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US Pivot Pitfalls and Prospects

Barack Obama's 'Asian Pivot' is set to become one of the defining foreign policy objectives of his second term. Richard Weitz outlines how the United States plans to strengthen its strategic position in the greater Asia-Pacific region and identifies the challenges it may confront.

By Richard Weitz for ISN

President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta are all making [high-profile visits](#) to the Asia-Pacific region this month in order to advance and refine the administration's "[Asia Pivot](#)" for the next four years. As a result, now is a good time to assess what the administration's strategic rebalancing toward East Asia has accomplished in its first term and what challenges and unmet opportunities remain. The most important achievement has been the strengthening previously strained ties with Japan and South Korea. However, tensions with China have nevertheless disrupted several elements of the United States' 'pivot'.

Lines of Action

During its first term, key members of the Obama administration expressed increasing interest in the Asia-Pacific region. In their view, the United States was at a strategic inflection point and needed to rebalance its foreign policy orientation. In particular, the end of combat operations in Iraq and Libya and the declining military commitment to Afghanistan and Europe meant that the United States had an [opportunity](#) to pay greater attention to the Asia-Pacific region. U.S. officials have cited a variety of economic, demographic, and strategic factors that [point towards Asia](#) becoming the world's most important region. Although downplayed by administration representatives, [China's growing economic and military power](#) has also been driving the United States to increase its focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

In an article for the November 2011 issue of Foreign Policy magazine, Secretary of State Clinton identified "[six key lines of action](#)" that constituted the main elements of the administration's approach toward the Asia-Pacific region:

- strengthening bilateral security alliances
- forging a broad-based military presence
- engaging regional multilateral institutions
- expanding trade and investment
- advancing democracy and human rights
- deepening working relationships with emerging powers

The administration's foreign policies have generally conformed to this reorientation, though some of these elements have received more emphasis and seen more success than others.

Deeper and Broader Security Ties

By the end of the first Obama administration, the bilateral security relationship between the United States and Japan had rebounded from earlier tensions over local opposition to the [Futenma Marine Air Station](#) on Okinawa. Currently, the Japanese government is striving to pursue a more balanced policy between Washington and Beijing. However, the country is divided politically, struggling economically, and embroiled in territorial disputes with its neighbors. These factors, in turn, constrain Japan's contribution to international security and also complicate Washington's diplomatic efforts across the region.

Relations between Washington and Seoul have also improved thanks to new free trade agreements and U.S.-South Korean solidarity over North Korea. The two governments have set aside past disagreements and also adopted a common policy toward many international issues. Yet, the United States is still striving to reassure South Korea about its aggressive northern neighbor, with Washington and Seoul struggling to meet a [2015 deadline](#) to transfer operational command and additional military missions from U.S. Forces Korea to South Korean counterparts.

Beyond improving relations between key allies and Washington, the Obama administration has made little progress towards transforming the traditional "hub-and-spoke" [network of bilateral alliances](#) into a better-integrated regional security structure in which Washington's allies are also allies of one another. Ties between Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand remain weak, with tensions between Tokyo and Seoul undermining their solidarity with respect to Beijing and Pyongyang. Integrating America's Asian allies more effectively would leverage their resources better in order to achieve common goals.

In pursuit of a broad-based military presence, the Pentagon's goal is to make the United States' [force posture in Asia](#) more "geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable." The military is rebalancing its global assets from other regions to Asia, as well as rebalancing within the Asia-Pacific region, reducing the concentration of forces from Northeast Asia and aiming at a wider distribution of forces throughout the entire region. This shift in geographic focus is also prompting the military to strengthen capabilities most suitable for the Asia-Pacific region, such as long-range strike, power projection, as well as extended logistics and transportation.

Partly due to foreign basing constraints in Japan and South Korea, the administration aims to deepen defense cooperation with new Asian partners, especially in Southeast Asia, and broaden collaboration to encompass a wider range of areas. United States' officials do not seek new permanent bases but only short-term access to places for joint exercises, training sessions, port visits, defense dialogues, and other temporary deployments. There is also a [special focus](#) on the development of the capabilities of local militaries. But whether short visits by a Special Operations Forces team can deter potential aggressors and reassure friends as effectively as large military bases and aircraft carrier task forces is questionable. Although using "places not bases" costs less, governments that host long-term U.S. facilities often cover many of the costs.

Multilateralism and Free Trade

The Obama administration also regards Asia's multilateral institutions as essential supplements to the longstanding bilateral alignments across the region. Washington hopes to leverage these partnerships and institutions and build a regional economic and security architecture—consisting of diverse bilateral alignments, international organizations, formal rules and informal norms—that bolsters

American values, preferences and interests while requiring the expenditure of only modest resources.

The administration has focused its partnership outreach on ASEAN and key Southeast Asian countries. For example, the administration launched a new US-ASEAN summit with a five-year action plan, signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Commerce, and appointed its resident representative to ASEAN. Obama also became the first American president to attend the [East Asian Summit](#), helping place the issue of maritime disputes on its agenda, much to the chagrin of China. But while ASEAN has welcomed the increased attention of Washington, member states have also taken care to reassure China, Russia, and other external powers that their interests will also be respected.

The Obama administration did not pursue a comprehensive economic agenda for Asia for its first two years in office but since 2011, has reinvigorated its campaign to complete long-stalled bilateral free trade arrangements [FTAs] and broaden them to include additional countries, especially in ASEAN, and issues. At present, the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) (TPP) is the administration's main multilateral economic initiative for the Asia Pacific region and provides a possible model for future American-supported FTAs throughout the world. Yet, while the TPP initiative is symbolic of the United States' renewed economic and political interest in East Asia, its impact will remain small unless Canada, Japan, Mexico, South Korea and other powerful national economies sign up to the agreement. Significantly, China is actively lobbying countries to enter into competing FTAs that exclude the United States. This week's East Asia Summit highlighted these divergences when both Washington and Beijing announced deadlines for their competing regional economic pacts.

Great Power Problems

Beijing's attempts to counter the TPP with its own economic initiatives further reflects that the most problematic dimension of the United States' pivot to Asia Pacific has been developing working relations with the emerging powers of Russia, India, and China. Washington has, for example, been unable to find a way to harness [Moscow's new interest in East Asia](#) in a mutually profitable manner. Ties between the Indian and U.S. governments have been treading water for the past few years, with declining expectations in both countries of a [breakthrough partnership](#) between the world's largest democracies that would help bolster regional security and the global economy.

Most importantly, the relationship between China and the United States is still at a pivotal point. The administration has yet to find a robust balance between deterring without alarming Beijing, or assuring its allies and friends that the United States would neither abandon them to China's growing might nor entrap them in an unwanted confrontation with Beijing. The Obama administration has sought to avoid confronting China directly by emphasizing shared general principles – such as the freedom of the sea, peaceful settlement of territorial disputes, etc. – rather than targeted policies designed to counter China. Despite repeated denials, Asian audiences see the United States as trying to balance Beijing, with Chinese policy makers accusing Washington of stirring up trouble in their backyard by encouraging other countries to resist Beijing's excessive maritime claims. Accordingly, there are powerful forces promoting cooperation as well as conflict between Beijing and Washington, and no one can say with any certainty which drivers will prove stronger.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[The Promise and Pitfalls of Grand Strategy](#)

[US-China Relations: Policy Issues](#)

[The US Pivot to Asia and Asia's Pivot to the US
Pivot to the Pacific?](#)

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