

“Pivot” and “Rebalance” - Maintaining U.S. Dominance in the Pacific

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In recent years, the Obama administration has made tremendous efforts to strengthen U.S. power in the Asia Pacific region. Implementing its so-called “pivot” and “rebalance” to the area, the Obama administration has worked to position the United States as a Pacific power.

“As President, I’ve rebalanced American foreign policy so that we’re playing a larger and long-term role in the Asia Pacific,” President Obama explained on August 2, 2016. The United States has “a massive interest in maintaining itself as a Asia Pacific power.”

With its approach, the Obama administration has also pursued a familiar objective for the region. While the administration may have presented its pivot and rebalance as a major shift in U.S. strategy, the leaders of the United States have spent many decades working to position the United States as a Pacific power.

When the Obama administration first began to tout the idea of a pivot and rebalance to the region during late 2011, analysts at the Congressional Research Service acknowledged that the administration’s approach resembled existing U.S. strategy. “Much of the ‘pivot’ to the Asia-Pacific is a continuation and expansion of policies already undertaken by previous administrations, as well as earlier in President Obama’s term,” the analysts reported.

More recently, the Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook has made a similar argument. Asked in early July 2016 about the increased number of U.S. patrols in the South China Sea, Cook responded by saying that “what we’re doing in that part of the world is consistent with what we’ve been doing for decades.” Indeed, Cooke defended the operations by acknowledging that the United States has historically maintained a powerful presence in the area. “There’s nothing new about what the United States is doing,” he added.

At the same time, the Obama administration has acted in ways consistent with the idea that it is directing a pivot and rebalance to the Asia Pacific region. Beyond its actions in the South China Sea, the administration has designed and implemented a series of new military and economic initiatives that are significantly deepening U.S. involvement throughout the area.

In the first place, the Obama administration has worked to reinforce the U.S. military presence. In spite of the fact that the U.S. Pacific Command managed about 300,000 personnel at the start of the administration’s time in office, the Obama administration has decided to increase the overall presence of U.S. forces in the area.

Currently, “we’re moving more of our forces to the region,” Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter explained in a written statement to the Senate Committee on Armed Services in March 2016. Providing more details, Carter specified that “we’re developing and implementing new posture initiatives - in places like Guam, the Northern Marianas, the Philippines, Australia, and Singapore,

as well as modernizing our existing footprint in Korea and Japan - and continuing to strengthen existing partnerships and develop new ones, from India to Vietnam.”

The following month, the State Department official Antony J. Blinken provided additional confirmation of the military buildup. The Obama administration is “rotating American personnel into new and more places, like northern Australia and new sites in the Philippines and modernizing our existing footprint in Japan and the Republic of Korea,” Blinken confirmed.

Moreover, a number of U.S. officials have wanted to see the Obama administration do even more. Despite the fact that the Obama administration has now expanded the U.S. presence to include approximately 360,000 personnel throughout the region, some officials have called for a stronger military presence.

Today, “the question I have is do we have a big enough stick over there,” the Representative Bradley Byrne stated during a congressional hearing in early July 2016. In other words, Byrne wanted to know whether the Obama administration maintained a strong enough military presence to successfully intimidate its rivals. “Do we have the right military assets in place in the right place to do what we need to do to fulfill the objectives of the United States both militarily and otherwise?” Byrne asked.

Facing such pressure, the Obama administration has only felt more justified in its approach. Since it has already significantly reinforced U.S. military power throughout the area, the administration has confidently responded to its critics by pointing the increase in military activities.

“We’re building our own capabilities in the region,” the Defense Department official Abraham M. Denmark assured the Congressman. “Our operations tempo has increased.”

In fact, the Obama administration has done even more to strengthen U.S. power in the area. Rather than relying solely on its big stick to keep the United States positioned as a Pacific power, the Obama administration has made a major effort to play a more direct role in shaping the region’s economic development.

Specifically, the Obama administration has worked to implement a new regional trading pact called the Trans-Pacific Partnership to acquire more economic leverage over the region. By working closely with its regional partners to implement the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the administration has sought to more effectively define the rules of regional trade and exchange.

The passage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership “would reinforce our economic power,” Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter explained in a speech in April 2015. Consequently, “it is probably one of the most important parts of the rebalance.”

Later in 2015, the U.S. diplomat Caroline Kennedy similarly identified the proposed trade deal as a key element of U.S. strategy. The Trans-Pacific Partnership is “an agreement of strategic importance” that will more tightly “bind” the United States to “the entire Asia-Pacific region,” Kennedy stated. With her comments, Kennedy indicated that the pact would significantly strengthen the staying power of the United States in the area.

More recently, the Secretary of State John Kerry has simply repeated the same basic argument. The implementation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership “will not only reinforce our economic preeminence,” but it will also “solidify our alliances” and “tie us to countries that we need to help us,” Kerry stated.

Clearly, administration officials agree that the passage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership will help them fulfill their regional strategy. Viewing the proposed trade pact as a powerful strategic tool,

they continually defend the measure as a strategically important initiative that will more firmly anchor the position of the United States in the Asia Pacific region.

"I support TPP because of its important strategic benefits," President Obama stated in May 2016.

By pushing ahead with the Trans-Pacific Partnership, administration officials also insist that they are more likely to achieve their broader regional objectives. While their critics continue to fear that the administration is not doing enough to assert U.S. power in the area, administration officials remain confident that they are using every tool at their disposal to keep the United States positioned as the dominant power in the Pacific.

"Do not doubt for second we're a Pacific power," Vice President Joe Biden declared during his visit to the region in July 2016. "We are here to stay."

Indeed, administration officials are working to ensure that the United State plays one of the most powerful roles in the Pacific. With their so-called pivot and rebalance to Asia, they are simply making their latest move to maintain U.S. dominance.

"In terms of my rebalance legacy, across the board we are just in the game," President Obama has insisted.

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P.S.

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<http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/08/24/maintaining-u-s-dominance-in-the-pacific/>

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