



## **The great Eurasian rebalancing act** by Marc M. Wall

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The news from Iraq makes it seem as though the battle for Baghdad is approaching. Yet an even bigger story is playing out on opposite sides of the great Eurasian land mass. Events unfolding there exhibit striking parallels. A resurgent Russia is pushing its expansionist ambitions in its “Near Abroad” just as an emboldened China is claiming vast stretches of its “Near Seas” as its sovereign domain. The actions of both nations are frightening neighbors, challenging US alliances, and stirring up regional rivalries. It is worth taking a closer look at these parallels: understanding the dynamics at play in one region shed light on the other and suggest policy lessons for dealing with both.

### **Drawing Russian and Chinese parallels**

At times the incidents on Russia’s western borders and China’s eastern seem like distorted reflections of one another in a carnival mirror. Russian security services are fomenting trouble on Russia’s border with Ukraine, while stepped-up Chinese maritime patrols are prowling waters within its “first island chain.” US Navy ships have been buzzed by Russian fighter jets in the Black Sea and come dangerously close to collisions with Chinese vessels in the South China Sea. Both Russia and China have been increasing annual spending on their armed forces at double-digit rates. US forces have tightened cooperation with nervous counterparts in NATO and in Asia.

Moscow’s and Beijing’s assertiveness has similar motivations – to reestablish their preeminence as dominant regional powers. Both regimes expect outside powers to defer to their claims of predominance in their regional spheres of influence. Both nations are also inspired by memories of past greatness tinged by feelings of resentment from humiliations at the hands of major powers. And since neither can look any longer to communism to bolster the legitimacy of their authoritarian regimes, they have had to find other means of rallying support.

The promise of rising incomes has powerful appeal in both countries, but those prospects are becoming increasingly frayed. Both economies are slowing, especially in Russia, which is teetering on the brink of recession. So the alternative for both Moscow and Beijing is appeals to nationalism. To consolidate popular support at home, their leaders present themselves as defenders of their peoples, avengers of past wrongs, and advocates of national greatness.

Both Moscow and Beijing see the United States and its allies as threats to their ambitions. Putin accused the US-led West of aiding and abetting the “coup d’état” against the Yanukovich regime in Kiev. Meanwhile, Beijing has convinced itself that the US is conspiring with its friends and allies in the region to encircle China and thwart its rise.

Russia’s and China’s neighbors have seized on commercial opportunities offered by the big powers next door, but they have also been made painfully aware of the downsides of this relationship. Russia has had no qualms about using Europe’s reliance on Russian natural gas as leverage. Nor has China been timid about playing economic hardball to get its way with recalcitrant trading partners.

Thus, though Russia and China may feel like victims, they are acting in the eyes of their neighbors like bullies. These fears are causing many nearby countries to look to their stronger friends for support, in particular to the United States. They are eager, if not desperate, for assurances that the US won’t abandon them to the tender mercies of big powers at their doorsteps.

### **Managing the Eurasian balancing act**

Russia’s and China’s actions challenge broadly accepted rules for international interactions. President Obama enunciated them in his speech at West Point on May 28: big countries cannot prey on small ones; territorial disputes should be resolved without force or intimidation; and rights of free navigation must be respected. Regardless of whether core US interests are directly jeopardized, those of its treaty allies are.

These concerns were in part behind the Obama administration’s decision to initiate a policy of “rebalancing” toward Asia. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wound down, it was increasingly clear that the United States needed to focus more on Asia, the region where the future’s main strategic challenges and economic opportunities converged.

Though the strategy was designed as a “whole-of-government” approach, its strictly military aspects grabbed the most attention. In fact, the plan involved only a relatively modest shift of military assets to the region. More important were its political and diplomatic elements. Those included updating US defense agreements with its allies, bolstering ties with emerging regional powers, and putting much more emphasis on regional institutions (especially ASEAN).

Trade initiatives were important too. The centerpiece was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a cutting-edge free trade agreement grouping some of the most dynamic economies on the Pacific Rim.

Putin’s annexation of Crimea and moves against Ukraine show that the rebalance needs to give greater weight to Europe. As long as Putin’s brand of assertive ethnically-based

nationalism holds sway, Russia will be seen as a threat to its neighbors and to European security. Eurasia's western flank now demands as much attention as its eastern flank.

The United States is not in the best position to pursue new exertions abroad. Iraq now grips Washington's attention. At home, it faces gridlock, budget constraints, and a public mood still smarting from interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. But these impediments notwithstanding, what should a new rebalance toward Europe look like? The Asian rebalance provides a few pointers.

First, don't overplay the military component. Limited military deployments are warranted. Increasing surveillance flights and sending US soldiers to join in NATO-led exercises, for example, make sense. So do discrete efforts to strengthen the defense capabilities of Ukraine and others on Russia's western border. But think long and hard before committing major hard power assets.

Second, renew NATO. Unlike in Asia, Europe doesn't have to create a new security structure. Rather, it needs to make the most of what it has. That includes refocusing the organization founded to protect its members against the Soviet threat on responding to Putin's expansionist agenda.

Third, reassure US allies but don't embolden them. As in Asia, European partners want to know the United States is not so self-absorbed that it no longer has the will to back up its commitments. It is important to provide such assurances, but also not to encourage them to act in ways that would incite conflict and drag the United States into fights not of its choosing.

Fourth, act multilaterally. Just as the US is encouraging new regional approaches in Asia, so too should it be acting in lock step with its NATO allies. It is smart to coordinate closely with Germany and other European friends in ratcheting up economic pressure on Russia. Cajoling them into taking more forceful measures may be necessary, but there is nothing to be gained from getting out in front of those whose economic and security interests are most on the line.

Finally, negotiate the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Like the TPP, a free trade deal with Europe would send a powerful message of economic solidarity and strategic reassurance. That means redoubling negotiating efforts and winning Congressional support for fast track authority.

As usual, the hard part will be execution. This new approach will require combining diplomatic, economic, and military tools in a smart strategy to address the sharpening strategic pressures on Eurasia's western as well as its eastern rim.

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