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Bridging Asia and the Pacific: Japan's Role in Reinforcing the US Pivot

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IN HIS FIRST YEAR on the job, US President Barack Obama declared himself the United States' first Pacific president. Evidence of a US strategic shift toward a greater foreign policy emphasis on the Pacific has been slow to emerge during the Obama presidency as America's quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq and domestic issues such as healthcare have stolen the limelight. But one can now see signs that the US shift toward the Pacific is more than mere rhetoric. Such signs include the US declaration that the Senkaku Islands are covered under the US-Japan Security Treaty; US cooperation with Southeast Asian nations regarding the Spratly Islands territorial issues and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea; US joint military exercises with the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam; and US moves to station two littoral combat ships in Singapore.

President Obama also recently made a highly publicized trip to the Pacific. In Honolulu, at the APEC Summit, he heartily endorsed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Then, in Canberra, President

Obama announced his "deliberate and strategic decision" to have the United States play a greater and longer-term role in the security and prosperity of Asia Pacific, stating that "reductions in US defense spending will not ... come at the expense of the Asia Pacific."* He also backed symbolism with substance when, with Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, he announced the stationing of up to 2,500 US Marines in Darwin. Finally, President Obama attended the East Asia Summit in Bali, the first time that the United States has formally participated in this meeting. Overall, these developments are highly positive and welcomed by Tokyo and other US allies around the region.

At the same time, however, this is no time for complacency. Against the backdrop of a shifting regional balance of power and ongoing global economic turmoil, the US Congress is demanding that budget cuts be made to bring spending down to sustainable levels, and

* Barack Obama, 2011. "Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament," <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>>.

defense spending is not immune to the large-scale cuts being made in the United States. While some savings will accrue from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq, it is unlikely to be sufficient. Given these economic challenges and the ever-changing balance of power in the region, it is all the more important that the United States' new strategy in Asia Pacific be developed in close collaboration with its closest ally in the region, Japan.

Enriching Asia Pacific Security

So how can the United States maintain its commitment to Asia Pacific and meet regional challenges in the face of the current economic turmoil? From a Japanese perspective, there appear to be three steps that the United States could take: proactively adapt its military deployment strategy, continue to strengthen partnerships in the region, and leverage new economic opportunities.

Revise its Forward Deployment Strategy

Given that military spending cuts are virtually guaranteed, it is clear that the United States will have to change its forward deployment strategy in accordance with the new financial reality. The impact of budget cuts would likely be less painful if the United States were to proactively consider a new military strategy in light of the current economic and security reality it faces. We may already be seeing the beginning of a new strategy with the Air-Sea battle concept, which some have touted as an effective response to China's increasing anti-access and area-denial capabilities. However, Air-Sea battle would be better employed as a strategy for the US military to streamline efficiency and spending among the Navy, Air Force, and Marines; reorganize US force dispersals to combine the strength of its air and sea capabilities; and reduce the focus on ground forces. The decision to station US Marines in Darwin, out of range of Chinese missiles, could also be seen as representing part of a change in the US forward deployment strategy.

Strengthen Partnerships in the Region

The United States should also continue to strengthen its regional partnerships. In its forays into Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States' lack of supportive regional partners was a contributing factor blinding it to its own failure to make an adequate prior assessment and occupation strategy. So while the United States was able relatively easily to destroy the regimes of the Afghan Taliban and Saddam Hussein, it could not create viable alternatives that would garner widespread legitimacy.

These mistakes must not be in vain but should provide valuable lessons for the future. US allies around the region welcome the US announcement that East Asia will be a top priority, but it is crucial that the United States cooperate closely with its regional partners in doing so. Its initial steps in this direction have been promising, but the perpetual challenge it faces is doing this in a sustained manner. Meanwhile, the United States would be wise to avoid unilateral decision making, an excessive focus on US hegemony, and harsh labeling of China as a threat. Instead, the key to fostering a secure and prosperous Pacific region is to focus on enrichment of the security environment, including increasing regional confidence-building mechanisms, particularly with China.

Leverage New Economic Opportunities

New economic opportunities can be leveraged to help strengthen regional partnerships and alleviate US budgetary strain. In this light, President Obama's endorsement of the TPP is encouraging. The TPP is an important policy tool for linking the United States with East Asian economic institutions. It can also be used as a model for deeper and wider regional economic integration in the future as negotiations are expected to go beyond trade and investment and cover areas such as competition policy, government procurement policy, and intellectual property rights. The eventual long-term goal should be to use the TPP as a stepping stone toward creating a Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP).

Some concerns have been raised that the high standards that the TPP strives to institutionalize will exclude rapidly growing emerging economies such as China. At this juncture, China will indeed not be able to join the TPP process as the high standards would require China to undergo huge domestic reforms too soon. But this does not mean that other countries should shy away from high-standard economic integration objectives. China is a dynamic society undergoing great changes, and it will continue to evolve and to develop economically. China will be able to join the TPP in the future after it has gone through the necessary transitional processes as an emerging market economy. A high-standard TPP agreement will serve as a motivator for China, giving it greater incentive to consolidate its rule of law and move into the ranks of the advanced nations. In the shorter term, China will naturally be more focused on narrower East Asia regional economic integration that only covers trade and investment.

Japan's Role

Japan is the United States' closest ally in Asia in terms of both economic power and military capabilities. So as the United States adjusts its military strategy to reflect budgetary realities and works toward enriching the regional security environment, Japan will continue to be a crucial regional partner. Given this role, it will be wise for Japan to take a number of proactive steps to consolidate the role of the US-Japan alliance in the US strategic pivot toward Asia, by serving as a bridge to the region and ensuring that the US-Japan partnership remains sustainable.

Moreover, given the nature of the US-Japan Security Treaty, whereby the United States protects Japan in return for the right to house US bases on Japanese territory, changes in US strategy require close consultation and cooperation with Japan. To this end, it is imperative that the governments of the United States and Japan move away from their previous narrow focus on the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma and sit down for broader discussions on the future direction of the alliance. These discussions should address the

future role of the Japan Self-Defense Forces in relation to changes in security strategy, how to best enrich the security environment as the balance of power in the region continues to shift, and the development of trilateral confidence-building mechanisms with China.

On the economic front, now that Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda has announced Japan's intention to join the TPP negotiations, Japan should play an active role in developing a vision for linking the TPP with East Asian economic integration and the long-term goal of realizing an FTAAP. To be in a position to play this critical role, Japan must liberalize sensitive sectors of its own economy, especially agriculture. In addition to being an unsustainable burden on the Japanese economy due to the government subsidies paid to farmers, agricultural protectionism is inhibiting Japan's ability to conclude quality FTAs. As Japan demands agricultural exceptions, its counterparts demand similar exceptions for their own sensitive sectors. It is regrettable that currently the public debate in Japan regarding the TPP is focused solely on the potential losses, particularly to agriculture. The Japanese government needs to reshape the debate and sell its future vision for the region to the Japanese public, making it clear that deeper economic integration through high-quality agreements will be beneficial for Japan and the region as a whole. The Japanese government must also simultaneously intensify its efforts toward creating a regional Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) among the ASEAN+6 nations.

Japan: Bridge Across the Pacific

As Japan sets out its vision, it must take into consideration its unique position as probably the only true Asia Pacific nation, able to bridge East Asia and the countries on the eastern rim of the Pacific Ocean. The United States, as President Obama announced, is a Pacific power; and so is Australia. But the concept of an Asia Pacific nation is not just geographic. It is also very much a part of Japan's identity. On the one hand, Japan has deep historical, cultural, and philosophical connections with the rest of Asia. And on the other hand, Japan is the only Asian nation that has become

an advanced industrial democracy with an economic and social structure similar to that in the West. Thus as East Asia continues to play a greater role in global affairs, Japan is uniquely placed to play the much needed role of a bridge between the two continents and between emerging economies and advanced industrial nations. It is against this background that Japan should be proactive in negotiations aimed at concluding the TPP as well as an East Asian regional EPA.

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