

Rebalancing to Asia with an Insecure China

As President Obama enters his second term, continuing to shift U.S. attention and resources to the Asia–Pacific will be a leading U.S. foreign policy priority. While many in the region have welcomed this renewed commitment, the U.S. “pivot” to Asia has created heightened concerns in China about U.S. intentions.¹ U.S. efforts to expand its military force posture in Asia, to strengthen security ties with allies and partners, and to enhance the role of regional institutions are viewed by many in Beijing as directly aimed at constraining China’s rise and as the principal cause of regional instability as well as the deterioration of China’s strategic environment.

In the years ahead, China’s perceived sense of insecurity will likely intensify as the United States continues to deepen its diplomatic, economic, and military engagement in Asia. This will limit the possibilities for U.S.–China cooperation on geopolitical issues and place additional strain on the bilateral relationship, leaving policymakers in Washington with the critical task of reconciling the goal of maintaining stable U.S.–China relations while pursuing next steps in the rebalancing effort. Even as major diplomatic breakthroughs and deliverables remain elusive, sustained commitment to intensive high-level engagement with Beijing will be essential to cope with inevitable crises. Furthermore, from a broader regional perspective, continued engagement with China will be a key element to actualizing the rebalancing strategy and ensuring that the United States can advance its multitude of interests in Asia.

At the same time, it will be essential for U.S. policymakers to better communicate the origin and content of the strategy, to further develop—with

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Beijing views the “pivot” as aimed at constraining China and as the principal cause of regional instability.

commensurate resources—the economic, diplomatic, and cultural elements of the rebalancing effort, and ultimately to demonstrate that America’s Asia policy is not only paying dividends to the relative strategic position of the United States, but to the region as a whole. The U.S. shift toward Asia should and will continue, but its execution must account for an insecure China in order for the rebalancing to achieve its intended aims.

China’s Insecurity Complex

This past August in Beijing, a senior colonel in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) told a U.S. think tank delegation that: “You have your Pearl Harbor and September 11th, we have our 1999.” This was a reference to the widely held view in China that the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during NATO’s air campaign over Serbia was an intentional warning to Beijing not to challenge U.S. dominance in international politics. However absurd on its face, the analogy exemplifies the pervasive perception that the United States is working to constrain China’s rise and to maintain U.S. hegemony in the region. Although China has long harbored concerns and conspiracy theories about U.S. efforts to weaken and encircle China, these perceptions are becoming increasingly dominant in Beijing.² An editorial in the *People’s Daily*, ground zero for quasi-authoritative commentary on U.S. foreign policy and the rebalancing, described U.S. strategy in Asia as having “the obvious feature of confrontation.”³

Chinese public opinion, although difficult to poll with precision, also appears to reflect growing suspicion toward the United States. The Pew Research Center found that the percentage of Chinese respondents who view the U.S.–China relationship as hostile has risen from eight percent in 2010 to 26 percent in 2012.⁴ These views are found not just among the public and in nationalist newspapers and micro-blogs, but are widely shared among Chinese government officials, academics, and think tank strategists. Wang Jisi, dean of Peking University’s School of International Studies and a leading expert on U.S.–China relations, has argued that in recent years the view throughout China has “deepened” that “the ultimate goal of the United States in world affairs is to maintain its hegemony and dominance and, as a result, Washington will attempt to prevent the emerging powers, in particular China, from achieving their goals and enhancing their stature.”⁵

Like taking a Rorschach test, Chinese analysts perceive U.S. policies in Asia as a dizzying array of ink blots that combine to paint an ominous picture of U.S. intentions. Such activities include strengthening U.S. security ties with treaty allies, including Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines; deepening relations with emerging powers like Indonesia and Vietnam; increasing U.S. engagement with ASEAN-centered institutions; announcing U.S. national interests in the South China Sea; supporting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement; re-engaging Burma; and deploying a rotational presence of U.S. Marines to Darwin, Australia. Taken together, leading Chinese thinkers view these actions as undermining China's security and increasingly believe the unifying rationale for such a seemingly coordinated U.S. approach is to constrain China's rise.

Beyond purely emotive impressions of malevolent U.S. intentions, two related arguments—often mixed in imprecise ways—form the basis for Chinese accusations about how the United States' renewed commitment to Asia is destabilizing to regional security. The first is that the United States is proactively fomenting conflict between China and other regional states (including the Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan) by “sensationalizing” divisive issues, like the South China Sea, and by actively pressuring and encouraging countries to challenge China.⁶ According to this view, the United States instigates crises both to suppress China's rise and to cause the U.S. military to be drawn or invited more deeply into the region's security affairs.⁷ Upon Secretary Clinton's September 2012 visit to Beijing, a commentary in China's official *Xinhua* news agency called upon the United States to “stop its role as a sneaky troublemaker sitting behind some nations in the region and pulling strings.”⁸ The second, and more nuanced, Chinese assessment is that recent U.S. statements and activities in Asia have, even if unintentionally, emboldened regional states to believe they can challenge China while the United States has their back. Chinese analysts argue that “the reason why some countries are so unbridled may be related with the adjusted geo-strategy of the United States.”⁹

Much of China's ire with U.S. rebalancing has been concentrated in the South China Sea, where six governments claim a variety of contested land features and surrounding waters in historical fishing grounds that are believed to be rich in hydrocarbons. China has repeatedly claimed “indisputable sovereignty” over the sea, demarcating its claims on official maps with a nine-dash line that stretches far from mainland China and snakes along the coasts of Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Taiwan.¹⁰ Seeking to maintain maximum leverage over individual claimants, China has bristled at repeated statements by U.S. officials, beginning with Secretary Clinton's intervention at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Hanoi, that articulate U.S.

national interests in the South China Sea, including the freedom of navigation and respect for international law.¹¹ Beijing has also objected to U.S. efforts to prevent and manage local crises by strengthening regional rules and institutions. After the release of a U.S. State Department press statement in August 2012 expressing concerns about particular Chinese actions in the South China Sea, the Communist Party's top newspaper, the *People's Daily*, told Washington to "shut up," accusing the United States of "fanning flames" of division.¹² China's official Foreign Ministry response noted that "people cannot but question the true intention of the U.S. side."¹³

The most serious crisis in the South China Sea last year began in an April 2012 standoff between Beijing and Manila over Scarborough Reef, when the Philippines apprehended eight Chinese fishing vessels in disputed waters. China was furious that the Philippines had used a naval ship (rather than a maritime law enforcement vessel) to arrest the fishermen, and were further incensed that the ship was the BRP *Gregorio del Pilar*, a decommissioned U.S. Coast Guard frigate transferred by the United States in May 2011. In the ensuing months, as the crisis dragged on, Chinese diplomats doggedly accused the United States of both maintaining a biased position and encouraging the Philippines to take additional provocative actions. A scattershot of events during the crisis reinforced China's concerns: these included the U.S.–Philippines Balikatan military exercise in April, a port visit to Subic Bay in May by the nuclear-powered submarine USS *North Carolina*, and a visit to Washington by President Benigno Aquino in June. Chinese officials argued that these activities were stoking tensions and emboldening the Philippines to perpetuate the standoff. In a June interview with Thailand's *The Nation* newspaper, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying expressed China's concerns that, "against the backdrop of ongoing changes in the overall environment in the Asia–Pacific region, these problems and differences seem to be hyped up, and even used to justify certain policies or actions."¹⁴

Amidst what it viewed as unrelenting pressure in the South China Sea, China saw disturbing parallels in the East China Sea with Japan. Strategists in Beijing perceived that the United States was again—by design—creating an additional source of instability on China's doorstep. For decades, tensions have simmered between China and Japan over the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands, which offer access to key shipping lanes, fishing grounds, and potential oil reserves. These tensions began to boil over in April 2010 when Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara declared his goal of purchasing three of the islands from a private Japanese citizen. Many in Beijing saw the maneuverings of the United States behind this, partly because Governor Ishihara first announced his intentions in a speech at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C. Subsequent events only fed Chinese suspicions. For instance, as the crisis

escalated into the fall of 2012, U.S. officials reiterated Secretary Clinton's October 2010 statement that the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security—which obliges the United States to defend Japan in case of hostilities—covers the Senkaku Islands.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Defense Department announced during Secretary Panetta's trip to Tokyo in August 2012 that the United States would locate an additional X-Band missile-defense radar in southern Japan. China claims that this is an attempt at containment and could reduce the effectiveness of its nuclear deterrent.

Few in Beijing accepted the explanation by U.S. officials that these actions were not aimed at China. Professor Shi Yinhong, director of the Center for American Studies at Renmin University's School of International Studies in Beijing, noted that "the joint missile defense system objectively encourages Japan to keep an aggressive position in the Diaoyu Islands dispute, which sends China a very negative message. Japan would not have been so aggressive without the support and actions of the U.S."¹⁶ Similarly, former Under Secretary-General of the United Nations and former Chinese ambassador to Japan, Chen Jian, said in an October 2012 speech in Hong Kong that many viewed the issue of the disputed islands "as a time bomb planted by the U.S. between China and Japan."¹⁷

More Rebalancing to Come

Recent U.S. initiatives in Asia by no means represent the culmination or complete execution of the Asia-pivot strategy. Instead, it is more appropriate to view them as first or foundational steps in a decade-long project upon which substantially more economic, diplomatic, cultural, and military initiatives will be built. The Defense Department's January 2012 strategic guidance document pronounced that the United States "will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region."¹⁸ Secretary Panetta's June 2012 speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore reinforced this message and described specific actions the United States would take to make good on its promise to provide "a deeper and more enduring partnership in advancing the security and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific."¹⁹

In his most cited announcement, Panetta avowed that "by 2020 the Navy will re-posture its forces from today's roughly 50/50 percent split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to about a 60/40 split between those oceans."²⁰ He also noted that the United States would invest in systems to address China's anti-access/area-denial capabilities (including advanced fifth-generation fighters,

The Asia pivot is better viewed as a decade-long project.

enhanced Virginia-class submarines, electronic warfare and communication capabilities, and improved precision weapons), as well as systems to address the “tyranny of distance” that U.S. planners face in the Western Pacific (including aerial-refueling tankers, a new bomber, and advanced maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare aircraft).²¹ Finally, beyond hardware, Panetta noted that the United States would continue to develop new operational concepts—including the Joint Operational Access Concept and the Air–Sea Battle concept—to meet the “unique challenges” of the Asia–Pacific.²²

In the security realm, the future of the rebalancing strategy will go beyond U.S. military modernization to include further development and diversification of U.S. force posture in Asia. Obama administration officials have announced that the U.S. military is seeking new presence and access arrangements in the region that are “geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable.”²³ In March 2012, *The Washington Post* published a map of Southeast Asia outlining a number of new potential operating locations for the U.S. military.²⁴ These included a possible rotational deployment of U.S. Marines in the Philippines, including bases for surveillance aircraft and increased ship visits; plans to base four U.S. Navy littoral combat ships in Singapore; a possible upgraded airfield for P-8 surveillance aircraft and Global Hawk drones on the Cocos Islands of Australia; possible expansion of the Royal Australian Navy’s primary base in Western Australia (HMAS *Stirling* in Perth) to accommodate visits by U.S. aircraft carriers, other warships, and attack submarines; the rotational deployment of as many as 2,500 U.S. Marines in Darwin, Australia; and a possible new Australian fleet base in Brisbane, Australia, that could accommodate visits from U.S. warships and submarines. While budget and political realities in Washington and the region will curb or slow these plans, at least some are likely to move forward in ways that will disquiet Beijing.

Add to that the possibility of deepening U.S. security ties with additional partners in the region beyond traditional U.S. allies, including those on China’s periphery and with which China has ongoing maritime and territorial disputes. On China’s southern border, for instance, high-level visits have become routine between the United States and Vietnam, including the Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue, launched by the State Department and Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2008, and the Defense Policy Dialogue, a high-level channel for direct military-to-military discussions first held in 2010.²⁵ Since 2006, the two countries have conducted at least nine joint naval patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin, and in August 2010 engaged in a bilateral non-combatant naval exercise in the South China Sea.²⁶

Furthering these security ties, in June 2012, Secretary Panetta made the first visit since the end of the Vietnam War by a U.S. defense secretary to the former

U.S. Navy base in Cam Ranh Bay. Aboard the USS *Richard E. Byrd*, Panetta declared that “access for United States naval ships into this facility is a key component of this relationship and we see a tremendous potential here for the future.”²⁷ He later spoke at a joint news conference about the potential to take the U.S.–Vietnam military relationship “to a new level” in the areas of maritime security, naval visits, search-and-rescue operations, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations.²⁸ Similar stories could be told about deepening U.S. security relations with any number of emerging powers in the region including India, Indonesia, and Singapore.

If current trends continue, China will also have to contend with deepening engagement between the United States and Burma, which at some point will include discussions about the content and timing of military-to-military relations between the two countries. As a step in this direction, Burmese officials for the first time participated as observers in the annual U.S.–Thailand Cobra Gold military exercise in February 2013.²⁹ Beyond security activities, U.S. diplomatic and economic efforts in Asia will also likely contribute to Beijing’s sense of unease, including the prospect of progress on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, growing U.S. collaboration with ASEAN, and enhanced U.S. development assistance in Southeast Asia. Beijing will not view these actions favorably, and to the extent that relatively minor U.S. initiatives to date have already raised concerns and codified a view of malevolent U.S. intentions, additional activities closer to China’s borders—in the Philippines, Vietnam, India, or Burma—will likely be cause for even greater suspicion.

China’s Vision: a “New Type of Relationship”

With several acts in the drama of America’s rebalancing to Asia to follow, there is an increasing dissonance between the future direction of U.S. regional policy and China’s view of what would constitute a stable U.S.–China relationship. In what could only be interpreted as a highly coordinated effort endorsed by the senior-most leadership in Beijing, Chinese government officials have in multiple venues and at the highest levels promoted the notion that the United States and China should work toward a “new type of relationship between major powers.” The concept was floated during then-Vice President Xi Jinping’s visit to Washington in February 2012 and subsequently reinforced and elaborated upon by the major players in the bilateral relationship, including President Hu Jintao, State Counselor Dai Bingguo, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, and Vice Foreign Minister for North America and Oceania Cui Tiankai.³⁰

The intellectual roots of this idea are relatively clear. For at least a decade, Chinese scholars, think tanks, and study groups have closely examined the historical rise and fall of great powers.³¹ And while warning against the cultural

invasion of the United States, Chinese strategists have freely imported Western theories of international relations—namely offensive realism and power transition theory—that portend inevitable great power conflict between established and rising powers.³² In turn, a principal task for Chinese thinkers has been uncovering means to subdue this (assumed) historical impulse, particularly while China's ascension and military modernization remain incomplete. Yuan Peng, Assistant President at the influential China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), has argued that “building a new type of relations between major powers is the only way to prevent the two countries from entering violent conflict as previous major powers did.”³³

This concept was given an unanticipated boost by a March 2012 speech at the U.S. Institute of Peace in which Secretary Clinton argued that the United States and China needed “a new answer to the ancient question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet.”³⁴ Disregarding the substance of the speech, which cautioned China against being an injurious “selective stakeholder” in international politics, the Chinese diplomatic community fixated on this one line as evidence that the concept was taking hold in Washington. Chinese officials also cite a meeting on the sidelines of the June 2012 G-20 Summit in Los Cabos, Mexico, in which President Hu and President Obama reportedly discussed the need for a new type of bilateral relationship.³⁵ In July, then-Vice President Xi told an audience at Tsinghua University, his alma mater, that “China and the United States are actively exploring a new type of relations between major countries.”³⁶

Chinese discourse surrounding the idea of a “new type of relationship” contains a number of positive elements, which describe shared goals in the bilateral relationship that have been repeatedly and publicly articulated by both sides. The United States endorses the notion of avoiding zero-sum competition and working assiduously to avert a spiraling security dilemma. Furthermore, expanding areas of cooperation and increasing bilateral communication are principal goals of U.S. China policy.

In its entirety, however, the concept is a poison pill for the United States because of China's view of how best to meet these shared goals, which in Vice Foreign Minister Cui's words requires “removing obstacles” and “accommodating each other's interests.”³⁷ Chinese officials do not see this as a reciprocal process, but rather one in which the United States—perceived as the primary source of mistrust and conflict—must unilaterally meet China's demands. Cui (promoted to be China's ambassador to the United States in April 2013) has argued that “China has never done anything to undermine U.S. core interests and major concerns, yet what the United States has done in matters concerning China's core and important interests and major concerns is unsatisfactory.”³⁸ Referencing instability in the South China Sea as an example, Cui has suggested that “China

is not the maker of these problems, and still less the perpetrator of harm. Rather, it is a victim on which harm has been imposed.”³⁹

Against this backdrop, China has called upon the United States to walk the talk and move beyond rhetorical statements about seeking a cooperative partnership with China.⁴⁰ This means curbing actions that Beijing views as both running counter to China’s interests and eroding mutual strategic trust between the two powers. The new type of relationship China is calling for is one in which the United States stops selling arms to Taiwan, abandons efforts to expand the U.S. military’s forward-deployed presence in Asia, lifts controls on exports to China, withdraws from security arrangements with allies and partners in the region (particularly from those with ongoing maritime and territorial disputes with China), removes theater missile defense capabilities, and ceases sea and air reconnaissance operations around China.

Even if one considers this list more aspirational than expected, the United States has no other readily available alternative set of bargaining chips that could serve the same function of assuaging China’s insecurities. Most of these are enduring elements of U.S. national security strategy that are unlikely to change solely to accommodate China’s anxieties. Furthermore, there is little evidence that China would do anything more than pocket U.S. concessions and continue to press for further advantage. The particular language of a “new type of relationship” is largely irrelevant. What matters most for the future of U.S.–China relations is that the United States is unlikely to take even a minority of the actions Beijing would deem necessary to solidify strategic trust and provide China with a satisfying dose of regional security.

The particular language of a “new type of relationship” is largely irrelevant.

Accounting for an Insecure China

China’s foreign policies have for decades reflected the principles of biding time, pursuing a restrained foreign policy, and viewing the first decades of the twenty-first century as a period of strategic opportunity to focus primarily on internal development.⁴¹ This strategy, however, has relied on the belief in Beijing that China’s commitment to the path of “peaceful rise” was leading the country toward greater prosperity and security, a supposition coming under increasing scrutiny in Beijing.⁴²

U.S. analysts are correct to assert that, to date, China’s leaders have continued to recognize the importance of pursuing a constructive U.S.–China relationship.⁴³

That said, particularly with China emerging from the inward-looking period of its decennial leadership transition, an array of potential scenarios—Chinese economic slowdown, domestic political cleavages over the pace and direction of economic reform, a spike in nationalism due to perceived external challenges—could raise the political cost for Chinese leaders who seek to perpetuate U.S.–China relations in their current state. The danger in the years ahead is that deepened U.S. engagement in Asia and its associated perceptions in China could amplify already existent voices in Beijing who argue that the current trajectory of regional affairs is placing China under siege in a deteriorating security environment.⁴⁴

Precisely how Beijing would respond is unknown, but it is hard to imagine that the United States would benefit from a China less committed to its relations with the United States. More rapid military modernization, the development of trade or diplomatic blocs that exclude the United States, assertive behavior in its near seas, the cultivation of explicit security ties with regional partners, more aggressive use of cyber intrusions into the United States, and increasingly discriminatory trade practices are among the policies Beijing could pursue. Even if China viewed its options in these domains as relatively limited and ultimately undesirable, it could still throw sand in the gears of U.S. efforts in the region. Although China's behavior has been problematic on regional issues ranging from the South and East China Seas to North Korea, Burma, and ASEAN, there is no doubt that Beijing could create far more mischief if it perceived a truly zero-sum rivalry with the United States that compelled a hard-nosed competition for influence in Asia. Preventing this outcome—and the major power war that could accompany it—are chief among the tasks of U.S. China policy.

There are real and significant areas of competition between the United States and China, and structuring the relationship to manage them is a more sensible approach than believing they can be solved or willed away through reassurance or by augmenting mutual trust. With the rebalancing effort galloping forward, and the United States unwilling (under current conditions) to entertain the acts of retrenchment which Beijing is calling for, Washington will need to devise its Asia policies to account for a suspicious and agitated Beijing. This means implicitly, if not explicitly, engineering engagement to focus more on laying the institutional groundwork for crisis management. The Strategic Security Dialogue (SSD) has provided an important forum to do just that, bringing together Chinese civilian and military leaders with their U.S. counterparts to discuss sensitive bilateral and regional security issues.

At the same time, U.S. policymakers will ultimately have to come to terms with the fact that dialogue and reassurance will only go so far. The domestic and

international sources of China's interests and insecurities run far deeper than short-term policy decisions in Washington. Accepting this reality, the United States should eschew the notion that U.S.–China relations represent “the most important bilateral relationship in the world,” and should resist the oft-made remark that “virtually no global challenge can be met without China–U.S. cooperation.”⁴⁵ Neither statement is particularly accurate, and both serve to create unrealistic expectations, produce unnecessary disappointment and animus, and ultimately contribute to greater bilateral friction.

Dialogue and reassurance will only go so far.

Reassessing Engagement

As Washington contends with a prickly Beijing in the years ahead, it will be tempting for U.S. policymakers to question the value of committing substantial resources to sustaining high-intensity engagement with China.⁴⁶ This would be a serious mistake. The new set of officials taking the reins of Asia policy in the second Obama administration will have the weighty task of maintaining a high tempo of U.S.–China diplomacy and building the personal relationships that have been crucial for stability. Bilateral engagement with China is unlikely to produce breakthroughs on North Korea, Iran, or the South China Sea, but it will nonetheless be necessary to weather the storms that are likely to occur between Washington and Beijing, as well as China and its neighbors. A critical lesson drawn from U.S.–China relations in 2012 is that the considerable commitment by the Obama administration to engage Chinese counterparts paid enormous dividends during certain crises, such as incidents in the South China Sea and the Chen Guangcheng case (when the dissident Chen escaped house arrest in April 2012 and sought refuge at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing). Both governments agree that the maturity of the relationship after years of investment was key to keeping these crises from escalating further.

From a broader regional perspective, continued intensive political engagement with China pays additional dividends for the United States. This is true even for those who are deeply skeptical about Beijing's intentions and would prefer that the United States prepare more proactively for an aggressive and revisionist China. In the current strategic environment, a hard-line policy toward Beijing—one that emphasizes economic and security competition at the expense of intensive diplomatic engagement—would undermine the rebalancing to Asia and hinder America's ability to shape the region in ways that can deter, defeat, and punish Chinese aggression. Assessing the specific components of the rebalancing effort—including those that contribute to the hedging side of the

U.S. China policy—it is evident that most initiatives would be undercut by deepened divisions between Washington and Beijing.

Short of overt and unprecedented provocations from China, soured U.S.–China relations would lead U.S. alliance partners—including South Korea, Thailand, and even Australia—to become more cautious in expanding their security activities with Washington.⁴⁷ Emerging partners like Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore would also move to scale back military relations with the United States. Meanwhile, efforts to strengthen regional rules and institutions to manage and resolve potential conflicts would grind to a halt if multilateral organizations were seen as little more than venues for U.S.–China competition. Finally, even the U.S. trade agenda and progress on the Trans-Pacific Partnership would likely stall if China became committed to using its economic muscle to counter U.S. interests.

Ultimately, even if engagement is not producing tangible results in the bilateral relationship, sustaining a well-functioning—if not always positive—diplomatic relationship with Beijing is critical to achieving U.S. objectives

elsewhere in the region. Countries in Asia have little choice but to manage the economic, diplomatic, and geographic realities of a rising China, and in doing so, few are willing to sign up for an overt counter-balancing coalition against Beijing. This is precisely why leaders throughout Asia have made clear to Washington that they have little interest in choosing sides between the two giants or being dragged into an adversarial dynamic. U.S. strategists who call for the United States to abandon its long-standing neutrality on

Engagement and balancing are mutually reinforcing, rather than opposing.

regional territorial disputes miss the strategic imperative of being seen as an honest broker in the region.⁴⁸ From this vantage point, the two prongs of U.S. China strategy—engagement and balancing—are mutually reinforcing, rather than opposing.

Diversifying and Deepening Rebalancing

With an eye toward sustaining regional support for the U.S. rebalancing to Asia, Washington will have to better explain the content and origin of the strategy. This means working to diminish perceptions of competition between the United States and China by continuing to search for ways in which the two countries can work together in Asia. Announcements by Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Yang of the launch of an array of U.S.–China joint cooperative projects in the Asia–Pacific at the past two ASEAN Regional Forums, while small in scale, provide a useful platform from which to build. Actively solving problems

together sends an important signal both domestically and regionally that the United States is interested in practical cooperation with China, and vice versa. Washington should also continue to reiterate—perhaps with greater emphasis—that it prefers others in the region to also have strong and positive ties with Beijing. (This also means communicating to allies and partners that the U.S. rebalancing to Asia does not give regional states the license to challenge or provoke China.)

The United States should also continue to search for additional opportunities to include the PLA in regional military exercises. Secretary Panetta's announcement that China would be invited to the 2014 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military exercise was a step in the right direction. Multilateral military engagement with China should also be explored with U.S. Marines now rotating through Darwin, Australia, possibly with other key regional actors such as Indonesia. In the meantime, the United States should seek to demonstrate to the region the inherent value of the U.S. military presence beyond high-end deterrence and dynamics with China. For instance, the United States could address non-traditional security challenges like humanitarian crises, natural disasters, human trafficking, and narcotics. Over the long term, it is crucial that governments and publics in Asia perceive U.S. efforts as sustained and earnest, and not as Trojan horses for developing improved access for warfighting.

At the same time, the United States should, to the extent possible, seek to address the chronic misperception that the rebalancing effort is primarily a military and security endeavor. Official commentary in China, as is true elsewhere, has focused on U.S. force posture revisions more than any other aspect of President Obama's Asia policy.⁴⁹ In response, leading U.S. officials have made major policy speeches both in Washington and the region aimed at underscoring the breadth of the U.S. agenda in Asia, including Leon Panetta at the PLA Engineering Academy of Armored Forces in Beijing and Tom Donilon at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. In previewing Obama's second term, Donilon noted explicitly that the rebalancing to Asia is a "multi-dimensional strategy" that "harnesses every element of our national power."⁵⁰ U.S. officials will have to continue sending these messages both rhetorically and through action.

As the U.S. shift to Asia continues to evolve, additional resources must go toward diplomatic, social, and economic initiatives. The Obama administration has taken initial steps with the Asia-Pacific Strategic Engagement Initiative (APSEI) and the new U.S. mission to ASEAN in Jakarta, Indonesia. Particularly as future security agreements come online, it will be increasingly necessary for the U.S. government to credibly make the case that defense policy is only one piece of a much broader agenda that includes investment, trade, development, tourism, and other forms of cultural exchange. Cooperative activities in energy and health announced by the White House at the conclusion of the 2012 East

U.S. China policy will have to remain focused on managing the consequences of an insecure Beijing.

Asia Summit demonstrate the types of non-security efforts where the United States can contribute much-needed assets and expertise to the region.⁵¹

It will likely prove impossible to perfectly reconcile the rebalancing effort with building positive and cooperative U.S.–China relations, but it is imperative that the United States does what it can to lower the dissonance between these critical objectives. U.S. China policy will have to remain focused on managing the consequences of an insecure Beijing and preventing relations from

spiraling downward. At the same time, rebalancing, even as it continues apace, should emphasize non-security dimensions, as well as the ways in which U.S. activities are strengthening relations with China and serving the interests of the region. No matter what, U.S. policymakers will need to go to great lengths to sustain the level of political engagement with Beijing necessary both to maintain stable U.S.–China relations and to permit the rebalancing effort to go forward.

Notes

1. For an official articulation of the “pivot” or “rebalancing” strategy, see Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century.
2. For a discussion on the multiple dimensions of Chinese distrust of the United States, see Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2012. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138009/andrew-j-nathan-and-andrew-scobell/how-china-sees-america>.
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