

Rebalancing the Rebalance

By Justin Logan - January 14, 2013

At a recent off-the-record meeting of Washington foreign-policy scholars and officials from Asian embassies, there was broad agreement on two points.

First, pretty much everyone in Washington supports the idea of a “pivot” or re balancing of American foreign policy toward East Asia. Second, few of us could explain precisely what the re balancing is. Official Washington supports a policy it can’t define. So — what is the rebalancing? Much like its military cousin, the operational concept Air-Sea Battle, the rebalancing is hard to pin down.

According to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, though, it definitely isn’t about containing China. In Panetta’s murky phrasing, it really is about “bringing China into a relationship to try to deal with some common challenges that we all face: the challenge of humanitarian assistance and needs; the challenge of dealing with weapons of mass destruction that are proliferating throughout the world; and dealing with narco-trafficking, piracy, how to improve trade and how to improve lines of communication.”

This is nonsense, and the Chinese know it. One part of the rebalancing was the pledge last June from Panetta that 60 percent of U.S. naval assets would be dedicated to the Pacific by 2020. The idea that drugs, piracy, proliferation and humanitarian assistance require 60 percent of U.S. naval forces is laughable.

If China tried this sort of rhetoric to defend deploying more than half of its naval assets to the Western Hemisphere, American leaders would not give the argument a moment’s consideration. The re balancing is absolutely about China.

Unfortunately, it is more about competition between the United States and China than between China and its neighbors. In keeping with historical precedent, Washington is leap frogging its allies to take the lead in dealing with potential security challenges in faraway regions.

To be sure, there have been a number of recent indications that Asian nations are responding to China’s growing power. The relatively hawkish Liberal Democratic Party has returned to power in Japan, although foreign policy was not a salient issue in the election.

The foreign minister of the Philippines, Albert del Rosario, admitted in an interview with the Financial Times that Manila would “welcome very much” a revision of Japan’s pacifist constitution and Tokyo’s remilitarization. Multilateral meetings among states like Australia, the Philippines, Japan and India are increasing.

But just as there are signs of concern about China, there is an extraordinary lack of willingness of countries in the region to actually do anything about it. There is little indication that Japan will increase its defense spending from roughly 1 percent of GDP, despite the fact that China regularly crosses over into what Japan considers its territorial waters, and recently into its airspace.

The Japanese populace, while anxious about growing Chinese power, remains paralyzed by the thought of doing something about it themselves.

Taiwan's defense spending is so grossly inadequate to its needs that it seems content to rely primarily on Washington for a fighting shot at persisting in de facto independence.

If Asian security primarily focused on competition between the United States and China, would-be U.S. partners all too often would play Beijing and Washington off one another instead of cooperating to protect themselves from China.

Moon Jae-in, who nearly won the South Korean presidential election, remarked recently that Seoul is "tilted too much toward the United States," and expressed opposition to helping the United States protect South Korea. As the Thai scholar Thitinan Pongsudhirak recently remarked, Association of South East Asian Nations members "don't want China and the United States to be in complete agreement. These tensions and rivalries give them leverage and bargaining power." Asian states would not engage in this childish behavior and would place less emphasis on pointless territorial disputes if Washington forced them to square up to the prospect of a much more powerful China.

But we shouldn't blame Asian states for shirking their responsibility to protect themselves. We should blame Washington for infantilizing them and working to make them reliant on the United States for defense.

A better rebalancing would not just pivot Washington's attention away from the endless squabbles in the Middle East and toward Asia, but also rebalance who contributes what to Asian security. The only way America's allies and partners in the region will do more is if Washington does less. The alternative is to engage in more direct competition with an increasingly powerful China, with our would-be partners standing on the sidelines.