

# ASAN REPORT

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## What Asia Wants from the US Voices from the Region

EDITED BY CHOI KANG, LEE JAEHYON

SEPTEMBER 2018

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Voices from the Region

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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

## About

**The Asan Institute for Policy Studies** is an independent, non-partisan think tank with the mandate to undertake policy-relevant research to foster domestic, regional, and international environments conducive to peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, East Asia, and the world-at-large.

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## Preface

This project was initially conceived in 2016 to survey Asian assessments of President Barack Obama’s much-heralded “Pivot” to Asia. It was inspired by a growing sense of concern and uncertainty about the future of United States policy towards Asia in the final days of the Obama administration. The project aimed to identify how the Pivot had been received throughout the region, where it had succeeded and failed, and offer policy recommendations for the next US administration drawing on a diverse range of Asian perspectives. While there were no shortage of policy recommendations about US policy towards Asia, we felt that largely absent from these debates were recommendations that reflected the voices and perspectives of Asian countries themselves.

As we traveled around Asia interviewing foreign and security policy experts in 2016, there was intense speculation about the upcoming American presidential election and its likely implications for the region. But the dramatic and unexpected election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States seemed to make our entire project redundant overnight. In retrospect, it was clear that almost everybody, whether explicitly or implicitly, had expected Hillary Clinton would win the election and that there would be some degree of continuity with the Obama administration and the Pivot.

But, instead, one of President Trump’s first acts upon taking office was to withdraw the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement—one of the key pillars of the Pivot to Asia—as part of his campaign pledge to put “America First.” Ever since, the Trump administration’s policy towards Asia has been fraught with controversy and surprises. Longstanding relationships with treaty allies and partners have come under intense scrutiny and re-negotiation. Meanwhile, the President has threatened a trade war with China over its trade surplus and an actual war with North Korea over its nuclear weapons program. Consequently, many in the region have had major doubts about the US interest in preserving the existing regional order, let alone pivoting to bolster it.

But after a year of these developments, the Trump administration announced its own Asia policy: the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy.” It was in light of this that we returned to our initial report to see if it was possible to salvage some of the effort we

had invested. Upon review, we found that many of the insights from our interviews remained highly relevant as policy recommendations for the Trump administration, in particular, as well as for future US administrations. Critically, our report addresses “What Asia Wants” of the US and its approach to the region, and this is a question that is ultimately bigger than what a single presidency is likely to do.

## Acknowledgements

During the course of this project, we interviewed 48 experts from seven different countries—Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam—and we would like to thank our interviewees for their generous insights. This report would have been impossible without their expert views.

We would also like to thank the Asan Institute’s research associates, Ben Forney, Kim Seonkyung, Lee Soo-hyun, and Kim Gibum, for their research assistance and administrative support, including arranging and transcribing interviews. Finally, we would also like to thank Peter Lee for assistance in editing and reviewing the report.

## Executive Summary

This report examines the Barack Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia” and United States strategy towards the Asia-Pacific. Drawing on 48 in-person interviews with regional security experts from Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam, it provides a comprehensive account of how Asian experts have assessed US strategic interest in and engagement with Asia over the past decade. The report argues that the long-term success or failure of any US strategy in Asia—whether it is the Obama administration’s Pivot to Asia or the Trump administration’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy—will ultimately be determined not just in Washington, but in Canberra, New Delhi, Jakarta, Tokyo, Singapore, Hanoi, Seoul, and many other cities across the Asia-Pacific region. In doing so, it addresses a question that is often overlooked in American policy debates: **What does Asia want?**

### Overall Assessments of the Pivot to Asia

The Pivot was the product of many factors, including fatigue over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the economic recovery after the 2008 global financial crisis, and the perceived need to balance China in the region. For various reasons, most Asian countries welcomed the US rebalance. However, many experts noted that the vision and goal of the Pivot was not clear. The policy was further constrained by a lack of resources, political will, and domestic divisions in the US over the policy’s purpose. The Pivot’s impact on Southeast Asia was a particularly interesting case where the diversity of ASEAN countries’ interests and their strategies in dealing with more powerful partners made the Pivot less effective.

### The Military Pivot

Views on the military Pivot were mixed. Military engagement during the Obama administration was seen as much better than that of previous administrations. Experts cited the re-assertion of US security commitments, upgrading strategic partnerships and the restrained use of military assets as positive aspects of the military Pivot. Nevertheless, there were reservations that the US had put too much emphasis on the military Pivot. In contrast, other experts noted that US military engagement was less than they had expected and wanted. Experts also cited the weak US military actions in the South

China Sea, questions about the future of US extended deterrence, missed opportunities in defense diplomacy and defense industry cooperation, and a lack for support for India as a counter-balance to China’s rise as negative aspects of the military Pivot.

### The Economic Pivot

Views on the economic Pivot were dominated by the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Experts were positive about the economic Pivot’s focus on trade liberalization and those countries in talks to join the TPP were particularly hopeful about the benefits of increased economic growth and cooperation. Indian and Korean experts also emphasized their bilateral trade relationships with the US in addition to the TPP. However, the high hopes that many experts had for the TPP and closer economic cooperation were balanced against a general sense of pessimism that the ambitious trade agreement would be successfully ratified by the next US president given the campaign rhetoric. In addition, experts thought the US could work harder on highlighting its significant investment throughout the region as a positive force. Finally, many were critical of the US reaction to China’s Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and particularly US attempts to pressure regional countries not to join.

### The Diplomatic Pivot

Views on the diplomatic Pivot were overwhelmingly positive. The diplomatic dimension of the Pivot focused on enhanced US participation in regional multilateral frameworks and strengthening bilateral relations. They were very positive about regular US attendance at multilateral meetings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit, as well as high-level official visits to Asian countries. They also liked the Obama administration’s respect for the principle of “ASEAN Centrality”, its investment in diplomatic efforts such as hosting the first US-ASEAN Summit, and noted the enduring cultural and educational influence of the US as positive aspects of the Pivot. Rather than criticize the diplomatic Pivot, most experts offered suggestions for how to make US diplomatic engagement more effective, including being more patient with multilateral institutional processes, as well as showing sensitivity and respect for smaller countries in such forums.

## The Pivot and China

All experts viewed the Pivot as ultimately about responding to the rise of China. Experts noted that the US seemed to lack a long-term vision for its relationship with China and of China's appropriate place in the regional order. At times, this had led to incoherent or ineffective policies that mostly responded to Chinese actions rather than actively shaping regional dynamics. US moves to strengthen ties with regional countries had also been hobbled by Chinese accusations of containment, leading regional countries to tread cautiously. Experts offered a variety of assessments for how the US should engage China; but most supported cooperative partnerships with China, given its economic clout, rather than open confrontation.

## Understanding Asia

Issues in the US understanding and knowledge of Asia were a common theme throughout the interviews. Experts noted that the US should not only know more about Asia as a collective entity, but also deepen its understanding of individual Asian countries. This was noticeable particularly in contrast with China. The different performance of the Obama administration's first and second terms was seen as largely due to the different levels of US understanding of Asia, exemplified by the individuals in the two administrations. While the first term had more Asian experts at the decision-making level, the second term cabinet was weaker in that regard. Finally, US understanding and interest in Asia were seen as often competing with other global interests.

## Policy Recommendations

1. The US should reassure allies and partners that it will be consistently engaged.
2. The US should be proactive and articulate a compelling long-term vision.
3. The US should seek consensus on constructive, cooperative relations with China.
4. The US should focus more on specific actions than policy announcements.
5. The US should encourage a greater regional sense of community that also includes it.
6. The US should promote closer defense cooperation with regional partners.
7. The US should expand its public diplomacy.
8. The US should invest in deeper knowledge of the region's history and culture.
9. The US should maintain and expand the liberal economic order.
10. The US should appoint more Asia experts to key government posts.

## Introduction

The United States "Pivot" or "Rebalance" to Asia is widely considered to have begun with then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's October 2011 article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, titled "America's Pacific Century." The article set forth one of the most comprehensive blueprints for the future of US foreign policy. The beginning of the Pivot, however, dates back to the early days of the Barack Obama administration during which the US signaled its renewed commitment to multilateralism and economic engagement with Asia. The Obama administration's signing of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2009 and its joining of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2010 were both concrete steps taken by the US under the banner of the Pivot to Asia. Since then, the Pivot was the defining theme of the Obama administration's policy towards Asia.

The election of Donald Trump in November 2016 signaled a major change in America's approach to the region. Trump's calling into question the efficacy of traditional alliances with South Korea and Japan, his landmark phone call with Taiwan president Tsai Ing-wen, and his withdrawal from the TPP have all signaled that he intends to transform America's relations the region. The Trump administration's approach to Asia may have taken a different tone, but the region's significance to US foreign policy will not diminish.

After a year, there are mixed signals from the Trump administration to Asian countries. On the one hand, the administration has emphasized the primacy of US interests under its "America First" banner. Rather than engaging Asian countries widely, the administration has been heavily concerned with China and North Korea while references to liberalism, democracy, or human rights have been noticeably absent in its Asia policy. On the other hand, there have been moves to re-engage with some Asian countries which were initially overlooked by the Trump administration in the first half of 2017. Leaders of some Southeast Asian countries were invited by President Trump to hold summits. Although not entirely successful, President Trump participated in the annual US-ASEAN summit and East Asia Summit at the end of 2017. There have also been increasing references by the president and his top officials regarding the Indo-Pacific as a US strategy towards the wider Asian region.

This project is designed to provide policy recommendations for current and future



US administrations to pursue in Asia. Several studies have already been put forth for what the new administration should do in Asia, yet these are primarily focused on what the US wants from an American perspective. This research project is unique in that it reflects the perspectives and recommendations of Asian experts from across the region. It provides a frank review of the Pivot over the past eight years and surveys the perceptions and interests of different Asian countries towards the US; in short, it is about what Asia wants.

## Methodology

From March to October 2016, the report's five co-authors—Dr. CHOI Kang, Dr. CHOI Hyeonjung, Dr. JANG Ji-Hyang, Dr. LEE Jaehyon, and Dr. LEE Ki Beom—conducted extensive in-person interviews with 48 policy experts based throughout the region. The authors chose interviewees from seven countries: Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam. These countries were chosen to represent a diversity of perspectives from four distinct sub-regions: Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania. Three countries were selected from Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam—given the heavy focus of the Pivot on that sub-region. We also took into account variation in country's existing political and security relationships with the US by including both treaty allies such as Australia, South Korea, and Japan, as well as non-allied regional powers such as India, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam.

Interviewees were primarily mid-career researchers based at government-affiliated and independent research institutions. The project deliberately chose to exclude prominent foreign and security experts, many of whom are senior public officials and thus often closely aligned with official government positions, to allow for franker assessments. Given the sensitive nature of the discussions in the midst of political transitions in the US, and the fact that many of the interviewees are closely involved in dealing with the US in their professional activities, interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis. While most interview respondents were nationals of their country of residence, the experts we interviewed in Singapore also included influential scholars and experts based there, though not necessarily Singaporean nationals. To protect their anonymity, the report will refer to all experts interviewed in Singapore as “Singapore-based experts.”

Interview questions focused on expert assessments of the Pivot during the eight years of the Obama administration as well as policy recommendations for the new incoming US administration. First, the research team asked questions regarding the Pivot, including its military, economic, and political dimensions, and US-China relations. The interviewees were then asked to offer suggestions for the next US administration's Asia policy as well as the future of the Pivot. The report concludes with ten policy recommendations based on these interviewee responses.

## Overall Assessments of the Pivot to Asia

The Pivot was the product of many factors, including fatigue over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the economic recovery after the 2008 global financial crisis, and the perceived need to balance China in the region. For various reasons, most Asian countries welcomed the US rebalance. However, many experts noted that the vision and goal of the Pivot was not clear. The policy was further constrained by a lack of resources, political will, and domestic divisions in the US over the policy's purpose. The Pivot's impact on Southeast Asia was a particularly interesting case where the diversity of ASEAN countries' interests and their strategies in dealing with more powerful partners made the Pivot less effective.

Experts throughout the region were generally positive about the Pivot's performance during the Obama administration, on average rating the strategy 7 out of 10 points, or a B+ to A-. They were generally positive in their assessment of the intention and direction of the Pivot, but their criticisms became more acute as they delved into the actual performance and outcome.

### Positive Assessments

Among the positive assessments of the Pivot, the most common response was that the strategy was right and very timely. Particularly, the pledge that the US would allocate more resources to the region was well received. Some mentioned that such a commitment by the US was overdue. As one Korean expert noted, "The notion of the Pivot itself is good. But to the point that the US will give priority to the corresponding power of Asia, it is rather long overdue. It is the right policy for the US." As one Japanese expert stated:

*During the Bush administration, the US was heavily engaged in the Middle East over other regions, and this caused a disruption and imbalance in overall foreign policy. With the introduction of the rebalance, I can say that the US began to return to normal.*

- Japanese expert

Experts also viewed the Pivot as an opportunity for the US to re-assert its declining credibility and influence in the region due to its domestic economic challenges and the continued rise of China. Most Australian experts welcomed the Pivot and said that it was not only in Australia's interests but also for Southeast Asia. As one Australian expert said:

*We were particularly keen to see the US more engaged with Southeast Asia. Because that is Australia's front door step, we thought the US presence there would have a stabilizing role in a region that was growing rapidly and was uncertain about its own strategic trajectory.*

- Australian expert

### Negative Assessments

While positive assessments of the Pivot focused on its overall purpose and timeliness, there were nonetheless several criticisms. First, all experts agreed that the Pivot did not have a clearly defined goal or long-term vision. As an Indian respondent noted:

*I do not think the US clearly articulated its aims and objectives ... There was a lot of confusion as to what the US actually wants and desires, and how it is seeking to attain those objectives.*

- Indian expert

This uncertainty over clear goals and a compelling vision left the Pivot lacking direction and vulnerable to Chinese accusations that it was a form of containment. The effect of this kind of accusation worked against the intentions of the Pivot and placed regional countries in a dilemma. As a consequence, they could not enthusiastically endorse the Pivot lest they be viewed as opposed to China, which, for obvious reasons, they wanted to avoid. The reason why the Pivot was vulnerable to Chinese framing was that it did not clearly define its long-term goals and vision, causing confusion among regional countries. As a Singaporean expert noted:

*The Chinese, for better or worse, have tended to define the economic dimension of the rebalance as an attempt to contain China's rise. So the TPP is all about the US trying to contain China. Everything that the US is trying to do is about containment of China. It just has been quite unfortunate, I think. I don't deny that there is potentially that element. They are pockets and quarters within the American establishment that obviously would*

*want to suppress the rise of China. It seems to me that the Obama administration's goal is much broader than containment. Its goals are to ensure continued prosperity of the region. The US clearly sees the Asia-Pacific region as very fundamental to its own growth. In that regard, its intentions are well beyond just restraining the more negative and aversive tendencies of the Chinese, and wanting to ensure that China becomes a responsible stakeholder. In that regard, it helps the entire region to prosper, to grow.*

*Unfortunately, that element has been downplayed because of the strategic competition with China. China defined the American effort in very negative terms which isn't good for the region at all. All in all, the Americans started with very good intentions, but overall the effect of the rebalance has been muted and limited in part because of the efforts of the Chinese to paint or portray it in very negative terms.*

- Singapore-based expert

In addition, many experts cited the lack of substantive policy content and the disjuncture between the strategy's announcement and what a Vietnamese expert called "reluctance and inconsistency" over the actual implementation. As a Korean observer also noted:

*The problem is that there was too much fanfare. It made a lot of noise but in reality it achieved almost nothing. It only aggravated Chinese threat perceptions toward the US while nothing was accomplished in terms of the US's rebalancing to East Asia. There is not much substance in it. It made a fuss, but it did not realize much of what it said.*

- Korean expert

By announcing the Pivot in so loudly, the US government set high expectations for regional countries that it would take substantial actions in Asia. The reality, however, did not live up to this expectation. Some experts saw the US engagement with Asia as largely the same as before or even less. The same interviewee added that the US should initiate policies quietly so as not to draw too much attention from potential adversaries such as China. Related to this point, another Korean expert added that attention should be sought when the US is actually taking action, not when announcing policies, to maximize impact.

This lack of concrete substance and the problem of implementation raised questions about the nature of the US approach to the Pivot. A Vietnamese expert cited the reactive tendency in US policy which tended to respond to what was happening in

Asia, stating:

*The rebalancing is not a proactive initiative of Washington. The US did not make the first step, but Washington was under pressure to express its position to defend its strategic interests in Asia.*

- Vietnamese expert

### **Sources of the Pivot's Weakness**

What was the source of these problems with the Pivot? The experts we interviewed put forward three different answers: a lack of resources, domestic division, and a lack political will. First, several experts mentioned the lack of sufficient economic resources invested in the Pivot while others cited the misallocation of resources in key areas. As a Japanese respondent remarked:

*US power is maintained by their economic advantage over the world ... The US can have a hard time if their economy is going through difficulties. This is the reason why Obama says how America is not ready to be the world's policeman. That clearly demonstrates the limits of US resources, both financial and human.*

- Japanese expert

A Korean expert further noted that the US military presence and routine operations throughout the region were being undermined due to the defense budget funding freeze:

*So, let alone rebalancing to Asia, the US forces already stationed here—the US aircraft carrier could not come when it had to because they did not have enough money to pay for maintenance costs of the ship. The USS George Washington got stranded because it was short of maintenance fees, repair costs, and operating budgets that it needed. This is really what happened. Despite North Korea's threat and their nuclear tests, it is hard for the US to make a show of force.*

*The US mentioned rotational deployment of strategic assets at the recent ROK-US 2+2 meeting, but it's not feasible. Not because they are afraid of China but because they don't have enough budget to do that. It basically requires money for them to do that. The US has to increase their annual defense budget by a few hundred million dollars, or even a*

*few billion. Without that money, they cannot keep doing it any longer. According to the anti-deficiency act of the US, they cannot promise anything that has expenses without the approval of the Congress.*

- Korean expert

A different Korean respondent stated that the problem had less to do with the overall level of resources but rather effective resource allocation. Contrary to public rhetoric, the Pivot was not adequately funded relative to other priorities.

Second, US domestic political and social divisions weakened the Pivot. A Korean observer argued that the political divide in the US hindered its foreign policy. If internal division helps consensus building based on substantial deliberation, then it could have a positive effect. But if it does not, then it risks damaging the credibility of the US by preventing any continuity in foreign policy. A Japanese commentator similarly noted:

*The weakness of US diplomacy is the instability of domestic politics. US politics depends much on popular opinion, and US society is changing so dramatically: equality, gender, religions, etc. These differences reflect on domestic political instability. The scope of interests is very wide so there are so many minor enemies everywhere. Not only in the Obama Administration, but also in American society there is a lack of consensus in every major issue: promoting human rights, the behavior of US towards its allies, etc. The consensus and definition of these concepts is becoming blurred. This is especially true in the tough competition occurring in elections with people like Trump and Sanders. After this election, I'm not sure if they can re-establish consensus about these major issues. That will be a big problem.*

- Japanese expert

Third, a lack of political will within the Obama administration itself worked against consistency in the Pivot by constantly changing the policy's focus rather than incremental progress. As an Indian expert explained:

*The problem for the US is that it has been deeply divided within itself. If you see the Obama administration's policy toward India for the last 8 years, you can see the number of changes that took place. For example, it began with strategic reassurance where the US and China both together could stabilize Asia. Then they pulled back to the Pivot argument, which Hillary Clinton announced. Then [John] Kerry seemed to downplay East Asia and*

*focus on the Middle East. Now Ash Carter, Secretary of Defense, emphasizes the need to find a new architecture for Asia driven by the rise of China.*

- Indian expert

A Japanese expert noted that the US Pivot failed to adjust to changes in the international environment over the course of eight years. This failure partly explains the varying effectiveness of the Pivot in the first and second terms of the Obama administration.

*A fundamental problem with President Obama's US rebalance to Asia is that the rebalance was announced in 2010-2011 when the world situation was different. We didn't have IS [Islamic State], we didn't have the annexation of Crimea. China was much more accommodating. But the situation totally changed. The situations in the Middle East and Europe are becoming worse, while China is becoming more assertive. I think the US needed to adjust the rebalance policy, but US didn't do so. After Secretary Hillary Clinton left, there was no readjustment. They are still doing the policies from 2010-2011. No adjustment, no action, no plan.*

- Japanese expert

### ***The Pivot's Challenges in Southeast Asia***

One of the structural problems that the Pivot had to face was striking the right balance among its various dimensions and Asia's distinct sub-regions, especially Southeast Asia. The failure to do this explains several of the complaints from regional experts. Southeast Asian countries are diverse in many ways. In particular their partnerships with the US and interests vary by country. Satisfying the needs of Southeast Asian countries requires delicate balancing, which the US often fails to achieve. As an Indonesian commentator explained Indonesia's sensitivities about US troop deployments:

*Indonesia has a sometimes confusing way of looking at [the US role in Asia]. On the one hand, we welcome very much the US presence. We think it's important for balance of power to have a strong superpower in the region and also for sort of a role model for rules-based society. On the other hand, we seem to not want an external power to be too much involved in the Asian security politics architecture. You can see, for example, we keep saying that the US presence is important for stability and security in Asia, but once the US put a couple of hundred troops in Darwin, for example, then we go crazy. We say it's too close to Indonesia; we don't want the US naval base there in Darwin. That shows you some kind*



*of an ambiguous position as to what extent we actually want the US. But I guess if you want to analyze from that, maybe the naïve way of looking at it is that Indonesia wants a US presence, but not so much visual presence in terms of troops and ships. So, more or less, I think that's how Indonesia senses the importance of US involvement in Asia.*

- Indonesian expert

Southeast Asian countries have their own historical experiences with US involvement in regional affairs that do not always evoke happy memories. It is not just their partnership with the US, but with other superpowers as well, that have left lasting historical imprints in the minds of Southeast Asians. These historical experiences now push Southeast Asian countries to seek regional autonomy while still pursuing partnerships with superpowers for various geopolitical and economic reasons. This creates a dilemma for any state which wants to build a partnership with Southeast Asian countries.

Regional countries are also diverse. They have different historical experiences, economic conditions, security concerns and socio-cultural characteristics. All these differences affect their national interests. When the US announced the Pivot, it was as if the audience was a single entity: Asia. But addressing all of these disparate countries under the heading of "Asia" has been counterproductive. The Pivot, therefore, had its own limits from the beginning: dealing with diverse interests through one single policy. This is closely linked to the structural issues raised by Southeast Asian experts in their criticism of the Pivot. An Indonesian observer argued:

*You will never get a single, unified view in which every single leader of every single country in Asia declare a permanent resolution to always keep the US presence forever. That's also going to be very difficult. Maybe we should stop chasing this elusive goal of a permanent engagement with the US. If less engagement means more autonomy for Asian countries, I'm pretty sure you'll find a lot of people in different parts of Asia would agree to that. If that means an independent Asian security architecture outside of the US alliance system, for every five guests who say, "No, it's bad," you will always find five that say, "No, it's good for our autonomy." In that sense, I don't think we should even chase the idea of a permanent, unchanging US commitment in Asia.*

- Indonesian expert

This view of Southeast Asia's diverse strategic preferences based on individual national

interests was also shared by other regional countries. As one Australian expert explained:

*I think there's a great deal of division among the Southeast Asian countries about how they assess how the rebalance has been executed. Various countries are at various stages, including Indonesia particularly, but also Malaysia and Singapore. Vietnam has been much more cautious and at times quite critical of the Philippines for relying on the rebalance and having overblown expectations about how much the US is going to support it if it overly provoked China. So the execution of the rebalance is perceived in a mixed way, not necessarily because of what the US itself, by itself did, but because of the response of countries particularly like the Philippines.*

*Vietnam has quite significantly deepened its military-to-military relationship with the US over the last few years and the frequency and the level of strategic political exchange between two sides has also increased, and that has been facilitated by the rebalance. Vietnam take a very different approach to the China issue than the Philippines, but the US rebalance is nevertheless helpful to it and for Indonesia similarly. Although the types of military equipment aid and relationship with the US are very different, much lower level for Indonesia, it has also managed to benefit from the rebalance. So overall, it's fairly positive and the worries are not so much about the US but about other Southeast Asian countries.*

- Australian expert

## Country Variation

Overall, the views of the Pivot vary between countries and sub-regions. Some experts took a more regional perspective, while others were more oriented towards individual countries' interests. Sub-regionally, Southeast Asia and Australia were more positive about the Pivot while Northeast Asia was less positive.

India showed quite a unique attitude towards the Pivot with respondents more narrowly focused on bilateral relations with the US and more concerned with what the US should do for India, particularly regarding economic assistance. Indian experts had a singular concept of the region; while other countries focused on Asia or the Asia-Pacific, the Indian respondents were more concerned with South Asia. An Indian expert cautioned that the Pivot to Asia was actually the US withdrawing its strategic focus from South Asia to focus more on Southeast and Northeast Asia.



Australian and Vietnamese experts were most positive towards the Pivot. Australian experts welcomed the Pivot from an alliance perspective and viewed renewed American engagement as a benefit for Australia's strategic interests. One respondent even argued that the Pivot required a response for Australia to do more to assist the US in its execution. Surprisingly, Vietnam was by far the most positive. This might have been biased by President Obama's visit to Vietnam just before the interviews were conducted, during which he offered several economic and military incentives to the country, including lifting the ban on arms sales.

Singapore and Indonesia were more neutral. Indonesian experts welcomed a greater US role in the region as a balance against a rising China but simultaneously had reservations about too much US engagement in the region, which could restrain the region's autonomy. Indonesian experts were particularly uncomfortable with US military engagement. And while Singaporean experts were more optimistic, they were still quite sensitive to China in many ways. Singaporean experts also had a more regional view than the Indonesians, who were more focused on the US-Indonesia relationship.

Korea and Japan were less positive about the Pivot for several reasons. While Japanese experts strongly supported the idea of the Pivot, their criticism stemmed from their view that the policy was not assertive enough. It made no attempt to decisively act on regional disputes, such as conflicting territorial claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea. Korean experts were the most indifferent, aside from India, not because they saw the Pivot as meaningless, but because it did not seem to produce great change. Korean experts did not recognize the Pivot as a new initiative, since the US had never left the region, in their view. The US, particularly the US military presence, has always been felt on the Korean Peninsula which made the Pivot less consequential to Korean observers.

## The Military Pivot

Views on the military Pivot were mixed. Military engagement during the Obama administration was seen as much better than that of previous administrations. Experts cited the re-assertion of US security commitments, upgrading strategic partnerships and the restrained use of military assets as positive aspects of the military Pivot. Nevertheless, there were reservations that the US had put too much emphasis on the military Pivot. In contrast, other experts noted that US military engagement was less than they had expected and wanted. Experts also cited the weak US military actions in the South China Sea, questions about the future of US extended deterrence, missed opportunities in defense diplomacy and defense industry cooperation, and a lack for support for India as a counter-balance to China's rise as negative aspects of the military Pivot.

Views on the military Pivot were mixed. Military engagement during the Obama administration was seen as much better than that of previous administrations. Interestingly, there was a discrepancy among different regions and countries. The positive assessment was stronger in Japan and Australia while respondents from Southeast Asia had more divided responses. In addition, Korean experts were less impressed while Indian experts did not offer many explicit comments. Experts cited the re-assertion of US security commitments, upgrading strategic partnerships and the restrained use of military assets as positive aspects of the military Pivot.

No expert expressed total opposition to increased US military engagement with the region. Nevertheless, there were reservations that the US had put too much emphasis on the military Pivot. In contrast, other experts noted that US military engagement was less than they had expected and wanted. By implication, regional countries actually wanted more US military engagement to resolve security issues in the region. The US, however, was not able to meet this need. Experts also cited the weak US military actions in the South China Sea; questions about the future of US extended deterrence; missed opportunities in defense diplomacy and defense industry cooperation; and a lack for support for India as a counter-balance to China's rise as negative aspects of the military Pivot.

## Positive Assessments of the Military Pivot

### *Re-asserting US Security Commitments to Allies*

For Australia, the forward deployment of US military forces in the region provided much-needed security assurances. Its enduring strategic anxieties had intensified following the Chinese military build-up and tensions in the South China Sea, an issue which is directly related to Australia's economic and security interests. An Australian commentator explained:

*I think that has been a benefit when Obama put some military meat on the bones of the Pivot strategy, as he announced during his visit here to Darwin and Canberra. The Australia-US relationship has broadened and deepened during the period over the last eight years. From Australia's perspective, because of our small population, distance, and remoteness, we have depended on a great and powerful friend to protect us in the region. We see a lot of opportunity, but also a lot of danger in this region. The fact that this relationship has broadened and deepened during the last eight years has been advantageous from Australia's perspective.*

- Australian expert

A Japanese expert went even further, noting that the US military engagement with Asia during the George W. Bush administration had been abnormal, given the situation in the Middle East and the war on terror. While welcoming the re-orientation of US forces back to the Asia-Pacific, they emphasized that it was really just a return to "normal."

*During the Bush administration, the US was heavily engaged in the Middle East over other regions and this caused a disruption and imbalance in overall foreign policy. With the introduction of the rebalance, I can say that the US began to return to normal. In 2008 and 2009, the US used to have more than 200,000 troops in Middle East. If you keep that level of force, you have to have at least three times that. That means the US must have 600,000 troops available for contingency in the Middle East. That's almost half of US troops. Nowadays the number of troops deployed in the Middle East is far smaller than that, so they can come back to the normal. And, in a sense, I've personally watched the Okinawa bases, which used to be almost empty in 2007, 2008, and 2009. Now there are lots of aircraft—they are really coming back to the normal level.*

- Japanese expert

Another Australian expert strongly defended the military Pivot against those who claim the policy lacked real military support or increased military asset deployment in the region, stating that:

*I think you will often hear scholars in Australia who are very pro-US, many of them in Canberra, say that the rebalance was not as much as they had hoped it would be. I think, for the most part, these scholars focus on the military. But to suggest that because the US defense spending is declining that means the rebalance has not been successful is incorrect. Actually, what happened is that the US has removed assets from elsewhere, but it has kept assets in the Asia-Pacific either at the same level or increased them. So I don't think there's a whole lot of merit to that argument. People who would make that argument generally don't focus on the facts.*

- Australian expert

Support for increased forward deployment of US forces in the Asia-Pacific region varies from country to country. While the Australian and Japanese experts quoted above viewed the US military presence positively, some Korean experts were unimpressed. For them, the increased deployment was less noticeable, although they appreciated the symbolic importance of the US emphasizing its military rebalance. One Korean expert argued:

*On the military side, there has been no huge change in the Asia-Pacific region. The US has already forward deployed their forces for a very long time, and their partnership with Japan has had considerable progress over the years. 60% of the US naval forces are stationed here in the Asia-Pacific. In fact, they are also doing the same with South Korea. The Obama administration gave salience to it to symbolically restore its presence in the region.*

- Korean expert

In a sense, this view is understandable, given the situation on the Korean peninsula. South Korea believes that US troops are there to stay as long as there is a threat from North Korea. Therefore, the military rebalance and the increase in military personnel and equipment in other parts of the region are not easily recognizable. It is also possible that Korean experts are not as concerned about new military developments in the region, as they are overly focused on peninsula affairs.

### Upgrading Strategic Partnerships

The military Pivot was also broadly successful in upgrading strategic partnerships in Asia. Examples of this include strengthening trilateral security cooperation among Korea, Japan, and the US; a better military partnership with the Philippines; closer military relations with Vietnam; incorporating Singapore into the regional US network, and more. A Singapore-based respondent outlined the strengthened US military partnerships as follows:

*On the security side, it worked really well both ways. If you look at major US alliances in the region, the alliance with Australia strengthened, the one with the Philippines has been revived, the one with Thailand not so much, the Korean one moved forward, and Japan got much stronger. If you look at security partners, the US-Singapore defense relationship has deepened and broadened. The US-Vietnam relationship is taking steps that no one would think of a decade ago (more on the US-side to be fair), and also US-India.*

- Singapore-based expert

### Defense Diplomacy and Regional Reciprocity

A Korean observer argued that all these achievements were done through diplomatic means without investing much money. In other words, the US military engagement and upgraded US military network was not done through deploying expensive new military assets, but was mostly accomplished through treaties, pacts, dialogues, meetings, and so on. Therefore, the US approach to military engagement in fact shows US restraint, which made regional countries more comfortable in responding to the military Pivot. As a Japanese observer argued:

*Specifically about the Obama administration, the strength and weakness is the restraint that was exhibited over the last eight years ... It is very cautious about the use of force, and that helped avoid unnecessary tension with its allies.*

- Japanese expert

The consequences of the military Pivot are recognizable on the ground. Some observers noted that, together with China's growing assertiveness, it forced regional countries to act. The changing perceptions of regional countries is not just because they had to improve regional security, but also because they felt that they had to react to the

US military rebalance. In other words, there was an emerging awareness that regional countries had to go beyond what an Australian interviewee described as "cheap riding," if not free riding. An expert based in Singapore observed:

*The interesting point is that there has been quite a bit of receptiveness. Part of the rebalance was not only the US doing more for the region, but also regional countries doing more for the US. So I think that worked quite well.*

- Singapore-based expert

Given these positive responses from the region, the military Pivot seemed quite successful. However, the policy is far from a complete success, and considering the diversity of each country's national interests, the US still has a substantial amount of work ahead. One of their most formidable tasks is how to bind the regional countries to the US in order to facilitate cooperation. A Japanese commentator suggested the need to build a better network for security cooperation beyond the simple, existing "hub and spokes" system. He argued,

*I think this network should be based on our respect for universal principles, because regional countries have different relationships with China, economically and politically. Our military strength is also different.*

- Japanese expert

This is not just applicable to military cooperation, but in other areas, too. With limited resources, the US is not able to serve all of the different interests of regional countries, which it partially accomplished during the Cold War. Today, the US also has to compete against a rising China, whose geographical proximity to the region gives it significant advantages. One of the ways to avoid becoming trapped in all the contradicting demands of the regional countries while still building a close cooperative network is to group countries that share similar principles, including sustaining the liberal political, economic, and military regional order that exists today.

### Negative Assessments of the Military Pivot

#### Weak US Military Actions in the South China Sea

Not surprisingly, the most frequently mentioned case highlighting the insufficiency of

US military engagement was the South China Sea dispute. Nearly all countries covered in this survey responded that US actions in the South China Sea were inadequate. The experts expressed hope that the US military commitment could be strengthened in this case. A Korean expert said that the US was passive, reactive, risk adverse in the South China Sea, and that its strategy had amplified the burden of regional countries. The expert added that US forces should be more proactive and willing to display their presence. Another Korean expert similarly argued that the US could have done more in the dispute to give strategic assurances to regional countries but was held back by China. The US was too considerate of the Chinese reaction in the South China Sea, and consequently, US actions did not display full commitment in the eyes of regional countries.

Japanese experts had the strongest criticism of US military actions in the South China Sea. Experts from other countries did not elaborate on the details of what the US did wrong. One Japanese observer began by criticizing the US response in the South China Sea as too little, too late. As a result, the US gradually lost the South China Sea to China, whose strategy is well planned and active. The expert argued:

*If I chose one [problem for the US military strategy] then it would be the overcautious and slow response on the South China Sea conflict. The South China Sea Conflict has been a problem, and I suspect that China has decided to push as much as they can while Obama is in power because they know that the next [president] will be tougher towards China. I think they are trying to maximize its gains and benefits during the time that they have. The US started the operation for the freedom of navigation last September, but it was too late and too little. My guess is that the White House micromanaged the problem so that there was one fleet that moved 12 nautical miles in conflict area. They are gradually stepping up. As you can see, China did not back down, and the US failed to pass a strong signal to China. Also, it was too late because China already committed huge resources to the South China Sea.*

- Japanese expert

Another Japanese expert cited the freedom of navigation operations by the US navy in the South China Sea as failing to deter China. On the contrary, it was vulnerable to the Chinese counter-claim that the US was the one actually militarizing the South China Sea, stating:

*US freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea, I think it was too late and too little. And actually China is justifying its militarization by criticizing US freedom of navigation. China says US operation is militarizing and destabilizing the situation. China deployed anti-air missile and recently, jet fighters. A couple of days ago, there was a report the US Air Force operated the aircraft above the Scarborough Shoal to dissuade China from doing the land reclamation. But I think China will take this as an opportunity to conduct land reclamation because they know the US has no determination to use force to stop it.*

- Japanese expert

Another Japanese expert proposed a number of measures the US and regional countries should take in the South China Sea. What is needed is for the US to take the lead militarily, as the expert argued:

*The biggest issue to keep an eye on will be the South China Sea dispute. The US will have to begin setting up countermeasures that include the stationing of US soldiers, capacity building toward Vietnam and the Philippines, and other multilateral responses like joining the Operation of Freedom of Navigation. By internationalizing the South China Sea dispute, for example, Australia and France are certain to participate, as well as Japan. If Japan became involved on its own, then China is certain to retaliate. Ideally, the US must make the first encounter with China so that others may follow its lead ... The US needs to mount a tougher approach.*

- Japanese expert

While Japanese experts were equally interested in the South China Sea and East China Sea disputes or more interested in the former, an expert based in Singapore actually made a comparison between the US military commitment in the East China Sea, where the beneficiary is Japan, and the South China Sea, where the beneficiary is the Philippines. The expert observed:

*US freedom of navigation operations don't have anything, or very little, to do with territorial and maritime boundary disputes with China and five Southeast Asian states. US interests are only about freedom of navigation and that they feel Chinese actions in the South China Sea are now inhibiting that. Two conflicts are ongoing in the South China Sea: the territorial maritime boundary disputes between China and Southeast Asian countries, with the US as an outside interested party, and the tension between the*



*United States and China over freedom of navigation. The United States, unlike in the East China Sea dispute, doesn't do two things in the South China Sea. They don't take a position on sovereignty disputes ... the US says that the US-Japan alliance covers the East China Sea dispute because Japan administers the islands. The US doesn't make such claims for the Philippines.*

- Singapore-based expert

On the whole, Southeast Asian experts doubt the US commitment in the South China Sea and view the US commitment in the East China Sea as stronger.

### ***Uncertain US Extended Deterrence and Credibility***

Japan, however, has its own suspicions about the US commitment to extended deterrence. A Japanese commentator argued:

*Maybe Japan is doing a very good job in terms of capacity building of its own ... To me, the [grade for] Obama administration's policy toward East China Sea is a "B". In the 1980-90s, American did not care much about what the Japan-US treaty meant for East China Sea. From time to time, some American politicians and high ranking officials used to say Senkaku is out of the treaty obligation. But that is not true. President Obama is the first US president who said the US-Japan defense treaty covers Senkaku. So Japan welcomed this. But we still have some suspicion over the US commitment.*

- Japanese expert

On extended deterrence, Korean experts were also more sensitive to the US commitment. A Korean expert questioned US credibility when it comes to security assurances given US military behavior in other parts of the world, noting:

*Credibility is the most important thing. The US should reassure its allies and partners in the region, and they must do it well. Through their rebalancing policy, the US successfully improved their image rhetorically and diplomatically. However, the US cannot help but lose credibility because of their lack of action. They spared themselves in the Ukrainian crisis. They are making slow progress with their Middle East policy. They also did not take more forceful action in the South China Sea when they should have. This is why I felt that there was lack of US action in comparison to their initial rhetoric.*

*To earn credibility from regional countries, the US should take action that can ensure them of a firm US reassurance, even if it is limited to a specific issue in the region. They can have a larger scale joint military exercise or raise the frequency of rotational deployment of strategic assets to the region. Regarding the South China Sea issue, the US should not just argue for freedom of navigation. Rather, they should send a stronger message toward China, pointing out precisely what they are doing wrong on a solid basis.*

- Korean expert

Related to extended deterrence, a Japanese commentator argued that if Mr. Trump became president, it would prompt a response from the Japanese far-right. As Trump criticized Japanese security free-riding during the campaign, it seemed like extended deterrence would no longer be guaranteed. The Japanese respondent argued:

*If Trump becomes president and pursues his policies, that would be a major crisis for Japan and many other countries in the world. There will also be a rising tide in Japan of anti-Americanism, which is currently not as strong in Korea. There is some comfort from relying on the US on security issues. There are people, however, who want an independent Japan that is robust. The constitutional purists believe the opposite as a left-wing fantasy. If Trump becomes president, then many of those doubts about relying on the US would be energized.*

- Japanese expert

### ***Missed Opportunities in Defense Diplomacy and Industry Cooperation***

Defense diplomacy and defense industry cooperation were identified as areas where the US should devote greater attention. A Vietnamese expert suggested that the US engage via regional defense diplomacy rather than just relying on hard power. By considering this as an alternative to actually stationing troops and bases in the region, it could avoid negative reactions from regional countries, including China. The expert remarked:

*Diplomacy under the Obama administration was used more often and diplomacy meant several things. It meant being less dependent on hard power. Even if it is used, it is the soft side of hard power. In other words, smart hard power is used. Then there is what's called the defense diplomacy, for instance, participation of the [Department of Defense] in all the diplomatic meetings such as US-ASEAN defense minister's meeting, the military-*



*to-military relations, and capacity building so you have diplomacy in the military establishment.*

- Vietnamese expert

A Japanese observer made the following suggestion for future US force deployments in the region when the US does not have sufficient military resources to invest:

*To carry out assurance towards its allies and friends in the region, the US must have smaller and very mobile units for rapid reaction or expeditionary functions. There should be more units available for various missions in the region. That is what I expect from the US ... a big size unit may be needed for the Korean contingencies. In that sense, US forces in Korea, and US forces in Japan Okinawa may be the one rushing into the Korean peninsula. But other than that, the US needs to have smaller and mobile units. What if something happens somewhere in Southeast Asia? What if some small contingency takes place out-of-region such as Indian Ocean? ... In those areas, perhaps the US needs smaller but very rapid engagement forces.*

- Japanese expert

In addition to defense diplomacy, an Indonesian expert touched upon a different aspect of the military Pivot that regional countries found wanting: defense industry cooperation. Whereas US treaty allies saw the military Pivot as a strengthening of existing ties, for non-allies such as Indonesia, the commitment of the US in the region was always in question. When the US approaches these countries for military engagement, it was mostly through education and military training, which is a rather low level of military engagement. While the absence of formal military treaties limited the scope of defense activities, such as stationing troops or constructing bases, there were many opportunities for deeper engagement with non-allies that had not been realized. The Indonesian expert explained:

*I'll give you an example with the Indonesian military. One of the key indicators of US commitment is not the level of education and training assistance, but it's the level of industrial collaboration. Are your defense companies willing to invest in our defense companies and have a long-term joint venture, which is something that the Swedish are offering? For the military, at least that's one indicator. Is the US going to invest long-term with us, or is this going to be on and off?*

- Indonesian expert

### ***Lack of Support for India as Counter-balance to China***

The US has to build a stronger coalition of partners with reliable capabilities in the region. This must be done if the US, together with regional countries, wants to deter Chinese aggression given its proximity to all states while averting confrontation. As an Indian expert summed up this delicate balancing act:

*The Chinese are in a position to test the credibility of the American alliance system. What the Chinese are doing is telling the neighboring countries, "Look, Uncle Sam is far away. I am here, so it is in your interest to be with me directly, and don't think Uncle Sam can protect you." This looks like the neighbor next door is more valuable than distant relatives.*

- Indian expert

A Korean expert proposed a geopolitical structure with allies in the region emphasizing India, so that China would not focus its military capacity on South China Sea or Northeast Asia:

*Why is India important to East Asia? If India's military power gets stronger and its economy grows bigger, the strategic competition between China and India will force China to exhaust its power there, which it would otherwise have projected in East Asia. We need to make China consume its power there. We should not attempt to do everything on our own, nor should we expect that the US can do it alone with its powers. Eventually, we need India as a force that can check on China and bother them in the Indian Ocean and South Asia. A penny more spent by China for strategic competition with India, a penny less to be spent in East Asia to secure its dominance in the region. That is also the reason why South Korea should strengthen partnership with India and Vietnam. It takes more than the US to prevent China from focusing its strength on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea, Japan and the United States should strengthen strategic communications and partnership with India. We should help India get stronger. We should have the strategic awareness that a strong India can play a crucial role in reducing security threats from China in East Asia.*

- Korean expert

### **Conclusion**

Variations between countries regarding the military Pivot were similar to the overall assessments of the Pivot. Australian and Japanese experts were the strongest supporters

of the military Pivot and experts from both countries expressed willingness to do more in support of it. Japanese experts, however, argued that there was room for improvement in US military measures, such as greater security guarantees in regional maritime disputes and firm assurances in the area of extended deterrence against Chinese threats. Korean experts did not see much difference in the US military engagement before and after the Pivot. This is partly because of the already strong US military presence on the peninsula.

Southeast Asian countries showed mixed responses to the military Pivot. No countries expressed open opposition. Nevertheless, Indonesian experts were most uncomfortable with the military rebalance. Indonesian respondents were wary of rising tensions in the region as a result of the military Pivot, although this does not mean that they were happy with rising Chinese assertiveness in the region. Experts from Vietnam and Singapore welcomed the military Pivot as a balancing force against China especially in the maritime arena, and Vietnamese experts were more supportive of the military Pivot.

In general, there were high expectations among regional countries for the military dimensions of the Pivot to offset rising Chinese assertiveness. It is not quite clear if these high expectations were created by the US or if they were just the wishful thinking of regional countries. What is certain is that the expectations were not met. US efforts to deter China and resolve disputes in the region were not successful. In addition, the physical presence of military personnel and deployments backed up by financial resources were inadequate.

## The Economic Pivot

Views on the economic Pivot were dominated by the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Experts were positive about the economic Pivot's focus on trade liberalization and those countries in talks to join the TPP were particularly hopeful about the benefits of increased economic growth and cooperation. Indian and Korean experts also emphasized their bilateral trade relationships with the US in addition to the TPP. However, the high hopes that many experts had for the TPP and closer economic cooperation were balanced against a general sense of pessimism that the ambitious trade agreement would be successfully ratified by the next US president given the campaign rhetoric. In addition, experts thought the US could work harder on highlighting its significant investment throughout the region as a positive force. Finally, many were critical of the US reaction to China's Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and particularly US attempts to pressure regional countries not to join.

While the military dimensions of the Pivot have attracted the most attention, the earliest elements of the Obama's administration's strategy focused on deeper economic engagement and trade cooperation with Asia. The centerpiece of the economic Pivot was the ambitious Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement. Later, when China proposed the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative, the TPP was framed as the American answer to the emerging Asian economic order. While strategic competition and rivalry between the US and China revolved around disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea, the economic rivalry focused on competition between the TPP and AIIB-OBOR. Consequently, perceptions of the economic Pivot were heavily dominated by the TPP.

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would be successfully ratified by the next US president given the campaign rhetoric. In addition, experts thought the US could work harder on highlighting its significant investment throughout the region as a positive force. Finally, many were critical of the US reaction to China's AIIB and particularly US attempts to pressure regional countries not to join.

## Positive Assessments of the Economic Pivot

### *High Hopes for TPP*

The majority of respondents viewed the TPP as the most important element of the US economic Pivot to Asia and supported it. An Australian respondent summed up its importance by noting that:

*I think the intention, the people understand. They take the face value, and that makes the economic side very important, because to be credible, the US has to demonstrate that it's not a power in decline, but that it's staking its economic future in order to make the military side possible in the future. So the TPP has been very important.*

- Australian expert

Even experts from countries that were not in formal talks to join or where there was considerable opposition to joining the TPP were nonetheless positive in their views of TPP. As one Vietnamese expert observed about US efforts to win over Vietnamese domestic opposition:

*Vietnam is the most enthusiastic supporter of the TPP and free trade. Obama realized he has found the most enthusiastic support in Vietnam. Of course, there are a group of people in Vietnam who are conservative and suspicious of the US. They fear that Washington could suddenly change its policy. Obama invited these activists to meet and talk. John Kerry said that this was not necessary because Hanoi already has enough pressure. Washington demonstrated mutual understanding and flexibility.*

- Vietnamese expert

Why were regional countries so supportive of US economic engagement with Asia, and particularly the TPP? The importance of the TPP for the whole region becomes apparent if we consider what would be the impact of the failure of the TPP. The

TPP is also important for individual country's economic imperatives and in helping governments "push for domestic economic reforms", according to an Indonesian expert. Domestic economic reform is difficult in any country. Depending upon the economic interests of various social sectors, there are pros and cons to economic reform. If the government does not have the political will and instruments to implement reforms, they fail. Asian countries in the TPP, particularly Southeast Asian governments, have tried to use political incentives to address domestic resistance to reforms. As an Australian commentator observed:

*People outside Southeast Asia tend to see the TPP as another way to conduct politics. I think within Southeast Asia there is a greater tendency to understand the TPP as an important economic tool in its own right because, for various countries, the potential medium-term benefits of the TPP are quite significant. For example, you may have seen the studies in Vietnam that suggest it stands to gain enormously if it manages to liberalize its economy enough to take advantage of the TPP. Singapore has also been very assertive in trying to persuade the United States and the Obama Administration that it must ensure that the TPP is passed within the Congress... Singapore, being a free trade economy and open trading economy, places way more emphasis on what the TPP can do for the Singapore economy, more than its neighbors.*

- Australian expert

### *Bilateral vs. Multilateral Trade*

Some observers from India and Korea saw the economic Pivot primarily from a bilateral perspective. The Indian view focused more on the India-US economic relationship and India's economic ties to the rest of Asia. As one Indian expert noted:

*The previous administration generally thought of India in the political sense. The Obama administration recognizes that India will be less committed in the political realm than in the economic realm ... The Pivot to Asia would mean that the US would want India to be more active in Asia, especially in the economic sense. India has been ignoring the Asia Pacific, talking about Southeast Asia, but not Asia Pacific. I think probably the American Pivot to Asia is good for India because it is an opportunity for India to economically engage with the Pacific more than before.*

- Indian expert

Another Indian respondent focused more explicitly on what the US could do for the development of the Indian economy, rather than mentioning the TPP or the US economic engagement with the broader region, arguing:

*India would appreciate the American administration's focus on creating greater manufacturing in India. For example, [using] Make in India and Digital India in developing greater science and technology strength, and in helping Indian manufacturing industries, the defense industry in particular. Greater cooperation with the US for economic progress will be appreciated. Obviously, it would also mean dealing with long traditional threats targeting India to cooperate and build a more peaceful and stable environment for India.*

- Indian expert

Korean experts also saw the TPP in more instrumental terms. Whereas most experts saw the TPP as crucial to the success of the Pivot and also of benefit to their respective economies, Korean experts were more skeptical about the prospects for multilateral trade liberalization in the region. They explained that this was why Korea had pursued a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) with the US so early on. Assuming that Korea could also conclude an FTA with Japan, Korea would have bilateral FTAs with most of the TPP members, which would reduce the need to formally join the TPP.

## Negative Assessments of the Economic Pivot

### *Pessimism over TPP Ratification*

Despite their support for the TPP, most experts were pessimistic about its future. There was a general consensus that the agreement's ratification by the US Congress would be very difficult in the near future. Some argued that there might be a chance for Obama to ratify the TPP during a lame-duck session of Congress, but the majority of experts expected that the chances were very slim. During the US presidential election campaign, both candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton had promised to either reverse the TPP process or pursue major revisions to the deal. Regional experts expected that the TPP would have to be ratified in the second or third year of the next president, at the earliest. Some even argued that there was a chance that the TPP would not be ratified at all. A Korean expert went so far as to say that it would be a "miracle" if the next administration ratified the agreement. A respondent in Singapore summed up this skepticism as follows:

*We all know that the TPP right now is in troubled waters. There is hope that Obama will manage to get it through between November [2016] and January [2017]. If he does that, his legacy in the Asia Pacific would be strengthened tremendously. If that does not happen, it will be automatically left for the next administration. Under Trump, I don't see how that is likely to happen; under Hillary Clinton, I think she would try to get it through, but with a delay and probably needing to re-negotiate some of it, so as to be able to show trade unions and public opinion in the US, "Look, I fought for an even better agreement." So, at the very least, things will be delayed by eighteen months.*

- Singapore-based expert

Nearly all experts feared that withdrawal by a future US president would seriously undermine American credibility as a regional leader and would deal an economic blow to those countries who had committed to join. As an expert from Singapore argued:

*Singapore is probably the strongest and the most consistent defender of a very large role for the US in the region. If the US can't deliver on the economic side, that makes it more difficult for Singapore to maintain its position that the United States is a resident power that should be fully recognized.*

- Singapore-based expert

The TPP was not just a trade liberalization agreement but the US vision for a new set of rules and regional economic order. It was seen by experts as competing with the Chinese economic vision based around the AIIB and Belt and Road Initiative. US failure to ratify the TPP would therefore be a huge setback in its regional rivalry with China. Furthermore, as a Korean expert observed, if the US falls behind in its race against China to set up a new regional economic architecture, then security issues will be affected as well. The TPP goes beyond the economy and has political and security implications. It is a barometer for the credibility of the US as a residential power in Asia. An expert based in Singapore concluded:

*I understand that many economists are saying that the level of growth generated by the TPP is quite marginal in most countries; going to be less than one percent. This is the solution to all problems. For that reason alone, it's more than a trade agreement. It's really about locking the United States in Asia in the 21st century.*

- Singapore-based expert



### *Low Visibility of US Investment in Asia*

Whereas the TPP was primarily about trade liberalization and tariff reductions, experts also cited a need for greater attention to investment flows, particularly from the US into Asia. We cannot understand the depth of US economic engagement with Asian countries if we only focus on the TPP. Contrary to conventional wisdom, US investment in the region is not smaller than that of China, which shows that the US still has a strong economic presence and leads foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region. As an expert based in Singapore argued:

*It focuses attention on the TPP and ignores the huge economic imprint of the US in the region. In Singapore, for example, the US is by far the largest source of FDI, but has nothing to do with the TPP. The size of the investment is seven times that of China. The idea that the US is a declining force in Southeast Asia or East Asia as a whole focuses on aggregate trade statistics only. If you look at FDI or foreign portfolio investment, the US is a huge player, and yet they haven't focused on that.*

- Singapore-based expert

But the views on US investment differed throughout Southeast Asia. Experts alluded to a connection between the visibility of investments and perceptions of economic presence. A Vietnamese expert called for greater US investment in Vietnam, noting that China's highly visible economic presence was "the reason behind the popularity of AIIB here." In a similar context, an Indonesian expert concluded that China clearly has the upper hand when it comes to economic power and resources, adding that "I don't think that [the US] can balance the Chinese ability to pour a lot of investment towards Southeast Asia." This suggests that the US economic presence through investment is not evenly spread out across the region. In fact, Vietnam, although a latecomer in forming a trade and investment partnership with the US, is rapidly developing its economic and strategic relations with the US. Therefore, Vietnam is one of the prime destinations for US investment today. Given this, the same complaint about the lack of US investment would be much stronger in other parts of this region.

### *US Pressure not to Join China's AIIB*

Finally, experts were divided on US opposition to regional countries joining China's AIIB. Some viewed the AIIB as offering financial resources that were badly needed in

the region and that it was an acceptable alternative to traditional financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank. Developing countries, in particular, welcomed the Chinese initiative in the hopes that it would help them to improve their poor infrastructure. By opposing the AIIB, the US gave the impression of blocking potential sources of economic benefits for regional countries. Furthermore, US actions were interpreted by some experts as driving US-China relations towards confrontation, thereby increasing the strategic burden for regional countries. An Australian observer remarked:

*I do think the US response to the Chinese Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, was wrong-footed in that, as China was offering to set up a financial economic engine for the region, the US said it shouldn't do it. Why not? What's the point of this? So I think the US was very flat-footed on the AIIB.*

- Australian expert

An expert based in Singapore went even further in criticizing the US attempt to put pressure on regional countries not to subscribe to the AIIB. The US was neither successful in persuading regional countries to reject the AIIB, nor was it able to stop China, which only proved that US influence on regional countries was limited. The expert added:

*I think AIIB diplomacy by the US was done really badly. I don't think the US should join the AIIB. Why should the US join the Chinese-led bank as a junior partner? That's just silly. It was pretty clear that the US put pressure on countries not to join. South Korea, Australia and Southeast Asian states joined. US pressure failed. Even when China was providing things that Southeast Asia or Asian countries wanted in a way that was welcomed in the region, the US tried to stop it. It shows the US wasn't sensitive enough to regional concerns about US hegemony. When the Americans pressured the Japanese in 1998 to cancel the Asian monetary fund idea, that didn't work well. The US can effectively pressure Japan; the US can't effectively pressure China. Every country in the region on the economic front wants to show that it's willing to have a closer economic relationship with China. So I think AIIB, if you look at US diplomacy, there they dropped the ball. It probably shows to me they won't think about it carefully enough.*

- Singapore-based expert



## Conclusion

On the economic Pivot, Southeast Asian countries' voices were the loudest since they have the most at stake on the success of TPP. While most experts welcomed the TPP, there was widespread pessimism on the ratification of the TPP from the US side, which was a barometer of the US commitment to the economic Pivot. Southeast Asian experts argued that the failure of ratification would be equivalent to not just the failure of the economic Pivot, but also cause substantial damage to US credibility in the region.

Experts from Vietnam and Singapore had particularly strong opinions on the success or failure of the TPP given their economic interests as members of the TPP. Indonesia, although not a member of the TPP, had similar views, and Indonesian experts predicted that the Indonesian government would soon express its intention to be a part of the TPP. The Japanese position on the economic Pivot and the TPP was broadly similar to Southeast Asian countries, but Japanese experts did not see the failure of TPP ratification as a credibility crisis for the US given that military and security issues were seen as more important for Japan.

Indian experts did not go into detail about the TPP or the US economic rebalancing to Asia. Instead, most of the respondents, when they were asked to review the economic Pivot, discussed bilateral economic relations and argued for more economic and development assistance from the US. Korean experts noted that the TPP is not urgent for Korea, as the country already has bilateral FTAs with most of the TPP members, except Japan. Experts from Australia, Singapore, and Indonesia were critical of the US attitude towards the Chinese AIIB. While regional countries were more supportive of security matters that deterred Chinese assertiveness, they were more ambivalent on economic issues.

## The Diplomatic Pivot

Views on the diplomatic Pivot were overwhelmingly positive. The diplomatic dimension of the Pivot focused on enhanced US participation in regional multilateral frameworks and strengthening bilateral relations. They were very positive about regular US attendance at multilateral meetings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit, as well as high-level official visits to Asian countries. They also liked the Obama administration's respect for the principle of "ASEAN Centrality", its investment in diplomatic efforts such as hosting the first US-ASEAN Summit, and noted the enduring cultural and educational influence of the US as positive aspects of the Pivot. Rather than criticize the diplomatic Pivot, most experts offered suggestions for how to make US diplomatic engagement more effective, including being more patient with multilateral institutional processes, as well as showing sensitivity and respect for smaller countries in such forums.

The diplomatic Pivot was focused on enhanced US participation in regional multilateral frameworks and strengthening bilateral relations. The US has historically managed relations with Asia-Pacific countries through bilateral channels and its various alliances, especially during the Cold War period. The Obama administration sought to re-configure this longstanding tradition by emphasizing multilateralism along with economic engagement.

Experts viewed US diplomatic engagement the most positively of all the elements of the Pivot. They were very positive about regular US attendance at multilateral meetings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit, as well as high-level official visits to Asian countries. They also liked the Obama administration's respect for the principle of "ASEAN Centrality", its investment in diplomatic efforts such as hosting the first US-ASEAN Summit, and noted the enduring cultural and educational influence of the US as positive aspects of the Pivot. Rather than criticize the diplomatic Pivot, most experts offered suggestions for how to make US diplomatic engagement more effective, including becoming more patient with multilateral institutional processes, showing sensitivity and respect for smaller countries in such forums.

## Positive Assessments of the Diplomatic Pivot

### Regular US Attendance at Regional Meetings

President Obama's emphasis on multilateralism was received very well by regional experts. While regional countries welcomed the US presence in the region, many of them had concerns about potential US unilateralism in regional affairs and bilateral relations. Traditionally, Southeast Asian countries were more sensitive to the unilateralism of a stronger country and subsequently supported multilateralism in the region. Northeast Asian countries were not as supportive of multilateralism in the region, especially when it came to their partnerships with the US. Nevertheless, there was consensus on the importance of US multilateral engagement with the region. As a Japanese observer commented:

*Another strength is that the US emphasizes multilateralism. It is the same reason why many US allies are more concerned about credibility issues rather than the unilateralism of the US that was exhibited during the Clinton and Bush administrations. That is a reasonable approach in emphasizing diplomacy and international organizations when that works.*

- Japanese expert

In this spirit, many experts positively assessed high-level visits by US officials to the region and, more importantly, the frequency of President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's participation in regional multilateral meetings, which was in stark contrast with previous administrations. An expert in Singapore observed:

*If you look at the first 4 years, it is quite remarkable what Obama was able to achieve. We should not forget that prior to him we had George Bush [and] the "coalition of the willing" kind of rhetoric. Why should I go to some of the summits? Condoleezza Rice [did not attend] some of the ARF meetings. So, this was a true scene change. It happened with US joining the [ASEAN] Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and then wanting to join the East Asia Summit and the ADMM+ [ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus] ... I think the first four years were quite remarkable.*

- Singapore-based expert

An Australian expert agreed:

*I think the Obama administration has been more successful than most in convincing Asian countries that it is taking Asia more seriously on the diplomatic side, in particular. I think, if you look at the visits, the number of times the secretary of state has come to Asia, it's been a better performance than the Bush administration or the previous administrations.*

- Australian expert

### Respect for ASEAN Centrality

Multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific region necessarily focuses on ASEAN. ASEAN is the oldest and most stable multilateral cooperation body, and nearly all multilateral frameworks in the region are ASEAN-led. With the exception of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which was initiated and promoted by the US and Australia, other multilateral institutions such as the ARF, ASEAN+3, EAS and ADMM+ are either ASEAN initiatives or at least ASEAN-centered in that either ASEAN countries comprise the majority of members or dominate the agenda-setting process. The concept of "ASEAN Centrality" encapsulates this cornerstone of East Asian multilateral institutions and their modus vivendi. Given this, how the US approaches ASEAN is key to successful engagement with regional multilateral institutions. An Australian expert praised President Obama and the Pivot in this regard, noting that:

*Southeast Asians were annoyed at the Bush administration's "Little ASEAN," and the Obama administration made a very big show of honoring ASEAN Centrality. I think it was for strategic reasons. It was to prevent China from making itself central to the East Asian diplomatic architecture. The US prefers ASEAN to be central but that demonstration of respect for ASEAN centrality was very appreciated by Southeast Asia, and I think it was very effective in generating good wealth for the United States in what it was trying to accomplish in East Asia.*

- Australian expert

However, some Korean experts argued that while US engagement with multilateral institutions in the region is undoubtedly important and significant from a Southeast Asian perspective, the benefits to Northeast Asia were marginal.

*That makes sense from an ASEAN centrality perspective. But, in some sense, ASEAN and Northeast Asia are worlds apart. With regards to security issues, they have completely*

*different sets of interests. On the contrary, common interests are very weak.*

- Korean expert

The expert added that most multilateral meetings in the region are of little importance since the decisions are not binding and their main purpose is for socializing. Nevertheless, the US had reason to engage with those institutions for two reasons. First, it is a cost efficient way to engage with many regional countries at once. Second, discussions of the US were unavoidable at such meetings and it was useful for the US to participate in these conversations.

### ***Greater US Diplomatic Investment***

The diplomatic Pivot also entailed upgrading bilateral relationships with key regional countries. The primary focus of these efforts was Southeast Asia given its strategic importance to US-China competition, including in the South China Sea, and the sub-region's neglect under previous administrations. A key milestone in this engagement was President Obama's 2016 hosting of ASEAN leaders for a two-day summit in California. As one Vietnamese respondent argued:

*If you look at the ASEAN summit in Sunnylands in January this year, Obama made a written commitment to attend every summit between ASEAN and the US. I think only Obama can make such commitments ... A US president attending every single ASEAN meeting has never occurred before. So Obama has set off to a very good start putting Asia again at the center of the US policy, and countries like Korea and Vietnam should take advantage of this.*

- Vietnamese expert

Another Vietnamese expert added that in addition to high-level attendance at inter-governmental summits, the US had also been steadily increasing its diplomatic presence throughout the region.

*On the diplomatic front, the US is focusing more on Asia-Pacific regions and moving away from other regions. Look at the number of US diplomats in Hanoi. The numbers have increased sharply in comparison to 5 years ago not only in Vietnam, but also in Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Singapore, and across the region, even in China and South Korea. US diplomacy has greater presence to better represent and protect its interests. What does it*

*mean? It means they have more probability in dealing with related issues, based on a better understanding of Asia in the long run.*

- Vietnamese expert

### ***Soft Power Works***

The diplomatic Pivot has also been bolstered by US soft power. While soft power, smart power, and socio-cultural issues were rarely mentioned in American statements about the Pivot, some respondents were surprisingly detailed about how soft power had influenced positive assessments of the US. A Japanese expert argued that, "[American] soft power is still number one. Even though the relative strength is questionable, even China cannot match the United States at this moment, particularly on the soft power." Vietnamese respondents were particularly positive on US soft power and its regional influence. One expert explained how US efforts to foster people-to-people and educational exchanges worked well, not just in Vietnam, but throughout Asia, stating:

*Last, but not least, is people-to-people exchange. The number of Asian students – young Asians, both men and women – going to the US is increasing. This is good. So I believe that after 8 years, the US administration and Obama has made big accomplishments. The US is strengthening its posture and reinforcing its positive image in the region without creating much level of conflict, except with China.*

- Vietnamese expert

Unlike other countries covered in this survey, Vietnam had severed relations with the US for most of the Cold War. This lack of a relationship, in addition to Vietnam's strategy of leveraging US influence against China in the South China Sea, probably accounted for Vietnamese experts' positive assessment of the soft power of the US. Another Vietnamese expert mentioned US education as an important element of its soft power, comparing the US education system with that of China, pointing out:

*With the Obama administration, in addition to economic and military enhancement, I see soft power as a way to extend US values, which could be a long term. If you look at the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, he set the standard for young generations to look up to big powers. In that perspective, this does not apply to China, to be honest. The Chinese are imposing their views through Confucian institutions. This is different from the US, which extends its influence through education. People go to China*

*to study because it is cheap. The US is the main place to study, even in comparison to the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.*

- Vietnamese expert

Another Vietnamese expert further noted that the Obama administration in particular had increased US soft power. Whereas the Department of Defense had wielded substantial foreign policy influence under previous administrations, President Obama seemed to have reduced its role in favor of the Department of State and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was a believer in smart power. As the expert observed:

*When Obama came to power in 2008, the US was in a state of economic crisis. The military budget was reduced. In other words, the hard power approach was less feasible both financially and economically. Soft and smart power was chosen purely out of necessity and that choice was not a difficult approach to take. Second ... under President George W. Bush ... Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had a big influence on foreign policy ... and when Obama assumed the presidency, Clinton became the Secretary of State, and she was a believer of the smart power approach.*

- Vietnamese expert

Experts observed that time played an important role in the policies of the Pivot and that the diplomatic and economic elements of the Pivot were stronger during President Obama's first term while the military aspect was more dominant in the second term.

## Negative Assessments of the Diplomatic Pivot

### *Attend but Don't Dominate Meetings*

There were very few negative assessments of the diplomatic Pivot. Most experts did, however, offer suggestions to how to make US diplomatic engagement more effective. First, the US has to be patient in its engagement with regional multilateral institutions. The history of US engagement had left skepticism about the US willingness to stay consistently engaged. Southeast Asian experts were especially pointed about the inconsistent track record of past administrations' regional involvement. As a Singapore-based expert explained:

*The US policy can change from administration to administration ... Thailand and the*

*Philippines were left out when Kissinger suddenly surfaced in Beijing. We were still fighting in South Vietnam.*

- Singapore-based expert

Experts noted that regional forums were built around ASEAN and that progress was often slow. As an Australian expert observed:

*I think the US has been much better engaged with regional multilateral cooperative frameworks like ASEAN, EAS, and the ASEAN Regional Forum. I think it has put diplomatic thought forward quite noticeably in Asia, and particularly in Southeast Asia. But those things are relatively slow growing plants. It'll take a decade or two for ASEAN countries to think of the US as a familiar diplomatic partner.*

- Australian expert

Second, the US also has to show proper respect for other state's autonomy. As an observer based in Singapore argued:

*I think the US should do two things. One is show up regularly, and don't even appear to be trying to change or take a leadership role in the regional organizations, particularly ASEAN-based ones. Southeast Asian states are very defensive about dialogue partners making suggestions, and the bigger the dialogue partner is, the more that defensive reaction is. So, the US came in and said, "This is what we want from East Asia Summit." I think they understand that. If you look at the other part of US diplomacy in the region, not so much in Southeast Asia but in East Asia more broadly, they become much more active in trilateral and mini-lateral forums that they are at the center of because you can do a lot more there. China is also not in the forums. If the US is smart, I think they will learn this lesson. Show up to the formal meetings, don't look like you're trying to set the agenda, and then work more closely, not just bilaterally, but in trilateral and mini-lateral settings. ASEAN processes present the US with a very difficult situation because the US likes to be seen as doing things and have them done.*

- Singapore-based expert

This comment at first seems to contradict one of the key expert recommendations regarding the Pivot that the US should have a clear vision and well-defined goals. But experts noted that even as the US should have clear aims and ideas about its role and desired relationships with countries, it should nonetheless seek to be a sincere and



active participant in multilateral forums rather than dominating such forums. As an Indian expert explained:

*There are two things the Americans have to do. First, they need to be present. If they go away, then it's going to be problematic for all of us. Second, they must stay, but they cannot control the place. The American problem is they only know how to lead.*

- Indian expert

Another Indian expert further added:

*Big powers will always be big powers; there is no doubt about it. However, Asian powers at this point of history do not really accept [the] hegemony of any powers. There is no doubt about the American Pivot to Asia, but the US should not reflect on the region as its extension or constituency. Because today's globe would not accept the hegemonic construct "if you are not with me, then you are against me."*

- Indian expert

### ***Have Realistic Expectations for Regional Forums***

Regional experts proposed two different directions for US engagement in multilateral institutions. First, they suggested that the US continue engaging with regional multilateral institutions and that it identify a specific role for itself. Second, they suggested that while there is no harm in US engagement with regional multilateral frameworks, its bilateral partnerships are more fundamental and substantive and should remain its focus. An Indonesian expert emphasized the virtue of engaging with Asia through multilateral frameworks as follows:

*I think it's the commitment to regional institutions that signals the US willingness to, on the one hand, be committed to the region and, on the other hand, be committed to the point of not creating one-way dependence. The US is committed to also empower Asian countries. In the absence of a single view of Asian countries, the commitment of empowering the regional institutions sends a strong signal. Attending the EAS more regularly, but also, just going back to old themes like ASEAN as the fulcrum of regional institutions is never a bad idea.*

- Indonesian expert

ASEAN as a group of ten developing countries is often downplayed in the regional context, especially by bigger countries. However, the role and strategic weight of ASEAN has grown substantially in recent years. If the US is serious about engaging with regional multilateral frameworks and seeking a strategic edge, engaging with ASEAN and helping the institution realize its potential is crucial. A Japanese observer noted:

*The problem with ASEAN is that ASEAN underestimates itself. Their population, economic power, military strength, and political influence in East Asia are changing. ASEAN, as a whole, is a really big player in regional issues, but ASEAN underestimates itself, and they are still preoccupied with a small-nation mindset, which China wants to see. So I think the US should take policies treating ASEAN as an equal partner, and encourage ASEAN to play a greater role. And of course, [the] US needs to back-up [ASEAN] if China tries to threaten or coerce ASEAN member countries. I think we have to encourage ASEAN to play a greater role.*

- Japanese expert

Regarding the specific role the US has in regional multilateral institutions, experts recommended that the US join these institutions as a member to infuse fresh ideas into the debates. In some sense, regional cooperative mechanisms are not very productive, as a Singapore-based expert suggested:

*Obama showed up in every single East Asia Summit, coming up with new ideas and initiatives. If you look at the multilateral institutions, there are not a lot of actions going on right now. There is a lot of talk, but there is not a lot of action. The action seems to be more at the bilateral and trilateral level. Trying to restart the process of doing things at the multilateral level would be good, and I think the US can contribute to this together with its partners like Japan, South Korea, ASEAN countries, and so on. That's important on the diplomatic side.*

- Singapore-based expert

In contrast, one Korean expert offered a realist perspective by noting that superpowers have a tendency to pursue bilateral or unilateral solutions over multilateral dialogue. At the end of the day, major issues in the region will be dealt with through bilateral channels between the US and regional countries. Rather, what regional countries expect from the US is regular participation in multilateral forums with a high level of representation and to maintain channels of dialogue. The expert argued:



*I took part in multilateral diplomacy many times before, but my conclusion of multilateral diplomacy is that, regardless of how well it is done, it cannot overcome the reality of power. Multilateralism can survive and have an effect under a structure where the reality of power cannot fully exert its influence. But East Asia is still a world that is controlled by power politics. In a world governed by power politics, multilateralism loses its ground and has the smallest chance of success. Even without substance, we still need to keep this talk-shop multilateralism alive. I think it is meaningful to keep building habits and customs of having multilateral discussions on each other's matters of interest.*

- Korean expert

## Conclusion

Southeast Asian countries strongly welcomed US engagement with regional multilateral forums. Greater US diplomatic engagement, including frequent visits by President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, and other senior officials, served their individual and collective interests. Southeast Asian experts also highly rated the Obama administration's strong diplomatic focus on Southeast Asia which helped alleviate concerns about the military dimensions of the Pivot. Interestingly, Vietnamese experts discussed US soft power and socio-cultural exchanges a lot. Other countries barely mentioned this. Vietnamese experts appreciated US soft power and wanted more socio-cultural cooperation between their countries. Australian expert's views were also similar to those of Southeast Asia in welcoming greater diplomatic investment and attention.

On the contrary, Japan and Korea were less enthusiastic about the US engagement in regional multilateral forums. Japanese support for the multilateral diplomatic efforts were lower than for US military engagement. Korean responses were largely ambivalent, with most experts noting that multilateral engagement was better than nothing, but that there was little hope that such engagement would resolve any major problems in the region. It was only useful to narrow the distance between the US and regional countries.

## The Pivot and China

All experts viewed the Pivot as ultimately about responding to the rise of China. Experts noted that the US seemed to lack a long-term vision for its relationship with China and of China's appropriate place in the regional order. At times, this had led to incoherent or ineffective policies that mostly responded to Chinese actions rather than actively shaping regional dynamics. US moves to strengthen ties with regional countries had also been hobbled by Chinese accusations of containment, leading regional countries to tread cautiously. Experts offered a variety of assessments for how the US should engage China; but most supported cooperative partnerships with China, given its economic clout, rather than open confrontation.

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### Lack of Long-term Vision and Policy Ineffectiveness

Experts noted that throughout the eight years of the Obama administration, the US had been unsure about how to deal with China, leading to moments of indecision. There are roughly three different paradigms for understanding the US strategy towards China: containment, engagement-accommodation, and a strategic response. While some did suggest a greater need for deterrence, and others supported greater autonomy for China, most experts agreed that the Pivot represented a strategic response given the inter-dependent nature of the two countries. As an Australian expert noted:

*I think it was certainly a response to China, but it is not about containing China. I would say no one is going to contain China anyway. It's an untenable objective, but it's certainly a response to China. You can't remove that from the background to the rebalance. Why is Asia a strategic priority for the US? I don't think it's just about growth opportunities in Southeast Asia. It is a strategic response to China. I think it's very difficult to disentangle these two things, but containment is a much more loaded term. Even if you want to contain China, the debate goes on in Washington. How do you do it when China and the US occupy the same economic system? It's not like Soviet Union and the US in the Cold War, where you had a total diarchy of systems. Now we are occupied where both China and the US live in the same economic space, have their own debt, they buy each other's goods. So in that sense, containment is not going to work.*

- Australian expert

Criticisms of US policy towards China were two-fold. First, the US lacked a clear long-term vision and direction for how to deal with China. Second, US policy towards China had been ineffective. On the lack of vision, one Indian expert argued:

*There is a great anxiety about China's rise and what China is doing in the region, especially in the South China Sea. However, I don't think there is either clarity among the US, or unity on how exactly you are going to deal with the rise of Chinese power. I think the larger direction is that it is becoming more difficult in terms of the need to assert American power.*

- Indian expert

This lack of long-term strategy meant that the US had failed to deter China at decisive moments and, in the words of one Vietnamese expert, “allowed Beijing to do what it wants.” This was particularly evident in the ineffective US response to issues such as maritime disputes in the South China Sea. A Singapore-based expert noted that “rising Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea is causing concern in various key Southeast Asian countries for the United States.” As a Japanese expert noted:

*I find Obama's response to the South China Sea conflict rather unsatisfactory. The US must become more wary towards China and implement stronger countermeasures. While US diplomacy exerted influence on territorial disputes like Senkaku Islands, as a whole, I cannot say that US policy towards Japan has been completely effective.*

- Japanese expert

Another Japanese expert summarized US responses to Chinese provocations as “too little and too late,” noting:

*The Obama administration has become a little bit disappointing in comparison about the past. The US has not well managed its relations with China. The US responses were too little and too late. The US was not tough enough vis-à-vis China ... It seems that the US does not have a clear China policy, except its phrase “cooperation and competition.” The US was not tough enough vis-à-vis China. You can say it was relatively successful in the eyes of the US. But from the eyes of a country in the region, it was not.*

- Japanese expert

In contrast, Chinese scholars and officials often cite the Pivot as the cause for their increasing assertiveness in the region. According to them, the Pivot unnecessarily caused tensions in the region in its attempt to contain China. As a response, China had to safeguard its interests, which caused it to be perceived as more aggressive. Very few regional experts accept this Chinese explanation. But the Pivot has perhaps made China even more assertive, especially in the South China Sea, and that this had resulted in escalating tensions. A Vietnamese expert argued:

*In assessing the rebalance, one question arises. Is it making China become more nervous? For a long time, China was trying to extend its influence through the South China Sea, but the US presence made it more difficult for China ... The rebalance made China become more assertive. Assertiveness of China also created opportunities for US to expand its presence in the region.*

- Vietnamese expert

Given the ongoing US-China tensions, one of the consequences of the Pivot has been suggestions of an anti-China coalition in the region based around growing threat perceptions of China. This coalition, however, has also heightened Chinese security fears, making it more assertive in its behavior. The core problem is that the US, other than assembling this coalition of states receptive to its military engagement, did not have a clearly defined strategy and did not take serious action to deter China. As a Korean expert argued:

*One thing that changed is that the Pivot only made China think that the US is seriously going to pursue a China containment policy and create a sort of hostile coalition against*

*it to curb its rise. It only helped to create such threat perceptions on the Chinese side and the Chinese have vigorously strengthened their military capability substantially. That provided an excuse for China to stand up to [the] US's rebalance policy.*

- Korean expert

The Obama administration's much-touted military engagement throughout the region, including troop rotations and weapons sales, did little to deter Chinese actions. On the contrary, it led to a sustained Chinese effort at building up its own military capabilities. US partners, and particularly developing countries, were not strongly supported through the provision of major military support. Meanwhile, China responded to this "imaginary rebalance" by constructing new submarines, aircraft carriers, troop deployments, land reclamation projects, and increasing its military budget. This only succeeded in further advancing Chinese military dominance. The Korean expert continued:

*China responded with substance against an imaginary rebalancing by the US. They built an aircraft carrier and drastically upgraded their military power. The US, on the other hand, only scared the Chinese but actually did nothing. In practice, the US did not rebalance to Asia and also did not accomplish much except only helping China consolidate their military dominance in this region. It was worse than nothing.*

- Korean expert

## Options for Managing US-China Competition

While most regional experts did not find a US-China military conflict likely, they nonetheless called for more efforts at reducing tensions and promoting cooperation. It was particularly important to de-couple economic and security issues in US-China relations given the size of the Chinese economy. As a Japanese expert stated:

*The economy matters too. The US must think of regional economy and trade. China's economy affects almost everyone in the world. So China is really important. And, in the meantime, China may be a kind of threatening entity. China may be doing something very aggressive in South China Sea. But, on the economic side, we may have to talk to the Chinese. Decoupling is necessary. A pragmatic approach is needed. That is what we have found.*

- Japanese expert

However, this does not mean that China should be allowed to simply dictate its own

regional rules, going beyond or against the existing order that is supported by countries in Asia. A Japanese respondent observed:

*I think what we have to have in mind is that we have to preserve the rules-based liberal international order. And we don't have to contain China. Containment and engagement—that is not the point. Whether we can preserve the existing rules and order, especially international order, or not. So, even though China is our number one trading partner, if China violates existing rules, we have to punish. That should be the basic principle. We can take various measures—military, economic, political, and diplomatic. But whenever we try to take tougher measures, such as freedom of navigation operations, some people say that still China is our trading partner so that we have to take a moderate approach. We have to make this universal principle as a standard for our policy making. If China violates existing rules, without hesitation we should take tougher punishment and sanction. And, of course, China will respond harshly. Perhaps we have to expect certain conflict. But if we continue to avoid those tough measures, then China will become more assertive, and they will achieve their goals.*

- Japanese expert

In contrast, some experts argued that the US-China relationship should look beyond just isolating economic cooperation from strategic tensions and aim for a fundamental re-orientation of the US perception of Asia, including China. An Australian expert recommended that the US needed to re-assess its long-term position in, and relationship to, Asia to put it on a more stable footing:

*The US policy towards Asia in the next administration should be targeted at stability and at working out an inclusive modus vivendi with China. The trouble with the rebalancing policy is that it's not a cooperative policy; it's a unilateral policy. Fundamentally, the rebalance is about trying to tell the world, particularly China, that the United States belongs to Asia, and that the United States is paramount in Asia. That's what the rebalance policy is about, and by that definition, it can never be a successful policy because it is not reconciled. It's not a basis to be able to begin the conversation of how cooperative security can be achieved in the region. So I think the next administration, if it wants to pursue a policy of stability, is going to have to start from the baseline of saying, "Do we think that the United States can indefinitely remain the preponderant power in Asia?" And I recommend that the answer has to be "no" because they have failed to persuade the Chinese so far to agree to an Asia which is completely dominated by Americans. If they can't persuade the Chinese, it's not*

*going to happen. It doesn't matter who else they can persuade in the region. So that needs to be the first question. And if it has come to the rational answer that they can't indefinitely be the paramount power, then the question should be, "How can we work with the Chinese?"*

- Australian expert

Another respondent from Singapore went even further by pointing out that there was a need to frankly discuss China's growing strategic interests and how much the US and the rest of the region is willing to accept those interests. Citing the work of Australian scholar Hugh White on the inevitability of China's future dominant position in the regional order, the expert noted:

*How to bring the Chinese in a positive way is to open space for the Chinese. Some of the ideas that Hugh White has been talking about are in terms of power sharing and how to provide more space for the Chinese. The Chinese basically came knocking on America's door, a new Great Power relationship, and the Americans just crushed it. I wonder if paying serious attention to the Chinese and giving them a space to do this may require a resetting of China-US ties and taking seriously Chinese goals. The next US president may need to consider doing that.*

- Singapore-based expert

## Understanding Asia

Issues in the US understanding and knowledge of Asia were a common theme throughout the interviews. Experts noted that the US should not only know more about Asia as a collective entity, but also deepen its understanding of individual Asian countries. This was noticeable particularly in contrast with China. The different performance of the Obama administration's first and second terms was seen as largely due to the different levels of US understanding of Asia, exemplified by the individuals in the two administrations. While the first term had more Asian experts at the decision-making level, the second term cabinet was weaker in that regard. Finally, US understanding and interest in Asia were seen as often competing with other global interests.

A common theme throughout many of the interviews was that there was a gap between US understanding of Asia as a region and knowledge of individual countries. Many experts noted that the often contradictory demands of different sub-regions, and even within single countries, simply reflected the diversity of Asia. In response, the US needed to recognize these differences and develop a Goldilocks strategy of engagement that is "not too hot and not too cold." For example, some countries wanted stronger US security guarantees, but at the same time they opposed too much military engagement. Similarly, countries wanted the US to participate in multilateral forums, but did not want it to dominate these forums. Most importantly, while welcoming the US presence, these countries emphasized their autonomy. The key to understanding these contradictions is a deep knowledge of Asian countries and their strategic mindsets.

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## Regional vs. Country-Specific Knowledge

Many respondents, regardless of their sub-regions or country background, questioned the level of US understanding of Asia. As a Vietnamese commentator said, “I think Americans need to spend more time studying Asian partners, even though they understand the region quite well.” ASEAN and the larger Asian region contain diverse political systems, levels of economic development, and socio-cultural characteristics, including many religions and historical experiences. With a broad and all-encompassing single policy, there are too many things for the US to manage. Another Vietnamese observer argued:

*The US should look closer into the details of every single country. We all have a different past, present, and a different set of priorities. Rebalancing does not mean changes across the borders, which don't apply to everyone. It means being able to customize to specific partners and present it in a way that is popular that can win the hearts and minds of the people rather than win the co-operation of the ruling party or the administration ... I think people-to-people relations and specific features of each country will be most important for the US to be successful in the rebalance. Asian countries are not like European countries. The next administration should study the different characteristics of individual countries thoroughly in order to succeed.*

- Vietnamese expert

Another Vietnamese commentator argued that the lack of US understanding of individual countries would cause future problems in bilateral relations, although the overall US-Asia partnership remains positive. Other Asian countries have their own situations which could potentially clash with the US Pivot to Asia. The Vietnamese commentator further argued:

*I would advise the US to not become so involved in the domestic politics of Vietnam and push for only one issue. For instance, when the US attempted to mount an “investigation” in Vietnam, this was perceived in a negative light. However, the use of that term is quite common in the US. Furthermore, China is using two ways to respond to Vietnam. One way is to try to be very close with Vietnam and describing us as partners or brothers of communism. In order to respond to this, a step-by-step approach is required. The US also does not have a complete understanding of the situation of Vietnam.*

- Vietnamese expert

It is noteworthy that regional countries often compare the US understanding of individual countries with China. When they are uncomfortable with the US, they turn to the Chinese case and how China deals with countries. The above comment implies that China is less critical of individual countries’ internal and domestic matters, which they find comforting.

Another commentator based in Singapore also noted that the US has to show up more often to regional meetings but also engage more effectively. Often American participants or observers complain that regional multilateral meetings are not backed by mechanisms to enforce the decisions made. Nevertheless, China has been a consistent participant and has learned how to interact with regional countries; the US has not.

*Actually, they should learn that playing the ASEAN game is very low cost. You just come to meetings, make statements. They're very cheap diplomacy. And that's what the Chinese learned. [The] Chinese engage ASEAN. They start so many mechanisms with ASEAN. They always show up in every ARF meeting, every working group meeting. They always come and make statements. Really effective. Now they have more ASEAN-China mechanisms than ASEAN-Japan.*

- Singapore-based expert

## Asia Expertise during Obama's First and Second Terms

Related to this lack of understanding, experts also cited the differences in knowledge and interest between the first and second terms of the Obama administration. Experts saw the second term, including the change to Secretary of State John Kerry, as weakening the Pivot and shifting US policy focus to other regions. One Japanese expert summed up this perception by noting:

*Especially during the second administration ... the implementation fell off. The people who were the key figures and pushed for the concept during the first administration are gone, the national security adviser is weak, and Secretary Kerry is not interested in Asia. Very unfortunate.*

- Japanese expert

A Singapore-based commentator was blunter, stating that:

*Kerry is very sleepy when he comes to ASEAN meetings. He doesn't know ASEAN. He is more concerned about Crimea, the Middle East, about Iraq, those kinds of things.*

- Singapore-based expert

Another Japanese commentator compared the difference between the first and second Obama administrations more systematically, arguing:

*In the first term, the US government was more understanding of the intricacies about how to deal with allies in Asia, both South Korea and Japan. That delicacy was gone in the second term. If I had to choose, then the first term was much better. Not because the policy changed, since it stayed the same, but the way in which the policy was delivered and rhetorical responses to initiatives does not give Tokyo the credit that it thinks it deserves. The second term, the key officials were more interested in climate change, the Middle East, Russia, and Europe. They put Asia issues in the back. This includes the South China Sea.*

- Japanese expert

As a consequence, the Pivot in the Obama administration's second term was more fragmented and less effective, although President Obama's personal interest in the policy saved it from collapsing completely. As a commentator based in Singapore summed up this assessment:

*In the second term, like most other presidents, Obama became more focused on foreign policy and legacy. Lifting the arms embargo in Vietnam was part of that, same with Cuba and Iran. He could have had a US-ASEAN summit in his first term, but he waited until his seventh year to do it. Strengthening military relationships, especially when the US is the predominant power in the region that most countries rely on, isn't as hard as getting the TPP through Congress. Their rebalance is unbalanced at the moment, because in some sense military-to-military stuff is easier than economic pacts like KORUS FTA. But I was impressed in the second term about Obama's personal commitment to the rebalance. He showed that it wasn't just a Clinton idea and he supported something he saw his own interest as well.*

- Singapore-based expert

As these observations imply, a difference between the Obama administration's first and second term was the individuals involved. The people from the first administration were more enthusiastic about the Pivot, and they were able to carry out the policy

based on their deeper understanding of Asia. By contrast, the senior officials in the Obama administration's second term were less interested in Asia, which resulted in poorer performance. As a Japanese expert noted:

*The main reason was the personnel change. Hillary Clinton was gone and now Kurt Campbell is going, so that is huge. From the Pentagon, key officials who were really informed on Asian affairs took off after the first term. That change in personnel was a big factor.*

- Japanese expert

A Singapore-based observer elaborated on this by stating:

*In the first term, if you look at the East Asia team, Hillary Clinton was a more active Secretary of State and more focused, not only on Asia, but also on this strategic rivalry with China than John Kerry was. John Kerry was more focused on traditional things, like the Middle East. And Kurt Campbell was a more active and effective [Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs] than Daniel Russell, partially because Campbell was very well-known, particularly in Northeast Asia. The first Asia team was better than the second team - not that the second one was a bad team. It seemed pretty clear in the first term that it was Hillary Clinton who wrote the Foreign Affairs piece about the Pivot, so it seemed very much as a Clinton-Secretary-of-State-driven policy that President Obama supported.*

- Singapore-based expert

## US Global vs. Regional Interests

In general, there are many Asia experts in policy circles close to decision making in the US. But Asia has to compete with other global issues for the White House's attention. Furthermore, experts pointed out that there is a gap between how US strategic priorities are conveyed via American diplomats and senior officials visiting their own countries and how the US calculates its interests in global terms. A Singapore-based expert argued:

*When we talk to Americans at the Embassy, they always make you believe that Asia is very important, but when you travel to Washington, you realize it isn't that important. The US is a global power with interests all over the world. So that will remain a struggle for the Asia voices in the US administration to make sure the attention is given to Asia.*

*This will depend a lot on personality and people who essentially understand Asia and spend time focusing on it. At the end of the day in Asia, we will always have to accept that Asia will have to continue competing with Syria and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.*

- Singapore-based expert

What made the difference was whether there were acknowledged “Asia experts” in key positions in the US foreign policy decision making apparatus, including the National Security Council, Department of State, and Department of Defense. When key decision makers are Asia experts, the Pivot had more of an impact in the region and was viewed more favorably. If the decision makers had a deep understanding of Asia, then their policies and implementation were generally well received by Asian countries. An Indonesian expert summed up this point as follows:

*The US needs capable Asia-hands, not crazy ones. I think forming a capable Asia team is definitely the first step. Because for a while, actually, since Kurt Campbell left, the Southeast Asia office in D.C. has been dead. So, having the Southeast Asia office in the White House or the National Security Council or State is important. Unfortunately, Southeast Asia is not really a popular region for D.C. over the last few years, so it's going to be pretty hard. But that's only in terms of trying to figure out a much more nuanced and coherent approach.*

- Indonesian expert

Regardless of countries and regions, there was a general consensus that the first Obama foreign policy team implemented the Pivot better than the second team. Most of the regional respondents attributed this disparity to the personnel composition of the teams and their level of understanding Asia. The first team had people with a deeper knowledge of the region and thus was more effective in implementing policies. However, the second team suffered from a lack of experience in Asia, resulting in collective indifference towards the region.

## Conclusion

American knowledge of the Asia-Pacific, including its distinct sub-regions and the diversity of individual countries, will require continued work and investment. The importance attached to individual American policymakers and their place in key decision making positions was a point of frequent mention by experts. In contrast to Southeast Asian respondents, experts from Northeast Asia did not point out that

the Obama administration lacked Asia experts at the decision making level. What mattered for them was how to utilize these experts by proffering effective policy recommendations. Southeast Asian experts were less confident when assessing the presence of Asia experts in the US foreign policy team. They argued for a deeper US understanding of individual Asian countries for more effective implementation of Asia-related policies. Southeast Asian experts also compared the approaches by China and the US, concluding that China has a better understanding of Asian countries and the modus operandi in the region.

## Policy Recommendations

Based on the preceding discussions about the Obama administration's Pivot to Asia, this report sets out ten policy recommendations that were most frequently raised by regional experts. These recommendations address how the current US administration as well as future administrations should engage with Asia on a more effective and constructive basis.

1. *The US should reassure allies and partners that it will be consistently engaged.*
2. *The US should be proactive and articulate a compelling long-term vision.*
3. *The US should seek consensus on constructive, cooperative relations with China.*
4. *The US should focus more on specific actions than policy announcements.*
5. *The US should encourage a greater regional sense of community that also includes it.*
6. *The US should promote closer defense cooperation with regional partners.*
7. *The US should expand its public diplomacy.*
8. *The US should invest in deeper knowledge of the region's history and culture.*
9. *The US should maintain and expand the liberal economic order.*
10. *The US should appoint more Asia experts to key government posts.*

### 1. The US should reassure allies and partners that it will be consistently engaged.

The US has contributed greatly to peace, stability, prosperity, and freedom in the Asia-Pacific, but its interest and activism in the region has fluctuated over the years. For the US to maintain its leading position in the region, it should reassure its allies and partners that it is a reliable provider of public goods on a consistent basis. The US should expand and fulfill its existing regional responsibilities faithfully, re-affirm its strategic assurances to allies, and address the expectations, anxieties and concerns of regional countries.

### 2. The US should be proactive and articulate a compelling long-term vision.

The US has a tendency to react to situations and events in a crisis management mentality rather than to proactively shape regional affairs. Instead, the US should seek to identify

emerging challenges and opportunities, and, in the process, foster an environment conducive to success in consultation with partners. The US should present a compelling long-term vision for the region that is realistic and also accommodates regional interests. This should be a comprehensive and balanced vision encompassing politics, diplomacy, economics, and defense, and one that can improve and evolve through consultations with regional countries.

### 3. The US should seek consensus on constructive, cooperative relations with China.

The US needs to lay out what kind of relationship it ultimately seeks with China in coming decades. The US must actively discuss the issue of China with regional actors to better understand each other's perceptions and positions and find common ground. It must also increase efforts to bring together different voices on China. The US must champion the rules and regulations of the international liberal order and increase efforts to find and expand common ground with China in all areas by engaging rather than competing.

### 4. The US should focus more on specific actions than policy announcements.

A lofty vision lacking a specific course of action will only weaken regional trust. Therefore, the US should present a clear strategy and specific steps that will achieve its vision. Additionally, it must follow the plan faithfully to prove to regional countries that the vision is not hollow and to enhance their trust in the US. The US should outline the tasks that it will undertake independently as well as bilaterally or multilaterally, issues that deserve both urgent and future attention, and ensure that these tasks are pursued to create the greatest effect.

### 5. The US should encourage a greater regional sense of community that also includes it.

The US is a global power with global interests, and the Asia-Pacific inevitably competes for its attention with other parts of the world. To alleviate the constant concern among regional countries about a lack of attention, the US should encourage solidarity among countries in the region, as well as establish and expand networks of cooperation at varying levels. Active participation in multilateral forums such as the ARF, ADMM+,



and EAS would signal a US commitment to collective institutional mechanisms and solidarity with regional partners. In addition, the US can show its enthusiasm by supporting further institutional and rule-building efforts and dialogues.

## **6. The US should promote closer defense cooperation with regional partners.**

In order to maintain its strategic primacy, the US should continue to invest in military modernization, maintain the appropriate level of military spending, secure wide-ranging military options, and maintain a high level of preparedness. However, the US cannot deal with all current and future problems alone. Therefore, it should promote networks of cooperation with allies and partners to establish a common defense mechanism. The US should share responsibility for peace and stability as well as instill confidence among regional partners regarding its participation and security commitments. The US should also plan for contingencies through knowledge-sharing and joint exercises. Defense industry cooperation will be an important sector for improving investment efficiency and an area for future growth. Importantly, the US must make clear that such cooperation does not imply that it is pursuing a military-oriented policy by maintaining a high degree of transparency and openness with regard to the military and enhance military trust by improving international communication and exchanges.

## **7. The US should expand its public diplomacy.**

The US continues to enjoy great appeal and cultural and economic influence. However, it has not been able to fully utilize its soft power in its foreign policy. The US should diversify its public diplomacy in order to expand and strengthen solidarity and understanding between governments and societies. Also, the US should open up to greater exchanges with Asian nations, which will encourage more people to visit and have a better understanding of the US. In doing so, it must rely on a multi-layered, pluralistic, and multilateral approach.

## **8. The US should invest in deeper knowledge of the region's history and culture.**

The US should develop a deeper knowledge and familiarity with the Asia-Pacific's diverse and rich history, much of which continues to shape various disputes, tensions,

and animosities. A focus purely on outcomes over process risks overlooking these historical legacies. Similarly, strategies that do not account for the specific sub-regional differences between Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania and their own particular historical experiences can produce unintended side effects and solutions that are temporary and short-lived. Demonstrating familiarity with the region's diversity and its long history will be critical to fruitfully engaging individual countries as well as region-wide processes.

## **9. The US should maintain and expand the liberal economic order.**

The US has played a critical role in maintaining and expanding the liberal economic order and has contributed greatly to the development and prosperity of the region and the world through its commitment to free trade. The US should cooperate with regional actors to further develop this liberal economic order, which can guarantee the development and prosperity of all involved.

## **10. The US should appoint more Asia experts to key government posts.**

The US should appoint more policymakers with strong Asia expertise. Frequent personnel changes within and between American administrations tend to disrupt inter-personal networks between US and Asia-Pacific officials and lead to policy confusion. When US strategy towards the Asia-Pacific is being formulated and conveyed by policymakers unfamiliar with the region, it diminishes US credibility. The appointment of experienced Asia-Pacific experts to senior roles in future administrations would help signal US priorities. Also, given the importance of trust between leaders, the next American president must aim to improve personal relationships and trust with Asia-Pacific leaders. The US must also invigorate people-to-people exchanges and strengthen the network among those in leadership positions.

## Conclusion

The US had many reasons to upgrade its engagement with Asia. Likewise, Asian countries had many reasons to welcome the US focus. The responses from regional experts were more positive than the report's authors initially expected. At the same time, regional experts identified a number of areas where further improvement was needed. The military aspect of the Pivot received mixed responses. Experts recognized a need for the US to engage with countries militarily to provide security guarantees and extended deterrence. However, the level of military engagement was less than expected given the complexities of ongoing military tensions. The US handling of relations with China was rated most poorly by regional experts. Many argued that the Pivot lacked a clearly defined strategy for China and that it exacerbated strategic dilemmas for most countries.

The economic aspect of the Pivot, which was predicated on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, received favorable responses from regional experts. Yet despite the welcoming tone for the initial proposal, many questioned the likelihood of full ratification of the TPP, which was closely linked with the sustainability of the Pivot and the overall credibility of the US. The diplomatic aspect of the Pivot, including US engagement with regional multilateral forums and bilateral relations, was most positively received. Nevertheless, the longevity and sustainability of US engagement with multilateral institutions remains in doubt.

The report's authors identified three inter-linked critiques among regional experts: the lack of a clear vision or strategy, issues in US-China relations, and the lack of resources invested to implement policies. These issues should be properly addressed if future US administrations are to continue to have a positive impact in the region. First, the US has to have a clear vision, goal and strategy in Asia. What should the US seek to achieve in the region? What is the specific long-term US strategy in Asia beyond reacting to regional developments? By allowing China to depict the Pivot as a strategy of containment, regional countries experienced a strategic dilemma in supporting the policy. Some experts predicted that the future of the Pivot under the next administration would be shaped by the Chinese response.

Second, the US has to clearly define its relations with China. What is the intention of

the US in the region in regard to China? Does the US want to contain China or does it want to engage with China, or both? Is de-coupling security and economic relations the answer? Or is the US trying to co-opt China as long as China accepts the existing regional order? How could the US persuade China? These are questions that will influence both the direction of US policy in Asia and how regional countries will view the success of any such policy.

Finally, if the US can find answers the question of long-term goals and China's place in the emerging regional order, then it will not have to worry about the final point of a lack of resources. Regional countries will be ready to work with the US. As mentioned above, regional countries are eager to cooperate with the US in many areas, including security. After eight years of the Pivot there is a growing network of regional countries that are willing to contribute to improving the region. This will benefit not just Asia, but also the US. With strong partners, a lack of resources will not matter anymore. The US will not have to bear the burden alone when regional countries are willing to join the US effort. This is what Asia wants.



## What Asia Wants from the US

### Voices from the Region

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