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America's Quest for a New Equilibrium with Asia: Pivoting to Surrogacy?

By Emrys Chew and Alan Chong

Synopsis

US Secretary of State John Kerry, attending the ASEAN Regional Forum in Brunei on his first official trip to Southeast Asia, has reaffirmed the salience of America's "pivot" to Asia. This "rebalancing" of US strategic priorities has called for increasingly sophisticated approaches to matters of mutual interest and concern in the region.

Commentary

BY HIS very presence at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Brunei this week, US Secretary of State John Kerry turned his first official trip to Southeast Asia into a reaffirmation of the rebalancing policy his predecessor Hillary Clinton had initiated. In her *Foreign Policy Magazine* article of October 2011, then Secretary Clinton introduced America's diplomatic and military-strategic "pivot" toward Asia as prologue to "America's Pacific Century":

"Open markets in Asia provide the United States with unprecedented opportunities for investment, trade, and access to cutting-edge technology Strategically, maintaining peace and security across the Asia-Pacific is increasingly crucial to global progress, whether through defending freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, countering the proliferation efforts of North Korea, or ensuring transparency in the military activities of the region's key players."

A "Pacific pivot" arising from imperial advocacy

Yet Clinton's evocation of a United States poised to increase its stake in the Asia-Pacific was hardly the first time America was "pivoting" to Asia. As an "empire of liberty" that emancipated the Philippines (1898-1946), America progressively championed liberal democracy. Historically, American policy towards Southeast Asia has revolved around ideological and existential challenges as complex as civilising mission, communist counter-insurgency, and counter-terrorism – from critical moments of high involvement to occasional lapses into disenchantment.

The Asia-Pacific system underpinned by the San Francisco Treaty (1951-52) still embodies American efforts to forge trade and security partnerships with Asian capitalist economies, in a worldwide strategy to contain communism. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO, 1954-77), a collective defence organisation formed during the Cold War, is likewise remembered as Washington's attempt to mastermind an Asian regional

equivalent of NATO.

One cannot forget the poignant scene in the press photo of that last US Huey helicopter, preparing for takeoff from the rooftop of CIA quarters, Saigon, on April 29, 1975, even as a bedraggled beeline of humanity queued desperately to board the remaining “chariot of freedom.” In what proved to be decolonisation’s closing sequence, those left behind would become part of Saigon’s capitulation to North Vietnamese forces and its subsequent assimilation into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Today’s Vietnam is a burgeoning paradox: a heady mix of politically sanitised, do-it-yourself entrepreneurial practices, intoning the hybrid mantra of a market economy with socialist orientation. Crucially, Vietnam now adopts a pro-American stance of its own volition, while America’s “pivot” still sits uncomfortably with political realities here.

The Obama Administration has done well to couch the “pivot” in terms of America’s “rebalancing” to Asia: revitalised bilateral security alliances; renewed relationships with rising powers, including China; re-engagement with regional multilateral institutions; and reinforced economic and military-strategic partnerships, preferably not at the expense of democracy or human rights.

Southeast Asia’s myriad paths of self-determination

But Southeast Asian states, as postcolonial entities, value the freedom of setting policy directions with minimal interference from great powers. The unrelenting pursuit of autonomy forms a dominant theme in Southeast Asia’s international order. During the 1950s and 1960s, American frustrations in dealing with Sukarno’s Indonesia, Ngo Dinh Diem’s South Vietnam, U Nu’s Burma and, at times, even Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore, presented more than transitory discomfiture.

In the drive towards state- and nation-building, most Southeast Asian foreign policies were reoriented towards consolidating domestic space by maximising neutral spaces abroad.

The Cold War could be harmonised, demonised, or, more likely, neutralised such that domestic progress would be unaffected. For Burma (later known as Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, foreign policy meant ensuring the great powers did not turn into tigers that might devour them in the political night. There were practical degrees of non-alignment by choice; those taking the side of the Cold War protagonists – the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and post-Sihanouk Cambodia – did so from nationalist aspirations that shared a similar ideological outlook at home.

Interestingly, when the Cold War ended, all of these ideological stalwarts would seek reconciliation with sceptical local adversaries and hostile great powers alike.

In the 2010s, the US “rebalancing” to Asia must be recognised as something more than another predictable rotation away from the post-Vietnam withdrawal syndrome. In form, the recalibration of US forces recalls SEATO: the Marines deployed to Darwin, Australia; the Littoral Combat Ships positioned in Singapore; and somewhat shriller security commitments reaffirmed with Manila, Hanoi, Seoul, and Tokyo.

But these gestures cannot obscure the reality of a more self-confident ensemble of ten independent-minded ASEAN members, of which only two – the Philippines and Thailand – are formal US allies. From Brunei to Cambodia, Malaysia, and Thailand, each state welcomes a reinvigorated American presence on its terms: to counterbalance an assertive China, and to do so in the spirit of fluid, open multilateralism involving India, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Russia, and the European Union. The ARF is but a manifestation of this open multilateralism.

Pivoting from advocacy to surrogacy

The beauty of rebalancing amid this intricate network of surrogacy is that America the “regional policeman” need not be seen clad in starkly heavy-duty, law-enforcement uniform that might polarise wider opinion. Rather, as a favoured guest to whom customary hospitality has been extended, it takes its place at the table, to be sat on a locally-crafted welcome rug. This would be a diplomatic reception hosted by genuine friends of Washington, even if they do not always publicise their affection.

Perhaps with some irony on the occasion of a previous US “pivot” to Asia, a secret State Department Policy Planning Staff Paper of July 1949 had proffered similarly helpful advice, ostensibly drowned out by the Cold War’s alarums:

“In order to minimise suggestions of American imperialist intervention, we should encourage the Indians,

Filipinos, and other Asian states to take the public lead in political matters. Our role should be the offering of discreet support and guidance...”

There is nothing untoward about acting behind one’s surrogates, as Secretary Kerry’s visit to ASEAN this week attests.

Emrys Chew is Assistant Professor of History, and Alan Chong, Associate Professor of International Relations, at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. An earlier version of this commentary was published as part of a special issue on “The U.S. Pivot to Asia,” in The National Strategy Forum Review (Spring 2013).