GLOBAL POWERS DO NOT always act in assertive ways that are destined to change and transform the world to better serve their national interests. Sometimes they just accept the way things are because the status quo is what they want, while at other times, they fail to be proactive simply because the issues at hand are neither urgent nor significant to them. After all, global powers are not omnipotent either politically or economically, and they cannot exercise power across all foreign policy problems.

In 1988, in an article published in *World Politics*,
Kent Calder described Japan’s foreign economic policy as “reactive.” In his eyes, Japan failed to take major independent foreign policy initiatives, despite the fact that the country had the power and national incentives to be “proactive.” Japan only responded when there was outside pressure for policy changes. This reactive behavior was puzzling to Calder because Japan at that time was considered an economic superpower that was on course to surpass the United States. Calder’s answer to the puzzle was that Japan had domestic institutional weaknesses — such as bureaucratic fragmentation, political factionalism and the lack of a strong central executive — that impeded its ability to be more assertive.

BECOMING ‘JAPANIZED’
Fast forward to the early 2000s, and turn to Washington. The US clearly had domestic institutional strengths that Japan lacked in the 1980s. It had a strong central executive and well disciplined political parties. Of course, bureaucratic turf battles were not absent in the US, but this is normal for any democratic country. Even though Calder may not have been entirely correct in explaining Japan’s reactive foreign policy behavior, perhaps the opposite institutional characteristics of the US, particularly during the George W. Bush administration, may have been the source of transformative and proactive foreign policy during these years. Indeed, the US was so transformative and proactive under Bush that it was viewed by many as imperial in its behavior. The US had the power, will and interests to be proactive.

The all-too-common perception that Japan is “reactive” while the US is “proactive” is probably rooted in reality — Japan has, indeed, been reactive in many instances, while the US in recent years has been overly proactive, employing diverse strategies such as engagement, intervention, containment, multilateralism and aggressive unilateralism, to name a few.

These perceptions of the US are gradually being challenged under President Barack Obama, particularly in East Asia. It isn’t hard to explain the US’s increasingly reactive behavior in East Asia; the US is gradually and selectively becoming “Japanized” in terms of its capabilities, as well as its domestic institutional and structural characteristics.

Since the financial crisis in 2008, the US has lost enormous economic and financial resources to support its global economic and security strategies. On top of this, the ability of Obama to exercise domestic leadership has been vigorously checked and balanced by ideologically polarized political forces. Of course, the US is not Japan, and its global military presence is only one huge difference. The US is still by far the largest economy
Since the financial crisis in 2008, the US has lost enormous economic and financial resources to support its global economic and security strategies.

As a global power, the US cannot afford to leave policy-making in one of the world's most dynamic and vital regions solely to the countries of that region.

in the world. Yet its military reach is increasingly turning into a burden as financial resources to support are slowly drying up, while at the same time it has to fight post-modern enemies with so-called asymmetrical capabilities. In other words, like Japan’s Self-Defense Forces, the US military in the future may encounter more domestic and international restraints, although the sources of the restraints will be different from those of Japan. In such circumstances, it will be difficult for the US to engage in major proactive foreign policy initiatives, except where immediate and urgent US interests are at stake. This means the US will need to be selective in allocating its limited resources. Obviously, reform of the global economic order and the security problems in the Middle East will be the most conspicuous areas demanding proactive US foreign policies.

Outside of these two areas, the Obama administration is unlikely to find the time, energy and resources to engage in tough and time-consuming domestic political battles with a resurgent conservative opposition, as well as more progressive critics, over transformative foreign policies. The administration faces a great many obstacles, the major ones being weak economic growth, a fragile financial system, a fatigue factor regarding Iraq and Afghanistan and the massive losses sustained in the recent mid-term elections in Congress. These have gradually Japanized the US, at least for now, leading to a very reactive posture in East Asia.

The characteristics of America’s reactive behavior in East Asia are somewhat different from those of Japan. The focus has been mainly on responding to demands from its main allies in the region or reacting to events that involve them. And the US response has been primarily indirect, involving little more than reaffirming its support for those allies. Notable examples include the US’s reactive behavior toward North Korea; territorial disputes between South Korea and Japan, China and Japan, and Russia and Japan; the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement; and the controversy over the Futenma airbase in Japan.

In contrast, US policies toward China cannot be viewed as entirely reactive. The US has twice held strategic and economic dialogues with China, and has actively sought to foster new relations with China by encouraging it to play a more active role in tackling major global economic, security and environmental issues. However, we should not view US policies toward China as primarily East Asian in focus. China is already a global power, and its concerns and interests stretch far beyond Asia. US-China relations, especially from the American viewpoint, are thus global in nature, except in such areas as the Six-Party talks. Proactive US policies toward China, therefore, do not undermine the argument that the US has become reactive in East Asia. Along similar lines, US policies toward Japan may sometimes extend beyond Asia, but the passive nature of Japanese foreign policy means the bilateral relationship between the two is hardly global, except in a few economic areas.

**INDIRECT, SOFT AND SYMBOLIC**

As a global power, however, the US cannot afford to leave policy-making in one of the world’s most dynamic and vital regions solely to the countries...
Under the Obama administration, even if the US had the will and interest to be deeply engaged in Asia, it lacked sufficient resources to do so.

His administration’s East Asia policies at the midpoint in his term have betrayed many of the visions and hopes that Obama articulated.

of that region. Particularly at a time when China is rising, it is unimaginable that the US would leave Asia on its own. As Obama campaigned for the presidency, and in the months after he assumed office, he and his team articulated a vision and strategy for relations with East Asia. The so-called balanced strategy, emphasizing the “power of balance” instead of a “balance of power,” was one example. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates both stressed the importance of “balanced strategy,” even before Obama took office.2

The notion of a “power of balance” involves two things — a more even distribution of capabilities and resources among traditional and non-traditional actors; and the use of both hard and soft power. A report co-authored by Campbell when he was Chief Executive Officer of the centrist Center for a New American Security in June 2008 specifically mentioned that the US needs to lead changes in the Pacific region “rather than merely reacting to the new order shaped by others.”3

In controversial remarks made during his presidential campaign, Obama said he would willingly meet leaders of hostile nations including North Korea. That message was received well by many Asians who were eager for a peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. They saw in Obama’s remarks a major policy change from the Bush administration’s unerring hostility to contact with the so-called Axis of Evil countries. Dialogue and negotiation along with well-designed roadmaps for the settlement of pending issues seemed to be in the offing. It was a harbinger; many thought, of sincere and active US engagement in East Asia.

Particularly on North Korea, Obama stressed the need for “sustained, direct and aggressive diplomacy.” US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, described the US-China relationship as “the most important bilateral relationship in the world in this century.” The US under Obama elevated the status of regular bilateral dialogues between the two countries to a “Strategic and Economic Dialogue,” underscoring the new importance of the relationship. For the Obama administration, China was gradually emerging as a strategic partner rather than a competitor.

Obama also stressed the importance of the US-Japan alliance, but he distanced himself from relying too heavily on the alliance in approaching Asian affairs — in keeping with the “power of balance” strategy. Instead, Obama’s administration affirmed the similar importance of other bilateral alliances, including those with South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines and Australia.

Contrary to the hopes and expectations of many in Asia, US policy in East Asia did not unfold as described above — a consequence of the realities of a weakened US economy and the polarization of domestic politics. Even if the US had the will and interest to be deeply engaged in Asia, it lacked sufficient resources to do so and was also constrained politically from aggressively transforming the region to its liking. The US wasted too many resources during the Bush administration on efforts that were unilateral and seen as arrogant in the eyes of its Asian partners.

The Obama administration had to take the neg-
The Democratic Party of Japan attempted to assert itself as a more equal partner with the US by altering a 2006 US-Japan agreement to relocate the Futenma Marine Air station to a less densely-populated location in Okinawa. The government of Yukio Hatoyama also decided to withdraw Japan’s non-combat naval support in the Indian Ocean for allied forces in Afghanistan. Hatoyama’s vision of an “East Asian Community” alarmed many Japan-watchers in the US, raising concerns about a weakening of the US-Japan alliance. In response to all of this, the Obama administration, as it has done elsewhere in east Asia, seemed content to merely react or adjust to these unexpected developments — rather than to shape events proactively.

All in all, the Obama administration’s east Asia policies at the midpoint in his term have betrayed many of the visions and hopes that Obama articulated before and shortly after he was elected. It appears that the US has neither the resources nor the strong domestic leadership required to proactively engage in east Asia. The US in east Asia has become a reactive state. The audacity of hope, it appears, has been replaced by hope deferred.

NOTES
3 Kurt Campbell et al., The Power of Balance, p. 7.

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