

# What Asian Pivot?

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The Obama administration's Asia pivot doesn't really exist. Like most grand strategic concepts, it is mostly symbolism, a public relations gloss that gives a sense of purpose to disparate military, diplomatic, and economic policies.

The "pivot" (or, as the Obama administration now prefers, "rebalance") entered the national lexicon late in 2011. The initial focus was military. That November, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed that the nation had reached a "pivot point" allowing it to "redirect" resources that had been going to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to Asia. The administration's January 2012 defense budget guidance claimed that the Pentagon would "rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific and Middle-East regions."

Not coincidentally, the United States was then exiting Iraq, beginning Pentagon budget cuts, and slightly reducing the number of U.S. troops stationed in Europe. Rhetorically, the pivot put a proactive spin on that, suggesting that U.S. foreign policy activism was not lessening but shifting in focus.

The White House quickly dropped the Middle East from the pivot talk, probably because its inclusion confused matters and threatened the political rewards from exiting that region. Now purely Asian, the pivot had several elements, with the list varying somewhat depending on the official offering it. First, several hundred and eventually 2,500 Marines would be stationed permanently in Darwin, Australia. Second, the 500-strong U.S. military force in the Philippines would grow, possibly by adding air or naval forces. Third, a new U.S. Singapore agreement allowed for the stationing there of four U.S. warships, the new Littoral Combat Ship (LCS). Fourth, the Navy would deploy 60 percent its fleet in the Pacific, rather than 50 percent. Finally the Navy and Air Force have a new joint operating concept, Air-Sea Battle, which is meant to better integrate surveillance and airstrike platforms to attack coastal powers like China.

That is actually less pivot than meets the eye. No Marines are now stationed in Darwin. The first 250 recently left; 1,110 are due in spring, and the total will only reach 2,500 in five years or so. Even that will add only about four percent to U.S. ground forces in the region. And Darwin is on a separate continent, about the same distance from the South China Sea as Washington D.C. is from Greenland. At that distance from trouble spots, it is hard to see what military purpose the Marines serve.

The Navy actually had about 55 percent of its fleet in the Pacific when the shift was announced, so the increase is minor. The plan is to reach 60 percent in 2020, by which time the fleet, suffering a flat shipbuilding budget, may have shrunk enough so that the Pacific fleet gets smaller even as it become a bigger fraction of the whole. Air-Sea remains an amorphous buzzword without clear budgetary implications that actually preceded the pivot. So did the agreement for the Navy presence in Singapore, which may have a short life if the LCS program is cancelled or as is more likely, curtailed. The deal for more troops in the Philippines remains an ambition that has not yet been negotiated. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel insists there will be no permanent U.S. garrison there.

Recently, perhaps because of Chinese concerns, the White House has deemphasized the military side of the pivot. National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon said in March that the “rebalance” meant neither contain China nor simply a shift in military forces, but is rather: “an effort that harnesses all elements of U.S. power—military, political, trade and investment, development and our values.” In practice, the non-military aspects of the pivot seem to be: more attentiveness to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), increasing aid to the region, promoting democracy and human rights, and pushing the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an effort to liberalize trade among the North American and Asian nations.

But if the pivot is everything, it is nothing. The administration seems to have made pivoting or rebalancing to Asia into a description of standard U.S. policy toward Asia. U.S. military, trade, aid and diplomatic initiatives in pursuit of free trade, democracy, and political stability are nothing new.

There is even less substance to the non-military side of the pivot. As the State Department’s Inspector General Office recently noted, the pivot has had no obvious organizational or budgetary manifestation in the State Department, aside from the creation of an Ambassadorship and permanent mission for ASEAN. Foreign assistance to the region is actually down almost 20 percent since 2010. U.S. interest in TPP talks and deeper ties to South-East Asian states precedes

the Obama Administration. There is no big new effort to push democracy, except in Burma, where democracy became possible thanks to internal political transition, not a U.S. policy change.

U.S. governmental officials might reasonably respond to these facts by saying that the pivot is a state of mind; a way of harnessing disparate offices and people to focus on Asia while turning away from the Middle East's troubles. But the administration refuses to admit that it is sacrificing anything to pivot, sapping it of even symbolic strength. Donilon insists that the focus on Asia has no bearing U.S. engagement elsewhere. Other U.S. officials assure European allies that the pivot is towards Asia "but not away from Europe." John Kerry has just told the Saudis that United States is committed to their defense. And his priorities seem more focused on the Middle East—starting with Israel, Egypt, and Syria—than Asia.

For the pivot to be more than a gloss, it needs to guide organizational and governmental choices among competing policies. For example, the Pentagon might shift more of its non-war budget to the Navy from the Army. Service in Asian posts might begin to gain promotions in State's diplomatic corps. That sort of prioritization is not evident, despite all pivot talk. Thus far then, the pivot is mostly vapor.

Asian states seeking U.S. protection should take note. Confusing informal talk of alliances with the real thing risks several dangers. States might underarm against China. They might fail to form their own defensive alliances. Or they might take provocative actions under the false assumption that Uncle Sam will back them up. Perhaps all parties would be better off if the United States pivoted home.