

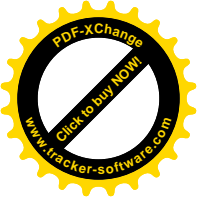
## **Rebalancing that Needs to Be Balanced: China's Perception of the U.S.' Rebalancing to Asia**

*By Zhixin Zhang*

The U.S. “rebalancing,” or initially “pivoting,” to Asia has aroused suspicion and criticism from China since the Obama administration formally put forward the strategy in the Fall of 2011. Most Chinese share the notion, as suggested in China’s recently-published national defense white paper, that by strengthening its military presence and reinforcing its alliances, the U.S. is not only creating more tensions in the Asia-Pacific region but also antagonizing the external environment for China’s peaceful rise. To better achieve the goal of the rebalancing strategy, the U.S. needs to adopt a more balanced stance toward China and demonstrate more sincerity and determination to help shape a regional order that truly benefits all.

In fact, China’s initial observations of the U.S. strategic shift can be traced back to July 2010 when Secretary Clinton reasserted U.S. interests in “preserving freedom of navigation and regional security” in the South China Sea at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Since then, there has been heated debate in China about the approach, objectives, and consequences of the shift in the U.S.’ strategic focus; these implications are especially pertinent to China’s peripheral strategic environment. Since 2011, Chinese strategic thinkers appear to have reached three major consensuses. First, the U.S. rebalancing is a long-planned strategy that will project many years into the future. As President Obama said at the 2011 APEC Summit, the U.S. “is here to stay.” Second, the U.S. aims to achieve this strategy through a comprehensive approach incorporating military, diplomatic, and economic elements, though it will alter the combination of such elements to generate the “smart power” optimal to meet different situations on hand. Finally, considering the difficult recovery of the U.S. economy, it will take a long time for the strategy to fully develop, and China must act patiently and prudently to maximize the potential for strategic cooperation with the U.S.

Despite unsettled debate in China regarding the policymaking origins of the rebalancing policy, most Chinese see the strategy rooted in two major U.S. national security concerns. One is “strategic anxiety” caused by China’s and other Asian powers’ rapid economic and geopolitical rise over the past decade. Four years before, the U.S. had largely ignored this part of the world for so long that it could not be considered a major player in regional affairs and regional integration initiatives such as the East Asian Summit (EAS), ARF, and “ASEAN-plus;” its global leadership in this part of the world was declining. The other concern is more imminent—the U.S. economy. Facing an uncertain economic recovery and a persistently high unemployment rate, President Obama announced the “National Export Initiative (NEI)” in his 2010 State of the Union Address, aiming to double U.S. exports over the next 5 years. Achieving this objective depended on how well the U.S. increased its engagement with the Asia-Pacific economies and adapted to the China-driven regional economic trade bloc. Thus, it was natural for the U.S. to deploy its diplomatic and military influence in the region to create opportunities for expanding its economic ties, a tactic described by some Chinese as “building the stage with military engagement to make room for the economy to sing.”

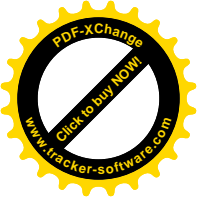


Will the U.S. rebalancing benefit China and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole? It is difficult to say. For the time being, many Americans point to the escalating security situation on the Korean Peninsula and the Diaoyu Islands conflict and say, “See, things would have gone much worse without our reassuring and stabilizing efforts.” However, most Chinese believe that many of the ongoing crises would never have happened – or would have been minimized – had the U.S. not “returned” to the region with a self-interested policy disguised in altruistic statements. Would Japan have risked hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth in annual exports to China in order to “purchase” the Diaoyu Islands – over whose sovereignty the forefathers of both countries farsightedly agreed four decades ago to “shelve the disputes” – without U.S. endorsement and reassurance? Would Vietnam and the Philippines have ignored the principle of “shelving disputes and joint development” as stipulated in the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in South China Sea (DOC), and attempted unilateral exploration of marine resources in disputed territories? To many observers (not only the Chinese), the region has become *less* secure since the U.S. rebalancing. Consequently, the U.S. finds itself in a dilemma balancing its security commitments to allies and its relationship with China. In other words, the U.S.’ efforts to forestall regional conflicts in the future have caused unintended burdens at present.

Moreover, the U.S.’ hasty and high-profile rebalancing has created many impractical expectations among its allies and non-allies alike. Some Asia-Pacific countries want U.S. security assistance and assurance; some expect American open markets for cheap goods; and some look forward to generous U.S. foreign aid to eliminate poverty and encourage development. However, due to financial pressures, the gap between the U.S.’ domestic budget and the Asia-Pacific strategy is likely to grow, making its rebalancing commitments an empty promise to those who waited in vain for U.S. help during the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Most Chinese believe that the worst effect of a failed U.S. rebalancing strategy could be the deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations. Although some Chinese academics maintain that the U.S. rebalancing to Asia does not necessarily bring more harm than good to Chinese national interests (such as accelerating China’s domestic reform and creating more opportunities for Sino-U.S. cooperation), one must acknowledge the fact that China is facing immediate challenges posed by the U.S.’ increased involvement in the region. For example, the U.S. expansion of its military presence coinciding with the territorial disputes between China and its neighbors – from deploying littoral combat ships (LCS) to Singapore, to stationing Marine Corps in Australia’s Darwin Port, and to enhanced joint military exercises with almost all major Asia-Pacific countries but China – all but proves the U.S. intention to “wedge in at every opportunity.” This naturally leads some to agree with what Chinese hawks have been advocating, that because the U.S. is planning a “C-shaped encirclement” of China in an attempt to contain China within the first island chain, China must abandon the illusion of Sino-U.S. strategic co-development and prepare for the inevitable “show-hand.” If the U.S. rebalancing continues fomenting such a mentality, then the Sino-U.S. relationship will inevitably spiral downward and the whole region will suffer.

Fortunately, there are influential Chinese observers who argue that the U.S. rebalancing is not intended to solicit strategic conflicts in the region, but rather to hedge for the unknown future and avoid conflicts – a defensive maneuver disguised in offensive trappings. Notwithstanding the



growing mutual suspicion between both sides, as Wang Jisi and Kenneth Lieberthal pointed out in a widely-discussed Brookings report in 2012, China and the U.S. have not given up hope and continue to build an open, inclusive, and mutually beneficial regional framework for cooperation. Such good will and, more importantly, determination should serve as the foundation for enhanced Sino-U.S. relations in the future. Considering it is now the beginning of both President Obama's second term and President Xi Jinping's first year in office, both countries should endeavor to reach a renewed consensus on their common interests and goals, while negotiating their individual concerns. More understanding and patience, especially on the interpersonal working level, are crucial to the building of a future Sino-U.S. relationship based on trust, understanding, cooperation, and common prosperity. For the rebalancing strategy to succeed, the U.S. must make concerted efforts to assure the Chinese of its intent to engage China – not to contain it – and to convince other peoples of the Asia-Pacific that they will truly benefit from growing U.S. engagement with the region.

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