

## The United States, the Middle East, and the Future of “Asia Pivot”

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### Introduction

When the United States (US) declared its intention to “pivot” to Asia-Pacific in November 2011, that policy was received in the region with a degree of mixed feeling. On the one hand, many welcomed the United States’ pivot to Asia-Pacific as a much-needed strategic move at a time when the strategic environment in the region is in flux due to the changing power relationship among major powers. To American allies and partners, Washington’s pivotal strategy, which was later renamed “rebalancing,” was seen as a factor that provides a degree of assurance in East Asia amidst strategic uncertainties stemming from the rise of China. On the other hand, however, many have also expressed doubts about the ability of the United States to sustain that policy and questioned its staying power. Past experience, especially during the Bush administration, suggests that beyond its relationship with China and Japan, and its preoccupation with the problem in the Korean Peninsula, the United States’ attention to the region, especially in the case of Southeast Asia, has been “episodic rather than consistent.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Brandon, “A Strategic Pivot in U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations in 2012,” <http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2012/01/04/a-strategic-pivot-in-u-s-southeast-asia-relations-in-2012/>

One particular source of doubt about the sustainability of Asia pivot strategy has been the United States' entanglement with the Middle East. It has been argued, for example, that the U.S. "can't pivot to Asia-Pacific with feet still bogged down in Middle East."<sup>2</sup> A more cynical view even wonders whether Asia pivot is only meant as President Obama's ticket out of Middle East.<sup>3</sup> This line of reasoning argues that the Middle East is too difficult a region for the Obama administration to deal with. Moreover, many in the US are strongly convinced that the United States' strategic, security and economic interests in the Middle East would make a "pivot to Asia" unsustainable. Senator John McCain calls Obama's pivot away from Middle East as "naïve" and "dangerous."<sup>4</sup> The Middle East, and also Europe, sees the US as an indispensable power in the region. Indeed, as Robert Kagan also observes, "every time the Obama administration tries to turn toward Asia, the Middle East drags it back."<sup>5</sup>

This paper examines the United States' pivot strategy in Asia in light of recent developments in the Middle East. More specifically, it discusses the growing perceptions in East Asia about U.S. "pivoting back" to the Middle East, less than two years after it declared that it would "pivot" to East Asia. The paper also looks at the strategic implications of regional concerns about America's declining commitment to East Asia for the international politics of East Asia. It argues that while recent events in the Middle East, and America's response, might have heightened East Asia's concerns about America's staying power and the sustainability of "pivot to Asia," it is still too early to assume that the "pivot back" to the Middle East would mean that Washington might once again "ignore" East Asia.

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<sup>2</sup> David Bell Mislán, "US Can't Pivot to Asia-Pacific With Feet Still Bogged Down in Middle East," *Global Times*, 20 March 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Cohen and Robert Ward, "Asia Pivot: Obama's Ticket Out of Middle East?" *The Diplomat*, 21 August 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/08/21/asia-pivot-obamas-ticket-out-of-middle-east/>

<sup>4</sup> Jake Miller, "McCain: "Naïve" and "Dangerous" to Pivot Way From Decaying Middle East", *CBS News*, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-250\\_162-57588141/mccain-naive-and-dangerous-to-pivot-away-from-decaying-midele-east/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-250_162-57588141/mccain-naive-and-dangerous-to-pivot-away-from-decaying-midele-east/)

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kagan, "United States Can't Pivot Away From Middle East," *Washington Post*, 20 November 2012.

## Pivoting Back to the Middle East?

President Obama's "Pivot to Asia" strategy was announced in November 2011, a few days before he for the first time attended the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali, Indonesia. The announcement, and US' participation in the EAS, reflected President Obama's earlier promise that as a "resident power" in the Asia-Pacific, the region would become the focus of America's global re-positioning after a decade of war and entanglement in the Middle East. Indeed, a series of concrete follow-up steps taken throughout 2012 demonstrates Washington's resolve to implement its "Asia pivot" strategy. For example, the US would strengthen relationships with key allies such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea, deploy 2,500 marines in Australia, four Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) in Singapore, expand military cooperation with the Philippines, move 60 per cent of its naval assets into the Asia-Pacific by 2020, take the lead in free trade talks under the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), enhance its participation in regional multilateral processes, and forge closer relationship with emerging partners such as Indonesia, India and Vietnam.

With these measures, Obama's "Asia Pivot" was increasingly seen as a pivot away from the Middle East. As Kagan notes, "in the Middle East, the 'pivot' is seen as attempt to turn away from this region's difficult problems."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Obama administration's approach to developments in the Middle East during 2012 reinforced that impression. It has been asserted, for example, that "the Obama administration has put no emphasis on Middle East peacemaking: America's allies in the region see its position on Iran's nuclear ambitions as ambiguous; and in Afghanistan, the administration is looking for the exit at a hurried pace."<sup>7</sup> Some in Europe had also expressed the same concerns about the implications of "Asia pivot" for the EU's ability to cope with rapid and volatile developments in the Middle East brought about by the "Arab Spring". Olaf Bohnke of the European Council on Foreign Relations, for example, admitted that "Barrack Obama's 'pivot to Asia' has been the cause of much comment and concerns in Foreign Affairs Ministries this side of the Atlantic" because "many of the problems in the wider

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Middle East: Goodbye to All That," *BusinessWeek*, 5 September 2012.

Middle East cannot be solved without the involvement and support of the United States."<sup>8</sup>

However, both within the US and across Asia, doubts and concerns about the sustainability of Obama's "Asia Pivot" quickly returned after President Obama's re-election. Many, for example, pointed to the fact that there was a conspicuous reduction of Asia expertise on the President's senior team; a factor that would erode America's resolve to follow through "Asia pivot" strategy. The replacement of State Secretary Hillary Clinton, regarded as the key driver of the policy of "Asia pivot," by John Kerry immediately resulted in speculations that he would be "taking the steam out of Obama's first-term focus on Asia."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Secretary Kerry's immediate focus to Middle East after his appointment reinforced the impression that the second Obama administration would soon "pivot away" from Asia to the Middle East. Gone also were National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, Secretary of Treasury Timothy Geithner, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, the National Security Council (NSC) Director for East Asian Affairs Jeff Bader, and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell.

While most governments in East Asia do not question the sincerity of President Obama's desire to pivot to Asia, they do have real reasons to doubt the ability of his administration to sustain the policy. Asian governments are aware that the Middle East is still of paramount significance for America's national interests and foreign policy. Even though the US is no longer heavily burdened by military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US cannot just pack and leave the region. While the American public might have lost the appetite in America's military involvement in the Middle East, pivoting away from that region is an impossible option for the US. For Washington, defeating terrorism and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), ensuring energy security, and assuring Israel's security constitute three core national interests in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, for decades the U.S.

<sup>8</sup> Olaf Bohne, "Don't Pivot Too Quickly, Middle East Tells US," *Deutsche Welle*, 5 December 2012, <http://www.dw.de/don't-pivot-too-quickly-middle-east-tells-us/a-16429597>

<sup>9</sup> Howard LaFranci, "Obama Cancels Asia Trip: Is the US 'Pivot' in Jeopardy?," *The Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/2013/1004/Obama-cancels-Asia-trip.-Is-the-US-pivot-in-jeopardy>

<sup>10</sup> Colin H. Kahl and March Lynch, "U.S. Strategy After the Arab Uprising: Toward Progressive Engagement," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2013), p. 48.

foreign policy has been defined more by the pursuit of these interests than any other priorities. Even President Obama's personal resolve to "rebalance" America's fixation with the Middle East by "pivoting to Asia" cannot diminish this strategic reality.

The strategic importance of the Middle East for the US becomes even more apparent in light of recent developments in the region. In this context, the "Asia pivot" has been criticised as being defect at birth because "it was unveiled just as the convulsions of the Arab Spring began tearing apart the decade-old political order in the Middle East...<sup>11</sup> With the breakdown of decades-long autocratic rules in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, followed by (unsuccessful) mass protests in almost all Middle East countries and the still on-going sectarian war and chaos in Syria, Middle East has now become a land of turmoil and uncertainty. The US immediately finds itself in a quagmire. On the one hand, "pivoting back" to the Middle East, immediately after the "Asia pivot" was announced, would undermine US credibility in the Asia-Pacific. On the other hand, changes in the Middle East, and the geopolitical ramifications for the region, are too important for the US to ignore. Faced with this quagmire, throughout 2012 the US pressed ahead with the emphasis on "Asia pivot" while continuously assuring its allies and partners in the Middle East that the US remained committed to the region. Consequently, the US policy towards the Middle East during 2012 has been described as "drifting."

By early 2013, however, the unfolding events in the Middle East began to distract Washington's focus on the Asia-Pacific and, at the same time, its preference "to lead from behind" in the Middle East was increasingly becoming untenable. The second Obama administration, as mentioned earlier, was turning its attention more and more into the Middle East. It has been asserted, for example, "John Kerry has clearly pivoted back toward the Middle East" and wanted to focus on three key critical issues of "ending the Syrian civil war, brokering a lasting Israeli-Palestinian settlement and reaching an accord with Iran."<sup>12</sup> President Obama's speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in

<sup>11</sup> David J. Karl, "The Pivot Under Pressure," *The Diplomat*, 8 October 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/10/08/the-pivot-under-pressure>

<sup>12</sup> Nikolas Gvosdev, "Asia Pivot to Suffer as Obama's Attention Returns to Middle East," *World Politics Review*, 27 September 2013, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/13253/the-realist-prism-asia-pivot-to-suffer-as-obama-s-attention-returns-to-middle-east>

September this year seems to confirm this when he emphasised the importance of three key issues that John Kerry has focused on, and stated that "we will be engaged in the region for the long haul."<sup>13</sup> This clearly leaves East Asia to wonder about the place and the future of Asia pivot in America's foreign policy.

From the outset, Asians themselves have questioned the American staying power and the sustainability of "Asia pivot." Doubt about "Asia pivot" in the region has been driven not only by America's fixation with the Middle East but also by more structural challenges and obstacle facing the US. The most difficult constraints for the US in sustaining Asia pivot come from domestic factors. For one, the US has been facing serious financial constraint due to its difficult economic problems. For example, as mandated by legislation in 2011, Washington has to cut defense spending by \$487 billion over the next ten years.<sup>14</sup> There is also growing perceptions in Asia that US polarised domestic politics has increasingly become a major obstacle for Washington in pursuing its objectives abroad. The government shutdown in October, for example, forced President Obama to cancel his much anticipated travels to attend two Asia's most important summits, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting (Bali, Indonesia) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Brunei.

Indeed, there are reasons to believe why the US might not be able to resist the necessity to get immersed again in the Middle East affairs. First, Syria presents a serious challenge to the US' role and commitment in the Middle East, when the aborted plan to launch military strike against Assad regime has led critics to charge that Obama administration "risked sending a message to our allies from Seoul to Warsaw and beyond that our commitments are based on political expediency and short-term public opinion rather than principle."<sup>15</sup> Second, the military coup against Mohamed Morsy government in Egypt, and the Army's brutal repression of the Muslim Brotherhood,

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Landler, "Obama Defends U.S. Engagement in the Middle East," *The New York Times*, 24 September 2013.

<sup>14</sup> "Pivot to Asia Could be Hurt by US Budget Cuts," <http://asiancorrespondent.com/99895/pivot-to-asia-could-be-hurt-by-us-budget-cuts/>

<sup>15</sup> Tom Nichols and John R. Schindler, "America's Middle East Policy Collapses," *The National Interest*, 16 September 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/americas-middle-east-policy-collapses-9073>.

presents a difficult dilemma of balancing interests and values in the US foreign policy. Third, despite the difficulties he had encountered earlier, President Obama still sees the need to resuscitate Israel-Palestine peace talk. Fourth, with the new government in Iran, which has displayed a degree of willingness to engage the US in a more conciliatory manner, there is now a new hope to resolve the standoff over its nuclear program.<sup>16</sup> Fifth, other American allies, especially in Europe, continue to cling to the view that "even as Europe's own response (to Middle East) is forthcoming, the fact remains that many of the problems in the wider Middle East cannot be solved without the involvement and support of the United States."<sup>17</sup>

Despite such obvious reasons for "pivoting back" to the Middle East --to devote more energy, attention and efforts to attend to the region's problems-- the US administration has been in pain to convince and assure its allies and friends in Asia that it remains committed to Asia pivot. They argue that pivoting to Asia does not necessarily mean that Washington would move away from the Middle East. And, pivoting back to the Middle East does not necessarily mean moving away from Asia. The US, at least to many Americans, is still a global power with global interests; a status that requires global presence and role. Obama administration also declares that the US intends to uphold its global responsibility. The question is whether the US can still afford to be everywhere, all the time and whenever it wants. This means the US would have to make some difficult policy choices and decide where its immediate strategic priorities lie. In light of on-going challenges and new opportunities for the US in the Middle East, domestic polarisation, and growing fiscal problems, one cannot be blamed for wondering whether the drive towards "Asia pivot" would decelerate under the renewed US focus on the Middle East. Consequently, there has been a lively debate both within and outside East Asia about the fate of "Asia pivot" and the future role of the US in the region.

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<sup>16</sup> Laurence Norman, "Iran Makes New Nuclear Offer," *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 October 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Bohnke, "Don't Pivot Too Quickly,"

## Strategic Implications for East Asia

East Asia's concerns about the future of America's commitment to "Asia pivot" have been clearly on display after President Obama's no-shows at APEC Leaders Meeting and the EAS. Criticisms and alarming voices, as well as more confident expectations, have been making rounds across the region. Naturally, the subject of scrutiny has been America's standing and credibility in East Asia and Washington's commitment to the Asia pivot policy. Australia's leading security expert Alan Dupont notes that the central question being asked in East Asia now is "whether U.S. friends and allies will continue to invest so much of their political and military capital in a country that appears unable to govern itself or meet its declared commitment."<sup>18</sup> Australian prominent economist Peter Drysdale asserts that "President Obama's cancellation of his Asian trip to APEC in Indonesia and the East Asia Summit in Brunei ... is a serious blow to American standing and its interests in the region and globally" and America's friend and allies "must naturally question the credibility of its commitments around the world."<sup>19</sup>

Among its Asian allies and partners, similar questions have also been asked. Richard Heydrian, a foreign policy advisor to the Philippines Congress, asked: "How can the United States be a reliable partner when President Obama can't get his own house in order?"<sup>20</sup> Doubts about the US commitment have also been raised in Japan and South Korea, two American closest allies.<sup>21</sup> In Singapore, Simon Tay wondered, "if they can furlough jobs, cease government services and risk a downgrade in the country's credit rating, will American politicians be consistent about faraway Asia?"<sup>22</sup> Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's remarks in Bali, that "we prefer a U.S. president who is able to travel to fulfil his international duties to one who is preoccupied with his

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<sup>18</sup> Alan Dupont, "The Inevitable Resurgence of Obama's Pivot," *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 October 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Drysdale, "Asia Gets on With It While America's Out of Play," *East Asia Forum*, 7 October 2013, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/10/07/asia-gets-on-with-it-while-americas-out-of-play/>

<sup>20</sup> Jane Perlez, "Cancellation of Trip by Obama Plays to Doubts of Asia Allies," *The New York Times*, 4 October 2013.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Simon Tay, "An Unfortunate Twist in the US Pivot," *The Malaysian Insider*, 4 October 2013.

domestic preoccupation,"<sup>23</sup> capture the general mood in East Asia. An Indonesia's minister admitted, "Without Mr. Obama, you can imagine how disappointed we are. We could hardly imagine he wouldn't come."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, with the headlines such as "*Asian 'Pivot' Losing Its Edge*" and "*Obama Cancels Asia Trip: Is the US 'Pivot' in Jeopardy?*" one cannot escape the impression that America's "Asia pivot" does suffer credibility problem.

Those who still have faith in America's role in East Asia argue that Obama's absence at the two most important events in East Asia should not be taken as evidence of America's diminishing commitment to the Asia pivot strategy but should be seen instead as a temporary setback due to the pressing domestic issue at home. They also argue that the US still possesses tremendous firepower, enormous economic resources, and strong interest to sustain its role as a central player in the region. Dupont, for example, believes that "the take away for the region is that the U.S. is far from a busted flush in Asia, and a renaissance may be closer than pessimists think."<sup>25</sup> Recent trips by Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel to strengthen US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances have also been seen as "evidence of the fact that the Pivot to Asia is alive and well."<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, it is an exaggeration to take Obama's absence at APEC and EAS as evidence that the U.S. is in the process of withdrawing from East Asia. As Indonesia's Foreign Affairs Minister Marty Natalegawa has argued, "the U.S. engagement in the region is a continuous, rather than an event-based fact."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, it is clearly premature to announce that U.S. renewed preoccupation with the Middle East means the end of "Asia pivot." What the U.S. needs to do now is to re-double

<sup>23</sup> Stuart Grudgings, "As Obama's Asia 'Pivot' Falter, China Steps Into the Gap," *Reuters*, 6 October 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/06/us-asia-usa-china-idUSBRE99501O20131006>

<sup>24</sup> Steve Holland and James Pomfret, "Obama Cancels Asia Tour Over Shutdown," *Global Post*, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/americas/united-states/131004/obama-cancels-asia-tour-over-shutdown>

<sup>25</sup> Dupont, "The Inevitable Resurgence of Obama's Pivot."

<sup>26</sup> Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Rebalancing Alliances: The Forgotten Side of the US Pivot," *The Diplomat*, 4 October 2013, at <http://thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2013/10/04/rebalancing-alliances-the-forgotten-side-of-the-us-pivot/>

<sup>27</sup> Bagus BT Saragih and Linda Yugisman, "Show Must Go On Without Obama," *The Jakarta Post*, 5 October 2013.

its efforts to eliminate doubts and convince its allies and partners in East Asia about its long-term commitment to the region. Because, even if the U.S. remains capable to push through its commitment to Asia pivot, perceptions about America becoming “a part-time power”<sup>28</sup> might alter strategic calculations in many regional capitals. This will bring about two strategic implications for East Asia.

First, one cannot dismiss the possibility that the “Asia pivot” factor might no longer feature prominently in some countries’ foreign policy calculation. In other words, there is a possibility that countries in the region is now more convinced that as the Asia pivot cannot be taken for granted, the U.S. ability to shape the regional order can no longer be taken for granted as well. What is certain is that the perception about uncertainty in the US engagement and ability to pivot is consistently on the rise. This perception will even grow stronger after President Obama ends his term. If the first “American Pacific President” and the architect of “the Asia pivot” cannot sustain his own vision and fail to convince others that he would be able to push it through, what can be expected from a post-Obama administration? Presented with such strategic uncertainty, some countries might over-emphasise the limits of American power and exaggerate the Chinese clout in their strategic calculation; an attitude that would lead to greater deference to China.

Second, perceptions about U.S. diminishing ability to sustain Asia pivot would push key regional powers to undertake strategic re-adjustments. If the US primacy and security guarantee can no longer be taken for granted, some countries would intensify their military build-up. East Asia would also see a greater impetus for regional realignment among regional powers, such as between Japan and Vietnam and between Japan and the Philippines. Driven by common concerns about China’s growing assertiveness, America’s preoccupation with the Middle East would be seen by allies as a factor that reinforces the need to find their own solution to their strategic conundrum: how to deal with China at a time when US’ primacy can no longer be guaranteed. Instead of giving priority to strengthening regional cooperative mechanism that includes China, the fear of America’s neglect could easily lead to an effort to build an anti-China coalition.

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Burns, “Shutdown Diminishes US as a Global Power,” *Boston Globe*, 9 October 2013.

These two strategic implications, and the debate on the status and the future of Asia pivot, once again highlights East Asia's own strategic conundrum. On the one hand, strategic transformation taking place in the region, with its uncertain implications, has reinforced the need to intensify the on-going efforts to construct a new regional order based on norms and institutions. On the other hand, regional institutions would not function properly unless there is a stable balance of power among the major powers in the region, which, in turn, requires Washington's sustained role and engagement in East Asia. Finding a solution to this predicament is the greatest challenge for East Asia. And, there is no reason to believe that the U.S. is no longer interested in shaping the emerging regional order in East Asia. Washington clearly understands that the construction of regional order would go on, with or without the U.S. Asia pivot. Again, the challenge for the US is how to ensure that its interest in one region (Middle East) would not diminish its interest in the other (East Asia). One solution to this predicament for both America and East Asian countries (including China) is to intensify the collaboration among them in constructing a new regional order undergirded by norms and institution, and by liberal internationalism rather than narrow nationalism.

Beyond such normative and neo-institutionalist prescription, however, amore practical and realistic response to the fear about America's pivoting back to the Middle East is by exploring how East Asia can also play a more helpful role to help resolve the problems in the Middle East. East Asia can no longer think that the events in the Middle East have no direct bearing on the region, and assume that the U.S. would be able to sort out the challenges there on its own. Only with greater role and responsibility by East Asia does the US would be able to sustain its deep and continuous engagement both in the Middle East and East Asia at the same time.

### **Concluding Notes**

The region's significance as the fulcrum of global transformation is too importance for the US to ignore. This paper has argued that America's fixation with the Middle East, coupled with its own domestic constraints, once again highlights East Asia's strategic conundrum. On the one hand, the region needs to intensify its on-going efforts to

construct a new regional order based on norms and institutions, with or without the US' "Asia pivot". On the other hand, regional institutions would not function properly unless there is a stable balance of power among the major powers in the region which, in turn, requires Washington's sustained engagement in East Asia.

The absence of a stable balance of power among major players would complicate the efforts to establish norms and institutions. Without the U.S. engagement, there would not be a stable balance of power in East Asia. It is also important to note that the pursuit of balance of power without the commitment to establish norms and institutions would easily plunge the region into a theatre for rivalry among major powers; a situation that would be in the interest of no one. In other words, it is obvious that a stable East Asia needs not only U.S. interests in sustaining the Asia pivot but also its commitment to play a role as a "full-time" Pacific power. For that, East Asia needs to share greater responsibility in contributing to peace and development in the Middle East.