Advice from a Good Friend: A South Korean View on the US Rebalancing
By Kang Choi

While many Asian countries have welcomed the renewed US focus on Asia in its foreign policy, their embrace of the US pivot comes with doubts and misgivings about the commitment and ability of the US to carry through on its new policy. Kang Choi examines how South Korea, as a close US ally, views the US policy and how it should be implemented.

SOUTH KOREA HAS REACTED with mixed feelings toward the US “pivot to Asia,” now also called the “rebalance” towards Asia. Most South Koreans welcomed the announcement of US President Barack Obama’s new policy for two reasons: North Korea and China.

In recent years, South Korea has experienced a series of deadly North Korean provocations such as the sinking of the corvette Cheonan in March 2010 and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November of the same year. Faced with multiplying threats from North Korea, the pivot could provide the basis to further strengthen the existing US-South Korea alliance, which would reassure South Koreans. It would also help ensure peace and security on the Korean Peninsula as well as the resources and political will of the US to carry through on its new policy.

Regarding China, South Korea has, like other Asian states, witnessed the relentless rise of Chinese power, both economic and military, and experienced the assertive, if not aggressive, external behavior of China in handling maritime disputes in the region. There is also China’s uncooperative attitude in dealing with North Korean provocations of the South and the country’s nuclear weapons program. So the new US foreign policy focus is being perceived in South Korea as a way, maybe the only way, to counterbalance a rising China by preserving and strengthening the system that has ensured peace and stability in the region over the past several decades.

On the other hand, South Koreans are also concerned about the possibility of being caught between the US and China in a regional power game, with many recalling the old saying about the danger of being a shrimp stuck between two whales. For South Korea, both the US and China are indispensable. South Koreans don’t want to be put in a position of having to choose between the two. Therefore, exactly how the US implements its pivot, and how the Chinese react to it, will be crucial in determining whether South Korea is, indeed, put into this nightmare position.

There is an additional concern for South Koreans that has to do with their previous experiences of US policy toward East Asia and the Asia-Pacific in general — namely, whether the US pivot is reliable and credible; whether it is simply political and diplomatic rhetoric that won’t be followed up with concrete actions. Past experiences indicate that the strategic center of gravity in US foreign policy can easily shift, depending on circumstances elsewhere in the world. For example, if the situation in the Middle East were to take a serious turn for the worse, the US might again neglect the Asia-Pacific and ask its allies to assume greater roles. If that were to happen, South Korea, being aligned with the US, would face the prospect of abandonment. All these questions come down to the resources and political will of the US to implement its pivot to Asia. In short, despite US assurances to its allies and friends, a fear both of entrapment and abandonment coexist in the minds of most South Koreans.

ASSESSING THE PIVOT
Obama vowed to be the United States’ first Pacific president when he came into office in 2009. Despite this, very little happened in the first two years, due largely to the domestic economic and financial crisis and ongoing problems in the Middle East. After experiencing tensions in its relations with China, the Obama administration finally announced its pivot strategy in late 2011. That strategy appears to be based on the following factors:

• The increasing importance of the Asia-Pacific region to the US economy;
• The growing power of the Chinese military and the visible assertiveness that the country displays in its external behavior;
• The worsening domestic fiscal problems and the expected cuts in the US defense budget.

In addition, the winding down of US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has enabled the United States to identify a new strategic center of gravity.

The Obama administration’s new agenda also reflects the rediscovery of the importance of the trans-Pacific axis in the 21st century in various dimensions from security to economics. Engagement and enlargement, which were first announced as US policy priorities by former President Bill Clinton about 15 years ago, capture the
basic nature of the pivot, which includes the following elements in three different areas:

1) The political/diplomatic area:
• Participating in and working with multilateral regional mechanisms;
• Managing and developing a co-operative relationship with China.

2) The military/security area:
• Strengthening traditional alliances;
• Strengthening partnerships with other countries in the region.

3) The economic/trade area:
• Developing and strengthening trade relations, through, for example, the South Korea-US FTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

How the second Obama administration will implement its pivot policy remains to be seen. Observing Obama’s trip to Southeast Asia right after his re-election, it is possible to argue that in his second term he will be more active and remain focused on the Asia-Pacific region in a possibly more comprehensive and integrated way.

Nevertheless, South Koreans have reasons for concern that center around the fact that except for the policies relating to managing and developing a co-operative relationship with China, the other elements of the pivot listed above could be seen as measures to encircle or contain China. Most countries in Asia share the same concern. Most countries in Asia share the same concern. To be sure, some Asian countries have experienced tensions or disputes with China, due to the complex ties and asymmetrical interdependence with China, notably in economic and trade matters. Still, no country in the region wants to go up against China or be forced to make a choice between the US and China.

The second point, which is closely related to the first, is that US policy has been relatively reactive to regional dynamics. America has not paid sufficient attention to the unfolding changes in the region, and its policies are selective and issue-based, rather than comprehensive. This aspect of US foreign policy has engendered skepticism among countries in the region about whether the US has a clear vision for the Asia-Pacific.

Third, there are serious questions about whether the US has the physical and financial resources and the political will to implement the pivot to Asia. The US is still suffering from its financial and economic crisis, and it will continue to do so for years to come, especially given the need to focus on deficit reduction in the coming decade. In the face of a fast modernizing Chinese military, the expected US defense budget cuts pose a serious challenge, and could weaken the US military in the long run and raise the issue of burden-sharing and responsibility-sharing with its allies and partners in Asia. Thus, a key issue relating to the credibility of the US pivot is, ironically, whether the US can get its domestic economic house back in order. In other words, “It’s the economy, stupid,” as Bill Clinton’s campaign strategist James Carville famously said.

Fourth, while the Obama administration is pushing the TPP trade agenda, the prospects for the TPP aren’t good. Given a lack of domestic political enthusiasm in either the US or other countries, it is very unlikely that a high-standard trade agreement of this type will be concluded anytime soon. The reality is that in the process of regional economic integration in Asia, the US cannot replace, or compete with, China, which has concluded, and is actively pursuing, various free-trade agreements with many countries in Asia. Also, given the expected growth of the domestic market in China, it will remain the No.1 economic and trading partner for almost every country in the region for decades to come.

ENHANCING AMERICAN CREDIBILITY
Most East Asian countries welcome the US pivot to Asia as a stabilizing force in the face of China’s rising influence. However, the US should establish the reliability of its regional policy through sustainability and consistency.

Compared to previous US administrations, the Obama administration is, indeed, putting more emphasis on the Asia-Pacific, and it has taken a rather comprehensive and integrated approach. But it should add two more elements: balance and depth. Right now, the US pivot appears imbalanced across the different areas and pillars listed above. There should be a balance among the political/diplomatic, economic/trade, and military/security areas. The US should try to build a “system of systems” for regional co-operation and integration. And it should also pursue the effort to deepen and enrich its existing bilateral relations. These steps would enable the US to become a real “resident power” in the region.

In the political/diplomatic arena, it must seek hard to develop the US-China bilateral relationship alongside US relations with other Asian countries. Otherwise, China will conclude that the motive behind the US approach is to encircle and contain China, and it will employ countermeasures. And this will drag US allies and partners where they don’t want to go — having to choose between the two powers.

The US should also discuss with its allies and partners the form and conditions of the desired regional architecture. Though there is talk about peace, stability and prosperity, there have been few, if any, meetings that have comprehensively assessed and forecasted the future regional strategic environment. Without a clear and common vision with guiding principles for the region, it will be impossible to overcome strategic distrust. Efforts must also be made to devise an action plan to achieve the desired regional architecture and end-state. Of course, due to the differences among countries in their perspectives and concerns, it will take a long time to reach an agreement and even longer to implement it. But it is a process of building trust and a foundation for genuine and comprehensive co-operation.

The US should think of ways to make its bilateral and multilateral mechanisms mutually reinforcing and complementary. This will require that Washington enhance its visibility in existing multilateral forums and pursue efforts to create mini-lateral forums such as one involving US-China-South Korea. In other words, the US should try to create and increase interconnectedness between bilateral mechanisms and multilateral mechanisms.

Finally, the US should seek to build strong and sustainable domestic support for implementing the pivot to Asia. Recovery of its economy and the need to address the fiscal crisis are important not only domestically, but also internationally. The US should seek to meet the expectations of its allies and friends. Otherwise, US leadership will be damaged and the pivot to Asia will falter.

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