

Return to Asia: It's Not (All) About China

by Ralph Cossa and Brad Glosserman

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"All right China, come out with your hands up; we've got you surrounded!"

When one reads about the US "pivot" to Asia, it is almost always cast in terms of countering China's rise, as if it – and everything else that Washington does in Asia – is always all about China. Of course, Beijing thinks it's all about China . . . but, then again, Beijing thinks that everything that happens anywhere is usually about China.

But the only thing new about the US pivot toward Asia is the word "pivot." The idea of focusing on Asia during this, the "Pacific Century," dates back to President Bush . . . President George H.W. Bush's new world order that is. Ever since the end of the Cold War, US presidents have been acknowledging the growing importance of Asia and the need for the United States to remain engaged in this critical region in our own national interest.

In a series of four East Asia strategy reports between 1990-1998, prepared by the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations, the Pentagon – at a time when China was largely an afterthought – clearly signaled its intention to shift its focus toward Asia. As the Bush administration's April 1990 East Asia Strategy Initiative notes: "it is essential to position ourselves now to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Our goals in the next decade must be to deal with the realities of constrained defense budgets and a changing threat environment while maintaining our resolve to meet American commitments. In this context, we believe that our forward presence in the Asia-Pacific region will remain critical to deterring war, supporting our regional and bilateral objectives, and performing our military missions." Sound familiar?

This theme was further underscored in President Clinton's New Pacific Community and in his own East Asia Strategy Reports. While the George W. Bush administration likewise stressed the importance of Asia in the 21st century, it (regrettably) did not issue its own series of strategy reports; nor (thus far) has the Obama administration. Issuing such a document would help clarify the whys and hows behind the pivot. (The Pacific Forum, working with several Washington-based think tanks, offered the Obama administration a blueprint for such a report: http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/issuesinsights_v09n01.pdf). Nonetheless, the frequent assertion by senior officials in both administrations that the US is a "Pacific nation" makes it clear that the region continues to hold pride of place whenever

America's post-Cold War leaders think about America's economic and strategic future.

As a result, the argument or accusation that the US is suddenly "back to Asia" misses the mark. We never left. Asia policy has been one of the few US foreign policy arenas that has enjoyed both considerable continuity and bipartisan support in the post-Cold War era. Sure, each administration has attempted to differentiate its policies from those of its predecessors, but the similarities are far greater than the changes.

From our vantage point, recurring Obama administration assertions that "America is back" runs the risk of being counterproductive. We understand the political necessity of making such a claim. It provides a policy framework in the aftermath of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and at a time when Washington is trying to set parameters for defense policy amid unprecedented fiscal constraints. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton mentioned in Honolulu during her APEC speech, "after a decade in which we invested immense resources in [Iraq and Afghanistan], we have reached a pivot point. We now can redirect some of those investments to opportunities and obligations elsewhere. And Asia stands out as a region where opportunities abound."

But the "America is back" rhetoric is troubling. First, there is the insinuation that a nation that "returns" has either left or might leave again; that its commitment comes and goes. We don't want to be sending that message to allies, partners, and potential adversaries. Second, it confuses other governments in the region. In conversations throughout Asia, friends have asked us what this new policy means. Those who never questioned the US commitment still wonder what is behind this language. They worry that a "surge" in the US presence is a cover for more aggressive and potentially destabilizing policies. They worry too that the US is preparing a more confrontational policy toward China. (That doesn't mean that they don't worry about China and its intentions; but they want the US to be a comforting presence, not an instigator.)

Take the Darwin deployment for instance. Beginning in 2012, US Marines will begin six-month rotations to Darwin for joint training. Initial deployments will involve 250 Marines with the number eventually growing to 2,500 by 2016. Beijing was quick to protest the announcement, calling it "a manifestation of a Cold War mentality," and warning, in a People's Daily editorial, "If Australia uses its military bases to help the US harm Chinese interests, then Australia itself will be caught in the crossfire." Someone needs to hand our Chinese colleagues a map. Last we looked, Darwin was some 2,500 miles from the nearest Chinese landmass; that's one heck of a crossfire! We are not privy to US war plans, but if we're talking about the South China Sea – and everyone seems

to be nowadays – it’s hard to imagine (with all due respect to USMC capabilities) that 250-2,500 Marines, that far from the action, will tilt the balance at any rate.

To say that it’s not all about China is not to say that it is not at all about China. In some fundamental ways, Chinese statements and actions in recent years have made it at least in part about China. 2010 in particular was the “year of living arrogantly” for China and its People’s Liberation Army; 2011 was for the most part a period of backing off but by then the damage to the credibility of China’s “peaceful rise” pledge had been done; concerns about Chinese intentions – and the need to respond to them – have risen exponentially.

Take recent discussions between Washington and Manila about increased defense cooperation, for instance. While defense officials in both countries are careful to portray the talks in positive terms – aimed at strengthening their long-standing alliance and helping the Philippines to build capacity – that are not aimed at China or anyone else, every piece of reporting on the discussions begins with an assertion that they are aimed at countering China’s rise. (Most also contend – inaccurately – that US forces and bases are about to return to the Philippines, something that, for starters, would require a Philippine constitutional amendment.)

While the US bases agreement with the Philippines ended two decades ago, the alliance remains strong. US ships routinely visit the Philippines, our militaries exercise together on a routine basis, and US advisors continue to provide training and assistance in support of Philippine counterinsurgency operations in the south. Sustaining and building upon such support is hardly front page news. But growing Philippine concerns about Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea make it front page news, and significantly increase Manila’s incentive both to increase the US presence and to remind China about the defense commitments that have always been inherent in the alliance.

In short, America’s return to Asia is overblown; we never left. And the primary factor behind the continuing focus on Asia is the awareness that Asia’s economic, political, and security significance is likely to grow, regardless of the nature of China’s rise; the US is committed to remaining “all in” in Asia (as President Obama pledged in Australia) because it has been, is, and will continue to be in America’s national security interest to do so. It’s not all about China and would be less about China than it is today if China would become more transparent about its claims and intentions and military modernization plans in the future.

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