

## **Hugo Meijer (ed.), *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance toward Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic Dimensions.***

(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy, pp. vii+336, ISBN 1137440368.

*Reviewed by Eleni Ekmektsioglou*  
American University

The book is a very comprehensive effort to address what could arguably be regarded as one of the most significant policy initiatives in the post-Cold War world; the US pivot to Asia. While there has been a plethora of opinion pieces and short research projects on the topic<sup>1</sup>, the book is one of the few attempts to approach the US rebalancing in a systematic way situating the question within the broader historical context of the US foreign policy in the region in order to unearth claims regarding both its drivers and its consequences. The edited volume achieves that by addressing the drivers in its first part where the authors explain the rationale behind the pivot while the second section turns to regional actors along with the European Union identifying their views with regard to the US policy.

While each chapter addresses a different question, the recurrent theme and main argument of the book is related to the multifaceted nature of the pivot – military, economic, diplomatic – in an effort to debunk analyses that emphasise its military aspect. Shedding light on the ‘multidimensionality’ of the rebalance, as the editor Hugo Meijer calls it, is the stepping stone to the second argument of the book which aims to convince readers of the ‘hopelessness’ of a US containment strategy against China. In fact, the whole first part of the book is organised in a way where chapters dealing with economic questions are in a constant dialogue with the authors that address the military and strategic aspects of the policy, while one cannot help but notice that all authors – no matter what their chapter focus is – put a special emphasis on the linkages between security and economic questions, hinting that any approach that deals exclusively with one or the other is inevitably incomplete.

The multidimensionality of the rebalance and focus on the nexus between security and economics is a strong piece of evidence regarding the unique nature of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Ross, ‘The Problem With the Pivot’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 6 (2012); Ashley J. Tellis ‘Balancing Without Containment: An American Strategy for Managing China’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 22, 2014; Peter Chow (ed.), *The US Strategic Pivot to Asia and Cross-Strait Relations* (N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Thomas Mahnken and Dan Blumenthal (eds.), *Strategy in Asia: The Past, Present, and Future of Regional Security* (Stanford, California: Stanford Security Studies, 2014); Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise: An Insider’s Account of America’s Asia Strategy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013); William Tow and Stuart Adam (eds.), *The New US Strategy towards Asia: Adapting to the American Pivot* (London: Routledge, 2014).

the US-China relationship, which differentiates it from comparison with the Cold War international system that gave birth to the notion of containment. This way the use of the notion of containment to describe the US foreign policy in the Asia Pacific is strongly discouraged. That said, the authors seem to embrace the idea of hedging without, nevertheless, explicitly referring to it. Hedging is a more pertinent term and in compatibility with the third argument of the book, which states that the pivot marks continuity in the US foreign policy vis-à-vis the region instead of a rupture from the past, all political rhetoric notwithstanding. Going against the administration's statements that portray President Obama as the first Asia Pacific President, the book argues that the rebalance is predicated upon previous administrations' initiatives, mainly featuring the second term of the Bush administration as well as the Clinton years. In fact, from all three aspects – economic, diplomatic as well as military – the authors argue that the pivot marks a cumulative evolution of a long-standing US foreign policy towards the region, driven by changes in the strategic environment such as the shifting of the centre of gravity from West to East. Seen this way, the pivot is not a policy that seeks to contain China but rather an initiative that seeks to re-define bilateral relations with regional players while increasing American participation and contribution to regional institutions.

Within this broader argument of the edited volume, Michael McDevitt situates the pivot in the long historical presence of the US in the region, explaining that the goals are not novel, but rather the energy and resources the US is ready to invest in achieving them is what differentiates the rebalance from previous policies. Both Michael McDevitt and Guillaume de Rouge use the linkages between security and economic questions in order for them to describe the strategic context within which the rebalancing is taking place, with the former focusing on the US goal of maintaining its primacy and the latter emphasising the American goal of embedding China into the complex web of security and economic relations that characterise the region. While Michael McDevitt puts forward the argument of a consistent American foreign policy – at least with regards to the goals stated –, See Seng Tan comes to question two of the main claims of the volume; on the one hand, the consistency of US involvement in the region and, on the other, the novelty as well as substance of the Obama administration's emphasis on regional organisations and multilateralism. See Seng Tan, in contrast to some contributors of the volume, sees President Obama's engagement with regional institutions as rather 'stylistic', as he calls it, with no substance, and epiphenomenal to the underlying political processes that shape the region's future. Through the use of historical evidence, the chapter argues that America's à la carte multilateralism will be likely to continue in the future, juxtaposing ASEAN's ostensible experience with the US to NATO's consistent and meaningful engagement with American officials. Finally, the last chapter of the first part addresses the military question and what many saw as the evidence that proved the American intention to contain China; the Air Sea Battle concept. Benjamin Jensen and Eric Shibuya, through the clever use of the concept of 'retroactive continuity', examine services' procurement decisions, force structure as well as operational concepts, and find that the foundation of a new strategic doctrine had already been laid during the Bush administration and reflected a broader concern on the proliferation of precision strike and other A2/AD systems.

Moving to the second part of the book, an attempt is made to capture regional reactions to the pivot as well as European concerns along with areas of transatlantic

cooperation in the Asia Pacific. Starting with China, Emmanuel Puig and Mathieu Duchatel survey the Chinese scholarly debate on the US rebalance identifying two conflicting views; one that sees the pivot as part of an ever evolving relationship between the US and China at the antipode of which they find the 'containment school' that regards the rebalance as an effort to encircle the mainland. For Puig and Duchatel, Xi's initiative for the creation of 'new great power relations' is the ideological reaction to the US policy that seeks to redefine state relations mitigating security dilemma-related concerns. In other words, the two authors suggest that creating a new great power relationship is China's attempt to keep friction with the US at a controlled level, but structural realities pertain. Chinese scholars refer to the high levels of mistrust, the asymmetry in nuclear capabilities as well as the unpredictability of American politics that prevent the two countries from a profound and meaningful rapprochement. Young Kim turns to Northeast Asia and, in a very detailed chapter, he explains the profoundly different views held by the two main US allies, Japan and South Korea. The argument in a nutshell is based on the gap in threat perceptions as well as in the prioritisation of policy goals which leads Japan and South Korea to almost diametrically opposed takes on US policies. While South Korea is deeply concerned with DPRK and seeks to normalise relations with China, cold Sino-Japanese relations due to territorial disputes and historical grievances render Japan positively disposed and, in fact, reassured by a reinforced American presence. South Korea's reluctant stance towards the US is closer to Southeast Asian countries' ambivalent attitude who would rather avoid finding themselves in the position of choosing between two major Powers. Eric Frecon and Hugo Meijer come to shed more light on Southeast Asia, pointing out its growing strategic importance. The main argument is that challenges concerning the freedom of navigation, territorial disputes as well as piracy pushed the US to rebalance its focus from Northeast Asia towards the Strait of Malacca and South China Sea. Finally the last chapters look at European countries and the impact of the pivot on transatlantic cooperation. Jolyon Howorth explains how the pivot shook Europeans and their hopes for a deepening of the Common Security and Defence Policy while May-Britt Stumbaum identifies areas of transatlantic cooperation in the Asia Pacific where coordination would be mutually beneficial for both the US and the EU. A very valuable contribution comes from Isabelle Facon who looks at Russia – a country frequently neglected even though geographically it forms part of the region. Isabelle Facon researches the consequences of the US pivot on Russian policies and she finds the links between the US Asia Pacific strategy and Russia's Ukraine policy.

After having summarised the main arguments and issues covered in every chapter, it becomes obvious that the book sets a very ambitious goal – to help readers understand both what drove the policy of rebalancing as well as its potential impact on the region's future. Starting from the former, the first part of the book on the drivers gives an excellent overview of the main reasons behind the pivot referring to all structural factors – economic and security ones – with a focus on the international level. However, one cannot help but wonder to what extent variables at the systemic level could entirely account for a policy that, according to the authors, is not even novel but rather a continuation of past initiatives. In other words, the first chapters ask the question of why the pivot took place, using evidence from previous administrations that demonstrate its continuity. Another valuable question to address would be why the policy acquired such great dimensions during the Obama administration and what

specific bureaucratic, organisational as well as political considerations gave it its final shape. Put differently, a chapter on the bureaucratic politics as well as political negotiations and consensus-shaping processes that generated the pivot would have added to the systemic analysis of international drivers which, nevertheless, leaves domestic factors under-examined. It needs to be said that there are claims in a couple of chapters regarding the strategic use of the pivot from the Obama administration as a rhetorical device that aimed to differentiate him from his predecessor. These statements invite the reader to think of reasons at the sub-state level that contributed to the final policy outcome, which, nevertheless, the book does not fully address.

Another point that is indirectly related to the reluctance of the contributors to open the 'black box' of the state is the lack of theoretical clarity with regard to the concept of continuity or change. While the principal thesis of the book is that the pivot continues past policies, there is no elaboration on what the authors mean by the term 'continuity'. In fact, some chapters regard continuity in the short-term within the post-Cold War context (Jensen and Shibuya for instance) while others refer to the notion covering a longer period – from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards (McDevitt or Frecon and Meijer). It needs to be stressed that the volume is not an historical one. However, the historical context creates the contour of the policy that makes the main theme of the volume, which renders the need of theoretical clarity on the terms of continuity and change one of paramount importance. Using Herman's classical definition of change in foreign policy, change can take place at several levels<sup>2</sup>; change can be defined as a refinement of the scope or the intensity of the policy effort but it can also happen at the level of the means used to achieve the goal. Greater policy changes are defined as the ones that modify the policy goals or profoundly change the international orientation of a state and self-definition within the international system. Herman's foreign policy change terminology helps us grasp phenomena of policy continuity or change in a more nuanced way. Returning to the argument of the book with regards to continuity, it seems to me that the thesis refers to the policy goals rather than the intensity of the effort or scope where some profound changes have taken place. Having said that, it would add to the theoretical clarity of the argument if the authors approached the different components of the rebalancing through a clearer theoretical framework that would allow them to make more rigorous statements on the continuity or not of US foreign policy in Asia.

Finally, even though there is an excellent chapter on Southeast Asia, its main theme links it to the first part of the book that looks at the drivers rather than to the second that surveys regional reactions to the rebalancing. Whereas Russia's, Japan's, South Korea's and European views are extensively covered, at the end of the book the reader still wonders about the smaller – albeit very important strategically – Powers of the region and their take on US policy. The criticism is more pertinent when related to states that are parties to the South China Sea disputes and also strategic partners with the US such as the Philippines. It should be mentioned that Eric Frecon and Hugo Meijer approach Southeast Asia asking what the consequences of the pivot would be in that sub-regional *status quo*. They tackle the issue of arms race explaining how military modernisation is driven by economic, industrial as well as political reasons rather than the US rebalancing. However, regional perspectives on

2 Charles F. Hermann, 'Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (March 1, 1990), pp. 3–21.

the pivot are rather neglected especially with regard to the future of the US-China relationship and how that affects Southeast Asia.

To conclude, the book is the first systematic effort to explore comprehensively a highly consequential policy as well as to support and demonstrate empirically through historical examples a commonly used argument that regards the pivot as a continuation of previous administrations' policies. It is an excellent read for those who seek to understand the international systemic origins of the policy and want to start thinking about its consequences and what needs to be done further in order for the two main Powers to forge cooperative relations away from friction.