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BLURRING BORDERS:
NATIONAL, SUBNATIONAL, AND REGIONAL ORDERS IN EAST ASIA
A CONFERENCE REPORT
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On June 1, 2015, FPRI’s Asia Program, in partnership with the Asia Program and the Kissinger Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, convened a full-day conference on “Blurring Borders: National, Subnational, and Regional Orders in East Asia.”

Participants included Richard Bush, Brookings Institution; Felix Chang, FPRI (moderator); Robert Daly, Woodrow Wilson Center (moderator); Jacques deLisle, FPRI and University of Pennsylvania; Dru Gladney, Pacific Basin Institute and Pomona College; Shiho Goto, Woodrow Wilson Center (moderator); Christine Kim, Georgetown University; Satu Limaye, East-West Center; Mike Mochizuki, George Washington University; J. Stapleton Roy, Woodrow Wilson Center; Gilbert Rozman, Princeton University and FPRI; Sheila Smith, Council on Foreign Relations; and Robert Sutter, George Washington University.

In the conference’s keynote address, Ambassador J. Stapleton Roy highlighted the challenges to the United States and the US-backed regional order in East Asia posed by several developments: the great and growing importance of East Asia, in terms of population size, economic scale, and military power; the emergence of new regional organizations—in many of which the US does not participate (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and BRICS-related bodies); and changes in China since Xi Jinping came to power as a bold leader combining Deng Xiaoping-style pragmatism, Mao-like ideology, a commitment to market economics, and a foreign policy that seeks a leadership role for China. The question for the US is whether it will adapt effectively or become mired in attempts to preserve a not fully sustainable status quo.

Among the significant issues the US faces is the more muscular foreign policy that China has adopted under Xi. Signs of this include Xi’s proposed “new type of great power relations,” Beijing’s shift to a “proactive foreign policy” and efforts to build up a “China brand,” as well as China’s approach to territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas. China seeks a role in Asia that is equal to or greater than that of the United States, and it has the ability to contest the US’s long-standing role in defining the regional order. But this does not mean that China has the intention or the ability to drive the US out of the region.

If Pax Americana were to end in the East Asia-Pacific region, it is uncertain how and whether a new stable order can be crafted in a region marked by great disparities in power, especially between China and its neighbors. There will not be a Pax Sinica in which China’s dominance approaches that which the US has enjoyed. China cannot rebuild the late imperial tribute system because the world order is and will continue to be based on a Westphalian system of independent, sovereign states. China’s still-limited resources and neighboring states’ fears that China, given its sense of grievance in foreign relations, will engage in “score settling” are factors that further limit China’s role in a regional security order. Modern weapons make it more risky for states to resort to military force.
As China continues to rise, we are more likely to see a multipolar world with several powerful players. In this environment, the US must reconsider its accustomed legalistic-moralistic approach to foreign policy that was suited to a postwar bipolar world, and its reliance on alliances based on shared ideology and traditional power resources that continued into the post-Cold War world. The US also needs to bring to bear the resources—both its own and those of its allies and partners—necessary to underpin a stable regional order.

It would be both unwise and wrong for the US to try to inhibit China’s rise, not least because China’s growth does much to drive the region’s prosperity. Instead, the US should increase incentives for China to behave as a responsible stakeholder in the region and to forego the more seriously status quo-challenging ideas that are present in some, but not all, Chinese analyses of regional security. To advance that agenda, the US should: support solidarity among ASEAN countries to limit China’s ability to pursue policies that sow division among member states over issues such as the South China Sea; maintain a strong American presence in the region to give confidence to US allies; underpin an otherwise hard-to-sustain security commitment with a balanced role that includes a robust economic component, including the TPP; and support regional institutions and legal principles—including those that emerged in response to the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis—that can deter China (as well the US and others) from irresponsible behavior. For the US, the challenges in pursuing this course lie partly in domestic politics. Opposition in Congress and political polarization have limited the US’s ability to mobilize necessary resources, and to support adaptation of key existing institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Washington has not been able to offer bold measures to match China’s AIIB, “one belt, one road” and other initiatives from Beijing.

The US should cooperate with other states to reinforce the rule of law in maritime zones and, in turn, a more stable and less conflict-prone order in East Asia. The US’s ability in this area would be enhanced by ratifying the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and by supporting regional efforts to craft legal rules that move beyond the Declaration of Conduct for the South China Sea. The US could benefit from engaging and repackaging attractive or unobjectionable ideas offered by China, such as Xi Jinping’s proposal at a recent Work Conference that China should “promote peaceful resolution of differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, and oppose the willful use or threat of force.” The US and China both would be well-served by not exaggerating their differences and being more creative in pursuing common interests and helping to sustain the great success story that East Asia has been in recent decades.

**Sovereignty, Identity and Culture: Subnational Issues and Challenges**

Panelists assessed the intertwined questions of identity, sovereignty and culture in four diverse examples of “subnational” contexts: Okinawa in Japan, the Muslim Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (both in China), and the recently heated politics of China’s claims that the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo was part of the Chinese empire.

**Mike Mochizuki** assessed the lasting effects of Okinawa’s complex history, which has included periods of separate rule, dual subordination to China and Japan, full Japanese sovereignty, and renewed ambiguity after the Second World War when China initially sought to reassert its claims to the Ryukyu Islands, followed by a protracted period of US occupation until the reversion agreement that restored Japanese control in 1972. This history has given Okinawans a persisting sense of a separate identity despite integration into Japan through vigorous assimilation efforts and nationalist education beginning after Japan annexed Okinawa in the late 19th century.

In terms of Albert Hirschman’s classic framework of “exit, voice, and loyalty,” Okinawans have not pursued or had much prospect for “exit” from Japan. A postwar independence movement gained little traction beyond academic circles, activists, and a minority of Okinawans. Most Okinawans today wish to remain a part of Japan. As this suggests, Okinawans have been loyal to Japan, but they also had demonstrated relatively high loyalty toward patron powers in earlier times, including under Ming China’s tributary system, and later under dual Chinese-Japanese rule.

Okinawans’ preferred mode has been “voice.” But this voice has been too little heard and heeded despite its distinctive content and potential contribution to addressing troublesome issues in the East Asia. Within Japan, Okinawans are particularly concerned with avoiding serious conflict between Japan and China because Okinawans would be at the front line in any major confrontation. More than Japan as a whole, Okinawans have the potential to take the lead in addressing the “history” problem between Japan and its neighbors, in part because Okinawans have had their own experiences—and discontents—under both Japanese and Chinese rule. Ignoring Okinawans’ views on the issue of US bases in Okinawa brings risks for US-Japan security relations and the US’s security role in the region. Okinawans’ often-expressed opposition to construction of a facility at Henoko to replace the controversial base at Futenma is too often dismissed as a “not in my
Dru Gladney examined China’s challenges in dealing with the Muslim Uyghur minority that lives primarily in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Chinese rule over the Uyghurs is an example of China’s effort to integrate non-Han areas, primarily to the West of the Chinese heartland, in a modern nation-state (rather than merely subject them to imperial rule). Historically, these areas were only intermittently under China’s control—notably, under the non-Han Yuan and Qing dynasties. During the PRC era, Xinjiang and the West have only relatively recently become major foci of regime policies and concerns. The economic reforms that have defined the post-Mao reform era began on the east coast and spread toward Xinjiang only during the Jiang Zemin years. Post-9/11 concerns about terrorism and a fast-growing China’s need for oil and other energy resources increased Xinjiang’s importance to the PRC. But only under Xi Jinping has the region been recast as a key factor in China’s development and foreign policies, including through the “one belt, one road” initiative, the Iron Silk Road proposal (for international rail links traversing the West Asian region), and China’s broader quest for a larger role in Eurasia.

China’s “nationalities” (minzu) policy has been the principal tool for integrating and governing the Uyghurs and the other fifty-four officially designated national minority groups—ten of which are Muslim. The term was borrowed in the early twentieth century from the Japanese attempt to translate the German idea of volk, and the basic policies—adopted in the PRC’s early years—were modeled on Soviet policy from the Stalin era. Beijing’s policies toward the region have not prevented the emergence of a “Xinjiang problem.” As national economic interests and investment in Xinjiang have grown, the regime’s policies have at times been marked by ambivalence between adopting a “silo” approach that brings few linkages to the local economy, and pursuing deeper integration of Xinjiang amid massive in-migration by Han Chinese. After 9/11, terrorism has become a significant problem, in the eyes of the central government and also in reality. Several significant attacks have occurred in recent years, including notorious ones outside Xinjiang, such as a vehicle driven into a crowd at Tiananmen in central Beijing in 2013 and a knife attack at the train station in Kunming in 2014.

Radicalized Uyghurs returning from the Middle East and growing religious conservatism among unemployed and disenfranchised young Uyghur men portend more difficulties and indicate the inadequacy of the regime’s traditional “carrot and stick” policies. Al-Qaeda, ISIS and similar groups, however, hold limited appeal to Uyghurs, who seek primarily to preserve their culture and secure independence or autonomy for their homeland, not jihad or a new caliphate.

China thus has strong reasons to revise its nationalities policy, particularly in regions such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Mongolia, where distinct identities persist. China’s policies have had some positive effects, including providing resources that have raised living standards. But significant adjustments are needed—especially to policies that foster in-migration of Han Chinese (who are now 40% of Xinjiang’s population), undertake investments that contribute little to the local economy, or one-sidedly emphasize repression over accommodation. If such changes are not forthcoming, Beijing risks greater violence and Islamic radicalization in Xinjiang.

Jacques deLisle turned to another special region in China—the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region—and the significance for Hong Kong’s “one country, two systems” model of recent disputes over democratic reform. The controversy erupted after Beijing’s announcement in August 2014 that Hong Kong voters’ exercise of universal suffrage in the 2017 Chief Executive election—which Beijing had promised in a 2007 interpretation of Hong Kong’s Basic Law that had rejected an earlier push from Hong Kong for more rapid democratization—would be limited to a choice among two or three candidates chosen by a committee of mostly “pro-Beijing” and “pro-business” elites similar to the one that had selected previous chief executives. Beijing rejected Hong Kong democrats’ calls for a process that would give voters a wider choice of candidates. Students and others took to the streets. A heavy-handed reaction by the Hong Kong government (including police use of pepper spray, which students repelled with umbrellas that gave their movement its name) and vituperative condemnation by Beijing built public sympathy for the movement in Hong Kong. But popular support waned as citizens became frustrated with the effect of protesters’ encampments on traffic and commerce, violent clashes occurred at the protest sites, and it became obvious that the protesters’ demands were futile. Beijing made clear that it would not revise its August 2014 dictum, and the pan-democrats in Hong Kong’s legislature secured the one-third of the votes necessary to block the government’s legislation to implement Beijing’s plan. The near-term result is the retention of the prior method for selecting the next Chief Executive. The broader issue is the implications for Hong Kong’s autonomy and democratic development.

The Umbrella Movement—like other efforts to advance democracy in Hong Kong—did not signal separatism or a challenge to the basic “federalism plus” arrangements embodied in the Sino-British Joint Declaration that returned Hong Kong to China and the Basic Law that China adopted as a mini-constitution for the SAR. The Umbrella Movement raises the prospect—far
from a certainty—that Hong Kong politics has changed, especially through an enduring politicization of a younger generation. If so, it will alter Beijing’s options for governing Hong Kong. Although in these respects possibly new, the Umbrella Movement is the latest installment in a long-running conflict between Hong Kong democrats, on one side, and Beijing and its Hong Kong allies, on the other side, over the basic terms of governance in the SAR: Beijing’s ultimately discretionary choices as the SAR’s sovereign, or conformity to universal principles of democracy and human rights.

Given the Umbrella Movement’s limited aims and uncertain legacy, Beijing’s harsh and strong reaction to the movement is striking. Several explanations might be plausible, none of them good for the prospect of Beijing’s accommodating calls for greater democracy in Hong Kong. First, Beijing may have listened to poor advice from the local government and business leaders, who had self-interested reasons for opposing the pro-democratization forces’ goals and who have long pressed the view that Hong Kong is an economic and not a political city. Second, Beijing may have understood the issues but was unconcerned about consequences. International pressure and local discontent were insufficient to dissuade the central authorities from intransigence. Third, Beijing feared a “democratic contagion” spreading from Hong Kong and did not want ordinary Chinese and the PRC’s restive minorities to ask why they too could not have the democracy that protesters sought, or to conclude that massive street protests were a means to achieve it. Fourth, Beijing invoked, perhaps disingenuously, the specter of a challenge to China’s sovereignty—in the form alleging that foreign “black hands” were behind the movement. Fifth, the view from Beijing may be simply that Hong Kongers had gotten away for too long with thinking of themselves as too special. Having been granted so much that was denied to other Chinese, they were not going to be indulged in their disruptive demands for still more.

Beijing’s reaction to the Umbrella Movement is potentially costly to its broader agenda, including deepening distrust of Beijing’s approach to political issues in cross-Strait relations and reinforcing perceptions in East Asia that China is heavy-handed and troublingly assertive.

Christine Kim assessed the controversy that began in the 2000s between South Korea and China over the history of Goguryeo, an ancient kingdom that straddled the northern part of the Korean peninsula and parts of northeast China. When Chinese official sources, including the Foreign Ministry, began to press the argument that Goguryeo was an ethnically Korean part of China’s empire, South Koreans reacted strongly. South Korea’s account of its own history has more often stressed the kingdom of Silla, which was based in the home region of many South Korean leaders, and which had unified the peninsula and thus resonates with contemporary Korean aspirations for national reunification. But Goguryeo has been a significant part of the national narrative as well, emphasized by Park Chung-hee and a symbol of national pride and military prowess.

China’s efforts to cast Goguryeo as Chinese did more than stir up yet another “history question” in East Asian regional relations. They also raised concerns in South Korea that China’s claims about ancient Goguryeo reflected contemporary China’s hegemonic ambitions. Concerns and debates intensified in South Korea about the risks of the nation’s high level of economic dependence on China, and polls showed a precipitous decline in views of China, with the PRC dropping from being the most favorably regarded foreign state to only 6% of South Koreans having a positive image of China.

The controversy over Goguryeo has not had a deep and lasting impact on bilateral relations, however. Although no accord has been reached over these nettlesome history issues, economic relations, tourist visits, and cultural exchanges have continued relatively unimpeded. Bilateral relations have warmed under South Korea’s President Park Geun-hye. Nonetheless, the prospects for renewed friction are real. Korean nationalism is a significant force. Although it has been much less volatile toward China than toward Japan, the Goguryeo incident shows that it can turn toward China. The risks of this are enhanced by other concerns in South Korea about the bilateral relationship, including over the vulnerabilities that come from asymmetrical economic interdependence, China’s threat to erode South Korea’s advantage in high technology, and concerns about whether South Korea’s institutional infrastructure is adequate to manage the risks of political frictions with China, and, more fundamentally, to sustain a robust democracy at home in the face of powerful nationalist sentiments that were on display in the controversy with China over Goguryeo.

Regional Architectures: Multistate Alignments and Institutions

The second panel turned to supranational issues, including signs of an emerging bipolar order in East Asia, the prospects for regional security architecture that can help in addressing long-running problems, and the challenges and possible opportunities facing the region’s most prominent multilateral organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Panelists also addressed the roles and interests of the United States in these regional issues.
Gilbert Rozman argued that there are strong signs of an emerging bipolar order in the region. This has the potential to lead to a new Cold War although the US and China have kept open the possibility of cooperation on vital issues such as climate change, Iran, and, perhaps, currently more friction-producing issues such as North Korea and the South China Sea. China and Russia are the first and second most important powers on one side of the bipolar order, and the US and Japan are the first and second most important powers on the other. Emblematic of the larger pattern are two recent summits—between Xi and Putin and between Obama and Abe—and two economic initiatives—the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership and the PRC’s Eurasia-focused “One Belt, One Road” initiative. China and Russia have been upgrading their military cooperation through arms sales, joint exercises and agreements to cooperate on a range of strategic areas. The US and Japan have drawn closer together in security affairs over issues such as freedom of navigation and the disputes between China and Japan over the Diaoyu / Senkaku Islands. China’s “One Belt, One Road” policy appeared to conflict with Russia’s support for a Eurasian Economic Community, but the two countries insist that they will be closely aligned.

The long-delayed but now-accelerating TPP promises closer economic integration between the US and Japan as the group’s two largest economies.

More than economics and high politics are driving this pattern. History and national identity matter as well. China and Russia share a common view of the Second World War that has woven the history of the war deeply into their respective senses of nationalism and national identity, underpinned a commitment to limiting Japan’s roles and powers, and entailed a rejection of the universal, generally liberal-democratic values that the US and Japan (and, increasingly, others in the region as well) have embraced in the postwar era.

The move toward bipolarity involves frustrations for lesser powers—that is, the powers lesser than the US and China. Russia and Japan each had sought to assert their national identities, widen their diplomatic horizons, and pursue their own agendas. But relations between Russia and Japan have deteriorated and each has fallen into the role of junior partner to a greater power, while more loudly insisting on pride in its distinct civilization. For middle and small powers, options have become more narrowly limited. South Korea’s middle-power activism has proved abortive. A period of good relations with both the US and China and promotion of a Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative has been followed by troubled relations with Russia and China and tightening alliance with the United States. ASEAN faces serious challenges to its effectiveness as its members divide among themselves over issues—including maritime claims—that are foci of friction between the US and China. For second- and third-tier powers in the region, it is proving increasingly difficult to act without damaging relations with either the US or China.

The greatest driving force behind these trends has been a rising and more assertive China, and this has intensified under Xi Jinping. In grappling with the challenges that growing bipolarity in the region presents, analysts—and US policymakers—need to pay more attention to national identity than international relations theory typically does. National identity is a major factor in China’s behavior and in the alignment between Russia and China.

Richard Bush assessed the prospects for building successful security architecture in the region, which he defined as institutions that are created as, or become, agents for solving the region’s security and related problems, specifically four significant and persisting ones. In the case of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, such architecture has not been and, in the near term at least, is unlikely to be built. The Six-Party Talks have not been successful in solving the problem, which remains ultimately a bilateral US-North Korea issue with little hope for a bilateral resolution. With the US not offering what North Korea demands, bilateral talks hold little potential to resolve the core issues. The relevant task increasingly has become to contain the consequences of North Korea’s program rather than to create an institutional framework capable of achieving denuclearization.

Prospects for regional security architecture are limited for the South China Sea disputes. China’s quest for strategic depth in the East China Sea and the South China Sea conflicts with the US’s intention to maintain its traditional role as guarantor of regional security, as well as a robust economic and diplomatic presence in the region. The ways China has asserted its territorial claims, nationalist sentiments in China and several rival claimant states, and concerns about energy security have increased friction among China and US friends and allies in the region. The significant and widely recognized risk of confrontation between the military and law-enforcement forces of China and its neighbors creates heightened incentives to build institutions for cooperation and conflict-avoidance. So does the need for multilateral coordination to keep open the sea lanes.
Potentially promising mechanisms have proven weak, however. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea might provide a framework of relevant rules, but its principles are increasingly contested among China, the US and other states in the region. The ASEAN-driven Declaration of Conduct for the South China Sea often has been violated and has failed to ripen into a long-anticipated and more binding Code of Conduct. Some recent initiatives could portend progress, including the US’s and China’s pursuit of a bilateral accord on conduct for the operations of their air forces in the region, or Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou’s “peace initiative.”

Taiwan presents different challenges for regional security architecture. Beijing prefers to address cross-Strait issues as a bilateral and, in principle, domestic matter, and seeks to minimize the US’s role. Taiwan seeks ties with the US to strengthen its hand with the PRC. Addressing cross-Strait issues is further complicated by Taiwan’s internal divisions over issues of Mainland policy, national identity, and how to handle the fraught conceptual question of the “Republic of China.” Such internal political disagreements are unlikely to abate as Taiwan enters its presidential election season.

Given Beijing’s positions on Taiwan’s international participation, states that are engaged in regional architecture projects are reluctant to bring in Taiwan absent Beijing’s rarely forthcoming assent. Such exclusion is costly to region security, however, because Taiwan not only has a major stake in issues such as disease control, natural disasters, and other non-traditional security concerns (as well as economic affairs) but also has resources and experience to help in addressing those issues.

No regional security architecture is likely to help address the conflict in Hong Kong over the procedures for selecting the Chief Executive or the broader question of democratization in Hong Kong. The issues at stake are internationally important and are significant concerns for US policy. But Beijing regards Hong Kong as an unquestionably internal matter and has claimed that the US was a “black hand” behind the Umbrella Movement. Prospects for a swift and amicable resolution are poor, given Beijing’s rejection of calls to revise the proposed electoral rules, and the transformation that Hong Kong has undergone since its 1997 reversion to China, including a rising sense of a distinct identity (especially among the young), and a strong desire for its own politics (alongside close economic ties with the Mainland).

Satu Limaye identified six dynamics in Southeast Asia, assessed their implications for the region’s institutional order, and considered the issues posed for US policy. First, Southeast Asia’s post-colonial states are still engaged in processes of nation-building and state-building at home while also pursuing regional integration. Second, as new leaders have come to power (especially in Southeast Asia’s Communist states), the foundation for regional coherence that founding-generation leaders once provided has faded. Third, Southeast Asia’s high economic growth has become increasingly dependent on integration with a global supply chain that ties the region to Northeast Asia. The region’s external economic links may transform further with the US-led TPP and the PRC-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Fourth, the balance of power within Southeast Asia has been shifting, with the relative rise of Vietnam and the increased involvement of extra-regional powers. Fifth, Southeast Asia is becoming more “internationalized” as India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and others have engaged more intensively with the region. Sixth, new economic, political, and military arrangements that link various regional states unevenly with China, the US and other outside powers have tested the coherence and unity of ASEAN, pulling member states into closer alignment with different extraregional powers.

In this context, regional architecture generally—and ASEAN specifically—face several challenges. First, Southeast Asian leaders are likely to give priority to domestic state-building over commitments to strengthening ASEAN as an institutional structure. Second, a core ASEAN principle of not intruding on member states’ sovereignty persists and limits ASEAN’s potential as a multilateral organization. Assertions of ASEAN’s centrality are less effective as the organization’s cohesion weakens and member states turn to outside powers to balance one another. Third, this outreach to powers outside Southeast Asia has drawn ASEAN members into those states’ often zero-sum disputes along Asia’s long littoral. This in turn has fostered friction among ASEAN states. Finally, the changing modes of outside powers’ engagement with the region are threatening to turn “internationalization” from a source of relatively free public goods for Southeast Asian states into an invitation to outside powers to see the region as a platform or arena for conflicts among themselves. The result is to increase Southeast Asia’s “strategic exposure.”

These developments mean that US policies must address several issues. First, the TPP will initially include some, but not all, ASEAN states. The US will have to develop ways to engage the for-now non-participating states and find ways to address development gaps. Second, the US faces mounting difficulties in crafting its approach to the South China Sea disputes as they become more of a US-China bipolar issue, divide ASEAN states among themselves, and leave ASEAN with a less clear role. Third, the US faces complex and uncertain choices over how much weight to give ASEAN institutions, other regional bodies, and individual nation-states in pursuing its “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia and other policy aims in the region. Fourth, the
US’s support for using the East Asia Summit to address major issues has sharpened questions over the EAS’s identity—whether it is another “ASEAN-plus” body or a more fully open, Trans-Pacific organization. Finally, US policy must cope with Southeast Asian states’ ambivalence about how much to invest in global, rather than regional, issues and how much to accept the US’s agenda or to press more strongly for their own, distinctive agendas.

Major Powers and Interstate Relations: Japan, China and the US’s “Rebalancing”

The final panel focused on relations among the major states that still largely define international relations in East Asia: the United States, China, and Japan.

Robert Sutter addressed several factors affecting international relations in East Asia and several strategic advantages that the US enjoys in the region. The regional distribution of power has been shifting, primarily because of China’s rise. Economies in East Asia are becoming even more globalized. Multilateral links are growing in a region that has had weak international institutions. Security threats from North Korea and terrorism persist. The US’s engagement in the region has fluctuated between highly involved and troublingly withdrawn. Although East Asia largely welcomed Washington’s move away from the unilateralism of the George W. Bush administration, Obama has been seen as an unreliable (albeit more collaborative) partner.

When it does engage in the region, the US has several strengths that can help advance its policy goals. First, the US is—and is recognized in the region as being—an irreplaceable provider of the public good of regional security on which East Asian states depend for their prosperity and stability. “Rebalancing” seeks to reaffirm the US’s commitment to this role. Second, the US remains a major market for the products of the region’s significantly export-dependent economies. Although intra-regional trade has flourished, exports to the US and EU (as well as Japan) remain important and, especially in China, much of the export sector consists of foreign-invested firms, many with ties to or based in the US. With East Asian regimes’ political legitimacy still significantly dependent on economic growth, this economic element of US engagement remains a crucial foundation for US influence. The TPP is a significant step forward for US interests and influence on this front. Third, the US provides vital cooperation with and support for military and intelligence organs of allied and friendly states in the region. This makes the US a singularly valuable and valued partner. Fourth, the US enjoys significant non-governmental power. US NGOs have established good relations and reputations in the region. Many citizens from Asia have lived, studied, and worked in the United States, and have often had very positive experiences. Success stories of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans further enhance the US’s stature in the region.

Overall, the US’s rebalancing policy has been welcomed in East Asia despite continued skepticism about whether the US will be willing and able to sustain its commitments, even as support in the US for a policy of reassurance toward China has been waning. It is in the US’s interest to see the development of stronger, more capable states among its friends and allies in the region.

China is in a much weaker position to pursue its agenda, so much so that it has not succeeded, or pushed very hard, to do so despite opportunities seemingly presented by the US’s distraction in the Middle East and resulting disengagement from East Asia. Beijing’s assertive behavior, both before and since Xi Jinping came to power, has given China a bad reputation among its neighbors. Notwithstanding high levels of economic interdependence, China and its neighbors have growing differences over political and strategic issues, including the maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas.

Robert Daly added that there is much frustration in China over China’s lack of discursive power in international relations and its inability to equal the US in presenting its agenda. In think tanks and elsewhere in China, there is a tendency to see the shadow of US power everywhere, while their counterparts in the US increasingly see the shadow of China.

Sheila Smith considered Japan’s challenges in handling geostrategic change in Asia, especially issues related to China’s rise. New issues have been added to older ones to yield a daunting list of problems in bilateral relations: the Japanese Premier’s visits to the Yasukuni shrine and the Second World War-rooted “history” questions more broadly; maritime and territorial disputes in the East China Sea, and the spike in tensions surrounding the 2010 ramming of a Japanese coast guard ship by a Chinese fishing vessel in waters near the Senkaku / Diaoyu islands and the stand-off at sea that followed the Japanese government’s 2012 nationalization of privately owned land in the islands; and concern in Japan about imports from China of unsafe food, which became a proxy for broader worries about economic dependence on, and vulnerability to, China.

Although the downward trend in relations between China and Japan has worsened in the last few years, the current round of difficulties began at least a decade ago. Japan’s traditional framework for handling relations has failed in the face of new
frictions with China and changing domestic politics. Consumer groups are increasingly worried about dangerous imported food. The previously pro-China business community has grown frustrated with experiences in, and rivalry from, China. Popular opinion more broadly has turned sour on China. These constituencies have joined with longer-standing nationalist animosity toward China.

Public doubts about the government’s capacity to conduct effective diplomacy have further opened the door to rising nationalism in Japan. But this nationalism differs from common perceptions. Anti-Chinese nationalism in Japan can be intense, but it is not generally widespread and is often focused on particular issues. Anti-Korean nationalism in Japan has surged over history issues but is tempered by generational shifts. Contemporary nationalism in Northeast Asia more generally is not about responding to Western imperialism, but rather is about reexamining the Post-Second World War settlement.

In this context, US policy faces challenges, opportunities and limits. The US must reassure its ally Japan, in part to reduce the risk of conflict between Japan and China in a period of troubled relations between the two. The US should continue to seek regional norms and practices on trade and maritime security (and other matters) that support the US’s rebalancing policy, take its allies’ interests into account, and positively engage China where possible. In addressing the “history questions” that have long roiled regional relations and that are transforming amid current revisiting of the postwar settlement, the US should seek, modestly, to facilitate tension-reducing discourse through non-governmental channels, including scholarship by historians in the region. Obama’s rebalancing policy sought to shift focus from the Middle East to Asia, in keeping with the US’s national interests. But that did not resolve tensions between “alliance-centric” and “China-centric” perspectives in the US’s Asia policy circles, and advancing US interests increasingly requires getting both types of policies right.