



## Reassessing the U.S. Rebalance to Northeast Asia

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*Abstract: After assessing the “pivot” to Asia, the author contends that now is the time to split the rebalance of Asia in two—Northeast and Southeast Asia. Northeast Asia poses the more complicated challenge. The Northern Triangle of China, Russia and North Korea (despite appearances) is drawing together, but the U.S.-Japan-ROK Alliance is at an impasse. Serious differences exist between Japan and South Korea. Without this bilateral relationship working well, the rebalance to Northeast Asia is hampered in dealing with North Korea’s regional diplomatic strategy, the regional strategy of Russia to transpose its notion of a “new Cold War” to the east, and the Chinese strategy of weakening U.S. alliances. U.S. rebalancing success versus determined adversaries has little chance unless Seoul and Beijing are in greater agreement.*

The discussion of President Barack Obama’s rebalance to Asia has centered on whether the expectations raised are really being met. Is Obama’s commitment steadfast? Are U.S. resources sufficient? Do allies and partners feel confident in what is being done? If we focus instead on the nature of the challenge—even as it is changing—and on the importance of calibrating the U.S. response with that of its allies, then we can gain a deeper understanding of what the rebalance really requires. In doing so, we are bound to recognize that Northeast Asia poses its own complex challenges.

This analysis is based on four arguments. *First*, the U.S. rebalance in Northeast Asia is distinct from that in Southeast Asia, facing different challenges and great power maneuvering of a more complex nature. *Second*, what appeared in the 2000s to be an isolated strategic challenge from North Korea has become a much more serious test for U.S. diplomacy, with separate threats from North Korea, Russia, and China, and different responses from the two U.S. allies. *Third*, despite China’s tensions with North Korea and consensus in support of denuclearization

among the five states in the diplomacy of the Six-Party Talks, the “Northern Triangle” of China, Russia, and North Korea has revived and should be understood as a challenge for rebalancing. *Fourth*, the high visibility of clashing narratives about history has obscured a more fundamental challenge for Obama’s rebalancing, namely: sharply opposed strategic thinking in Tokyo and Seoul about China and Northeast Asia’s regional security architecture.

Strategic rebalancing toward Northeast Asia begins with the response to Xi Jinping’s moves in the region. These include tightening ties with Vladimir Putin as talk of an alliance can be heard on the Russian side; putting limited pressure on Kim Jong-un as he turns in several directions to find new diplomatic scope; and striving to deepen the split between Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzo. Beijing is the driving force in Northeast Asia, as in Southeast Asia, which makes U.S. policy reactive. Yet, this is complicated by an irreversible U.S. impasse with North Korea, an increasingly “Cold War” atmosphere with Russia, and, most importantly, unprecedented trouble in triangular coordination with the two allies—Japan and South Korea—that anchor the U.S. presence in this region.

This article first considers U.S. strategic objectives in Northeast Asia, reflecting on the ongoing discussions at Washington, D.C. think tanks. It then explores debates in Japan and South Korea about emerging strategic objectives and what the U.S. role should be in pursuing them. Finally, it evaluates the options for fine-tuning the rebalance in light of the realities in Northeast Asia. Indeed, a new awareness is emerging that there are two rebalances, one to Southeast Asia in which U.S. relations with Japan and South Korea are not seriously tested, and one to Northeast Asia, where no solution is apparent on how to manage differences with the two indispensable allies.



U.S. Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy visits Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Tokyo, Japan in November 2013. (U.S. State Department Photo by William Ng.)

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