Effect of Obama administration policy change on Korea unclear, or perhaps minimal

Chad O'Carroll, October 2nd, 2015

Initially emerging in 2009, the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” strategy was said to reflect growing consensus that a significant part of history in the 21st century would be “written in the Asia-Pacific region.”

To take advantage of the growth and activity forecasted to take place there, Washington declared that the U.S. would build extensive diplomatic, economic, developmental and, crucially, security ties with countries in the region. Coming after almost two decades of testing foreign policy hurdles in the Middle East, the rebalance of focus eastward was timed to coincide with a pullout of Iraq and reduction in military spending.

But today, almost seven years on, the policy appears to have had little impact on how Pyongyang looks at the outside world. And with inter-Korean tensions nearly bubbling over into conflict on two occasions since 2013, U.S. deterrence over the North has been described in some quarters as being shakier than ever.

In part three of a major new NK News expert interview series, established and rising American North Korea watchers look back at how exactly the pivot to Asia is impacting the Korean peninsula. While some suggested Pyongyang may be increasing emboldened by decreasing U.S. military capabilities – with the impact that some nations may be unsure of relying too much on American
assurances – others stated the policy didn’t effect the Koreas too much.

Experts from the American panel of respondents include:

- **Bruce Klingner**, Senior Research Fellow, Northeast Asia Asian Studies Center, Heritage Foundation
- **Darcie Draudt**, Non-Resident James A. Kelly Fellow, Pacific Forum CSIS and Doctoral Candidate, Johns Hopkins University, Department of Political Science
- **David Straub**, Associate Director of the Korea Program, Stanford University
- **Dr. Nicholas Eberstadt**, Henry Wendt Scholar in Political Economy, American Enterprise Institute
- **Dr. Stephan Haggard**, Lawrence and Sallye Krause Professor of Korea-Pacific Studies; director, Korea-Pacific Program; and Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at UC San Diego

![U.S. and ROK forces near the DMZ](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Navy_070228-N-6955R-001_Soldiers_of_the_U.S._Army_and_the_Royal_Korean_Army_waving_flags_on_the_outskirts_of_the_Demilitarized_Zone.jpg) | Picture: Wikimedia Commons

Q3) Has the current administration’s diplomatic and military “Pivot to Asia” policy been effective? What impact has it had on the U.S. presence in East Asia, especially with regard to relations with both Koreas? And – has the policy been effective or ineffective?
The Obama Administration heralded its Asia Pivot strategy as a major break from the policies of its predecessor, even proclaiming that the U.S. was now “back in Asia” as a result. Asia was to be given primacy in American foreign policy, reflecting the importance of the region to U.S. national interests and the drawdown of American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Yet years after its introduction, uncertainties linger as to just how significant a policy shift the Asia Pivot actually was. More important, Asian nations are now questioning U.S. military capabilities and resolve – the result of underfunded U.S. defense requirements and perceived American foreign policy missteps.

The chief of Naval Operations told Congress that in order to meet the global needs of combatant commanders, the Navy would need a 450-ship fleet. Currently, the Navy has 289 ships and shortfalls in the shipbuilding budget will bring the fleet closer to 220. The commander of U.S. Pacific Command testified that the Navy and Marine Corps do not have enough assets to carry out contested amphibious operations in the Pacific if a crisis were to arise. The Marine Corps has stated that it would need 54 amphibious assault ships to fulfill the validated requirements of all the combatant commanders but there will be fewer than 30 available.

The commander of U.N. and U.S. forces in Korea testified that he has doubts about America’s ability to counter a large-scale North Korean attack effectively.

The U.S. Air Force has grounded 13 combat squadrons (250 planes), nearly one-third of its active-duty fighter and bomber squadrons and warned that there may not be sufficient combat air power to respond immediately to contingencies.

The commander of U.N. and U.S. forces in Korea testified that he has doubts about America’s ability to counter a large-scale North Korean attack effectively due to the low readiness of forces stationed outside of Korea, which could “lengthen the time required to accomplish key missions in crisis or war, likely resulting in higher civilian and military casualties.”
The pivot has been interpreted narrowly through a military lens. But as initially conceived, it centered on improving relations with China, working to expand trade and investment opportunities through the (highly secretive) TPP process and reaching out to other important players in the region such as India, Indonesia and ASEAN more generally.

The policy was not designed to yield a particular result but rightly stated the intention of the United States to shift its foreign policy emphasis away from the land wars in Asia in Iraq and Afghanistan toward other priorities. The failed Arab spring, the Syrian, Yemeni and Libyan civil wars and the Iranian nuclear challenge all suggest how hard it is for the United States to modify its foreign policy commitments to the Middle East. But the pivot should not be seen either as a huge success nor as a failure. Its objectives were longer-run in any case and the president has faced a number of more pressing challenges elsewhere.

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In general, Asia policy seems to have been reasonably successful during the Obama years.

The presence in Asia is a sort of advertising. It’s a way of merchandising and putting a happy face on the reality of lower American military budgets and diminished future American military capabilities. It’s a way of saying we’re cutting back on Asia less than on the rest of the world.

To the extent that American influence and credibility in the Asian Pacific region has not declined precipitously, I think we in the United States can give a lot of thanks to our friends in Beijing.
Chinese behavior over the last five or six years has done an awful lot to, how do we say, scare straight a number of its neighbors. And to remind a number of its neighbors of just how important it will be to have American presence, friendship and regional alliances. So the Chinese governments has probably been a much better salesman for U.S. influence than U.S. policy has been itself.

The presence in Asia is a sort of advertising

There are some happy circumstances over the past few years regarding personal relations between the U.S. president and two ROK presidents that have helped bolster ROK-U.S. ties, but the whole question about future U.S. commitment to Asia I think still needs to be answered more definitively.

The “pivot to Asia” – or, as U.S. officials now prefer to call it, the “rebalance” – was genuinely meant to highlight the strategic importance of East Asia to American national interests, as opposed to what the Obama administration rightly regarded as a misguided preoccupation with places such as Iraq. Politically, it was also intended to give the Obama administration an argument to rebut critics at home who said that the withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan showed that it was “weak” on foreign and security policy. Pointing to the rebalance, the Obama administration could say, “Look, we are not weak, we are smart.”

While the “rebalance” has, unfortunately, further heightened China’s mistrust of the United States, it has reassured many in East Asia that the U.S. is indeed committed to the region as the PRC has become more assertive and, at times, even bullying.

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Still, I think that the hoopla about the rebalance is overblown. The change in U.S. focus was marginal and incremental. The United States has been a Pacific power for well over a century and will always remain one. The additional military forces that the United States has or will station in the region are also quite limited. Even the new trading “blocs” that the PRC and the U.S. are championing in the region are being oversold, by both: neither their economic nor their strategic impact will be all that great. So I don’t think that the rebalance as such really has had or will have much effect on the Korean Peninsula.
The rebalance policy is, by definition, about reconfiguring the U.S. efforts abroad—including diplomatic, military, and economic—to a more even posture, balanced between the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific. These days, the question in Washington and among U.S. allies is not just on the policy’s efficacy, but also about its sustainability. Since the policy was announced in 2011, the United States has been caught in new challenges outside of Asia, most notably new crises in the Middle East and Europe as new battle lines are drawn with emboldened state and non-state actors. At the same time, we see challenges to U.S. interests also rising in the Asia-Pacific, including territorial revisionism and irredentism, regression from democracy, and the development of new military and weapons capabilities that threaten U.S. interests.

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The United States has sought to try new cooperation and training with its existing alliance structure in Asia, to varying degrees of success due to its overextended assets with a more limited budget. The alliance with Korea is one of these partners. While the policy in and of itself has definitely signaled to South Korea these new and evolving intentions, Seoul has some questions about U.S. ability to commit long-term to these objectives especially as the region is undergoing tremendous change. The shifting geopolitics in East Asia, particularly as China seeks greater influence throughout the region, is not lost on Seoul, and there are several debates within the alliance with South Korea just over the past year that show this. Several questions the United States’ staying power will need to be answered before the policy can be viewed as more effective in the eyes of U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific.

Main picture: NK News