

Mr. Obama: focus on alliance management, not rebalancing rhetoric by Jeffrey W. Hornung

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There is a tendency to frame President Barack Obama's upcoming trip to Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines (also Malaysia) as a chance to back up his rebalance rhetoric to Asia. Because these three formal US allies are at wits end in their dealings with an assertive China or a provocative North Korea, the logic goes that the US needs to demonstrate signs of resolve to the region, particularly given Washington's lackluster response to Russia's actions in the Crimea. While it is true that Asian powers, even US allies, harbor questions and deep uncertainties regarding the rebalance strategy, focusing on whether the president can back up the rebalance rhetoric as a measure of his trip's success is misguided. It would behoove the president to skip the rhetoric and focus instead on crucial alliance management. After all, many of Washington's allies' anxieties are, at their core, alliance issues rather than rebalance issues.

Those who focus on the emptiness of rebalance rhetoric tend to look at the shrinking US defense budget, missed presidential face-time at Asian meetings during the sequestration, and Washington's continued focus on the Middle East, Russia, Afghanistan, and pretty much anyplace other than Asia. It is a fact of life that the US Navy will shrink and that the Air Force is also slated for reductions. Similarly, the US forward presence in the region is being repositioned, which will include a reduction in permanent bases and a move of forces out of Okinawa. These quantitative facts are an easy target to criticize the rebalance, regardless of the fact that the administration is emphasizing quality of engagement and less tangible items like a Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade agreement, strengthened diplomatic relations with new partners, and active support for maritime laws. But it is also a fact that US allies look at these quantitative changes and worry about not only a reduced presence, but reduced US commitment to their security.

This is because US allies face two major security challenges stemming from China and North Korea, which appear to be getting more assertive and provocative. China is the preeminent concern for Japan and the Philippines. Under Xi Jinping, Chinese decision-making has become more centralized. At the same time, and possibly as a result of greater centralization, China has become much more assertive

in the region, including against US allies. Over the past year, China has maintained regular provocations against Japanese assets in the waters and airspace surrounding the Japan-administered Senkaku Islands, unilaterally imposed an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea that covered these same islands, and gained control over and restricted Filipino access to Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

North Korea is the primary concern for South Korea, although Japan also views the regime with trepidation. Under Kim Jong-Un, the country maintains nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles but appears to have become more provocative as its threats against its neighbors have become, at times, more vitriolic and it has proven its willingness to use terror against members of its own regime.

But understanding these security challenges, one has to ask how will having the president reiterate the importance or reality of the rebalance calm these allies' anxieties? Instead, it makes sense that shoring up the foundations of each alliance and clarifying forward progress on outstanding issues would be a more effective way to assure regional allies. In other words, President Obama should focus on alliance management.

With Japan, this means starting with an update on current progress on revising the alliance's defense guidelines. This should include a frank talk with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo on the likelihood of his government reinterpreting its right to exercise collective self-defense. It is increasingly clear that Abe is heading into rough waters with not only his coalition partner but within his own party. Abe can lose the bravado behind closed-doors and give a realistic assessment to his ally of whether this is likely to change so the two can obtain a better understanding of where revisions of roles and missions will head. The President should also discuss the current situation in Okinawa in regard to the closure and relocation of Marines Corps Air Station Futenma to Nago City. Finally, given Japanese concern about Chinese activity around the Senkaku Islands, Obama should reiterate that the islands fall under Article 5 of their Security Treaty and emphasize that no other US ally receives this same assurance.

With South Korea, the discussion should focus on the OPCON transfer of wartime command to South Korean forces. This issue is at the heart of South Korean anxiety over North Korea provocations. The transfer has been delayed twice and is currently scheduled for 2015. But, once again, the talk of a delay has become a source of contention between the allies. President Obama and President Park Guen-hye need to have a realistic discussion on the OPCON transfer situation. While it is easy for Washington to understand why Seoul may want to maintain the current structure, President Obama needs clarification on Seoul's readiness. Obama needs a realistic

picture of South Korean abilities to lead a military operation in wartime and set out a timeline that both allies are comfortable with if the current timeline cannot hold. It would also behoove Obama to reaffirm his support and express gratitude for the January 2014 agreement on a new five-year Special Measures Agreement under which Seoul will raise its host nation support payments for US Forces in South Korea by roughly 6 percent.

When President Obama visits Manila, his priority should be on the maturation of defense relations, as represented by the new security agreement expected to be signed by President Benigno Aquino before arriving in Manila. The agreement would expand the US military's rotational presence in the Philippines by promising access and use of Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) facilities and areas by an increasing number of US troops (but not the establishment of permanent military presence or bases). It also allows US forces to bring equipment and war material onto Philippine facilities as long as it does not contain nuclear weapons or WMD. Obama should reiterate that this agreement is a powerful reminder that the US is engaged in the region and committed to its ally's defense.

At the same time, while the mutual defense treaty does not oblige the United States to take sides over sovereignty questions in territorial disputes, President Obama should reiterate that the treaty includes language related to attacks on the AFP, public vessels, or aircraft. Because the United States is bolstering defense cooperation with the Philippines, it would also be fitting for Presidents Obama and Aquino to discuss efforts to build AFP defense capabilities and progress on the May 2013 defense modernization program intended to upgrade the Philippines' air and maritime capabilities.

While US allies have overlapping security concerns, the means each alliance uses to deal with regional security challenges differ. As such, President Obama needs to manage the specific issues unique to each alliance rather than focus on rhetoric for an amorphous rebalancing strategy. Only when common understandings are reached with the United States and each of its allies over force/command/treaty issues can concerns over US commitment begin to be assuaged. So it should be the president's aim to pursue the much more basic goal of alliance management on his Asia trip, hoping to reduce any political divergences that may currently exist in the US alliance relationships.

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