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Hub and Spokes: How US Allies in Asia Can Contribute to the US Rebalance

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Hayley Channer, Visiting Scholar at the East-West Center in Washington and Analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), explains that “Overall, all US allies in Asia could assist the rebalance by deepening their links with each other, increasing their interoperability, and by investing more in multilateral forums.”

The US rebalance to Asia and the promise of renewed American attention and resources has prompted some US allies and partners in the region to expect more of their superpower ally. Many countries, including Japan, Australia, and South Korea, welcomed the rebalance, although there has been criticism from some that the rebalance is “all rhetoric and no action.” While the expectations of US allies vis-à-vis the rebalance have been well communicated, exactly what the United States expects of its allies is less clear. Certainly, the United States faces greater constraints after two long military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, sequestration, and a diversified global security environment that continues to spread US resources more thinly. These constraints have influenced the United States to expect more from its allies in Asia and globally. The question remains though, what precisely does the United States expect of its allies, and in what areas?

In order to answer this question, it is important to recognize what allies are currently doing. Japan, Australia, and South Korea are three of the closest US allies in Asia and are often mentioned together in connection with the US rebalance. Japan has been contributing to the rebalance in a number of ways by attempting to reinterpret its pacifist constitution and expand the role of its self-defense forces in global security operations—especially those mandated by the United Nations—by increasing defense spending and acquisition. No doubt, these measures also work in favor of Japan’s national interests. Australia has been hosting US Marines in the country’s Northern Territory since April 2012 and has further increased its defense cooperation with the United States on force posture, interoperability, space, cyber, and ballistic missile defense. It has also offered political support and, importantly, spoken out against China’s unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in November 2013. South Korea has also supported the rebalance militarily, by accepting another battalion of US troops and heightening military exercises with the United States in face of highly unpredictable and belligerent actions by North Korea. Thus, US allies in Asia have been contributing to the rebalance in a number of areas and in different concentrations. So, what more does the United States expect?

Speaking off-the-record with former US government officials, think tank experts, and academics in Washington DC over the past two months has provided this author with some fascinating insights.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

Where Japan is concerned, the overwhelming view is that its greatest potential contribution to the rebalance is economic, specifically, by agreeing to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and undertaking economic structural reforms to revitalize its economy. The TPP—a trade pact under negotiation between twelve countries—is designed to open markets and establish high-standard trade rules for the global economy. From the perspective of the United States, TPP is the economic component of the rebalance. If successful, a TPP



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agreement would include member economies that represent approximately 40 percent of the world’s economy and would help shape the rules of international trade for the 21st century. As the world’s third largest economy, Japan’s inclusion would be a major contribution to ensuring TPP success. Other areas where Japan could help the rebalance are by increasing its defense spending above one percent of GDP; improve its relations with South Korea and China; and increase its engagement with Southeast Asia. The latter is something that Japan has already begun to do.

For Australia, its main strength in supporting the rebalance is seen in being a political voice for the region. The vast majority of interviewees thought that Australia could assist the United States by promoting a rules-based order and adherence to international norms and codes of conduct. In particular, Australia was considered to be somewhat passive regarding China’s actions in the South China Sea over territorial disputes. Australia currently maintains a position of neutrality and, while it supports ASEAN’s call for a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea with China, Australia emphasizes that it has no direct interests in the dispute. The commonly held American view is that Australia should speak out more strongly against coercive action by China and voice its support for the Philippines’ move to seek international arbitration, just as the United States has done. By having a louder voice in regional affairs, Australia could encourage other countries to follow suit and, collectively, they could influence China. In terms of a military contribution, Australia could support the rebalance by increasing its defense spending, upgrading existing military bases to host additional US forces, and increasing maritime domain surveillance.

In contrast to Japan and Australia, expectations of South Korea’s contribution to the rebalance were not as great or well defined. There is a palatable feeling of uncertainty in Washington about the extent to which Seoul is willing and able to contribute to the US rebalance. This derives from the belief that South Korea sees the rebalance as directed at China and is cautious not to be seen siding with Washington against Beijing. Seoul is careful not to upset relations with Beijing as China is crucial to the outcome of the reunification of the peninsula. Despite South Korea’s unique concerns, Washington analysts still identified areas where Seoul could be doing more to militarily support the rebalance.

In particular, South Korea could implement measures that would allow it to regain wartime operational control (OPCON) of its forces in a war time environment. The United States would like to see OPCON transfer realized in order for South Korea to take greater responsibility for its own security. South Korea could also develop a more sophisticated ballistic missile defense system—integrating ground and sea-based platforms—as well as enhance its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, and keep its military reserve forces in service until the age of fifty. In terms of political and diplomatic contributions, South Korea could make a concerted effort to improve relations with Japan.

Overall, all US allies in Asia could assist the rebalance by deepening their links with each other, increasing their interoperability, and by investing more in multilateral forums. In addition, many in Washington would like US allies to be proactive on regional issues and, rather than always look to the United States to take the lead, be more forward leaning.

From the above, it is clear that the United States expects more from its allies in Asia. Financial, political and—in some cases—social and cultural constraints will prevent allies from fulfilling US wishes in all areas. However, Japan, South Korea, and Australia are all making greater efforts to support the US rebalance and, if they can better communicate their intentions to the region and to their own domestic populations, this will go some way towards ensuring the longevity of the rebalance and the continuation of this policy beyond the current administration.

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