead, taking into consideration the fact that in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War the US was the only remaining power. Nevertheless, four years of preoccupation with foreign policy with a huge and complex agenda of difficult foreign issues resulted in Bush’s defeat in the presidential reelection. When Clinton came to office, he shifted the emphasis from foreign affairs to domestic issues, with the centerpiece of his policy on boosting the economy. As regards the foreign policy, in the first term of his office despite distancing himself from his “foreign affair” predecessor president – Bush the senior, Clinton ended up with his “Engagement and Enlargement” foreign policy, deserving credit for “engaging the US globally”. However, Clinton received mixed marks for his foreign policy, which has been criticized for being a “band-aid” policy, responding to events rather than crafting events. The Bush Junior era, however, can be crudely labeled as “war on terrorism”, based on the solid Bush doctrine, which urged (or rather commanded) nations to join the US in an effort to root out terrorism – “either you are with us, or you are with them”.

The “strategic pivot” to Asia Pacific or “rebalance” was launched in Obama’s presidency, the essence of which is a focus on this region and a significant elevation of Asia’s place in the US foreign policy[[3]](#footnote-3). The policy emerged against the background of the US facing the need of reorienting its foreign policy after more than a decade of intense, resource-consuming engagement and entanglement with South Asia and the Middle East. The “pivot”, or “rebalancing” consists of a comprehensive set of diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives to build extensive economic, diplomatic, people-to-people and security ties with the region as the US under president Barack Obama regards itself as a “Pacific power”[[4]](#footnote-4).

**Explaining the “pivot”**

The first priority of the “pivot” is enhancing the US alliances in this region, ranging from its traditional ally – Japan to the oldest friend – Thailand. The US- Japan alliance, with the security treaty at the heart, has stood the test of time. Japan, urged by the US, has significantly increased its contribution to the maintenance of world peace and security; while the US has never gone back on its words about the military umbrella it provides Japan with. The US- Korean relationship has not only deepened but also become increasingly global in nature judging by the bilateral cooperation in a diversity of problems across the world, from Southeast Asia to Afghanistan and the Gulf of Aden[[5]](#footnote-5). The US- Filipino ties have never been that strong, both in terms of economic and people-to-people cooperation and regional security concerns. The US and Australia have cooperated both bilaterally and on global challenges. As for Thailand, the oldest but seemingly distant ally, president Obama’s visit to the country marked the return of Washington to commit itself to work closely with Bangkok on bilateral matters as well as regional development issues.

The next tenet of the policy is to improve the relationship with emerging powers in the region, with China as the first in line, India, New Zealand, Indonesia and Vietnam. While the “rebalancing” is perceived positively across a range of nations, China remains skeptical about the true intentions lying behind the policy despite the fact that the Sino – American relationships have been productive with an unprecedented number of dialogues, exchanges and meetings on various levels.

The rebalancing also covers the US support for universal values, cooperation with multilateral institutions, namely ASEAN as well as the elevation of the economic statecraft, with the Trans- Pacific Partnership as one of the most outstanding achievements so far.

However, it may be because of the increase in the US military presence in the region as definitely the last but not least tenet of the “pivot” that evokes such suspicion from the Chinese side. Examples of US military presence range from the deployment of US marine forces to Australia, the appearance of US littoral ships in Singapore to the signing of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the Philippines in 2014 [[6]](#footnote-6).

**Differences in the way Washington and Beijing view the “rebalance”**

Obviously, there was a distinctive gap in the way Washington and Beijing perceive the Obama administration’s strategic rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific. Although Washington states that the “pivot” aims at pursuing US economic and security future in this crucial region of the world, Beijing believes that Washington is taking measures to contain China rising as a great power.While the US considers its intensified cooperation with its alliances in the Asia Pacific a positive factor in maintaining regional peace, China perceives it to be a preemptive step against China and a threat to security and balance of power in this part of the world.

No matter how eloquent the US is about the importance of the Asia Pacific region in the world economics and politics, China seems not to bite the arguments. “Peace and security in the Pacific have been threatened by a series of increasingly bold American diplomatic and military maneuvers, most recently underlined by the United States’ ‘return to Asia’”[[7]](#footnote-7).Chinese diplomat Cui Tiankai openly challenges the US to convince China that *“*there is no gap between its policy statement on China and its true intentions”[[8]](#footnote-8).

Convincing Beijing that the rebalance is not designed to contain China while simultaneously demonstrating Washington’s commitment to its allies has been a huge challenge to the Obama administration.

**How would the US convince China? And to what extent is the strategic rebalance about China?**

It seems that despite a number of reasons, the most convincing argument the US has to provide is that it is undeniable that the Asia Pacific is growing to be the most powerful region in the world, being home to more than half of the world’s population. The region contains the largest democracy in the world (India), the largest Muslim-majority country (Indonesia), the second and third largest economies (China and Japan), and seven of the ten largest armies. It is predicted that Asia Pacific will account for half of the world’s economic output and include four of the world’s ten largest economies (China, India, Indonesia, and Japan). With its fairly stable politics, the region represents promising opportunities in an uncertain global economy.

The second persuasive reason is that the rebalance has more to do with the Middle East than with China, that rebalancing to some extent means rebalancing within Asia as the Middle East has been a burden to the US and it is high time for the US to shift eastward[[9]](#footnote-9). The “pivot” does not mean returning to Asia, but rather “rebalancing” within Asia. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific Kurt Campbell says that “one of the most important challenges for U.S. foreign policy is to effect a transition from the immediate and vexing challenges of the Middle East to the long-term and deeply consequential issues in Asia.”[[10]](#footnote-10) However, it is understood by all that it is in the Middle East that lie the key interests of the US – oil, and rebalancing does not mean abandoning the Middle East and that the “pivot” has not been driven by the weariness resulting from the endless warfare in the Middle East.

Although it is difficult to tell whether the US is rebalancing “pre-eminently”[[11]](#footnote-11) toward China or, rather, toward the whole region, it must be admitted that, the rebalance is, to a great extent, about China.

Needless to say, China’s size of the economy is incomparable to any country in the region. In fact, not only being the world second largest economy after the US, China is on its way to overtake the US in GDP in 2018[[12]](#footnote-12). Due to Chinese economic preponderance and military power (illustrated through very bold territorial claims in the region) the status quo in the Asia Pacific is changing, and the US acknowledges that building a cooperative relationship with the ever-more influential China is the key for its success in the region. However, it must be noted that the People’s Republic of China is the “epitome of all the contradictions in the region”[[13]](#footnote-13): China has been witnessing an impressive economic growth, at the same time it is where unfair trade practices take place. China has increased its cooperation with international institutions while ignoring concerns from its neighbors as well as the international community to assertively take measures to claim territory in the South China Sea”. [[14]](#footnote-14)

**“Panda huggers” vs. “Dragon slayers”**

Concerning China’s military rise, the US elite is divided. There are two ways of thinking about China’s rise, one pessimistic, the other optimistic. Adherents of the former – more skeptical viewpoint belong to the realist school of international relations and are colloquially known as the “dragon slayers”; whereas those advocate the latter are referred to as “panda huggers”, who are influenced by the liberal school of international relations. The “dragon slayers” and the “panda huggers” split over whether China’s growing military power necessarily threatens American security interests. The argument brought forward by the “dragon slayers” is that if China continued to grow economically, China would surely pursue regional hegemony just as the US did in the Western Hemisphere in the 19th century. Therefore, China’s attempts to dominate Korea and Japan, as well as other countries in the neighborhood would be a matter of time. This argument is backed up by China’s increasingly powerful military capacity, with its nuclear weapons, advanced conventional weapons and military forces. Adherents of this viewpoint also put forward the assumption that China would develop a doctrine similar to the Monroe Doctrine, directly addressed at the US, stating that the Asia Pacific belongs to the people of the Asia Pacific and the US- as an outsider should stay out the business. Skeptics also believe that a powerful China would be a detrimental factor to the status quo in Asia Pacific as China is rising to be the regional hegemon. Believing that does not necessarily imply that China would have wicked motives, but because according to realists, in order to maximize its chance for survival, the best way for any state is to become the hegemon in its region. However, China becoming the hegemon in Asia Pacific is optimal for China, but it is clearly not in America’s interests[[15]](#footnote-15).

On the contrary, the “panda huggers” find it hard to understand why China would have any problems with the status quo as under the existing order China already enjoys a great amount of influence over other nations in the region. Besides, being a member of a number of international institutions, China’s behavior can be constrained. Advocates of this optimistic view also hold that the economic growth taking place in China would eventually help transform China’s political system in a positive direction, resulting in a more responsible China in regional order as well as international system. It must as well be noted that the liberals believe that it is groundless to conclude that a growing Chinese power would necessarily mean there would be a zero-sum security tradeoff between China and the US and its allies[[16]](#footnote-16).

**“Congagement”**

So how should we assess the Chinese element in the US’s “pivot” to Asia Pacific? It is worth taking into consideration the US’s foreign policy toward China independently from its “rebalance”. Since the end of the Cold War, the way the US has conducted relations with China can be summarized in a policy of “congagement”[[17]](#footnote-17), which means a combination of military containment and economic engagement. On the one hand, “congagement” means reassuring allies that the US’s commitment to the region is unshakeable. In an address to the Australian parliament, President Obama referred to the US- Australian cooperation as an “unbreakable alliance”, a “commitment to the security of the Republic of Korea” that will never “waver”, and a “larger and long-term role in the region” for the US. He also reiterated the US is “a Pacific power, and we are here to stay.”[[18]](#footnote-18) During the Philippines and China’s disputes over the Scarborough Shoal, Secretary Clinton claimed to defend the Philippines.

On the other hand, the US has been making efforts in engaging China in various dialogues and regional as well as international mechanisms. Diplomatic exchanges and visits on various levels help create the image that the two countries are doing their best in enhancing their cooperation.

**Conclusion**

Although it would be groundless to conclude that the “pivot” is a preemptive move against the rise of China in the Asia Pacific, the US’s “rebalance” to the region to a great extent is about China. There has not been a consensus in the US on how the rise of China would necessarily be at the expense of the US, with the optimists believing that China can be contained and that China would gradual develop into a responsible power, while the pessimists claim that it is just a matter of time that China becomes the hegemon of the region who would seek to drive the US out the region. The “pivot” should be understood on the basis of the US’s foreign policy toward China, which is based on the principle of “congagement”, which in its essence means that Washington must engage China in regional and international mechanisms as well as balance against China in order to engage it and maintain the *status quo* in this crucial region.

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