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Rethinking the Rebalance

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The United States must overhaul its Indo-Pacific strategy since President Barack Obama's "rebalance" to Asia has lost momentum.
- Persistent shortcomings – insufficient resources, lack of a positive trade agenda and an overly China-centric focus – have undermined regional trust in the United States as a reliable partner.
- The failure of the current strategy raises four critical challenges: a narrow focus on Northeast Asia, Taiwan as a test of US resolve, a potential shift to offshore balancing and the growing risk of nuclear proliferation among allies.
- The United States must address these dynamics to protect its interests in an evolving Indo-Pacific.

COMMENTARY

The time has come for the United States to fundamentally rethink its Indo-Pacific strategy.

When President Barack Obama proposed the "rebalance" to Asia, he sought to reorient US foreign policy towards Asia after a decade mired in the Middle East. In a sense, he succeeded. The Trump and Biden administrations both reaffirmed that Asia (later the Indo-Pacific) would be their top regional priority. It is now clear, however, that the United States is unwilling to embrace or unable to execute the core logic of the rebalance strategy. Of the three pillars that Obama emphasised – security, prosperity and good governance – only the security pillar of US strategy remains intact today. But the security pillar is narrowing to Northeast Asia, leaving the United States without a compelling approach to South Asia, Southeast Asia, or the Pacific Islands.



Security has become the primary focus of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, overshadowing its economic and governance pillars. *Image source: Wikimedia Commons.*

Missed Opportunities

Over the last decade, many experts have suggested ways to improve US engagement in the Indo-Pacific. They typically conclude that Washington needs to do three things to be successful in the region: (1) devote additional resources to Asia; (2) implement a positive trade agenda; and (3) engage with regional countries on their own terms, rather than through the lens of China. Unfortunately, the United States has failed in each of these areas, particularly in Southeast Asia. As a result, [Yuen Foong Khong and Joseph Liow](#) recently assessed that, “The region is drifting toward China, a fact that bodes ill for American ambitions in Asia.”

The Trump administration is accentuating many of these faults. If anything, Washington has actually devoted less attention to Asia. To date, President Donald Trump and his Secretary of State Marco Rubio have been to Asia just once between them, but travelled to Europe and the Middle East a combined ten times. Meanwhile, the United States has limited access to US markets while embracing protectionism and coercive economic policies, including against allies and partners in Asia. Critical relationships are suffering, from India to Taiwan, while others are drifting aimlessly.

The United States is now seen in many capitals as the region's most unpredictable actor – what Michael Beckley has called a “[rogue superpower](#)”. Rather than imagining that American leaders will adopt a more enlightened set of policies and be trusted to uphold security, prosperity and good governance across the Indo-Pacific region, it is time to ask what can be done within the confines of a deeply flawed US approach to the region. Going forward, American strategists will have to acknowledge three major constraints.

First, the Indo-Pacific will not receive the resources that Asia experts desired from Washington. The United States will continue to have global responsibilities. Even “prioritisers” in the Pentagon have found themselves authorising new deployments in the Middle East and Latin America, to say nothing of military operations at home. Meanwhile, barring the eruption of a larger conflict, the American people's appetite for additional overseas spending is waning. Although concerns about China can attract bipartisan support, US policymakers will have to make do with the resources they have on hand today.

Second, the United States will not develop and implement a positive economic agenda towards Asia. Democrats and Republicans jointly abandoned the Trans-Pacific

Partnership and its offer of additional US market access. American businesses will continue to invest and operate in the region, but the US government's regional trade and development agendas have evaporated. Limited cooperation on specific economic security initiatives may still be possible, but will be viewed sceptically by many partners. As a result, the United States will be sidelined as regional economic integration accelerates.

Third, regional trust in the United States has eroded, which will limit US options and influence. Kori Schake has [noted](#) that, "No dominant power has ever had so much assistance from others in maintaining its dominance." But the era of Pax Americana is now over. Countries will not align and cooperate as easily with the United States. Even close allies are reshaping their engagement with Washington to protect their independence in the face of US pressure and unpredictability. This is no longer about foreign views of Donald Trump, but perceptions of America itself.

Pivotal Implications

Rather than asking whether these constraints can be reversed, observers should start thinking about how US policy and the Indo-Pacific region will adapt. In some ways, it is too early to sketch out a coherent vision of a reimagined Asia. But four basic implications are already becoming clear. And each one brings with it a major question for American strategists in the years ahead.

First, as security comes to dominate the economic and governance pillars of US strategy, Northeast Asia is once again dominating Washington's thinking. The US focus on security in Northeast Asia will diminish US influence in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Oceania. This will also accelerate the emergence of multipolarity. Absent more robust regional coordination, Beijing could seize this opportunity to dominate the rest of the region. This raises a question for American strategists: Should the United States encourage rising Asian powers to play bigger roles in their sub-regions, particularly India in South Asia and Indonesia in Southeast Asia, even if doing so will sideline Washington and make other regional players more nervous?

Second, as Northeast Asian security comes to dominate US regional engagement, Taiwan will become a litmus test, not only for US allies and partners, but for America itself. Washington's focus on deterring a Taiwan contingency has led it to prioritise countries that can provide either military forces or access to nearby real estate. But by making support for Taiwan the sine qua non of its regional strategy, the United States has set a high bar for its own engagement. This comes at exactly the moment that some US officials and experts are [questioning support for Taiwan](#). If the United States disengages outside Northeast Asia and then stands aside on Taiwan, would this amount to the United States essentially abandoning the entire Asian region?

Third, as China's power and influence in continental Asia grows, the United States might rethink its approach and openly embrace an offshore balancing role. Some US relationships in maritime Asia would remain largely intact, particularly those with Japan and Australia (and, perhaps, the Philippines), which are key hubs for the United States in the region. But US alliances in continental Asia could change or disappear. At greatest risk is the US alliance with Thailand, which already appears to be on borrowed time. But South Korea could once again find Washington asking difficult questions

about whether Seoul should be inside or outside America's defence perimeter in Asia. In short, if the United States adopts an offshore balancing approach, what would this imply for US allies and partners sitting on the Asian continent?

Fourth and finally, a series of shifting regional dynamics suggest that nuclear proliferation in Asia is a real and growing risk. American allies in Asia have avoided proliferation for 80 years by relying on US extended deterrence. But these arrangements are under threat due to China's and North Korea's nuclear modernisations as well as American unpredictability. As a result, some regional players are starting to reconsider their rejection of nuclear weapons. Traditionally, this would have spurred a forceful response from Washington. Yet, some strategists are rethinking this approach and asking whether the United States should [permit allies to go nuclear](#). How should the United States react if its allies and partners pursue independent nuclear options?

The world ahead will be more complex and dangerous. The logic of US strategy is shifting. Questions about rising powers, Taiwan, continental alliances and nuclear proliferation will be critical for US policymakers in the years ahead. Past strategies will not dictate future policies – change is not only possible but inevitable. As the United States adapts, so too will the Indo-Pacific. American strategists must accept the world they have shaped and craft realistic approaches to protect US interests in this evolving region. For better or worse, the time has come to rethink the rebalance.

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