

# Asian Perceptions of the Rebalance

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**Three years have passed since President Barack Obama announced the U.S. “rebalance” to Asia.**

A recent CSIS survey found that 79 percent of strategic elites in Asia support the rebalance, with opposition mainly coming from China where only 23 percent were in support. Yet, as enthusiastic as most Asian observers are about a renewed U.S. focus on their region, the rebalance or “pivot” to Asia has been overshadowed by doubts regarding the administration’s ability to follow through. In the CSIS survey, 51 percent of elites questioned whether the rebalance has been effectively resourced or implemented. Concerns center on three questions.

First, can the administration and the Congress reach agreement on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)? At present, the core of the negotiations between Japan and the United States have broken down over about five remaining issues, with Washington blaming Japanese intransigence and Tokyo blaming the Obama administration’s unwillingness to seek Congressional Trade Promotion Authority (TPA). TPP is seen in the region as an indispensable cornerstone for building an open and inclusive trans-Pacific economic architecture going forward.

Second, does the United States have the willpower to counter increasing evidence of coercion in the region? Chinese mercantile and paramilitary coercion against claimant states in the East and South China Seas and North Korea’s ongoing nuclear weapons and missile programs have caused regional allies and partners to carefully watch the U.S. defense budget and the U.S. responses to the crises in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine. On the one hand, they worry that renewed U.S. involvement in the

Middle East or Europe will undercut the rebalance to Asia; but on the other hand, they worry about Washington’s lack of demonstrated resolve in these cases and the signal this sends for Asia.

Third, what is the administration’s bottom line in Asia? Is the objective of the rebalance a “new model of great power relations” with China—as the administration has announced at various points, to the chagrin of allies and partners like Japan or India that are relegated to non-great power status by Beijing? Or is the objective to strengthen security

and economic partnerships with states under pressure from China, which Beijing views as a new form of containment? The success of the rebalance depends in large measure on how credibly and consistently the United States articulates its own role in shaping a future regional order.

## **IS THE OBJECTIVE OF THE REBALANCE A “NEW MODEL OF GREAT POWER RELATIONS” WITH CHINA OR IS IT TO STRENGTHEN SECURITY AND ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH STATES UNDER PRESSURE FROM CHINA?**

While these questions percolate around the U.S. rebalance, there is good news for the administration as it refocuses on Asia and the Pacific over the coming years. First, elites in Asia appear to have confidence in American leadership overall, with 57 percent of respondents to the 2014 CSIS survey predicting that among various scenarios for the future of Asian order a decade from now, continued U.S. leadership was most likely. The major powers, including China, were most certain of this future. As President Obama prepares to travel in November to the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, the administration would do well to use the opportunity to better define its vision for the rebalance in the years ahead. ►