

# The US Rebalancing to Asia and Transatlantic Public Opinion

Linda Basile and Pierangelo Isernia

The US policy of ‘rebalancing to Asia’ is likely to have major implications for transatlantic relations as well as for the role of rising powers, such as China. US public opinion and leaders are largely aware of this eastward shift in attention and this awareness can be considered, albeit in a somewhat indirect way, an indicator of support for the policy. On the other side of the Atlantic, however, Europeans seem to be less aware of the fact that the Far East is becoming the main chessboard of international relations in a multipolar global order. Nevertheless, when objectively informed about China, people on both sides of the Atlantic are less in favour of a shift in interests toward Asia and their negative perceptions of China are significantly correlated to a hesitancy in supporting a rebalancing policy. Moreover, if people perceive Beijing as a threat, especially an economic threat, they are even less likely to support a shift of interests to the Far East, the only exception being American elites, who tend to increase their support for the rebalancing strategy in the presence of a Chinese economic threat.

**Keywords:** pivot to Asia, rebalancing, China, transatlantic, public opinion

Over the past seventy years, American statecraft has experienced an ongoing shift eastwards. Europe was the main focus of US attention for more than fifty years, followed by the Middle East, as a consequence of 9/11. More recently, high-level US officials have announced that the ultimate landing place for American interests will be the Far East.<sup>1</sup> This move has been prompted by a unique intersection of threats and opportunities arising from countries in the Asia-Pacific – a corner of the world in which outstanding economic development and processes of staggering modernisation coexist with security threats. The People’s Republic of China is the epitome of all the contradictions in the region: impressive economic growth goes

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<sup>1</sup>Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century”; Logan, *China, America, and the Pivot to Asia*.

hand in hand with unfair trade practices; growing assertiveness in the South China Sea is paralleled by increasingly cooperative attitudes in international institutions.<sup>2</sup>

This increasing attention towards the East, however, has inevitably raised concerns about a reduction in US commitments elsewhere in the world, with Europe potentially first in line. If this is the case, such a re-orientation would call upon Europeans to rethink their geopolitical interests and decide whether they want to enhance transatlantic relations by boosting cooperation with the US in Asia or take a more independent approach. Looking towards Asia also implies coming to terms with the role of China as a global actor. The current public debate about rebalancing to Asia is very often influenced by perceptions of China.

Not surprisingly, the implications of the US' announcement of its 'pivot' or, as it has come to be known, 'rebalancing' to Asia have inevitably stirred a lively debate among decision-makers, scholars and commentators on both sides of the Atlantic and there is still no consensus about the nature, advantages and drawbacks of the policy.

Although foreign policy strategies are decided at the highest levels, public opinion is likely to affect and constrain such choices.<sup>3</sup> In this article, European and American public and elite views of this strategic move towards the Asia-Pacific region are explored for the first time in a systematic and comparative way. In particular, the article intends to address four main questions. First, whether American and European public opinion and elites are aware of a US strategic shift towards Asia. Secondly, how much support there is for such a strategic shift towards the Asia-Pacific in Europe and the US. Third, whether and what role China, as the main rising power in the region, plays in forming public attitudes towards the rebalancing to Asia. Last, whether the perception of China as a threat is likely to influence attitudes towards this strategy.

The article is structured as follows: the next section outlines the main points of debate surrounding the rebalancing strategy; it is followed by a brief review of the main literature dealing with public opinion towards Asia. The third section then addresses the aforementioned research questions by examining patterns of convergence and divergence between leaders and the general public, as well as between Europeans and Americans.

### **It takes two to tango ... or should we dance in three?**

Far from being a recent development, the US 'pivot to Asia' builds upon a foreign policy orientation that can be traced back to the policy of engagement with China under the Nixon administration.<sup>4</sup> In the 2000s, both Bill Clinton and

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<sup>2</sup>Cronin and Sullivan, "The Pivot and Underlying U.S. Interests".

<sup>3</sup>Page and Xie, *Living with the Dragon*, 2.

<sup>4</sup>Campbell and Andrews, *Explaining the US 'Pivot'*; Nathan, "Foreward".

George W. Bush showed clear signs of willingness to pursue greater US involvement in Asia.<sup>5</sup> Even in years in which US foreign policy priorities were mainly the ‘war on terror’ in the Middle East, it was clear to analysts and policymakers that the challenges posed by the Asia-Pacific region could not be overlooked.<sup>6</sup> It has been the Obama presidency, however, that has emphatically and clearly framed US strategic interests in the Far East as a key policy shift.<sup>7</sup> The early steps in this move were the US senior officials’ visit to the Asia-Pacific in 2009 and increased US involvement in territorial disputes in the China Sea.<sup>8</sup> In 2011, these steps translated into a more ambitious and deliberate policy strategy. As then Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote, “the Asia-Pacific has become a key driver of global politics”, and the US should take the lead in “harnessing Asia’s growth and dynamism”.<sup>9</sup> At a later stage, US policy officers replaced the term ‘pivot’ with ‘rebalancing’, as the latter better conveys the idea that the US is not suddenly shifting towards a neglected region but, rather, is just accommodating its interests in a region that has been underemphasized in the last years due to other pressing commitments.<sup>10</sup>

While the US’ shift in interests to the east is self-evident for decision-makers, it is still unclear whether the American public shares this same awareness. It is even less clear how Europeans see it. Some scholars have warned that rebalancing to Asia inevitably implies a ‘pivot away’ from the traditional fulcrum of American foreign policy, Europe.<sup>11</sup> But US officials have often reassured the transatlantic allies about the unquestioned preferential partnership with the EU. Even Secretary of State Clinton’s speech clearly defined the transatlantic partnership as a model for future US relations in the Asia Pacific:

By virtue of our unique geography, the United States is both an Atlantic and a Pacific power. We are proud of our European partnerships and all that they deliver. Our challenge now is to build a web of partnerships and institutions across the Pacific that is as durable and as consistent with American interests and values as the web we have built across the Atlantic.<sup>12</sup>

Leaving open the question whether or not US policy is shifting away from established priorities, any rebalancing strategy undoubtedly has major consequences for the future of US-EU relations. In years of financial constraints and shrinking resources, an increase in investments and military engagement in East Asia would

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<sup>5</sup>Ross, “The Problem with the ‘Pivot’”.

<sup>6</sup>Kugler and Tamen, “Regional Challenge”; De Santis, “The China Threat”.

<sup>7</sup>Le Gloanec and Muniz, *Redefining the Transatlantic Security Relationship*; Smith, “The ‘Pivot to Asia’”.

<sup>8</sup>Swaine, “Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses”.

<sup>9</sup>Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century”.

<sup>10</sup>Khalid, “US Strategy to Contain China”. To ensure consistency, the term rebalancing is used throughout the article.

<sup>11</sup>Smith, “The ‘Pivot to Asia’”.

<sup>12</sup>Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century”.

unavoidably imply a reduction in the US presence in Europe. As a side-effect of the increased military presence in other, more dangerous theatres, since 1989 the US government has reduced troops in Europe by 85 percent and shut down two-thirds of its military bases in Europe.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, the EU has to consider what to do next in light of these processes. So far, the timid attempts of the former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, to increase EU involvement in the Far East had to face the twofold challenge of the lack of a coherent foreign policy, both among EU members states and across different issues, and the increasing concerns at the European borders, such as the crises in Syria and Ukraine, that compelled her to keep the EU foreign policy agenda closer to home.<sup>14</sup> The current HR, Federica Mogherini, seems to be showing increasing concern for the Asia-Pacific region, as clearly emerges from her speeches, in which she asks for a joint transatlantic strategy towards Asia.<sup>15</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to explore whether the debate over a possible American rebalancing to Asia has raised concerns among the European public and if there is any understanding of a possible shift of European interests to Asia, alongside the US. A related point in this discussion is the role of China as one of the key drivers of the policy of rebalancing to Asia.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, China's size and rate of growth are incomparable to any other Asian country. The Obama administration, however, has claimed that the rebalancing is about the broader Asia-Pacific area and is not limited to China. An example of this far-reaching strategy is the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free-trade agreement between the US and all countries in the region but China. At the same time, it is undeniable that China's ascent to global power status has played a critical role in encouraging (or imposing) a shift eastwards. Moreover, US officials have often referred to China's challenge when framing the rationale and goals of the rebalancing.<sup>17</sup> For this purpose, it might be interesting to explore whether public opinion, when it looks at Eastern Asia, thinks in regional terms or, rather, prioritises China.

A further source of concern is whether the Asia rebalancing is bolstered by feeling of threats or by forward-looking attitudes towards Beijing. Two approaches,

<sup>13</sup>Ross, "The Problem with the 'Pivot'".

<sup>14</sup><http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/2014/07/11/study-distraction-europes-pivot-asia/>.

<sup>15</sup>The new H.R., Federica Mogherini, has recently argued for both more effective EU engagement in Asia, and a common transatlantic effort in Europe. Speech delivered at the launch of the Transatlantic Trends Survey, Washington, 10 September 2014, <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/brussels-launch-of-transatlantic-trends-2014-with-federica-mogherini/>.

<sup>16</sup>Smith, "The 'Pivot to Asia'"; Logan, "China, America, and the Pivot to Asia"; Cronin and Sullivan, "The Pivot and Underlying U.S. Interests"; Ross, "The Problem with the 'Pivot'"; Swaine, "Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses"; De Santis, "The China Threat".

<sup>17</sup>For instance, in 2012, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta, in a speech to Chinese troops in Beijing, claimed that: "our rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region is not an attempt to contain China. It is an attempt to engage China and expand its role in the Pacific." <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/09/19/panetta-says-new-asia-focus-not-aimed-to-contain-china/>.

drawing on the *liberal vs. neo-realist* schools, can be called upon to describe how policymakers and the public look at China.<sup>18</sup> The former, liberal, perspective sees China's impressive ascent and rapid economic development as an opportunity for engaging it in the world community.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Americans (and/or Europeans) should strive to integrate Beijing more systematically into the world economy and involve it in multilateral institutions and agreements. A wealthy and prosperous China would pursue a path towards democracy that could eventually end up making the PRC a status quo power, unlikely to continue a security competition with the US.

The realist perspective instead is afraid of China's economic growth and military assertiveness. Advocates of this school of thought, which relies on neo-realist premises, would like to thwart China's rise, although they are sceptical about the effectiveness of any policy of engagement.<sup>20</sup> Perceiving Beijing as more of a threat, especially a security threat, the US should avoid any engagement and "go to great lengths to contain China and ultimately weaken it to the point where it is no longer a threat to rule the roost in Asia".<sup>21</sup> Can these two different perspectives on China also be found among the general public? And, furthermore, how is being afraid or forward-looking about China likely to affect attitudes towards the rebalancing strategy?

### Public opinion and Asia

A limited, but growing, body of literature studies public perceptions toward Far East Asia and China in particular.<sup>22</sup> Most of the analyses so far, however, focus on American public opinion, both descriptively<sup>23</sup> and explanatorily,<sup>24</sup> while much less is known about what the Europeans think of China and the Asian region.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Logan, "China, America, and the Pivot to Asia". For a systematic review of different positions on China in the international system, see Friedberg, "The Future of US-China Relations".

<sup>19</sup>Ikenberry, "The Rise of China".

<sup>20</sup>Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise" and *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

<sup>21</sup>Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* and "The Gathering Storm", 390.

<sup>22</sup>For recent studies, see e.g. Kang and Chu, "China's Rise through World Public Opinion" and the articles in the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary China* on attitudes toward China; Fordham and Kleinberg, "International Trade and Relations with China"; and Page and Xie, *Living with the Dragon*.

<sup>23</sup>Feraru, "Public Opinion Polls on China"; Tien and Nathan, "American Ambivalence toward China"; Murray, "The Polls – Trends Déjà vu?".

<sup>24</sup>Hirshberg, "Consistency and Change"; Page and Xie, *Living with the Dragon*; Xie and Page, "What Affects China's National Image?"; Wang and Shoemaker, "What Shapes Opinions of China?".

<sup>25</sup>A few studies explore attitudes towards Asian countries and China with some degree of comparison (e.g. Erskine, "The Polls: Red China and the UN"; De Boer, "The Polls: Changing Attitudes and Policies"). Attitudes of European public opinion towards the Asia-Pacific region have been almost completely neglected so far. The only available work (Kim *et al.*, "Yin and Yank") explores the link between anti-Chinese attitudes and anti-Americanism among Europeans. Relatively more has been written on what the public in East Asia (China included) thinks of Europe (e.g. Chaban and Holland, *The European Union and Asia-Pacific*).

This article starts to fill this gap, looking at European and American public opinion toward China, for the first time in a systematic way, drawing upon a rich set of survey data collected by the Transatlantic Trends Survey (TTS) series.<sup>26</sup> When possible, this set of public opinion surveys is compared with a couple of recent cross-national elite surveys: namely, the Transatlantic Trends: Leaders (or Transatlantic Leadership Survey – TLS)<sup>27</sup> and the TRANSWORLD Elites Survey (TES),<sup>28</sup> the fieldwork for which was carried out, respectively, in 2010 and 2013. The analyses in this article use a subset of countries surveyed by TTS, including only those for which data at both the mass and elite level are available, namely US, France, Germany, Greece,<sup>29</sup> Italy, Poland and the UK.

Given our interest in the ‘US rebalance to the Asia–Pacific’, the article starts out by focusing on a question, fielded in TTS since 2002, as well as in TLS and TES, that asks “which country, in terms of national interests today, is more important between the transatlantic partner or countries of Asia, such as China, India and South Korea”. Those who lean towards Asian countries are considered as supportive of rebalancing. To assess what might explain a positive or negative orientation toward rebalancing, a number of factors are considered. In particular, we look at the perceived role of China, its rise to global power status, as well as the feelings of threat that these dynamics generate among the public and leaders.

### **Support for a ‘rebalancing to Asia’ over time and comparatively**

To study how people look at the possibility that their country might shift eastwards, the first question is which continent is more important for their country’s national interests, Asia or Europe (the US in Europe). In the US, TTS has asked this question, with some variations in wording, since 2002. As shown in Figure 1, American public support for a shift of interests to Asia moved up from 27 percent in 2002 to 33 percent in 2004. In 2011, when a ‘rebalancing’ policy

<sup>26</sup>Transatlantic Trends is a comprehensive annual survey of American and European public opinion, observing the patterns of transatlantic convergence or divergence within the general public. A project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS) and the Compagnia di San Paolo (Italy), TTS receives additional support from the Barrow Cadbury Trust (UK), Luso-American Foundation (Portugal), Fundación BBVA (Spain), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Sweden) and the Open Society Foundation (US) <http://trends.gmfus.org/transatlantic-trends/>. Sample size is usually around 1,000 respondents.

<sup>27</sup>Transatlantic Trends: Leaders (or Transatlantic Leadership Survey) is a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Compagnia di San Paolo, in collaboration with the University of Siena. <http://trends.gmfus.org/archives/transatlantic-trends-leaders/>.

<sup>28</sup>The TES – TRANSWORLD Elites Survey is part of a broader EU project, funded under the 7th Framework program, aimed at examining the state of transatlantic relations (<http://www.transworld-fp7.eu/?cat=86>). TES investigated the attitudes of elites in the US, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the UK. The elites were selected from three target groups: opinion leaders (media, academics, think tanks, trade unions); politicians (elected representatives and their chiefs of staff in the US, ministers of departments who were relevant to the survey, senior politicians on committees relevant to the survey, members of the European Parliament); and senior business decision-makers, with particular reference to small and medium enterprises (SME). In all countries, a sample of approximately 290 elites was interviewed.

<sup>29</sup>Greece is present only in the TRANSWORLD Elites survey and in TTS 2014.

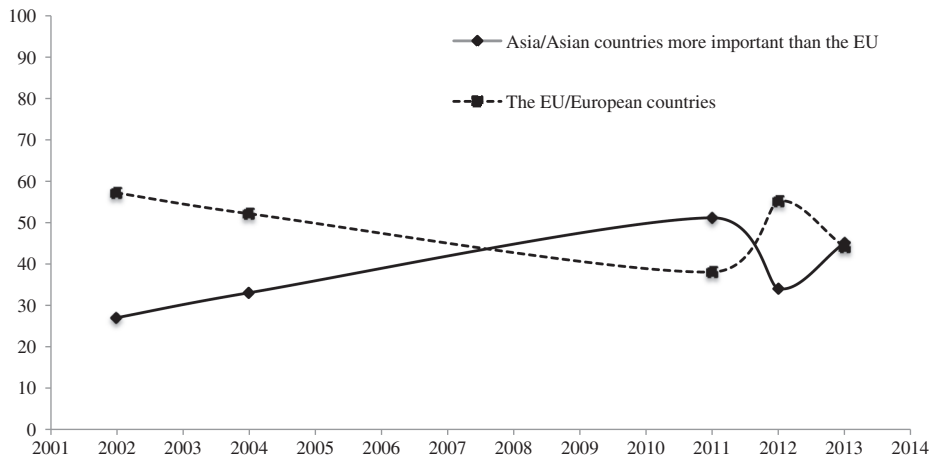


FIGURE 1. More important countries for US interests, 2002-13 (%).  
 Source: TTS 2002, 2004, 2011, 2012 and 2013. Data are weighted by socio-demographics.

was officially announced, a majority of Americans answered that Asia was more important than Europe (51 percent). The following year, this percentage went down to 34 percent – a shift of 17 percentage points from the previous year – to bounce back to 45 percent in 2013, with US attitudes now evenly split between those leaning toward Asia (45 percent) and those toward Europe (44 percent).

Tocci and Alcaro<sup>30</sup> suggest that the US return to Europe could be a consequence of the euro currency crisis, which was perceived in the US as a ‘transatlantic crisis’ and brought the attention of the American public back to Europe. Accordingly, the temporary slump in interest for Asia was mainly a consequence of the increased concern for Europe’s fate, rather than the realization of a decline in the relevance of Asia. On the whole, however, TTS survey data seem to confirm what the literature has amply shown in the US:<sup>31</sup> American public opinion is well aware of the importance of Asia for US national interests and a substantial minority, if not a plurality, is ready to support a rebalancing of US foreign policy over time.

Question in 2002: “In your view, which continent is more important to the US, Asia or Europe? (Answer options included “Both”); in 2004-13: “In terms of American vital interests today, which are more important to the United States: the countries of Europe, such as Britain, France and Germany, or the countries of Asia, such as China, Japan and South Korea?” (the “Both equally important” option was included in 2004 only); in 2013 this question was put to half the US sample; the remaining half had to choose between Europe and China.

<sup>30</sup>Tocci and Alcaro, *Three Scenarios for Transatlantic Relationship*.

<sup>31</sup>Page and Xie, *Living with the Dragon*.

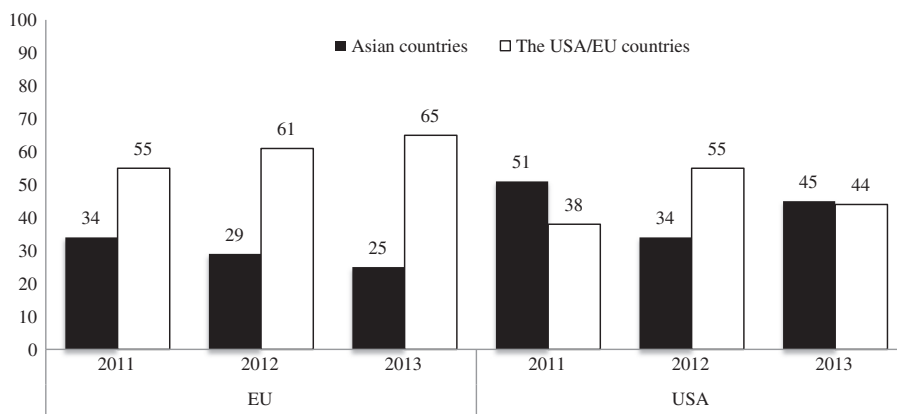


FIGURE 2. More important countries for national interests: EU vs. US, 2011-13 (%).

Source: TTS 2011-2013. Data are weighted by socio-demographics.

Q: "In terms of American vital interests today, which are more important to the United States: the countries of Europe, such as Britain, France and Germany, or the countries of Asia, such as China, Japan and South Korea?"

Starting in 2011, the same question has also been asked in Europe. As Figure 2 reports, unlike the Americans, European public opinion shows an unyielding emphasis on the US over Asian countries. Even more, the focus on the US has sharpened, rather than blurred, over time, with an increase of 10 percentage points between 2011 and 2013. Within Europe, Germany and UK have the highest percentages of those emphasising the US over Asia, ranging, in the time span considered, between 60 and 70 percent. In France, in 2011, half of those interviewed leaned toward Asia (50 percent) rather than the US (44 percent). In the following year, the trend reversed and, in 2013, 69 percent of French responded that the transatlantic partner was more important.

By comparing EU with US public opinion, it can be concluded that while the 'rebalance to Asia' has become an unavoidable fact for a substantial portion of Americans, Europeans are still used to considering the US as their main partner and reference point. Europe shows no clear sign of a shift eastwards. This suggests a potential *EU-US divide about the need to prioritise the Asia-Pacific region in foreign policy*. Whether this is because the EU institutions' increasing attention towards Asian countries has not yet had an impact on EU public opinion, or because European public opinion mirrors the current hesitation of the EU in pursuing a more convincing rebalancing strategy is still an open question.

A slightly different picture emerges when we move from the general public to the political, economic and opinion leaders. The TES survey, conducted at the end of 2013, compares general public opinion and political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. It finds that European and American leaders are much more in line with their respective public than with one another, with some remarkable exceptions.



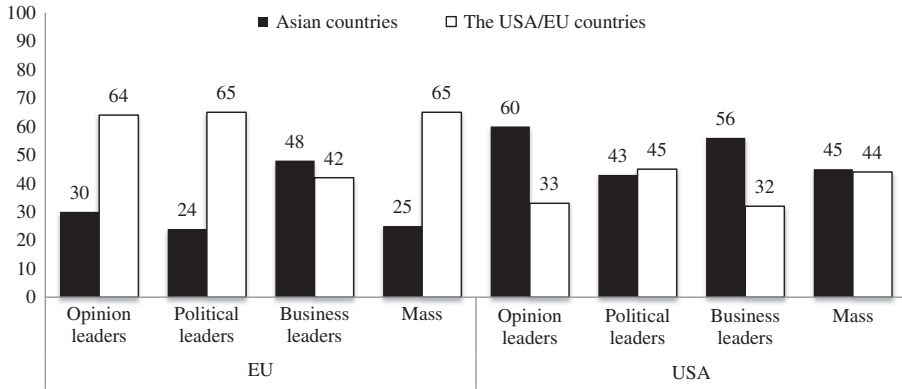


FIGURE 3. More important countries for national interests – Asia or the US/EU: elites vs. general public (%).

Source: TTS 2013, TES 2014. Mass data are weighted by socio-demographics.

Q: “In terms of American vital interests today, which are more important to the United States: the countries of Europe, such as Britain, France and Germany, or the countries of Asia, such as China, Japan and South Korea?”

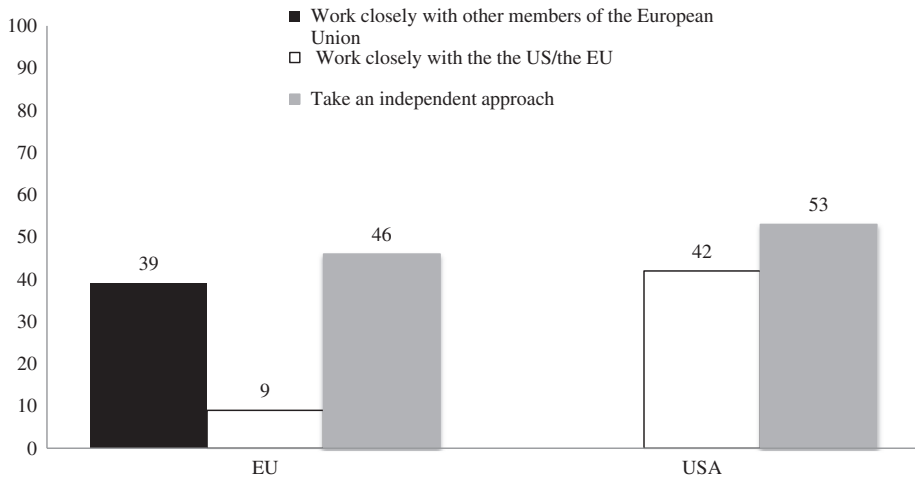


FIGURE 4. Managing relations with China: transatlantic cooperation vs. bilateral approach (%).

Source: TTS 2014. Data are weighted by socio-demographics.

Q: “In managing our relationship with China, should [COUNTRY] work closely with other members of the European Union (EU only), work closely with the United States/ the EU or take an independent approach?”

First, a majority of the European business community (48 percent) thinks that Asia is more important than the transatlantic ally, thus bringing them closer in their view to their counterparts in the US. Second, while the majority of US opinion leaders and businessmen think that Asia is more important than Europe for

American interests, American political leaders are divided, mirroring the same division found among the American public.

The potential US-EU divide over the rebalance to Asia is likely to have some implications for EU policy, and especially for the prospects of a transatlantic partnership in the Asia-Pacific. As H.R. Federica Mogherini recently warned, “we should together pivot to Asia, the US and the EU,”<sup>32</sup> thus implicitly acknowledging that the EU is lagging behind in a coherent and full-spectrum policy in the Pacific region that goes beyond the trade promotion agenda. It happens that in 2014, TTS asked the general public whether, in managing their country’s relationship with China, they would prefer working together with the US, with other members of the EU or, bilaterally, with China (Figure 4). In Europe, 39 percent preferred the EU option, while a plurality of 46 percent wanted their country to take a bilateral approach to China and only 9 percent favoured closer EU-US transatlantic cooperation. In the US, the majority (53 percent) preferred working with China bilaterally and another 42 percent supported a joint US-EU approach to China. These data suggest that H.R. Federica Mogherini might have a hard time translating her exhortation to ‘pivot together’ to Asia in the near future into practice.

### ***Is it Asia or China?***

As already argued, any debate over rebalancing to Asia is heavily influenced by China’s role both in the area and in the wider world system. Therefore, it is important to clarify whether and to what extent the aforementioned attitudes toward rebalancing toward Asia are driven by perceptions about China or rather about a broader Asia Pacific region. TTS allows us to explore this issue. In 2013, the survey embedded a split-half experiment in which each half of the sample received a slightly different version of the same question. A group, randomly chosen, was asked to choose between the US/European countries (mentioning Britain, France and Germany) and Asian countries (mentioning China, Japan and South Korea), while the other half was asked to choose clearly between the US/ European countries (once again, mentioning Britain, France and Germany) and China.

Table 1 shows that an explicit reference to China is likely to affect responses. In the US, when the question was to choose between Asia and the EU, 45 percent of the sample picked Asia. When instead China was set as an alternative to Europe, the percentage dropped to 37 percent (a statistically significant difference,  $\chi^2 = 8.568$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Similarly, while 20 percent of the Europeans consider Beijing more important than Washington, this percentage goes up 5 percentage points when asked to choose between Asian countries in general and the US (this difference is also statistically significant,  $\chi^2 = 34.725$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). When people are primed about China,

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<sup>32</sup>Excerpt from speech by H.R. Federica Mogherini at the German Marshall Fund in Brussels, 10 September 2014.

**Table 1. More important countries for national interests: China or Asian countries (%).**

	EU		USA	
	<i>Asia</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Asia</i>	<i>China</i>
The US/EU countries, such as Britain, France and Germany	65	73	44	53
China/Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea	25	20	45	37
DK/RA	11	10	9	7
Total (%)	100	100	100	100
<i>N</i>	(2522)	(2483)	(515)	(485)

EU:  $\chi^2 (2) = 34.725, p=0.000$ ; USA:  $\chi^2 (2) = 8.568, p=0.014$ .

Source: TTS 2013. Data are weighted by socio-demographics.

Q: "In terms of American vital interests today, which is more important to the United States: the countries of Europe, such as Britain, France and Germany, or the countries of Asia, such as China, Japan and South Korea?/ China?"

support for rebalancing is less likely to occur than when they are primed about Asia in general. A possible reason is that rebalancing is mostly seen as an economic issue whereas China is seen not only as an economic partner, but also as a potential military challenge.

This interpretation seems to be supported by other data bearing upon feelings about China and the desirability of a strong Chinese world leadership. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, those who have an unfavourable opinion of China, as well as those who say that a strong world leadership by China is undesirable, are more likely to emphasise the importance of the transatlantic partner over Asia, both in the US and in the EU.

US and European elites were not asked about their opinion on China or the desirability of strong Chinese leadership, but on their expectations regarding the influence of three Asian countries in 2020 (China, India and Japan) (Table 4). Both groups converge on the idea that, in the next six years, China will be very influential. The overwhelming majority of opinion makers (90 percent of American ones and 80 percent of European) say that Beijing will be very influential. Substantial majorities of business leaders, both in the US (57 percent) and the EU (65 percent), agree. On the contrary, no such influence is expected from India or Japan in the near future. By cross-tabulating the question on China's influence with the question on the country/region that is most important for national interests, it emerges that there is a relationship between China's perceived influence in the future and the leaders' propensity to consider the Asia-Pacific important, especially in the US and among business leaders.

Results from mass and elite data therefore suggest that attitudes towards Beijing affect support for the rebalance to Asia. In particular, negative feelings about China's role in a multipolar order are likely to increase the opposition and diffidence towards a broader strategy that shifts the attention increasingly eastwards.

**Table 2. Opinion on China and more important countries for national interests (%).**

	EU			USA		
	<i>Favourable</i>	<i>Unfavourable</i>	<i>DK/</i>	<i>Favourable</i>	<i>Unfavourable</i>	<i>DK/</i>
			<i>RA</i>			<i>RA</i>
The US/EU countries, such as Britain, France and Germany	62	74	60	39	55	37
China/Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea	32	20	16	53	37	24
DK/RA	6	7	24	7	7	39
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>N</i>	<i>1511</i>	<i>3060</i>	<i>434</i>	<i>299</i>	<i>601</i>	<i>100</i>

EU:  $\chi^2(4) = 265.125$ ,  $p=0.000$ ; USA:  $\chi^2(4) = 120.514$ ,  $p=0.000$ .

Source: TTS 2013. Data for the public are weighted.

Q: "Please tell me if you have a very favourable, somewhat favourable, somewhat unfavourable or very unfavourable opinion of [China]."

**Table 3. Opinion on Chinese leadership and more important countries for national interests (%).**

	EU			USA		
	<i>Desirable</i>	<i>Undesirable</i>	<i>Neither</i>	<i>Desirable</i>	<i>Undesirable</i>	<i>Neither</i>
			<i>or both</i>			<i>or both</i>
The US/EU countries, such as Britain, France and Germany	67	72	57	40	54	42
China/Asian countries such as China, Japan and S. Korea	30	21	17	52	40	30
DK/RA	3	7	26	7	6	28
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>N</i>	<i>718</i>	<i>1600</i>	<i>225</i>	<i>215</i>	<i>230</i>	<i>65</i>

EU:  $\chi^2(4) = 148.975$ ,  $p=0.000$ ; USA:  $\chi^2(4) = 33.645$ ,  $p=0.000$ .

Source: TTS 2013. Data are weighted by socio-demographics. Due to the small number of cases, those who answered "neither or both desirable" have been collapsed with those who do not answer.

Q: "How desirable is it that China exert strong leadership in world affairs? Very desirable, somewhat desirable, somewhat undesirable, or very undesirable?"

The role of China in affecting attitudes toward the 'rebalancing' can be further investigated by exploring the impact of the perceived threat posed by Beijing on this move eastwards. When public opinion and elites in Europe and the US are surveyed about their perception of the economic and military threat posed by Beijing, four things appear quite clearly (Figures 5 and 6).<sup>33</sup> First, over time, US

<sup>33</sup>Figures 5 and 6 show the results for 2013, only. Data for previous years, as reported in the article, are drawn from TTS 2010 and 2011.

**Table 4. Leaders' opinions on China's influence and more important countries for national interests (%).**

	Opinion leaders			Political leaders			Business leaders		
	Very influential	Influential	Not influential at all	Very influential	Influential	Not influential at all	Very influential	Influential	Not influential at all
EU									
The US/EU countries	64	64	—	65	65	—	41	46	48
Asian countries such as China	31	30	—	24	19	100	52	44	33
DK/RA	5	6	—	10	16	10	7	10	19
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	202	50	—	211	63	2	411	144	19
USA									
The US/EU countries	32	50	—	36	86	—	29	34	80
Asian countries such as China	63	25	—	48	14	—	65	52	20
DK/RA	5	25	—	15	—	—	6	14	—
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	38	4	—	33	7	—	114	65	5

Source: TRANSWORLD Elites Survey 2013.

Q: "How influential will each of the following countries and institutions be in 2020: very influential, influential or not influential at all? How about [China]?"

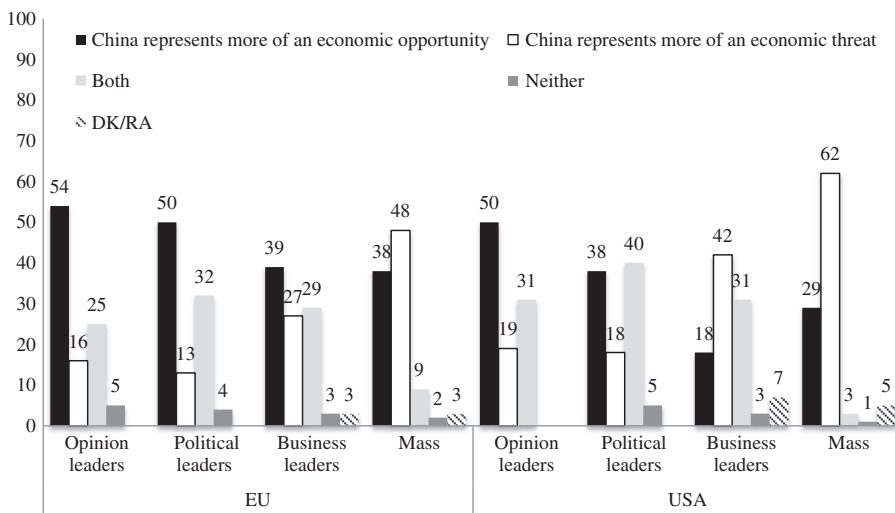


FIGURE 5. Perception of Chinese economic threat, masses vs. elites (%).  
 Sources: TTS 2013, TES 2013. Mass data are weighted by socio-demographics.  
 Q: “There are different views about the rise of China. In economic terms, do you see China as more of an opportunity for new markets and investment, or rather as a threat to our jobs and economic security? Which view is closer to your own?” [“Both” option was available in TTS only].

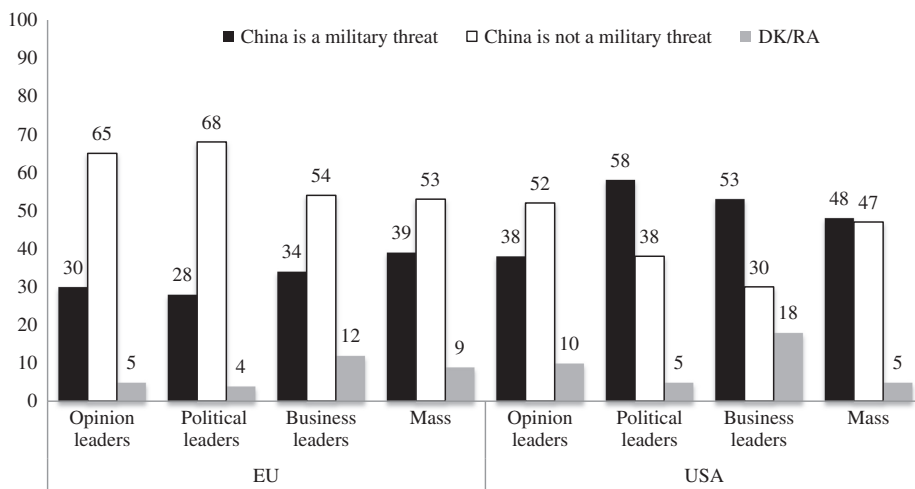


FIGURE 6. Perception of Chinese military threat, masses vs. elites (%).  
 Sources: TTS 2013, TES 2013. Mass data are weighted by socio-demographics.  
 Q: “There are different views about the military power of China. Some people see China as a military threat, while others do not. Which view is closer to your own?”

public and elites are in general more concerned about China than their European counterparts. Second, public opinion, on both sides of the Atlantic, is more likely to perceive an economic threat coming from China than a military one. In Europe,

**Table 5. Type of perceived Chinese threat and support for the rebalance to Asia – EU, masses vs. elites.**

<i>EU masses (weighted by socio-demographics - %)</i>					
	<i>Military threat only</i>	<i>Both military and economic threat</i>	<i>Neither military nor economic</i>	<i>Economic threat only</i>	<i>Other</i>
The US	69	80	61	73	59
China/Asian countries such as China, Japan and S. Korea	26	15	33	20	29
DK/RA	4	5	6	7	12
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100
<i>N</i>	591	1118	1284	1095	434
<i>EU elites (weighted by type of elite - %)</i>					
The US/EU countries, such as Britain, France and Germany	61	60	58	62	55
Asian countries such as China, Japan and S. Korea	32	31	37	34	35
DK/RA	7	8	6	4	10
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100
<i>N</i>	200	189	497	184	478

Masses:  $\chi^2(10) = 351.518, p=0.000$ ; Elites:  $\chi^2(10) = 77.460, p=0.000$ .

in 2010, 53 percent of the general public felt economically threatened; this dropped by 8 percentage points in 2011, and has remained at that level ever since. In the US, those who perceive an economic threat increased by 11 percentage points from 2010 to 2013. Third, although only a minority in both Europe and the US perceive China as a military threat (37 percent in Europe in 2010, which dropped in 2011, to increase again to 41 percent in 2012 and stayed at about that level, 39 percent, in 2013), the percentage of Americans who feel worried about the Chinese military threat is systematically higher than in Europe, approaching nearly half the sample. Last, both EU and US elites are much more worried about the military threat posed by Beijing than the economic one, with Washington, once again, more worried than Brussels.

Looking at how different elite groups view China as a threat in 2013, however, it emerges that US business leaders share with the public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic the feeling of a growing economic threat.

How are threat perceptions going to affect the rebalance to Asia? To answer this question, the responses to the two threat questions, economic and military, were aggregated into four groups. A first group was made up of those individuals who felt that China poses only a military, but not an economic threat. A second group included those who perceive both an economic and a military threat coming from

**Table 6. Type of perceived Chinese threat and support for the rebalance to Asia – US, masses vs. elites.**

<i>US masses (weighted by socio-demographics -%)</i>					
	<i>Military threat only</i>	<i>Both military and economic threat</i>	<i>Neither military nor economic</i>	<i>Economic threat only</i>	<i>Other</i>
EU countries, such as Britain, France and Germany	34	58	40	53	41
China/Asian countries such as China, Japan and S. Korea	58	35	53	37	54
DK/RA	8	7	6	10	5
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100
<i>N</i>	94	353	170	244	50
<i>US elites (weighted by type of elite - %)</i>					
EU countries, such as Britain, France and Germany	44	35	36	26	45
Asian countries such as China, Japan and S. Korea	47	58	49	74	49
DK/RA	9	6	15	-	6
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100
<i>N</i>	25	69	42	22	80

Masses:  $\chi^2(10) = 121.685$ ,  $p=0.000$ ; Elites:  $\chi^2(10) = 28.777$ ,  $p=0.001$ .

Beijing. In a third group, there were those who do not feel worried either economically or militarily by China. The fourth and last group included those who perceive China only as an economic threat, not a military one.<sup>34</sup>

As reported in Tables 5 and 6, one group of respondents among the general public, both in the EU and the US, leans toward the neo-realist school of thought: the more they feel threatened by Beijing, both militarily and economically, the more they prefer the transatlantic partner over Asia, thus encouraging policies to contain and thwart China. Similarly, the perception of China only as an economic threat is associated to scepticism towards a strategic move eastwards. In the US, however, the majority of the people who think that China is an economic opportunity, regardless of whether they consider it a military threat or not, tend to see Asia as more important for American interests than Europe. This is a typically 'liberal' stance, to the extent that people perceive the economic opportunities of China and, as a consequence, favour policies aimed at engaging China and its neighbours in a partnership, in order to take advantages of their rise.

As for the elites, in the EU, the perception of threat makes little difference to the prevailing emphasis on the transatlantic partnership. On the contrary, US elites

<sup>34</sup>Those who answered that China was "both economic opportunity and threat", as well as "Do not know" and "refused to answer", are included in the "Other" category.



are more likely to prefer Asia to Europe, but especially when they see China as an economic threat, alone or in combination with the military one. These data suggest that there is a group, which stands somewhere between neo-realists and liberals, that includes those who are worried about China economically but, at the same time, do not want to isolate China. Rather, they prefer to engage with Beijing in a liberal manner in order to integrate its threatening economic rise into the framework of multilateral institutions.

### **Concluding remarks**

The US 'rebalancing to Asia' is the consequence of Washington's gradual shift in attention towards the Asia-Pacific region. As the data reported and discussed in this article reveal, this strategy is likely to have major implications for transatlantic relations as well as for the role of rising powers, such as China, in a multipolar global order.

First, our findings show that American public opinion, as well as American leaders, are largely aware of this move towards the Far East and are increasingly likely to see that region as the ultimate landing place of US interests. This awareness can, albeit in a somewhat indirect way, be considered an indicator of support for the policy of 'rebalancing'. On the other side of the Atlantic, Europeans, with the exception of business leaders, do not share that view. European citizens seem to be less aware of the fact that the Far East is becoming the main theatre of international relations in a multipolar global order. Whether this is a legacy of the past, when the transatlantic was the key area of world political interest, a more sober assessment of where real European interests lie or, rather, a consequence of the uncertainties of the EU's position toward Asia (and China), is hard to say. Be that as it may, an open discussion of European interests in the Asia-Pacific region should become a priority for the EU, if it wants to start playing a leading role globally.

Second, as scholars and commentators have often argued, rebalancing to Asia basically means coming to terms with China's rise to the status of global power. Our analyses show that when people are impartially informed about China, they are less in favour of shifting interests to Asia and that their negative perceptions of China are significantly correlated to hesitation in supporting a rebalancing policy eastwards. Furthermore, when people perceive Beijing as a threat, especially an economic one, they are less likely to support a shift in interests to the Far East, again with the exception of American elites, who tend to increase their support for the rebalancing strategy in the presence of an economic threat from China.

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