



Obama's Second Term in the Asia-Pacific Region

Reflecting on the Past, Looking to the Future

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Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region proved to be one of the top priorities of U.S. foreign policy during President Obama's first term. The East China Sea and South China Sea territorial disputes; Kim Jong-un's succession to the North Korean leadership and subsequent provocations; and China's rapid military modernization over the last two decades were and continue to be among some of the top security issues for the Obama Administration. Economic partnerships, political developments, disaster relief efforts, and other regional issues in the Asia-Pacific all demanded the attention, resources, and diplomatic talent in Washington. The 2008 global financial crisis left the world and, consequently, the Asia-Pacific region with stunted growth rates and dramatic decreases in exports. Certain authoritarian regimes remained obstinate to demands regarding democratic rights and civil liberties, while others undertook steps toward reform and accepted international assistance. Indeed, the political landscape in the Asia-Pacific region is vastly diverse and rapidly changing, a fact to which the Obama Administration demonstrated a strong awareness of by its "pivot" towards the region.

The policy of the "pivot" or "rebalance" to the Asia-Pacific was laid out by top officials in the Obama Administration, including former-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former-National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, through a series of talks, press releases, and publications in late 2011, and came in a timely manner. By way of its new strategic focus centered on Asia, the Obama Administration clearly asserted that American national interests in the Pacific would not be left to passive leadership from Washington. Active American participation and guidance would be required, especially in the face of a rising China.

However, important changes in the President's Cabinet early in his second term, most notably with the entrance of new secretaries of State and Defense, Senator John Kerry and Senator Chuck Hagel, respectively, have caused policymaking communities in Washington, as well as the Asia-Pacific region, to question the Administration's continued commitment to its "rebalance" policy. Indeed, many observers have examined the traveling schedules of senior U.S. officials in assessing President Obama's priorities in engaging with global leaders. Secretary Kerry's repeated and frequent visits to the Middle East – in comparison to his sporadic and short visits to Asia – since he assumed office in February 2013 have cast some doubt in the Asia policy community as to whether the Obama Administration remains dedicated to the "rebalance." A lack of clear leadership in Washington for its Asia policy, as the result of prolonged vacancies in key positions at the start of Obama's second term – including the posts of Assistant

Secretary of State for Asia (recently filled) and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia – implies that the “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific may no longer be a top priority of the Obama Administration’s second term. Furthermore, as Randall Schriver, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Asia, points out, for the first time in twenty years, there is no identifiable go-to-person at the Cabinet level or the deputy level for Asia in Washington.¹

The purpose of this report is to outline the Obama Administration’s Asia policy in its first term and to assess the trajectory of U.S. policies in the Asia-Pacific region in its second term, given the leadership and personnel changes within the Administration as well as the changes within the political leadership of Asian governments. This report will provide background on Obama’s inheritance from the previous Administration, outline and analyze Obama’s policies in his first term, and assess the direction of his Asia policy in the second term by considering implications of substantial personnel changes within the U.S. executive branch dealing with Asia policy.

Background

President Obama’s inheritance from the Bush Administration’s Asia-Pacific policy can be best described as a “mixed bag.” Overall, the Administration faced a challenging international security environment after the 2001 September-11 attacks, and devoted a large portion of its attention and efforts toward the Middle East, in its “global war on terror.” As the war in Afghanistan and Iraq consumed U.S. foreign policy efforts, government officials in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in Southeast Asia, were left with a sense of American absenteeism. Officials and diplomats in Washington were preoccupied by events and assignments in the Middle East, while resources were being allocated to fight wars against terrorist forces. Washington’s allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific consequently questioned U.S. commitment to their security arrangements in the region.

Although this sense of inattention by American officials in Asia marred U.S. relations in the region, the Bush Administration carried out many important foreign negotiations. Bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) with Australia and Singapore were signed during Bush’s presidency.² The Bush Administration also launched negotiations for the South Korea-U.S. FTA and the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (TPP), both of which gave the Obama Administration a good footing and prospects for continued talks. Bush Administration officials led initiatives to strengthen relations with existing allies and forge new partnerships with India, Indonesia, and Vietnam.³ Since then, the Obama Administration has completed the United States-Korea Free Trade

Agreement (KORUS-FTA), a significant accomplishment for political leaders in both Washington and Seoul.

In addition to economic accomplishments, the Bush Administration also made progress through multilateral frameworks to confront regional security challenges. In dealing with North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the Six-Party Talks were multilaterally launched in 2003, bringing officials from Pyongyang to the negotiation table together with representatives from China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. In the context of a possible nuclear contingency on the Korean peninsula, these talks signified that a multilateral mechanism could be the solution in forging consensus and cooperation among interested parties on the long-standing problem of North Korea's belligerent behavior and nuclear ambitions. The Bush Administration also launched the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which, according to former-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, was the cornerstone of the effort against proliferation in Asia, and is now showing results.⁴ In addition, the Container Security Initiative (CSI) was formulated in an effort to help maintain and secure maritime routes and infrastructure on global trade routes, including in the Asia-Pacific. The main objective of the CSI was targeted at curtailing the shipment of illicit weapons that have the potential for terrorist use.⁵

Relations with China were relatively positive after Bush and his team successfully handled the EP-3 incident in April 2001 near Hainan Island, in which an American intelligence aircraft collided with a Chinese fighter jet, and 24 Americans were detained and later released. By issuing statements that "saved face" for both governments, Washington and Beijing maneuvered a potential crisis tactfully.⁶ Sino-U.S. relations also significantly improved after the start of the U.S.-led war against global terrorism. Beijing launched its own version of "war on terror" against separatists in the northwestern province of Xinjiang in which the region's Uighurs have long supported independence from central government.⁷ U.S.-China relations were, as then-Secretary of State Colin Powell observed, "At their best since 1972."⁸

President Bush and former-Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had a notably close relationship, which momentarily bolstered the U.S.-Japan alliance during Bush's first term. Koizumi strongly supported the War on Terror led by the U.S. immediately after the September 11 attacks and quickly deployed Japan Self Defense Forces (JSDF) to support U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.⁹ However, after the Bush Administration removed North Korea from the Axis of Evil list in the fall of 2008, Tokyo saw the move as disregarding the issues of abducted Japanese citizens and its national interests.

U.S. - R.O.K. relations faced troubles during most of Bush's presidency largely as the result of differing stances on policy towards North Korea and controversies over U.S. military presence in South Korea which fueled anti-American sentiments. The Sunshine Policy supported by liberal presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun was deemed by Washington an ineffective way of dealing with the government of North Korea. Against the notion of rewarding North Korea's bad behavior with more "carrots," the Bush Administration pursued a tougher stance against Pyongyang, emphasizing its demand for complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Further tensions intensified in U.S.-R.O.K. relations when anti-American protests erupted in 2002 after U.S. military vehicles killed two Korean schoolgirls.¹⁰

Overall, security cooperation and economic engagement with regional allies and partners have constituted the pillars of U.S. strategy toward the Asia-Pacific, even as U.S. bilateral relations have undergone various types of challenges. Under President Obama's leadership, Asia's importance to the United States through its "pivot" or "rebalance" model has had a reassuring effect on allies and partners in the region. The Obama Administration's intent to pursue greater involvement in Asian affairs has been received positively by most governments in Asia – aside from China – and has increased political confidence towards American commitment to ensuring a more peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific.

Obama's First Term: Post-2008 Financial Crisis

Although the 2008 financial crisis that originated on Wall Street did not affect Asian financial markets as much as it did the West, it still impacted the progress of economic growth and the level of investment in the Asia-Pacific region through lowered levels of trade.¹¹ Asia houses the world's fastest growing economies, and it suffered considerably in 2008 and 2009. Singapore was one of the hardest hit, its GDP growth plunging from 7.8% in 2007 to 1.1% in 2008.¹² Trade shrank as demand from developed countries, particularly the G3 – the U.S., E.U., and Japan – decreased considerably. The decline in export demand resulted in factory closures, increased job losses, and a negative overall environment for consumers and investors interested in Asian markets. As a result, commodity-exporting countries in Southeast Asia were among the hardest hit as commodity prices fell in the global market.

Table 1: East Asia—GDP and Merchandise Exports Growth Rates

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010 projected
	Annual GDP Growth (%)				
Indonesia	5.5	6.3	6.1	3.6	5.0
Malaysia	5.8	6.3	4.6	(0.2)	4.4
Philippines	5.4	7.2	4.6	2.5	3.5
Singapore	8.4	7.8	1.1	(5.0)	3.0
Thailand	5.2	4.9	2.6	(2.0)	3.0
Viet Nam	8.2	8.5	6.2	4.5	6.2
Southeast Asia	6.0	6.4	4.3	0.7	4.2
People's Republic of China	11.6	13.0	9.0	7.0	8.0
Hong Kong, China	7.0	6.4	2.5	(2.0)	3.0
Republic of Korea	5.1	5.0	2.5	(3.0)	4.0
India	9.7	9.0	7.1	5.0	6.5

Source: Asian Development Bank (2009)

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the threat of protectionism rose in the Asia-Pacific region. Despite G20 efforts at the November 2008 Summit to curtail protectionist efforts in the region by having members pledge to “no protectionism,” a subsequent report revealed that at least 121 protectionist measures have been implemented by G20 governments since November 2008, with another 134 measures pending.¹³ This turn towards protectionist economics runs counter to American interests in securing the world’s most populous markets.

In order to advance American economic and security interests in the Asia-Pacific, Hillary Clinton visited Asia as her first travel destination as Secretary of State, a widely-read sign of the Administration’s strategic interests in the region and its commitment to its Asian allies and partners. Secretary Clinton visited Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and China in February 2009, assuring the leaders in the Asia-Pacific region of U.S. intentions to uphold its security obligations and to chart a new way for further economic cooperation, among other forms of engagement.

U.S.-Sino Relations

Early in President Obama’s first term, U.S. policy towards China was summarized by a policy of “strategic reassurances,” which was essentially a demand by American officials for China to demonstrate that their growth “will not come at the expense of security and well-being of others.”¹⁴ A strategy for building mutual trust, “strategic reassurance” was

the primary policy tool that Washington prescribed for Beijing to assure regional players of China's intentions of a peaceful rise to power with transparency and respect for the rule of law. Not only was it important for China to prove to Washington its peaceful intentions, the Obama Administrations ceded that such reassurances would also be vital for America's Asian security allies and partners. The purpose of reassurance was to ensure that China established itself as a rising power that "respects the rule of law and universal norms and ... provides greater stability and growth for its own people."¹⁵ In addition, in the "new era of engagement" under Obama's leadership, regional multilateral institutions will play a critical role in shaping regional dynamics, and the context in which China's rise to power can unfold peacefully.

As former-Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg articulated in a speech at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) on 24 September 2009, titled "Administration's Vision of the U.S.-China Relationship," strategic reassurances by China were especially important in the following key areas:¹⁶

- Transparency and assurance on Chinese military activities in air, sea, and space, as well as nuclear weapons and the increasingly important cyber realm;
- Assurance that China's resource demand do not result in irresponsible mercantilism in developing countries such as Burma, Zimbabwe, and Sudan;
- Assurances within the U.S.-China economic relationship to lessen misunderstanding and missteps leading to a trade war.

The concept of "strategic reassurance" was designed to ensure that Beijing and Washington shared a vision of win-win solutions in multiple issue areas rather than zero-sum rivalries. However, during the first two years of the Obama Administration, the policy of "strategic reassurances" resulted in very little assurance from Beijing to the U.S. and China's neighbors. The Communist Party in China illustrated its non-compliance with global norms and rules through revisionist claims in the South China Sea, expanded naval activity, feuds with Google over internet freedom, and an intentionally obstructive role at the climate change negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009.¹⁷ Critics of the policy held that "strategic reassurance" was in reality appeasement towards China, letting Beijing get away with irresponsible acts that undermined human rights and other global norms important to the establishment of the rule of law.¹⁸ "Strategic reassurance" has been largely replaced by the "rebalance" to Asia, which has provided a new broader framework for engagement with countries in the Asia Pacific, including China.¹⁹

In an effort to enhance U.S.-Sino cooperation, the Obama Administration and the Chinese government launched the Strategic and Economic Dialogue in April 2009,

coined by Hillary Clinton as “the most intensive and expansive talks ever between our governments.”²⁰ This strategic dialogue is designed to be a forum where the two sides can come together to discuss a range of bilateral issues, from security issues to energy initiatives to human rights. One meeting is scheduled annually, alternating between Washington and Beijing.²¹ These strategic dialogues are a work-in-progress, although some criticize the talks as lacking concrete results, especially for pressing issues such as cyber security and political disputes.

Cross-Strait relations took a positive direction after Ma Ying-jeou of the Kuomintang (KMT) Party came into office as the president of Taiwan in 2008. With an official policy of cross-strait rapprochement, the Ma Administration took a dramatic turn away from the previous administration's pro-independence stance under Democratic People's Party (DPP) president Chen Shui-bian. Ma's friendly policy was highly favored in Beijing, ameliorating tensions between the two governments.²² The signing of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in 2010 signified a new era in cross-Strait relations and a deepening economic relationship. While cross-Strait rapprochement efforts have eliminated much of the contention regarding Taiwan in Sino-U.S. relations during Obama's first term, the issue of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan continues to be a controversial topic. Chinese criticisms in aftermath of a completed arms sale package in the fall of 2011 demonstrated Beijing's irritation at Washington's role in arming Taiwan. As Taiwan continues to press the U.S. for F-16 sales, the Obama Administration will have to walk the tight rope of fulfilling its security obligations in Taiwan and maintaining a constructive relationship with China.

U.S.-Sino-Southeast Asia Relations

China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea during the first two years of the Obama Administration raised concerns in Washington as Beijing's intentions in the maritime domain were brought into question. China's territorial disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines highlighted the difficulties presented by quarrels in the South China Sea. As one of the world's most important energy trade routes in the world, the Strait of Malacca is the main shipping route between African and Persian Gulf suppliers and Asian consumers. Almost a third of global crude oil and over half of global liquefied gas passes through this channel each year.²³ Given the Strait's importance, Southeast Asian governments have demonstrated that they will not easily give up territories in the maritime domain in the face of a more assertive China.

From 2009 to 2010, Chinese authorities detained an unusually high number of Vietnamese trawlers in waters near the Paracels, in addition to expanded its deployment of patrol vessels in the vicinity of the Spratly Islands. Southeast Asian territorial

claimants have been unsettled by China's increasingly aggressive behavior. In addition, a joint submission by Malaysia and Vietnam in May 2009 to the Commission on the Limits of Continental Shelf (CLCS) claimed seabed resources in the southern South China Sea, which disregarded other interested parties such as Brunei, China, and the Philippines.²⁴ This move exacerbated the frictions of overlapping claims by other nations in the South China Sea.

On 9 March 2009, a Pentagon statement reported that five Chinese ships harassed U.S. surveillance ship USNS Impeccable while it was conducting routine operations in international waters in the South China Sea after a week of provocative acts against U.S. vessels.²⁵ Washington responded in protest to these actions to the Foreign Ministry in China as well as the Chinese embassy in Washington. This maritime dispute highlighted tensions caused by a Chinese naval presence in the South China Sea and greatly alarmed officials in Washington concerning China's broader regional and global intentions.

The Obama Administration addressed the tensions in the South China Sea at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum in Hanoi in July 2010, where former-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the U.S. supported "freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea."²⁶ By highlighting the importance of resolving disputes without the use or threat of force, Secretary Clinton strategically delivered a message of U.S. interests in preserving peace in the busy sea-lanes of South China Sea, and more importantly, internationalized the issue, a move against which China protests.²⁷ The Administration's move to openly state its national interest in commercial lanes in the South China Sea demonstrated the rising importance of Southeast Asia to the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

In addition to maritime security issues in U.S.-Sino-Southeast Asia relations, human rights and democracy-building remain important agendas for policymakers in the Obama Administration. American advocacy for democratic values, adherence to universal human rights, and free and open markets clash with Chinese governance which is characterized by authoritarianism, centralized and controlled economic planning, and a bad track record of non-compliance with human rights laws and norms. As the result, China's credibility as a responsible stakeholder remains in question. In contrast to China's behavior, rising powers in Southeast Asia increasingly adhere to shared values that could challenge China's non-compliance with regional norms for democratic values and rights.

Engagement and Multilateral Institutionalism

The first two years of the Obama Administration revealed a significantly high volume of U.S. activities in Southeast Asia: a first-ever visit by a U.S. secretary of state to the ASEAN secretariat, the U.S. signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), the appointment of a resident ambassador to ASEAN David L. Carden, the holding of U.S.-ASEAN Leaders Summits. In addition, the U.S. announced a policy of engagement with Burma, the declaration of a Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), and a clear statement on U.S. interests in the South China Sea. U.S. support for regional institutions was clear and unprecedented. Active U.S. engagement with every country in the region stemmed from the Administration's concerted interest in the rise of new players in Southeast Asia and the growing role that these states may yet play in a global context.²⁸

The Obama Administration has taken a strong interest in participating in and engaging with multilateral regional institutions in Asia such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the East Asia Summit (EAS), in which President Obama became the first U.S. president to participate in on 19 November 2011.²⁹ The Administration's interests in solving challenges of maritime security, non-proliferation, and disaster response were highlighted during this meeting.³⁰ The President's frequent participation in regional institutions demonstrates Washington's express interest in active engagement in the region's multilateral institutional architecture.

In addition to participating in multilateral institutions in Southeast Asia, the Obama Administration has also made trilateral cooperation between U.S.-Japan-India, U.S.-Korea-Japan, and U.S.-Japan-Australia a priority. The first U.S.-Japan-India trilateral meeting was held on 19 December 2011 at the U.S. State Department. Shared values such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, and open markets brought the three sides together. Some

claim that these stated shared values are an effort to push back against Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific.³¹ The

“The cooperative effort between the U.S., Japan, and the Republic of Korea, has made a difference, not only with respect to the North Korean provocations, but it has sent a strong signal about the strength of our alliance.”

-Secretary John Kerry, July 2013

U.S.-Korea-Japan trilateral meetings have taken place on an “as-needed” basis to address regional concerns, including security threats and humanitarian assistance.³² The security triangle has united around concerns caused by provocations of the North

Korean government, with all three governments calling for denuclearization on the Korean peninsula.³³ These talks demonstrate the Obama Administration's emphasis on cooperation with alliance partners to conduct its regional diplomacy in Asia.

U.S.-Japan Relations

Relations with Japan were rocky in the Obama Administration's first term, which saw four different Japanese Prime Ministers including Taro Aso (LDP), Yukio Hatoyama (DPJ), Naoto Kan (DPJ), and Yoshihiko Noda (DPJ). The frequency of leadership changes in Tokyo over a short span of time resulted in a difficult and strained alliance relationship. Controversies on the relocation of U.S. forces at the Futenma Marine Corps Air Base in Okinawa further deepened the rift between Washington and Tokyo under the Obama Administration.

In September 2009, Yukio Hatoyama took office as the first prime minister from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Hatoyama had an agenda to shift from a U.S.-centric to an Asia-centric foreign policy focus and vowed to close Futenma and transfer its functions off Okinawa, a prefecture that houses 75% of U.S. forces in Japan with only 0.6 percent of Japan's total land mass.³⁴ Hatoyama vowed to revisit the 2006 agreement that stipulated the relocation of the Futenma base from the densely populated Ginowan City to Henoko, located on the less-populated Northeastern shore of Okinawa. The agreement also designated the relocation of eight-thousand Marines and nine-thousand family members to Guam by 2014.³⁵ In response, Obama Administration officials urged Japanese leaders to move on from revisiting the 2006 agreement and to honor basing arrangements.³⁶

Legislators in Congress added fuel to the controversy of the relocation of U.S. forces on Okinawa by questioning the cost of rebasing, which had ballooned from an initial estimate of \$10.3 billion to \$23.9 billion. Senators Carl Levin, John McCain, and James Webb led the scrutiny against the existing plan of relocation and questioned its affordability. They raised concerns regarding the growing estimated costs of moving 8,000 Marines and their dependents from Futema to Guam and blocked funds dedicated to the realignment. Although both the U.S. and Japan were officially committed to the construction of the new base, political and budgetary constraints regarding the Futema relocation plan made significant progress in the near term very difficult, if not impossible.³⁷

Historical controversies continued to mar Japan's regional relationships with Korea and China, indirectly affecting U.S. bilateral relations in Northeast Asia. Offensive Japanese comments regarding Korean "comfort women" during World War II, prime ministerial-level visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, and territorial disputes at the

Dokdo/Takeshima Islets (in which Japan and South Korea made different historical claims) all added to the tension. As the alliance partner for both Tokyo and Seoul, Washington has had the challenging role of trying to advise both governments on the benefits of more sensitive and amicable political maneuvers and policies.

U.S. assistance to Japan in the wake of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami significantly altered the tone of the alliance relationship. A string of natural disasters ravished several cities, killed an estimated 16,000 people, and triggered a nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi plant. The Obama Administration launched “Operation Tomodachi” (translated as Operation Friends) to provide relief to disaster victims. This involved nearly 24,000 U.S. service members, 189 aircraft, and 24 naval ships, at a total cost of nearly \$90 million.³⁸ Aid efforts focused on transporting relief supplies, JSDF personnel and equipment, as well as searching for stranded victims and restoring facilities at Sendai Airport.³⁹ Japanese public opinion of the U.S. according to the Pew Research Center significantly improved, reaching 85% (the highest in a decade), after the extensive efforts of Operation Tomodachi.⁴⁰

U.S.-Korea Relations

The most important success of Obama's first term on the Korean peninsula was the passing of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS-FTA). An initiative beginning in the Bush Administration, the KORUS-FTA signifies an important move forward in the bilateral economic relationship between two major economies in the 21st century.

The security challenge posed by North Korea's repeated provocations during President Obama's first term have drawn Washington and Seoul closer together. The Obama Administration, which began with the hopes of engaging North Korea with an open hand, was rapidly disillusioned by Pyongyang's lack of reciprocity on commitments. Furthermore, North Korea's 2009 nuclear test; the 2010 sinking of *Cheonan*, a South Korean naval corvette, by a North Korean torpedo; the shelling of the South Korean island Yeonpyong; and attempted rocket launches brought greater division between and increased scrutiny of inter-Korean relations, and strengthened the U.S.-South Korea security alliance in the face of active North Korean threats.

In June 2010, as a response to North Korea's provocations, President Obama and former-President of South Korea Lee Myung-bak agreed to postpone the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) from the U.S. to South Korea, initially planned in 2007, from 17 April 2012 to December 2015. The postponement “reflects the current security condition on the Korean peninsula and will strengthen the alliance of the two nations,” said Lee after the bilateral summit at the G-20 meeting in Toronto. The purpose of the transfer was to “send a clear message of the U.S. staying power in the

region,” said Ambassador Jeff Bader at a press briefing at the White House immediately after the postponement was announced.⁴¹ According to recent reports, South Korea has requested further postponement of the OPCON transfer date set for the end of 2015 due to heightened threats from North Korea in early 2013. The Obama Administration, amidst severe defense budget cuts, is likely to continue to support eventual OPCON transfer.⁴²

The US-Korea alliance has seen some important changes within President Obama’s first term. The 2009 Joint Vision statement for the U.S.-South Korea alliance strategically shifted the fulcrum of bilateral cooperation from being Korea-centric to one that focuses on global challenges, ranging from terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, piracy, organized crime, to climate change, poverty, infringement on human rights, energy security, and endemic diseases.⁴³ Such broadened focus for the alliance highlights the Obama Administration’s desire to redistribute the weight of responsibility for its global priorities and increase burden-sharing among partners and allies.

Air-Sea Battle Concept

China’s rapid military modernization continued to raise concerns in Washington on U.S. defense capabilities and preparedness to counter Chinese force mobilization in the Asia-Pacific, specifically against U.S. friends such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. To counter China’s anti-area access denial (A2/AD) strategy which is founded on the core element of maintaining a “keep-out” zone to limit or hinder U.S. access, the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Report (QDR) introduced the air-sea battle (ASB) concept to counter and hedge against Chinese threats in the Asia-Pacific.⁴⁴ The ASB concept is a strategy for aligning air and naval commands so that they are more integrated and ready to take on threats should there be a sudden contingency.

Under the Obama Administration, the importance of military posturing in the Asia-Pacific has not gone unnoticed. The ASB concept is a strategy for the U.S. to creatively utilize a wide range of resources and joint capabilities with partners to counter any traditional security threats in the region. Analysis of the concept shows that it is largely aimed at the coordinating and mobilizing of forward-deployed forces should regional actors choose aggression in the near-sea and air space. By combining symmetric weapons warfare with asymmetric operations, the U.S. seeks to become flexible in its force posturing and to develop an integrated force with the necessary characteristics and capabilities to succeed.⁴⁵

In short, the May 2013 Department of Defense report titled “Air-Sea Battle: Service Collaboration to Address A2/AD Challenges” summarizes the ASB as a strategy of

developing “networked, integrated forces capable of attack-in-depth to disrupt, destroy and defeat adversary forces.” As a fairly new concept introduced by the Department of Defense under Obama’s first term, the implementation and further development of the ASB concept is likely to continue in Obama’s second term – especially given the PRC’s (People’s Republic of China’s) continuing military build-up and U.S. and ally interests in the region.

Obama’s “Rebalance” to Asia

The “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia was promulgated by the Obama Administration in the fall of 2011 and early 2012.⁴⁶ With a high-profile series of Presidential and Cabinet-level trips, announcements, speeches, and articles, the “Pacific Pivot” has garnered the attention of Asian allies and partners.⁴⁷ U.S. emphasis on the importance of Asia served to demonstrate the Administration’s commitment and resolve to the policy.⁴⁸ The “pivot,” a term that suggests an absolutist connotation of turning from a former trajectory to the current direction, has been substituted with “rebalancing,” which is more relativistic, both in terms of where America places its priorities geographically and which policy arenas it emphasizes.⁴⁹ Security, economic and human rights components to the rebalance color the scope of the new foreign policy.⁵⁰

One of the top priorities of the Obama Administration is to strengthen its relationship with alliance partners, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines, which are described by Hillary Clinton as “the fulcrum of U.S. strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific.”⁵¹ The core goals of the Obama Administration for its alliances are to update alliance relationships by maintaining consensus on core objectives of the alliances; to ensure that alliances are “nimble” and “adaptive” to new regional challenges; and to guarantee that the defense capabilities of alliances are capable of deterring provocation from potential non-alliance actors.⁵²

In the post-9-11 international security environment, the Obama Administration seeks maximum agility and a capable force structure in the Asia-Pacific to deal with imminent regional and global threats. Accordingly, the highest-profile new initiatives of the “rebalance” policy lie in the security sphere. By strategically placing more forward-deployed troops in Australia and Singapore, as well as maintaining and strengthening its military presence through a broader distribution of forces, including Guam and Philippines, the Obama Administration has pursued a more flexible and capable military force structure in the region.⁵³ The Department of Defense and White House have stressed their desire to increase training and joint exercises with allies and new military partners in the region as a crucial part of the “rebalance.”

Moreover, the Obama Administration has pledged that defense cuts will not come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific, with former Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta promising that the Navy will reconfigure its forces from a 50-50 split between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific to 60 percent of the Navy's assets being assigned to the Pacific Ocean.⁵⁴ As a primarily naval theater of operations with the exception of the Korean peninsula, the defense structure in Asia relies heavily on sea lanes. The “rebalance” policy not only aims to protect the region from unwanted security threats, but also to secure commercial sea lanes for American imports and exports flowing in and out of the region. It is increasingly important for the U.S. to maintain freedom for navigation from the Arabian Sea to the Pacific Ocean.⁵⁵

The economic aspects of the “rebalance” under the Obama Administration have been largely shaped by U.S. participation in the TPP talks aimed at institutionalizing regional free trade practices. The vision of the U.S. Trade Representative for the TPP is an FTA for the twelve negotiating parties – Australia, Brunei, Chile, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the U.S., and Vietnam – which will form the basis for a broader agreement that eventually could eventually include all the economies of the Asia-Pacific region, including China.⁵⁶ If successful, the TPP could provide the US with a number of benefits. It would include U.S. access to growing markets in Asia, help stimulate the growth in U.S. exports, generate export-related jobs, and foster an economic recovery, while enhancing measures to protect U.S. intellectual property rights, and ensuring that business competition occurs in a fair regional market.⁵⁷

The third major component of the U.S. “rebalance” policy falls in the “dignity basket” that seeks to uphold democratic and human rights and the rule of law. The Obama Administration's emphasis on universal rights targets the credibility of the Chinese government in the midst of its rapid growth and intends to apply pressure on Beijing to adhere to right practices as a responsible stakeholder. In this way, China's rise would be perceived as less of a threat to regional and global powers and more as a constructive member of the international community.

The Administration's “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific region is in essence a hedging strategy towards China, one that combines engagement with Beijing with the creation of a network of bilateral military partnerships and alliances in the Asia-Pacific as a potential counterweight against the rise of China.⁵⁸ The U.S. “rebalance” has endowed smaller nations who are claimants of the South China Sea territories with more political capital without becoming directly involved in such territorial disputes. As a result, Chinese and western analysts are concerned about the “rebalance” being an actual policy of containment against China. Obama Administration officials, in response, repeatedly make clear that “rebalance” to Asia is not a containment strategy, but a policy aimed at

strategically placing the U.S. in a favorable position as the Asia-Pacific becomes one of the major centers of global activity.

Some criticisms of the “rebalance” in Obama’s first term have been contingent on the fact that America’s growing role in the region has been predominantly military in nature. Observers point to the rhetorical emphasis of Asia in the Obama Administration and ask whether the “rebalance” is credible or not. Given the growing presence of U.S. military forces in Asia—made possible in part by the military drawdown in Afghanistan and Iraq during Obama’s first term—the effect of the “rebalance” so far has been most obviously observed in military affairs.⁵⁹ Officials in the Administration have made an effort to widen the perceived scope of the “rebalance” policy through addresses and speeches, averring that the policy also includes economic, diplomatic, and cultural elements, despite regional doubts. Policies of engagement with Asian countries within the “rebalance” framework will have to be realized in President Obama’s second term in order for measures other than enhanced U.S. military presence to be felt in the region. The credibility and commitment of the Obama Administration to “rebalance” to Asia will be put to the test as the next four years present the President’s Asia team with challenges to overcome and new opportunities to seize.

Obama’s Second Term: Personnel Changes

The January 2013 inauguration of President Obama for a second term has prompted a series of personnel changes within the State Department, Pentagon, and National Security Staff. Senator John Kerry, the nominee for Secretary of State, was confirmed on January 29th; Senator Chuck Hagel, the nominee for Secretary of Defense, was confirmed on February 26th after a bruising Senate confirmation hearing; and John Brennan, the nominee for Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was confirmed March 7th. These three men (less so Brennan) represent the new faces of Obama’s foreign and security policy team with potential implications for the Asia-Pacific.⁶⁰

For the “inner Cabinet,” which includes the top positions at the departments of State, Defense, Treasury and Justice, President Obama selected familiar entities who have been with him since his first days in office or earlier. With the departure of former-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former-Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell, two key architects of the “rebalance” policy, questions have been raised about the political support in Washington for sustaining the “rebalance” to Asia. The close relationship between Clinton and Campbell, and Clinton’s close relationship to President Obama, gave the “pivot to Asia” policy the top-down political support that it needed to navigate bureaucratic fights within government bureaucracies over strategy and allocation of resources.

Policy battles having taken place within the first term, issues now going forward will presumably be less about strategic direction than in the ability to sustain support across government. Personnel shifts within the foreign policy and national security system, however, could have a meaningful effect on how the Asia policies laid out in the first four years of the Obama Administration are executed and sustained over the next four years.

State Department

Under Secretary Kerry's leadership, the State Department has focused much of its attention on the Middle East, making observers nervous about his commitment to the "rebalancing" in the Asia-Pacific, an effort spearheaded by Kerry's predecessor. Largely seen as an Atlanticist, Kerry's initial briefings at the State Department reportedly left many with the impression that he would focus primarily on the Middle East, Iran, and Russia – possibly at the expense of Asia. These perceptions were reinforced during his first few weeks as Secretary as he made his inaugural trip abroad to Europe and the Middle East, but not Asia (unlike Clinton).⁶¹ Furthermore, the painstakingly slow pace of nominating an Assistant Secretary for Asia also gave cause for observers to question Kerry's priorities and his commitment to the "rebalance" policy.⁶²

A position that is intimately tied to the "pivot" policy and actively involved in its execution is that of the person permanently filling the post vacated by the departure of Kurt Campbell. In July 2013, Daniel Russel was officially confirmed for his post as Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs at the State Department. Russel, a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, served as the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Asian Affairs on the White House National Security Staff (NSS) immediately prior to his current post. As a 'Japan guy',⁶³ Russel's nomination was greeted by critics as misguided, particularly at a time when Obama's "pivot to Asia" necessitated a deeper knowledge of China.⁶⁴ Evan Medeiros, who is the former NSS Director for China, has replaced Russel as the NSS Senior Director for Asia. With Tom Donilon replaced by Susan Rice, it appears that Russel may be the point-person on actualizing the substance of the "rebalance" strategy.

From 2009 to 2011, Russel was the NSS Director for Japan, South Korea, and North Korea. Before joining the NSS, Mr. Russel was Director of the Office of Japanese Affairs at the Department of State. From 2005 to 2008, he was U.S. Consul General in Osaka-Kobe, Japan. Previously, he served as Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in The Hague from 2002 to 2005, and as Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Nicosia, Cyprus from 1999 to 2002. From 1996 to 1999, Russel was Chief of Staff to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. Earlier assignments include posts at the

U.S. Embassy in Seoul, Korea and with the U.S. Mission to the United Nations.⁶⁵ With a wealth of experience in Asia, Russel brings the expertise needed in Washington to continue the “rebalancing” in Asia during Obama’s second term.

President Obama also named Joseph Yun, who filled in for Kurt Campbell as acting Assistant Secretary of State, as U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia.⁶⁶ As a long-time State Department official who, during Obama’s first term was intimately engaged with the U.S. “pivot,” Yun’s nomination as Ambassador to Malaysia, a country based in Southeast Asia, seems to highlight the importance that the Obama Administration attaches to the Southeast Asia in its “pivot” policy.

Clifford Hart, who served as the Obama Administration's special envoy to the six-way talks since June 2011, has assumed the position as the U.S. Consul General for Hong Kong and Macau, replacing Stephen Young.⁶⁷ As a veteran-diplomat with extensive experience in Asia, including three posts in the PRC (People’s Republic of China) and two in the ROC (Republic of China, or Taiwan), Hart, as an Obama Administration official, has the difficult task of repairing relations after recent tensions arising from the Edward Snowden case.⁶⁸ Hart must mend the broken trust between U.S. law enforcement agencies and their counterparts in Hong Kong after Snowden, a former National Security Agency contractor who leaked sensitive

Secretary Kerry’s Team

Secretary Kerry has been moving to fill other posts from his former Senate Foreign Relations Committee and personal staff. Alec Gerlach, Kerry’s former press secretary in the Senate, an Obama 2008 campaign operative and also a Glover Park Group veteran, is Kerry’s personal spokesman in the State Department’s public affairs operation. Shannon Smith, a longtime Senate Foreign Relations Committee Africa hand is to be deputy assistant secretary in State’s Africa bureau. The committee’s chief counsel, Andrew Keller, joins the legal team at the department, and Greg Kausner, who handled arms control and arms sales at the committee has joined the political military team as a deputy assistant secretary. Anthony Wier, who handled non-proliferation matters for the committee, joins the policy planning shop, along with Perry Cammack (for the Middle East) and Melanie Nakagawa (for energy and environment), working for their old committee boss, David McKean.

Source: Al Kamen, “Kerry team starting to fill in at State,” *Washington Post*, 15 May 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/in-the-loop/post/kerry-team-starting-to-fill-in-at-state/2013/05/15/e65ce214-bbf8-11e2-97d4-a479289a31f9_blog.html>

information on extensive internet and phone surveillance by U.S. intelligence, was allowed to leave Hong Kong on 23 June 2013, defying Washington's requests for extradition.⁶⁹

Defense Department

Former Senator Chuck Hagel replaced Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in late February of 2013. Upon entering office Hagel's attention has been largely given to the pressures of the across-the-board cuts known as the sequestration. These cuts bring into question U.S. plans to increase military presence in the Asia-Pacific, namely in the Philippines, Singapore, and Australia. Observers also question the credibility of former Defense Secretary Panetta's pledge at the June 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue, where he affirmed that the U.S. navy will re-posture its forces from today's roughly 50-50 split from the Pacific and Atlantic to a 60-40 split in these oceans by 2020.⁷⁰ As the sequestration cuts have been taking place, Asian countries question the ability of U.S. to follow through on their previous plan to "rebalance" U.S. military assets to Asia. As a response to these concerns, Secretary Hagel has made an effort to reassure allies and partners in the region via multilateral institutions, including the most recent Shangri-La Dialogue held in June 2013. At this multilateral forum, Hagel highlighted U.S. commitment to the region, by specifically emphasizing U.S. military re-posturing in Asia through force deployments, technological innovation, and strategic realignment; bilateral alliances and partnerships; as well as participation in multilateral institutions to create a sustainable regional security architecture.⁷¹ Secretary Hagel's speech reiterated the Administration's priorities and strategic plans in the Asia-Pacific extending from the "rebalancing" policy of President Obama's first term.

Mark Lippert, who was the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, was promoted to serve as the chief of staff to Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel in early May. ⁷² Hagel and Lippert have known each other for many years before coming to the Pentagon. Formerly a foreign policy adviser to Senator Barack Obama in 2005, Lippert's promotion will bring to Hagel a trusted White House operative, and to the White House, a solid communication link from Hagel. Although Hagel has long been an Obama friend, he has no working experience with the senior staffers whom Lippert knows well. Lippert's background and experience s are expected to help Hagel navigate the Pentagon's bureaucratic waters and "enforce Hagel's will" across the building.⁷³ Lippert is "results-oriented and collaborative," and has proven his ability to manage people within the framework of bureaucracy.⁷⁴

Peter R. Lavoy now serves as the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs (APSA). He is the principal deputy assistant secretary of defense

working on Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Central Asian policy. Dave Helvey is the current (Note: no longer “acting”) Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia and the Principal Director for East Asia in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, East Asia (APSA/EA).

The leadership changes observed in the Pentagon have the potential to noticeably impact policy plans in the Asia-Pacific arena. However, with significant pressure from sequestration cuts, the ongoing “furloughs” at the Department of Defense (DoD) have taken up the bulk of the attention of Pentagon officials who are in charge of executing the new, down-sized budget. Under budget pressures from Congress, the DoD is tasked with reallocating resources and cutting defense personnel and programs while ensuring that American defense architecture around the world is ready to face a diverse range of global threats.

In maneuvering the balance of the trade-off between troop capacity and defense capability, Hagel faces tough decisions. One option is to maintain a sizable military to assure overseas presence and project global power. But this comes at the expense of military technology innovation in cyber-warfare and Special Operations. The other option, the vice-versa, is to increase technology and significantly decrease military capacity by cutting the number of forces, resulting in the military going to fewer places and do fewer things, especially if crises occurred simultaneously in different regions of the world.⁷⁵ As sequestration continues to affect the DoD and its defense planning, the military component of the “rebalance” – which calls for new forward deployments in U.S. naval, air, and land forces – may be scrutinized, bringing the credibility of the “rebalance” policy into question.

White House

The nomination with the most significant bearing on the White House’s management of foreign policy and national security team is the selection of UN Ambassador Susan Rice as Obama’s national security adviser, to replace the retiring Thomas Donilon.⁷⁶ The national-security job makes Rice the president’s foreign policy briefer, gatekeeper, troubleshooter and chief broker in inter-agency wrangles over foreign policy and security.⁷⁷ Yet in terms of her personal capacity, it remains to be seen if Rice will be able to command the same kind of influence that Donilon had over foreign policy/national security during Obama’s first term. In any case, it is without a doubt that the second term of the Obama Administration will carry with it a different tone from the first.

Samantha Powers was appointed to serve as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, filling in the position of NSA Susan Rice.⁷⁸ Powers is the former-Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights. The author of

numerous books, Powers is most well-known for *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (2003) and *Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World* (2008).

Like Rice, Powers is a known champion of human rights and supports more "interventionist" policy in situations where there are flagrant abuses of human rights. The appointments of Rice and nomination of Powers in their respective positions appears to give the human rights community powerful advocates for their cause in very senior level positions.

Denis McDonough is the new White House new chief of staff. A former aide to Senator Tom Daschle, where he worked under Mark Lippert (the current chief of staff, or TAS in Pentagon jargon, of Secretary Hagel),⁷⁹ McDonough is known for his strong work ethic, his mild manner, and his devotion to the Catholic faith.⁸⁰ As Obama himself indicated during a press conference, McDonough has been involved in just about every major national security decision made by Obama since he took office, from the surge in U.S. troops in Afghanistan to the launching of the commando raid that killed Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden.⁸¹

The appointment of former White House Chief of Staff Jack Lew as Secretary of Treasury, and his first subsequent overseas visit to China, suggests that economic issues may be under close scrutiny by President Obama during his second term.⁸² Indeed, as indicated earlier, for his "inner Cabinet" — the top positions at the departments of State, Defense, Treasury and Justice — have been deliberately filled with loyalists.⁸³ The trio of "old hands" inside the West Wing — senior adviser Valerie Jarrett, Chief of Staff Denis McDonough — will exert greater top-down influence over policy decisions.⁸⁴

Tony Blinken (Vice President Biden's former top aide) replaced Denis McDonough as Deputy National Security Advisor, with McDonough moving up to serve as White House Chief of Staff. Jacob Sullivan, an influential adviser under Secretary Clinton as director of the State Department's Policy Planning Office since 15 February 2011, and part of Clinton's inner circle, has replaced Blinken as Vice President Biden's top aide as his national security adviser.⁸⁵

Implications

What effect will these personnel changes in Obama's foreign policy team have on the U.S. Asia policy? It remains unclear. However, it is speculated that by assembling a team where all the top players are going in the same direction and have notably close relations with the President, there could be a tendency for groupthink.⁸⁶ Some speculate that

there is a potential for a more “centralized” policymaking process dominated by the White House, with fewer strong dissenting voices and less debate injected into the policymaking process compared to the first four years of Obama’s presidency.⁸⁷ One other effect – a widely speculated one – could be reduced emphasis on the “rebalancing,” which some circles have criticized for being more symbolic than substantive.

Not only are leadership changes within the Obama Administration important for the future of Asia policy, but also other new vectors for the region are at play as Obama’s second term was met by a wave of regional leadership changes. Former-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe resumed office in December 2012, having held the position previously from 2006 to 2007; China’s 18th Party Congress in 2012 brought in the fifth generation of new leaders, with Xi Jinping as the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party; Park Geun-hye was inaugurated as South Korea’s first female president in February 2013; Kim Jong-un succeeded his father as the supreme leader of North Korea after Kim Jong-il’s death in November 2011. The leadership changes in Northeast Asia present a new security environment for the Obama Administration to make sense of and maneuver carefully.

Conclusion

The Obama Administration’s second-term objectives in the Asia-Pacific, though largely the same in rhetoric, can only be truly measured by the level of commitment demonstrated by officials and the allocation of limited resources. The “rebalance” to Asia has faced some setbacks with the flurry of personnel changes and the lack of an obvious point-person for Asia within the Administration. With the original strong proponents of the “rebalance” to Asia, Hillary Clinton and Kurt Campbell, now out of office, and the results of new leadership in greater Asia beg the question of U.S. credibility in maintaining its strategic emphasis in the Asia-Pacific. In the coming years, the strategic goals of maintaining close ties with alliance partners, managing China’s rise and contingencies on the Korean peninsula, ensuring free and safe trade for American transnational business interests, and injecting liberal ideologies such as civil liberties into societies in transition will likely remain as some of the top priorities of the Administration for Asia. The challenge will be how the officials in Obama’s second term carry out these objectives.

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