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## The US in the Asia-Pacific: Continuing rebalance towards a region in flux

The evolving Asia-Pacific region is marked by increased balancing strategies, the forging of flexible partnerships between countries, and economic interconnectedness. In order to retain a central role and achieve a new equilibrium, the US will need to adapt to these changes.

US President Barack Obama's tenth and final trip to Asia during his time in office turned out to be a bumpy ride. When he landed in Hangzhou for the G20 summit in September, his Chinese hosts failed to facilitate a proper way for the president to disembark, in an episode that came to be known as "stairgate". Just before Obama's visit to Laos for the East Asia Summit, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines verbally insulted the US president, while hinting at his country's "separation" from the US and realignment with China.

The global media have widely reported on these incidents as being symbolic of the erosion of US influence in the region, and of the failure of the US rebalancing strategy towards the Asia-Pacific. This is widely off the mark, however.

During his time in office, Obama relaunched America's focus on Asia as an engine of global economic growth. He also renewed awareness that the US is still needed as a security provider in a region marked by increasing rivalry for regional influence and an ongoing military buildup.

Obama furthermore achieved significant diplomatic success. He secured US membership of the East Asia Summit, a regional dialogue forum led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The US policy of "pragmatic engagement" with Myanmar in 2009 contributed to the remarkable political transformation of the country. Relations with Vietnam were reset, resulting in closer defence ties and joint military exercises. Obama was the first US president to visit Laos.

At least as importantly, the US strengthened alliances with Japan and South Korea. Tokyo responded to US calls for tighter military and security cooperation by creating a National Security Council and by launching a "State Secrecy Law" facilitating intelligence-sharing with US agencies. In addition, Japan can now more easily exercise the right to collective self-defence, which allows the country to come to the aid of its ally in military conflicts. The US's other Northeast Asian ally, South Korea, increasingly under threat from the unpredictable regime in the North of the peninsula, allowed the US to deploy a high-altitude missile defence system. US diplomatic pressure also contributed to the warming of relations between South Korea and Japan, resulting in an agreement on the lingering 'comfort women' issue.

In spite of this overall positive legacy for US re-engagement in the Asia-Pacific during the past eight years, it is clear that the region is in flux, as a result of the growing influence of China. China's military force is rapidly expanding, modernizing,

and structurally reforming. Beijing is increasing its presence in Southeast Asia, assertively pursuing its "core interests" in the East and South China Seas, and actively seeking "reunification" with the Republic of China (Taiwan). At the same time, it is a driving force behind economic integration in the region, leading connectivity projects such as One Belt, One Road.

In the light of China's ascendancy, the US will inevitably be cooperating as well as competing with China for regional power and influence. At the same time, the US will need to carefully monitor three particularly salient realities in the region.

First, an increasing number of countries in the region will show that they are willing to balance the US and China against each other. Myanmar is an example of a country that, in economic terms, sought to actively balance an excessive dependence on China by opening up to investments by the US, in addition to those by Europe and Japan. The communist regime in Vietnam has strong diplomatic ties with China, but Hanoi has shown increasing willingness to forge strategic links with Washington, especially in the light of the territorial dispute with China over the Spratly Islands. Finally, the threats by Philippine President Duterte that his country would pivot towards China were

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arguably in the first place an effort to play Washington off against Beijing, to entice China to suspend sanctions, and to boost investments and foreign aid in the Philippines.

Second, the hub-and-spoke system upon which US hegemony was based will increasingly be complemented by more informal, issue-based strategic partnerships among countries in the region. Japan, for example, has a strategic partnership with ASEAN as a whole, and it has signed separate agreements with Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Securitized aid plays a strong role in these partnerships. Japan furthermore signed a partnership agreement with India, focusing on economic, technological and infrastructure development, but also on quadrilateral security cooperation (together with the US and Australia). Strategic partnerships are looser, less formal, and more targeted constructions than alliances, but for countries like Japan these agreements offer an additional tool to shape the regional security environment, in addition to the alliance with the US.

Third, the region will continue to integrate in terms of the economy, trade and investment, and connectivity will remain the buzzword. At the moment it seems unlikely that the US Congress will ratify the

Transpacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, yet failure to do so would have consequences for the US presence as a trade power in the Asia-Pacific. It would prevent it from helping to set the economic rules and regulations. Furthermore, it would have an impact on perceptions of the US in the eyes of its Asian partners, and propel China forward as the leading economic power in the region.

The US and its new government will need to carefully balance cooperation and engagement with Beijing on the one hand, while remaining strategically and militarily committed in the region. The new US administration will have to do so in the context of the three core issues listed above, irrespective of who becomes president.