

6

U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea

A Legacy for America's Pacific Century

Tongfi Kim

Tongfi Kim is an assistant professor of international affairs at Vesalius College in Brussels, Belgium. His research centers on security studies and the international relations of East Asia. He is the author of *The Supply Side of Security: A Market Theory of Military Alliances* (Stanford University Press, 2016), and his articles have appeared in *Asian Security*, *International Interactions*, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, and *Security Studies*.

During his visit to Japan in November 2009, U.S. president Barack Obama declared that he, as “America’s first Pacific President,” would ensure that the United States strengthened its leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. The region has been important to the United States since at least the late nineteenth century, but the Obama administration’s new emphasis was arguably a shift in U.S. grand strategy. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it in her influential article in 2011, the Obama administration’s pivot or rebalancing strategy aimed to “lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region.”

Although there is significant uncertainty over the direction of U.S. foreign policy under President Donald Trump, the rebalancing strategy remains important as a reference point to future U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific. This chapter first analyzes the background to the U.S. strategy. It then explains how diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions of the strategy are related to the disputes in the South China Sea, with a special focus on the People’s Republic of China (hereafter referred to as China). The subsequent sections describe the responses of the territorial disputants and other regional states. I argue that China’s economic allure is shaping U.S. and other states’ policies toward the South China Sea disputes, that the United States has had moderate success without provoking China too much, and that geography and U.S. naval dominance influence the regional states’ responses to the American strategy. The conclusion briefly discusses the implications of this chapter’s findings.

BACKGROUND TO THE REBALANCING/ PIVOT

From a long-term perspective, the rising economic power of Asia-Pacific states has necessitated U.S. engagement in the region for economic and geopolitical reasons. For commercial interests

alone, the United States cannot neglect the region's large population (Asia accounts for about 60 percent of the global total) and fast economic growth. Moreover, because the new wealth translates into military capabilities and geopolitical influence (as in the case of China), the United States has politico-strategic reasons to prioritize the region. Granted, Asia was an important battleground during the Cold War, and the United States in the early post-Cold War era also strived to prevent the emergence of a superpower in the region. However, by the time President Obama took office in 2009, Asia's strategic importance had further grown relative to other regions—not least due to the rise of China.

China's economic importance to the United States and the global economy—in addition to its role in diverse issues such as climate change and nuclear nonproliferation—means that Washington needs to maintain and improve its ties with Beijing while also competing with it as a rival. At the first meeting of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in 2009, Obama stated that the “relationship between the United States and China will shape the twenty-first century, which makes it as important as any bilateral relationship in the world.”

China overtook Japan as the second-largest economy in the world in 2010, but China presents a different challenge than did Japan in the past. Beijing's views on democracy and the current international order are significantly different from those of Washington, and China does not acquiesce to U.S. primacy. Through its economic power, China is competing with the United States for influence across the globe, and the competition is most intense in the Asia-Pacific. China replaced the United States as the largest trading partner (in goods) of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in 2007, and China's goods trade with ASEAN countries in 2014 was more than double that of the United States.

The region provides the United States with various options to counter the strategic weight of China, but these options need reinforcement and cultivation. The United States has treaty alliances with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand, and it also has friendly relationships with other emerging powers such as India and Indonesia. These regional states might have their own reasons to balance against the rise of China, but to many Americans, it does not seem prudent to count on such balancing. Aaron Friedberg, for example, advocates stronger U.S. military commitment in Asia for the following reason: “Without active cooperation from its regional partners, Washington cannot hope in the long run to balance against a rising China. On the other hand, without strong tokens of its continuing commitment and resolve, America's friends may grow fearful of abandonment, perhaps eventually losing heart and succumbing to the temptations of appeasement.” Thus, at least in part, the U.S. rebalancing strategy can be seen as a long-term adjustment of the U.S. grand strategy in response to the growing importance of cooperation and competition in the Asia-Pacific.

From a shorter-term perspective, there were two specific reasons for the Obama administration's Asia-Pacific foreign policy: the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the global financial crisis of 2007–9. Despite the increasing importance of the Asia-Pacific, the foreign policy resources of the George W. Bush administration (2001–9) were focused on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, Asian leaders saw a wavering of U.S. commitment to the region in Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's (2005–9) absence at the annual ministerial gatherings of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2005 and 2007. As the wars became less popular in the United States, a renewed emphasis on the Asia-Pacific made political sense for the Obama administration. Michael Green and Dan Twining, for example, suspect that the pivot strategy was “a convenient political frame for the White House to try to explain that the Obama

administration remains muscular and strategic, despite its accelerated retreat from Iraq and Afghanistan.”

In terms of military resources, the winding down of the two wars was a precondition for the rebalancing toward Asia; Noboru Yamaguchi argues that the strategy was “fundamentally a demobilization from a wartime posture rather than a mere geographic change in U.S. policy priorities.” As supporters of the strategy in the region complained, measures to strengthen the military dimension of the rebalancing strategy were rather modest. Although the limited nature of the military measures was partially attributable to U.S. policymakers’ desire to avoid provoking China, it is essential to take into account the domestic aftereffect of the two wars. Thus, pivoting “away” from Afghanistan and Iraq may have been more important than pivoting “toward” the Asia-Pacific.

The Obama administration’s strategy was also significantly affected by the global financial crisis of 2007–9. The crisis increased the importance of economic engagement in the Asia-Pacific and imposed constraints on the U.S. military budget, which was already strained by the costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In response to the global economic downturn, the Obama administration introduced the National Export Initiative in 2010, for which Asian nations were major targets. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was a central piece of the rebalancing strategy. There was a competitive element in the TPP, especially over the long term; as President Obama declared, the United States “can’t let countries like China write the rules of the global economy.” But the urgency of economic recovery from the financial crisis was no less important to the Obama administration’s economic foreign policy.

In the face of budget constraints after the financial crisis, the U.S. government was forced to cut its military spending; the rebalancing strategy therefore aimed to preserve military resources in the Asia-Pacific by shifting priorities. Perhaps the most prominent among the military components of the strategy is the planned reinforcement of naval capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region. At the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2012, U.S. defense secretary Leon Panetta declared that the U.S. Navy would redeploy its forces from its current 50/ 50 percent split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to a 60/ 40 percent split.¹⁷ As the financial crisis and subsequent budget cuts cast doubt on U.S. staying power in the Asia-Pacific (and China appeared to be triumphant in the wake of the global crisis), such rebalancing of priorities was important to the military credibility of the United States.

U.S. policymakers have repeatedly emphasized that the rebalancing strategy was not targeted against China and that rebalancing was not just about military objectives. Asia-Pacific states, however, were most interested in the strategy’s implications for Sino-American relations and U.S. military presence in the region. Many states in the region seek to benefit economically from China’s rise, but they are also anxious to keep the United States in regional affairs as a counterweight to the increasing power of China. As will be explained in the following sections, maritime and territorial disputes in the South China Sea have intensified the competitive aspects of U.S. strategy.

COMPONENTS OF THE U.S. REBALANCING STRATEGY

The South China Sea Disputes

Disputes in the South China Sea involve multiple states over multiple issues. China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Republic of China (hereafter referred to as Taiwan) have conflicting claims over various islands and maritime features in the South China Sea. Because China's vague maritime claim based on the "U-shaped line" includes much of the South China Sea, it also worries countries such as Indonesia, which is not part of the current territorial disputes. In addition to having interests in these disputes as a third party, the United States has an important disagreement with China in the South China Sea over China's rights to regulate foreign military activities within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). In March 2009, for instance, five Chinese ships obstructed the U.S. survey ship USNS Impeccable in China's EEZ in the South China Sea.

Maritime and territorial disputes in the South China Sea have a decades-old history, but tensions in these waters have intensified in the last several years due to China's increased presence. Even Alastair Iain Johnston, who criticizes the discourse of China's "new assertiveness," acknowledges that China has become more assertive in these waters since around 2010. Although Southeast Asian states have conflicting claims among themselves as well, international attention has been mostly drawn to China's disputes with those nations and the United States because of China's growing power and increasing maritime presence.

In addition to increasing the activities of its maritime agencies in the waters, China has executed highly visible actions that challenged the status quo. For example, after months of standoff with the Philippines, China extended its control over Scarborough Shoal in 2012 by reneging on a U.S.-negotiated agreement. In 2014, China moved an oil platform to waters near the Parcel Islands, which are claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, triggering large anti-China protests and riots in Vietnam. Since September 2013, China has also been engaging in massive island-building and construction of military facilities in the disputed Spratly islands. Although other disputants have also engaged in similar activities in the past, the much larger scale and faster pace of the Chinese endeavor have alarmed many states. China's broad and vague claims based on historical rights have also been worrying the disputants. For instance, in his visit to Singapore in November 2015, Chinese president Xi Jinping asserted that the South China Sea has been Chinese territory since ancient times and that protecting it is a matter of China's territorial sovereignty. In July 2016, an international tribunal in The Hague decided against Beijing's broad claims to the South China Sea, but, as it had previously declared, the Chinese government rejected the ruling.

Diplomatic Rebalancing

Although the U.S. rebalancing strategy had been launched before these moves by China, the South China Sea disputes have been an important focus of the strategy from its inception. One of the important features of the strategy was increased attention to Southeast Asia, in addition to the traditionally strong U.S. engagement in Northeast Asia.²⁸ In his memoir, Jeffrey Bader, who was the director of Asian affairs on Obama's National Security Council, describes how Obama's team formed its foreign policy partially in response to the dissatisfaction of Southeast Asian governments with U.S. engagement in the region during the George W. Bush administration.

Thus, the signs of the rebalancing strategy could already be identified in the early days of the Obama administration, especially in diplomacy. In February 2009, after she was confirmed as secretary of state, Hillary Clinton chose Asia as her first overseas destination and became the first U.S. secretary of state to visit ASEAN headquarters. ASEAN secretary general Surin

Pitsuwan commended Clinton by saying that her “visit shows the seriousness of the United States to end its diplomatic absenteeism in the region.”³⁰ Clinton continued her active Asia diplomacy and visited Asia-Pacific states significantly more than her predecessors. Unlike previous U.S. administrations, which had been reluctant to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the Obama administration pleased Southeast Asian states by signing the treaty in July 2009. This, in turn, paved the way for the United States to join the East Asia Summit in 2011.

As the United States engaged Southeast Asia more closely, it became more vocal on the disputes in the South China Sea. At the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 2010, Clinton made a declaration that caused chagrin and consternation in China. She said that the United States “has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia’s maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea.” Clinton repeated the U.S. position, which is framed as neutrality and adherence to international law but collides with China’s positions on the disputes. While claiming not to take sides on the competing territorial claims, Clinton clearly took a position against China’s U-shaped line as it is not based on land features:

The United States supports a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving the various territorial disputes without coercion. We oppose the use or threat of force by any claimant. While the United States does not take sides on the competing territorial disputes over land features in the South China Sea, we believe claimants should pursue their territorial claims . . . and rights to maritime space in accordance with the [United Nations] convention on the law of the sea. Consistent with customary international law, legitimate claims to maritime space in the South China Sea should be derived solely from legitimate claims to land features.

Clinton later declared that “the United States helped shape a regionwide effort to protect unfettered access to and passage through the South China Sea, and to uphold the key international rules for defining territorial claims in the South China Sea’s waters.”

President Obama himself, of course, was an important part of the diplomatic component of the rebalancing strategy. He aimed to reassure Asian states about U.S. leadership in the region by increasing the visibility of U.S. diplomacy. In November 2009, Obama attended the first U.S.-ASEAN summit meeting, which previous administrations had resisted. Because the disputes in the South China Sea have been worrying many states in the region, he also addressed the issue despite his administration’s simultaneous need for improved China-U.S. relations. In November 2011, before Obama became the first U.S. president to attend the East Asia Summit, China’s assistant foreign minister Liu Zhenmin explicitly argued against discussing the disputes at the meeting. Obama, however, declared that “cooperation in the South China Sea” was one of the “shared challenges” to be discussed at the summit meeting. In February 2016, Obama hosted the first U.S.-ASEAN summit meeting held in the United States, and many believed that the U.S. goal in the meeting was to counter China’s influence in Southeast Asia.

Economic Rebalancing

The rebalancing strategy also had a strong emphasis on economic engagement because “economics and trade are both causes of and instruments for the pivot toward the Asia-Pacific.” China, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam were some of the most important targets of the Obama administration’s National Export Initiative. The Trade Promotion Coordinating Committee identified the entire Asia-Pacific region as “next tier markets,” which were expected to grow

quickly in the coming years. The economic component of the U.S. rebalancing strategy involved competitive elements, but it should be noted that economic cooperation with China was a major goal of the strategy as well.

Arguably, the crown jewel of U.S. economic rebalancing was the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was agreed in October 2015 among twelve states in the Pacific Rim. It did not include China. The broad scope of the issues covered by the TPP was controversial within and outside the United States, but many appreciated the long-term significance of the agreement. Even before Japan joined the TPP negotiations in July 2013, a U.S. analyst pointed out that “the relatively small immediate economic benefits from liberalizing trade with the current TPP members should not obscure the importance of designing the rules of the game, so to speak, for trade and investment in what will likely be the most dynamic and fastest growing region of the world over the coming decades.”

The economic element of the rebalancing strategy had links to incentives and disincentives that have affected U.S. policy in the South China Sea. On one hand, the importance of economic cooperation with China has prevented the United States from taking a confrontational stance on the South China Sea disputes. Hillary Clinton took a relatively firm stance on the disputes in the South China Sea, but she still acknowledged that the United States should not make an enemy out of China: “Today’s China is not the Soviet Union. We are not on the brink of a new Cold War in Asia. Just look at the ever expanding trade between our economies, the connections between our peoples, the ongoing consultations between our governments. . . . Geopolitics today cannot afford to be a zero-sum game. A thriving China is good for America and a thriving America is good for China, so long as we both thrive in a way that contributes to the regional and global good.”

On the other hand, the economic importance of the Asia-Pacific region to the United States means that Washington has strong incentives to sustain its leadership in the region against China’s challenges. For its long-term economic growth, the United States needs to be part of Asia-Pacific politics. This requires the United States to avoid disillusioning Asia-Pacific states about its strategic engagement, including the South China Sea disputes. The growing economic importance of the Asia-Pacific region has also been linked to the strategic value of the South China Sea. A U.S. Congressional Research Service report explained that “with an increasing volume of U.S. exports and imports flowing in and out of the region, it has become critical that the United States maintains free navigation from the Arabian Sea across to the eastern edge of the Pacific Ocean. This has been one of the arguments made for U.S. interest in a peaceful resolution of the territorial disputes over the South China Sea.”

Military Rebalancing

The strategic value of the South China Sea, in combination with the importance of maintaining U.S. military prestige in Asia, prompted the United States to engage in military rebalancing as well. The military component of the rebalancing strategy had direct relevance to the disputes in the South China Sea. In his speech to the Australian parliament in November 2011, Obama emphasized that the Asia-Pacific was prioritized in U.S. military policy: “As we end today’s wars, I have directed my national security team to make our presence and mission in the Asia Pacific a top priority. As a result, reductions in U.S. defense spending will not—I repeat, will not—come at the expense of the Asia Pacific.”

In addition to shifting capabilities to the Asia-Pacific, the 2012 Strategic Guidance of the U.S. Department of Defense focused reductions on Army and Marine ground forces while preserving U.S. naval capabilities. This was consistent with the rebalancing strategy because naval power is considered to be particularly important for the Asia-Pacific. The guidance also emphasized the need to maintain power projection capabilities in the face of anti-access/ area denial challenges from states such as China and Iran. Building on his predecessor Leon Panetta's pledge to assign 60 percent of U.S. naval forces to the Asia-Pacific by 2020, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel stated in 2013 that the United States had committed and would continue to commit 60 percent of overseas air forces to the region. The Pentagon confirmed the shift in naval and air forces in the Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy released in August 2015, and Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus requested an 8 percent increase in the 2016 budget for the Navy.

The military component of the U.S. rebalancing strategy also involved closer cooperation with allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific. Starting in April 2012, the U.S. Marines have been deployed on a rotation basis in Darwin, Australia; the deployment began with 200 Marines and is scheduled to increase to 2,500.⁴⁹ In April 2014, the United States and the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which facilitates the deployment of American military personnel in the Philippines on a rotational basis. The agreement builds on the Visiting Forces Agreement signed in 1998. By 2018, 4 U.S. littoral combat ships are scheduled to be deployed rotationally in Singapore. The new Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation released in April 2015 are more relevant to the Sino-Japanese disputes in the East China Sea but may also have some significance in the South China Sea. At his meeting with Obama on November 19, 2015 in Manila, Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe expressed strong support for the U.S. position in the South China Sea and stated that his government would consider dispatching the Japan Self-Defense Forces to the South China Sea. In September 2016, Japanese defense minister Tomomi Inada stated that Japan would "increase its engagement in the South China Sea through . . . Maritime Self-Defense Force joint training cruises with the U.S. Navy."

Another important military component of the U.S. rebalancing was its efforts to expand "cooperation with emerging partners throughout the Asia-Pacific to ensure collective capability and capacity for securing common interests." Put differently, capacity building of Southeast Asian states is one way of balancing the rising Chinese presence in the South China Sea without the United States risking direct conflict. The United States has provided assistance to the maritime capacity building of countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2015, in the same speech where he criticized China's land reclamation in the Spratly Islands, U.S. secretary of defense Ashton Carter announced the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative, which would provide equipment and training to Southeast Asian states.

In the context of China's increased presence in the South China Sea, the U.S. efforts to enforce freedom of navigation work as implicit support for other claimants in the area. According to Carter, "On October 27, 2015, the U.S. Navy destroyer USS Lassen (DDG-82) conducted a FONOP [Freedom of Navigation Operation] in the South China Sea by transiting inside 12 nautical miles of five maritime features in the Spratly Islands—Subi Reef, Northeast Cay, Southwest Cay, South Reef, and Sandy Cay—which are claimed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines."⁵⁶ What was at stake was the credibility of the United States as

the protector of the status quo in the South China Sea. It remains to be seen how U.S. policy will develop with respect to China's artificial islands.

In sum, the U.S. rebalancing strategy was linked to the South China Sea disputes in diplomatic, economic, and military affairs. Strategy involves consideration of others' actions, and so the next section examines the reactions of other states to the U.S. strategy, especially with respect to the disputes in the South China Sea.

REACTIONS TO THE U.S. REBALANCING

With the notable exception of China, Asia-Pacific states generally see the U.S. rebalancing strategy in a positive light. According to a survey of strategic elites in the Asia-Pacific in 2014, the following percentages of experts in each country supported the Obama administration's goal of a strategic rebalance: the United States, 96; Singapore, 96; Japan, 92; South Korea, 92; Taiwan, 90; Indonesia, 87; India, 82; Australia, 81; Thailand, 54; and China, 23. Although not part of this survey, many Philippine and Vietnamese experts are likely to support the strategy as well due to high tension between their countries and China. Overall, 51 percent of respondents answered that rebalance was "the right policy but is not being resourced or implemented sufficiently, followed by 24 percent who felt it is reinforcing regional stability and prosperity." China was the only country where a majority of respondents (74 percent) perceived the rebalancing strategy to be too confrontational toward China.

China's Response

China in the post-Cold War era has been generally critical of what it characterizes as a domineering U.S. presence in Asia. **Because China is by far the strongest state that has maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea, it prefers to deal with the other disputants on a bilateral basis to obtain advantage in negotiations.** Thus, China opposes U.S. rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific in general and U.S. interventions in the South China Sea in particular. For instance, an article in the China Daily criticized Clinton's remarks on the South China Sea disputes at the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 2010, arguing that her "seemingly impartial remarks were in effect an attack on China and were designed to give the international community a wrong impression that the situation in the South China Sea is a cause for grave concern." The article then lauds Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi's response to Clinton, namely, that the situation is peaceful and stable, the United States should not coerce nonclaimant states into taking sides, and turning the issue into a multilateral one will only make matters worse.

From the Chinese perspective, along with Sino-Japanese disputes in the East China Sea, the South China Sea disputes are probably the most important factor that drives the competitive aspect of U.S. rebalancing. An article in the People's Daily, an official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, criticized the U.S. strategy as follows:

Are the actions of the United States sailing its warships to the South China Sea, frequently holding military drills clearly against China with the countries around the sea and trying to form a military alliance with them responsible actions? Are the actions of the United States forcing Asian countries to take side[s] between the United States and China and even deliberately smearing normal cooperation between China and its surrounding countries responsible actions? . . . the so-called "freedom of navigation of the South China Sea" issue . . . is just a step taken by the United States to implement its "returning to Asia" strategy.

Naturally, there are debates in China over the U.S. strategy. Dong Wang and Chengzhi Yin provide an extensive survey of the debates, explaining positions of both moderates and hardliners. In 2014, they argued that “the moderates’ more optimistic assessments are largely shared by mainland Chinese policy makers” despite “the hardliners’ dire and pessimistic analyses of the U.S. pivot or rebalancing to Asia.” With heightened tensions over China’s land reclamation activities, the competitive aspect will likely become more pronounced in coming years.

In terms of the effects of the U.S. strategy on Chinese policy in the South China Sea, two contrasting views are conceivable. On one hand, as the Chinese government itself likes to warn, the U.S. strategy may provoke China and escalate maritime tensions. Robert Ross argues that the rebalancing strategy is “unnecessary and counterproductive”; among other things, “Beijing will push back against countries that rely on the United States to support them in sovereignty disputes.” On the other hand, as the U.S. government would like to believe, the U.S. rebalancing strategy may deter China from taking aggressive actions and lead to a more conciliatory policy from Beijing. For example, a Congressional Research Service report in 2012 made the following observation: “After the United States, Vietnam, and other East Asian countries diplomatically pushed back in 2010 against what they saw as Chinese encroachment in the South China Sea, China chose to join multilateral negotiations with Southeast Asian countries over a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. More recently, Vietnam’s move to strengthen U.S.-Vietnamese ties (as well as deepen its ties to India and Japan) appears to have led Beijing to try to patch up its relationship with Hanoi, contributing to an easing of tensions.”

Both of these contrasting views may be partially correct, because competing dynamics could coexist in Chinese foreign policy. The U.S. rebalancing strategy may indeed provoke China and increase tension in the South China Sea, but it is hard to imagine that the absence of the U.S. strategy would have induced China to claim less in the disputes. In a counterfactual world where the United States did not rebalance to the region, Southeast Asian states may have more readily conceded to China, thereby reducing tensions over the disputes, but the status quo might have been more dramatically revised in favor of China.

Responses of the Philippines and Vietnam

The Philippines and Vietnam were in the most desperate need for U.S. support through the rebalancing strategy. Despite the commonality, however, their approaches varied significantly. While the Philippines under former president Benigno Aquino III openly defied China and sought U.S. support, Vietnam was cautious to avoid provoking China. Geography probably played an important role in this difference. 64 The Philippines can count on the ocean as a protective barrier against China, and the Philippines is a treaty ally of the United States, the dominant naval power for the foreseeable future. In contrast, Vietnam shares a land border with China, and it has fought numerous costly wars against China throughout its history, most recently in 1979. Although Vietnam normalized its diplomatic relations with the United States in 1995 and continues to improve ties, it does not have a U.S. security commitment.

In expressing desire for deeper U.S. engagement in the South China Sea, the Philippine government’s position was the most clear-cut among Southeast Asian states, especially after Aquino took office in 2010. Aside from China’s increasing activities in the South China Sea, Philippine domestic politics also pushed the Aquino administration (2010–16) to take a harder stance in the disputes. Sino-Philippine relations were relatively good under former president

Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–10), who took an “equi-balancing” strategy between China and the United States. In his “anything-but-Arroyo” campaign, Aquino shifted the Philippine policy decidedly in favor of the United States, partially to dissociate himself from his predecessor.

The rebalancing strategy presented an excellent opportunity for the Philippines to seek stronger U.S. support for its position on the disputes in the South China Sea. Whereas the U.S. government publicly declared that the U.S.-Japan alliance covers the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands, it has left the applicability of the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty to the Philippine-claimed territories in the South China Sea at best unclear. By fully embracing the U.S. rebalancing strategy, the Philippine government sought to influence the U.S. position. Moreover, even if the U.S. government did not change its stance on the Philippine claims, increased U.S. military presence in the Philippines and the South China Sea was a welcome development to the Philippines, which had sought to balance the rising Chinese presence.

According to Jeffrey Bader, “Of all the countries in the region, Vietnam was arguably the most determined to see the United States play a greater role there because of its anxiety over China.” Although they have been relatively low key, Vietnam and the United States have conducted joint naval exercises since 2010. Secretary Clinton suggested a strategic partnership between the United States and Vietnam in her visit to Hanoi in October 2010. Instead, in July 2013, the two countries formed a “comprehensive partnership,” which seemed to fall short of a full strategic partnership. In July 2015, Nguyen Phu Trong became the first secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party to visit the White House, where he shared his concern about the South China Sea disputes with President Obama. The United States lifted a decades-old arms embargo on Vietnam in May 2016.

While Vietnam has strong strategic reasons to align with the United States, its attitude toward the U.S. strategy (and China) was not as clear as that of the Philippines. Vietnamese political leaders have historical and ideological reasons to be suspicious of U.S. intentions. Moreover, they have much to lose if the U.S. strategy does not work out in the long run. As Carl Thayer points out, “Vietnam cannot choose its neighbors and one enduring axiom of Vietnamese national security policy is to avoid having permanent tensions in relations with China.” Thus, Vietnam actively engages China and other states such as Russia, India, and Japan while also seeking a stronger U.S. presence in the region. Finally, Vietnam and the Philippines have been increasing cooperation on the South China Sea disputes: in November 2015, the two countries issued a Joint Statement on the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership, which repeatedly refers to cooperation in the South China Sea.

Responses of the Other Disputants

So far, the other claimants in the South China Sea disputes have had a much lower level of tension with China. They took softer stances toward China while still supporting the U.S. rebalancing strategy. Malaysia, for example, has taken a “conscious and deliberate policy of not viewing China as a threat.”⁷⁵ While Malaysia has strengthened security relations with the United States in the last several years, it has balanced these efforts by increasing security cooperation with China. Malaysia and China held their first defense and security consultation in September 2012 and their first joint military exercise in September 2015. Perhaps as a diplomatic tactic vis-à-vis China, “the rebalancing has not featured high-profile bilateral initiatives with Malaysia,” even though “most observers say U.S.-Malaysia relations have warmed considerably in recent years.” Brunei, another Southeast Asian claimant and TPP member, welcomed the U.S.

rebalancing, especially its economic aspect. Brunei is also increasing maritime cooperation with the United States, but it is less enthusiastic about military rebalancing.

Because Taiwan receives informal U.S. military protection against China and seeks to expand economic ties with the United States, the U.S. rebalancing strategy was clearly a welcome development for Taipei. It was, however, concerned that Sino-American competition might damage cross-Strait relations, which improved significantly after Ma Ying-jeou took the Taiwanese presidential office in 2008. **Taiwan's position in the South China Sea is complicated by its historical relations with China, which inherited the Republic of China's claims.** While China is the main threat against the security of Taiwan, it is sometimes seen as being on the same side in the South China Sea disputes. With respect to U.S. rebalancing and China, Taiwan simply had bigger fish to fry than the disputes in the South China Sea.

Responses of Other Southeast Asian States

Singapore warmly welcomed the U.S. rebalancing strategy. The U.S. policy was consistent with Singapore's grand strategy, which relies on the United States as "an external balancer capable of preserving a stable distribution of power in Southeast Asia and the wider Asian region." Singapore, however, "wants to preserve its independence of manoeuvre with China and to avoid a situation where it would eventually have to 'choose' between Washington and Beijing." Thus, while serving an important role in U.S. military rebalancing, Singapore closely engaged China. In May 2015, for instance, Singapore and China conducted their first bilateral naval exercise.

Consistent with its emphasis on independence from superpowers, Indonesian foreign policy has avoided taking sides with either the United States or China. Both Washington and Beijing have been courting Jakarta, and Indonesia probably benefits from this competitive dynamic. Indonesia's maritime and territorial disputes with China are only latent, but Jakarta is suspicious of China's broad claims in the South China Sea.⁸¹ As the largest member of ASEAN, Indonesia is also wary of China's challenge against the centrality of ASEAN in regional politics. On balance, disputes in the South China Sea have pushed it toward the United States and increased security cooperation between the two countries. For example, Indonesia and the United States have conducted surveillance exercises since 2012. In April 2015, the Indonesian navy also revealed its desire to hold regular naval exercises with the United States near the Natuna Islands. Not coincidentally, China claims waters in the islands' EEZ.

Despite the U.S.-Thai alliance, Thailand was ambivalent toward U.S. rebalancing, especially in military affairs. Thailand has maintained highly cordial relationships with both the United States and China, but U.S.-Thai relations have experienced setbacks since the coups d'état in Thailand in 2006 and 2014. Thailand has been an informal ally of China since they began balancing against the unified Vietnam in the late 1970s. Thailand's military relations with China, therefore, are significantly warmer than those of other Southeast Asian states. Thailand's economic and military dependence on China has been increasing even more in recent years. Reportedly, in a closed-door meeting of Thai strategic elites in 2012, three dozen participants unanimously agreed that Thailand must look beyond the U.S. alliance and strengthen Sino-Thai relations.

Other mainland Southeast Asian states are not supportive of the U.S. rebalancing strategy, as they have deep economic and military dependence on China and do not have much at stake in the South China Sea disputes. The opening of Myanmar has been a big success for the U.S. strategy, but Myanmar is still highly dependent on China and is reluctant to embrace the United States

wholeheartedly. Cambodia's pro-China stance led to ASEAN's first-ever failure to issue a joint statement after its annual meeting in 2012. Although the United States has made progress in improving its relations with Laos, it still has not matched Chinese influence there.

Japanese and Indian Responses

Although not part of the South China Sea disputes, Japan and India have watched U.S. policy toward the South China Sea with keen interest. These two states are major powers with significant interests in the South China Sea and share concerns about the rising power of China. Even before the U.S. rebalancing strategy, the United States, India, Japan, and Australia initiated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in 2007, which prompted a diplomatic protest from China. Yet Japanese and Indian attitudes toward the U.S. rebalancing strategy have important differences.

Along with the Philippines under former president Benigno Aquino III, Japan was the most passionate supporter of the U.S. rebalancing strategy. The U.S.-Japan alliance and American military presence in Asia are the most important bases of Japanese defense policy. Moreover, Japan has maritime and territorial disputes of its own with China. Consequently, Japan fully and publicly embraced the U.S. strategy, and it is eager to assist U.S. engagement in the South China Sea. The Japanese government is contributing to the maritime capacity building of the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia by, for example, providing patrol ships and training to these countries' maritime agencies. In addition to discussing a possible status of forces agreement, Japan and the Philippines held joint naval exercises in the South China Sea in May and June 2015. Furthermore, Japan signed a defense agreement with Indonesia in March 2015 and established a strategic partnership with Malaysia in May 2015. In April 2016, two destroyers of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force made a port call at Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay, which faces the South China Sea. With the United States, Japan held their first bilateral naval exercise in the South China Sea in October 2015. China has sternly opposed and warned against Japan's involvement in the sea.

The U.S. rebalancing strategy seemed to bring geopolitical benefits to India as well, but India has been more cautious in its approach toward the United States than Japan. Although India does play a role in the South China Sea disputes, for example, through its security cooperation with Vietnam, its support for the U.S. strategy was less public than that of Japan. On one hand, India clearly benefits from a greater U.S. presence in the South China Sea and the broader Asia-Pacific because "the greater the U.S. pressure in the Pacific, the more likely that China would want to keep its southwestern frontiers tranquil." On the other hand, India recognizes the danger of provoking China, and its domestic politics and tradition of nonalignment also hinder its approach to the United States. Geographically, the land border with China, which remains disputed, gives India incentives to align with the United States against China. The geographical contiguity, however, also makes India more cautious in handling its strong neighbor, against which it lost a war in 1962.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific was motivated by multiple factors, but its development was significantly influenced by the maritime and territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Due to the high visibility of China's activity in these waters, the disputes have become a litmus test for the U.S. commitment to its Asian allies and partners. Although both supporters and opponents of the strategy can criticize its implementation, it seems to have had at

least moderate success in a difficult task—namely, reassuring regional states without provoking China too much.

Although each state's response to the U.S. rebalance needs to be understood in the context of its foreign policy tradition as well as its relationship with the United States and China, geography seems to have a systematic influence: namely, countries that are closer to China and on mainland Asia are more cautious of embracing the U.S. strategy. Maritime states have more incentives to support the United States because their maritime and territorial interests are threatened by China's advances in the South China Sea. Moreover, maritime states are able to take a more defiant policy against China because they are not too threatened by China's land forces and are not yet vulnerable to China's naval forces as a result of U.S. naval dominance. If China establishes naval dominance in the South China Sea, their attitude may well change.

Although Donald Trump's foreign policy will differ significantly from that of Barack Obama, the legacy of the U.S. rebalancing strategy will remain in the dynamics of the South China Sea disputes. The long-term factors that encouraged the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia will continue in the coming decades, and the strategy had fairly broad bipartisan support in U.S. foreign policy circles. Moreover, "By routinely participating in leaders' and Cabinet-level officials' meetings such as the [East Asia Summit], the Obama Administration has raised costs to it and successor administrations of not participating in the future, thereby helping to lock in U.S. engagement in the future." This was a welcome development to the Southeast Asian disputants in the South China Sea, as the disputes in these waters are unlikely to disappear any time soon.