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Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

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Explaining the US 'Pivot' to Asia

Kurt Campbell and Brian Andrews

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INTRODUCTION

The United States government is in the early stages of a substantial national project: reorienting significant elements of its foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific region and encouraging many of its partners outside the region to do the same. The “strategic pivot” or rebalancing, launched four years ago, is premised on the recognition that the lion’s share of the political and economic history of the 21st century will be written in the Asia-Pacific region. To benefit from this shift in global geopolitical dynamism and sustainably grow its economy, the United States is building extensive diplomatic, economic, development, people-to-people and security ties with the region. Despite considerable efforts to detail and implement the policy transparently, there remain misunderstandings abroad – real or feigned – about the key tenets of the pivot, as well as questions about US commitment to the policy given potentially destabilizing developments in other regions of the world.

To the doubters of its fortitude, it is worth remembering that the United States has long had a bipartisan consensus on the importance of the Asia-Pacific region to its foreign policy and national interests. Dating back to early in the last century, Democratic and Republican administrations alike, with congressional support, have built and maintained strong ties that bind the United States with countries across the Pacific by dint of alliances, trade, values, immigration and family links. Some have mistakenly described the rebalance as a ‘return’ to Asia – nothing could be further from the truth because, in reality, the United States had never left. It is, however, a vast and dynamic increase in US focus and depth of engagement in the region.

CONTEXT

President Barack Obama entered office at a particularly difficult time. The global financial crisis not only caused severe hardship at home, but it also raised profound questions about the long-term viability of the US economic model and the international liberal order the United States has championed since the Second World War, particularly when juxtaposed with the perceived success of China’s economy. Crisis at home and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan generated a powerful centripetal force in the United States – a demand for greater focus within its borders rather than robust foreign policy endeavours. To put it bluntly, the emerging narrative in the Asia-Pacific region was one of American lack of strategic focus and decline, at a time when many in the region sought greater US presence and leadership.

American engagement with the Asia-Pacific region is premised on a desire for a peaceful, stable and economically prosperous region – a vision shared with America's Asian partners. By utilizing 'forward deployed diplomacy' as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called it, the United States has sought to provide reassurance of its lasting commitment in order to cultivate an open, fair, stable and predictable political, economic, and security operating environment across a vast region spanning from India to the United States. From friends in Asia, the United States seeks nothing less than their active commitment to building and sustaining this effort on all fronts, so that all countries in the Asia-Pacific region play their part in finding and implementing solutions to shared regional and global challenges, from the proliferation of dangerous weapons to the impacts of climate change.

Given the region's vital importance to America's future and questions about the durability of its commitment, President Obama early in his administration made the important strategic decision to 'pivot' or 'rebalance' foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific region as large troop deployments in the Middle East and South Asia were responsibly ending. This effort, building on the investment of preceding generations in the region, required a whole-of-government approach using all elements of US national power. To develop and implement it, the government's national security leaders showed strong cooperation and team work. Secretary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and his successor Leon Panetta, and National Security Advisor Tom Donilon worked closely and effectively together, with the full range of US agencies and departments and a host of supporting characters, to realize the president's vision through six key efforts.

ALLIANCES

The first priority has been to strengthen the US alliances that are the foundation of engagement in the region and provide the pillars upon which the region's sustained peace and security rest. In partnership with its allies, the United States strives to create a stable security order that builds strategic confidence within the region and provides the context for states to build closer ties with each other. The past four years have demonstrated that the strength and diverse nature of the US-Japanese alliance transcends partisan politics on both sides of the Pacific as the United States worked hand-in-hand with both Democratic Party and Liberal Democratic Party governments. The strength of US-Japanese ties were demonstrated not only in the rapid US response to the March 2011 triple disaster in Japan (earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis), but also the day-to-day management of alliance issues on

both sides of the Pacific. The US-South Korean alliance is increasingly global in nature, building on seamless bilateral cooperation on the Peninsula to tackle challenges together across the world, from Southeast Asia to Afghanistan and the Gulf of Aden. The United States and Australia continue to expand their cooperation both bilaterally and on global challenges. The US-Filipino relationship has not been this strong in decades, with substantial programmes to increase economic and people-to-people ties while cooperating closely on regional security concerns, including maritime security. President Obama's trip to Thailand last November reaffirmed the US commitment to its oldest alliance in Asia and witnessed the signing of an agreement to expand US-Thai development cooperation in other countries in the region, working in partnership to narrow Southeast Asia's development gap.

IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS WITH EMERGING POWERS

While strengthening its alliances, the United States has embarked on the second priority: improving relations with other partners and emerging powers in the region. There is likely no greater challenge for American foreign policy than finding a way to sustain a strong, robust and productive relationship with China – which is in the US, Chinese and broader regional interests. To promote this goal, the United States and China have launched an unprecedented number of dialogues and exchanges, including the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, which held its fifth round in July, while also using informal leaders' meetings, like the recent Sunnylands summit between President Obama and President Xi Jinping, or bilateral engagements on the sidelines of multilateral meetings. These mechanisms were not created merely for dialogue's sake, but rather to find tangible ways for the United States and China to cooperate in advancing shared regional and global interests, including on the most difficult security challenges like North Korea and Iran. Recognizing there will be inevitable frictions in the US-Chinese relationship, the dialogue between the two countries has helped to create a context for disagreement and competition within rules and limits, to minimize the potential for misunderstandings and miscalculations.

The United States has also elevated its strategic dialogue on East Asian issues with India. The Indo-Pacific region is increasingly a contiguous political, economic and security operating environment, which in reality is the historical norm. India is the linchpin of this system, and will have a large and important role in East Asia as it continues to follow through on its Look East policy. As the world's oldest and largest democracies, respectively, with

similar values and interests, there is substantial common cause between the United States and India in the region. The challenge the United States faces with regard to India is finding real ways to expand cooperation in economics, development and security. As a sign of the progress that has been made, the two countries have launched creative diplomatic efforts to build understanding and enhance coordination across the Indo-Pacific, like the trilateral dialogue including Japan, which has held four successful rounds.

The United States has significantly improved relations with important emerging powers like Indonesia and Vietnam while tightening its partnerships with New Zealand and Singapore. In addition to broadening and deepening relations with China, it has also further developed its informal ties with Taiwan, in part as an effort to provide the Taiwanese people with the security and confidence necessary to increase connectivity across the strait. Taken together, these and additional steps the United States is taking to strengthen bilateral ties with other countries in the region are providing greater diversity and depth to its foreign policy, particularly in Southeast Asia.

ECONOMIC STATECRAFT

Recognizing the Asia-Pacific region as increasingly the driver of global economic growth, the third element of the approach has been elevating the importance of economic statecraft as a core element of US foreign policy in order to fuel the economic recovery. American companies continue to represent the gold standard in trade and investment. Sophisticated developed economies like Japan and Singapore as well as developing economies like Myanmar and Indonesia all seek improved economic ties with the United States. At the same time, there is a growing desire in Asia to invest in the United States, under the framework of a transparent and predictable legal and investment system, as the latter's economy picks up steam. While the private sector must drive this process, the US government has taken steps to create a political and international regulatory environment to facilitate closer commercial ties across the Pacific and promote shared economic growth. During its host year in 2011, the United States refocused APEC on its core mission of facilitating Asia-Pacific economic integration. The US-Korea Free Trade Agreement passed the Senate with large bipartisan support, eliminating tariffs on 95 per cent of US consumer and industrial exports within five years. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) will bring together economies from across the Pacific – developed and developing alike – into a single trading community. For the countries of South-east Asia that are not yet ready to join TPP negotiations, the United States has launched with the Association

of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) the Expanded Economic Engagement (E3) initiative to build capacity in South-east Asia, recognizing at its core that the TPP should be aspirational to all in the region, not invitational.

Energy diplomacy will play an increasingly large role in economic policy on both sides of the Pacific. Global energy dynamics are changing dramatically — in terms of the geography of supply and demand, as well as the world's energy mix. Alternative energy options, unconventional gas, surging energy demand and growing dangers from climate change are reshaping the geopolitical energy space. As America moves from greater energy self-sufficiency to increasing exports, energy diplomacy will play a greater role in its energy policy. In November 2012, President Obama, joined by Brunei and Indonesia, launched the US-Asia Pacific Comprehensive Partnership for a Sustainable Energy, underwritten by \$6 billion in financing from the Export-Import Bank and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, to create a framework for consolidating and expanding energy and environmental cooperation to ensure affordable, secure and cleaner energy supplies for the region.

ENGAGING WITH MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

Fourth, a new and innovative element of US regional policy has been engagement with the Asia-Pacific's maturing multilateral institutions. These bodies, while relatively young, have the potential to help build and reinforce a system of rules and responsibilities in order to address complex transnational challenges and promote cooperation. Recognizing that a strong and integrated ASEAN is fundamentally in the US national interest, the United States has been the first non-member to open a permanent mission to the institution, followed up by appointing a resident ambassador and launching a host of cooperative and capacity-building programmes. To narrow the development gap in the ASEAN countries and support integration in the Lower Mekong sub-region, the United States launched the Lower Mekong Initiative, increasing its presence in an emerging region in which historically it had been underrepresented.

Recognizing the need for a leaders-level forum to provide strategic guidance and oversight to the vast array of emerging institutions, President Obama made the strategic choice for the United States to join the East Asia Summit and reorient the annual gathering to discuss pressing political and strategic issues, like maritime security and non-proliferation. Similarly Secretary Clinton attended the annual ASEAN Regional Forum foreign ministers meeting to

press for reforms in Burma/Myanmar, urge peaceful approaches to disputes in the South China Sea and build international pressure against North Korea's provocations. The Defense Department joined the new ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus mechanism and has strongly supported its development into a serious institution. The United States has also supported greater integration of the Pacific region, including via high-level US participation in the annual Pacific Island Forum meetings.

All of these bodies provide channels for cooperative activities, lowering the transaction costs through collective action. In these institutions, responsible behaviour is encouraged and rewarded, while outliers are held accountable for their actions. Additionally, US membership provides a circadian-like rhythm to engagement in the region – adding predictability to high-level US visits and a steady churn of lower-level supporting meetings that develop new cooperative programmes and initiatives to advance peace, stability and prosperity, further giving the region confidence about the American intention to play a consistent and enduring role in Asia.

SUPPORT FOR UNIVERSAL VALUES

Threaded throughout all US diplomatic engagements in the Asia-Pacific region is steadfast support and advocacy for universal values, including human rights and democracy. These values are an intrinsic part of American national identity and are reflected in all diplomatic engagements, including with partners whom the United States disagrees with on these issues. There has been progress on respect for democracy and human rights in the region, most notably in Burma/Myanmar where the government has taken remarkable steps – such as the release of political prisoners, their incorporation into the political process – and political and economic reforms, including rights to organize and greater freedom to the press. While more progress is necessary, particularly on ethnic strife and violence, Burma/Myanmar serves as a powerful example of a totalitarian country taking the necessary transformational steps to benefit its people, and the United States has actively supported the effort. Throughout the region, the American message has emphasized that respect for fundamental human rights is ultimately a source of stability and enabler of national greatness and prosperity.

INCREASING US MILITARY PRESENCE

The sixth and final element of the rebalance has been the development of a geographically dispersed, politically sustainable force posture in the region. The legacy of the Cold War left the United States defence presence in the region overleveraged in North-east Asia while there were greater demands for joint training, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief from countries in South-east Asia. In broadening its defence engagement, the United States is responding to a demand signal from countries in the region seeking greater opportunities to train, exercise and interact with the US military. Regrettably, the military component of the pivot/rebalance has frequently been over-emphasized and characterized as the driver of US policy. Marine deployments to Darwin in northern Australia and US littoral ship presence in Singapore are often more tangible and easier-to-report-on examples of increasing US presence in Asia than senior and mid-level participation in scores of bilateral and multilateral meetings or support for development projects throughout the region. US security engagement in Asia would not be possible if it was not embedded in a much broader national agenda including diplomacy, trade, development, values and multilateral institutions.

CONCLUSION

Over the past several months, a growing number of voices, both in the United States and abroad, have begun to question the US commitment to maintaining a disciplined focus on building diplomatic, economic, people-to-people and security ties with the Asia-Pacific region. With each new personnel move in the Obama administration or crisis in another region come the perennial questions about waning American attention to the Asia-Pacific and whether the 'pivot' or 'rebalance' is ephemeral in nature. These concerns are misplaced. America's future demands greater attention to the Asia-Pacific region – a dynamic fundamentally understood by President Obama and his team. Early into his second term, he has already met with the leaders from seven important Asian allies and partners, with plans to travel to South-east Asia in October. Over the last four years, the United States built bilateral dialogues and mechanisms with a host of countries that continue operating today. At the same time, the US government is mounting new innovations in foreign policy, like the Sunnylands Summit and participating in an ASEAN-based joint military disaster relief exercise with Japan, India and China, hosted by Brunei in June. The increasing complexity of the Asia-Pacific region demands US attention, and the United States remains well-positioned to play a pivotal role in the region through the 21st century.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kurt Campbell is Chairman and Chief Executive of The Asia Group and former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Brian Andrews is an Engagement Manager at The Asia Group and previously served at the White House, State Department, and Defense Department on Asia policy.