

China and the Two Pivots

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Partly in response to the U.S. rebalancing to Asia, Chinese leaders have been trying to define Asia for Asians. The Russian pivot to Asia complicates this agenda. On the one hand, Chinese analysts portray Russia as a European power; on the other, they seek to justify Russia's legitimate role in Asia. Ultimately, China distinguishes among outside powers in Asia, including the United States and Russia, and does not treat these outsiders equally. Although Chinese observers, to varying degrees, view the U.S. rebalancing policy as threatening, they see Russia's turn to the East and response to the U.S. pivot to Asia largely as neutral or positive for China. Although some aspects of Russian policy have been at odds with Chinese interests, the recent warming trend in Sino-Russia relations has done a lot to offset these concerns.

The United States "Pivots" to Asia

The Obama administration sought to reemphasize U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific very soon after taking office in 2009, but it was former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who depicted the United States in Asia as being at a "pivot point" in a 2011 article in *Foreign Policy*. The policy was later reformulated as a "rebalancing" to convey that the United States had not shifted its focus but was only reemphasizing its longstanding interests in the Asia-Pacific region after a period of preoccupation with the Middle East.

The security aspects of the rebalancing policy have received the most attention. These involve increased U.S. naval deployments to the Asia-Pacific, as well as closer security relations with allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, and partners like Singapore and the Philippines. The Obama administration has broadened its bilateral diplomacy in the region and improved relations with Burma, India, and Vietnam. It has increased its participation in regional multilateral arrangements by joining the East Asian Summit and developing a multilateral economic agreement, the Trans-Pacific

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Partnership (TPP). While criticized (especially by Chinese experts) as a containment strategy directed against China, U.S. policymakers contend that the rebalancing policy includes efforts to engage China in a wide range of initiatives.

And Putin “Turns to the East”

Since the days of Peter the Great, Russians have discussed how their country could best balance its interests between West and East. This has long been a conundrum since Russia is culturally European but two-thirds of its landmass is located on the Asian continent. As CSIS fellow Jeffrey Mankoff has noted, ever since the 2008 financial crisis Russia has been slowly focusing more on Asia and seeking to take advantage of the region’s growing economic power to develop the Russian Far East.² During his third term as president, Vladimir Putin has been more actively courting Asian leaders and in 2012 Russia hosted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) annual forum in Vladivostok.

Despite Russia’s higher diplomatic role, many Asian observers continue to view the country as a marginal player in regional trade and multilateral initiatives. Nonetheless, new oil and gas pipelines, increased LNG sales to Asia, improved infrastructure in the Russian Far East, trade agreements, and developing partnerships with China, India, and Vietnam, as well as efforts to engage a wider range of states in Southeast Asia, are finally giving substance to all the years of talk of the “Asia vector” in Russian foreign policy.

Chinese Perspectives of the U.S. Pivot

Chinese leaders have responded in a measured way to the U.S. rebalancing policy, if not to its regional military deployments and exercises. According to Carnegie Endowment scholar Michael Swaine, the restrained official Chinese commentary on the U.S. rebalancing policy reflects:

- 1) The leadership transition in China that occurred when the U.S. pivot policy was developed.
- 2) A realization that many Asian states are concerned by China’s rise.
- 3) The hope that Asian states [like Russia] also view the U.S. pivot as a polarizing strategy.
- 4) An uncertainty in the Chinese leadership about the long-term impact of the pivot or U.S. commitment to it.

In contrast to the restraint by the Chinese leadership, unofficial Chinese sources display a range of perspectives. Some argue that the U.S. rebalancing is a direct response to the rise of China and the shift in the U.S.-China balance of power. They also criticize the

² Jeffrey Mankoff, “Russia’s Asia Pivot: Cooperation or Confrontation?,” *Asia Policy*, January 2015.

United States for seeking to perpetuate its hegemony, contain China, sow distrust in U.S.-China relations, and increase the risk of conflict. Others see the U.S. policy as a readjustment after a period of intense focus on the Middle East, a hedging strategy against China's rise, and a precautionary measure.

According to Nanjing University professor Zhu Feng, there is a political spectrum among Chinese scholars. Feng categorizes five types of responses to the U.S. rebalancing:

- 1) Populist – Western imperialists seek domination, and there is a need for China to return to a Maoist path.
- 2) Nationalist – the United States is a barrier to China's rise and seeks to marginalize China.
- 3) Realist – the U.S.-China relationship is a power struggle and China should safeguard its position.
- 4) Internationalist – China needs to integrate into global society and focus on the well-being of the Chinese people.
- 5) Liberal – the lack of democracy in China is a barrier to smooth U.S.-China relations.

Feng argues that nationalists and realists enjoy a slight majority, though many academics support the internationalist view.

Chinese scholars also differ on how China should respond to the U.S. rebalancing. Some contend that China should take the long view and realize that most Asian states do not want to choose between the United States and China. These scholars contend that if China continues with its peaceful development agenda, time is on China's side. Wang Jisi, a leading scholar at Peking University, argued in 2012 that China should "march west" and rebalance its own overemphasis on East Asia with a renewed emphasis on Central and South Asia.

Xi Jinping's Asian Dream

In an effort to respond to the U.S. rebalancing as well as other perceived challenges in Asia, over the past year President Xi Jinping has defined an "Asia-Pacific" dream and articulated his vision of Asian security. Xi's "Asian Dream" also reflects the new leader's effort to reassure China's neighbors that a rising China will play a constructive role in the region and reinvigorate China's diplomacy with neighboring states. Xi's vision of Asia for Asians involves the following key points:

- Asian people should manage their own regional security.
- China will play a leading role through efforts to connect its western provinces to Central and South Asia (via the New Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road) and

regional initiatives (like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific).

China Responds to Russia's Asia Pivot

As they redefine China's own role in Asia, Chinese policy analysts and academics have also been debating the prospects for Russia to play a greater role in the region. Some highlight the obstacles that Russia faces in seeking to play a greater role in Asia: the absence of mutual trust between Russia and many key Asian states, Russian fears about becoming a resource appendage to China, the weakness and resource dependence of the Russian economy, Russia's European identity, and its focus on the Eurasian Union. Others note recent Russian policies and partnerships with states in the region. They point out that Russia is gradually balancing its ties between Asia and the West by becoming more active in Asian institutions and expanding partnerships with China as well as traditional partners like Vietnam and India.

Chinese policy analysts largely agree that Russia is an outside player in Asia, yet Russia's response (or lack thereof) to the U.S. rebalancing has led to discussion and divergent perspectives on Russian intentions in the region.

- 1) *Russia's "turn to the East" supports China's efforts to counter the U.S. rebalancing*

Many Chinese scholars view Russia's Asia pivot as a response to U.S. pressure—they argue that Russia understands China's position on the U.S. pivot and will be cooperative. Others note that Russia previously sought to engage Asia in the 1990s in response to U.S. pressure and contend that now the cause for the pivot is internal (i.e., a desire to benefit from Asia's economic dynamism as well as China's economic growth).

- 2) *Russia should be more aware of the negative consequences of the U.S. rebalancing*

Chinese analysts argue that the U.S. rebalancing also poses a threat to Russia because it will hinder its goals in Asia and marginalize the country. According to this perspective, the United States is expanding its security architecture in Asia at a time when Russia increasingly faces NATO pressure in Europe. Chinese experts warn that the United States does not take Russia seriously in Asia

- 3) *Russia's Asia policy reflects its neutral stance on the U.S. rebalancing*

Some Chinese analysts are skeptical or even critical of Russia's neutral response to the U.S. rebalancing, which they argue could be advantageous for Washington. These experts claim that Russia welcomes the U.S. pivot to the extent that it increases Russia's value to China and relieves pressure on the Russian Far East.

Other Chinese scholars suggest that Sino-American confrontation is not in Russia's interest and that Russia is unlikely to actively support the U.S. rebalancing policy or participate in the U.S. containment of China, though Russia may not take sides in China's disputes with the United States, Japan, or other Asian states.

Chinese analysts have been wrestling with the tradeoffs involved in a more active Russian role in Asia. Although China hopes that Russia will help offset any perceived pressure from the United States and support Chinese positions in Asia, the Putin administration has not overtly taken China's side in disputes with Japan or over the South China Sea. Moreover, from China's point of view, Russia's most active diplomacy in the region, for example in reinforcing longstanding partnerships with Vietnam and India, has not been advantageous to Chinese interests.

In the past year, however, some developments in Sino-Russian relations have assuaged Chinese fears in this regard. Russia and China will hold their second set of naval exercises in the East China Sea this August. In April, China became the first foreign country to purchase Russia's S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, which expands its air defense by 100 kilometers, with the potential to hit aerial targets as far as New Delhi and Hanoi. The Chinese military is reportedly seeking to buy Russian SU-35 aircraft which, as analyst Harry Kazianis has [argued](#), would expand China's access denial capability in the East China and South China seas by enabling longer patrols, especially if armed with anti-ship missiles.

Implications for the United States

Even if Russia's Asia pivot is not directed against the United States specifically as some Chinese analysts have hoped, Russian gas sales to China at least will have significant implications for Washington. Energy expert Keun-Wook Paik [argues](#) that, if completed, the two projected gas pipelines from Russia to China would have "massive" impacts on global LNG sales to China and lead to the suspension of many LNG projects, affecting suppliers seeking to increase their share of the Chinese gas market, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and eastern Africa.

Some observers like Artyom Lukin and Rens Lee see an opportunity for the United States to engage Russia in the Russian Far East, where suspicion of Chinese intentions has been strongest and interest in diversifying Russia's Asian partners greatest, but the Putin administration now appears more comfortable with closer cooperation with China, even in the Russian Far East.³ A major improvement of Russia's relations with Japan would do the most to disconnect Russia's Asia pivot from China's goal of countering the U.S. rebalancing strategy, but this has been set back by the sanctions put in place in the aftermath of the Ukraine conflict.

³Artyom Lukin and Rens Lee, "The Russian Far East and the Future of Asian Security," *Orbis*, Spring 2015.

For further reading:

Pavel K. Baev, "[Upgrading Russia's Quasi-Strategic Pseudo-Partnership with China](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 337, August 2014

Mikhail Troitskiy, "[Unable to Lead, Reluctant to Follow: Russian, Chinese, and Indian Approaches to Balancing and Bandwagoning with the West](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 334, August 2014

Elizabeth Wishnick, "[Russia: New Player in the South China Sea?](#)" PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 260, July 2013

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