

U.S. Perceptions on East Asia's Regional Integration

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After the Obama administration took power, the United States has shown its interest in the region represented by President's attendance on East Asia Summit; "Pivot to Asia" speech; accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and promoting the negotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Does the United States support or oppose East Asian regional integration? Is America's renewed interest in Asia Pacific multilateralism serious or more aimed to contain China's expanding influence in the region? America's perceptions toward East Asian regional integration are still evolving and far from concluding into a stable strategy. America's major stance has largely been "wait-and-see". Although America's attitudes might be fluid, the major variables affecting them remain relatively stable. They include: America's major national interest; primary goal and tradition in its East Asia diplomacy. First, America's major national interest in East Asia is to serve for its global strategy and overwhelming policy priority. America's perceptions toward East Asian regional integration are subject to the most urgent policy priority. Second, U.S. East Asia diplomacy's primary goal is to maintain America's predominant presence and avoid the emergence of any other single dominant power in the region. America's assessment of whether China would replace the U.S. as the dominant power in the region would affect U.S. perceptions toward East Asian regional integration. Third, the long-standing tradition in America's East Asia diplomacy is its confidence in bilateralism and skepticism in multilateralism. Whether multilateralism in East Asia would come at the expense of bilateralism seems to affect U.S. perceptions toward East Asian regional integration.

Introduction

The U.S. is not an East Asian nation in terms of geography, but it maintains substantial presence and interest in the region. After the World War Two, the U.S. not only established bilateral security alliances with many East Asian countries, but also became the primary provider of market, investment and technology for them. The role of the U.S. in the region had been dominant. This twin "hub-spokes"

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bilateral system of East Asia's deep economic and security dependence on America had served as a *de-facto* East Asian regional architecture during the Cold War, which also partly hindered the regional integration. The collapse of the Cold War, China's reintegration into the world economy and the East Asian economic crisis during 1997-98 provided favorable conditions for starting the process of East Asian regional integration. Since the end of the 1990s, many regional cooperation mechanisms and institutions have been built mainly under the initiatives of ASEAN. This trend seems to provide an alternative regional architecture in East Asia. The new trend of regional integration has happened against the background of China's rapid rise and some mechanisms do not include America. As the U.S. remains primary security guarantor and major economic partner for many countries in the region, America's perceptions toward East Asian regional integration will be an important variable in the discourse. After the Obama administration took power, the United States has shown its interest in the region represented by President's attendance on East Asia Summit; "Pivot to Asia" speech; accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and promoting the negotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Does the United States support or oppose East Asian regional integration? Is America's renewed interest in Asia Pacific multilateralism serious or more aimed to contain China's expanding influence in the region?

National Interest & Policy Priority, Primary Goal and Diplomatic Tradition

America's perceptions toward East Asian regional integration are still evolving and far from concluding into a stable strategy. America's basic stance has largely been "wait-and-see". Although America's attitudes might be fluid, the major variables affecting them remain relatively stable. They include: America's national interest and policy priority, primary goal, and diplomatic tradition in its East Asia diplomacy. First, America's major national interest in East Asia is to serve for its global strategy and overwhelming policy priority. America's perceptions toward East Asian regional integration are subject to the most urgent policy priority. Second, U.S. East Asia diplomacy's primary goal is to maintain America's predominant presence and avoid the emergence of any other single dominant power in the region. America's assessment of whether China would replace the U.S. as the dominant power in the region would affect U.S. perceptions toward East Asian regional integration. Third, the long-standing tradition in America's East Asia diplomacy is its confidence in bilateralism and skepticism in multilateralism. Whether multilateralism in East Asia would come on the expense of bilateralism seems to affect U.S. perceptions toward East Asian regional integration.

Home Is Where the Heart Is¹ : National Interest and Policy Priority

In terms of primary national interest, East Asia has not developed to be a highest policy priority for American top decision-makers. During the Bush administration, the “global war on terror” was on the top in the governmental agenda. The American public also had great interest in foreign policy but more in the Middle East rather than Asia, not alone Asian regional integration. In junior Bush's memoir, Asia could hardly be found. APEC only appeared once when he described how the president was busy with designing the war on terror by using this multilateral platform rather than APEC itself. The indifference toward Asia had been obvious during his tenure. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice missed two the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) annual meetings in three years because she felt “ridiculous heading to Southeast Asia while trying to negotiate an end to war in the Middle East”.²

However, the “Leman shock” dramatically changed the discourse, both American public and elites began to shift their interest from overseas and military to domestic and economic revival. Obama administration would be mainly preoccupied with domestic agenda and the top policy priority would be economic recovery and job creation. Obama listed 5 policy priorities in his interview with the NBC and none of foreign policy was among them. In the presidential election campaign debate on foreign policy, Obama and Romney almost concentrated on the Middle East and terrorism and Asian affairs were largely ignored.³ Pew Research Center polling result of U.S. public priorities showed that 81% ranked domestic issues as a top priority against 9% for foreign policy-the largest gap in 15 years.⁴ In Obama's State of Union Address, domestic agenda was dominant including strengthening a thriving middle class, job creation, fiscal soundness, immigration reform and gun control.⁵

First and foremost, America's core national interest and policy priority are on domestic affairs and economy. Foreign policies including its East Asia diplomacy should be observed from this perspective as well. America's attitudes toward East Asia integration would be firstly decided by whether it could be contributive to America's economic revival and escaping the fiscal crisis. East Asian market might be important for boosting U.S. export in goods but the potential benefits should not be exaggerated. The

¹ Wang Jisi, “China's Search for a Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Mar/Apr 2011, Vol.90. Issue 2. Wang Jisi describes China's strategists' basic thinking of China's priority and core interest is at home not overseas. I think his observation is also applicable for America's case.

² Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), p.485.

³ Presidential debate on foreign policy at Lynn University, October 22, 2012.

<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/10/22/transcript-presidential-debate-on-foreign-policy-at-lynn-university/#ixzz2LuWZoZL8>, accessed on February 25, 2013.

⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, *Pew: Public Priorities: Deficit Rising, Terrorism Slipping*, January 23, 2012.

<http://www.cfr.org/polls/pew-public-priorities-deficit-rising-terrorism-slipping/p27164>, accessed on February 25.

⁵ *Remarks by the President in the State of Union Address*, White House, February 12, 2013.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address>, accessed on February 25, 2013.

United States is the largest outward investor. According to the Chamber of Commerce, in 2008, the revenues of U.S.-own foreign affiliates were about \$5,000bn, almost three times the value of U.S. exports of goods and services.⁶ In the current world economy, there are no means to call these companies back to provide jobs for American workers. America's economic future is more likely on its own innovation and reform including education, training and immigration. There is huge consciousness gap between East Asian experts and top decision-makers on East Asian regional integration in the U.S.⁷

Primary Goal in Asia: Avoiding Any Single Dominant Power

The second variant of America's perception on East Asian regional integration is whether there will be any single dominant power in the center of regional integration. China has become the biggest trading partner with most Asian countries in the last decade and China had signed Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN. There is no consensus on whether China would replace America to be the dominant power in East Asia. Some Americans elites concerned that the deepening regional integration would put China "at the center in Asia and the U.S. on the margins of not excluded altogether".⁸ However, China is more perceived to be less likely to be able to expel America in East Asia as the unequal power balance and unfavorable relations among Asian countries. The CSIS report writes: "The lack of consensus regarding the substance of East Asian integration and the final membership suggests that no regional power will be able to exclude the United States unless it chooses to be excluded itself."⁹ But how to explain Obama administration's Pivot to Asia, rebalancing and the TPP initiative? Obama's new Asian strategy of "pivot to Asia", attendance on East Asia Summit and the promotion of TPP have often been interpreted as curtailing China's expanding role in the regional multilateralism. Obama's diplomatic rhetorical pivot to Asia is more responding America's uneasiness toward its own identity as the most powerful nation in the world rather than real commitments in Asia.

For American general public and hawkish elites, it is just unacceptable that China's possible replacing the U.S. as the most powerful country in the world.¹⁰ During the two decades after the collapse of the

⁶ "Riveting prospects," *Financial Times*, January 7, 2011.

⁷ During the author's stay in the U.S. as serving a visiting scholar at MIT (2010-2011), I interviewed many experts and pundits for international relations. East Asian experts were much more interested in Asia-Pacific regionalism for example the TPP.

⁸ Aron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2011), p.169. Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.22.

¹⁰ Michele Flournoy and Janine Davidson, "Obama's New Global Posture," *Foreign Affairs*, August 2012. The first author is former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and the second author is former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Plans. They argue that retrenchment is misleading and America's role is unmatched and should not reduce overseas intervention.

Cold War, global dominance and primacy have been embedded into American identity. However, American economic crisis happened in 2008 which led to the global recession made Americans extremely uneasy about its future role in international system. As a rapid rising economy, China has been considered to be the mostly likely challenger to this part of American identity. American politicians know well that it would be an “un-American” political taboo of talking America’s retrenchment from the world leadership.¹¹ President Obama declared in his State of Union speech in 2012: “Anyone who tells you that America is in decline...doesn’t know what they are talking about.” The uneasiness of American public toward the aforementioned identity is further enhanced by American economic difficulties and China’s better record in the recession. The polling result is telling us the uneasiness of Americans. More than half of American public view China as a world power as a major threat to the U.S.¹² America’s President must do something to echo with the popular sentiments. Obama would like to leave an impression that his administration is imposing pressure on China to follow the path designed by the U.S.¹³ Showing American global leadership seems to be a pre-requisite for American president to hold his position. Even when the U.S. would really like to retrench from that role to some extent, America president just could not tell American people directly to avoid unbearable political cost. Obama’s retrenchment strategy is well designed and hidden by rhetorically emphasizing America’s continuing global leadership. President Obama and his team have been extremely sensitive about being possibly called as “the second coming of Jimmy Carter.”¹⁴ The sudden operation of killing Osama bin Laden provided a relatively acceptable excuse for his military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The sharp increase in using drone attacks from the Bush Administration to the Obama administration tries to tell the public that America could attack its enemies anytime without basing its large military on some dangerous foreign soil. With announcing the end of the Iraq War, the U.S. government assured the military and the public of continuing global leadership in the 21st century.¹⁵ With cutting defense budget, Secretary of Defense Panneta argued in Congress that the U.S. needed to invest more in weapon development.¹⁶

¹¹ Christopher Layne, “The Global Power Shift from West to East,” *The National Interest*, May/June 2012, p.21.

¹² Pew Research Center, *U.S. Public, Experts Differ on China Policies: Public Deeply Concerned About China’s Economic Power*, September 18, 2012, p.1 and p.13.

¹³ Obama said in his debate with Romney, “And we’re organizing trade relations with countries other than China so that China starts feeling more pressure about meeting basic international standards.” Ibid.

¹⁴ Edward Luce, “The mirage of Obama’s defence cuts,” *Financial Times*, January 30, 2012.

¹⁵ Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities For 21st Century Defense*, January 2012.

¹⁶ Geoff Dyer, “US defends shift in Asian military strategy amid criticism from China,” *Financial Times*, February 15, 2012.

Confidence in Bilateralism and Skepticism in Multilateralism

U.S. policies in Asia have been grounded “in traditional state-to-state relations”. After the World War Two, the United States tried some multilateral initiatives in Asia but all of them failed. For American decision-makers, East Asia seems to be a troublesome region without effective solutions. Bilateralism has thus been considered to be more pragmatic in Asia for decision-makers of America and the change of current regional architecture would not only be costly but also less useful or even dangerous.

In terms of bureaucracy, American State Department seems to be fragmented into country sections rather than a coordinated East Asian agency. Rice complained “In the Foreign Service there were Koreanists and Sinologists and those who knew Japan (agents of Chrysanthemum throne), but there were no real regionalists.”¹⁸

America’s skepticism toward multilateralism in Asia also comes from its perception of the ineffectiveness of East Asian regional arrangements. Asian multilateral arrangements are sometimes dubbed as an “alphabet soup” such as ASEAN, APEC, EAS, APT, ARF, SCO and so on, many American officials believed that “unfocused organizations were little more than talk shops and felt uncertain about which organization would emerge as most important.”¹⁹ Rice even felt embarrassed by the ARF’s unofficial agenda of a silly tradition had grown up whereby the foreign ministers from the non-ASEAN countries performed musical skits.²⁰ In terms of economic regional initiatives, there are TPP, AFTA, China-Japan-Korea FTA, APEC, FTAAP and RCEP. Pan-Asian solutions have had little utility in the midst of the first truly global financial crisis.

Center for Strategic and International Studies conducted a survey of strategic views on Asian regionalism among “strategic elites” of nine major countries in the Asia Pacific region. The U.S. strategic elites demonstrated the least enthusiasm towards the concept of building an East Asian Community although they were not necessarily against the idea.²¹ In terms of East Asia financial and economic integration, the American strategic elites were among the least confident in ASEAN-centered East Asian mechanisms although they demonstrated modest expectation of APEC and FTAAP for promoting trade liberalization.²² Yet, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are still seen as

¹⁷ Jeffery A. Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise: An Insider’s Account of America’s Asia Strategy*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institutions Press, p.5.

¹⁸ Condoleeza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), p.312.

¹⁹ Jeffery A. Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise: An Insider’s Account of America’s Asia Strategy*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institutions Press, p.5.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bates Gill, Michael Green, Kiyoto Tsuji and William Watts, *Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism: Survey Results and Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and International Studies Press, February 2009), p.8.

²² Bates Gill, Michael Green, Kiyoto Tsuji and William Watts, *Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism: Survey Results and Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and International Studies Press, February 2009), pp.15-16.

the most important institutions in tackling with financial crisis and promoting economic integration.²³

Conclusion

The United States does not oppose East Asian regionalism just because America believes it could not go too far and exclude the United States from the region. America 's current core interest and policy priority are in domestic and economic affairs which also partly restrain its resources using in foreign policy including in Asia. The real effects of Obama 's high-profile Asia diplomacy and multilateralism frenzy remain to be seen as political and diplomatic rhetoric does not equal to real commitments and actions.

²³ Ibid.