

Strategy Research Project

Effective Strategic Communications in Support of the Asia-Pacific Rebalance

by

Colonel Paul T. Brooks
United States Army



United States Army War College
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Colonel Paul T. Brooks
United States Army

Professor John F. Troxell
Strategic Studies Institute
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

Abstract

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The Asia-Pacific region is the most dynamic and challenging in the world because of its unique blend of economic opportunities, diverse political systems, and broad security challenges. This region includes a set of responsibilities, threats and opportunities for the U.S. unlike any other. This paper describes the U.S. strategy for the Asia Pacific region and how the nation communicates this strategy. It concludes by analyzing how the regional actors are receiving the strategy and suggests possible lessons for the strategic planner. Direct communication activities appear to be resourced adequately; however, financial assistance and support programs still appear to reflect pre-rebalance priorities. Regional reactions to the rebalance suggest a number of points: first, the U.S. must avoid activities that force partners to choose between the U.S. and China; second, the U.S. is no longer the most important economy in the region; third, nations are evaluating the rebalance within the context of the U.S. fiscal situation; finally, China's "containment narrative" is reinforced by U.S. actions to deepen relations with treaty allies.

Effective Strategic Communications in Support of the Asia-Pacific Rebalance

President Obama described the Asia Pacific region in a 2011 speech to the Australian Parliament as the region that would “largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or cooperation, needless suffering or human progress.”¹ He went on to lay the foundations of what would come to be known as the U.S. Pacific rebalance, a shifting of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power that would refocus the government for the 21st Century. The Asia-Pacific region is critical to the U.S. because it encompasses a set of responsibilities, threats and opportunities unlike any other in the world.² However, going forward into this new century the U.S. is not the only important actor in this vast and complex region. China provides another option for nations seeking a strong military partner, and is an alluring draw for nations with developing economies.

It is in this environment that the U.S. is attempting to maintain its influence and access through the application of a whole of government strategy for engagement in the region. This paper will first describe the overarching U.S. strategy for the Asia Pacific region, and then examine the nation’s structure and actions to communicate this strategy to audiences in the region. It will conclude with an analysis of the reaction and perceptions of regional actors in an effort to identify and suggest ways to improve our strategic communications efforts.³

U.S. Rebalance Strategy

In its simplest form a strategy is a policy driven plan that aligns ends, ways, and means in the long term pursuit of national interests. “National strategy” refers to the U.S. whole of government plan that integrates and balances all elements of national power in pursuit of long term national interests.⁴ The U.S. national strategy for the Asia Pacific

region is not described in any one document or policy paper; however, it is possible to identify a set of common interests that serve to focus the whole of government approach. The four core national interests of security, prosperity, values, and international order are described in the 2010 National Security Strategy and provide a foundation for this regional strategy.⁵ In 2012, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon expanded on these four core interests when he described seven national interests that were at play in the region. In addition to regional security and economic engagement, Donilon noted that humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, stronger regional institutions, respect for the rule of law, the protection of human rights, and sustainable energy were all in the U.S national interest.⁶

U.S. national strategy for the Asia-Pacific region has two overarching objectives that provide focus and structure for the alignment of ways and means. The first of these is to maintain a stable and secure environment for U.S. treaty allies and regional partners. Supporting objectives such as the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes and the development of democracy are included within this goal. The second objective is to ensure open, transparent and fair commerce in the region writ large. This objective is supported by lesser goals such as maintaining access to the global commons and economic/energy growth.⁷

United States Asia-Pacific policy pursues these ends by organizing the specific application of national power within five lines of effort. First the U.S. is using military, diplomatic and economic power to strengthen and revitalize existing security focused treaty relationships in the region.⁸ Second, the U.S. is enhancing relationships with emerging powers in the region such as India and Singapore through military and

economic channels. The third line of effort is the engagement with and through regional institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to increase both regional stability and economic opportunity.⁹ This effort is critical to providing both large regional actors an incentive to adhere to international norms and rules as well as small nations a forum for their issues and concerns.¹⁰ The fourth line of effort seeks to increase trade and foreign investment in the region. NSA Donilon referred to this “advancing the region’s economic architecture.” Finally, the U.S. is focused on strengthening its relationship with China as a partner in the region with significant common interests despite occasional conflicting values.¹¹

Resourcing the Rebalance

The success or failure of the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy is largely dependent on the resources that the nation devotes to both communicating and executing the strategy. In executing the strategy, the nation has planned to devote significant diplomatic, military and economic resources to the region. U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) is increasing security cooperation activities with traditional allies and emerging powers. Rotational deployments of about a battalion of U.S. Marines to Australia began in 2012 and will build to a Marine Air-Ground Task Force strength in the future.¹² The Navy is in the process of reorganizing the fleet to devote 60% of naval assets to the region including the deployment of an additional submarine to those already in the region, and four Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) rotating from Singapore.¹³

The Department of Defense (DOD) portion of the 2015 Presidential Budget (PB) submission maintains support for the rebalance despite recent comments by senior officials to the contrary.¹⁴ The requested budget maintains the purchases of ten submarines by 2019 and sufficient training funding to continue programs such as the

deployment of Marines to Australia. However, the Navy's strategy also reduces the recommended purchase of LCSs from 52 to 32, with only 14 of these coming in the next five years, reinforcing doubts about the sustainability of rotations out of Singapore despite assurances to the contrary.¹⁵ This highlights regional concern that U.S. fiscal constraints may not support the rebalance that policy makers envision. Nations such as India and Japan have questioned the U.S. ability to maintain their commitments in Europe, the Middle East and now Asia in light of domestic economic and political challenges.¹⁶ Overall, DOD's budget request maintains support for the lead initiatives that have been repeatedly mentioned within the context of the rebalance but does not appear to add additional capability to the region. Significant effort is placed on military-to-military engagement and enhanced training and exercise program.¹⁷ Both are low cost, high payoff options, but do less to maintain public awareness of the U.S. military presence in the region.

A review of the Department of State (DOS) strategy and the department's 2015 PB submission indicates an inconsistent level of support for regional programs. The 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) expanded the role of the Undersecretary, established a Center for Counterterrorism Communications, increased the focus on engagement and education, and highlighted the importance of Public Diplomacy in the DOS regional bureaus.¹⁸ The 2015 PB request highlighted the importance of these programs by devoting \$1.1 billion to public diplomacy overall with \$387.9 million of this coming in the overseas operations of Diplomatic and Consular Programs. However, the request also decreased funding for the Broadcasting Board of

Governors by \$12.2 million, and reduces support for the Asia Foundation and East-West Center by \$5 million and 5.9 million respectively.¹⁹

In strategic communications actions often speak louder than words, for the DOS actions come in the form of aid and development projects and program. The 2015 budget submission includes \$99.2 million through the Economic Support Fund for the East Asia and Pacific region, this is more than the \$93.7 million that was requested in 2014; however, it is significantly lower than all others including the Near East (\$1.5 billion), Europe and Eurasia (\$316.1 million), and Sub-Saharan Africa (\$521.1 million).²⁰ The budget requests \$22 million for East Asia & Pacific assistance with narcotics control and improvements to law enforcement, an amount dwarfed by the \$98 million requested for the Near East or the \$326 million requested for the Western Hemisphere.²¹ While these numbers are significant it is important to note that much of State Department Public Diplomacy activities are designed to create opportunities for dialogue and build people to people bridges. Education and exchange programs, alumni engagement, and language training all combine to create increased opportunity for better understanding and increased channels for dialogue. Funding for these programs and manning for critical staff positions are on the increase in the East Asia Pacific region.²²

Organizing to Communicate

The National Framework for Strategic Communications describes how the U.S. Government organizes to synchronize, plan and execute strategic communications activities. The framework outlines the roles and responsibilities of three main organizations, the National Security Council (NSC), the DOS, and the DOD as well as a number of other supporting entities such as the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the Intelligence Community.²³

The NSC is the lead organization for interagency planning and synchronization on matters of national security. The NSC has three roles in the interagency system: supporting the President, the development of mid to long term national security strategy, and the communication of executive guidance to the interagency. This work depends on continuous contact with interagency action officers and subject matter experts, but also the authority to convene regional and functional experts from across the government in Interagency Policy Committees (IPC) and sub-IPCs.²⁴ The framework clearly assigns the NSC staff responsibility for strategic communications coordination overall and in matters directly related to the Asia-Pacific region. The Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications and the Senior Director for Global Engagement manage the activities of the NSC's Directorate for Global Engagement and the IPC on Strategic Communications in order to carry out these responsibilities.²⁵

U.S. Strategic Communications are planned and coordinated through both a formal and informal mechanisms by the NSC. Formally, the system of IPCs and sub-IPCs develops the issues and priorities for the interagency. The interagency in turn operationalizes these priorities based on their agency focus, objectives in support of the overall national strategy, and enduring commitments. Informally, issues, actions and communications are coordinated on a day-to-day basis both among the interagency representatives and between the departments and the NSC.²⁶

While coordination of the overall effort is the responsibility of the NSC staff, the DOS is the lead department tasked with the actual business of communicating American policy and intentions to audiences around the world. This is accomplished through the direct communication activities and programs that indirectly communicate

U.S. intentions and policy. Within the DOS, the office of the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (USS PD/PA) is responsible for directly communicating with foreign audiences.²⁷ The Undersecretary oversees the Bureau of Public Affairs for immediate communication and the bureaus of International Information Programs (IIP) and Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) for more long term efforts. The Bureau of Public Affairs and its extensive network of offices and media hubs explain U.S. policy and actions to foreign audiences throughout the world utilizing both traditional and social media channels.²⁸ The DOS will use the guidance from the NSC to develop its Department-wide Joint Strategic Plan, which in turn drives a Joint Regional Strategy that is then integrated and refined by embassy country teams into Integrated Country Strategies with a feedback loop to ensure bottom-up refinement of the overarching plan. Statements and public speeches are carefully coordinated with agencies such as the DOD, DOE or others and cleared through the NSC to ensure that the DOS response to a specific issue is synchronized across the interagency.²⁹ The bureaus of International Information Programs as well as Education and Cultural Affairs handle programs ranging from Fulbright Scholarships and a host of student exchange programs, to the more than 800 “American Spaces” in the world.³⁰

The DOD communicates to audiences through its PA activities and through the employment of a variety of information related capabilities under the rubric of Information Operations. Words and actions are synchronized to prevent incongruities between what civilian and military leaders say, and what the forces actually do on the ground.³¹ At the strategic level DOD PA activities are led by the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) while the oversight of Information Operations is

handled by the office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD(P)). Strategic Communications is handled by these offices jointly in accordance with the 2011 direction from the Secretary of Defense.³²

Perceptions of the Rebalance

Regional powers have given America's Asia-Pacific national strategy a mixed reception since it was first described by Secretary Clinton in 2011.³³ U.S. involvement and interest in the region are understood by some as existing along a spectrum ranging from "over militarization" on the one extreme to outright "neglect" on the other. Four key themes seem to be emerging in the region two years into the rebalance. First, nations don't want to be forced to choose between the U.S. and China. Second, while nations value the security that the U.S. provides, economic relationships and territorial issues with China are equally if not more important. Third, nations in the region are evaluating the U.S. strategy through the lens of constrained resources and continued demands from the Middle East and Europe. Finally, China understands U.S. strategy to be one of containment and an attempt to counter its growing influence in the region. This view is driving China to maintain its military modernization program while at the same time pursuing a deeper relationship with the United States.

Nations in the region have a complex set of national interests, as well as domestic and regional issues that they are dealing with. These interests and issues make them hesitant to choose between the U.S. and China. Both powers offer a different, and often overlapping, set of opportunities for security and economic development. Consider the reaction to the rebalance in Thailand, a U.S. treaty ally, and India, an emerging power with which the U.S. desires to build a stronger relationship. Thailand clearly values its mutual defense treaty with the U.S. as well as its economic

ties. In 2012 the country signed a joint statement reaffirming the tenants of the U.S. Thai defense treaty and today it continues its aggressive program of joint training including the annual Cobra Gold exercises.³⁴

However, the U.S. message that the rebalance is not anti-China does not seem to resonate with Thai decision makers who are hedging their bets by engaging with both powers. Since 2011, Thailand has signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement with China and conducted high level military to military engagements ensuring that it has a military relationship with both powers.³⁵ Thailand is a member of the ASEAN led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which is heavily supported by China.³⁶ Finally, it is important to note that Thailand's three largest trading partners in 2012 were Japan, China and the U.S., with Chinese markets accounting for 11.7% of Thai exports (approximately \$26.9 billion) and U.S. markets only 9.9% (approximately \$22.8 billion).³⁷ Thailand maintains a policy of avoiding any action that might upset China, while maintaining existing defense ties with the U.S. In 2012 the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was forced to cancel a request to use the Thai U-Tapao naval base for a series of weather tests after repeated delays in gaining approval. Thailand is also reluctant to fully embrace stronger economic ties with the U.S. as evidenced by its lack of interest in a bilateral free trade agreement and failure to pursue membership in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) after expressing interest in 2012.³⁸

India is embracing closer ties with the U.S. but just as clearly does not want to be forced to choose between the two powers. Unlike Thailand, India represents an emerging regional competitor and market for China, with a strong military and massive

labor pool of its own. India has adopted a strategy of “internal” and “external balancing” in an effort to shape its relationship with China. It has built up its own military capabilities through a gradually growing program of training and procurement with the U.S. to enhance its internal capability to support its interests in the region. However, India’s military capabilities are dwarfed by those of China. For this reason India pursues closer ties with the U.S. and other Asian nations to fill its gaps in its military capability.³⁹ India’s security strategy is focused on maintaining internal and regional security, fortifying its own lead role in the South Asia sub-region, and stabilizing the wider global security environment.⁴⁰ In order to do this the country must take into account the fact that it shares a border with China and that the expansion of Chinese influence in the sub-region represents a challenge to India’s own role.⁴¹ India cannot choose between the U.S. and China because it needs them both to achieve its security and economic goals. The U.S. offers the opportunity to increase India’s internal defense capacity and serve as an external ally should Indian relations with China turn hostile. India’s economic profile differs from that of Thailand in that the U.S. accounts for 12.8% (\$37.1 billion) of Indian exports while China only accounts for 5% (\$14.7 billion).⁴² China offers economic opportunities that India cannot ignore with its growing economy, but also a regional competitor that India cannot avoid.⁴³

Ultimately “all politics are local” and it is difficult to characterize even a regional response to U.S. strategy because each nation represents a different set of interests, challenges, and internal conditions. It is only through dialogue with those countries that the U.S. can understand the economic and security challenges they face.⁴⁴ As the nations in the region continue their recovery from the Asian Economic crisis and China

continues to grow as the key market for most of the countries in the region, there is recognition that, while the U.S. is still an important trade partner, it is no longer the most important one. This change in relative economic power affects close U.S. allies in the region such as Australia, as well as emerging powers such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

China represents a significantly larger export market for Australia, verified by public opinion polling in 2013. In estimating the relative values of economies to Australia, China continues to be rated as most important by 76% of those polled, with the U.S. at 16% and Japan at only 5%. However, this same poll noted that the overall relationship with the U.S. was more important to a slightly larger percentage of the population (48% to 37%) and that a large majority of the population (87%) believed good relations were possible with both nations. Further 90% of Australians surveyed supported government programs that helped business to compete in the regional market, while only 68% supported increased defense spending.⁴⁵ These numbers are significant because they clearly demonstrate that, even with a very close ally, the Chinese economy represents a key factor in any strategy. For this reason Australia has joined both the TPP negotiations and the RCEP, thus choosing to hedge their bets and maximize opportunity.⁴⁶ U.S. messaging and action on economic matters is very important in this environment; however, it is more important to avoid creating conditions that would harm economic relationships between our regional partners and China. The U.S. should avoid using coercive economic statecraft in response to crises in the region and instead focus on diplomatic resolutions to issues.

The U.S. rebalance strategy is receiving limited support in Indonesia at least partly because of the importance of the Chinese economy. Indonesia consistently

demonstrates a willingness to expand the country's military relationship with the U.S. but also a mistrust of U.S. intentions and concern over how a deeper relationship might affect its relationship with China.⁴⁷ China is the second largest importer of Indonesian goods behind Japan with about \$21.7 billion to Japan's \$30.1 billion, while the U.S. is fifth at \$14.9 billion. As a member of ASEAN, Indonesia participates in the RCEP; however, unlike a number of other ASEAN states, Indonesia has not elected to join the TPP negotiations.⁴⁸

Malaysia, a country which has adopted a collectivist approach to resolving territorial disputes with China, remains marginally engaged with the United States despite its potential for leadership in regional security and trade issues. Malaysian leaders are critical of the U.S. deployment of Marines to Australia while simultaneously willing to engage in bilateral exercises as well as a significantly high degree of military-to-military engagement and utilization of U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET) opportunities.⁴⁹ Malaysia participates in both the TPP and the RCEP despite having a record of relatively restrictive rules on foreign investment and government purchasing which it would be forced to reform if the TPP is signed.⁵⁰ The U.S. has slipped to 5th on the list of Malaysia's trading partners in 2012, with exports to the U.S. totaling only \$25.9 billion (approx. 8.7% of total exports) and imports \$12.8 billion (approx. 8.1% of total imports).⁵¹

Finally, nations in the region are evaluating U.S. strategy with a critical eye that is cognizant of the demands for resources and attention that the Middle East and even Europe represent. Japan and the Philippines have treaty relationships with the U.S. and host a significant number of American forces. These nations also have a complex

relationship with China largely due to ongoing territorial disputes with their more powerful neighbor to the west. For these reasons, these two nations have adopted what could be characterized as a hedging strategy in reaction to the U.S. rebalance.

Japan is a key nation for the U.S. for a number of reasons including the strong bonds of trade, common values and military ties. In 2013 the U.S. exported more than \$65 billion in goods to the island nation and imported more than \$138 billion. While this number is significant, in 2011 the U.S. ranked second behind China for both import and export destinations.⁵² Unlike some other nations in the region, the U.S. and Japan share common values including the respect for human rights, freedom of speech, and the importance of a democratically elected representative government. Finally, the U.S. relationship with Japan includes a set of treaty obligations, but it also provides critical access because of the nation's proximity to the Korean Peninsula, China and the shipping lanes.⁵³

The U.S. rebalance seems to have resonated with Japanese audiences; however, national interests and concern over the sustainability of the U.S. strategy have caused the Japan to hedge its bets by broadening engagement with both the U.S. and China while simultaneously strengthening and deepening its defense ties to the U.S. and growing its own extant defense capabilities.⁵⁴ Japanese public opinion supports the U.S. and its policies with more than 60% approval rating of President Obama and his international policies. Overall 70% of Japanese polled by the Pew Center had a favorable view of the U.S. and 38% felt that the U.S. considered their Japanese interests to some extent in its foreign policy.⁵⁵ The Japanese government has demonstrated that, despite U.S. strategic messaging, it is unwilling to rely too heavily on

U.S. protection going forward despite this high support for the U.S. in Japan. In 2013 Japan established its own National Security Council, refocused its forces on defending its territorial claims, and began increased amphibious training with U.S. Marines, a trend which has continued in 2014.⁵⁶

The Philippines' reaction to the U.S. rebalance has been slightly different than that of Japan despite similar core elements in its relationship with the United States. Where Japan has adopted a hedging strategy the Philippines seems to have doubled down on its relationship with the U.S. in order to counter China's growing regional influence and provide protection for Philippine territorial claims. The Philippine government is looking to Washington to fund programs to modernize its air and naval forces; however, these programs will not provide the necessary capabilities to forcibly defend their territorial claims nor are they sustainable without U.S. financial support.⁵⁷ In addition to requesting, and receiving additional U.S. military aid, the Philippines has opened additional ports and airfields for greater use by American forces to include the prepositioning of humanitarian assistance supplies and increased ship support operations.⁵⁸

The Philippine strategy creates an additional challenge for the U.S. because of its potential to increase tensions in the region. Chinese analysts point to the Philippine's increasingly assertive posture, and the implied support that the deeper relationship with the U.S. provides, as evidence that the U.S. is encouraging tensions in the region.⁵⁹ However, the U.S. has a history of effective alliance management which is only strengthened by deeper military-to-military ties as well as programs to build space for

engagement. Often public and private engagements with allies and partners enable U.S. diplomacy to reduce tensions and avoid situations from deteriorating into a crisis.⁶⁰

It is impossible to analyze the reaction to the U.S. rebalance without considering the perceptions of the major regional power in the Asia-Pacific. Despite U.S. messaging to the contrary, Chinese analysts and strategic thinkers tend to characterize the U.S. rebalance as a strategy to encircle and contain the fast developing nation. Further, that the rebalance often incites other regional actors to take a more aggressive stance in their relationships with China.⁶¹ However, it is important to distinguish between rhetoric and actions in assessing China's reaction to the rebalance. In 2013 China continued its program of military development and modernization and has begun taking a slightly more aggressive stance in its territorial disputes as exemplified by the declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.⁶² However, since 2012 China has participated in international counter-piracy operations off the coast of Africa and U.S. led regional joint military exercises, conducted a number of high level military-to-military engagements with the United States, and supported humanitarian assistance missions in the region.⁶³ Active engagement at the military and civilian senior level is essential to clarifying U.S. intentions and understanding Chinese actions in this context. The significant number of senior leader engagements in the region over the last two years is a trend that will continue in order to reduce the chances for misunderstanding in this complex region.⁶⁴

China's response has not been solely a defensive military one. Reflecting the idea that a mutually beneficial relationship can and should be grounded on "peaceful competition" China has continued to deepen its regional economic ties.⁶⁵ China's

support for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations sponsored RCEP, for example, has created a regionally focused compliment to the U.S. TPP.⁶⁶ Going forward strategists must accept that the two nations have some opposing interests in the region, but that these opposing interests cannot be allowed to escalate tensions.

Conclusions

The Asia-Pacific region is and will remain the U.S. priority in the 21st Century because of the tremendous risks and opportunities that the region presents. Security challenges to U.S. interests and treaty allies combine with the potential for regional economic growth and the opportunity it represents for U.S. business highlight the importance of the strategy and how it is communicated to the region. The U.S. strategy is organized around two overarching objectives: the maintenance of stability and security and the development of open and fair trade. These objectives are supported by five lines of effort (allies, emerging powers, regional institutions, trade and investment, and engaging China) that attempt to balance ways and means through a whole of government approach.

Strategic Communications is a national level process to align rhetoric with actions in pursuit of national policy. To this end there are three main actors within the U.S. government focused on developing, synchronizing and executing strategic communications: the NSC staff, the DOS and the DOD. Interagency planning and coordination is accomplished by the NSC system of IPCs for while the DOS and DOD focus on developing and coordinating communications within their authorities. Sufficient resources have been requested in 2015 for DOS and DOD direct communication efforts in support of the rebalance; however, this remains dependent on Congressional support for these programs through the budget process.

Actions often communicate more than words, for this reason it is important to understand how the U.S. has allocated resources. The resources allocated by the DOD have gained considerable attention and seem to be communicating the message of commitment to the region's security to U.S. allies and potential adversaries alike. The resources requested by the DOS to support the region through programs such as Economic Support Funds, counter narcotics and military training/financing are dwarfed by those requested for Europe and Eurasia, the Middle East and even Sub-Saharan Africa.

Regional perceptions of the rebalance vary but have coalesced around four main themes. First, it is clear that nations in the region do not want to be forced to choose between the U.S. and China. Nowhere is this fact more apparent than in the examples of Thailand and India, one a U.S. treaty ally and the other a key emerging power in the region. Second, while the U.S. represents an important security guarantor, it is no longer the most influential economic partner in the region. Nations as diverse as Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia have important economic ties to China, and this growing reality cannot be underestimated. Third, nations are evaluating the rebalance within the context of competing demands for U.S. resources and fiscal constraints. Two of our closest allies in the region, Japan and the Philippines, have adopted different strategies to address the uncertainty created by U.S. financial challenges and the federal budgeting process. Finally, China has established a containment narrative that is reinforced by high visibility U.S. military actions and the responses to current events by the U.S. and her allies. This does not prevent Chinese leaders from pursuing a dual track strategy of military modernization and political and economic engagement in

response to the rebalance, but challenges the inclusive tone that U.S. strategic communication activities are trying to convey.

The themes noted above suggest some possible steps that may improve regional actors' response to the U.S. rebalance. First and foremost, the U.S. must avoid actions and language that encourage the perception that engagement is a zero-sum game and supports the Chinese encirclement narrative. Second, the U.S. must maintain military commitments to the region and strategic leaders should address questions about the viability of this force in order to reassure both allies and adversaries. However, the U.S. should reduce the visibility of this presence to neutralize the Chinese encirclement narrative.⁶⁷ The realignment of military forces, and the effort by senior leaders to communicate U.S. commitment, has sent its desired message to potential adversaries in the region.

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