



Obama is still searching for right tone in executing 'Asia pivot'

By: Hannah Allam – January 22, 2013

WASHINGTON — China may be the centerpiece of the Obama administration's second-term foreign policy agenda, with U.S. strategists trying to avoid entanglement in Syria or Mali in order to stay focused on a vision of reasserting the American presence in Asia.

But getting sucked back into Middle East and North African conflicts isn't the only risk to the administration's so-called "Asia pivot": The United States still hasn't found the right tone for its dealings with China, say analysts who specialize in Asia-Pacific issues.

Analysts say the United States remains too involved in the region's territorial disputes, especially as it helps nations organize into an anti-China bloc in talks over contested islands in the South China Sea that are of little or no strategic value. Elsewhere, the American administration still has to win over nations that are reluctant to risk the economic punishment of being seen as allied with a U.S. strategy to constrain China's rise.

"If you stand still in Asia, you're going to fall behind the rise of China," said Robert S. Ross, a professor of Chinese foreign policy at Boston College. "We're not going to stand still, but we can improve our rhetoric and disentangle from these territorial disputes."

Obama, who's sometimes called the "first Pacific president" because of his childhood years in Indonesia and his upbringing in Hawaii, clearly has the political will to make Asia the focus of U.S. policy. More than half of American naval assets are deployed in the region, the administration has signed fresh defense agreements with Asian partners and there's been a marked increase in high-profile U.S. state visits to promote trade and diplomacy.

In November, Obama made a historic trip to the former pariah state of Myanmar, his fourth high-profile visit to Asia in as many years, and his secretaries of state and defense, Hillary Clinton and Leon Panetta, have been frequent visitors, as have numerous more junior diplomats and defense officials.

"There's no comparison," said Daniel Sneider, the associate director for research at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University in California, commenting on the Obama administration's approach versus that of its predecessor. "These guys have been there. They've thought about it more. They have a broad strategy."

Sneider, however, saw risk to that strategy in the pull of crises elsewhere. “It has to be backed up by devoting real resources in the end,” he said of an Asia focus. “Any new engagement of U.S. forces in the Middle East will immediately undermine this policy.”

Even in tightly knit Washington policymaking circles, there’s confusion over how to pursue this new Asia focus, starting with what to call it.

A first suggestion, “forward-deployed diplomacy,” was jettisoned as too militaristic, especially when it comes to prickly superpower China. Then came “the Asia pivot,” which rankled Middle Eastern and European allies, who thought it suggested abandonment of their regions. The White House now prefers “the rebalancing,” while some policymakers are starting to use the blunter “return to Asia.”

The semantics matter, analysts said, when one of the most sensitive parts of the plan includes dealing with Chinese suspicions that the maneuvering is intended to blunt China’s economic and military rise.

Any hope of a deeper, more complex U.S. focus on Asia, analysts who study the region say, hinges on how the second Obama administration tweaks the long-standing policy toward China that some dub “conengagement,” an attempt to blend containment of growing Chinese military power with engagement on trade and diplomatic issues.

Justin Logan, the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian research center in Washington, argued in a report this month, called “China, America and the Pivot to Asia,” that few are fooled that U.S. policy isn’t really about containment and that the United States should step back from involving itself in “every diplomatic flare-up” so that it retains greater distance from the squabbling parties.

“If the Chinese were getting up in our face saying, ‘We’re putting 60 percent of our naval assets in the Caribbean and developing military alliances with Cuba and Venezuela, and none of this has anything to do with the United States,’ no one would believe that,” Logan said.

He suggests offloading some of the security responsibilities to allied nations such as Japan, South Korea and India, and encouraging talks among those nations without U.S. officials present, let alone in the lead. Logan said it was healthy for there to be some doubts about exactly where U.S. forces would be committed in any regional flare-up. That would encourage nations to avoid such high-stakes disputes in the first place or to look inward for defense strategies and “help minimize free riding,” as he put it.

Logan’s report describes two polarized camps when it comes to how the U.S. should approach China. The hawkish policy camp, nicknamed the “dragon slayers,” demands a bigger U.S. military presence in Asia to restrict China’s sea access and act as a barrier to any bullying of weaker nations.

At the other end of the spectrum on China policy are the analysts Logan calls “panda huggers,” who are betting that a focus on trade and diplomacy over military might will force China to democratize and become a more trusted U.S. partner.

The administration's current plans call for deploying 2,000 Marines to Australia and four coastal combat ships to Singapore – hardly terrifying prospects for the Chinese, the hawks complain.

But critics of the notion that the pivot lacks military chops point out that there's already a huge U.S. military presence in the Asia Pacific, larger than during the most recent Republican administrations. There are 40,000 American troops in Japan, more than 28,000 in South Korea and 4,500 in Guam, a self-governing U.S. territory. There are six aircraft carrier strike groups and the U.S. Pacific Fleet, which conducts regular joint military exercises with Asian allies.

When the Obama administration got serious about the pivot in 2010, Boston College's Ross said, "you couldn't have asked for a more robust strategic presence than we had at the time."

Obama has made that presence even greater, at the expense of irritating the Chinese without any appreciable strategic benefit. That includes an increase in a U.S. military presence in South Korea that Obama ordered to reverse President George W. Bush's decision to reduce it by 40 percent – including a cut in joint military exercises, pulling troops out of the area between the demilitarized zone and Seoul, and announcing that in 2012 the U.S. would hand over wartime operational control to South Korean forces.

In contrast, the Obama administration increased troop levels by 10 percent, signed four new defense agreements with South Korea, increased the size and scale of joint exercises and deferred the handover of operational control of forces until 2015.

The moves, Ross said, came at a time when the presumed target of the posturing – North Korea – posed less of a threat than ever when it came to conventional warfare.

"If you're Chinese, you begin to ask yourself why this is happening, and it wouldn't be unreasonable to think that America's presence in South Korea is not directed at North Korea, but directed at China," Ross said.

Obama's picks for secretaries of state and defense, Democrat John Kerry and Republican Chuck Hagel, have records of moderate stances toward China, which analysts say portends a policy of more engagement – not just with the Chinese, but also with other Asian powers such as Japan, India, Vietnam and South Korea.

Kerry, especially, is familiar with Asia from his close involvement with the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

"I expect him to pursue an intense strategy of engagement with China, with hedging," Sneider said. "I expect Kerry to head down a path of trying to engage the new Chinese leadership as far as they're willing to go."

Analysts said Kerry should make it a priority to draw the U.S. back from involvement in territorial disputes over contested islands while ensuring that a more neutral stance isn't viewed as abandoning important allies.

One fight is over the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands; the Chinese call them the Diaoyu Islands. Taiwan also has staked a claim. In December, a Chinese government airplane conducted a flyover of the disputed islands, prompting the Japanese to dispatch eight F-15 jets and an early-warning aircraft in response.

The Chinese plane already was gone by then, and the situation cooled until Christmas Eve, when a Chinese coast guard Y-12 aircraft switched course to the Senkaku Islands. Again, the Japanese launched several fighter jets and the Chinese plane left the area.

“People are watching this scrambling of jets, movements of coast guard vessels around these islands,” Sneider said. “On one hand, the U.S. is going to back the Japanese as our allies. On the other hand, there’s a message to both Japan and China to cool it.”

The other big territorial fight is over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. They’re claimed by China and several other nations: Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Vietnam.

After a long-standing hands-off approach marked by American platitudes about “freedom of navigation” and “peaceful resolution,” Ross said, the Obama administration jumped into the fray in 2010 by gathering the common claim-holders for talks – but notably excluding China.

Southeast Asian countries became so badly divided over how to negotiate over the islands that last July at the 45th annual summit for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – an economic and political bloc of 10 countries – member states failed to issue a joint diplomatic statement for the first time.

“So now we’re involved,” Ross said of the United States. “All this tangled us up in the territorial disputes, in which we have no interests. The islands are not strategically or economically valuable.”

Asia analysts also warn that too myopic a focus on China’s military buildup might distract from nurturing important trade and diplomatic relationships with other growing powers, such as India, Malaysia and Vietnam.

According to figures compiled by the financial news service Bloomberg, Asia accounts for 25 percent of U.S. exports – in support of 2.4 million American jobs – and 35 percent of its imports. By 2030, Bloomberg noted, Asia is expected to compose 49 percent of the global population, 43 percent of the world’s economy, 35 percent of its trade and 41 percent of energy consumption.

“If the United States wants to play the long game, the region is the Asia Pacific,” said Ronak D. Desai, a fellow with the Truman National Security Project, a leadership training institution in Washington.

“It’s not about whether they’re worried about China’s rise. China is rising,” Desai added. “The question is whether China is rising peacefully and how we’re going to manage that rise in a way that promotes both regional and international stability.”