Introduction and overview

Americans are in the midst of debate about how to position the United States in the changing security and other dynamics in East Asia. The administration of President Barack Obama has undertaken various policy initiatives under the rubric of an American “pivot” to the broad Asia-Pacific region, including all of East Asia. The initiatives are multifaceted covering security, economic and political–diplomatic efforts. They were generally welcomed in the region though China objected strongly, especially to the security initiatives. European and Middle Eastern allies and associates also worried about their standing as the Obama government focused on the Asia-Pacific (Saunders 2013, 1–5; Sutter et al. 2013, 1–6).

Against this background, the pivot has been redefined beginning in the latter part of 2012 with less dramatic language as American rebalancing. Earlier emphasis on enhanced US security measures was played down in favour of emphasis on less sensitive economic and diplomatic initiatives. And the Obama government leaders made notable efforts to accompany greater American competition with China for influence in the East Asian region with US efforts to engage Chinese leaders in dialogues designed to build common ground and avoid confrontation. American leaders well understood that while America’s allies and many friends in the region favoured strong US regional engagement as a hedge against the possibly domineering behaviour of rising China, almost all governments in the region opposed US actions that would lead to conflict with China. The latter outcomes would upset regional stability, an essential prerequisite to effective national development, which represented the most important requirement and source
of political legitimacy of the vast majority of East Asian governments (Centre for Strategic and International Studies 2009, v–ix).

The Obama government initiatives came at a time of greater Chinese assertiveness vis-à-vis the United States and especially US allies Japan and the Philippines over China’s broad and disputed territorial claims along its rim in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. China’s overall power and influence have grown substantially, to the point where many in China and abroad believe a power shift from American leadership to Chinese leadership is under way in East Asia. Long the world’s fastest-growing major economy, China has become the world’s largest trader, largest manufacturer, largest holder of foreign exchange reserves and largest creditor nation; China is the second largest economy and the second largest destination of foreign investment. Advances in Chinese military power involve double-digit increases in annual defence budgets and marked improvements in China’s geographical reach, including in space and cyber-warfare. The strengthening of economic and military power underlines China’s greater prominence in international governance and leadership (Subramanian 2011, 1–10).

China says its foreign policy is consistent but experience shows repeated shifts and changes. Beijing’s emphasis since the turn of the century on peace, development and cooperation is welcomed but it has been accompanied in recent years by repeated use of coercion and intimidation in support of broad maritime claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Those neighbours and other concerned powers that accept Chinese claims are promised a peaceful relationship of “win–win” cooperation. Those that don’t, which include US allies, the Philippines and Japan, are subjected to threats and heavy coercion, short of direct use of military force. The US government endeavours to calm the situation while it engages in the broad-ranging improvement of American military, economic and political relationships throughout the East Asian region. The US goals are many but they promise greater American competition with China for regional influence on the one hand, while fostering greater constructive engagement with Chinese leaders on the other (Saunders 2013, 2–4; Sutter et al. 2013, 1–6). Debate remains evident among some specialists over consequences and sustainability of the Obama government’s rebalancing in the region (Ross 2012).

The current debate duly reflects perceived views in East Asia about US decline in influence relative to rising China. American policy makers take such views into account as they craft US policies and promote initiatives in the region. The recent Obama government initiatives