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## The US Pivot to Asia and Asia's Pivot to the US

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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's article "America's Pacific Century" in last November's *Foreign Policy* used the word "pivot" only three times in outlining evolving US strategy towards the Asia-Pacific. Yet the word was so enticing that the phrase "US pivot to Asia" became iconic when discussing US foreign policy towards the region. Indeed, many questioned the practicality and relevance of the word "pivot," rather than the actual implications of the policy under review. Whatever term one chooses, be it "rebalance," "refocus" or "pivot," the essential point is that the United States continues to enhance its engagement throughout the Asia-Pacific with renewed vigor.

**Jae-Kyung Park, Visiting Fellow with the US-Korea Policy Scholars Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), explains that "Asian countries were pivoting towards the United States long before the announced US pivot to Asia, and there is no sign that this will change course in the immediate future."**

However, what should not be forgotten is that this emphasis towards Asia by the United States was already being implemented via earlier actions and policy speeches by the Obama administration. These culminated late last year in a number of diplomatic events which very publicly highlighted US leadership in the region, including the United States hosting the APEC leaders' meeting in Hawai'i, the announcement of rotating US Marines through Northern Australia, and for the first time, President Obama's attendance at the East Asia Summit. It was clear that the "US pivot to Asia" policy was aimed at reassuring the general public—both in the United States and Asia—of the US commitment to the region.

The primary driving force for US policy makers behind the pivot is the allure of emerging Asian economies, especially China and India. Another reason includes the drawdown of US forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan, which enables the US military to concentrate more resources on the Asia-Pacific.

In addition, there are US concerns about trilateral and multilateral cooperation among regional actors. The most significant of these efforts is ASEAN's engagement with China, Japan and Korea, otherwise known as ASEAN+3. Since its launch in 1997 in reaction to the Asian financial crisis, the thirteen countries have quickly moved towards deepening and widening their cooperation with a visionary goal of building an "East Asian community." Numerous cooperation projects are proposed and implemented each year, supported by an array of government and ministerial meetings.

Another example is the growing trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and Korea (CJK), which originated on the sidelines of the ASEAN+3 summit meeting in 1997. For the past five years CJK leaders have been meeting separately from ASEAN+3 summits. In 2011, CJK established a Secretariat Office in Seoul and at the 2012 summit consensus was reached to start negotiations later this year regarding a CJK free trade agreement.

These integration efforts seem to demonstrate that Asian countries are increasingly looking for more opportunities within the region and among themselves for greater



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economic cooperation. Some political leaders in the region advocated an “Asia first policy.” One striking example is when former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, who in 2009, proposed the idea of an “East Asian Community” that excluded the United States. His vision was to strengthen cooperation among countries in East Asia, first in the form of a CJK trilateral organization and later extending to ASEAN+3.

During the past decade, many in Asia perceived that the United States in the aftermath of 9/11 had shifted its focus to Iraq and Afghanistan, and by default had inadvertently “neglected” Asia. Beijing was therefore able to further enhance and solidify its political and economic influence throughout the region. Thus, some in the region were beginning to wonder if China’s increased presence in regional affairs was overshadowing that of the United States, with concerns that Asia-Pacific countries would have to increasingly succumb to Chinese hegemony.

These concerns became particularly evident during 2009-10 as a result of certain unsavory unilateral assertive actions by China in the South and East China Seas and at regional meetings. In the United States too, some began to wonder if China’s influence in regional affairs was to the detriment of US interests.

However, the US pivot to Asia should not be understood solely as a US response to China’s rise. Most countries in the region had been repeatedly calling for a more active US presence throughout Asia. Indeed, Asian countries were pivoting towards the United States long before the announced US pivot to Asia, and there is no sign that this will change course in the immediate future. Most countries in the region want peace, stability and economic prosperity, and most understand that these goals are better guaranteed with an active US regional presence. That is why Prime Minister Hatoyama’s idea of an “East Asian Community” encountered sharp regional criticism, and even from within Japan.

Furthermore, many Asian states understand that the United States, as a Pacific power, has its own national interests in the region to safeguard. Based on this reality, there are a number of factors that the United States should take into consideration. Most importantly, informed representation by high-level US officials at regional meetings is vital. Indeed, it is often the case that just the act of turning up to meetings and summits is half the battle. President Obama, just by attending the East Asia Summit last year, in contrast to then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev who did not attend, did more for US interests in the region than any policy announcement could ever achieve.

The question, however, does remain within the minds of Asians whether future US presidents and their administrations will be as engaged with the Asia-Pacific as the Obama administration has been. There is also the lurking fear of US fiscal and economic woes that may lead to a reduction of US engagement throughout Asia; although the obvious counter-argument is that increased US economic engagement with Asia is in the best interests of the United States.

In addition, ASEAN+3 and the CJK trilateral mechanism should continue to develop, but in a transparent and open manner. This does not mean that membership has to be expanded, but that these institutions are complementary and not detriment to other regional groupings. For example, ASEAN+3 should continue exploring how to promote regional peace and stability together with the expanded East Asia Summit in a mutually reinforcing way. The point is that Asian allies and partners of the United States should remain cognizant of the many positive US contributions to Asia that have provided for regional peace and prosperity. In turn, as a Pacific power, the United States relies upon reciprocity for its own interests from its many regional friends, partners, and allies throughout the region.