

DEBATE

John Andrews, Author, Journalist and Contributing Editor to *The Economist*

Thank you very much. I think that the pivot to Asia by the United States began under Obama. Yet, if you think about what has happened, what has kind of taken up an awful lot of American diplomatic and foreign policy time in the last decade or so, it has actually inevitably become the Middle East. It is extraordinary that in a sense the Middle East should not matter that much to America, but it always drags American policymakers back in. Sorry, that was a slightly jaundiced note. Are there any questions, please, from the audience?

Fareed Yasseen, Secretary General of the Iraq Pugwash Association, former Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to the United States

Hello. I am Fareed Yasseen. I used to be the Iraqi ambassador to the United States. I think at the World Policy Conference a few years ago, under Obama, the concept of the pivot to Asia was raised. My question then was, 'What about the pivot by Asia?' Now, eight years later, can anybody add something to that on the concept of the pivot by Asia? What are the new strategies of the leaders?

John Andrews

That is an interesting question. You mean, in what sense has Asia's overall foreign policy direction moved?

Fareed Yasseen

At the time, the person who answered the question was the head of Lafarge, a French company, and he said he saw it very visibly in the fact that many leaders of Chinese companies were much more aggressive in the rest of the world than they had been previously.

John Andrews

Interesting. Jean-Pierre, the pivot by Asia towards the Middle East, for example, towards Iraq, and also to Africa?

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Senior Researcher Emeritus at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), Professor Emeritus at Hong Kong Baptist University

Well, China has been very active in the Middle East, and in Africa as well. However, I would argue actually that the new priorities of Chinese diplomacy today are more the Middle East and Latin America than Africa. If you look at the amount of trade between China and Latin America, it is twice as much, actually, than between China and Africa. It is around nearly

USD 600 billion against USD 300 billion. Also, the Middle East is a growing partner of China, both Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, but also Iran and other countries in the Middle East. However, I would add to that that actually Asian countries compete for influence in other parts of the world. In other words, the so-called global South is also very fragmented. We had a session just before this one about IMEC, which underscores the fact that India is also very active in the Middle East, and India is also active in Africa to some extent. Therefore, we see major powers also competing, not to mention Japan and countries which have been in the global South for a much longer period of time. Therefore, yes, Asia is also reaching out to other parts of the world, but there are several actors doing that. That is part of the multi-polarization of the world, including of Asia.

John Andrews

Thank you. A quick question to Douglas. I think it was Jean-Pierre who mentioned the Philippines and the tensions there. Biden obviously said at least four times that America would defend Taiwan. Whether that is true under a Trump Administration is another matter. What about the Philippines? The Philippines is a treaty partner of the United States, and I am somewhat surprised that the Philippines is going for arbitration again, having won the first time. Why do they need to go a second time? However, nonetheless, Douglas, do you think the US would actually intervene on behalf of Manila?

Douglas Paal, Distinguished Fellow at the Asia Program Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Well, it matters what the topic or the cause of the conflict is. I think recently, a few months ago, we had a concern that Scarborough Shoal and related shoals would be a pretext for some kind of conflict between the Philippines and China that would draw the US in, and I can tell you that American military figures do not think that should be the beginning of a war between the United States and China. The Chinese also felt that that was not a place where we should test each other. The Philippines went through a period of sort of testing it, and they themselves, I think in consultation with the US, decided to take an initiative to lower the temperature around the shoals. I think the US and China both welcomed the Philippines' decision to seek some kind of conciliation on management of the existing dispute between China and the Philippines.

John Andrews

Do you think it is sort of a domestic politics thing in the Philippines as well because I mean Duterte obviously had this sort of pro-China policy when he first came to power? Then it seemed to change.

Douglas Paal

I always thought Duterte was more anti-American than he was pro-China. It is deep in his blood, and we had to deal with that. It was awkward. We did not deal with it very effectively in my view. We have had weak leadership in our embassy since the Bush administration, and we could do a better job with our Philippine friends than we have done in the past. However, give credit to the Biden Administration, they have really stepped up to manage affairs better bilaterally with the Philippines, and you are seeing that in the expansion of access to facilities

in the Philippines, with improved exercise conditions. I think the kind of diplomacy that is taking place is also keeping the Philippines strong relative to China, given the conditions the Philippines operates under, but not provocative.

John Andrews

Thank you. Yes, there is a question there from Michel Foucher.

Michel Foucher, Member of the Center for Higher European Studies (former ENA) and senior counsel on studies at MEDEF

Yes. Could you come back to the content, benefits and possible impact on the Korean Peninsula of the last treaty of the so-called global strategic partnership between Moscow and Pyongyang? I suppose it was a Russian initiative. Could you confirm that? Also, it is an opportunity for South Korea to observe North Korean soldiers, and some generals also, in the field. What is your assessment, because it is a real shock, a change for the peninsula?

Hur Kyung-Wook, Chairman of Seoul Financial Forum, Chairman of the Board of the Korea Center for International Finance, former Vice Minister for the Ministry of Strategy and Finance

I am not quite sure whether it is a Russian initiative or a North Korean initiative, but I guess they have a common interest. They both tried to go around all of these sanctions, particularly from North Korea's point of view. There are already sanctions imposed on that country. I mean, it is the same for Russia, and they both found a common interest in having this relationship. Having said that, what I am told by the experts is that this sort of mutual defense agreement still has many loopholes, so that despite it appearing to be a close alliance, particularly from the Russian point of view, they can always walk away from the deal. However, I have not seen the treaty itself word by word. It is definitely a severely destabilizing force. Many Koreans are shocked. It has the potential for some kind of conflict to easily flare up to the global scale, and that is really scary.

Apparently, North Korea is said to get some energy, as well as food, but more importantly, some technology to further develop their ICBM and missile capacities. That is a really worrisome element of this deal. That is the reason why the alliance between Korea, Japan and the US, despite all the changes of all of the people who signed this declaration, the Camp David Declaration, should continue to be cemented and strengthened in many ways, despite the change of the governments in all of those three countries, because the underlying strategic interest does not change, despite the change of the figures at the top.

John Andrews

Yes, good point. Douglas, you had one?

Douglas Paal

I was just going to say there has been a studied silence from China on this agreement between Russia and North Korea, and I think the reason underlying that, although you cannot ask the Chinese because they will not respond, appears to be that North Korea has bought

itself more maneuvering room. They have been hostage to whatever China would or would not do on their behalf, and they now have the ability to play Moscow against Beijing, which they did in the 1950s and 1960s, but have not been able to do since the collapse of the Soviet Union. I think this was an opportunity for North Korea to take advantage of Russia's need for weaponry and the like, and for soldiers, to get what they wanted, which was more maneuverability vis-à-vis China.

John Andrews

Yes, good point. China must be pretty disappointed by its friendship without limits with Russia. I mean, given that Russia has done so badly in real terms in Ukraine, and now is under pressure to leave Syria, it has not actually worked out very well for China from, I think, a selfish Chinese point of view.

Hur Kyung-Wook

I just want to say that recently China unilaterally lifted the short-term visa requirement for Korea, and many people interpret it as a way to show displeasure toward North Korea's close alliance with Russia.

John Andrews

Excellent. We have run over time and dinner is approaching. There is a last question, a brief question, if you would not mind, and brief responses.

Mikaa Blugeon-Mered, Special Advisor at Hy24, Adjunct lecturer on Hydrogen geopolitics at Sciences Po and Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P)

Okay, very brief. Thank you, gentlemen. Donald Trump has said that any person or company investing USD 1 billion or more in the US would receive fully expedited approvals and permits, including, but in no way limited to, all environmental approvals. At the same time, China is raising the bar on its environmental requirements for all industries, particularly energy and hard-to-abate industries. Do you think that Europeans developing CBAM and the likes are likelier to align with China and with Asia rather than the US, and that could provoke another type of pivot from an industrial point of view?

John Andrews

Good question. Who would like to answer that?

Douglas Paal

This is all very late-breaking news. We do not know the details. However, the United States Supreme Court decided last week that the massive amount of environmental reporting required for investments in the US was superfluous and should be avoided. Therefore, I think Trump is taking advantage of that to turn it into something he can trade with. However, in fact, it is a *fait accompli* done by the US courts.

John Andrews

Jean-Pierre?

Jean-Pierre Cabestan

Just two points on this issue, climate change and the COP negotiation. Of course, China is trying to reach out to European and other developed economies in order to create some kind of consensus on those issues. However, there are two obstacles to really move towards some kind of consensus between China and the EU on that. The first one has to do with climate finance. I think, as you may know, China considers itself to be a developing economy. As a result, its contribution to climate finance is only voluntary. It does not mean that China is not going to contribute anything, but it is really going to be on a bilateral basis, depending very much on China's own plans. The other issue is the carbon tax that the EU is going to introduce very soon, which has been criticized by China, and which is going to be a new element of friction between the EU and China, including on climate change. Therefore, I do not see a united front between China and the EU really taking shape. There is dialogue and there will continue to be dialogue.

John Andrews

Are the carbon border mechanisms due to come in next year or in 2026? I cannot remember.

Jean-Pierre Cabestan

I might be wrong, but I think it is 2025.

John Andrews

I think dinner is on your minds. Whether it is on the minds of the panel, I do not know, but I think they have done a terrific job, and they deserve a very good round of applause. Thank you very, very much.