

Reflections on U.S. Policy in the Asia Pacific

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The most ballyhooed dimension of President Barack Obama's foreign policy during his first term in office, what some have suggested is his signature achievement in that arena, has been the so-called "pivot" toward the Asia-Pacific region. Recently, however, the term "pivot," with its implication of turning one's back on areas that were previously considered of primary importance, has been superseded by "rebalance" as the buzzword of choice in Washington's Asia policy circles. While "pivot" implies a precipitous turnabout, "rebalance" sounds like the outcome of a well-reasoned deliberative process carried out by deeply knowledgeable and reflective officials steeped in the calculus of national interest and ostensibly concerned with the good of the global commons. As such, the term "rebalance" serves both the *amour propre* of the American officials in charge of Asia policy as well as the national self-conceit, hard as reinforced concrete, that the United States is now, and has consistently been, at least since the end of World War II, a force for stability, peace, democracy, and human rights in the Asia-Pacific region. When leading American officials, including President Obama himself, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, former Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, and National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon, the main expositors of rebalancing, review the record of America's engagement with Asia over the past nearly seventy years, they seem incapable of restraining the rhetoric of national self-congratulation regarding the high-minded purposes and beneficent outcomes of American policy. Donilon, for example, concluded a major speech to the Asia Society in New York on March 13, 2013, with these rhetorical questions, "...without the stabilizing

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presence of U.S. engagement over the past seventy years, where would the Asia-Pacific be today? Without the U.S. guarantee of security and stability, would militarism have given way to peace in Northeast Asia? Would safe sea lanes have fueled Pacific commerce? Would South Korea have risen from aid recipient to trading powerhouse? And would small nations have been protected from domination by bigger neighbors?" Of course, his questions allowed only the response he gave, namely, "I think the answer is obvious." And not only with regard to the past, but also to the future. "[T]he [Asia-Pacific] region's success in the century ahead, and the United States' security and prosperity in the 21st century still depend upon the presence and engagement of the United States in Asia. We are a resident Pacific power, resilient and indispensable."

As an American, I suppose that my chest should swell with patriotic pride. As an historian, I cringe at this version of the past. Of course, official Washington's reading of history, like any politically-motivated reading, is incomplete, one-sided, distorted, and tendentious. The U.S. record in the Asia-Pacific region since World War II is a decidedly mixed one. Among other things, Washington can take considerable credit for catalyzing the transformation of Japan from a militarized oligarchic empire into a peaceful, democratic state. It can celebrate its resistance to Kim Il Sung's rash blunder in attempting, with Stalin's and Mao's consent, to unify Korea by force in 1950. The long overdue U.S. opening to China in 1971-1972 was an important step forward. But weighed in the balance against such singular accomplishments are such realities as Washington's decision in September 1950 to cross the 38th Parallel into North Korea, a decision that brought China into the war and needlessly prolonged and deepened a national tragedy. Add to this the arrogant folly of the Vietnam War with its millions of casualties, overwhelmingly Vietnamese; the linked tragedy of Cambodia; and Washington's support of the genocidal Khmer Rouge after their ouster from power by Hanoi in 1979. Next, consider U.S. long-term support of brutal military and civilian dictatorships in Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Vietnam, and the Republic of Korea during the Cold War decades when knee-jerk anti-communism reigned. Democracy and human rights were honored in the breach. Washington

was slow to respond to popular democratic movements in the Philippines and the Republic of Korea in the 1980's. The U.S. still brushes aside the overwhelming popular opposition to American bases in Okinawa, stemming in part from the often offensive and at times brutal behavior of American service personnel, a phenomenon with which Koreans, especially Korean women, unfortunately are all too familiar. Of course, the above-mentioned U.S. officials, all well-educated and thoughtful, know all of this seamy history, but as the cheerleaders of American power, not seekers after truth, they must pretend otherwise. No surprise there, of course. Americans as a people tend to be ahistorical except when it comes to remembering heroic victories or traumatic moments like Pearl Harbor or 9/11.

But let us return to the notion of rebalance. What was the point of enunciating this policy in the first place? And what does it actually mean? On taking power in January 2009, the Obama administration inherited twin disasters at home and abroad. The financial collapse of 2008 and domestic economic crisis demanded immediate attention. Abroad, the faltering wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that badly damaged America's international reputation, and not only in the Muslim world, were the most important foreign policy legacy of the preceding George W. Bush administration. Critics of the war in the United States not only expected a change of course from Obama, but also hoped that the new administration would conduct a public airing of the subterfuges, outright lies, mistakes, and blunders of Bush, Vice-President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and numerous others responsible for the Iraq War in particular. But rather than confront the recent past, Obama, in a gesture of apparent magnanimity that supporters called realism and critics on the left political cowardice, chose to look forward rather than back in what quickly turned out to be the vain hope of eliciting bipartisan support for his domestic policies. From this perspective, the pivot or rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific was a timorous recognition that the Bush-era obsession with areas of secondary strategic and economic importance to the United States was mistaken. Perhaps it also represented a tacit commitment not to get involved in any more "wars of choice." Of course, the major premise of the rebalance, namely, that the Asia-Pacific region is of prime interest to the United States in the early 21st

century, is hardly a revelation. Nor is Kurt Campbell's true but trite comment to Japan's *Asahi Shimbun*, on February 9, 2013, that "The truth is we [the United States] have never left Asia."

What, then, is the "rebalance" all about? It may be viewed in the context of the U.S. Department of Defense statement, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," issued on January 3, 2012. This document confirms that the United States continues to see itself as the irreplaceable hub of the international system, enforcer of last resort of the rules of the game, uniquely legitimate by virtue of its professed selfless intentions, and solely capable by virtue of its superior military power, to impose and maintain order wherever it chooses to do so. According to this hegemonic logic, the United States must maintain the unchallenged capacity to project power anywhere and everywhere, including in areas of vital interest to other powers large and small. It is more than a curiosity that in its section titled, "Primary Missions of the U.S. Armed Forces," China is paired with Iran as states that "will continue to pursue asymmetric means to counter our power projection capabilities." The implication is that it is illegitimate for weaker states to develop their own defensive capabilities insofar as such capabilities might impinge upon American freedom of action.

As outlined by its proponents, the strategy of rebalancing as applied to the Asia-Pacific region appears to be very different from U.S. strategy toward Europe. In reality, however, the differences are only in form; the underlying objective is the same, namely, maintaining American supremacy. In Europe, NATO, which was significantly enlarged after the Soviet Union, its Cold War *raison d'être*, collapsed, is now an integrated military alliance that embodies an expansive notion of the Atlantic world. It provides a backup source of presumptive international legitimacy when great power disagreements in the Security Council deprive the U.S. and its allies of the mantle of UN-conferred legitimacy.

In the Asia-Pacific region, as U.S. policymakers are well aware, both the geographic and political terrain are very different. Therefore, instead of offering an impossible one-size-fits-all NATO-style security structure, Washington, like a multi-armed Buddhist

statue, extends a multitude of possible security connections ranging from formal alliances at one end of the spectrum to military-to-military consultations, occasional port visits, and joint anti-piracy efforts at the other. In the words of the Defense Department, “we will seek to be the security partner of choice.” The image that comes to mind is that of a food court in a mall where hungry shoppers may choose from a variety of cuisines offered at adjoining stalls.

At the core of the rebalance strategy is the question of China. U.S. officials, think-tank pundits, and academic analysts broadly agree that the U.S.-China relationship is the most important bilateral relationship of the 21st century, at least in its opening decades. But is China friend or foe? Partner or adversary? And what is the future direction of China’s development? Will the single-party, authoritarian and repressive state survive? Will it collapse? Is it undergoing a transmogrification into a form of national socialism (read fascism) with an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy? What are the prospects for China evolving into a species of pluralist democracy as the Philippines, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan did in the 1980’s? Of course, there are no clear answers to any of these questions, and this essay is not the place to explore them. My point is that as an analysis of the strategy of rebalancing reveals, in the inevitable uncertainty regarding China’s future policy direction, against the background of a cacophony of different voices offering different answers to these questions, Washington is of two minds when it comes to China.

The so-called China hawks are particularly critical of China’s current policies and apprehensive about the aggressive actions along its land and maritime borders taken by the newly installed leaders, headed by Xi Jinping. Even they recognize that the U.S. relationship with China is much more complex and, therefore, difficult to manage than was the unalloyed Washington-Moscow antagonism of the Cold War era. For its part, the Obama administration, like all U.S. administrations since the opening to China in 1972, insists that it “welcomes the rise of a peaceful, prosperous China. We do not want our relationship to become defined by rivalry and confrontation,” as National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon recently stated. Its welcome, however, is contingent upon China accepting an

American-defined structure of power in the Asia-Pacific region and acting “responsibly and constructively” in a manner prescribed by the United States. As Kurt Campbell said, “it will be important for China to accept that the United States is going to play an enduring, strong role in the Asia-Pacific region.” In other words, if China, a rising power, accepts a subaltern role in a U.S.-dominated Asia-Pacific region, the competition between Washington and Beijing will remain manageable, areas of cooperation can be carved out, and the worst-case scenario of an open conflict can be avoided. The realists’ “iron law” of a virtually inevitable clash between a rising power and a dominant power can be avoided. But from China’s perspective, when the disparate pieces of Washington’s rebalance are assembled into a whole, they appear as a form of encirclement, a policy of containment that not only dare not speak its name but vigorously denies it is anything of the sort. What else could be the meaning of Washington’s revitalization of its alliances with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, its cozying up to ASEAN, India, and Vietnam, its arms sales to Taiwan?

While U.S. analysts tend to interpret these as parts of a so-called “hedging strategy” which is not inconsistent with cooperative U.S.-China relations in both security and economic arenas, Chinese observers tend to think otherwise. Some Washington insiders do, too, calling for “rebalancing” the rebalance. Ken Lieberthal of the Brookings Institution calls for strengthening and intensifying U.S.-China ties at the presidential level where policy in this vital relationship is made. Joseph Nye of Harvard University invokes the ghost of George Kennan, the father of Cold War containment, to warn against “overmilitarization and [to] ensure that China doesn’t feel encircled or endangered.” More bluntly, in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Robert Ross argues that, “The new U.S. policy unnecessarily compounds Beijing’s insecurities and will only feed China’s aggressiveness, undermine regional security, and decrease the possibility of cooperation between Beijing and Washington.” Recent aggressive Chinese moves along its border with India, its truculent naval activity in the East and South China seas, and its continuing military buildup can be read as validation of either position in the U.S. China policy debate. What is clear and persuasively argued in

Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell's recent study, *China's Search for Security* – Chinese military modernization is taking place not in isolation but in the context of region-wide military modernization in the Asia-Pacific region. Meanwhile, the United States continues to be and will long remain the dominant military power there. I would only add that during the Cold War exaggerated estimates of Soviet power long fueled high levels of official and public anxiety that led to the militarization of U.S. foreign policy, fostered a siege mentality, ignited an arms race, and led to multiple interventions abroad, often with devastating and tragic results. In the 1980's, as the Soviet threat first faltered and then imploded, alarmists raised a hue and cry about the threat that Japan, America's closest ally in Asia, supposedly posed to the U.S. economy and its regional and global position. America, a country with an insatiable appetite for the apocalyptic, always provides a ready market for hysterics, in the realm of international politics no less than in religion.

In a recent article, former Australian prime minister and foreign minister Kevin Rudd, himself something of a "China Hand," endorsed Washington's rebalance as an appropriate signal to Beijing of U.S. determination to remain a major power in the Asia-Pacific region. He called on the Obama administration to take the initiative "by introducing a new framework for cooperation with China that recognizes the reality of the two countries' strategic competition, defines key areas of shared interests to work and act on, and thereby begin to narrow the yawning trust gap between the two countries," in part by high-level summitry of the sort that Lieberthal also recommended to Obama. There are yet no signs from Washington that such an initiative is forthcoming, although the new secretary of state, John Kerry, called for a "special relationship" between the United States and China, a concept freighted with positive connotations that is likely to sink of its own weight.

Rudd also writes that "The postwar order in Asia has rested on the presence and predictability of U.S. power, anchored in a network of military alliances and partnerships." This, of course, echoes the American conceit of the postwar role outlined by the U.S. officials cited earlier in this essay, and is open to the same skepticism.

In closing, let me pose the question of whether we possess the imagination to envision

an international order in the Asia-Pacific region that does *not* rest on the dominant presence of American power? Can we envision a stable and peaceful order in which the United States as a Pacific power remains a vital element in a reconfigured balance of power, but no longer seeks to impose its own vision on a diverse region that is unlikely to reach consensus on such contentious issues as domestic governance, human rights, democracy, religious freedom, and so forth? I think we can. Such an order would likely comprise not a single architecture of power, but a series of regional and sub-regional groupings, some primarily economic in nature, others oriented toward issues such as maritime security, and informal and possibly shifting coalitions of large, medium, and small countries that would coalesce to resist the attempt of any would-be hegemonic power, including China, to dominate the region. Such an Asia-centered regional system already exists in embryonic form although its gestation period is likely to be a long one and it may never actually come to term. But if it does, it would spell the end of the post-World War II regional order in the Asia-Pacific region and might function no worse and perhaps better than America's stewardship of the past seventy years.