

The Reality of the So-Called Pivot to Asia

by Joshua A. Parker and David A. Anderson

Shortly after President Obama took office in 2009, it became clear he wanted to shift U.S. foreign policy focus away from the Middle East to Asia. His immediate goal was withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq and gradually bringing an end to U.S. troop commitments in Afghanistan. As those objectives were met, he planned to invest more effort into the Asia-Pacific region, in what would become known as the Asia pivot or rebalance. The pivot was designed to demonstrate a whole-of-government shift of U.S. foreign policy efforts to the Asia-Pacific region. The Administration appeared motivated to conduct the pivot as a result of the aggregation of four specific developments: (1) the winding down of U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; (2) the growing economic importance of the Asia-Pacific area, particularly China, to the country's economic future; (3) China's increasing military capabilities and assertiveness to claims of disputed maritime territory that threatened U.S. freedom of navigation and its ability to project power in the region; and (4) federal budget cuts that created the perception of waning U.S. commitment to the region. The pivot would reassure U.S. allies and partners in the region.¹

This shift in focus to the Asia-Pacific was formally established in 2011. However, it did not gain much attention until U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's "America's Pacific Century" article appeared in the November 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy* and President Obama reinforced the idea in remarks to the Australian Parliament in Canberra later that same month. Both maintained that influence in Asia is important to U.S. national security interests. Clinton specifically stressed the importance of a whole-of-government approach, including diplomatic, economic, military, and strategic efforts.²

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The pivot strategy called for meeting six key objectives that involved constantly sending the entire range of diplomatic, economic, and military assets to all corners of the region. The first objective was to strengthen bilateral security alliances, specifically with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The second objective was to improve

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relationships with the emerging powers, most notably China, India, Indonesia, Singapore, New Zealand, Malaysia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Brunei, and the Pacific Island countries. The third objective was to engage in regional multilateral institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. The fourth objective was to expand trade and investments throughout the region, ideally through the development of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), by bringing many of the region's nations into one single trading community. The fifth objective was to increase U.S. military presence and activities in the region. Finally, the sixth objective was to advance democracy and human rights in the region.³

Over the last four years, many would argue the rebalance to Asia has not received the prescribed, whole-of-government attention originally envisioned by Secretary Clinton and President Obama. Pundits contend that the Obama Administration has been too distracted by other prevailing global issues that have marginalized a possible inclusive scheme. This article investigates whether there has been a balanced and fruitful approach by assessing the

use of the government's diplomatic, military, and economic instrument options in achieving the Asian pivot objectives outlined by President Obama.

Diplomatic Efforts

There are numerous challenges that many nations across the region share, including transnational crime, climate change, human trafficking, and maritime disputes. These regional problems are most effectively dealt with when addressed through multilateral organizations at a regional level. In 2011, the U.S. took action to increase its involvement in numerous multilateral institutions. Most notably, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of East Asian Pacific Affairs created a new Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Multilateral Affairs and a new U.S. ambassador position to the ASEAN.⁴ Following this, the Administration raised participation in the East Asian Summit to Head of State level and the ASEAN Regional Forum to the Secretary of State level by signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. In 2012, Clinton participated in the Pacific Islands Forum, which was the highest U.S. level of participation to that point.⁵ As a measurement of the Administration's overall commitment to the pivot, official government travel to the region among key officials saw Clinton conducting more trips to the region than her predecessor. However, Obama and his other major cabinet officials travelled to the region less frequently (52 trips vs. 57 trips) as did the second Bush Administration officials.⁶

The amount of dollars spent is another effective way to assess the Administration's diplomatic commitment to the pivot. Here again, the Obama Administration demonstrates little added commitment to the pivot through diplomatic funding. For example, the fiscal year 2015 budget request for the East Asia and Pacific Bureau's diplomatic engagement only accounts for 8 percent of all regional bureaus

and is second-to-last of the six regional bureaus for funding. Even more telling is that the funding for the East Asia and Pacific Bureau has decreased almost 12 percent since its height in 2011.⁷ This is very telling considering the region encompasses the largest population and the second largest gross domestic product and two-way trade with the U.S. It is hard to imagine that there would be a decrease in funding to the bureau if the Obama Administration was truly committed to the pivot.

Other budgetary issues are also telling. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has the means to assist with development projects in a large number of countries throughout the region that are eligible to receive development aid. With a renewed focus on Asia, it would seem logical that USAID development project funding would increase. However, that has not been the case. The 2015 budget for U.S. development funding in the region was reduced to 2010 budget levels (a figure from the year prior to the pivot).⁸ In fact, worthy endeavors such as the Lower Mekong Initiative, a project spearheaded by Clinton in 2011 as part of the development program to improve the environment, education, women's rights, and infrastructure in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, and eventually Burma in 2012, was simply funded by reallocating money from other projects in the region.⁹ Examples like this show that the region is not getting the "new" money that it needs—the Administration is merely "robbing Phan to pay Phung."¹⁰

Furthermore, the State Department funding for public diplomacy saw no change from 2010 to 2013. It had a slight increase in 2014 and then leveled off again in 2015. Public diplomacy funding covers such things as scholarships and grants (e.g., the Fulbright Program). There was an approximate 7,000 student decrease in non-Chinese Asians studying in the U.S. between academic years 2009–2010 and 2012–2013 and a modest reduction of some 232 U.S. students

studying in non-Chinese Asian countries between 2009–2010 and 2011–2012.¹¹

On a somewhat optimistic note, some U.S. civilian agencies have increased their foreign deployed staff to East Asia. USAID increased its personnel in the region from 84 in 2008 to 183 in 2013. The 183 personnel figure still only accounts for 11 percent of all foreign-based USAID personnel. However, USAID did open new missions in Burma and Papua New Guinea, a positive action. During the same period, the Treasury Department increased its staff from 3 to 10, again only accounting for a sparse 17 percent of its global staff abroad. The Departments of Commerce and Agriculture had better total numbers. The Commerce Department increased its personnel from 78 to 91, totaling 41 percent of foreign staff, while the Department of Agriculture slightly decreased its staffing from 59 to 55, totaling 31 percent of its foreign deployed staff.¹²

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Military Efforts

The military response to the rebalance has been the most visible portion of the pivot. The Department of Defense (DoD) has moved significantly faster than the majority of the U.S. interagency organizations in reallocating resources to the region.¹³ This comes as no surprise. The U.S. has been the dominant Pacific region power since the end of World War II, and the recent, rapid rise of China is of growing concern. Not only does China have the second largest economy in the world, it has put significant effort into modernizing its military,

evident by an average increase in defense spending of 12 percent a year.¹⁴ In fact, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute predicts that by 2035, China will pass the U.S. in defense spending.¹⁵ The three most significant aspects of China's military modernization are the development of its Navy, the growth in its ballistic and cruise missile capabilities, and the technological advancement of the People's Liberation Army Air Force.¹⁶

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China's purpose behind these three initiatives is to gain the capabilities to deter or counter third-party interventions in regional incidents. Commonly referred to as anti-access/area denial, these capabilities are designed to control access and freedom of operations in different portions of the maritime and air domains, in addition to space and cyberspace. The realities of its anti-access/area denial strategy lead to increasingly high-tech, long-range, anti-ship cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, air-to-ground missiles, air-to-air missiles, and kinetic and non-kinetic counter space systems. Furthermore, China is making significant strides in electronic warfare capabilities.¹⁷ In sum, China's anti-access/area denial efforts are focused on establishing a potential "no go zone" to restrict the U.S.'s ability to project power inside the First Island Chain and to freely use bases located near Chinese territory.¹⁸

As a response to potential anti-access/area denial threats toward the U.S., DoD constructed a new operational concept as part of the core element to the military efforts of the pivot.¹⁹ The new concept is referred to as

Air-Sea Battle, and though the details of the concept remain classified, the general idea is to focus on integrating air and naval capabilities intended to maintain the ability to project military power, even if potential adversaries are utilizing an advanced anti-access/area denial strategy. The idea of a new operational concept was first officially announced in the 2010 U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review, but it was not defined as Air-Sea Battle until 2011 when it was announced by then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.²⁰ Even though the concept was initiated prior to the official announcement of the Asia pivot, it quickly morphed into one of DoD's initial efforts at achieving the strategic purposes of the pivot, to include maintaining U.S. dominance in the Asia Pacific region and reassuring the Asian allies of U.S. commitment.

Even though the Air-Sea Battle concept is heavily supported by the U.S. Navy and Air Force and has been endorsed by the Pentagon, the Administration has yet to approve it because Congress and both the U.S. Marine Corps and Army have put up resistance to its authorization. Much of that resistance is a result of budget issues stemming from the concept. According to recent reports, DoD is planning on spending almost \$268 billion between 2010 and 2016 on research, development, and procurement related to Air-Sea Battle.²¹ Most of that money would be devoted to the Air Force and the Navy at the expense of the Marine Corps and Army budgets.

Even with the planned overall reduction in defense spending, the U.S. will maintain a strong presence in the Asia-Pacific region as highlighted in Obama's November 2011 speech to the Australian Parliament:

As we consider the future of our armed forces, we've begun a review that will identify our most important strategic interests and guide our defense priorities and spending over the coming decade. So here is what this region must know. As we end today's wars, I have directed my national security team to

make our presence and mission in the Asia Pacific a top priority. As a result, reductions in U.S. defense spending will not—I repeat, will not—come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific.²²

The most notable military action has been the U.S.-Australia agreement to eventually base 2,500 U.S. Marines in Darwin, Australia. As of 2012, a company-size element of Marines began rotating through a pre-existing Australian military facility at Darwin for approximately six months at a time. Throughout the rotations, the force has gradually gotten bigger, and the current rotation consists of 1,177 Marines.²³ These Marines are part of a Marine Expeditionary Unit that is designed to act as a regional quick reaction force, deployed and ready for an immediate response to any crisis. With the Marines based in Darwin, the U.S. will be able to respond much quicker than previously. Additionally, the U.S. and Australia have announced plans for increased access of the Royal Australian Air Force facilities by the U.S. military. Lastly, Australia agreed to give the U.S. Navy more access to Australia's Indian Ocean navy base HMAS Stirling in the vicinity of Perth.²⁴

Singapore has agreed to allow a continual deployment of up to four U.S. littoral combat ships to base out of its Changi Naval Base. These vessels are a class of comparatively small surface ships intended for operations close to the shore that can defeat anti-access and asymmetric threats in littoral zones. For example, in 2013, the USS Freedom completed a ten-month deployment in the region, and the USS Fort Worth is currently in the middle of a 16-month deployment.²⁵ These forward-deployed ships also provide a rapid response force, help build partner capacity, and contribute to naval readiness.

The U.S.-Philippine alliance also continues to be a source of regional stability. Building on the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement was signed

by the U.S. and the Philippines governments in April 2014. The agreement calls for increased rotational presence of up to 500 U.S. military personnel and boosted security cooperation activities in the Philippines, as the country moves from its focus on internal to external security defense.²⁶

The U.S.-Japan alliance is also continuing to grow. Specifically, Japan's 2013 National Security Strategy and the July 2014 cabinet decision on expanding its roles in collective defense are positive steps in assuming a stronger role in maintaining regional security. Additionally, December 2014 witnessed the signing of the U.S.-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement, where all participants agreed to increase their transparency with information regarding the North Korean missile and nuclear threats. Lastly, the U.S. helped Japan bolster the region's missile defense capabilities against North Korea by providing two additional AEGIS destroyers, for a total of eight ballistic missile-defense-capable platforms, and in December 2014 provided a second AN/TPY-2 long-range radar system. Those added capabilities, in addition to a recent installment of a Terminal High Altitude Area

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Defense System, will be vital in protecting important regional nodes from ballistic missile and anti-access/area denial adversary activities.²⁷

Overall, the DoD has begun increasing the military presence in the Asia Pacific region and by 2020 plans to have 60 percent of the U.S. Navy's forces in the region.²⁸ Part of that Navy plus-up included swapping out the USS George Washington aircraft carrier with the upgraded

USS Ronald Reagan in Japan in 2014. The U.S. military has also increased its rotations and deployments of E-3 Airborne Warning and Control Systems, E-8 Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar Systems, and E-2D Advanced Hawkeyes in the region.²⁹

In addition to adding more military assets to the region, U.S. military services have also fielded new systems and concepts for employing a credible force in the region. Some examples include replacing the P-3 maritime patrol aircraft with the more sophisticated P-8s and making preparations for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighters deployment by building maintenance hubs in Australia and Japan.³⁰

However, one of the more notable concepts is the U.S. Army Pacific's Pacific Pathways concept, which is designed to demonstrate a larger global response and a regionally-engaged Army. Pacific Pathways uses an Army unit of approximately 500 to 600 Soldiers and links three consecutive bilateral training exercises with three separate Asian nations into one

single exercise events with separate trips in and out of the region for each exercise.³¹ The goal is to conduct three Pacific Pathway deployments a year (each with three events) with three separate countries, which will greatly increase the U.S.'s expanded presence in the region.

Economic Efforts

Most recent U.S. economic efforts in the Asia-Pacific region have been focused on bilateral trade arrangements, such as the 2012 Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, Bilateral Investment Treaty consultations with India and China, U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, and Trade and Investment Framework Agreement negotiations with Taiwan. However, from January 2012 through May 2015, annual trade figures between Asia and the U.S. were eerily flat. The most notable difference since the announced pivot in November 2011 has been the percent of the annual U.S. trade deficit with Asia. It increased from a minus 34.4 percent in 2011 to a minus 36.7 percent in 2015.³² Further concerning is that the U.S. Trade Representative traveled to Asia only eight times during Obama's first term, compared to 23 and 18 times respectively for the Bush Administration's first and second terms.³³

By far the biggest and most comprehensive current effort for the economic component of the pivot is focused around the TPP, a proposed regional free trade agreement that has the potential to become the largest such agreement ever developed. The U.S. is currently leading negotiations with eleven other potential member states throughout the Pacific Rim: Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. These twelve countries account for approximately 40 percent of the global economy, which would make the TPP the largest of any free trade agreement in recent years.³⁴ Those involved in the negotiations describe the TPP as a "comprehensive and high-standard" agreement

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event. For example, the first Pacific Pathway deployment was in 2014, where one Army unit based out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA, conducted consecutive training/exercise events in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Japan. The Pacific Pathway units are tailored specifically for the exercises, but during the prolonged deployment of four to five months, they are also capable of responding to any potential crisis in the area. With a reduced defense budget, the consecutive country deployments with only one trip in and out of the Pacific region saves considerable transportation costs, as opposed to conducting

with the goal of liberalizing trade and services that includes rules-based commitments that go beyond the currently established World Trade Organization regulations.

The Obama Administration lists numerous reasons for pursuing the TPP, but the primary goals are job promotion and economic growth in the U.S. and Asia-Pacific. More specifically, the Administration wants to “unlock opportunities for American manufactures, workers, service providers, farmers, and ranchers—to support job creation and wage growth.”³⁵ According to the U.S. Trade Representative, the TPP would account for 37 percent of all U.S. exports and could produce up to 4 million jobs in the U.S.³⁶ Additionally, it would provide new market access for services and goods, strong labor and environmental standards, new rules to ensure fair competition between private companies and state-owned enterprises, and substantial intellectual property rights to encourage innovation.³⁷ The TPP has been in development for the past four years and has become increasingly controversial, especially in domestic political circles. Even China has expressed minimal interest in joining; China seems more focused on promoting its own proposed regional trade agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Pact. With all ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, plus South Korea, Japan, India, New Zealand, and Australia already signed up, the Pact could challenge the TPP.

The Peterson Institute for International Economics projects moderate U.S. net gains in a multitude of different TPP scenarios. The best-case scenario with TPP participation from South Korea and Japan alone is a projected U.S. net gain of \$36 billion, which compared to the U.S.’s \$17 trillion economy is not a significant game changer. However, as most other studies show, the gains would not be evenly spread out across the U.S. economy. The U.S. manufacturing sector would see a \$44 billion drop, the mining and agricultural sector would see a near zero

gain, with the service sector being the clear winners with a projected \$79 billion gain, offsetting the negative manufacturing losses.³⁸ The Peterson Institute also points out that free trade agreements normally result in offshoring of U.S. manufacturing and service sector jobs, inexpensive import products, and generally less bargaining leverage for the labor force.³⁹ With the TPP potentially absorbing additional countries in the future, to include China, many argue the likely threat to U.S. jobs would be even larger. The TPP is not a foregone conclusion. Many of the possible member states (including the U.S.) remain apprehensive about the economic value of the partnership, while many others fear the possibility of China’s economic reprisal to those joining. The questionable viability of the proposed partnership, when coupled with flat trade figures between Asia and the U.S. since 2011, call into question the substantive appropriateness of the Obama Administration’s economic efforts in conducting the pivot.

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Conclusion

The Obama Administration’s pivot strategy has been notably unbalanced. While the desire has been to pursue a whole-of-government approach, the military component has overshadowed economic and diplomatic efforts. This manifestation has antagonized China, who sees the pivot as largely a U.S. military strategy of containment or encroachment. China has responded by accelerating its military expansion and modernization efforts. U.S. involvement in multilateral organizations in the region, more specifically, adding a U.S. ambassador to ASEAN and raising U.S. participation in the

East Asian Summit to Head of State level, are certainly positive actions. Unfortunately, funding and personnel devoted to diplomacy in the region has generally decreased since the announcement of the pivot.

Finally, having so much of the U.S. economic effort centered on a successful TPP agreement has been problematic. Even if all interested parties join the TPP, the value-added to the U.S. economy and U.S. interests throughout the Asia-Pacific is at best uncertain. What is known is that China has responded to TPP efforts with a proposed competing regional trade partnership of its own consisting of many of the nations considering the TPP. This outcome cannot be seen as serving the regional interests of the U.S. In fact, it directly competes with U.S. economic interests. The U.S. needs to rethink its pivot strategy in meeting its regional objectives before it further erodes U.S.-China relations and precariously positions its regional allies (politically, economically, and militarily) between its own interests and China's. A more diverse and truly balanced approach is in order. **IAJ**

NOTES

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