

Is the United States in a New Frenzy over Asian Multilateralism?

— Obama Administration's Perceptions
on East Asia Regional Integration

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Although the United States is, geographically, not an East Asian nation, it maintains a substantial presence and interest in the region. After World War II, the US not only established bilateral security alliances with many East Asian countries, but also became their primary provider of market, investment and technology. The role of the US in the region was predominant. This twin “Hub and Spokes” bilateral system of East Asia’s deep economic and security dependence on the United States served as the *de-facto* East Asian regional architecture during the Cold War, which also partly hindered regional integration. After the end of the Cold War, China’s reintegration into the world economy and the East Asian economic crisis of 1997–98 provided favorable conditions for starting the process of East Asian regional integration. Since the late 1990s, many regional cooperation mechanisms and institutions have mushroomed primarily via ASEAN initiatives. This trend seems to provide an alternative regional architecture in East Asia, in parallel with the rapid rise of China in particular, in which some

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mechanisms do not include the United States. As the US remains the primary security guarantor and major economic partner for many countries in the region, the US's perceptions toward East Asian regional integration will be an important variable within any discourse. After the Obama administration took power, the United States has shown its interest in the region, as demonstrated by the following facts: the President personally attended the East Asia Summit to propose the "pivot to Asia" strategy and sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation; and the United States has been playing a leading role in negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Are these a reflection of new US frenzy over Asian multilateralism? With China's rapid rise and changes in international power balance, does it signify that the US is seeking a new regional architecture? Is the US's renewed interest in Asian multilateralism aimed at containing China's expanding influence in the region? The answers to these questions are of significance for China in its perception of the US's strategic intentions in East Asia. This essay tries to answer these questions.

NATIONAL INTERESTS AND POLICY PRIORITIES,
PRIMARY GOALS AND THE DIPLOMATIC TRADITION

The US's perceptions toward East Asian regional integration are still evolving and far from consolidating into a stable strategy. The US's basic stance has largely been "wait and see". Although US attitudes might be fluid, the major variables affecting them remain relatively stable. They include the US's national interests and policy priorities, primary goals, and the diplomatic tradition within its East Asia diplomacy. First, the US's major national interest in East Asia is to serve its primary national interests; and its perceptions toward East Asian regional integration are a most urgent policy priority. Second, the primary goal of US East Asia diplomacy is to maintain the US's predominant presence and avoid the emergence of any other single dominant power in the region. The US's assessment of whether China would replace the US as the dominant power in the region would affect US perceptions toward East Asian regional integration. And third, the long-standing tradition in US East Asia

diplomacy is its confidence in bilateralism and skepticism about multilateralism. Whether multilateralism in East Asia would come at the cost of bilateralism seems to affect US perceptions toward East Asian regional integration.

PIVOT TO THE UNITED STATES:
CORE NATIONAL INTERESTS AND POLICY
PRIORITIES AT HOME

The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union encouraged Americans to hail the “end of history”¹ and a “unipolar moment”.² In the first decade of the 2000s, the US had basically defined its core national interests in terms of its primacy within the international system.³ The terrorist attacks in 2001 further stimulated the US intention to broaden its definition of national interests, which were demonstrated by its large-scale military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴ In terms of primary national interests, East Asia has not developed to be the highest policy priority for top US decision-makers. During the Bush administration, the global war on terror was at the top of the governmental agenda. The Bush administration’s assertiveness about military success ironically boosted global confidence in US hegemony. This global confidence translated into a huge inflow of cheap capital to support that hegemony. This situation of an overfunded United States bred unrestrained consumption and a credit-fueled boom, which led to an irresponsible fiscal policy. During the Bush administration, economic growth, global primacy and cheap credit were considered as certainties. The US public also had a great interest in foreign policy, but more toward the Middle East rather than Asia, let alone Asian regional integration. Asia, for

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instance, could scarcely be found in Bush Junior's memoirs. APEC only appeared once, when he described how he was busy designing the war on terror and planning to use APEC as a multilateral platform. The indifference toward Asia had been obvious during his tenure. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, moreover, missed two ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) annual meetings in three years because she felt "ridiculous heading to Southeast Asia while trying to negotiate an end to war in the Middle East".⁵

However, the "Lehman shock" dramatically changed the discourse, and the interest of both the US public and the elite began to shift from overseas and military matters to domestic and economic revival. The Obama administration was mainly preoccupied with the domestic agenda and the top policy priorities would be economic recovery and job creation. Obama understood clearly that US global influence was based on its economic power and correctly called for a "pivot to America". Obama listed five policy priorities in his interview with the NBC and not one concerning foreign policy was among them.⁶ In the presidential election campaign debate on foreign policy, Obama and Romney almost completely focused on the Middle East and terrorism, and Asian affairs were largely ignored.⁷ Obama's former White House Presidential Office Director Rahm Emanuel wrote in *The Washington Post* in November 2012 that the US should "come home and rebuild America."⁸ The results of a Pew Research Center opinion poll of US public priorities showed that 81% ranked domestic issues as a top priority, as against 9% answering foreign policy the largest gap in 15 years.⁹ In Obama's 2013 State of the Union Address, the domestic agenda was of primary concern, including promoting a thriving middle class, job creation, fiscal soundness, immigration reform and gun control.¹⁰ Obama has consistently said, "national building right here at home".¹¹ First and foremost, the US's core national interests and policy priorities concern the domestic economy. Foreign policy, including its East Asia diplomacy, should be observed from this perspective as well.

On the other hand, the Obama administration has been sending consistent signals about shifting the US's strategy focus to the Asia-Pacific region. President Obama dubbed himself the US's first

“Pacific President.”¹² Secretary of State Hillary Clinton broke with US diplomatic tradition and started on her first overseas trip to Asia less than one month after she took office.¹³ By October 2011, Secretary of State Clinton had made seven visits to Asia and made Asia her most frequent destination, which was in stark contrast with her predecessor Secretary Rice. In the process of reengaging Asia, the shift of the US’s security focus to Asia is attracting global attention. However, US attitudes toward East Asian integration would first be decided by whether it could contribute to the US’s economic revival and create more jobs. East Asian markets might be important for boosting US exports of goods, but the potential benefits should not be exaggerated. The United States is the largest outward investor. According to the Chamber of Commerce, in 2008, the revenues of US-owned foreign affiliates were approximately US\$5 trillion, almost three times the value of US exports of goods and services.¹⁴ In today’s global economy, it is impossible to call these companies back to provide jobs for US workers. The US’s economic future more likely depends on its own innovation and reforms, including education, training and immigration. There seems to be a huge divergence between East Asian experts and the top decision makers on East Asian regional integration in the US.¹⁵

PRIMARY GOALS NOT UNDER THREAT:
CHINA WOULD NOT BECOME
THE SINGLE DOMINANT POWER IN ASIA

The second variant of the US’s perception of East Asian regional integration is whether there will be any single dominant power at the center of regional integration. China has become the biggest trading partner with most Asian countries in the last decade and China has signed a Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN. There is no consensus on whether China would replace the US as the dominant power in East Asia. Some members of the US elite are concerned that deepening regional integration would put China “at the center in Asia and the US on the margins, if not excluded altogether”.¹⁶ However, China is perceived more as being less likely

to be able to oust the US from East Asia, due to the unequal power relations and unfavorable relations among Asian countries. A CSIS report states, “The lack of consensus regarding the substance of East Asian integration and the final membership suggests that no

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regional power will be able to exclude the United States unless it chooses to be excluded itself.”¹⁷ But how to explain the Obama administration’s rebalancing strategy and the TPP initiative? Obama’s new Asian strategy of “pivot to Asia”, attendance of the East Asia Summit and the promotion of the TPP have often been interpreted as curtailing China’s expanding role within regional multilateralism. Obama’s rhetorical diplomatic pivot to Asia is more a response to US uneasiness concerning its own identity as the most powerful nation in the world, rather than a real commitment to Asia.

For the US public and elite, it is simply inconceivable that China could possibly replace the US as the most powerful country in the world.¹⁸ During the two decades following the end of the Cold War, global dominance and primacy have become embedded into US identity. The military success in the Global War on Terror further strengthened the United States’ confidence in its own power. However, the US economic crisis of 2008, which led to a global recession, made the US extremely uneasy about its future role within the international system. Talk of decline increasingly became commonplace in the US, although some tried to persuade the country that it could maintain its predominant status for a long time. As a rapidly rising economy, China has been considered to be the mostly likely challenger to this part of US identity. But US politicians understand clearly that it would be an “un-American” political taboo to talk about US retrenchment from its world leadership role.¹⁹ President Obama declared in his State of the Union Address in 2012: “Anyone who tells you that America is in

decline...doesn't know what they are talking about." His rival in the presidential election, Mitt Romney, announced that he "reject[s] the philosophy of decline in all of its variants." On the other hand, many scholars, pundits and opinion-leaders are increasingly shaping the debate about a power transition, a power shift and US decline. The uneasiness of the US public concerning the aforementioned identity is worsened by the US's economic difficulties and China's better financial performance during the recession. Opinion poll results tell us of the uneasiness of Americans. More than half of Americans consider China, as a world power, a major threat to the US. But at the same time, more than 60% of Americans regard relations between the US and China as good.²⁰ As for the US President, he should do something to echo popular sentiment. Obama would like to give the impression that his administration is exerting pressure on China to follow a path chosen by the US.²¹ Demonstrating US global leadership seems to be a prerequisite for a US president to stay in office. Even when the US would really like to retrench from that role to some extent, the president simply would not be able to tell that directly to the American people and simultaneously avoid an unbearable political cost. Military supremacy and the easy use of force are extensions of the US identity of global primacy and exceptionalism. Obama's retrenchment strategy is well designed and hidden by rhetoric emphasizing the US's continuing global leadership. President Obama and his team have been extremely sensitive about possibly being labeled with the phrase "the second coming of Jimmy Carter."²² The sudden operation resulting in the killing of Osama bin Laden provided a relatively acceptable excuse for his military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The sharp increase in the use of drone attacks from the Bush administration into the Obama administration is an attempt to signal to the public that the US can attack its enemies at any time without stationing large numbers of its military personnel on dangerous foreign soil. When announcing the end of the Iraq War, the US government assured the military and the public of its continuing global leadership in the 21st century.²³ In cutting the defense budget, Secretary of Defense Panneta argued in Congress that the US needed to invest more in weapons development.²⁴

Yet, China's rise does not rank among the public's top concerns regarding threats; Iran's nuclear program, Islamic extremist groups, and North Korea's nuclear program stood at around 70%. Even the drug-related violence in Mexico concerns Americans more than China's emergence as a world power.²⁵ For Americans, global terrorism (especially nuclear-armed terrorist attacks) remains the biggest threat. In terms of foreign policy, the prevention of nuclear proliferation and the Middle East (the Iran issue in particular) remained the priority for the United States.²⁶ Regarding East Asia, only North Korea's nuclear program was emphasized in Obama's State of the Union Address, and the word "Asia" only appeared twice and "China" just once.²⁷

Economically, the negotiations for the TPP have been widely considered as an important part of the US rebalancing strategy and the containment of China.²⁸ However, the trend of increasing dependence on China's economy by states in the region would not be reversed by the TPP initiative. It seems as though the US would like to establish a set of newer and higher standards first and then ask China to join, as happened with China in the process of its WTO accession. This seems to be less realistic as well. First, the huge disparities among the countries currently taking part in the negotiations mean that there is no easy way to achieve a new deal with higher standards in the near future. Second, the new pact would be less meaningful if China, as the second biggest economy in the world, is excluded from the rule-making process. It is simply inconceivable that the nations of the region would make a choice between either the TPP or China, but not both. Therefore, the Chinese government identifies the TPP as one of the several possible economic arrangements and thus takes a relatively open attitude toward it.²⁹

DIPLOMATIC TRADITION REMAINS RELEVANT:
CONFIDENCE IN BILATERALISM
AND SKEPTICISM IN MULTILATERALISM

US policies in Asia have been grounded "in traditional state-to-state relations".³⁰ After World War II, the United States had

attempted a number of multilateral initiatives in Asia, but all of them failed. For US policy-makers, Asia seems to be more of a fragmented region full of internal clashes, with fewer conciliatory elements necessary for establishing a regional organization. Cyrus Vance, former secretary of state, wrote in the 1980s, “The growth of economic interdependence has been primarily a product of market sources”.³¹ He believed regional arrangements in the Asia-Pacific were limited in their potential reach and the situation was not yet ready for a government-organized body similar to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).³² He wisely predicted that any formal governmental regional body in Asia would “raise at the threshold problems of membership” and proposed an informal, non-governmental body — a “Pacific Roundtable”.³³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security advisor from 1977 to 1981, wrote in the 1990s, “The absence of a regional balance of power, intensifying nationalism and political uncertainty... [contributed to Asia’s being] ...singularly deficient in regional political development.”³⁴ Condoleezza Rice recalled in the 2000s, “East Asia was a ticket of bad bilateral relations. The United States was struggling to maintain good relations with each of the powers and often found itself caught up in the hostility of a region that had not yet put World War 2 behind it.”³⁵ For top US decision makers, East Asia seems to be a troublesome region without effective solutions. Bilateralism has thus been considered to be more pragmatic in Asia by US decision makers and a changing of the current regional architecture would not only be costly, but also less useful or even dangerous.

The United States’ skepticism toward multilateralism in Asia also comes from its perception of the ineffectiveness of East Asian

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regional arrangements. With regard to the East Asian Economic Crisis, US strategists perceived that regional institutions had greatly been weakened. “No regional institution has played an important part in the current crisis. ASEAN, so dependent on Indonesia strength, may no longer be able to play its historic role.”³⁶ The US’s unhappiness with the ineffectiveness of Asian regional arrangements is the main rationale for top US decision makers to be reluctant to attend Asian regional meetings, even though the long distance has been used as an excuse.³⁷ Rice even felt embarrassed by the ARF’s unofficial agenda: A silly tradition had grown up whereby the foreign ministers from the non-ASEAN countries performed musical skits.³⁸ When the first East Asia Summit was convened in 2005, the US side did not show much interest, as the “disputes and confusion over its composition, direction, and relationship to both broader and more selective existing mechanisms reveal, East Asian community still has a long way to go.”³⁹ Asian multilateral forums are not for collective decision-making or consequential actions and the long trek for these events is largely considered by many American officials as a ‘tedious task’.⁴⁰ Many US officials believed “that unfocussed organizations were little more than talking shops and felt uncertain about which organization would emerge as most important.”⁴¹ They complained that “most of the new formations in the region” were “with too many actors who lack capacity and thus bring too little to that table on too many issues.”⁴² In terms of bureaucracy, the US State Department seems to be fragmented into country sections rather than have a coordinated East Asian agency. Rice complained, “In the Foreign Service there were Koreanists and Sinologists and those who knew Japan (agents of the Chrysanthemum Throne), but there were no real regionalists.”⁴³

Regarding the East Asia Summit, Obama’s decision to attend was because the US wanted to have the option and show its emphasis on Asia.⁴⁴ The US finally signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2009 as it was a pre-condition for membership of the EAS. The State Department and the navy quickly produced written analysis on accession to the TAC, saying that nothing in the agreement would affect US policies and freedom of action.⁴⁵ Although former Secretary of State Clinton visited Asia much more

frequently than her predecessors, she listed the priority for the Asia strategy of the United States as the strengthening of bilateral security alliances and not regionalism.⁴⁶

The Center for Strategic and International Studies conducted a survey of strategic views on Asian regionalism among the “strategic elites” of nine major countries in the Asia–Pacific region. The US strategic elite demonstrated the least enthusiasm toward the concept of building an East Asian Community, although they were not necessarily against the idea.⁴⁷ The survey showed that not only the US, but other countries’ elites also had far more confidence in national tools and global institutions than in regional multilateral tools.⁴⁸ In terms of East Asian financial and economic integration, the US strategic elite were among the least confident in ASEAN-centered East Asian mechanisms, although they demonstrated modest expectations for APEC and FTAAP in promoting trade liberalization.⁴⁹ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are still seen as the most important institutions in tackling financial crises and promoting economic integration.⁵⁰ In terms of the regional cooperation in the use of energy and resources, the US elite demonstrated far more trust in bilateral arrangements (nearly 35%) and the International Energy Agency (23%) than in any East Asia regional initiatives (ASEAN Plus Three, 4%).⁵¹ In terms of regional economic initiatives, there are the TPP, AFTA, the China–Japan–Korea FTA, APEC, FTAAP and RCEP. The utility of these regional frameworks in an economic crisis is greatly doubted. In responding to security challenges in both traditional and nontraditional forms, the US elite trusts far more in the US’s own national forces, bilateral alliances or *ad hoc* multilateral mechanisms rather than East Asian regional platforms (shockingly, none of the US respondents rated the ASEAN Regional Forum as being relevant in dealing with security-related challenges).⁵² ⁵³ The ARF is Asia’s leading security forum, and yet all of the potential sources of major conflict — China–Taiwan, Korea, India–Pakistan, and sensitive territorial disputes — are off the table.

CONCLUSION

The Obama administration does show certain interest in Asian multilateralism, but its perceptions on regional integration are still evolving and no cohesive strategy is being formed. The US's primary priority is domestic and economic affairs. The US's diplomatic focus remains on the Middle East and its primary security concern remains as terrorism (especially nuclear terrorism). China's rise does pose challenges to the US, and it is conceivable that the US would be excluded from the region. The US diplomatic tradition of confidence in bilateralism and skepticism toward multilateralism is still considered by the US as the most relevant and useful policy choice in Asia. The United States does not oppose East Asian regionalism for the simple reason that it believes it would not go too far. The real effects of Obama's high-profile Asia diplomacy and multilateralism "frenzy" remain to be seen, as political and diplomatic rhetoric does not equal real commitment and action.

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4 President George W. Bush announced that the United States should prevent any other power from "surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States," George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: White House, September 2002, p. 30.

5 Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2011, p. 485.

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12 "Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall," November 14, 2009, Tokyo, Japan, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, available at:<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall>, January 25, 2012.

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18 Michele Flournoy and Janine Davidson, "Obama's New Global Posture," *Foreign Affairs*, August 2012. The first author is former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and the second is former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Plans. They argue that retrenchment is misleading and the US's role is unmatched and it should not reduce overseas intervention.

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49 *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

52 Security-related questions in this survey included "preventing an attack on your country", "responding to natural disasters", "handling health pandemics in the region", and "preventing terrorism in the region". *Ibid.*, pp. 13-15.

53