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Article

The Rebalance to Asia Policy of the Obama Administration (2011–2017): Diversifying the United States Security Design in Asia-Pacific

Abstract: *The gradual and steady growth of China's economic and military power over the past decades has reoriented the foreign policy priority of the United States from the Middle East to the East Asian region. In 2011, U.S. embarked in a strategic repositioning effort focused on Asia-Pacific initially named the "Pivot to Asia" and subsequently assumed by the administration of President Barack Obama as the "Rebalance to Asia". A qualitative analysis of the official documents and of the discourses considered relevant for the strategy reveals that the pivoting policy provided six key lines of action oriented on three axes: diplomatic, economic and military, indicating an American foreign policy oriented towards preserving its dominant position in the North-east Asian and Southeast Asian regions and maintaining the status-quo while facing China's evident rise of influence in Asia. Within the Rebalance policy, engaging regional multilateral institutions had the main purpose to create a stable system of norms corresponding to the international rules supported by organizations capable to enforce them. Also, strengthening relations between*

the United States' regional allies in order to better integrate alliances had an essential role and ensured diversification of the U.S.'s strategic approach beyond the enduring Hub & Spokes paradigm, notably with states of the Asia-Pacific region interested in reducing China's influence in the area, who regarded the American strategy as a way to diminish their own exposure to China's rising power.

This study aims to contribute to the theoretical de-

bate over the rebalancing policy, emphasizing on the reconfiguration of the regional security design, with the scope of improving the security mechanism in Asia-Pacific region envisioned by the Pivot. The conclusions concern the extent to which the modernization of the regional security architecture has been accomplished in order to correspond to the strategic objective of consolidating the United States influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords: ASEAN; Pivot; Rebalance to Asia; regional security

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1. Introduction

In April 17, 2014, an U.S. Senate report related to recommendations for the adjustment of the “Rebalance to Asia” policy, was quoting in its preamble the American Secretary of State John Hay who, in 1900, had declared that “the Mediterranean is the ocean of the past, the Atlantic the ocean of the present, and the Pacific is the ocean of the future” (US Senate, 2014).

After a decade long policy of U.S. active involvement in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, hoping to set a pacification template (Galtung, 2005: 31), the arrival of President Barack Obama in office in January 2009 has marked a shift in the American foreign policy priorities, concretized by the “Rebalance to Asia” policy, also referred to as the “Pivot to Asia”.

In November 2011, President Barack Obama addressed the Parliament of Australia, in a speech considered the official symbol of the United States’ launch of the Rebalance to Asia policy, as the American President asserted America’s persistent strategic interests that required the U.S.’s “persistent presence in the region” (The White House, 2011).

Ever since her confirmation hearing as Secretary of State at the beginning of 2009, Hilary Clinton was calling for a new strategic vision driven by an “intelligent diplomacy” (US Senate, 2009), signaling the intention of the Obama Administration to substantially engage into the Western Pacific Rim political area.

Another manifestation of the Obama Administration’s adjusting priority interest towards the Pacific area, through a „broad, deep and sustained involvement in Asia“, had been formulated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the ASEAN Regional Forum (Association for Southeast Asian Nations) in Hanoi, Vietnam, in July 2010, followed by an article published in the magazine Foreign Policy in the fall of 2011, announcing a „pivotal point“ (Clinton, 2011), the shift of the priority interest of the U.S. foreign policy agenda from the Middle East area to the Asia-Pacific area.

The Rebalance strategy had no dedicated official paper (as in the case of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” issued in 2017 by the Donald Trump Administration), except for its military dimension, but the large number of public speeches related to the strategy of the Obama Administration have been repeatedly consistent in unveiling the policy’s guiding parameters.

The American initiative was a response to the trend of global power shifting towards the Asia-Pacific basin resulting from the constant growth of China’s economic, political and military influence, and from the assertion of the “Asian Tigers”, naming Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea.

The U.S.’s endeavour was doubled by the need to reassure the regional allies and partners after the strong economic impact produced by the US subprime and credit crisis in 2008 and to reaffirm the power of the United States in terms of the ability to control the recurrent financial crises and their consequences. Thus, the White House reacted by promoting rebalancing strategies to Asian Pacific, in order to engage more deeply and assert its own interests in the region and to promote its values that represent an essential part of the constant attempt to universalize the international norms set by the U.S.A. ever since the end of the Second World War.

The Pivot to Asia, as part of a U.S. foreign policy prompted to reorient its strategic priority, to engage politically in the area and to assign significant resources, emphasized the role of the United States as a „pacific power“. Its directive was materialized by strengthening the ties with regional defence treaty allies (Japan, Australia, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines), by deepening relations with emerging powers such as India, Vietnam, Singapore and

Indonesia and by a substantial American engagement into regional organizations, especially in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) that has been supported and centralized by the pivotal policy as the most comprehensive regional forum. In this respect, the United States signed ASEAN's founding Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in July 2009. Efforts in improving the participation of the United States in APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) and EAS (East Asia Summit) were also on the agenda of the Pivot.

However, due to the policy's different objectives, the intense diplomatic dimension and its declared aim to empower regional institutions and to expand economic ties between the U.S. and the rising economies of the Asia-Pacific region, experts are divided in the interpretation of the results of the strategy and the ways in which it can be theorized and the first part of this article is devoted to the opinions formulated by experts regarding the framing of the pivoting strategy of the Obama Administration in a formula to abide theorizing. The second part is dedicated to the stated objectives of the policy that encompass the purpose of this paper, detailed in the third part of such, focusing on the actual accomplishments of the Pivot regarding the intended multilateralism promoted by the strategy. Assuming that the foreign policy strategy of the Pivot was not primarily aimed at delimitation within a theoretical framework, but to adapt the U.S.'s posture to the fast changing geopolitical circumstances in East Asia, the conclusions are limited to the results concerning modernization of the regional security architecture built on multilateral relations, envisioned by the Rebalance to Asia policy in order to consolidate the United States influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

2. The theoretical debate over the Pivot strategy

As the rebalancing policy had three different vectors: diplomacy – backed by the neoliberal political establishment, economic – expressing a liberal view, and military – grounded on a realist perspective, the scholar approach is often segmented on each vector in order to be consistent with the existing IR theories. For a non-segmented theoretical approach, an analysis of the Pivot in terms of its medium and long-term results would be required.

Due to the declared aims regarding cooperation with the countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including China, promoting free trade and economic prosperity in the region, the economic component was largely integrated in the liberal logic. On the contrary, the military dimension was interpreted in terms of defensive realism due to its objective to increase the U.S. military presence in the area, to provide assistance and military equipment to the regional allies and to strengthen the ties between the United States and its regional allies. In an opinion, it was considered that the military dimension represents an application of the deterrence theory (Ratner, 2013). Other opinions consider that the Pivot is directed to China, in a mix of strategies used by American administrations during the Cold War and the strategy is not relevant as a whole neither for a realist nor for a liberal approach or a constructivist one (He 2018). The perspective on the Pivot in terms of the realist IR school of thought could also be the result of the clearly defined military nuances of the strategy that overwhelmed the other dimensions.

Campbell defines the Pivot as a strategy “seeking to shape the contours of China's rise” (Campbell, 2016: 12) and lists its ten points plan, with a focus on strengthening ties with the regional allies on bilateral and multilateral level as the scaffolding of the Asian balance of power, on managing the relation with China while finding common ground in order to overcome the “Thucydides gap” (a classical realist notion), on updating and modernizing the

American military capabilities in the region and on engaging in multilateral bodies that have the power to shape and shore up the rules and norms in the region on issues of profound consequences to US interests (Campbell, 2016: 197-200).

China viewed the American rebalancing as a „major strategic challenge“ (Zhang, 2016), to which it was obliged to respond firmly, manifesting itself within the imperative to maintain a balanced approach to Chinese strategies. Chinese scholars have considered that the Pivot was an exercise of „smart power“, a skilful coordination of hard power and soft power in international relations, supported by force, using flexible diplomatic means and being good at creating and using crises with the scope of intervening in regional affairs (Hu and Meng, 2020). The Belt and Road Initiative adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 is often considered by the Chinese experts a response to the American Rebalance strategy (Yong, 2016).

The policy has various interpretations, centred on either the realist perspective or on the liberal one: although it emphasizes political and military objectives, it is nevertheless also reflecting the American need for trade and economic cooperation with the states of Asia. As a result, the criticism on the „Rebalancing towards Asia“ policy is mostly related to its inconsistency, to the lack of an ideological component and to the missing theoretical support in the IR realm, which created difficulties to the experts in the academic world attempting to theorize the strategy. In terms of ideology, in 2016, Campbell explained that the strategy was intended “to prevent the collective dominance of a group of ideologically aligned states rather than the rise of one particular hegemon” (Campbell, 2016: 142).

Criticism over the tactics of the Pivot was formulated with regard to the instability created by the policy in the area (allies versus non-allies), the undermining of the U.S.-China relations and the weakening influence of the United States outside the Asian Pacific area due to the excessive resources invested in the Rebalance. Others suggested that the strategy represents a return to the Guam Doctrine of Nixon Administration (Green, 2017). Some authors categorized the Pivot as a containment policy, but arguments regarding a new version of the Cold War’s containment strategy applicable to China predates the Rebalance policy (Shambaugh, 1996). The pivoting strategy itself has its roots in the shift towards Asia incipient policy (Silove, 2016) of George W. Bush Administration regarding the necessity to achieve interoperability between U.S. military and its regional allies on bilateral level and to increase their military capabilities. The arguments for containment were mainly grounded (i) on the exclusion of China from the Trans-Pacific Partnership project, and multilateral economic agreement that never came into force as it has been discarded by Donald Trump once in the presidential position and (ii) on the clear military dimension of the policy.

The debate around the Pivot sustains a realist perspective, as it focused on deepening or building potential new U.S. alliances and partnerships with Asian states other than China, as in the case of the military agreements with the regional allies or the TPP trade agreement, where the U.S. provided leadership and represented the essential voice in the decision-making of such. An assessment of the actual accomplishments of the policy proved to be stable in the realist view and were maintained in part by the subsequent FOIP policy (Free and Open Indo-Pacific). The liberal perspective is also acceptable as the Pivot envisioned cooperation by building and sustaining key international institutions in the region and creating global governance.

3. Strategic objectives of the Rebalance policy

In absence of a framework document of the Obama's Administration regarding the Rebalance to Asia, six key lines of action have been drafted: „strengthening bilateral security alliances, deepening working relations with emerging powers in the region – including China, collaboration with multilateral regional institutions, expanding trade and investment, creating a broad-based military presence and promoting democracy and human rights“ (Silove, 2016). One essential goal of the policy was “to sustain and strengthen America's leadership in the Asia-Pacific region and to improve security” (Clinton, 2010) alongside heightening prosperity and promoting the American values. The main tools of American engagement in Asia were identified as alliances, emerging partnerships and the work with regional institutions (Clinton, 2010).

Several diplomatic, economic and military-strategic components of the 2011 U.S. rebalancing policy have been designed to operationalize the strategy, such as strengthening political and economic relations with the states in the region, bolstering existing alliances and initiating military relations in the area, improving of the United States' participation into regional organizations, increasing the volume of exports of American companies to the Asian market.

An extensive description of the courses of action and the diplomatic, economic and military components of the 2011 rebalancing strategy are detailed and defended in the book „The Pivot“ belonging to Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Policy in the Obama Administration, considered the main strategy's architect.

The need to include and expand the role of the United States in the regional security design of Asia-Pacific was considered the most relevant objective of the Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy (Graham, 2013), targeting several directions: to maintain a strong and modern U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region, strengthening relations with allies and regional partnerships and strengthening contacts with regional organizations, developing more cooperative relationships, expanding economic partnerships through regional trade agreements, establishing partnerships with emerging democracies in the region to strengthen internal governance mechanisms.

The political dimension was supported by intensive diplomacy led by President Barack Obama, advocating for an active American participation in multilateral regional institutions. However, this dimension was also the most criticized, as relatively few American government officials were involved in the enforcement of the policy, allowing civilian agencies to handle its directives to a large extent (Katagiri, 2019).

The economic dimension of the pivoting policy represented an alteration of the U.S. strategic narrative, turning its main focus on the Asia-Pacific, in an attempt to revive the slowing U.S. economy after the financial crises of 2008 and trying to pull out the American military from the costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The said dimension was reflected in the provisions of the Agreement on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, concluded in February 2016, which, however, was not ratified by the U.S. and President Donald Trump withdrew the signature of the United States in January 2017. However, the agreement entered into force without the American side, thanks to Japan's efforts, under the name of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), currently being overshadowed by the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), concluded in November 2020 under Chinese coordination. United States are not a party in RCEP.

The most structured component of the policy, the military-strategic dimension, was presented in a U.S. Department of Defense document, „Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for the Defense of the 21st Century“, released in January 2012. The document stated that the United States economic and security interests were inseparably linked to the contribution of the U.S. military to contribute to the global security in the region within an area geographically described from “the Western Pacific and Asia East to the Indian Ocean region and South Asia”. The military dimension of the rebalancing policy was championed by US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who detailed the regional military cooperation component at the Shangri-La Dialogue forum in the summer of 2012.

Despite its critics, this dimension of the Pivot’s strategy offered a perception of stability and security to the allies of the United States in the area, in the general context of accelerated growth of the political, economic and military influence of China over the nations of the region, resulting into increased political influence on the states with frail economies in that area.

The commitment of the United States related to strengthening the United States alliances in Asia-Pacific in order to ensure the security of the area is considered to this day the most substantial achievement of the American rebalancing: the strategic partnership with Singapore (2012), the strategic partnership with Vietnam (2013), the strategic partnership with Malaysia (2014). The enhanced defense cooperation agreement (EDCA), concluded in 2014 between the U.S. and the Philippines allowed the rotation of U.S. troops on the territory of the Philippine state, as well as the construction and operation by the U.S. military of the Philippines’ military facilities (without the right of the US to establish permanent military bases) and allowed local personnel’s access to U.S. air and sea vessels.

Also, the Maritime Security Initiative, launched at the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue, was meant to work with the countries involved in the initiative (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam) to improve their ability to detect and exchange information on each other’s air and maritime activity in the South China Sea, by building a joint capability of the countries to address some maritime challenges, by expanding exercises and by focusing on raising regional maritime domain awareness (MDA) and moving towards the creation of a common operating pictures (COP).

4. Pivot’s vision for a modernized regional security architecture

The complex political environment and the specificity of the security challenges in the Asia-Pacific region underpinned a key objective of the Pivot, to reconfigure regional security design beyond the traditional bilateral ties established by the Hub & Spokes strategy (Campbell, 2016: 199), by linking allies and partners together in common purpose (Campbell, 2016: 204), in addition to strengthening relations with the allied states of the region.

Such modernization of the American security approach to Asia-Pacific required to identify appropriate vehicles that could contribute to the coagulation of such body, considering the particularities of the area: the high variety of cultures and political systems, the sensitive differences between the levels of development, as many of them emerged as independent states in the decolonization process after the Second World War, the absence of historic alliances between the Southeast Asian nations or their sense of mutual distrust that many scholars highlight in the analyses of the respective political space.

The Pivot aimed at altering the regional security approach in order to ensure cooperation through multilateral security institutions in addition to the existing bilateral alliances, tightening multilateral dialogue with U.S.'s allies, while also incorporating U.S. strategy towards China and integrating the deepening of security cooperation with India and Vietnam. The consolidation of a multilateral security network allowed for better coordination between the allied states and aimed at sharing the burden and better consistency of the responsibilities of each ally. Within the multilateral security framework, the „Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative“ launched at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2015 helped building a multilateral maritime security network that facilitates information sharing, identifying potential threats and working collaboratively to address common challenges (US Embassy & Consulates in Indonesia, 2022) between the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and the U.S.

The rebalance policy was particularly successful in trilateral security cooperation: the U.S.-Japan-South Korea dialogue improved coordination among U.S. allies in the region and the U.S.-Japan-India trilateral dialogue contributed to improvement of strategic coordination between the three states. The reduced number of parties of the trilateral dialogue offered a greater degree of flexibility than the multilateral approach, focusing the discussion agenda on specific issues of interest for each party engaged in the dialogue.

In terms of the American engagement into the regional organizations, two significant achievements of the rebalancing policy in the security architecture diversification have been considered: the U.S. joining the East Asia Summit (EAS) turned into an important regional forum for security as a result of the American efforts, and the substantial stimulation of ASEAN's importance on the global stage enforced by the Strategic Partnership concluded between ASEAN and the United States in November 2015.

East Asia Summit is a broad-based initiative (initially named East Asian Economic Group), intended to create a free trade area among the Southeast Asian and East Asian nations, with the scope to coagulate a trade block comparable to the European Union consecrated by the Maastricht Treaty and to the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), both concluded in 1992. Upon its creation, a strong opposition came from the United States who considered the initiative an attempt to duplicate and undermine APEC (Muni 2006). The participation of President Barack Obama in the Summit at the end of 2011 was appreciated as a step forward in the Pivot's objective regarding the American commitment to engage in the Asia-Pacific institutions and to provide leadership in the multilateral architecture of the region. The East Asian Summit is considered today the main forum for political and strategic dialogue in the Indo-Pacific, both the United States and China being members of the format.

In November 2009, during his first visit to Japan, President Obama stated that the approach to China was to focus on the American interests (The White House, 2009) and considered ASEAN to be a catalyst for Southeast Asian dialogue, cooperation and security. The engagement of the United States with ASEAN within the framework of rebalancing strategy was intended to be a mechanism to bring closer relations on multiple levels, between the U.S. and Southeast Asian states and to „pursue the convergence of interests between ASEAN states and major external powers“ (Rubiolo, 2020). One of the main concerns of ASEAN member states was represented by the potential conflict escalation in the South China Sea following China's assertion of the Nine Dash Line, which represented an indication of the increasing multi-leveled asymmetry between the power of the member states of the Association and China, with a distribution of power clearly favourable to China. In 2012, ASEAN's attempt to issue a joint

communicate with China due to the disagreement on the text related to the South China Sea disputes. In this context, the role assumed by the U.S. consisted in ensuring a zonal balance, as an extra-regional power that had the necessary capabilities for both for a credible engagement with the parties involved.

Within the American pivot strategy, the United States offered increased international importance to ASEAN, affirming ASEAN's centrality, materialized by intensifying collaboration notably with member countries interested in reducing China's influence over them, who saw the American strategy as a way to diminish their own exposure to China's rising power.

The role granted to ASEAN among the regional bodies of particular importance on the international level corresponds to the strategic interests of the United States to ensure its presence and exercise its economic, diplomatic and strategic-military influence in the region. The steps made within the Pivot strategy deepened the U.S.-ASEAN ties, but did not result into an enlargement of the regional security framework in the area for multiple reasons: the Association have built its security mechanism set on the regional customary norms corroborated with the ASEAN's assumed non-alignment position meant to protect the national interests of each member state without being caught in the great powers rivalry (the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN Security Outlooks are suggestive in this respect). Also, ASEAN was at the core of an array of important regional platforms of regional cooperation, such as the APEC forum, EAS, ASEAN Plus Three or ASEAN Regional Forum. However, ASEAN has embraced the American effort to boost its role as the axis of the regional balance of power and as a key contributor to South Asia's strategic autonomy.

5. Conclusions

The U.S. rebalancing towards Asia policy initiated in 2011 has started a new period of intensifying and prioritizing the foreign policy strategic focus of the United States over the Asia-Pacific region, which, although significantly modified in the mandate of President Donald Trump, continues to manifest itself as a priority axis projection of the interests of the United States. The programmatic strategy document „Asia-Pacific Rebalancing 2025“ is a relevant proof in this regard in consideration of its guiding lines concerning the ongoing efforts to align Asia strategy within the U.S. government and with allies and partners, strengthening the capacity, capability, resilience, and interoperability of allies and partners, developing innovative capabilities and concepts for US forces and sustaining and expanding the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region (Green et al., 2016).

The sustained efforts of the American diplomacy in the sense of engaging into regional multilateral bodies, as well as strengthening the relations of the United States with its regional allies and between the allies themselves constituted steps meant to adapt and update the approach of the American security architecture in the Asia-Pacific, in front of the complexity of the security threats in the region.

However, the characteristics of the political area of East Asia in a generic way are delimited by the great economic, military and cultural differences in the region. As a result, a comprehensive, multilateral security body did not emerge and has not turned into a viable prospect to this day, at least not in the absence of a security threat that would require coordination and the close cooperation between the states of the region to remove the danger.

Also, the participation of the United States in the structures with security components of significant regional multilateral bodies was received with reservations, because the states in the proximity of China avoid being caught in the rivalry between the United States and China. Even in the case of security alliances, most of the allied states of the United States have a long tradition of isolation (except for Australia), political preferences, economic interests and large agendas with disputable content (to name one, the South China Sea overlapping claims), which makes collaboration difficult. Under these conditions, the success of the American goal of diversifying security policies in the region was limited, because the pivoting strategy could not report the crystallization of a viable collective security institution during the Obama Administration or later. The absence of a framework document that could have clarified the role and purpose of the strategy could have helped the collaboration with the allies and would have diminished their reservations, as well as that of the member states in the regional bodies.

However, the shortcomings of the Pivot policy are not insurmountable in terms of diversifying the U.S.' security design in the Asia-Pacific through a multilateral approach, if flexibility is acquired considering the specifics of the area. The modernization of the San Francisco system will most likely lean on the U.S.'s shoulders, requiring time, stability and irrevocable trust building, in order to be absorbed by the traditionally isolated and reluctant Oriental culture that adds to the complex agenda generated by China's political, economic, technological and military rise. Identifying common interest of all parties involved is also necessary to the extent that each ally and partner contemplates not only its individual national security, but also the stability and preservation of peace in the entire Asia-Pacific region.

This author of this paper considers that, in political terms, the Rebalancing to Asia strategy is an expression of an offshore balancing policy, as major efforts in all the dimensions of the policy were concretized in burden sharing and increasing responsibility of the regional allies, doubled by the American enhanced support and promotion on the global stage of representative regional bodies to become strong, credible voices in the security architecture of the area, capable to play an active role in the regional geopolitics.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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