

Summary: The implications of the U.S. rebalance to Asia are manifold, and most importantly seem to have changed the nature and dynamics of the relationship with China, whose initial negative reaction to the rebalance has however not changed U.S. attitude towards engagement with China. The management of this relationship gives the Europeans a clear opportunity to provide their regional expertise and to play a role in dealing with the pressing regional security issues.

The Strategic Logic of the U.S. Rebalance to Asia and a Potential European Role

by Phillip C. Saunders

One of the clearest articulations of the rationale and strategic logic behind the U.S. rebalance to Asia is the November 2011 *Foreign Policy* article by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.¹ In the context of withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, Clinton argued that the United States needs “to be smart and systematic about where we invest time and energy, so that we put ourselves in the best position to sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values.” Secretary Clinton described the Asia-Pacific region’s importance as “a key driver of global politics” that spans the Pacific and Indian oceans, boasts half the world’s population, includes key engines of the global economy, and is home to several key U.S. allies and “important emerging powers like China, India, and Indonesia.” She argued that “harnessing Asia’s growth and dynamism is central to U.S. economic and strategic interests” and that the United States has an opportunity to help build “a more mature security and economic architecture to promote stability and prosperity.” Given the importance of the Asia-Pacific region to America’s future, “a strategic turn to the region fits logically into our overall global effort to secure and sustain America’s

global leadership.” She drew an explicit parallel with U.S. efforts after World War II to build a “comprehensive and lasting transatlantic network of institutions and relations.”

Secretary Clinton called for “smart execution of a coherent regional strategy that accounts for the global implications of our choices” and a sustained U.S. commitment to “forward-deployed” diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific. She outlined six key lines of action:

1. Strengthening bilateral security alliances
2. Deepening our working relationship with emerging powers, including with China
3. Engaging with regional multilateral institutions
4. Expanding trade and investment
5. Forging a broad-based military presence that modernizes traditional basing arrangements in Northeast Asia while enhancing the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean
6. Advancing democracy and human rights

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The “rebalance” is intended as a comprehensive approach that brings U.S. commitments of global diplomatic, economic, and military resources into balance with expanding U.S. political, economic, and security interests in Asia. It also reflects a mid-course correction based on the Obama administration’s experience implementing its Asia policy. Obama administration officials devoted significant early efforts to broadening and deepening U.S.-China relations in order to better address regional and global challenges. Although the political need to rebrand policy precluded the use of the Bush administration’s “responsible stakeholder” language, the current administration’s view of China as a rising power with expanding global interests, succeeding within the existing international system, was very similar. Administration officials have sought to engage China in cooperation on regional and global issues, including efforts to deal with North Korean and Iranian nuclear ambitions, address climate change, and mitigate the impact of the global financial crisis. Their expressed goal was a “positive, cooperative, and comprehensive relationship” with China that allowed the two countries to work together on an expanded set of common interests.

Unfortunately, efforts to build a deeper partnership with China produced relatively meager results. Despite formal engagements through the bilateral Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), reciprocal summit visits, and regular meetings on the margins of multilateral fora, Chinese leaders remained suspicious and reluctant to expand cooperation with Washington or to take on more international responsibilities. The period from 2009-2010 also saw a more assertive Chinese posture on a wide range of bilateral, regional, and global issues that undid most of the gains Beijing had achieved from its 1998-2008 cooperative “win-win” regional diplomacy. In particular, efforts to advance Chinese maritime sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea did considerable damage to Beijing’s efforts to persuade others of China’s peaceful rise.

This context — heightened concerns about Chinese behavior and regional demands for a stepped up U.S. security role — is also a significant part of the political rationale for the U.S. strategic rebalance to Asia. However, the United States has not abandoned efforts to cooperate with China or to build a more stable Sino-U.S. relationship. The broad U.S. strategy of seeking to integrate China more fully within the current global order, while discouraging any efforts to reshape that order by the use of force, remains in place. A key implementation challenge is making the rebal-

ance robust enough to reassure U.S. allies and partners that the U.S. capability and will to maintain its presence in Asia over the long-term, while not alarming Chinese leaders to the point where they forego cooperation with Washington in favor of a more confrontational approach. Finding and maintaining this sweet spot will be difficult.

Despite China’s negative reaction, the rebalance has had a positive impact on regional security dynamics by reaffirming U.S. commitment to sustaining a long-term presence in the Asia-Pacific and raising the costs of potential Chinese efforts to resolve its maritime sovereignty claims through the use of coercion or force. China has complained that the rebalance encourages other Asian countries to challenge Chinese maritime claims, but Beijing’s most important response has been to redouble efforts to stabilize Sino-U.S. relations, most notably through efforts to build a “new type of great power relations” with Washington. The June 2013 summit meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and President Obama is a manifestation of this Chinese effort.

The U.S. rebalance to Asia is a comprehensive policy that includes major diplomatic and economic components as well as the much-discussed military elements. The European Union and major European countries are actively engaged diplomatically and economically in Asia, but have struggled to articulate a security role given declining European defense spending and limited ability to project conventional air and naval forces into Asia. In reality, European countries have important security interests in Asia

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and can play a constructive role by increasing engagement at both the low and high ends of the spectrum.

European militaries, foreign ministries, and non-governmental organizations have a great deal of expertise in preventive diplomacy, engagement of former rivals, and non-traditional security. This expertise is the product of engaging the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact in the late stages of the Cold War, of reaching out to newly independent states and integrating some into NATO and European Union structures, and of pursuing a broader post-Cold War security agenda that gives greater weight to human security and non-traditional security issues. Although Asian officials and elites used to reflexively dismiss the relevance of the European experience and institutions for Asia, there is newfound interest in adopting some of these ideas and mechanisms into emerging Asian regional security institutions. European countries may have a comparative advantage in pursuing this agenda because they are viewed as more neutral due to their lack of formal security alliances with Asian countries. More European activity in areas such as civilian control of the military, preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping, and humanitarian affairs/disaster relief would involve a relatively modest commitment of resources, but could have a major positive impact if the commitment can be sustained.

At the same time, some European countries can play an important role in engaging Asian countries on high-end security challenges in areas such as nuclear nonproliferation and arms control, emerging norms on behavior in the space and cyber domains, and freedom of navigation. European countries have significant stakes in influencing which international rules and norms prevail in these areas. The European Union and individual European countries have seats at the table in the global institutions that are attempting to address these issues, but security dynamics in Asia involving countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, India, and Pakistan will play a major role in shaping outcomes. European governments, think tanks, and scholars need to be actively engaged with their counterparts in Asia to influence both intellectual debates and security dynamics on the ground.

European countries conducted their own economic pivot to Asia in the 1990s; many are now attempting to increase their diplomatic resources and leadership attention devoted to the region. Greater security engagement on the low and high-end issues discussed above could complement these efforts, with positive returns for European interests and for Asia-Pacific security and stability.

About the Author

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