

PART THREE



Sustaining the Rebalance



SHOULD WE CHANGE OUR SECURITY APPROACH IN ASIA?

Two years after the Obama administration announced its “pivot” to Asia, Fellow Zack Cooper sat down with Michael J. Green, senior vice president for Asia and Japan Chair, Christopher K. Johnson, Freeman Chair in China Studies, and Victor Cha, Korea Chair, to discuss whether the United States has the right security approach to the region.

ZACK COOPER: How would you evaluate the “rebalance” now that we’re two years in?

MICHAEL GREEN: I would give the Pentagon good marks for engagement with Southeast Asia. Secretary Hagel has been there twice already and cooperation with the regional militaries in both bilateral and multilateral spheres is increasing rapidly. But Southeast Asia is the easier problem, since everybody wants more of us but nobody wants a heavy footprint. I do not think the administration is making comparable traction yet in Northeast Asia, which is a much harder problem.

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON: I agree with Mike. The rebalance has reassured our allies and friends in the region. But China is strongly signaling its intent to ramp up its engagement with its neighbors, especially in the economic, trade, and military-to-military spheres. If one of the goals of the rebalance is to reassure China that our strategy is not aimed at containing them, while at the same time influencing their actions in such a way as to get them to comply with commonly accepted international rules and norms, I think the track record is much more mixed. I don't think the rebalance has had much impact in fundamentally reshaping China's broad strategy in the region.

GREEN: I'm not sure the "pivot" or "rebalance" was about Northeast Asia originally. In Southeast Asia, they want us over the horizon, but in Northeast Asia our Japanese and Korean allies want us to have the ability to fight and win. And both allies face increasingly complex threat environments, including North Korea's nuclear break-out and Chinese operational coercion in the East China Sea.

JOHNSON: In fact, the rebalance has so far failed to address China's success in fundamentally altering the status quo in both the East and South China Seas. It is clear that it's going to take more than a few littoral combat ships in Singapore and some Marines in Darwin to meaningfully impact China's security calculus. Secretary Clinton's intervention at the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2010 put the Chinese on their back foot, but we must now follow through to sustain that pressure.

VICTOR CHA: The rebalance deserves high marks for making a clear declaration that America's strategic priorities are shifting to Asia, but the key test for its success is follow-through. Aside from the implementation of some agreements on basing and trade from the previous administration, there have not

been new security initiatives to accompany the pivot. Many in the region are still wondering whether this declaration of a pivot might fall the way of past ones dating back centuries in which Washington declared a "new Pacific era," and then promptly forgot about it.

COOPER: Certainly the sequester environment makes it harder to convince allies and competitors of our enduring presence?

GREEN: Sequestration casts a large shadow. Our allies in Northeast Asia will notice if we go from 11 to 7 carriers over the next decade. Throw in the fact that we need to reassure Beijing that we don't really want a fight in the first place, and the puzzle is very complex. It is reassuring, though, to hear that U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine assets will be weighted to the Pacific. On the other hand, there is a narrative building in the region that President Obama is not keeping the same focus on Asia in his second term, an impression that could get worse now that the government shutdown forced him to cancel his participation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit and East Asia Summit in early October.

CHA: Asian suspicions about the "un-pivot" were confirmed by Obama's no-show for the dual Asian summits in October. It is harmful because it underscores an American pattern of inconsistency. In March 2010, the president canceled an Asia trip two days before his departure because of the healthcare reform bill. Three months later, he canceled another trip because of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. What the region sees is an America lacking the capacity to sustain regular engagement in the Asia-Pacific. It is difficult for the United States to be perceived as a leader if we are not seen as dependable.

Important work could have been done on this most recent trip. Obama needed to sell a not-yet-completed trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership,

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which could add over \$70 billion per annum to the U.S. economy by 2025. He needed to strategize with Beijing and Seoul on how to rein in North Korea. He needed to send deterrence messages to China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. He needed to calm the waters between his two key Asian allies, Japan and Korea. John Kerry admirably stood in for Obama on these and other tasks, but at these summits if you are out of sight, you are out of mind. This was wholly apparent in the leadership group photo for APEC, where the secretary was placed in the back row corner while Chinese leader Xi stood front and center next to the Indonesian host.

COOPER: Do the leadership changes in China, Japan and South Korea provide more of an opportunity to strike this balance between reassurance and deterrence?

CHA: People say leadership changes offer the opportunity to “reset” relations. But you only have to reset what is not working. And relations with these three countries have for the most part been working. The biggest challenge in the near-term is not forging bilateral alliance ties, but forging better Japan-ROK ties.

GREEN: I agree with Victor that maintaining constructive Japan-ROK relations is essential to U.S. interests in Northeast Asia. Japan’s prime minister need not be an obstacle to this. Abe provides the potential for the quality the Japanese most desperately need in their leaders—longevity. We need a strong Japan, and Abe is already opening up new opportunities for closer defense cooperation with Washington through his plans to recognize Japan’s right of collective self-defense under the UN Charter. But while initial U.S. apprehension about Abe’s ideology has ebbed as his government has focused on pragmatic steps to grow the economy, Seoul seems to have hardened its views towards Japan. This will be a real dilemma for the United States going forward.

CHA: Abe is rebuilding the reservoir of trust in the U.S.-Japan alliance that had been depleted in recent years. In Korea’s case, I think South Korea’s president only reinforces her predecessor’s commitment to the U.S. alliance. The question is what can Abe and Park do together? Relations with Xi remain more of a work-in-progress. The key metric of success will be cooperation on North Korea, intellectual property, and cyber.

JOHNSON: The jury is still out on exactly how China has changed its North Korea policy, but it is clear that there is a different approach under Xi that may be more in line with U.S. interests. There is also significant movement on the security dynamic between the United States and China. Xi has made clear to the PLA that mil-to-mil relations must improve. The two sides are creating more normalized defense ties by signing new agreements that emphasize working-level cooperation and interaction. All of this is good news, provided we remain clear-eyed in understanding that China’s actions may have more to do with Xi’s internal political calculations than with maintaining healthy Sino-U.S. relations

COOPER: You mentioned North Korea. This is obviously one of the continuing security challenges in Asia, along with the potential for conflict in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Do you see multilateral fora playing any role in managing crises going forward?

CHA: Not really based on the past record. In CSIS's recent survey of Asian elites, the overwhelming majority said they'd look to themselves or partners like the United States over established multilateral groups like APEC or ASEAN to solve real problems. To the extent that multilateral groups pool common crisis response resources like in the 2004 Tsunami, then these typically form around pre-existing bilateral relationships. The greatest role these groups play is in fostering transparency and establishing norms. I just don't see how you manage a crisis without a lead power moving the group forward.

GREEN: The most impressive multilateral forum in Asia right now is the youngest. That's the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus that brought Secretary Hagel out to the region recently. ARF is interesting because it imposes an influence cost on any big power that gets too pushy. The Six Party Talks on North Korea are looking pretty tattered, but do point to the eventual need for a Northeast Asian security forum of some kind. I think trilaterals like the U.S.-Australia-Japan Trilateral Security Dialogue are an undervalued mechanism to build trust and patterns of cooperation that endure through times of crisis, but those are based on U.S. bilateral alliances, of course.

JOHNSON: I'm skeptical of using multilateral fora to shape sustainable solutions to crises. China can manipulate ASEAN when it really matters, and the member states collectively are struggling to dissuade China from pursuing bilateral negotiations with the other claimant countries in the South China Sea. Similarly, I don't see Tokyo being willing to accept a multilateral approach to resolving the East China Sea dispute. Still, there

are intriguing signs that Xi Jinping is allowing more internal debate on pursuing a binding Code of Conduct with ASEAN. If realized, this could mark a meaningful shift in China's approach to multilateral diplomacy.

COOPER: So what more should Washington be doing to strengthen our security approach to Asia?

GREEN: Three things. First, we have to get out of the sequestration bind so that the Pentagon can actually match resources to strategy. Second, the Pentagon has to decide what they want our big alliances with Japan and Korea to look like. Abe is ready to do more, so now the burden falls on the administration. Meanwhile, President Park's government in Seoul is getting anxious about accepting wartime operational command in 2015 from the United States as planned, but the administration does not want to reopen the issue. We need to get off autopilot and pivot to Northeast Asian security too. And third, finish TPP and get it through Congress. America's role in Asia depends on the Navy, but rises and falls with trade.

CHA: I think the United States can be more present in the region with a special focus on alliances and partners. We should place a higher priority on U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral coordination and consolidation. U.S. leaders can reach a framework agreement on TPP. And finally, the United States can finish base consolidation agreements in Japan and Korea.

JOHNSON: I would just add two additional thoughts. First, we should be talking less and doing more. Much of the hard work needed to properly implement the rebalance will best be done quietly. Second, the United States needs to try to better define specific roles for individual countries based on their niche capabilities. Without U.S. leadership to design a suite of capabilities based on countries' individual strengths, it will be impossible to develop the holistic security net that the rebalance was intended to realize. ►