The United States and Asia in 2013

From Primacy to Marginalization?

ABSTRACT
Prospects for a U.S. decline in global power generated by political strife and protracted economic recession at home have affected Washington’s regional diplomatic presence and strategic influence in the Asia-Pacific. Ongoing regional power politics and economic imperatives may constrain the ability of the U.S. to quickly recover from the largely self-imposed damage it has inflicted on its future role as a central regional player.

KEYWORDS: ASEAN, China, Japan, Korean Peninsula, pivot strategy or “rebalancing”

The United States is facing a crossroads over how influential it will continue to be in Asia-Pacific politics. In 2013, Washington had both significant policy successes and self-imposed setbacks in the region. President Barack Obama’s administration prevailed against a particularly serious episode of North Korean brinksmanship and established constructive ties with China’s new leadership. Such progress was largely undermined, however, as growing domestic turmoil in the U.S. affected its Asia-Pacific diplomacy. The policy impasse between President Obama and Congress over health care and larger budgetary issues led to unanticipated U.S. diplomatic setbacks in Asia. The squabbles also bolstered concerns of traditional U.S. allies and partners over America’s ability to sustain a critical presence and commensurate influence in the region.
Problems in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf also continued to distract U.S. policymakers from exercising leadership and fully implementing their “rebalancing” posture in Asia. The year thus ended with increased uncertainty about the U.S.’s future presence and role in the region. Clear progress on important issues was achieved. This was largely overshadowed, however, by the image of a once proud American superpower struggling with its political dysfunction and with juggling too many overseas commitments to sustain a primary role in the Asia-Pacific. The danger Washington faced at the end of 2013 was that for the first time in the postwar era, it could be perceived as a marginal rather than central player in this area of the world.

Policy statements offered by Obama and his key foreign policy lieutenants during his first term of office were designed to leave no doubt about the U.S.’s resolve to play a decisive role in Asia. The “rebalancing” or “pivot” strategy explicated in late 2011 and elaborated in 2012 to shape the future U.S. politico-strategic and economic profile in Asia was the most obvious case-in-point. Washington’s promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade initiative, its support for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ (ASEAN) regional community-building efforts, and the deepening of America’s Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) with China also illustrated this intent of greater overall U.S. regional involvement. By the middle of 2013, however, most of those officials who had spearheaded the pivot initiative—including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, her Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific Kurt Campbell, and National Security Adviser Tom Donilon—had resigned.

Obama’s second-term team comprised individuals who were either less oriented toward Asia or less experienced in sustaining the Asia-Pacific rebalancing agenda within broader U.S. policymaking circles. While Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel pressed the rebalancing strategy’s military component, Asian leaders were unimpressed that its diplomatic and economic dimensions appeared to be waning. The president’s cancellation of his plans to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping’s summit in Bali and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in October in Brunei reinforced this perception. Obama’s absence from these critical meetings when he had pledged to secure a TPP agreement by the end of the year and to strengthen the pivot strategy’s credibility left U.S. regional allies worried over U.S. policy directions and future regional clout.
TENSIONS ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA: U.S. AND CHINESE INVOLVEMENT

The most serious crisis between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the U.S. in decades erupted in early March 2013 after the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed UNSC 2094 imposing additional financial sanctions against North Korea. This followed the DPRK’s conduct of its third nuclear weapons test on February 12. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un countered the U.N.’s initiative by ratcheting up tensions over the ensuing three months with a remarkable series of threats. These were most likely designed to reinforce his own leadership credentials within the DPRK by adopting an extremely bellicose posture against the U.S. and South Korea. Kim’s stance may also have been aimed at compelling Washington to modify its posture of no negotiations with the DPRK until the latter commits to genuine nuclear disarmament. Among the most spectacular North Korean provocations was the release of a photo showing Kim and his generals plotting a “U.S. Mainland Strike Plan” allegedly targeting Washington, D.C., San Diego, Honolulu, and (possibly) Austin, Texas, for potential nuclear missile strikes.

Pyongyang also said it might attack Guam with its longer-range missile systems, threatened South Korea with all-out war, and scrapped its adherence to the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement. It warned foreign diplomats stationed in Pyongyang to get out of town as their safety could no longer be guaranteed in a “wartime environment.” Officials put the country’s Musadan intermediate-range ballistic missiles on high alert, announced that the DPRK would restart its Yongbyong nuclear reactor to manufacture nuclear weapons-grade material, and closed down the Kaesong industrial complex, the last vestige of “test” economic cooperation between the two Koreas. In mid-May 2013, the DPRK launched six short-range missiles in response to ongoing U.S.-South Korea military exercises.

During the year, Kim hosted American basketball celebrity Dennis Rodman three times, the only American to have met Kim since he assumed the leadership in December 2011. Efforts in 2013 by current and former U.S. officials to negotiate with their North Korean counterparts for the release of imprisoned American Kenneth Bae, accused of plotting to overthrow the North Korean government through proselytizing, proved futile: the North rescinded an invitation to the U.S. human rights envoy for North Korea,
Robert King, to visit Pyongyang and bargain for the release of Bae. Merrill Newman, an American tourist and former U.S. Army officer who had fought North Korean forces during the Korean War, was detained in late October by Pyongyang for six weeks on charges of subversion but was released after signing a letter of apology for past “war crimes.”

Almost as quickly as it arose, however, North Korea’s belligerent stance waned—from late May until early October. Pyongyang’s hardline tactics had clearly failed to divide the U.S.-South Korea alliance, as newly elected South Korean President Park Geun-hye demonstrated when visiting Washington in early May. During her trip, Park signed a joint declaration with Obama commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the U.S.-South Korea security alliance. She also delivered a well-received address to a joint session of Congress. Park advanced a “Korean Peninsula Trust-Building Plan” designed to gradually condition North Korea toward adopting more moderate positions on intra-Korean relations. The plan focused on functional and technical cooperation prior to engaging in politico-strategic negotiations. Park’s approach appeared to succeed when North Korea agreed to reopen the joint Kaesong industrial zone, and operations recommenced there in mid-September. Inter-Korean talks on the future joint management of the complex were held in late December and coincided with a visit of 30 delegates from a G20 conference convened in Seoul to explore ways for advancing Kaesong’s “globalization” by attracting more foreign investment.

Perhaps even more central to understanding the DPRK’s new-found moderation toward the U.S. and South Korea was the emergence of China’s noticeably tougher posture toward the Kim regime. Frustrated by North Korea ignoring its pleas not to proceed with nuclear and missile testing and by its strategy of brinksmanship directed toward South Korea and the U.S., China’s new leadership approved the Bank of China’s imposition in May of sanctions against North Korea’s Foreign Trade Bank. It further tightened restrictions against the export of materials to the North. When attending Asian summit meetings in place of President Obama earlier that month, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry indicated that the U.S. was ready to sign a non-aggression treaty with North Korea if the latter state was willing to move toward denuclearization and comply with international demands. Feeling the bite of sanctions from all sides, however, the North rebuffed Kerry’s offer and reverted to issuing a new series of threats. Its National Defense Commission, chaired by Kim, warned of “all out war” if the U.S. did not “withdraw various
measures aimed to isolate and strangle us.” It railed against a U.S. joint naval exercise with South Korean and Japanese elements (which was focused on disaster relief coordination). Following the early December purge and execution of Jang Song-thaek, Kim Jong-un’s uncle and erstwhile mentor (along with several of Jang’s associates), North Korea’s National Defense Commission faxed South Korea’s National Security Council warning that any repeats of anti-Pyongyang rallies that erupted in Seoul following Jang’s removal and death would precipitate strikes against the South “without any notice.” As the end of 2013 approached, prospects for any comprehensive diplomatic breakthroughs with the DPRK appeared to be remote.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

President Obama’s informal summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Sunnylands retreat in Rancho Mirage, California, on June 7–8, was the highlight of bilateral Sino-American relations for 2013. Wide-ranging discussions were conducted on North Korea, Iran, cybersecurity, climate change, military-to-military relations, regional territorial disputes in the East China and South China Seas, and other subjects. Of central concern to Xi was what China viewed as the imperative for Beijing and Washington to agree on the concept of a “new model for [their] major country relationship.” This would entail conflict avoidance, mutual respect of each other’s core interests, and “win-win” bilateral cooperation on key economic and security questions. The Americans agreed that a blueprint should be put into place to avoid the type of geopolitical competition often flowing from “power transitions” between hegemonic and rising powers. However, Obama and his advisers remained somewhat wary of what was regarded as a continuing Chinese tendency to emphasize what the U.S. would need to do to realize a modus vivendi with Beijing, rather than to address mutual responsibilities.

U.S. common interests with China were incorporated in various agreements reached during the two countries’ annual S&ED in Washington in July. These included pursuit of a bilateral investment treaty that could reduce Chinese investment restrictions for American businesses and ease U.S.

technology transfer restrictions to China. Climate change and energy policy are also sectors where cooperation has been formalized. Recent progress has been made on “stepping up” visits between high-level military officials. Bilateral military collaboration on countering maritime piracy and on coordinating disaster relief operations has also intensified.

These positive, mostly functional, trends have been overshadowed, however, by continuing tension in three key areas: mutual concerns over cyber-hacking of intelligence, intellectual property, and industrial targets; American worries about what are deemed highly aggressive Chinese postures and behavior regarding maritime territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas; and mutual anxieties about each other’s ultimate strategic intentions.

Chinese policymakers are disturbed that while the U.S. constantly urges greater pressure from them on North Korea to accept denuclearization, Washington neglects to forcefully press its Japanese and Filipino allies to understand China’s interests in the East and South China Seas. Indeed, Kerry had intimated in April that the U.S. would be duty-bound by its Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security with Japan to defend that country’s “administrative control” of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, were they to come under external attack.

In November, China’s frustrations led it to declare without prior international consultation a new and extensive air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea as a means of reinforcing its territorial claims on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the adjacent Chunxiao gas field, and Socotra Rock/Ieodo (claimed by both China and South Korea). Beijing insisted that all military and commercial aircraft passing through this sector would be required to file flight reports with Chinese officials, thereby tacitly acknowledging (from Beijing’s perspective) the validity of the PRC’s (People’s Republic of China) sovereign claims. Japan resisted this directive and ordered its national airlines to disregard it. While the U.S. urged its commercial airlines to observe Chinese filing guidelines to prevent passengers from incurring harm through unanticipated miscalculations, it demonstrated contempt for China’s initiative by sending two B-52 bombers from Guam to fly unimpeded through the zone. South Korea extended its own ADIZ to include contested waters around Ieodo. During the ensuing weeks, China appeared to be searching for ways to soften its original initiative by asserting that ADIZs were not “territorial airspace” and could be interpreted in different ways by different countries.
U.S. officials also continue to insist that China join ASEAN claimants in observing a code of conduct in the South China Sea as an initial confidence-building measure for lowering frictions emanating from maritime territorial disputes; by year’s end, Beijing was visibly moving to accommodate this issue. This was the case despite a near collision in mid-December between the USS Cowpens, an American missile cruiser, and a Chinese warship operating in the South China Sea near China’s Liaoning aircraft carrier. Independent experts and observers described this episode as the most significant U.S.-China maritime incident since 2009. The Obama administration continues to press China for greater transparency in explaining its ongoing, substantial increases in military spending (Chinese defense spending has more than doubled since 2006). China remains concerned about U.S. missile defense technology and is introducing new missile technologies designed to counter it.

THE U.S. AND A RESURGENT JAPAN

Following the election of the Liberal Democratic Party to form a new government in Japan in December 2012, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo quickly established his imprint on U.S.-Japan economic and security relations. Following his visit to Washington and summit with President Obama in late February 2013, Abe moved to position Japan to participate in TPP negotiations; that country became a fully-fledged TPP negotiating participant in July. The U.S. also granted Japan access to U.S. liquefied natural gas exports, and entered into a partnership with Tokyo to exploit and extract natural gas from methane hydrates in Alaska.

U.S.-Japanese bilateral consultations on North Korea, counter-proliferation, and non-traditional security initiatives were frequently held on the sidelines of various multilateral gatherings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus 8 (ADMMþ8) and the EAS directly, and in trilateral formats involving U.S.-Japanese delegates’ meetings with Australian or South Korean counterparts.

Negotiations over the future status of U.S. forces stationed in Okinawa proceeded apace. In March, the Japanese government requested the Okinawa Prefectural Government to approve a land permit for the Futenma Replacement Facility. The U.S. Defense Department released an Okinawa Consolidation Plan the following month outlining how the U.S. would shift and streamline its force presence operating on that island.
Evolving changes in Japan’s defense planning and policies directly relate to the future viability of the U.S.-Japan security treaty and overall U.S. regional deterrence and defense postures. The question regarding Japanese defense burden-sharing is no longer “how to get Japan to do more,” but “how much can Japan do without destabilizing the region?” A new Japanese defense White Paper was issued in July that explicated a national “dynamic defense” posture. It speculated that Japan may need to develop a collective defense (as opposed to strictly self-defense) posture in certain instances and cultivate selective “offensive strike capabilities” to guarantee its own maritime security. If such measures were adopted, they would intensify concerns already held by Japan’s neighbors over its August 2013 deployment of the Izumo “flat-topped” helicopter destroyer and its collaboration with the U.S. on ballistic missile defense technology.

These concerns were further intensified in December when Japan announced a 2.2% increase in its annual defense budget—the biggest percentage rise in almost two decades. Its new Five Year Defense Plan projected an overall defense spending increase of 5%, including the purchasing of surveillance drones and new destroyers for patrols in the East China Sea and the underwriting of more-advanced amphibious capabilities within its ground defense forces. Meanwhile, Abe’s “democratic security diamond” proposal floated at the beginning of the year, which envisions greater defense coordination among “like-minded” democracies such as Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S., gained little resonance in South Korea (which Abe did not include in his blueprint). It did nothing to alleviate Chinese or North Korean concerns about what they viewed to be increasingly nationalistic Japanese behavior.

ASEAN AND BEYOND

Until President Obama was forced by the domestic political impasse to cancel his attendance at APEC and the EAS in October, the U.S. was clearly attempting to counter growing regional doubts about its rebalancing or pivot strategy in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania, a strategy fueled by its budget crisis and events in the Middle East. In early February, U.S. officials emphasized the imperative of strategically linking Southeast Asia with the Indian Ocean to form a critical maritime theater of operations; they stated that by 2020, 60% of U.S. naval assets would be deployed in the “Indo-Pacific.” Officials pointed to...
what they called visible signs of America’s determination to sustain critical economic and politico-strategic roles in the broader region: the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership, along with the 2011 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance, the 2012 Washington Declaration on Defense Cooperation with New Zealand, a 2013 Trade and Investment Framework Agreement with Myanmar, a 2013 U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership, and the 2013 U.S.-India Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation. Also included were the deployment of the first of four U.S. Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore in March 2013, the rotation of U.S. Marine Air Ground Task Force units to Darwin, Australia, and substantial increases in U.S. military assistance to and intelligence coordination with the Philippines.

That such momentum would transform so quickly into a possible power vacuum wrought by an intractable financial imbroglio between U.S. congressional factions and the Obama administration resulting in a government shutdown is still conceivable. This remains the case, notwithstanding a reported federal budget compromise reached during the waning days of congressional deliberations in December. While the consequences for ASEAN of the U.S. near-absence may be minimized over the short term, a prolonged or repeated U.S. government shutdown could have dire global ramifications within the context of structural changes in the Asia-Pacific balance of power. A desirable outcome would be what one Thai analyst has characterized as Southeast Asia not being “about all China and no U.S. or all U.S. and no China.” It is about some of both in a moving balance that sometimes will appear elusive and multidirectional, and in which ASEAN maintains its leverage over the future of regional order-building by hedging against both Chinese and U.S. power. By the end of the year, however, it remained unclear if the U.S. would be able to sustain sufficient influence and resources over the long term to ensure the type of equilibrium required for such ASEAN tactics to be applied.

CONCLUSION

Even given its near-calamitous domestic political circumstances, U.S. power cannot be wholly marginalized or discounted in the Asia-Pacific region.

There is still no substitute for Washington in deterring war on the Korean Peninsula, constraining both Chinese and Japanese nationalist tendencies from intensifying security dilemmas in Northeast Asia, and providing an Asia-Pacific offshore balancing mechanism to prevent regional great power confrontations in more-distant littorals. Additionally and importantly, the fundamental American democratic ideals—if not all of the mechanisms currently managing them—still have appeal for much of the region’s populace.

Future historians, however, may recall 2013 as a turning point where internal political constraints in the U.S. began to overwhelm its capacity to exercise guaranteed primacy in all but the most fundamental areas of its national economic and security interests. How the U.S. will operate as an actor limited by such capacity constraints represents a new and potentially risky element in Asia-Pacific relations.