

Oliver-John Keetch

# The 'rebalance' to Asia; US (re)engagement with South East Asia

How have the US's security and economic relationships with South East Asia evolved since 2009, with a particular focus on the case studies of the Philippines and Indonesia, in response to the declared 'rebalance' to Asia?

## Topic and Research Question

My MA thesis examines how the US's security and economic relationships with South East Asia have evolved since 2009 in response to its declared 'rebalance' to Asia.

There has been much debate about the substance of the policy in practice; about how much of a strategic shift it really is, and how consequential it has been. It is this set of questions that form the basis of the thesis.

The thesis examines what the consequences of the rebalance are for the countries in the region it is aimed at, at the heart of the Asia-Pacific. The research question is: How have the US's security and economic relationships with South East Asia evolved since 2009, in response to the declared 'rebalance' to Asia?

The research is relevant to scholars of US foreign policy and its relationships with countries in the Asia-Pacific, as it seeks to help fill a tentatively identified research 'knowledge gap' regarding the practical outcomes and effects of the rebalance.

It is also relevant to policy makers and practitioners, in the US and elsewhere, that have a strong interest in learning from the experience of implementing strategy and policy shifts in the real world of politics, diplomacy, and economic and trading relations.

## State of the Art

There is a significant amount of literature that examines the foreign policy and international relations of the US as they relate to the Asia-Pacific. This places the rebalance in the context of the established theory and practice of US foreign policy, as a continuation of the 'Open Door' policy extant since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and as the latest example of the 'bilateralism' that the US has pursued since 1945.

Theories that seek to explain the US's bilateral approach to the region, characterised commonly as a 'hub and spokes' model, can be summarised in two broad schools of thought:

- **Realism:** Emphasising the realities of geography, security and military and economic power, particularly in the post-World War Two era. Potential partners in Asia could not offer any meaningful economic and/or military support to the US and they were in many cases content to trade some autonomy

in the political and security fields in exchange for access to the US's huge market.

- **Constructivism:** Emphasising the lack of shared historical and cultural ties between the US and countries in the Asia-Pacific (often contrasted with Europe). Conversely, many countries in the region having been recently liberated from colonial rule guarded their new-found independence jealously; rendering more substantive and integrated multilateral alliances unattractive.

The John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno edited *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* and the Saadia Pekkanen, John Ravenhill and Rosemary Foot edited *The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia* were important reference works for the thesis.

## Methodology and Approach

Based on the findings of the Literature Review, the Analytical Framework employed was designed to:

- Assess changes in **bilateral relationships**; the foundation of the US's engagement with and presence in the region.
- Analyse a range of **qualitative and quantitative sources and combining discourse and additional empirical analysis**; to provide a rounded analysis of any changes.
- Focus thematically on the two themes of **security and economics and trade**; the areas where substantive, structural changes are likely to have occurred rather than headline shifts in political or diplomatic relationships.

The discourse analysis entailed the creation of a database of all significant speech acts relating to the US-Philippines and US-Indonesia bilateral relationships based on US Government sources. This was then assessed systematically by theme and discourse content and structure.

The additional empirical analysis of security and economic relationships was based on US Government and independent sources and structured around examination of:

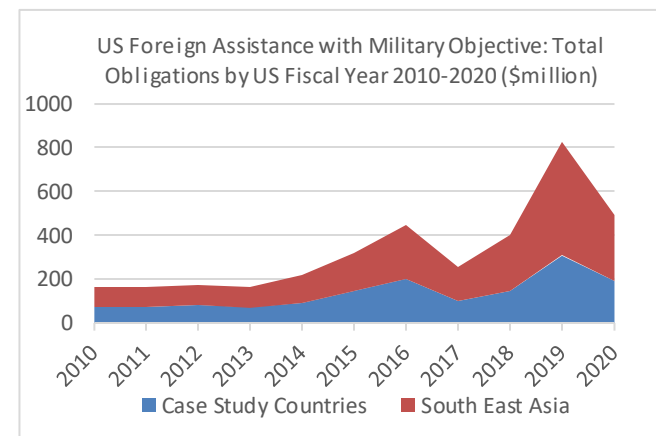
- Existence or creation of formal treaties or agreements
- Strengthening of existing treaties or agreements
- Changes in levels of foreign assistance
- Changes in levels of arms exports from the US
- Changes in the content of arms exports or from the US

- Changes in levels of trade, imports, exports, and investment

## Main Facts

Cross-cutting findings:

- Evolution of 'values' discourse to emphasise shared commitment to 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' as a public good, consistent across US Administrations
- Experimentation with multilateralism and 'mini-lateralism' but no break with bilateral approach - these initiatives have not entailed any *actual* security commitments on the part of the US or others
- Hardening of criticism of China, but maintenance of position that relationships are not directed against it
- 'Securitisation' of aid, particularly marked for the Philippines and the region (see graph) and increases in arms exports, but no marked shift in US aid overall



- Very limited progress in strengthening economic and trade relationships through Government-to-Government agreements

The Philippines:

- Significant increases in security cooperation, backed by revision of formal agreements
- Lack of even incremental progress in economic/trading relationship despite formal alliance

Indonesia:

- Initial caution over criticising China has evolved towards a more robust approach and marked increase in security cooperation with the US
- Overall declining trend in US aid and no progress in agreeing any economic or trade agreements.

## Results

US security and economic relationships have not changed as much as the nature of political rhetoric and commentary around the rebalance might have led a reasonable observer to expect.

The rebalance is primarily a reenergising of the existing 'hub and spoke' model of US-regional country relationships explained in Foreign Policy and International Relations theory. This means the focus remains on bilateral security alliances and largely bilateral trade and economic agreements. Many of the fundamental, structural imperatives remain the same.

There is evidence however of a long-term US strategy, within existing constructs, to incrementally increase cooperation, build capabilities, and strengthen longer term partnerships, primarily in the security field.

This thesis takes a declared US policy as its starting point. Taking the starting premises and views of countries in the Asia Pacific fully into account in further research could lead to a complementary and rounded understanding of the evolution of relationships.

## References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at:

<https://theses.univie.ac.at/detail/66546/>

## About the Author



I graduated from the University of Keele in the UK in 2000 with a BA (Hons) in International Relations. For the next 20 years I worked mainly for the UK's Department for International Development, with postings in Burma/Myanmar and India. Since June 2022 I have been working for the World Wide Fund for Nature, supporting project development and conservation delivery in Europe and North Africa.

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