

Is the Pivot Doomed? The Resilience of America's Strategic 'Rebalance'

U.S. foreign policy is beset by numerous simultaneous crises. In Syria, the Assad regime continues to commit massive human rights abuses, while Islamic State jihadis are seizing territory in Syria and neighboring Iraq. Russia has annexed Crimea and is threatening its neighbors from Ukraine to the Baltics. In Nigeria, Boko Haram is killing students while they sleep and abducting hundreds of young girls to sell into slavery, while the Ebola virus is killing thousands in neighboring West African states. And as if this wasn't enough, in Asia, China is on the march in the South China Sea, North Korea may test another nuclear device, and U.S. allies Japan and South Korea continue to feud over history issues. In light of these challenges, U.S. foreign policy analysts may understandably question the fate of President Obama's signature foreign policy initiative, the 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to the Asia-Pacific.

Concerns no doubt grew deeper when, addressing a conference of defense industry officials on March 4, 2014, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Acquisition Katrina McFarland stated that, owing to budgetary constraints, "right now, the pivot is being looked at again because, candidly, it can't happen."¹ Political opponents of the president—and leaders in China and North Korea who regard the pivot to Asia as a threat to their interests—took this to heart, believing that the Assistant Secretary had, through a slip of the tongue, revealed that the administration's strategy was about to be downgraded. Were they right? Is the pivot doomed?

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In a word, no. The strategy of rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific will endure. This is because the rebalance is a low-cost, durable, fundamentally sound, and strategic policy based on the national interests of the United States. It enjoys widespread support both within the bureaucracy and across much of the

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mainstream political spectrum. For this reason, it is not only likely to be sustained across the remainder of the Obama administration's time in office, but will also likely continue in the succeeding administration, no matter who comes to office in 2016.

This essay looks at what the rebalance is and why it is so widely misunderstood. It then examines why its demise has been so widely, albeit erroneously, predicted. Finally, it explores

the question of what could lead to its abandonment and the real threats to the success of the rebalance to Asia.

What's in a Name?

The pivot, formally rebranded by the administration as the 'rebalance' when European allies fretted that the term 'pivot' suggested that the shift in focus and assets would come at their expense, is a whole-of-government strategy driven from the White House. It is not the policy of a given department or agency, nor of a particular secretary. Given that the administration's own defense officials are sometimes confused as to the policy, it is perhaps not surprising that the strategy is difficult for outsiders to understand. An appropriate starting place for any discussion of the rebalance is to look at the clearest official articulation of the strategy before turning to an examination of its core elements and why it is so often misunderstood.

In a speech to the Asia Society in March 2013, then-National Security Advisor Tom Donilon explained that the rebalance is built around five pillars: closer coordination with the five U.S. treaty allies in Asia (Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines); deepening cooperation and capacity building with emerging powers such as India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Myanmar; forming a "constructive relationship" with China; increasing engagement with the region's multilateral institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asian Summit (EAS); and concluding negotiations on new trade and investment initiatives, most notably the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement.

Since 2009, the administration has taken significant policy steps in each of these areas. For example, the administration has convened its first ever

“two-plus-two” dialogue with Japan, bringing together the two countries’ foreign and defense ministers, agreeing to revise the Guidelines for U.S.–Japan Defense Cooperation, and pushing forward with force posture realignment, in addition to restating the U.S. position that the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands fall under the two countries’ mutual defense treaty. With Australia, the United States has reached an agreement on a rotational deployment of 2500 U.S. Marines per year to Darwin, and the President has made high-profile visits in 2011 and 2014. In the Philippines, the Obama administration has won expanded rotational access to military facilities, and the President visited Manila in 2014. The United States has also improved military ties with former treaty ally New Zealand, removing obstacles to official defense contacts and enabling the two sides to hold joint exercises.

Similarly, in its relations with India, the United States has announced its intention to streamline defense industrial cooperation approval guidelines while expanding arms sales and technology transfer, hosted both ex-Prime Minister Singh and current Prime Minister Modi on state visits, and has announced plans for President Obama to visit New Delhi in early 2015 to attend India’s national Republic Day celebrations as a state guest. With Vietnam, the United States has initiated a major expansion of U.S. defense contacts—including reaching a deal on access to maintenance, repair, and logistical facilities at Cam Ranh Bay for U.S. supply ships—and has lifted its embargo on sales of defense articles. As the regime in Myanmar began a process of limited opening up in 2011, the Obama administration moved to engage it, appointing Derek Mitchell as Special Representative and Policy Coordinator, and sending Secretary Clinton to visit. In November 2012, President Obama made his own trip, and in May 2013 he welcomed President Thein Sein to the White House. As the two sides warmed to each other, the United States normalized diplomatic relations, appointed Special Representative Mitchell to the post of Ambassador, and began lifting economic sanctions. More recently, in November 2014 President Obama visited Myanmar for a second time in connection with the East Asian Summit, speaking out forcefully on behalf of continued opening and reform in that country.

Expanding contacts with China is a third area where the United States has sought to enhance its engagement of the region. In addition to combining the separate Senior Dialogue and Strategic Economic Dialogue mechanisms into the expanded Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), the Obama administration also founded a Strategic Security Dialogue in 2010 to address cyber, space, and nuclear security concerns. People-to-people contacts received a boost in 2009 when President Obama announced the administration’s “100,000 Strong” educational initiative to increase the number of U.S. students studying in

China. The administration has also deepened the military-to-military relationship, despite record levels of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and other tensions in the relationship. Striving to reassure China that the United States does not see future conflict as inevitable, the Obama administration has responded positively to Beijing's proposal that the two sides explore building a "new type of relationship" between an existing power and an emerging one. Reflecting this heightened commitment to a stable relationship, President Obama welcomed Chinese leader Xi Jinping to the Sunnylands Ranch in California in June 2013 for a "shirtsleeves" meeting. He also visited China for a November 2014 summit in Beijing.

Elevating U.S. participation in ASEAN, the East Asian Summit, and other regional institutions and multilateral forums is a fourth area of substantial evolution in U.S. policy. Early in its first term, the Obama administration signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and appointed a permanent ambassador to that

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organization. In 2011, it announced that the United States would commit to fully joining the East Asian Summit. Additionally, on a trip to Thailand in 2009, then-Secretary Clinton announced the formation of the Lower Mekong Initiative, a step that positions the United States to assist Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia in the areas of environment, health, education, and infrastructure development, thereby enhancing U.S. soft power in the region.

Finally, the rebalance has an economic dimension in addition to the diplomatic, defense, and people-to-people aspects noted above. The most important economic initiative is the TPP, a high standard, 21st-century free-trade zone linking together economies that constitute 40 percent of global GDP. The administration's success in encouraging Japan to commit to joining the TPP negotiations in 2013 was a major accomplishment. The administration also succeeded in achieving ratification of the Korea–U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) in 2011 and has expanded trade and investment ties with the rest of Asia as well.

As the above review shows, the pivot or rebalance is a strategy that has been carried out over a period of more than five years across a host of issue areas by a wide array of government agencies and senior officials from the President on down. Yet, if even the President's own top officials sometimes misunderstand or mischaracterize the pivot, it is perhaps not surprising that others do, too. The next section looks at why.

Don't Call It a 'Comeback'

As seen above, public discussion of rebalancing often includes misunderstanding or mischaracterization. This is because of its complex nature, problems in the strategy's initial branding, and the ease of putting metrics to steps in the defense realm compared to the difficulties of measuring advances in diplomacy or economic initiatives. Separately, some observers appear to mischaracterize rebalancing primarily out of a desire to undermine the strategy for reasons of political interest, national interest, or to find a journalistic hook to make a story appear more compelling.

A first challenge is that the steps making up the strategy began to emerge even before the term 'pivot' was articulated. This makes it hard for casual observers who don't follow the region closely to understand just how far back the roots of the strategy reach. For example, by the time Secretary Clinton articulated the view that the United States was returning to Asia in July 2009 in Bangkok, she had already made a trip to the region—she visited Japan, China, South Korea, and Indonesia in February on her first trip abroad as Secretary of State, rather than heading to Europe as had traditionally been the case.

Moreover, the strategy has developed over a wide array of issue areas and over an extended period of time, making it relatively more complicated to assess than a smaller, more time- and functionally-bounded policy initiative. Furthermore, when the strategy was initially rolled out, in addition to the confusion over its name—first the pivot, then the more awkward 'rebalance'—the strategic messaging failed to convey to many observers that the policy was more than just its military components, leading to an overemphasis on security aspects of the strategy.

This leads to a third challenge in understanding the rebalance in its totality, namely the issue of metrics. It is easy to put numbers on the defense aspects of the policy, such as what percentage of ships in the U.S. fleet will be assigned to the Asia-Pacific by 2020 (60 percent); the number of Littoral Combat Ships being sent on rotation to Singapore's Changi Naval Base (4); or how many U.S. Marines will pass through Darwin, Australia, annually on rotation (2,500). By contrast, tracking and assessing the non-military aspects of the pivot is more complicated. For example, it can be difficult for outsiders to know how much progress the United States, Japan, and other TPP negotiating partners have made in their efforts to establish a new trade architecture. Similarly, the impact of signing the ASEAN

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Treaty of Amity and Cooperation is more challenging to gauge than measuring ship counts or numbers of boots on the ground.

Separately, those who oppose the rebalance often mischaracterize it for a variety of reasons, often apparently related primarily to their dislike of the authoring administration or to their focus exclusively on its military dimensions (or both). Political opponents of the Obama administration within the more hawkish wing of the Republican Party have criticized the administration for “under-resourcing” the military dimensions of the pivot. Conservative think-tank analysts have sought to paint the administration as pursuing a “pivot in name only,” while others describe the policy as more “divot” than “pivot” due to a purported mismatch in resources and aims.² Usually left unspoken in such analyses is the fact that much of the reduction in overall U.S. defense expenditures is driven by Tea Party Republicans’ pressure on reducing government spending as a strategy to cut the national debt. The Obama administration has striven to protect the rebalance from the impact of sequestration to as great an extent as possible, with the President’s Defense Strategic Guidance 2012 laying clear priority on continuing to rebalance to the Asia–Pacific so as to be able to “deter and defeat aggression” and “project power despite anti-access/area denial challenges.”³

Separately, U.S. allies and security partners in Europe and the Middle East have voiced fears that, by shifting attention to Asia, the ‘rebalance’ will result in reductions in U.S. attention and resource commitments to their regions. By contrast, China and North Korea—both of which oppose the pivot—have criticized the strategy as threatening or being overly militarized, describing it as fueling regional tensions.⁴ Some analysts have pushed this line of thought, believing the United States should cede more influence in the Asia–Pacific to China as a strategy to avoid conflict, promoting a 19th-century-style ‘spheres of influence’ approach.⁵

Yet, even in the face of the criticisms, denigrations, and hand-wringing of the strategy’s opponents, rebalancing has not only continued to unfold, it has grown stronger over time, both taking on more substance and demonstrating more staying power. Why?

The Resilience of the Rebalance

In its short life, the rebalance has already survived a number of challenges that some observers predicted would kill it, including the various Middle East crises centered on Libya, Iran, and Syria; sequestration and the government shutdown of 2013; and the fallout from Russia’s illegal occupation and annexation of portions of Ukraine. The latest and potentially most serious challenge is the increased prospect of the civil war in Syria sparking a broader regional war that

engulfs Iraq and Iran and others, prompted by the dramatic military offensive by the Islamic State (IS). How did rebalancing come through these crises almost completely unscathed? The strengths of the strategy center primarily on its routine, low-cost, and resilient nature as well as its emphasis on steps that key regional actors support.

Shortly after the pivot was announced, some U.S. analysts expressed concerns that, even if it wanted to, the United States would not be able to avoid being drawn into continuing conflicts in the Middle East. In the case of Libya, the Obama administration was able to leverage select U.S. enabling technologies, such as overhead surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities plus electronic warfare, to suppress Tripoli's air defenses—this provided a mix of European and indigenous forces the support they needed to bring down the Qaddafi regime without having to divert serious attention or capabilities from the rebalance. In the case of Iran, the administration has settled on a diplomatic approach of freezing the Iranian nuclear program while still holding in reserve the possibility of using force; again, the rebalance remained unaffected. On Syria, the administration appeared prepared to move ahead with strikes on the Assad regime until a last-minute deal brokered by Russia promised to remove the chemical weapons from Syria without the use of force. Most recently, the Obama administration has moved ahead with plans to use air power and a very small number of Special Operations Forces to shore up a militarily beleaguered regime in Baghdad so as to take the fight to IS without committing substantial numbers of ground troops to the effort.

Yet, even if these various foreign policy challenges blow up into full-scale military crises, they would at most probably sap only some aspects of the rebalance, most notably the attention of high-level administration officials and the disposition of some key military assets. U.S. diplomatic and multilateral engagement efforts in Asia, outreach to allies, and economic and trade policy initiatives would still proceed apace unaffected.

Critics of the administration's policy point to a second factor that could weaken the rebalance: reductions in defense appropriations associated with sequestration pose a threat to U.S. extended deterrence and war-fighting capabilities. Conservative critics allege that the Obama administration is underfunding, hollowing out, or simply not providing the forces needed to credibly execute the rebalance to Asia. Such analysts cite the President's decision to cancel his trip to Asia during the 2013 government shutdown, arguing that the absence of the United States' top elected official dramatically weakened U.S. influence in Asia. While the President's inability to attend the East Asian Summit in 2013 was indeed unfortunate, regional leaders understood that this was a one-time absence and that the United States would be back in the future. Ultimately, states in the region appear to understand that the U.S.

ship of state will not be thrown off course for long, even by debates over defense budget allocations.

A final issue that some observers worry might derail the rebalance is the resurgence of an aggressive, expansionist Russia. Exemplified by Moscow's decision to infiltrate irregular armed forces to instigate and support an insurrection in Crimea, this analysis suggests that the United States might be drawn back into the active defense of Europe against a predatory nationalistic Russian regime bent on reclaiming 'lost' territories that escaped Moscow's clutches at the fall of the Soviet Union.

A 'Cold War redux' with Russia would no doubt absorb substantial amounts of U.S. senior leadership attention, diplomatic energies, and military resources. Yet, if it were to come to pass, such a development would probably not draw so many resources away to lead the United States to cancel its diplomatic, military, or economic commitments to Asia. Indeed, Russian aggression is most likely to be countered using a mix of sanctions, diplomacy, energy policy cooperation, and selected deployments of key military assets. Specifically, any peacetime reinforcement of U.S. forces for Europe would probably rely primarily on U.S. Army and Air Force assets, with little impact on the Navy or Marine Corps. Such assistance would probably not come out of forces currently dedicated to the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific.

The Rebalance's Kryptonite

Despite the substantial resilience of the rebalance to date, it is not impossible to imagine circumstances under which the strategy as a whole might fail. While many aspects of the pivot have already entered into stable, routine bureaucratic practice and are almost certain to survive in perpetuity, some developments, even if unlikely, could still call into question key pillars of the strategy. If these

Five potential developments would represent a major turn away from the rebalance.

key pillars were to fail, then it is possible that the strategy as a whole might collapse.

At least five such developments would represent a major turn away from the rebalance. The first would be a U.S. decision to draw down its commitments to one or more of its Asian allies as a consequence of a major military threat from China or North Korea—one that led the United States to abandon its treaty partners. A second possibility would be a decision by one or more key

Asian states to request that the United States withdraw its troops, either as a consequence of problems in the bilateral relationship or out of a desire to bandwagon with China. Third, if the United States, implicitly or explicitly,

ceded leadership over the Asia-Pacific to Beijing—perhaps as a consequence of a decision to form a G2 condominium with China to manage the two countries’ strategic rivalry—rebalancing would effectively collapse. A fourth possibility would be the collapse of the TPP negotiations. A fifth potential challenge would be the failure to sustain sufficient defense resource commitments to support the rebalance.

The greatest threat to the rebalance would come from the United States failing to live up to its commitments to its treaty allies in the Asia-Pacific or simply retreating to a ‘Fortress America’ posture of isolationism.

The greatest threat to the rebalance would come from failing to live up to commitments to treaty allies.

While some regional actors worry about the staying power of the United States, Asians by and large do not appear to have concluded that the United States cannot remain preeminent in Asia if it so chooses, and few appear to expect a firm and long-lasting turn toward isolationist retreat. Make no mistake, the region still remembers the Nixon/Guam Doctrine that Asians should bear more of the burden of defending themselves and its eventual abandonment of South Vietnam; remembers the “Nixon shock” attendant upon the opening of relations with China and the consequent severing of official U.S. ties with Taiwan; remembers the efforts of the Carter administration to draw down forces in Korea; and remembers the prospects of a return to the perceived ‘Japan passing’ and ‘South Korea sidelining’ of the Clinton administration’s response to the first North Korean nuclear crisis. Nevertheless, few allies and partners appear to regard these as likely today. Indeed, defense analysts in the United States share the concerns of, and are coordinating on responses with, their Japanese and Filipino colleagues on how to respond to so-called ‘gray zone’ conflicts where non- or para-military forces are used to achieve outcomes without resorting to war. Similarly, the United States and South Korea have jointly developed a Counter-Provocation Strategy to deal with a highly risk-acceptant North Korean regime.

The United States has repeatedly reinforced its low-end and high-end capabilities across the Asia-Pacific in recent years. It is also developing new operational concepts such as Air-Sea Battle, a plan to integrate air and naval forces with other capabilities more effectively to improve responses to advanced military threats in the region. Important steps in the hardware domain that the United States has taken with Japan, for example, include the 2012 agreement to begin replacing U.S. Marine Corps helicopters with the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, the 2013 decision to add an additional AN/TPY-2 X-band radar site in southern Japan, and the late 2013 deployment to Japan of the U.S. Navy’s most

advanced anti-submarine and anti-surface ship patrol and reconnaissance craft, the P-8A Poseidon. Additionally, the United States and Japan have announced plans to deploy two additional Aegis-equipped destroyers by 2017. It deployed Global Hawk UAVs in May 2014. The United States has also expanded joint training with Japan into new military arenas including practicing amphibious assault operations and island re-taking exercises in early 2014.

Similarly, the Obama administration agreed to South Korean requests to delay return of war-time operational control (OPCON) over the South Korean armed forces in 2010 in the wake of repeated North Korean provocations. Additionally, in the aftermath of the North Korean execution of Jang Song-taek, the United States increased its forces on the Korean peninsula, adding approximately 800 additional troops plus new M1A2 tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles to enhance deterrence. During the President's April 2014 visit to Seoul, the United States again agreed to delay wartime OPCON transfer. Together, such moves should help reinforce deterrence on the peninsula, especially if supplemented by the deployment of a Terminal High-Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD) battery currently under consideration.⁶

The Obama administration has also moved to assist Manila in improving its situational awareness and maritime domain surveillance capabilities, and has transferred retired U.S. Coast Guard cutters to the Philippines Navy to help it improve its operational capabilities. More recently, during President Obama's April 2014 trip to Asia, the United States signed an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the Philippines that will ultimately grant U.S. forces rotational access to an as-yet unspecified number of Philippines military installations, as well as the right to preposition equipment and materiel. The United States has also authorized substantial sales of arms to Taiwan including a large upgrade package for Taipei's fleet of F-16s and other hardware and software improvements.

Still, were China to take from Russia's annexation of the Crimea the lesson that it can use force to redraw borders (for example by seizing Taiwan or the Senkakus), it would pose a major challenge for the United States that, if not met, would constitute a failing of the strategy. Similarly, if North Korea were to strike out at Seoul or Tokyo while successfully using nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles to deter a U.S. response, the rebalance would be crippled. If the United States stood on the sidelines and allowed such developments to unfold uncontested, it would effectively be retreating from the Asia-Pacific and abandoning the rebalance.

A second threat to the rebalance would stem from regional actors seeking to push the United States out of the Asia-Pacific. While China is the most prominent actor that might be looking to do this, it would need help from other states in the region. The 1992 expulsion of U.S. forces from the Philippines at

the end of the Cold War is one past example. Another example of a regional actor looking to downgrade U.S. military presence in the region came during the Roh Moo Hyun administration (2003–2008), when progressives in Seoul sought to distance South Korea from the United States. A final development worth noting was the September 2009 victory by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which brought to power an administration headed by Hatoyama Yukio who spoke of wanting to “restrain U.S. political and economic excesses.” He emphasized his desire to pursue what he called “the appropriate path for protecting Japan’s political and economic independence and pursuing our interests in our position between the United States and China.”⁷

If Japan or South Korea asked the United States to withdraw its forces, such a move would strongly undercut the military pillar of the rebalance. While such a development is extremely unlikely, it is not altogether impossible. Such a request could conceivably come about if a new leadership in Tokyo or Seoul sought to establish its security by bandwagoning with China. Alternatively, in the aftermath of a particularly shocking military accident, such as the crash of a U.S. military helicopter in Japan, as happened in Okinawa in both 2004 and 2013 (albeit with no loss of life either time, fortunately), or the June 2002 roadside accident involving a U.S. armored personnel carrier that claimed the lives of two young Korean girls, public sentiment against basing U.S. forces in Japan or South Korea could rise dramatically. Similarly, a string of serious criminal actions by U.S. service members, similar to the 1995 Okinawan rape case or the March 2013 air gun incident in Seoul, could turn Japanese or Korean publics sharply against continued hosting of U.S. forces.

A third threat to the rebalance could come from a decision by Washington to cede regional leadership to China. The United States could simply decide to withdraw from its commitments and call its forces home from the Asia–Pacific. If the U.S. economy were to face a further significant setback, it is possible that voters would elect to high office politicians—currently represented primarily by the libertarian, Tea Party wing of the Republican Party—who view U.S. global leadership, military operations, and overseas security commitments with deep skepticism. Such a perspective would also appeal to some segments of the Democratic Party, which would prefer to focus scarce U.S. budgetary resources on domestic initiatives to improve infrastructure, health care, education, and social welfare.

Separately, Washington could pull back from the region as part of a strategy to manage growing tensions with China. Facing growing tensions with a nuclear-armed, ‘near peer’ China burgeoning in overall economic size, the United States might decide to manage this strategic problem through bandwagoning, appeasement, or the formation of a G2 condominium. Such a

strategy, while perhaps unlikely, is by no means without precedent in world affairs, and might look something like a return to, or an expanded version of, the 1970's *détente* with the Soviet Union, with cooperation in certain policy arenas being bought at the price of a tacit or explicit acknowledgement of spheres of influence.

Most Asian observers dislike or fear such an outcome, and such a development would run counter to the emphasis on reinforcing a rules-based international order that the Obama administration has emphasized and that appears to enjoy substantial bipartisan respect in the United States. Indeed, anxieties among Asian observers about the reliability of the United States in the face of challenges from China have been a constant theme during the Obama administration's time in office. These have ranged from questions about whether or not the administration supported former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski's proposal that the United States and China form a G2;⁸ to concerns about the inclusion of language in a joint statement issued at the end of the Obama visit to China in 2009, suggesting the United States would "respect" Beijing's expansive notion of its "core interests";⁹ and including the administration's decision to respond positively to talk about moving to "operationalize" China's proposal to build a "new type of great power relationship."¹⁰

Another variant of the U.S. withdrawal scenario would see the United States reduce its presence and leadership role in Asia or trade away various commitments (such as its implicit willingness to defend Taiwan) in exchange for steps by China to manage key international challenges (such as nuclear proliferation by North Korea or Iran). While such moves are highly unlikely at present, some observers have proposed considering them, a move almost all serious observers of U.S. Asia policy reject.¹¹

The failure of the TPP represents a fourth possible development that would weaken one of the critical pillars of the rebalance. Since the mid-2013 decision

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by Tokyo to join the TPP talks, negotiations have been ongoing but have yet to reach a successful conclusion. The negotiation partners missed their stated goal of concluding the talks by the end of 2013 as well as the possibility of cinching a deal during the Obama visit to Japan in April 2014, largely over Tokyo's desire to retain protective tariffs around five "sacred categories" of products

(rice, barley and wheat, sugar, dairy products, and pork and beef). The concerns of U.S. Democratic senators about political vulnerabilities stemming from trade liberalization votes has been widely seen as limiting the prospects of the TPP.

The Obama administration, which would almost certainly require the Senate to re-authorize Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) in order to pass the TPP, received a set-back in January 2014 when then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) restated his opposition to any such deal, leading Michael Auslin of *The Wall Street Journal* to proclaim the “slow death” of the pivot.¹² Since the mid-term elections of 2014, however, there have been some positive signs from both incoming Senate Finance Chairman Orrin Hatch and from President Obama about their shared desire to pass Trade Promotion Authority so as to conclude the TPP agreement, though opposition from Tea Party Republicans and pro-labor groups who support Democrats could still pose an obstacle.¹³

While the failure to cinch an early agreement on the TPP might delay an important component of the rebalance, more substantial damage would come from Japan deciding to abandon the TPP negotiations or South Korea moving to withdraw from the KORUS FTA, both steps that are unlikely but not impossible and would appeal to select actors in the two countries. Similarly, a decision by either government to prioritize a more China-centered economic strategy by completing negotiations on the proposed China–Japan–Korea (CJK) FTA and/or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), both of which exclude the United States, would also damage the rebalance.

A fifth area that could weaken the rebalance would be if the U.S. Congress were to fail to appropriate sufficient resources to carry out the defense components of the strategy. Alternatively, if the administration were to decide to allocate substantial portions of its current and/or projected defense assets elsewhere over an extended period of time, such as to the Middle East or Europe, the rebalance would probably fall short of expectations and would be dramatically weakened. While the currently existing force posture in the Asia–Pacific already enables the U.S. military to provide substantial operational capabilities and combat power, regional actors have been led to believe that more is on the way, and these expectations help define a useful metric for measuring the impact of the rebalance.

It is worth noting, however, that while the administration has talked about or taken a small number of steps in the defense realm associated with the rebalance, it has been careful not to make clear exactly what development, acquisition, and procurement decisions would directly flow from the strategy. As such, it is extremely difficult for outsiders to evaluate what capabilities the United States might have anticipated developing and deploying that it might subsequently feel forced to delay or cancel altogether. Since the development of major weapons systems usually requires an extremely lengthy lead-time, it is unclear at present that any system originally conceived of in the context of the rebalance has actually been cancelled.

The Future of the Rebalance

Most of the key aspects of the rebalance will probably survive for years or even decades to come.

As this essay has argued, the rebalance is almost certain to survive in many, and probably even most, of its key aspects for years or even decades to come. The cost of the rebalance is low, while its expected return on investment is high. The ASEAN ambassadorship, for example, doesn't cost much, presents substantial opportunities to give the United States voice and sway in an increasingly geostrategically important region, and is welcomed by regional states. Similarly, many aspects of the policy have entered into standard bureaucratic routine. For example, the United States is not going to pull out of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, nor stop attending the East Asian Summit out of concerns for cost or owing to a change in administration. Likewise, even a more nativist or isolationist future U.S. administration would probably still continue the Lower Mekong Initiative and the 100,000 Strong program, and would be unlikely to reinstate the bans on New Zealand defense vessels visiting U.S. Navy and Coast Guard installations that were lifted in 2013.

Even the most costly aspects of the strategy—the U.S. force posture changes and new capabilities being deployed to the region—will not necessarily come undone just because a new administration takes office. Indeed, if that administration is headed by the most likely Democratic candidate for the presidency, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the U.S. commitment to the Asia-Pacific may deepen even further. Likewise, if a traditional Republican candidate from the more hawkish wing of the party were to win the election, resources for defense might increase and trade deals might become easier to conclude. Moreover, if the TPP negotiations are successfully concluded during the remaining years of the Obama administration, any succeeding administration would be highly unlikely to abandon such an arrangement.

In conclusion, the rebalance is very likely to survive in almost all its most important aspects even after the current administration passes into the history books. It reflects a sensible strategy, is carried out by numerous departments, has low resource requirements, and serves core U.S. national interests. So long as Americans continue to attach value to the opportunity to engage with Asia economically, remain committed to U.S. alliances with regional states, and desire to play a leading role in shaping the region's fate, the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific is likely to endure.

Notes

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