Yet strategic posturing in Europe and the Middle East needs not entail strategic ambiguity towards Asia, for it would undermine what American efforts in Asia have achieved.

When John Kerry visited Berlin during his first foreign trip as Secretary of State, his message was clear: The US is not losing sight of Europe because of Asia. [1] That message was apparently welcomed by those who have been wary of a “premature pivot” [2] to Asia that would supposedly prove a detriment to US interests in other parts of the globe. One year after then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote of “America’s Pacific century” on Foreign Policy rolling out the US “Asia pivot”, [3] the foreign policy guru Leslie H. Gelb lamented that “[w]hen the Obama administration announced what sounded like a strategic shift in emphasis toward Asia, it demonstrated a lack of sensitivity to all Europeans in a time of great need.” [4]

George Washington University’s Amitai Etzioni argued in various pieces that “pivoting to the Far East [would] prove a major distraction” as “events in the Middle East [would] remind us soon where the true front lines are.” [5]

Not long after Obama began his second term in office, that scenario seemed to materialize as the civil conflict in Syria escalated. While Obama is increasingly consumed by domestic politics and Middle East turmoil, the departure of some of the main advocates of the “Asia pivot”, including Secretary Clinton, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific Kurt Campbell, has raised questions about the future of the US endeavor in Asia. If anything, Kerry’s apparent caution with regards to the “pivot” at his confirmation hearing [6] and the itinerary of the new US Secretary of State’s first foreign tour seem to signal the new Obama foreign policy team’s waning enthusiasm for continuing the focus on Asia.
What then will become of US policy in Asia? In the current climate, the debate over that question is becoming increasingly polarized. While many advocate continued (re)engagement with a region of strategic importance to the United States, others remain skeptical about the feasibility and, indeed, desirability of such an endeavor. As developments in the Asia-Pacific region so far appear to indicate a compromise between US goals of reaffirming US leadership in Asia, promoting adherence to international rules and norms as a basis for enduring regional stability, and building a constructive relationship with China, many have started to question the wisdom of the “pivot” and called for an overhaul of US policy in Asia. Arguments for American “pulling back” from Asia mainly rely on two lines of reasoning: First, the US “pivot” does not contribute to regional stability and therefore is not in the region’s interests; second, increased American engagement in Asia does not help enhance US security and hence is not in American interests. A closer look at the “pivot” and regional dynamics, however, shows an opposite story.

One of the oft-cited indications that the US “pivot” might be going astray in contributing to Asian stability, to many critics, is the emboldened stance many regional countries seem to be taking towards China. To these critics, American efforts to enhance alliances and partnerships in Asia were feeding many US allies and friends’ adventurism and seeding rivalry, to the detriment of regional security and stability. Yet as Georgetown University’s Victor Cha has argued, America’s alliances in Asia have been maintained as much an instrument to control US allies and avoid saber-rattling with potential adversaries as they are a deterrent to those adversaries. At the beginning of the Cold War, Washington’s decision to establish bilateral alliances with South Korea and Japan instead of incorporating the latter two into a larger multilateral network where American voice would presumably hold less sway was a deliberate choice to counter Soviet influence and at the same time avoid unintended clashes with Soviet forces on the Asian front.

That kind of restraining effect offered by alliances remains in place today. Early into Obama’s first term in office, it was demonstrated as the contours of things on the Korean peninsula turned for the worse in 2010. After Pyongyang evaded responsibility for the Cheonan incident, in which North Korea was accused of sinking a South Korean submarine and causing the
The (continued) need for American "Pivot to Asia"

Written by vuquangtiep
Thursday, 27 June 2013 07:11

des of 46 South Koreans, and Beijing refused to press its quasi-ally on that issue, Washington took an active role in keeping the situations in check by demonstrating support for South Korea while at the same time encouraging Seoul to exercise restraint. [9] Indeed, even China has grasped the values of US alliances with Japan in discouraging Tokyo’s backsiding into its past militarist adventurism. Given growing unease with China’s rise in various Asian capitals today, American presence is all the more critical to provide both the assurance and deterrence all regional countries need.

Many would point to the string of confrontations in East Asia that happened to concur with US return to the region and seem not convinced that the American “rebalance” is indeed beneficial to regional stability. It should be noted, however, that tensions in the East and South China Sea had smoldered before the Obama administration announced the “pivot” – even before the administration took office. What is truly disturbing for regional peace and stability is the correlation between signs of US withdrawal from Asia and China’s moves to advance its interests to many regional countries’ chagrin. In 1974, when American troops were beginning to leave Vietnam after the signing of the Paris Accord, China took advantage of Vietnam’s situation to capture the Paracels from South Vietnamese forces. In the early 1990s, Manila’s decision to discontinue to host American military base in the Philippines hastened further American disengagement from the region, and the Filipinos paid quite a dear price for their decision as China, emboldened by US troops’ departure from Philippine shores, leveled up its assertiveness at the Mischief Reef. [10] Apparently the Clinton administration’s demonstration of US resolve and commitment to Taiwan’s security in 1996 forced Beijing to review its strategy and adopt a more nuanced “charm offensive” towards its neighbors. Yet a decade of relative calmness in the South China Sea began to fade away as the Bush administration appeared to be indulged in the war on terrorism. [11] In formulating and executing the “pivot”, the Obama administration was responding to regional events rather than precipitating those events; in fact, Washington was answering US allies and friends’ concerns about China’s power trajectory and perceivable US distractedness in ways that help assuage those concerns rather than precipitate them and allow unnecessary conflicts to transpire.

The question now is whether America can help regional countries to hammer out solutions for their long-standing disputes and suspicions. By elevating US engagement in regional multilateralism, the Obama administration is working in that direction. It might be discouraging to
The (continued) need for American "Pivot to Asia"

Written by vuquangtiep
Thursday, 27 June 2013 07:11

see that Washington’s coordination with regional countries at the 17th ASEAN Regional Forum and subsequent efforts to gear the East Asia Summit towards addressing imminent security concerns in the region have elicited negative responses from China. Indeed, China’s apparent success in manipulating regional security fora after Beijing’s initial shock at the ARF-17 shows that those multilateral fora still have a long way to go in helping to resolve persistent regional security issues and lay the foundation for lasting peace in the Asia-Pacific. Nevertheless, continued American “absenteeism” at regional security venues would only let those security issues fester beneath frequent handshakes as China continues to dominate Asian multilateral security institutions.

By demonstrating a willingness to invest in Asian multilateralism, Washington can shrug off the charge of US aloofness that has long tainted American image in the region while showing regional countries where exactly they need to work on in building a viable regional security architecture. In 2010-2011, the Vietnamese and Indonesians were very much confident in ASEAN’s ability to begin to take on more challenging tasks in addressing regional security concerns as the regional grouping appeared to reach a mature phase. The apparent setback in July 2012 forced a serious reconsideration of that optimism. US experiment with ASEAN multilateralism has thus helped exposing ASEAN fora’s weaknesses and has arguably fostered efforts to revamp regional multilateral organizations to better reflect regional concerns and facilitate frank, constructive dialogue.

Would these be important to US security? While most observers acknowledge the significance of Asian security and prosperity to American well-being, many seem to believe the costs of increased US engagement in Asia are outweighing the benefits. Given increasing US-China interdependence, some have argued that heralding a strategy that appears to be directed at China would only play into Beijing’s threat perception and jeopardize Sino-US mutual interests. The Obama administration has gone to great pains to ensure heightened American presence in Asia is not equated to a US “containment” strategy against China. The administration’s alertness in reframing the “pivot” into more of a “rebalancing” indicates a desire to attend to the economics of the US-China relationship and what it means to US security and wellbeing. Time and again US administration officials have rejected the idea that America would, or could,
engage in a military conflict with China, and even a critic of the “pivot” has pointed out that recent US military deployments are not meant to serve as “tripwires” against China, for they would have been sent to locations nearer to China’s shores such as Taiwan or disputed areas in the South China Seas had it been US intention to contain China. [15]

Indeed, as Harvard’s Joseph Nye has pointed out, the idea of containment, which would entail total economic isolation as in the Cold War, is not applicable in describing the US-Chinese relationship today. [16] Moreover, in the Cold War, to contain Soviet expansion, America threw its power into Europe, the Middle East and East Asia to push out Soviet presence where it seemed to be advancing. Today, while “rebalancing” towards Asia and watching China’s behavior on its periphery, America has continued to provide security for various parts of the globe where China’s economic interests are burgeoning and enable China to reap the benefits of the global liberal order. [17] American efforts to maintain and expand the channel of dialogue with China on various global and regional issues, which have helped foster US-China relations to reach what many observers consider a “mature” level despite persisting mutual distrust, [18] also testify to the fact that American (re)engagement in Asia is not to contain China.

Yet US attempts to accommodate China’s concerns do not, and should not, mean acquiescing to every China’s claim of US disingenuous intentions. Not long after Washington expressed increased attention to Asia, many were quick to point out that the term “pivot” was sending a wrong signal, although arguments made for the case appeared to serve different purposes. Some Chinese scholars, in a visit to Vietnam in early 2012, noted with irony that “the US had never left” Asia and thus propagation of a “pivot to Asia” demonstrated developments in US thinking not necessarily beneficial for regional stability. Many US military experts, on the other hand, also emphasized that America had never left Asia, but the implication apparently was that labeling US efforts as a “pivot” might show inconsistent American commitment to the region. [19] This divergence in perception of the “pivot” and the different conceptualizations of the American presence in Asia that underlie such discrepancy indicate that Chinese suspicions of American efforts in Asia will not go away any time soon – in fact, it is doubtful if Beijing would ever fully appreciate the American presence in the region even as China values current US role in restraining Japan’s posture towards its neighbors – yet bending to China’s pressure and vilification will hardly speak up for American credibility.
Some have cautioned that America’s undertaking actions that are deemed provocative to China would only serve to amplify the voice of some Chinese military hard-liners and make Sino-US relations more difficult. [20] The other side of the coin, however, is that America’s rushing to adopt a conciliatory tone toward China and disengaging from the region would also serve to embolden those Chinese hard-liners’ confidence in China’s growing power and their conviction that assertiveness pays. Reporting on the recent standoff between China and the Philippines, the Philippines-based Inquirer Global Nation quotes China’s PLA Major General Luo Yuan as saying “[it is] debatable if the U.S. would be willing to force a showdown with the world’s second largest economy on the Philippines’ account”. [21]

Such an assertion speaks volumes about the confidence among many of the Chinese military elites nowadays.

Another reason many believe the “pivot” is not in America’s security interests comes in the form of “entrapment risks”. Analysts such as Kenneth G. Lieberthal of the Brookings Institution and Justin Logan of the Cato Institute increasingly see Asia as a “cost center” for the United States in which heightened American commitment is likely to encourage many Asian states’ increased reliance on the US to provide for their security and/or raise the possibility of America being drawn into unnecessary conflicts with China to protect those countries’ interests. [22] To compound the problem of “free-riding”, many have contended that by touting the “Asia rebalance”, the Obama administration was creating promises it would not be able to fulfill, given current budget constraints. [23] US security commitments in Asia, so the argument goes, have allowed US allies and partners in the region to keep a limited defense budget while behaving more provocatively than they would be if they were not certain about American posture. [24]
Yet it is mind-boggling to think that absent US security commitment, those ally and partner countries would both pump up their defense spending and behave more accommodating towards China. More likely is that without America playing the role of a balancer, increased military investment would bolster those countries’ ability and willingness to take China head-on, which would be far more detrimental to everyone’s interests. As has been widely noted, however, the Japanese have slowly but surely begun to upgrade their defense capability while working closely with the US. [25] Paradoxically, while critics of “cheap riding” have argued that the projected two-percent increase in Japanese military expenditure is minimal and inadequate, [26] others are worrying about a possible resurgence of Japanese militarism, [27] which suggests that the Japanese investment in their military buildup might be at the right level.

It is complacent, moreover, to think that American investment in security alliances and partnerships is solely for the benefits of US allies and partners and not the US. The US, Logan contends, should only enter into alliances during wartime and avoid building alliances during peacetime lest it has to wage war for the sake of those alliances. [28] Yet it is worth noting that alliances are not only for fighting wars but also for preventing wars –by, inter alia, ensuring that wars are fought effectively when they do occur. [29]

It is hardly the case that Japan’s role in the US-led global war on terrorism is for the security of Japan only. Indeed, it was precisely because Washington had kept US Asian bilateral alliances that even after years of generally “benign neglect” toward Asia, [30] America could quickly call on Japan and Australia when Washington decided to wage the war on terrorism.

As enhanced cooperation is essential to ensure the interoperability and therefore credibility of American and allied forces, furthermore, it might be beneficial for Washington not to overemphasize the entrapment risks that are supposed to accompany US alliances and partnerships in Asia. Indeed, many commentators have pointed out that no countries in Asia today want to see a conflict between the US and China. [31] What they have failed to mention, however, is that much as the US understands Asian nations do not want to choose between America and China, many of those nations also understand Washington cannot afford to
The (continued) need for American “Pivot to Asia”

Written by vuquangtiep
Thursday, 27 June 2013 07:11

sacrifice relations with China for the sake of even America’s closest allies. Given the region’s
own dynamics, that many in Asia have elicited US backing in dangerous times indicates more of
a confidence in the deterrent effect their alliances and partnerships with the United States
supposedly generate than an expectation that the Americans would actually come to their
rescue. At a time when perceptions of American relative decline are widespread, Washington
might need more of that kind of confidence than not. As Michael Auslin observes, a belief in US
decline and disinterest in regional affairs among countries in the Indo-Pacific region may set a
tipping point at which the balance of power it tilted in China’s favor as regional countries
contemplate strategic hedging and readjustments to acclimatize to China’s (likely) ascendancy.
[32]
If the Chinese are to believe America is in decline, which they seem to be,
[33]
Washington can work with US allies and partners to prove they are wrong. If US allies and
partners believe the United States is in decline, America is in serious trouble.

With the “pivot to Asia”, in sum, the Obama administration has demonstrated and restored
faith in US leadership in the region and has arguably laid the groundwork for enduring stability
in Asia. While the American goal of building a stable and constructive relationship with China to
prod Beijing into becoming a more responsible global player has seemingly suffered some
setbacks, over the long term, a strong US presence in Asia will encourage Beijing to recalibrate
China’s relationships with its Asian neighbors to avoid what is viewed as a US strategy to
“contain” China. That will be the prelude to more serious Chinese attempts to engage in the
building of regional norms and rules of the road to ensure lasting Asian security and stability. As
has been noted, Washington’s demonstration of US commitment to security in the Taiwan Strait
in 1996 induced more restrained China behavior in the South China Sea in the subsequent
decade, culminating in the signing of the Declaration of the Conduct of the Parties in the South
China Sea in 2002. US-Indian strategic cooperation following 9/11 also prompted improvements
in Sino-Indian relations as China adopted a more accommodating stance on Sino-Indian
economic relations as well as on the two countries’ border issues.
[34]
There are grounds to believe that continued US “rebalance” to Asia will nudge China in a similar
direction if the door of engagement is simultaneously kept open for Beijing.

The matter is maintaining the momentum of the pivot. Some have pointed out that the Obama
administration has overemphasized to Congress the impacts of the defense budget cuts on US ability to maneuver in Asia while underemphasizing those impacts to American allies and friends in the region. That, however, needs not be the case; nor does the US need to intensify the level of American military engagement in Asia. Many in Asia may well be aware that several recent symbolic American military postures in the region are just what they are: symbolic.

That America has to be more frugal may in fact work to Washington’s advantage: it shows that the US is more willing to work with others than to work over them as has often happened in the past, which will make US allies and partners in Asia more confident and comfortable working with America.

Indeed, many in Asia now appreciate American time more than American might – they value US willpower more than US manpower. In this context, it is important that Washington is not seen to be sending mixed signals to countries in Asia. Given that US ability to focus on Asia is contingent upon the contours of things in the Middle East, especially the events in Syria and Iran, it is understandable that Washington might want to keep a close watch on the Middle East and revamp ties with American allies and friends in that region as well as in Europe to prepare for situations where the US needs to build a coalition to support American military intervention there. Yet strategic posturing in Europe and the Middle East needs not entail strategic ambiguity towards Asia, for it would undermine what American efforts in Asia have achieved.

By Le Thuy Trang

The author is a research fellow at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

[1] Kerry was quoted as saying, “We are paying attention to Asia, and so are you... But we are not doing it at the expense of Europe, not at all.” See Patrick Goodenough, “In Europe,
The (continued) need for American "Pivot to Asia"

Written by vuquangtiep
Thursday, 27 June 2013 07:11


The (continued) need for American "Pivot to Asia"

Written by vuquangtiep
Thursday, 27 June 2013 07:11

Security


[12] Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi reportedly left the 17th ASEAN Regional Forum meeting after 13 foreign ministers participating in the event echoed US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s declaration of US support for freedom of navigation and a peaceful resolution for the South China Sea issue despite China’s pre-meeting attempts to prevent ASEAN from bringing the South China Sea problem to the discussion. Yang later returned to remind other participants that “China is a big country…and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact”. An article appearing on the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website the following day described Clinton’s remarks at the 17th ARF as “an attack on China”. Tran, “Recent developments”, 16.

[13] Former ASEAN Secretary General Purin Pitsuwan mentioned theretofore American “diplomatic absenteeism” in regional multilateral arrangements with then Secretary Clinton in 2009 when she visited the ASEAN Secretariat. See Congressional Research Service, “Pivot to the Pacific,” 2.

The (continued) need for American "Pivot to Asia"

Written by vuquangtiep
Thursday, 27 June 2013 07:11


The (continued) need for American "Pivot to Asia"

Written by vuquangtiep
Thursday, 27 June 2013 07:11


[26] Logan, “China, America”; Christopher Preble, “Why does U.S. pay to protect prosperous
The (continued) need for American "Pivot to Asia"

Written by vuquangtiep
Thursday, 27 June 2013 07:11


[28] Logan, “China, America”.


[33] Indyk et al., Bending history, 40.
The (continued) need for American "Pivot to Asia"

Written by vuquangtiep
Thursday, 27 June 2013 07:11


[36] It has been pointed out that nearly 54 percent of the American fleet have already station in the Asia-Pacific and future increase would only raise that number to 57 percent instead of 60 as promised. In addition, ongoing military budget cuts mean that there will be no funding for US military buildup in Asia in the near future. Dreyfuss, “Fool’s errand”.


[38] As the Libyan mission in 2011 has demonstrated, Obama is bent on securing a strong multilateral coalition for any military intervention he decides to undertake. Observers of Middle Eastern affairs have also noted that Washington has been cautious not to openly rule out the option of intervention in Syria even as there are strong disincentives for undertaking such course of action. See Jeffrey Goldberg, “Pentagon shoots down Kerry’s Syria airstrike plan,” Bloomberg, June 19, 2013, accessed June 23, 2013, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-06-18/pentagon-shoots-down-kerry-s-syria-airstrike-plan.html.