



By [David Francis](#)
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The Pentagon announced on Tuesday that it plans to send 800 troops and more than 40 tanks and armored vehicles to South Korea as part of the [U.S. pivot to Asia](#).

"This addition of forces to Korea is part of the rebalance to the Pacific. It's been long planned and is part of our enduring commitment to security on the Korean peninsula," Army Colonel [Steve Warren told Reuters](#).

The Obama administration says the pivot, first announced in 2011, is happening on three fronts. First, the U.S. military is building up its presence in the region. Second, on the economic front, the United States is seeking new trade partnerships with Asian nations. Finally, in a diplomatic effort, the United States is increasing cooperation with Asian governments.

But there's one problem with the Asian pivot; it's a carefully constructed myth.

"It's really more rhetoric than reality and more rhetoric than resources," says Bruce Klingner, senior research fellow on Northeast Asia at the Heritage Foundation. "On the one hand it's a good strategy as it's important to prioritize Asia for the United States because Asia is so vital to U.S. interest, diplomatically, economically and militarily. That said, there's not a lot of meat behind it."

Benjamin H. Friedman, a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the CATO Institute, concurs with this assessment. He said that the pivot is more of an effort to draw attention away from military pullbacks in Europe and the Middle East than it is a true effort to make Asia more strategically important.

"All strategies tend to have ... sort of a combination of public relations and speeches and documents to steer the foreign policy enterprise of the U.S. in a new direction. It puts a gloss on things ... but we don't see a lot of big changes being made that show a commitment to Asia," he said.

A closer look at actions on all three fronts shows why the pivot is a myth.

Military - The United States already has 28,000 troops in South Korea, so adding 800 doesn't substantially change the force. According to Friedman, the real proof of DOD spending priorities is in their budget. While it might appear that the Air Force and Navy -- the two forces who would benefit from the pivot - are making out better than the Army in the coming years, that's not the case.

The funding formula that DOD uses to allocate its annual budget hasn't changed; any extra cash the Army got during the Afghan and Iraq wars came out of supplemental war spending. "We're not seeing a fundamental shift in budget from the Army to the Air Force and Navy. If we were doing a serious pivot we would see that shift," Friedman said.

Friedman added that many of the exercises that the Pentagon touts in the region have been ongoing for years. Because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, no one was paying attention.

Economically - The Obama administration likes to tout the Trans-Pacific Partnership meant to increase trade with Asian nations of evidence of the economic pivot. But in reality, [TPP talks precede the Obama presidency by years](#).

"The economic aspect was left from the Bush administration. The reality is contrary to Obama's assertion. We are not back in Asia. The reality is we never left Asia," Klingner said.

Diplomatically - The White House often says evidence of its diplomatic shift to Asia is the number of meetings held between U.S. and Asian diplomats. Klingner said this is a ploy.

"But anyone who's even been in a meeting can tell you: attending more meetings doesn't mean success. There's a lack of tangible successes that the admin can point to rather than attendance," he said.

In a recent paper, Friedman said that State Department planning documents also reveal lack of action.

"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 [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations]. Foreign assistance to the region is [actually down almost 20 percent since 2010](#)," Friedman wrote.