

The US rebalance puts Asian alliances at stake

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The US is taking a considerable risk with its Asian alliances by linking their modernisation to its rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region. The US needs to ensure that its alliances, with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia, enhance both regional security and its future influence in the region. The aim is to update their usefulness, and to make them part of a wider network of security relationships. But by tying them closely to the rebalance the US is raising the stakes. If the alliances are successfully integrated into the rebalance they will continue to underwrite US influence in the region, but if the rebalance fails US relations with its allies in Asia are likely to suffer. In other words there is no easy way back to business-as-usual for the American alliances in Asia, if the rebalance should fail.

The rebalance was originally launched in 2011 as ‘the pivot to Asia’. It has a ‘whole of government’-approach, which means that it involves all parts of US policy that strengthens American influence in the Asia-Pacific. Until now the changes the rebalance entails for the US alliances in the region have received limited attention. One reason is that changes to alliances often take time. The five bilateral defence alliances have been the backbone of American influence in the region. Hence, it is easy to assume that the alliances are the structure on which the rebalance is erected. They are not. The alliance relationships themselves are just one part of the rebalance.

At different junctures in the past the US has had to renew the motives for maintaining its five Asian alliances. The focus on combating terrorism after 2001 was an example of this. The rebalance is a response to the Asia-Pacific being regarded as vital for the US future as a leading great power. The Obama administration assumes that the region will increasingly become the global centre of gravity for international politics and economic growth. If the US is going to be able to influence how the region develops it needs to stay involved with and relevant to several key countries in the region. The five alliances are remnants of a Cold War alliance system of ‘hub and spokes’, where the US is at the centre of separate alliances. This set-up is insufficient for securing American long-term sway in the region.

Originally, an alliance with the US alleviated the need for allies in Asia to be overly concerned about defence. Instead they could pour their energies into economic growth, as in the case of Japan. This shows that the alliances have had ramifications beyond military matters, and that they have contributed to American influence in the region. Consequently, the US needs to ensure that its allies regard an alliance with the US as relevant in the future, both bilaterally and in relation to third parties.

At the same time individual alliances might be a source of trouble for the ambitions of the Obama administration. Some American experts argue that allies may try to take undue advantage of their relationship with the US and force it to support their actions. This could for example happen in disputes with China, which would contribute to regional instability. There are discussions in the US about the future of the alliances and the risks of keeping them unchanged. For many experts the risk of increased tension is as a reason for modernising the alliances.

Given the Chinese assertiveness in recent years, the benefits of an alliance with the US might seem self-evident. However, the reasoning of allies may change as China’s importance grows. For example, some allies and partners might prioritize strengthening a regional multilateral group. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, is an example of a regional group of growing importance. The temptation for the members of such a group would be to balance between Chinese and American interests. Nevertheless, such priorities could contribute to the US being squeezed out of parts of the Asia-Pacific. Accordingly, for the US to reinforce its influence it needs to do more than merely offer a new motive for its alliances.

The US wants to create more interlinkages between existing Asian alliances and partners, especially strategic partners. The American diplomatic concept of strategic partnership is significant since it is the next best thing to formal alliances. The US is unlikely to be able to add more spokes – formal allies – to its present alliance system in Asia. Diplomatically it is useful that the precise nature of strategic partnerships is unclear. An adaptable concept helps in finding common ground with other countries.

By giving weight to the concept of strategic partnerships the Obama administration has shown that it is ready to forge new important security relationships in Asia. For example, it has persistently tried to establish a strategic partnership with India, a key regional great power. This is evident from Obama making a second official trip to Delhi during his presidency, making him the first president ever to do so.

Establishing new important relationships is one thing but the development of a more complex regional network will take time, and depends on the rebalance continuing. The recent US National Security Strategy 2015 confirms that the rebalance policy remains in place.

However, the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine indicate that two of the initial conditions for the rebalance are no longer in place. One condition was that the US assumed that Europe would be whole, free and at peace. Another condition was that the US sought to put the decade of large-scale military operations in the Middle East behind it. Some policy experts argue that the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine are only temporary problems for the rebalance. This is perhaps to underestimate the impact such conflicts can have in derailing the best laid plans. Nevertheless, the main problem for the rebalance is probably of domestic American making.

There is a debate in the US Congress about the international role of the US – and it is fought out in the budget negotiations. Funding for the US global posture might be squeezed between domestic expenditure and the desire to keep taxes low. The Republicans might be more interested in the latter than upholding their traditional line of favouring defence spending. In the coming years allies and partners will want to be reassured that the American military commitment to the Asia-Pacific is sustainable over the longer term.

The future of the rebalance might come to a head even earlier if the US is faced with a crisis of similar significance for the Asia-Pacific as the conflict in Ukraine is for Europe. American allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific will doubtlessly look at how the US handles similar challenges in their part of the world.

There are many contentious issues in the Asia-Pacific region, notably regarding the South China Sea. But other

issues may also rise on the agenda, such as the question of Taiwan's future status. After the Chinese handling of recent protests in Hong Kong, the idea that China's 'one country two systems' would work for Taiwan is less likely. Accordingly, the question of Taiwan's independence might resurface in the Taiwanese elections in 2016 and increase Sino-American tension.

Given that the rebalance is a long-term effort it will be a policy that the Obama administration hands over to its successor. It is likely to be less of a clear-cut Obama legacy and more of an issue that needs to be dealt with. It will be up to the successor of the Obama administration to fulfil the aims of the rebalance, such as ensuring that US relations with the Asia-Pacific emulates the strong transatlantic ties.

The US hopes that modernised alliances, as part of a network, will contribute to regional stability and help sustain American influence in the Asia-Pacific. This would enable the US to partake in shaping the future of the region.

However, the risks of tying the remake of the alliances to the rebalance are considerable. If the US expenditure for its military presence wanes it will have a significant impact on the rebalance. The consequence could be the same as with imperial overstretch; the US could be seen as having gone beyond its means. Consequently, partners and allies would see their expectations dashed. The only consolation would be that the US has not actually spent too much on the rebalance so far. Even so, US relations with its allies in the Asia-Pacific would suffer, as well as the policy of rebalancing as a whole. Subsequently American influence in the region, and globally, would weaken.

The rebalance is a centrepiece of the Obama administration's foreign policy legacy. The administration needs to work hard in order to hand over the rebalance – including the modernisation of the US alliances – to the succeeding administration. The stakes remain high.

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