

The 'Pivot' Has Run Out of Puff

Michael Fullilove, US News & the World Report, 4 December 2013

Despite Joe Biden's Asia trip, Obama's foreign policy has seemed Atlantic-focused recently

Joe Biden is in Asia this week on a trip designed to improve relations with China, an emerging superpower and rival of the United States, but also to reassure U.S. allies such as Japan and South Korea of America's staying power in the face of China's rise.

On this trip, however, the vice president will find that the wind is in face, rather than at his back. There is a growing perception in Asia that the Obama administration's much-ballyhooed "pivot to Asia" has run out of puff.

The "pivot" – or to use the administration's preferred term, the "rebalance" – was the most important foreign-policy initiative of President Obama's first term. It makes powerful strategic sense for the United States to rebalance its foreign policy toward Asia, where so many of its future opportunities and challenges lie.

Wealth and power are shifting eastward. China's economy is expected to be the world's biggest within the next five years; it is already the world's largest source of economic growth, the largest exporter of goods and the second-largest importer of goods. It holds more U.S. Treasury securities than any other country.

The Asian region is also the home of established economic powers such as Japan, still the world's third largest economy, as well as emerging economic powerhouses such as India and Indonesia.

If the economic outlook in Asia is positive, the security outlook is increasingly unpredictable. The Taiwan Strait is calm, but there are worrying tensions on the Korean peninsula and in the East and South China Seas. In the past week, Beijing's unilateral declaration of an air defense identification zone over disputed territory in the East China Sea has caused widespread disquiet

and ratcheted up tensions between China, Japan and South Korea.

All these challenges make the pivot urgent. If Washington cannot reassure its Asian allies that sequestration and defense cuts will not reduce the U.S. military presence in Asia, they may take matters into their own hands. Equally, China may conclude that America lacks resolve.

Washington must walk a fine line, reassuring allies without emboldening them and projecting strength to China without belligerence. Yet at the moment, friends and adversaries alike are increasingly concluding that America's heart is not in the rebalance.

The problem starts at Foggy Bottom. If it is true that in diplomacy words are bullets, then trip itineraries are battle plans. Whereas Hillary Clinton's first official trip as Secretary of State took in Tokyo, Jakarta, Seoul and Beijing, the itinerary of John Kerry's first trip felt like something from the 1990s: London, Berlin, Paris, Rome, Ankara, Cairo, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha.

Clinton was punctilious in paying attention to Asia. Kerry has made many visits to the Middle East during his time in office; his visits to Asia, by contrast, have been brief and unremarkable. Notwithstanding his energy and ambition, he is in danger of being pigeonholed as an old-fashioned Atlanticist.

No one would level this accusation at President Obama. But a combination of troubles abroad and political dysfunction at home are distracting him from the rebalance. In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September, Obama said he would focus his diplomatic efforts on ending the fighting in Syria, blunting Iran's nuclear program and bringing peace to the Holy Land. These initiatives are important – but are they all more important than securing America's future in Asia?

Then in October, Obama missed the APEC summit in Bali and the East Asia summit in Brunei because of the budget impasse and resulting government shutdown in Washington.

Of course, it is hard to pivot a country as big and unruly as the United States. One example of a pivot took place between 1939

and 1941, between the outbreak of the war in Europe and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. During this period, America remade itself from an anxious, isolationist, middle power into a confident, forward-leaning great power.

President Obama's challenge is not analogous to that facing President Roosevelt. China's foreign policy is in no way expansionist; a prosperous and strong China is in the world's interest.

Still, there is much at stake. Unless the United States reaffirms its presence in the Pacific, the region faces strategic imbalances and the prospect of dangerous rivalries. Washington should seek to cooperate with Beijing, but also renew America's presence in Asia and maintain a balance of forces in the region at a time when there is uncertainty about China's future behavior.

This will require the sustained attention of the whole administration, however – not just that of Joe Biden, welcome though he is in our part of the world. If Barack Obama wishes to achieve his declared ambition of being "the Pacific president," he needs to show the Pacific countries that America is here to stay.