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# Rebalancing or De-Balancing: U.S. Pivot and East Asian Order

Wei Ling

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**ABSTRACT** The U.S. strategy toward Asia in President Barack Obama’s first term features pivoting or rebalancing. This article traces the development of the U.S. pivot to Asia from power cooperation to balance of power and analyzes its key components featuring Indo-Pacific linkage, high military profile, and forward-deployed diplomacy in selected multilaterals, minilaterals, and bilaterals. The U.S. pivot has provided misleading reassurance to some U.S. allies and partners, has created a “side-taking” dilemma for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has increased mutual distrust with China, and has disrupted ongoing regional processes. The article argues that it is the pivot, or rebalancing toward Asia, that has, to a considerable extent, de-balanced the region.

**KEYWORDS** de-balancing; East Asia; order; pivot; rebalancing; United States

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## INTRODUCTION

President Barack Obama’s first term saw, on the one hand, the U.S. pivot to Asia, and, on the other, an increasing evolution toward a new regional order in East Asia. The Asia that Obama has pivoted to mainly refers to East Asia as defined by the membership of the East Asia Summit.<sup>1</sup> The evolution of the East Asian order is demonstrated by the rise of China to the status of the world’s second-largest economic power; the proliferation of regional institutions in terms of number, membership, and the level of institutionalization; and leadership transitions in all major countries concerned.

The U.S. pivot to Asia has seemed only natural given the transfer of the global political and strategic gravity from the Atlantic to the Pacific. However, its nature and tactics have changed significantly between 2009 and 2012. Simply put, the pivot started with power cooperation but turned into a balance-of-power, especially military power, situation. Such pivot features both continuities and changes in terms of the U.S. strategies in the region. But its key components, the high-profile military deployments and exercises, the expansion of geopolitical domain from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, and the “forward-deployed” diplomacy, have been very conspicuous. The U.S. pivot to Asia has so far produced mixed results. Seemingly, it has reassured U.S. allies in the region and balanced the rising power of China. But, upon closer examination, the pivot has created

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a “Georgia Scenario”<sup>2</sup> among some U.S. allies and partners, unnecessarily provoked China and increased U.S.–China distrust, disrupted ongoing regional processes, and, hence, to a considerable extent, de-balanced the region.

## PIVOT TO ASIA: FROM POWER COOPERATION TO BALANCE OF POWER

Asia has been the priority of the U.S. foreign strategy “since Day One of the Obama Administration.”<sup>3</sup> However, the nature and tactics of the strategy have changed over time—from power cooperation to balance of power, specifically, from calling for China to share responsibilities to balancing against China.

In 2009, the U.S. strategy toward Asia reflected Obama’s liberal internationalism, featuring responsible sovereignty, power cooperation, and international order based on rules and norms.<sup>4</sup> Coming back to East Asia, the United States put great emphasis on U.S.–China cooperation in tackling regional and global challenges and maintaining institutional order in the international society. At the same time, the G-2 concept was gaining currency and momentum.<sup>5</sup> According to China’s *Xinhua News*, on January 30, 2009, in his first telephone conversation with Chinese president Hu Jintao, President Obama said that no bilaterals were more important than the U.S.–China bilateral relationship.<sup>6</sup> In mid-February 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a speech, “U.S.-Asia Relations: Indispensable for Our Future,” in which she quoted a Chinese aphorism, saying that the United States and China were in the same boat and needed to cross the river peacefully together.<sup>7</sup> Clinton then made East Asia the destination of her first overseas trip as secretary of state, visiting Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Indonesia, and China. In April, the U.S.–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue was established. In July 2009, Hillary Clinton visited the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat, took part in the ASEAN Regional Forum, started the process of the U.S. accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, and declared that the United States was “back in Southeast Asia.”<sup>8</sup> In November 2009, Obama became the first U.S. president to take part in the U.S.–ASEAN Summit; he also paid a state visit to China, making commitments to “building a positive, cooperative and comprehensive

U.S.-China relationship for the twenty-first century.”<sup>9</sup> In 2009, cooperation with China was an essential part of the Obama pivot to Asia.

If the 2009 U.S. pivot to Asia was about “cultivating spheres of cooperation,” then in early 2010, it started to look increasingly like “competing spheres of influence.”<sup>10</sup> On January 12, 2010, Secretary Clinton said that “the United States is back in Asia” and that “we are back to stay.”<sup>11</sup> For the first time, she elaborated U.S. principles and priorities in shaping the regional order in Asia and clearly pointed out that the United States had a strong interest in continuing to play an economic and strategic leadership role in the region. She declared that Asia had a strong interest, too, in the United States remaining a dynamic economic partner and stabilizing military influence.<sup>12</sup> In July 2010, Clinton raised the South China Sea issue at the ASEAN Regional Forum and announced that peaceful resolution to the dispute was “a leading diplomatic priority” and “a U.S. national interest.”<sup>13</sup> Her remarks were generally regarded as a change in the U.S. China policy and taken by the Chinese side as provocation and attack. In October 2010, the United States acceded to the East Asia Summit. At the end of that month, Clinton urged Cambodia to balance against China and raised the Chinese dams on the Mekong River as important issues that Cambodia should discuss with China.<sup>14</sup> In November, through Obama’s visits, the United States strengthened ties with Indonesia and India. In 2010, the United States also raised its military profile in East Asia, holding more than half of its military exercises there. By 2010, the centerpieces of the U.S. pivot to Asia had become clear—maintaining U.S. leadership and counterbalancing the increasing influence of China.

In 2011, the word “pivot” was officially adopted in U.S. policy statements about East Asia. In November 2011, Secretary Clinton wrote “America’s Pacific Century” for *Foreign Policy*, saying that the United States stood at a “pivot” point as it began to conclude the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> In this article, “pivot” refers to “a strategic turn,” meaning substantially increasing U.S. diplomatic, economic, strategic, and other investment in the Asia-Pacific region. The article’s conclusion uses the term “pivot” twice, saying that the United States needs to “accelerate efforts to pivot to new global realities” and that “this kind of pivot is not easy.” This article has been to date the most comprehensive and well-developed elaboration

of the U.S. pivot to Asia, affirming the increasing U.S. diplomatic, economic, and strategic investment in Asia, stressing U.S. leadership in building regional institutions to tackle challenges, and expounding on “forward-deployed diplomacy.” In November 2011, the United States took part in the East Asia Summit (EAS) for the first time, with President Obama urging the EAS to be the premier framework to solve regional political and security issues.<sup>16</sup> In the same month, Obama also announced that the negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (TPP), which the United States joined in December 2009, should be concluded by July 2012. Hence, the order-shaping aspect of the U.S. pivot became obvious. Besides the U.S. security alliances as the security cornerstone, the United States should lead two regional institutions to navigate the evolution of the East Asian order: the EAS for regional political and security consultation and the TPP for regional economic integration.

In late 2011 and early 2012, in American official remarks and statements, “pivot” was out and “rebalance” was in. On November 27, 2011, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon elaborated a rebalancing of foreign policy priorities and pointed out that the centerpiece of the strategy included an intensified American role in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>17</sup> In addressing the Shangri-La Security Dialog in Singapore in June 2012, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta stated, “while the U.S. military will remain a global force for security and stability, we will of necessity rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>18</sup> He declared that 60 percent of U.S. warships would be deployed to the Pacific by 2020. From pivot to rebalance, the strategy only appeared softer. And, indeed, some rebalancing efforts were made. For instance, the U.S.–China Asia-Pacific Consultation was set up in late 2011 to improve the communication and cooperation of the two sides on regional issues. But the military highlight of the strategy has kept it hard at its core. And, U.S. diplomacy in Myanmar in 2012 was widely regarded as a significant counterbalance to China’s influence in the region.

## KEY COMPONENTS AND NEW FEATURES

Some argue that the pivot to Asia represents, at most, an expansion rather than transformation of the U.S. strategy because it has been simply trying

to sustain the post–World War II hub-and-spoke structure.<sup>19</sup> But the regional context has been changed and the regional order is in evolution. Hence, the U.S. pivot has taken on significantly new features in its key components.

First, the geographic domain of the pivot has been expanded from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, spanning both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, because of the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean in energy supply for East Asian countries and the perceived potential for India–China rivalry.<sup>20</sup> Secretary Clinton defines the region as “stretching from the Indian Subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas,” which are “increasingly linked by shipping and strategy.”<sup>21</sup> Since 2010, the White House, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense have all talked about welcoming the “Look East” policy of India, strengthening the U.S.–India partnership in the Pacific, and operationally linking the two oceans.<sup>22</sup> A strategic thinking in the making, the Indo-Pacific linkage has already developed some substance. Significant steps include: prioritizing U.S.–India defense cooperation in the strategic partnership, in particular, maritime security coordination and cooperation; furthering India’s engagement with East Asia and enhancing its role in East Asian multilateral fora; and forging close and systematic cooperation on security and economic issues between India and U.S. allies in the region.<sup>23</sup>

Second, the security and military components of the pivot have both high-profile and substantive investment. In the context of an overall militarization of U.S. foreign policy,<sup>24</sup> the highest-profile initiatives of the U.S. pivot to Asia lie in security and the military.<sup>25</sup> Despite around US\$487 billion in cuts in the overall defense budget over the next 10 years, U.S. military deployment in the region will not be weakened. Instead, it will be “more broadly distributed, more flexible, and more politically sustainable.”<sup>26</sup> The security and military pivot involves geographic rebalance, structural adjustment, and capability building.<sup>27</sup> New military deployments or plans have been made in and for Australia, Singapore, and the Philippines (for geographic rebalance). The first 180 of the eventual 2,500 U.S. marines were deployed in Darwin, Australia, in April 2012. Australia has also agreed to the United States having greater access to its air force facilities and Indian Ocean navy base. Singapore will have four U.S. littoral combat

ships stationed there; these are “smaller, surface vessels intended for operations close to shore and able to deploy quickly to crises that are part of a U.S. strategy focusing on the Asia-Pacific.” In the Philippines, the United States is planning on sending spy aircraft, deploying more troops, and staging more joint exercises.<sup>28</sup> In terms of structural adjustment, the new Defense Strategic Guidance has made it very clear that the U.S. Navy force would not suffer from the reductions, reflecting a top priority of the United States in the Asia-Pacific. The Guidance also has identified a shift toward a more flexible and sustainable style of military deployment in the region, featuring rotational military deployments, bilateral and multilateral exercises, and enhanced capability and competence of U.S. allied and partner forces, in contrast to the rigid cold war European style. Moreover, a new air-sea battle concept has been developed to counter perceived potential anti-access or access-denial strategies and capabilities of China.<sup>29</sup>

Third, diplomacy has been forward-deployed in selected multilaterals, minilaterals, and bilaterals. According to Secretary Clinton, “forward-deployed diplomacy” is proactive by nature—sending a full range of diplomatic assets “into every corner and every capital” of the region, engaging with regional institutions, partners and allies, and the people themselves “in an active effort to advance shared objectives.”<sup>30</sup> In her first three years in office, Secretary Clinton made 36 visits to the Asia-Pacific, accounting for 19.7 percent of her total foreign visits (doubling the record of Condoleezza Rice).<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in Obama’s first term, U.S. diplomacy was very active in all fronts in Asia. The administration’s engagement, however, was more significant with a few selected multilaterals, minilaterals, and bilaterals than with others.

U.S. participation and engagement in regional multilateral institutions during Obama’s first term is unprecedented given the traditional U.S. inclination toward bilateralism in Asia.<sup>32</sup> This administration’s understanding was that to rebalance Asia, the United States should no longer turn a blind eye to regionalism but, rather, take on a leadership role in building regional architecture and shaping regional order. In the area of political security, the United States has invested in the EAS, hoping that it will become the premier institution to address key challenges: maritime security, nuclear non-proliferation, and disaster response.<sup>33</sup> For regional economic integration,

the United States has promoted the TPP, which had attracted 11 countries for 15 rounds of negotiations by 2012.<sup>34</sup> In terms of minilaterals in subregions, the United States has invested significantly in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). In 2009, the United States launched the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), which included all Lower Mekong countries and promised US\$50 million in U.S. assistance. The LMI is conducted through the Asia Pacific Security Engagement Initiative<sup>35</sup> and regarded by countries in the region as a geopolitical move to counterbalance China in the subregion. Besides strengthening cooperation with traditional allies and partners like Indonesia and India, the U.S. move toward Vietnam and Myanmar is particularly noteworthy. In 2010, Secretary Clinton called for a U.S.–Vietnam strategic partnership, and the two countries carried out joint naval training and then started annual joint navy exercises. In 2011, the United States and Vietnam signed “a landmark Memorandum of Understanding” on further advancing bilateral defense cooperation.<sup>36</sup> In 2011 and 2012, the United States made successful moves in normalizing relations with Myanmar, which is of strategic importance in the U.S. pivot to Asia and in counterbalancing China.

## REBALANCING OR DE-BALANCING? THAT IS THE QUESTION

The U.S. pivot to Asia started as balancing through power cooperation, but has gradually leaned heavily toward balancing through security alignment and military deployment. So far, the pivot has produced mixed results. It has reassured U.S. allies and partners of the United States of its security commitment to the region; yet it has also created a potential “Georgia Scenario”<sup>37</sup> and a side-taking dilemma. The pivot has appeared as a significant counterbalance to China in the regional arena and yet has unnecessarily brought the most consequential bilateral relationship to a new low of distrust. The pivot has helped facilitate U.S. participation and leadership in regional integration, and yet disrupted ongoing regional processes cherished by other players. Therefore, is the U.S. pivot to Asia by nature a rebalancing or a de-balancing? That is the question. It seems the region has experienced more de-balancing than rebalancing.

First, the pivot has created a potential for a “Georgia Scenario” in territorial disputes and a side-taking dilemma for ASEAN countries. “Georgia Scenario”

refers to a situation where a state in a region takes too seriously U.S. reassurance and security commitment and “takes on a bigger fight than it can handle itself, only to find out that Washington had no intention of going to war in its defense over that particular issue.”<sup>38</sup> Neither the South China Sea nor the East China Sea territorial disputes are newly emerging issues. But they have become intensified after the United States directly inserted itself into these complex disputes.<sup>39</sup> The oft-repeated U.S. security commitment and increased U.S. military deployments and joint military exercises were interpreted by the Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan as U.S. commitment to defend the disputed waters, reefs, and islands, hence adding oil to the fuel of their nationalism and wishful thinking of taking advantage of China on these issues. They seem to have refused to question the U.S. intention of going to war with China in defense of a few reefs and islands that are of little strategic significance to the United States.

To ASEAN countries, the U.S. pivot to counterbalance China has put them in a position of having to take sides. An essential component of ASEAN identity is being neutral and independent rather than a victim in power confrontation and conflict. ASEAN has balanced its relations with regional powers well enough in the past two decades to remain institutionally central in and has benefited enormously from regional integration processes. Once it had to take sides between China and the United States, not only would the balance be tipped, but ASEAN itself would lose its identity and value.

Second, the U.S. pivot to Asia has fueled the suspicion of the U.S. containment of China and increased U.S.–China distrust. Many in the policy circles in Washington claim that the U.S. pivot is not at all about China, while many in China believe that it is all about China. A fair statement might be that the pivot is essentially about China. The U.S. pivot was developed based on the premises of China’s military modernization and diplomatic assertiveness. The U.S. direct involvement in the South China Sea disputes is driven by the perceived threat to the freedom of navigation. However, the United States has “greatly overestimated China’s military capabilities”;<sup>40</sup> Chinese behavior in territorial disputes has been largely responsive and peaceful.<sup>41</sup> And, given China’s trading status and military capability, the threat to the freedom of navigation on the South China Sea is a false proposition.

In the security and military pivot to Asia, the United States has strengthened defense ties with a number of China’s neighbors, including India and Vietnam, deployed marines in Australia, expanded military exercises with all its allies, and promoted a maritime coalition in the South China Sea. All these have worsened the strategic neighboring environment of China, contributed to “China’s deepening distrust of U.S. strategic intentions,”<sup>42</sup> and invited China’s pushback against the U.S. pivot, which, in turn, leads to further growth of mutual distrust.

Third, bringing along its own regional architecture initiatives, the U.S. pivot to Asia has disrupted ongoing regional processes and put ASEAN’s centrality and solidarity at risk. The U.S. initiatives designate the EAS as the political and security framework and the TPP as the regional free-trade agreement framework. The American EAS initiative put ASEAN centrality in regional institutions at risk. With the expansion of the EAS membership to all major powers in the region, ASEAN actually worries about its leadership and centrality in the EAS and, therefore, is unwilling to develop a substantive security mechanism under the EAS for non-proliferation, maritime security, and humanitarian security as the United States intended. ASEAN would rather keep the EAS as the leaders-led forum for broad strategic and political issues in the region as initially designed. So, in 2010, on the side of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM), ASEAN created ADMM+, a defense ministers meeting between ASEAN and its dialogue partners, and made it the major regional mechanism for security consultation. The ADMM+, by name and format, has ensured ASEAN’s centrality through resistance to the U.S. initiative.

The TPP has also been regarded by many as disruptive to ongoing regional Free Trade Area (FTA) negotiations and divisive to ASEAN. In 2004–2005, ASEAN, China, and Japan all developed their favorite regional FTA plans: respectively, ASEAN Economic Community, East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA or 10 + 3 FTA), and Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA or 10 + 6 FTA). All these regional processes have included ASEAN members as the core and have been making steady progress. The TPP, promoted and led by the United States, has included only selected members from ASEAN and East Asia. Therefore, the TPP process not only distracted from the ongoing FTA developments,

but also put ASEAN centrality and solidarity at risk. In response, China and Japan made a joint statement to support and advance EAFTA and CEPEA in tandem; ASEAN established a new mechanism, RCEP—Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership—to anchor itself to the core of the regional FTA arrangements; and China, Japan, and ROK started the trilateral FTA negotiations.

Indeed, the U.S. pivot to Asia has not only counterbalanced the rising power of China, it has also disturbed the strategies and plans of other regional players, especially ASEAN, which has been in the driving seat of East Asian regional processes since the beginning. ASEAN “welcomes” the U.S. pivot, but it also fears that the U.S. pivot will create a side-taking dilemma for ASEAN. In that case, ASEAN would face the threat of losing not only its driving seat, but also its cohesion and solidarity. In July 2012, for the first time since its establishment in 1967, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting failed to conclude with a joint statement because of territorial disputes in the South China Sea. This failure was generally regarded as a crisis of ASEAN and a reminder for how power politics can derail regional processes.

## CONCLUSION: U.S. CHOICE AND EAST ASIAN ORDER

Since day one of the Obama administration, it has pivoted to Asia. In the past four years, the pivot has been based on military power and a leaning toward balance against China. Power cooperation, once at the core of the Obama liberal internationalism, has been overshadowed and sometimes become like fences-mending. Four years after the U.S. pivot, the region has become less stable, less integrated, and more conflict-prone;<sup>43</sup> U.S.–China relations, the most consequential bilateral for the region and the world at large in the twenty-first century, have witnessed dangerous deepening of strategic distrust, while existing regional institutions and ongoing integration processes have undergone distractions and disruptions. Whither East Asia is a question that hinges very much on how the United States pivots to it.

In Obama’s second term, the United States will continue its pivot to Asia, but probably in a more balanced way. John Kerry’s confirmation hearing shows that he tends to take a less confrontational approach toward China and a more political-diplomatic rather than

military approach toward Asia.<sup>44</sup> In a recent speech, Tom Donilon presented five pillars of the U.S. pivot to Asia, which included building a stable and constructive relationship with China as a single third pillar. He further clarified that it did not mean containing China or dictating terms to Asia and that it was not just about military presence.<sup>45</sup> It seems that the pivot to Asia in Obama’s second term will have to first of all strike a rebalance among the elements and components of the strategy itself.

More than 20 years ago, China established a dialogue partnership with ASEAN and started to embrace the region through active participation in all multilateral regional institutions. This move has contributed significantly to regional integration and the transformation of regional culture from hostility and suspicion to amity and cooperation.<sup>46</sup> The two-way socialization between China and ASEAN is the key to success. Today, as the global gravity shifts to Asia, so do global challenges. In an increasingly complex regional context, the U.S. pivot should also open a two-way process, with the United States evolving together with key players and institutions in the quest for a regional order of peace, prosperity, and progress.

## Notes

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