

COMPLETING THE ASIA PIVOT

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SUMMARY

President Barack Obama has made “pivoting” or “rebalancing” of U.S. policies toward Asia one of his strategic priorities. The next administration must not simply maintain this policy on autopilot; it must also provide institutional structure, budgetary support, and conceptual legitimacy to the policy. It must articulate a clear and politically persuasive rationale for the rebalancing strategy, one that acknowledges China’s growing power but also incorporates other key U.S. interests. It must provide a clearer understanding of the nonmilitary components of the strategy. The United States faces grave challenges in Asia. But U.S. success in Asia requires success at home. The pivot toward Asia will succeed only if Americans themselves pivot toward a new era of civility and remember that pursuit of the common good requires compromise and cooperation.

President Barack Obama has made “pivoting” or “rebalancing” of U.S. policies toward Asia one of his strategic priorities. Friends of the United States in the region have largely applauded Obama’s heightened focus on Asia, and the president deserves credit for realigning U.S. policy to reflect the new 21st-century reality that, more than ever before, the future of the United States will be written in Asia.

The pivot represents a job well begun, but important questions have yet to be answered, and key uncertainties remain unresolved. The new administration must not simply continue the job begun over the past four years; it must give institutional structure, budgetary support, and conceptual legitimacy to the idea that America’s fate is inextricably linked to Asia.

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Americans today are focused inward, not merely because of the election. Americans are tired of foreign wars and an unruly world that all too frequently rejects American values and ideals. They face the prospect of a “fiscal cliff” at the end of the year that, if not avoided, could impose immense costs on the United States and quite possibly drive the country back into recession. Huge economic and financial challenges loom even if fiscal catastrophe on January 1, 2013, is dodged.

But Americans cannot afford to simply turn their backs on Asia. The next administration faces a daunting array of challenges there. The president’s ability to deal with these challenges will go a long

way toward determining whether, four years from now, his administration is deemed a success or a failure.

By most reckoning, China will offer the most serious challenge to U.S. interests in the region in the years ahead. Indeed, many have described President Obama's rebalancing effort as essentially the containment of China by other means. But to cast the rebalancing strategy in such narrow terms misses the many ways in which America's future is linked to Asia's. Moreover, such a restrictive understanding of the rebalancing, by explicitly defining China as an adversary, can backfire. At a minimum, such an understanding would make securing Chinese cooperation on the many transnational dangers that threaten both China and the United States less likely.

As a first order of business, then, the next administration must articulate a clearer and more politically persuasive rationale for the rebalancing, one that not only acknowledges China's growing power and larger role in the region but also incorporates other key U.S. interests. Properly framed, the rebalancing strategy should be seen by all of Asia's major powers as an American commitment to strengthening the regional stability that for nearly four decades has worked to the advantage of all the countries.

At the moment, this stability seems increasingly endangered, as much by drift and indecision as by deliberate actions of regional actors. Progress in walking North Korea back from its goal of a nuclear arsenal has stalled, and the Six-Party Talks designed to bring Pyongyang into polite international society appear dead. A new arms race is under way, as virtually every country in the region is accelerating the acquisition of modern weaponry. Japan now faces a third decade of economic and political malaise. Even China's vaunted economy, which has served as the engine of growth for the entire region, is noticeably

cooling. A well-articulated U.S. commitment to the region would buttress the economic and political stability that could contribute to the easing of many of these concerns.

Perhaps most worrisome at present, territorial disputes, which are fueled by historical animosities and growing nationalism, threaten peace not only between China and various U.S. friends in the region, but also between Washington's two principal regional allies, Japan and South Korea. A forceful political, economic, and strategic U.S. presence in the region will not in itself resolve these increasingly dangerous conflicts. But active diplomacy could play a helpful role in persuading the disputants that some issues are simply too difficult to resolve quickly and that deferring their resolution may represent enlightened self-interest.

The American people also need a clearer understanding of the nonmilitary aspects of the rebalancing effort. At the moment, the element of the rebalancing that has gotten the most attention is the periodic rotation of U.S. troops to northern Australia. The Obama administration insists that the security component of the rebalancing strategy is not its most important aspect. Yet the economic dimension represented in the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations appears bogged down. The next administration must explain how the various components fit together and why the rebalancing is not essentially military.

The next administration will also need to work with India to incorporate it more fully and constructively into the Asian order. The Obama administration has already taken unprecedented steps to encourage India to play a more prominent role in the affairs of East Asia. New Delhi, however, still exhibits an indecision borne of uncertainty as to how far and how fast to move into the region. If the much-bal-

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lyhooded strategic partnership between the United States and India is to move beyond the merely rhetorical, Washington will need to persuade New Delhi that its desire to be regarded as one of the world's great powers is unlikely to be satisfied unless it is prepared to act as a great power in East as well as South Asia.

The next administration must also recognize that genuine leadership sometimes requires that leaders get ahead of the consensus. Administrations of both parties have properly insisted that working in lock-step with U.S. allies should be a cardinal principle of our policy in the region. But although this principle is valid, it should not require us to allow the domestic constraints of our friends to act as a veto on steps that are essential for U.S. interests. Not even our closest friends in the region will have the same priorities that we do. Japan, for instance, is almost certainly less anxious over a splenetic North Korea than we are, while Seoul may see less reason than Washington does to challenge Chinese rule breaking. We may not always view things the same way our friends do, but forceful, consistent leadership will reassure them even when we do reach different policy conclusions.

America's Asia policy must also recognize that traditional security threats, emanating from other states and usually involving force or other forms of coercion, have now been supplemented by entirely new categories of transnational dangers that demand new strategies, new organizations, new budgetary

resources, and new and creative ways of thinking about risk. Many of these nontraditional security threats, as they have been called, do not arise because of the actions of rival governments. Most pose dangers even though traditional weaponry may be absent. But in the 21st century, they constitute serious and even deadly challenges.

Imagine the chaos, let alone the cost, should a hostile government, a nonstate criminal cartel or terrorist organization, or simply bored teenagers target the U.S. electrical grid, transportation system, communication networks, or banking system. Such a “cyber 9/11” could literally shut the United States down in a way al Qaeda never could. And how likely is such a catastrophe? Earlier this year, a group of retired senior U.S. defense officials warned that it is not a question of whether such an event will happen; it is a question of when.

The United States faces a host of nontraditional security challenges that could arise in Asia. One simply has to recall the SARS scare in 2003, or anxieties occasioned by avian flu more recently, to appreciate the way in which pandemics could disrupt Americans' lives and cost billions of dollars. Climate change, environmental degradation, resource constraints, and food safety issues all pose threats that our grandparents never imagined. Americans should not for a minute think that important U.S. equities would be immune if water-stressed India were to resort to force in the face of a massive Chinese diversion of Himalayan water resources.

But the Asia pivot also entails an important U.S. component. The Obama administration, more than any administration in recent history, has, as a hallmark of its definition of national security, insisted that for the United States to be strong abroad, we must be strong at home. Both Republicans and Democrats can embrace this idea, even as they will continue to wrangle over the precise steps required to remain strong. Unfortunately, in recent decades, political polarization and an increasingly dysfunctional political system have made bridging those differences more and more difficult for every aspect of our lives, including changing the size and role of government, revitalizing the education system, rebuilding infrastructure, retraining workers, and more. In Asia, as elsewhere in the world, inaction and gridlock in Washington undermine U.S. leadership and reduce U.S. policymakers' ability to effectively engage in global issues.

The United States faces grave challenges in Asia, as in the rest of the world. But success in Asia requires success at home. The pivot toward Asia will succeed in protecting U.S. interests only if Americans themselves pivot toward a new era of civility and civic responsibility; reject the take-no-prisoners approach of today's politics; and remember that pursuit of the common good requires compromise, cooperation, and coexistence.

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