



United States Policy towards Northeast Asia

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With the Obama administration making the transition to its second term, it is appropriate to review its policy goals towards Northeast Asia and whether policy implementation can be sustained. In this essay, I review what senior officials have said on these subjects, and consider the challenge of coping with the rise—or revival—of China, while focusing more sharply on the Korean Peninsula.

DECLARATORY POLICY

Three texts reveal how the United States government views its interests and objectives towards Asia. Chronologically, they are: Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's October 2011 article in *Foreign Policy*; President Obama's speech to the Australian parliament on November 17, 2011; and National Security Adviser Tom Donilon's remarks to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.¹ Five topics merit attention: terminology; the purposes of policy; its scope; the approach to China; and sustainability.

In terminology, two words have gained the greatest currency: “pivot” and “rebalancing.” “Pivot” is a vivid word that plays upon Obama's love of basketball, it also has a rather absolutist connotation. “Rebalancing,” on the other hand, is more relativistic, both in terms of where America places its priorities geographically and which policy arenas it emphasizes. The word

that is least appropriate for Northeast Asia is “return,” which had some currency in the early part of the administration. “Return” may have been accurate for Southeast Asia but not for Northeast Asia.

In terms of the purposes of rebalancing, senior officials spoke in different but substantively convergent ways:

- Clinton referred to “harnessing Asia's growth and dynamism”; to “maintaining peace and security across the Asia-Pacific”; to responding to the wishes of the region itself; and, in effect, the long, benign impact of America's presence in and posture toward the region (“We are the only power with a network of strong alliances in the region, no territorial ambitions, and a long record of providing for the common good. Along with our allies, we have underwritten regional security for decades . . . and that in turn has helped create the conditions for growth.”)
- Obama spoke simply of a “large and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with friends and allies.”
- Donilon also implied a “shaping” objective, even though he did not use the word. He said, “We aspire to see a region where the rise of new powers occurs peacefully; where

¹ Hillary Rodham Clinton, “America's Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, October 11, 2011 (www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/10/175215.htm); “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament—As Prepared for Delivery,” November 17, 2011, White House website (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>); “Remarks by National Security Adviser Tom Donilon—As Prepared for Delivery,” November 15, 2012, White House website (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/15/remarks-national-security-advisor-tom-donilon-prepared-delivery>).

the freedom to access the sea, air, space, and cyberspace empowers vibrant commerce; where multinational forums help promote shared interests; and where citizens increasingly have the ability to influence their governments and universal human rights are upheld.”

On the question of scope, all three officials spoke to security, economics, and dignity (or democracy and human rights). Within the security basket, they referred to strengthening alliances, forging new partnerships, addressing emerging powers, and participating in the construction of regional architecture. Discussions of the economic basket were dominated by the Trans-Pacific Partnership as a means to adapt trade and economic relations to the realities of the twenty-first century (of course, the KORUS FTA is quite compatible with TPP and so can be seen as its precursor). On the dignity basket, Obama (and Clinton) emphasized that “every nation will chart its own course,” but also stressed that certain rights were universal. In addition to these three arenas, Clinton also cited what she called “‘forward-deployed’ diplomacy” and a broad-based military presence that was “geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable.”

On the implication of rebalancing priorities for China, all three reiterated the U.S. desire to expand the areas on which Washington and Beijing could cooperate to enhance the global good. As Donilon put it: “Our consistent policy has been to seek to balance these two elements in a way that increases both the quantity and quality of our cooperation with China as well as our ability to compete. At the same time, we seek to manage disagreements and competition in a healthy – and not disruptive – manner.” In

a later speech, Donilon stressed that re-balancing “does not mean containing China or seeking to dictate terms to Asia.”²

Finally, on sustainability, there was a frank acknowledgment that questions existed, and that some in the United States might see little value in a continuing active role in Asia. How conflicts over the budget are resolved is frequently cited as the indicator of policy sustainability, and rightly so. All three officials stressed that Obama had decreed that the U.S. defense presence in Asia would be exempt from budget cuts. Yet budget conflicts are only the most visible manifestation of ongoing debates over the role of the federal government domestically and the posture of the United States externally, and how the sacrifices required to underwrite that role and posture would be shared. The officials all understand that the key to sustainability is rebuilding the pillars of American national power, particularly the economy. As Clinton put it, “the steps we have to take at home—increasing our savings, reforming our financial systems, relying less on borrowing, overcoming partisan division—[are essential] to secure and sustain our leadership abroad.” They rejected retrenchment and isolationism as inconsistent with the reality that the United States is permanently a Pacific power.

Two features of the rebalancing policy stand out. The first is active presence in the East Asian region—in terms of forward deployment of military forces, the manifold activities of American corporations, and the activities of U.S. senior officials (periodically) and diplomats (every day) to protect and promote U.S. interests. The second is an emphasis on rule-creation: seeking to define the institutions, norms, and practices by which activity in various fields occurs, espe-

² “Remarks By Tom Donilon, National Security Advisory to the President: “The United States and the Asia-Pacific in 2013,” March 11, 2013, White House website (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/11/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisory-president-united-states-a>).

cially concerning investment, production, and trade. But rule-creation applies to domestic political systems as well, with respect to the rule of law, civil and political rights, and competitive political systems. Neither presence nor rule-creation are new objectives of U.S. policy; they have characterized much of Washington's strategy since the end of World War II. Nor are they implemented in an inflexible way. In each, there is a significant willingness to accommodate to new realities, particularly the desire of East Asian countries that seek to play a bigger role in the region's affairs. The big question, of course, is whether the efforts of emerging powers strengthen or diminish the peace, stability and prosperity of all.

CHINA

Which brings us to China. The principal dynamic that will govern the future of East Asia is China's rapidly growing power, how Beijing chooses to exercise that power, and how other countries choose to respond, particularly the United States. This is only the most recent case of power transition, where a rising and established power interact for good or ill. In most historical cases, the outcome has been war.

Several questions are important here.³ First of all, are the goals of the rising power revisionist or limited (to challenging or accommodating the status quo)? Second, what is the degree of urgency on the part of the rising power (i.e. patient or impatient) about achieving its goals? Third, what is the rising power's approach to risk—risk-accepting or risk-averse? Conflict is most likely when a rising power has revisionist

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³ This discussion draws on and elaborates Randall Schweller, "Managing the Rise of Great Powers: History and Theory," in *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power*, edited by Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert Ross (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 1–31.

goals, is impatient to achieve them, and is risk accepting, like Nazi Germany.

Regarding China, scholars have generally concluded on balance that Chinese leaders have tended to accommodate to the existing system, are patient about achieving their goals (whatever they are), and are fairly averse to risk. Recent events, however, have led some to believe Beijing is adopting a different stance.

Just as a rising power has choices about its goals and how to achieve them, established powers have choices about how to respond. They may react strongly to block a rising power's emergence or may accommodate it. The range of responses runs from preventive war on the one hand to total appeasement on the other, with strategies like bandwagoning, engagement, and balancing, in between. Mixed strategies are also possible, for example, a mix of engagement and deterrence. Optimally, the response is commensurate to the rising power's approach. The mixed approach that the United States and others have taken towards China so far fits a country that generally adapts to the international system (because it benefits therefrom) but some of whose actions suggest that it may adopt revisionist goals in the longer term.

Here, mutual perceptions count. If the established power believes the rising power has revisionist goals when it does not (because the rising power takes risks), it may overreact. If the established power believes that the rising power has limited goals when it in fact has revisionist goals, it will not be sufficiently firm (see Neville Chamberlain). Avoiding misperceptions is also important for the rising power. To date, the Chinese leadership appears to believe that American intentions are benign, while the nationalistic and vocal public believes they are malign.

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important.⁴ It is only over the long term that the United States may face a Chinese challenge to its global preeminence. But East Asia, China's home region and where its initial rise is occurring, is more problematic. Since World War II, the United States has believed that peace in the Pacific requires that it forward deploy its multifaceted power into East Asia, and rebalancing is an expression of that belief in new circumstances. Accordingly China's effort to expand its presence and influence in its home region encroaches on the presence of the United States and on the interests of its allies. This significantly complicates the challenge of both China and America to manage the power transition under way. In this sense, Chinese anxiety about the U.S. rebalance to Asia is thus understandable.

Clearly, power transitions are interactive processes. The rising power and the established powers make choices in a reciprocal fashion, for good or ill. This interaction can lead to mutual accommodation that fosters peaceful coexistence and stability, which is further enhanced by the development of extensive economic interdependence. But interaction can also produce mutual suspicion and hostility that ends in friction, conflict, and even war.

Scholars have looked at this interaction from two perspectives. The first concerns material power. The rising and established powers may have reasons to cooperate (e.g. economically), but they end up as rivals because each views the other's accumulation of economic and military power as evidence of hostile intent, and so increases its own power, creating a vicious circle. The second focuses on how the rising power and established powers interact regarding specific points of tension. The lessons learned in those areas inform conclusions about broader

trends. Each side interprets today's and tomorrow's relations more negatively because of the lessons it learns cumulatively from past encounters on these issues. How each party uses its power and "socializes" the other about its character and goals is as important as the absolute amount of power it possesses.

Accordingly, relations between the United States and a resurgent China over the long term will be shaped by a series of contemporary, specific test cases in which their respective interests collide and friction is as likely as (or more likely than) mutual accommodation. If friction predominates, the "socialization" in the specific cases will be negative and will foster broader perceptions of hostile intent. The list of test cases is not short. In early 2013, it included Taiwan; maritime East Asia; Iran's nuclear program; civil conflict in countries like Syria; the future of Pakistan; the global economy; climate change; and so on. The most consequential, however, may be the Korean Peninsula.

CHINA, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE KOREAN PENINSULA

It is North Korea that seeks to change the status quo in Northeast Asia, in ways that may not intend war but that could lead to war all the same. At a minimum, its efforts will create a less stable region. Neither China nor the United States nor South Korea wants instability. None certainly wants war. But the status quo that China would accept differs from that which the United States and the ROK prefer and think possible. The hope is that trilateral interaction can spur a convergence of preferences and methods. Inducing such a convergence is a key task for the U.S.-ROK alliance.

⁴ Jack S. Levy, "Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China," in *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*, edited by Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 11–33.

The DPRK has several coercive options in its repertoire. The one with the longest history is an invasion of the ROK, and although Pyongyang's invasion-related capabilities have degraded over time, it can still wreak major damage on the South. Its second option is to conduct limited, conventional attacks on the ROK, and it did so twice in 2010.

Seoul's decision to move towards a strategy of deterrence by punishment obviously creates some danger of escalation, even with a proportionate response by the ROK armed forces. Yet another option is the continued development of its nuclear program. North Korea's nuclear program has two dangers. First, the DPRK's potential ability to hit the continental United States with nuclear weapons might call into question the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence and lead both the ROK and Japan to consider an independent nuclear capability. The second danger is the prospect of nuclear proliferation by Pyongyang, and although most of the recipient parties would likely be far outside of Northeast Asia, any U.S. retaliation would occur within that region. Finally, in addition to potential DPRK coercion, Seoul, Washington, and Beijing would face a serious crisis management challenge if North Korea were to ever collapse.

Without question, none of these scenarios is anything that Seoul, Washington or Beijing wishes to face. Although the probability of such scenarios may be low, their consequences are severe, including the danger that each might lead to military conflict involving all three powers. The question is what the three nations can do to reduce the current probability of each scenario.

Regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons program, there may have been a time that diplomatic negotiations could have diverted it from its course. Certainly, no state, including the

United States, has been consistently sterling in how it has pursued a diplomatic solution. But there is a growing consensus that Pyongyang's goal all along was to become a state with nuclear weapons, and that is clearly the objective today. We should maintain contacts with the DPRK in order to detect any meaningful signal that it is interested in a fundamental change in policy, in the knowledge and hope that the new Kim Family leadership may conclude (if not today, some day) that its current course is not yielding sufficient benefits. Thus, the Park administration's good-faith effort to foster a trust-building process and exploit areas of mutual benefit while preserving deterrence makes sense, and it is regrettable that Pyongyang's initial reaction has been one of disinterest.

As a matter of strategy, however, the focus of U.S. policy will likely continue to be that of sharpening North Korea's choices (and to avoid letting Pyongyang sharpen our choices). Clearly, to effectively carry out that policy, Washington must both maintain consensus with Seoul and Tokyo and increase it with Beijing (there was convergence among the three nations after 2008 and divergence with China from late 2009).

Yet, just as North Korea is trying to re-shape U.S., ROK, and Japanese choices (likely without success), there is a decent chance that its WMD tests and conventional provocations will re-shape Beijing's choices. On the one hand, the steps that the three nations will necessarily take in response to enhance deterrence will increase China's sense of vulnerability. On the other hand, DPRK actions will undermine the PRC's self-identity and reputation as a guardian of peace and security and as East Asia's deference-deserving great power.

As much as China has sought to serve its national security by simultaneously fostering sta-

bility in North Korea and encouraging restraint by the international community, it will be decreasingly able to have both. One reason for the three nations to periodically engage Pyongyang and accommodate incremental responses to DPRK provocations through the United Nations is to demonstrate to Beijing that North Korea, not they, are the source of China's discomfort.

Finally, although North Korea has proven to be quite a resilient regime and the post-Kim Jong-Il succession has gone better than some expected, it is also a rather brittle regime. Disagreements within the elite over positions, policies, and budgets are likely, particularly when resources are scarce. There is no guarantee in the future that those differences will always be ended by decrees from above or at least contained. It is therefore prudent for the United States and the ROK to continue to consider the various scenarios for DPRK instability, immobility, and even collapse. Even if it is not their policy to seek regime termination, they must prepare for the possibility that the regime will end of its own accord. They should continue to seek very private discussions with China, to create the possibility that together they can meet the challenges of North Korean collapse in a coordinated and mutually beneficial way.

CONCLUSION

The rebalancing policy of the United States is a measured response to East Asia's new realities. It is not designed to contain China but it is the premise and basis for addressing China's revival in ways that China will choose to play a constructive rather than disruptive role in regional and global affairs. The Korean Peninsula is one of the "test cases" that will shape both PRC and U.S. intentions over the long term. Northeast Asia's shifting security environment already

poses new challenges for the United States and ROK, but their interests, while not identical, are very similar, and their long history of cooperation provides a good foundation for facing the future together. **SQ**

Keywords

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