

Obama's rebalance to Asia in his own words: where does it stand? by Scott Snyder

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President Obama had a better than expected visit to Asia for annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), East Asia Summit (EAS), and G-20 gatherings, due largely to a productive summit with Xi Jinping. At the end of his trip in Brisbane, Obama gave [his second major speech](#) on the US rebalancing policy to Asia, coming almost three years to the day following [an address to the Australian parliament](#) on his previous visit to Australia. A side-by-side reading of President Obama's two major Australian speeches on the subject (he has yet to give a major policy speech on the rebalance in the United States) provides a useful benchmark for assessing the administration's progress in implementing the policy. I found the following takeaways from my reading of the two speeches:

- The fundamental goals of the rebalance to Asia have remained consistent, focusing around the goals of shared security, shared prosperity, and commitments to advancing universal human rights in Asia. The Obama administration can justifiably point to progress in deepening alliances with Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines and strengthened partnerships with Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and India, but fallout from a coup d'état has taken Thailand out of the mix (and out of Obama's Brisbane speech). Modernization of U.S. military forces in Asia has made slow and steady progress.
- The Obama administration's rhetorical commitment to energizing institutions such as the East Asia Summit as vehicles for applying international norms to regulate regional behavior remains constant. The United States has reiterated the importance of maritime security, freedom of navigation, and peaceful resolution of territorial disputes, but the Obama administration's words are at risk of being hollow if China takes actions to change the facts on the ground. As a vehicle for upholding mutual restraint among its members, the capacity of the East Asia Summit remains limited. There is clearly more work to be done on this front.
- On the goal of sustainable and shared economic growth, evidence of progress remains slim. Obama's claim that "the United States has put more people back to work than all other advanced economies combined" rings hollow in Asia, which features growth rates that rival the United States. China's slowing growth rate at 7.5 percent still doubles that of

the United States. Moreover, the economic pillar of the rebalance depends wholly on TPP. This is especially the case now that China appears to have overtaken the United States rhetorically in its support for the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) concept that US officials in the Clinton administration had championed. Without TPP, there will in effect be no rebalance.

- The Obama administration turned allegations of distraction into a virtue by bringing the global agenda to Asia, arguing that the rebalance is "not only about the United States doing more in Asia, it's about the Asia Pacific region doing more with us around the world." In fact, the Obama administration's major successes in Beijing involved catalyzing China to show greater responsibility on global issues such as climate change, the Ebola crisis, and cooperation on countering violent extremism.
- Some Australian commentators have taken offense at Obama's touting of climate change policies in his Brisbane speech that are at odds with the Abbott administration. But a comparison of Obama's Brisbane speech with the one he gave three years ago in Canberra shows that it is not Obama's policies that have changed but those of the Abbott administration compared with its predecessor. Despite policy differences on this issue, security cooperation between the US and Australia has grown closer.
- While pursuing a "constructive relationship with China" and welcoming "the continuing rise of a China that is peaceful and prosperous and stable and that plays a responsible role in world affairs," President Obama insisted that "China adhere to the same rules as other nations," drawing a sharp line against Chinese exceptionalism or efforts to bend international rules to China's favor. In practical terms, the US response to new Chinese initiatives such as the BRICS bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is simultaneously testing both the Obama administration's ability to accept China's rise and whether new Chinese initiatives will abide by or challenge international practices and standards of good governance.
- Despite expanded functional cooperation with China on global issues, the rebalance to Asia continues to draw stark lines between the United States and China on universal human rights and rule of law. The Canberra speech in 2011 highlighted those values by pointing to the failure of forms of nondemocratic "rule by one man or rule by committee" that "ignore the ultimate source of power and legitimacy – the will

of the people.” This time around, in Brisbane, Obama argued for independent judiciaries and open government “because the rule of force must give way to the rule of law.” The universality of human rights has not generally been perceived (or advertised by Obama administration officials) as a centerpiece of the US rebalance to Asia, but it may offer the strongest justification for the policy, even if it is also the most starkly divisive issue with which the region must grapple, as well as the most sensitive issue in the US-China relationship.

So where does the rebalance to Asia stand? The consistency of Obama’s two speeches in Australia makes the case that the rebalance is real and credible. But whether or not it is sustainable or sufficient will not depend only on the Obama administration’s continued commitment to the policy. It will also depend on the ability of the next American president to carry forward the rebalance in an Asian and global environment that will undoubtedly pose new and even more difficult challenges to US leadership.

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