

Rebalancing as the Rorschach inkblot test

9th July, 2014

Author: Brad Glosserman, Pacific Forum CSIS

Since it was first announced in late 2011, the US rebalance to Asia has become the great foreign policy 'Rorschach test' — what one sees in the rebalance says more about the observer than it does about the policy itself.



One school sees the rebalance as an effort to realise the goals laid out in President Obama's 2009 National Security Strategy: it aims to tap the dynamism of the world's most productive region to revitalise the US economy, sapped by a decade of war. It embraces the thinking outlined in the president's West Point commencement address last month that it is important to diversify the forms of US engagement with Asia, relying less on 'the hammer' of US military force and more on diplomatic and business resources.

For others, the rebalance is a crafty strategy to contain China. They see the strengthening of US alliances and partnerships — a response to new security challenges and tightening fiscal constraints — as aiming to throttle a rising power seeking its rightful place in the region and the world. In this interpretation, Washington uses the rebalance to embolden nations on China's periphery — which have disputes with Beijing — to distract and check a regional competitor.

But a third school sees the rebalance as a means to gradually disengage the US from Asia — as the US further supports multilateral institutions and thickens the weave of security relationships among allies and partners. According to this logic, Washington aims to offload security responsibilities on to Asian nations and assume the role of offshore balancer, watching as regional governments tie themselves down in local disputes and intervening only when they threaten to get out of hand.

Call me credulous, but I put myself in the first group. My reasoning may sound counterintuitive, but it reflects my belief that the rebalance shows the continuity in US policy. Contrary to Obama administration pronouncements, the rebalance isn't new. Many if not most of the initiatives it embraces were put in place by previous US administrations. That consistency in policy — a bipartisan approach to Asia that has guided US thinking for decades — is the best answer to those who challenge the durability of the US commitment to the region, a chorus that swells every time there is a crisis elsewhere in the world. (Though a US reluctance to commit military forces to those crises then raises questions about Washington's readiness to do so in Asia.)

But it is unclear what is required for the Obama administration to get the big question — the US commitment to Asia — right. For all the talk of changing the weight placed on various instruments in the US foreign policy toolkit, the president's April tour of Asia emphasised the military component of US policy and paid precious little attention to the diplomatic and economic elements. To be fair, some of the fault should be shouldered by the media, which prefers a simple US versus China narrative. But a large part of the problem is a paucity of alternative initiatives. In the economic realm, for example, it is hard to see what the rebalance includes other than the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade negotiations.

US efforts to diversify its forms of engagement are also confounded by mixed messages sent by allies and partners. They urge the US to be a force for stability and order. Yet while Washington must signal resolve, it can't pick a fight. All nations in Asia emphasise that they don't want a bamboo curtain drawn through the region and don't want to be forced to take sides. The difficulties in US signalling were evident in the recent contretemps over comments by the Chief of Naval Operations when he said that discussion of [US plans and tactics toward China](#)^[1] shouldn't take place in public.

This is where that ambiguity in US policy — that Rorschach test — becomes so important. [As Scott Snyder observed after a recent tour of China](#)^[2], the rebalance is uniformly viewed there as a containment policy. China is well served by that interpretation. That assertion makes the US responsible for tensions in the region. If the rebalance is new, then China didn't change the status quo.

But the [US has been unable to stop China](#)^[3] from engaging in activities that undercut other countries' national interests. Beijing commenced drilling for oil in waters disputed with Vietnam, sent military vessels into waters disputed with the Philippines and has begun building artificial islands in the South China Sea. If the rebalance is supposed to contain China, then it isn't working.

[Chinese behaviour](#)^[4] appears to be reducing the ambiguity in US policy and transforming the 'rebalance inkblot' into an image whose meaning most observers can agree upon. It has underscored the urgency of the US call to shore up the institutions and mechanisms of international order, in particular respect for the rule of law and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Even more significantly, it has emphasised the need for a dialogue among like-minded governments to consult, if not coordinate, among themselves.

In Washington, the official line remains that the rebalance does not target China and that

[cooperation with Beijing](#) ^[5] remains a core component of US policy. But there is no mistaking the hardening of sentiment outside government. There is growing concern that the Obama administration's commitment to cooperation and engagement are seen as signs of US weakness. But that is a troubling misreading of US will and intent, one that threatens to have destabilising consequences for Asia.

If developments are transforming perceptions — if not the reality — of the rebalance, then Obama can retake control of the narrative by fleshing out the strategy behind the policy. Most importantly, given the stated desire to recalibrate the weight placed on the military dimension of US policy, how will the US implement the political and economic elements of the rebalance? How will the US support multilateral institutions — apart from showing up at meetings — and in what ways will it consolidate support for rule of law?

The more details that the US provides about the rebalance, the less observers will have to interpret. It isn't just a slogan, but it isn't yet a strategy. The Obama administration's chief task now is turning the inkblot into an image that most observers will be able to see.

Brad Glosserman is Executive Director of Pacific Forum CSIS, Honolulu.

Article from the East Asia Forum: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org>

URL to article:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/07/09/rebalancing-as-the-roschach-inkblot-test/>

[1] US plans and tactics toward China:

<http://news.usni.org/2014/06/17/greenert-dont-unnecessarily-antagonize-china>

[2] As Scott Snyder observed after a recent tour of China:

<http://blogs.cfr.org/asia/2014/06/20/sour-notes-from-china-on-the-u-s-rebalance-to-asia/>

[3] US has been unable to stop China:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/07/30/rhetoric-and-reality-of-the-us-rebalance/>

[4] Chinese behaviour:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/04/24/a-structural-approach-to-china-s-rebalancing/>

[5] cooperation with Beijing:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/11/19/sino-american-ties-building-relations-beyond-washingtons-rebalancing/>