

# The Obama Administration's Pacific Pivot Strategy: An Assessment

A Monograph

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## Abstract

The Obama Administration's Pacific Pivot Strategy: An Assessment, by COL Christopher H. Robertson, US Army, 48 pages.

The Obama Pacific Pivot strategy emerged out of two strands of thinking. First, the Bush administration, pre-occupied with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, neglected the Asia-Pacific region. Second, the rising economic and military power of the People's Republic of China (PRC) required greater attention from the United States. Studies drew parallels between the Europe of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Asia of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with the perception of the United States as a declining power struggling to accept its reduced stature with the rise of the PRC as a hegemonic challenger in the Asia-Pacific region. The potential for open conflict between the United States and the PRC existed as the Obama administration pursued its Pacific Pivot strategy. Whether this strategy achieved its intended objectives is crucial for the United States in evaluating national security in the post-Obama era.

This monograph examines the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot over the course of the President's two terms in office and answers the question: did the Obama administration's 2011 Pacific Pivot strategy achieve its intended objectives and make the US security position safer in the Asia-Pacific region. The Obama administration's over reliance on US military power undermined and may have ultimately negated the intended effects of the Pacific Pivot. This monograph examines the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot as a strategy, rather than merely a policy to answer the research question. To frame this inquiry a working definition of strategy will be developed and a historical review of the United States in the region conducted. US government and external metrics will be used as part of the assessment for analysis of the Pacific Pivot strategy's outcomes against its stated objectives.

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## Acronyms

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asia Nations
DoD	Department of Defense
DPRK	Democratic People’s Republic of Korea
EDCA	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement
NSS	National Security Strategy
PRC	People’s Republic of China
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RoC	Republic of China
RoK	Republic of Korea
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
USARPAC	United States Army Pacific
USPACOM	United States Pacific Command

## Introduction

Since taking office, I have worked to renew American leadership and pursue a new era of engagement with the world based on mutual interests and mutual respect.

—President Obama, speech at Suntory House, 2009

You can go to hell.

—President Duterte to President Obama, 2016

Beginning in the early days of the Obama administration the US government pursued and articulated a desire to change the course of US involvement in the Asia-Pacific region. By late 2011 this change became known as the *Pacific Pivot*. In its most basic form, the Pacific Pivot signaled an attempt by the Obama Administration to refocus American resources and attention from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. Why was this the case?

The Obama Pacific Pivot strategy emerged from two strands of thinking, the first being that the Bush administration, preoccupied with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, neglected the Asia-Pacific region and the second being that the rising economic and military power of the People's Republic of China (PRC) required management by the United States. Parallels between Europe of the early 20th century and Asia of the early 21st century was evident with the perception of the United States as a declining power struggling to accept its reduced stature with the rise of the PRC as a hegemonic challenger within the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>1</sup> How would the Obama administration resolve these two questions with this perception of US decline?

This monograph examines the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot over the course of the President's two terms in office and answers the question: did the Obama administration's 2011 Pacific Pivot strategy achieve its intended objectives and make the US security position safer in the

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<sup>1</sup> For different treatments of this argument see Munir Akram, "The Thucydides Trap," *Dawn* (July 24, 2016); Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War," *The Atlantic* (September 24, 2015); and Zhengyu Wu, "The Crowe Memorandum, the Rebalance to Asia, and Sino-US Relations," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 3 (February 2016), 389-416.

Asia-Pacific region. The Obama administration's over reliance on US military power undermined and may have ultimately negated the intended effects of the Pacific Pivot. This monograph examines the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot as a strategy, rather than merely a policy to answer the research question. To frame this inquiry a working definition of strategy will be developed and a historical review of the United States in the region conducted. US government and external metrics will be used as part of the assessment for analysis of the Pacific Pivot strategy's outcomes against its stated objectives.

Before addressing these questions, an a priori discussion must occur on what 'assessment' means in the case of analyzing strategy, in this case the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot. Department of Defense doctrine offers no manual for the strategy practitioner to start from when considering strategy. The Army War College Lykke model provides for a feedback loop to either adjust the strategy's objectives, the ends, or the strategy's resources, the means, or the strategy's employment concepts, the ways. Scant guidance exists to clarify or amplify this feedback loop. Clausewitz offered no defined method and merely mentioned the commander's intellect or genius. Freedman's seventeen-hundred-page tome *Strategy*, concluded with no suggestion on how this should occur.

Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, defines assessment through a deliberate comparison between the "forecasted outcomes to actual events to determine the overall effectiveness."<sup>2</sup> While Joint Publication 5-0 deals with operational planning of military campaigns and contingencies, the framework for 'assessment' provided establishes a sound start point for analysis of the Pacific Pivot strategy. The publication identifies two complementary pieces of the assessment puzzle, assessment should answer *are we doing things right* and *are we doing the right things*. The first question of assessment, doing things right, goes to the basic analysis in the

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<sup>2</sup> Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), III-44.



assessment process, did we complete the tasks required for attaining the stated objectives. Joint doctrine identifies this as a *measure of performance*. The second question of assessment, doing the right things, goes to the difficult analysis in the assessment, did we achieve the desired effect about the strategy's stated objectives. The foregoing discussion sets the foundation for the assessment to follow of the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot strategy and answers our first question posed as what to assess. The strategy assessment looks at the six lines of action identified by Secretary Clinton in her 2011 *Foreign Policy* article and determine whether the United States completed the actions to achieve these objectives. In addition, the assessment will look at the effect achieved in concert with the strategy's objectives.

Deciding upon the 'when' of the assessment poses two challenges, when to baseline the strategy's effects and how to adjust for different and incomplete data year sets for analysis. While the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot strategy took shape during President Obama's presidential candidacy, the first complete articulation of the strategy did not occur as previously noted, until November 2011. Which to choose? From an objective standpoint, it seems fair to use the earlier start point of 2009 since the administration began implementing portions of an as yet at the time consolidated strategy for dealing with the PRC and the broader Asia-Pacific region. The second challenge remains for discussion, what to do with the different and incomplete data year sets with which to analyze completion and derivation of the desired effects for the strategy's objectives. Since 2008 reflects the last full year before the beginning of the Obama administration's policies, that year will establish the baseline for metrics and assessment. Where a data set does not exist for 2008, the closest prior year will be used. At the time the research for this study concluded, not all reports for 2016 existed and therefore 2015 will serve as an end point for some analysis.

A final question to resolve, or at least start to address, before beginning an analysis of the Pacific Pivot strategy is the issue of efficacy and causality of the administration and broader United States government actions to achieve the intended objectives. This deals with the idea of *efficacy*,

do the actions possess the “ability to produce a desired or intended result.”<sup>3</sup> Causality deals with whether the actions produced the desired effect towards achievement of strategy objectives. Salmon discusses these concepts in *Causality and Explanation*. In his introduction, Salmon posed several issues with causality and understanding, particularly as it relates to human behavior. As he points out, “human behavior cannot be explained causally because it must be understood in terms of reasons, and reasons are not causes.”<sup>4</sup> A further complication in assessment of the Pacific Pivot strategy is the concept of INUS, “an acronym for Insufficient but Nonredundant (necessary) part of a condition that is Unnecessary but Sufficient.”<sup>5</sup> As it applies to assessment, together these issues raise concerns on (1) assessing whether the actions possessed the ability to produce the administration’s desired effect, (2) assessing whether the actions produced the desired effect, (3) assessing the reason attributed to human actions whether for or against achievement of a desired effect, and (4) assessing whether the actions were responsible in and of themselves or required some other action(s) to achieve the observed effect.

### America’s Pacific Pivot: Policy, Strategy, or Plan?

At first blush, this question of the Pacific Pivot as policy or strategy may seem trivial, however for the purposes of exploration and evaluation, this question requires an answer before moving forward. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines *policy* in the following ways:

Wise management  
A principle, plan, etc., as of a government and alternatively as  
A written insurance contract<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus*, 2nd ed., s.v. “efficacy.”

<sup>4</sup> Wesley K. Salmon, *Causality and Explanation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Salmon, *Causality and Explanation*, 22-23.

<sup>6</sup> *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “policy.”

The *wise management* and *principle* contained in these definitions establish the concept of *policy* as a framework for a government when faced with situations requiring a decision on how to act or respond. For instance, the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 restriction on military aid to countries whose elected governments are overthrown by a military coup falls into this category.<sup>7</sup> For those concerned with establishing an overarching philosophy for management of future actions, policy fits nicely to describe the Pacific Pivot.

Turning to strategy, *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines *strategy* in the following ways:

The science of planning and directing military operations  
Skill in managing or planning  
A stratagem, plan, etc.<sup>8</sup>

These definitions highlight *skill* or *ability* in planning future actions to ostensibly achieve some desired objective. *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines *plan* in the following ways:

A diagram showing the arrangement of a structure, pieces of ground, etc.  
A scheme for making, doing, or arranging something  
Any outline or sketch<sup>9</sup>

Each of these definitions are problematic for the purposes of this monograph since there is no clear agreement as to the act or conceptual framework for a strategy, the artifact. As evident above, *Webster's* conflates *policy*, *strategy*, and *plan* and refers to each in their discrete definitions. The Department of Defense offers an alternative for consideration.

The *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* defines *strategy* in the following manner:

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<sup>7</sup> Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as Amended, Public Law 87-195, US Statutes at Large 75 (1961).

<sup>8</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "strategy."

<sup>9</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "plan."

a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives<sup>10</sup>

This idea of strategy outlines three components necessary for translation from a theoretical concept to action. The first, the ideas for employment, established the ways, the methods, by which the elements of national power will be used. The second, the elements of national power, the means, represent the resources to be employed in differing manners. The third and final, the national objectives, serve as the guiding purposes or ends to which the resources and methods for application are directed. While this may appear self-evident, it underlines the notion of modern United States government and United States military strategy construction. It is not a merely semantic exercise.

While each term in some way suggest some aspect of the others, strategy rises to the correct interpretation for our inquiry with the Pacific Pivot. Strategy, as Lawrence Freedman suggested, implies something more than a plan's orderly "sequence of events that allows one to move with confidence" toward achieving one's goals.<sup>11</sup> Where two or more sides who "have different and possibly opposing interest and concerns" interact, strategy serves to adjust ends, ways, and means and align organizational elements in execution.<sup>12</sup> Without this framework, action devolves to tactics and a movement-to-contact mentality without concern for the larger end or goal in mind.

Clausewitz explored a similar understanding of strategy in his treatise *On War*.

Clausewitz' work was influenced by his experiences during the Napoleonic wars of Europe in the early nineteenth century and the positivist theories of the Enlightenment. With the resultant increase in the size of the armies made possible by the French Revolution's mobilization of the state and its seemingly unlimited resources, wars could now be waged on an increasingly larger

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<sup>10</sup> *DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 2017), s.v. "strategy."

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), xi.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

scale.<sup>13</sup> This apparent gain in military strength created a paradox, states could no longer conclude wars with a single clash of arms. Wars now required a “number of single acts,” these clashes of arms, to achieve the war’s objectives.<sup>14</sup> Clausewitz defined the “coordinating” of these acts “to further the object of the war” as strategy.<sup>15</sup> Strategy provided the means to mentally and physically align actions in space, time, and most importantly, purpose in achieving the war’s object, the policy exercised through means other than a continuation of politics and economics.

What then is the relevance for today’s understanding of the Pacific Pivot? First, it establishes the terms-of-reference for the examination and second it establishes the hierarchy between policy and strategy. For the purposes of this monograph, the Pacific Pivot is evaluated against the working definition of strategy inclusive of its ends, ways, and means construct. The Obama administration intended to shift American foreign policy from the Bush administration, the Pacific Pivot marked its strategy for implementation.<sup>16</sup> If this Pacific Pivot strategy represented a policy choice by the Obama administration among other potential policy options such as a continuation of focus on the Middle East, a Europe Pivot, America’s traditional area of focus during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or a Latin America Pivot, the focus of United States attention during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, what was the significance of the Asia-Pacific region that warranted United States attention to its national security situation?

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<sup>13</sup> Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (New York: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997), 31-33.

<sup>14</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 146.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Martin S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Lieberthal, and Michael O’Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama’s Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2012), 2.

## United States National Security Interests and the Asia-Pacific Region

At the beginning of the Obama administration, the 2006 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) remained in place as the guiding document for the executive branch and America's policies around the globe. The NSS clearly stated American interests and the challenges within the Asia-Pacific region for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Climate change, economic development, and security threats (mainly centered on the DPRK and global terrorism) were at the forefront of American concerns within the region. Beyond these explicit statements, five of the United States seven bi-lateral mutual defense treaties exist in the region: Japan, Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, and Australia/New Zealand. The NSS made a clear articulation that the "United States is a Pacific nation with extensive interests throughout" and that despite the US focus on two unfinished military and political engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan,

The region's stability and prosperity depend on our sustained engagement: maintaining robust partnerships supported by a forward defense posture supporting economic integration through expanded trade and investment and promoting democracy and human rights.<sup>17</sup>

The highlighted security tensions within the region related to the on-going tensions between two of the five declared nuclear powers in the region, India and Pakistan, the unresolved Korean peninsula conflict, and China. The NSS highlighted three "exacerbating concerns" for the United States regarding China:

continuing China's military expansion in a non-transparent way;

Expanding trade, but acting as if they can somehow "lock up" energy supplies around the world or seek to direct markets rather than opening them up- as if they can follow a mercantilism borrowed from a discarded era; and

Supporting resource- rich countries without regard to the misrule at home or misbehavior abroad of those regimes.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Office of the President, 2006), 40.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 41-42.

As almost afterthoughts, the NSS included the dispute between the PRC government and the Republic of China (RoC) government over the status of Taiwan and a perfunctory mention of human rights and democracy.<sup>19</sup> In sum, as articulated, the US interests and concerns in the region remained security of allies and partners, economic trade, and promotion of democratic ideals and human rights.

America's historical interest and interaction within the Asia-Pacific region is germane to developing an understanding of the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot before analyzing the administration's strategy. Identifying a start point for America's interest and national security concerns in the Asia-Pacific region presents a challenge since the problems of scale and scope develop, at what point does America end and the Asia-Pacific begin, where do they meet, and how are both intertwined?

As professor Paul Seabury pointed out in 1980, "America's Stake in the Pacific" manifests itself by geography, economics, and security concerns or more rightly, security guarantees.<sup>20</sup> Famously pointed out by a former vice presidential candidate and one-time governor, the United States can see Asia from its door step in Alaska. Although this view does not always possess the requisite understanding of Asia. American annexation of Hawaii and the Philippines at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century pushed American's territorial interests from the western edge of the North American continent westward across the central Pacific to the western edge of the Pacific Ocean.

Under the Tyler administration, the United States concluded the Treaty of Wanghia in 1845 with China prodded by "considerable China-trade interests" and "Protestant missionaries eager to

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<sup>19</sup> The author does not take a position on the US government's policy of referring to the government of the island of Taiwan as the 'Taiwan national authorities' nor the 'One-China Policy' as articulated in the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 and the three joint-communiques. The author however, does seek greater clarity when referring to 'Taiwan' as the physical landmass and the 'Republic of China' the political entity governing the island of Taiwan. Republic of China (RoC) will be used throughout this monograph to reflect the duly elected political entity that de-facto and de-jure governs the island of Taiwan.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Seabury, *America's Stake in the Pacific* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1981), 1-4.

work in China”.<sup>21</sup> A short decade later, the Pierce administration concluded the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854 with Japan that led to the expansion of American economic and humanitarian interests with the Japanese Empire.<sup>22</sup>

Over the next 125 years, the United States sent military forces to the Asia-Pacific region to protect its economic and expanded security interests during the Spanish-American War, Boxer Rebellion, Russian Revolution, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. During these interventions, the United States amassed a string of military bases stretching from the Indian Ocean around the Southeast Asian archipelagos through Japan to Alaska, ostensibly aimed to protect American investments and allies in the region, as well as to base operations aimed at curtailing Soviet hegemony in the region.

Occupying a central position between two bodies of water the United States must maintain a Janus outlook, one to the east and Europe and one to the west and the Asia-Pacific. Conventional wisdom of the past held that America’s great economic development and relative security rose from this unique central position in world geography protected by two vast oceans. The growing idea of globalism challenged this notion, no longer did these oceans separate and secure the United States, instead these oceans connected us to what lay beyond them and threatened to embroil us in conflicts and enrich the American economy through trade and markets for American industrial and agricultural products.<sup>23</sup>

The confusion over where American security and economic interests lay, as Seabury related, continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, where does the

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 160.

<sup>22</sup> Department of State, “The United States and the Opening to Japan, 1853,” *state.gov* (n.d.), accessed January 5, 2017, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/opening-to-japan>.

<sup>23</sup> White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Office of the President, 2006), 54 and White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: Office of the President, 2010), 2.



United States draw its strategic security boundaries and how should it balance this with its economic integration?<sup>24</sup> During the post-World War II era, how the United States made this determination or more correctly, where, the United States drew this perimeter created challenges for America.

Over the last seventy years, the United States deepened its security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific region. After World War II, the United States concluded a bi-lateral defense treaty with the government of Japan in 1952.<sup>25</sup> As much a defense treaty as an arms or defense limitation treaty, this agreement obviated the need for Japan to provide for its own defense unilaterally. Immediately after World War II, the United States saw no need for anything further from Japan, China was militarily weak and embroiled in a civil war and Russia possessed no Pacific naval fleet with which to either challenge the United States or threaten regional stability. General MacArthur at the time proclaimed, the Asia-Pacific region had taken on “the friendly aspect of a peaceful lake.”<sup>26</sup>

The Republic of Korea and the United States concluded a bi-lateral mutual defense treaty in October 1953 following the armistice with the North Korean government.<sup>27</sup> Outside of the on-going United Nation’s construct, the United States ensures the security and sovereignty of South Korea. In 1951, the government of the Philippines and the United States completed a bilateral mutual defense treaty.<sup>28</sup> Specific language covers an armed attack in the *Pacific Area*, a vague description but generally considered to mean the territorial environs of the Philippine Archipelago. Merely a day later, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand concluded a mutual defense treaty on 1

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<sup>24</sup> Seabury, *America’s Stake in the Pacific*, 30-31.

<sup>25</sup> Department of State, “U.S. Collective Defense Arrangements,” *state.gov* (n.d.), accessed October 11, 2016, <https://www.state.gov/s/l/treaty/collectivedefense>.

<sup>26</sup> Francis P. Sempa, “Douglas MacArthur and the Pivot to Asia,” *The Diplomat* (February 22, 2015), accessed September 12, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/douglas-macarthur-and-the-pivot-to-asia>.

<sup>27</sup> Department of State, “U.S. Collective Defense Arrangements,” *state.gov* (n.d.), accessed October 11, 2016, <https://www.state.gov/s/l/treaty/collectivedefense>.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

September 1951.<sup>29</sup> This treaty included the vague language like the bi-lateral treaty with the Philippines and recognized *an armed attack in the Pacific Area on any of the Parties* required all parties to come to the attacked nation's aid. In 1954, the United States expanded its security guarantees in the Asia-Pacific region with a multi-party defense treaty with Australia, France, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand, and the United Kingdom.<sup>30</sup> Under the provisions of this agreement, *an armed attack in the treaty area against any of the Parties* required all parties to come to the aid of the victim. These treaties provided the United States the means with which to deter the USSR and deny it access to overseas locations necessary to wage war in the Asia-Pacific region. What could not be foreseen at the time was the linkage of US security guarantees to post-Cold War issues: armed conflict arising from violations of economic sovereignty to territorial expansionism.

The end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was recognized as a watershed event in geopolitical terms, mostly in Europe. The average American and politician saw the decline and fall of the Soviet Union as largely an issue with European implications: no longer an Iron Curtain, NATO and Warsaw Pact forces no longer faced off, and nuclear tensions reduced. But what of the impact on the Asia-Pacific region? With the disappearance of Soviet military forces in the Pacific and concomitant reduction in US forces in the Pacific, what would the future hold? Did Fukuyama's declaration of "the end of history" hold in the Asia-Pacific as well?<sup>31</sup> Early on there appeared to be a reduction in tensions and security concerns in the region except for the North Korean regime's pursuit of nuclear weapons and proliferation of advanced military technology to nations such as Pakistan and Iran, irritants for US security concerns in the region, but manageable irritants especially when taken in consideration of a new-found cooperation with the PRC. This would not last.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer, 1989): 3, accessed January 15, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, China began rhetorical and physical confrontations with US interests in the Asia-Pacific region. PRC military officers and academics published articles and documents that claimed the United States as a threat to its interests.<sup>32</sup> Human rights and trade linkage was attached as a new form of imperial colonialism by the United States to dominate the PRC and the rest of Asia. PRC sales of military equipment around the region and across the globe increased and challenged US concerns over proliferation, particularly regarding advanced missile technologies. In the most direct challenge, the PRC conducted missile demonstrations during 1995 and 1996 in the Taiwan Straits to influence Taiwan presidential elections and resulted in the US commitment of two aircraft carriers in a show-of-force to reinforce the US guarantee of Taiwan's nominal independence under the RoC government.

Despite the growing potential and existential security concerns with the PRC following the collapse of the Soviet Union, peace and economic integration and development continued between the United States and the PRC. Between 1985 and 2006, total trade between the two grew by 542% from \$190 billion annually to nearly \$1 trillion annually, inclusive of exports and imports. While this raw figure hid the trade imbalance with the China measured at \$234 billion for 2006, the United States and PRC were not allowing the frictions generated by the United States Taiwan Relations Act and oft repeated concerns about human rights to mar the bilateral trade between the two economic powerhouses of the Asia-Pacific region. United States and PRC interactions and cooperation within the region and globally worked to deal with the rise of transnational terrorism and threats to global trade routes, in the Straits of Malacca, around the Arabian Peninsula (Red Sea, Somalia, and Indian Ocean), and the approaches to the Middle East at the western Indian Ocean.

The problem of North Korea's regime and nuclear weapons program plagued the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia despite the relative peace elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region

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<sup>32</sup> Qiao Lang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999).

during the 1990s. With few levers to manipulate, the United States looked to the PRC for aid. Under the Clinton administration, the United States negotiated a deal which halted further development of the DPRK's nuclear ambitions. As part of the negotiations, the PRC secured periodic inspection of the DPRK's nuclear facilities by United Nations workers, lowered the anti-RoK rhetoric by the DPRK, and appeared to reduce the tensions within the northeast Asia region. The United States looked to have a willing partner in the PRC in the region to help keep the peace, much as the United States and Russia worked to overcome past antagonism in Europe.

The India-Pakistan tensions and their nuclear arsenals found the United States faced with another concern in the region. US support to either nation, whether advanced weaponry to India (F16s) or US support and aid to Pakistan in the US-led Afghanistan War, raised tensions on the other side of the diplomatic ledger. The PRC's unresolved border claims with India and Pakistan further added to US security concerns and involvement in the Asia-Pacific region. US security concerns ranged across a broad stretch of the Asia-Pacific region by the time the US electorate voted to elect a one-term senator to the White House in the fall of 2008.

During the 2008 US presidential election, the Obama campaign's foreign policy team articulated the need for a break from not only the Bush administration's Asia-Pacific policy but the historical trend of US presidential administrations with respect to relations with the PRC. Obama's foreign policy team saw the Bush administration's policy with the Asia-Pacific region as sound, however, the region received too little attention and associated regional policy required a non-partisan, bi-partisan approach.<sup>33</sup> Obama's foreign policy advisors sensed a "general perception in Asia...that the United States was distracted by the war in Iraq and Global War on Terrorism" to the exclusion of Asian concerns and economic issues.<sup>34</sup> On the transition issue, the foreign policy

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<sup>33</sup> Jeffery A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution: 2012), 5-8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 1-2.

advisors saw previous administrations (Reagan, Clinton, Bush) handovers damage the US-PRC relationship with demands that generated mistrust on both sides, walk these demands back, and then worked to rebuild a more congenial relationship.<sup>35</sup> The Obama administration wanted to avoid this trap, a central reason was the need to leverage the PRC's assistance in ameliorating the global financial meltdown of 2008.

## Bending the Policy Arc

In 2005, Barack Obama articulated a foreign policy view that questioned America's foreign policy under the Bush administration. While he acknowledged the need to ensure American's security in a world vastly different from the Cold War, Obama lamented that, "fifteen years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States still lacks a coherent national security policy. Instead of guiding principles, we have what appear to be ad hoc decisions."<sup>36</sup> Obama refuted the idea of isolationism and saw challenges to global order and security "comes primarily from those parts of the world on the margins of the global economy."<sup>37</sup> According to Obama's interpretation of world events, expansionist powers capable of dictating the global order no longer existed. Obama stated,

our most complex military challenge will not be staying ahead of China (just as our biggest challenge with China may well be economic rather than military). More likely, that challenge will involve putting boots on the ground in the ungoverned or hostile regions where terrorists thrive.<sup>38</sup>

As the Obama administration assumed the governmental reins of power in January 2009, the Obama foreign policy priorities took shape: spur global economic recovery; halt/curtail Iran and the DPRK's nuclear weapons programs; end genocide in Darfur; increase US pressure on al Qaeda

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 18-20.

<sup>36</sup> Barack H. Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 302.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 304-305.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 307.

in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and tackle climate change. The administration's view saw China's role as important in all these issues.<sup>39</sup> When President Obama entered the Oval Office, the US trade deficit with the PRC stood at \$250 billion annually and the PRC owned \$1 trillion of United States government debt, the second largest single foreign holder.<sup>40</sup> The Obama administration sought the PRC's help to spur the global economic recovery as it possessed no other option, the PRC had massive currency reserves to spur growth, the United States and the rest of the western industrial nations did not.

From a global view, the Obama administration saw the US focus on the Middle East and Europe required a reorientation. The PRC's rapid economic growth and opaque defense spending needed the US attention. The continual focus on the Middle East and Europe had kept the United States from the proper level of engagement with its allies and partners in the region.

What engagement had occurred under the Bush administration centered on support to the US-led Global War on Terrorism.<sup>41</sup> The Obama team viewed US participation in regional institutions, ASEAN/ARF, ADMMT, etc., under the Bush administration as perfunctory and single-issue: terrorism. Secretary Robert M. Gates disputed this claim to a degree. Gates travelled to the Asia-Pacific region three times as the Bush administration's Secretary of Defense and stated he:

made three trips to Asia during my first fourteen months as secretary. The first, in early June 2007, was to Singapore for the 'Shangri-La' Asia Security Summit, named for the hotel where it was held every year. My maiden speech in Asia focused on urging the Chinese to explain the purpose behind their major military buildup, but I also tried to turn down the temperature in the relationship with China by calling for a bilateral dialogue on a range of issues.<sup>42</sup>

Following the Obama administration's view, Secretary of State Clinton proposed a radical shift to highlight the new administration's break from the past and Bush administration policies. Secretary

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<sup>39</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 5-8.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 195.

Clinton advocated that her first official trip abroad be to the Pacific, visiting Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and China. This visit served as a signal to the region and US allies, partners, and enemies alike, that the United States saw the region as important both now and into the future.

The Obama administration's approach to China and Secretary Clinton's trip in 2009 initially focused on the differentiation between it and previous administrations. Obama's efforts would attempt three things:

- (1) articulate the general themes of Obama's American foreign policy,
- (2) build personal ties between key officials,
- (3) develop a transactional record on substantive issues.<sup>43</sup>

The issues to be covered included three main areas:

- (1) recovery from the financial crisis and restructuring of the global architecture,
- (2) addressing climate change,
- (3) constraining nuclear proliferation.<sup>44</sup>

From the outset, the Obama administration's approach differed to an almost negligible degree from previous US presidential administrations, economic and security concerns appeared at the top of the dialogue with the PRC.

In the November 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine, Secretary Clinton outlined the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot.<sup>45</sup> As Clinton articulated the administration's view the time had come "for the United States to make similar investments as a Pacific power" as was done by the United States with Europe after the end of World War II.<sup>46</sup> These investments would include

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<sup>43</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, 11.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>45</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "America's Pacific Century: The Future of Geopolitics Will Be Decided in Asia, Not in Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States Should Be Right at the Center of the Action," *Foreign Policy* 189 (November 2011): 57, accessed September 8, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41353253>.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

diplomatic, economic, and strategic efforts in the Asia-Pacific region. The Pacific Pivot encompassed six key lines of action:

- (1) strengthening bilateral security alliances
- (2) deepening working relationships with emerging powers, including China
- (3) engaging with regional multilateral institutions
- (4) expanding trade and investment
- (5) forging a broad-based military presence
- (6) advancing democracy and human rights.<sup>47</sup>

While the article attempted a broad review of US interests across the Asia-Pacific region, China occupied the focus, whether for its opaque military build-up, currency manipulation, or human rights abuses. Secretary Clinton's article presented the Obama administration's strategy for the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>48</sup>

The exact origins of the administration's Pacific Pivot remain muddled. Secretary Gates mentioned China cursorily in his memoirs but never in the context of a coherent national strategy. Secretary Panetta's memoirs from his time as Central Intelligence Agency Director and successor to Gates as Secretary of Defense also made scant mention of strategy input on China except a mention to,

“rebalance” our forces toward Asia in order to be able to project force quickly and powerfully from the Middle East to the Pacific, a recognition that future conflicts were more likely to spring from those parts of the world than from Europe, where NATO provided an umbrella of security for our interests

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<sup>47</sup> Clinton, “America's Pacific Century,” 58.

<sup>48</sup> Kurt M. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016), 135.



as part of new defense strategic guidance.<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey Bader, National Security Staff Senior Director for East Asian Affairs, made no mention of a consolidated policy discussion on an Asia-Pacific strategy. Rather, Bader described an Obama foreign policy team that used strategic judgements

as an essential framework for our decisions and actions. Some strategic principles were relatively clear...at the outset. Others would become more evident as events requiring responses unfolded.<sup>50</sup>

Even Secretary Clinton herself avoided in-depth discussion of the development for the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot strategy beyond that in early 2009 she

invited a number of academics and Asia experts to dinner at the State Department. We talked about how to balance America's interests in Asia, which sometimes seemed in competition.<sup>51</sup>

Gates and Panetta reflected in their memoirs that the Obama administration tightly controlled policy and strategy in the White House.

Despite the opacity of its development, the strategy's ends remained unchanged from the earliest days of American interest in the Asia-Pacific region: prevent a regional hegemon from challenging the US dominant position and expansion of the US economic opportunities with Asian markets. These two areas found expression in innocuous terms of "stability and prosperity."<sup>52</sup> Understanding the first end in its larger context of American actions within the region is crucial for linking to the second. The United States pursued a "consistent goal in Asia, which is to prevent any single country from dominating" the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>53</sup> From its earliest days, the US geographic and economic interests pushed to the edge of the Western-Pacific basin. American industry needed Asian markets for continued growth. During the Cold War, the United States could

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<sup>49</sup> Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 383.

<sup>50</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 46.

<sup>52</sup> Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," 57.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict With China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 4-6.

not allow a Eurasian industrial power such as Japan, or natural resources, such as Southeast Asian raw materials, from falling under Moscow's control.<sup>54</sup> Even American allies, like Japan, fell under this rubric. The US-Japan security treaty post World War II prevented the "reemergence...of Japan as an independent" power able to challenge the United States.<sup>55</sup>

Without a hegemonic challenger to the United States, US trade and economic interests in the Asia-Pacific region could flourish. Economic expansion and integration of the region's American allies grew in importance during the Cold War. Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, and Australia as security partners served as economic vanguards across the Asia-Pacific region against the USSR and communist economic, security, and political ideology. These nations would provide forces, facilities, or access during two ground wars in Asia during the next three decades to maintain US hegemony in the region.<sup>56</sup> The PRC played a similar role as the United States leveraged the Sino-Soviet split. The United States and the PRC "saw each other as actual and future strategic partners, each of them interested in an alliance of necessity with the other to prevent the domination of Asia by the Soviet Union."<sup>57</sup> The United States however viewed this as an unequal partnership. The United States saw Chinese cooperation as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The PRC has not viewed its relationship with the United States in the same manner.

The PRC embraced the nationalist sense of China's "Middle kingdom" identity.<sup>58</sup> Prior to its decline in the eighteenth century, China viewed itself as the center of the world and global trade surrounded by states "paying tribute to China's rulers."<sup>59</sup> European imperial powers, Japan, Russia and the United States intervened in China during the Opium Wars, Boxer Rebellion, World War II,

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<sup>54</sup> Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 54.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>56</sup> Bernstein and Munro, *The Coming Conflict With China*, 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*.

in the names of trade and protection of national interests that left China divided and prostrate for 200 years, its period of “national humiliation.” Since the end of World War II, Asian economies grew and flourished regionally and globally, most notably Japan and South Korea with China’s being the most recent at a dizzying pace. The PRC economic miracle averaged nearly 10% annual growth for nearly a decade. This rise of economic power in the Asia-Pacific region has a corollary: “military muscle tends in time to follow economic power.”<sup>60</sup> The PRC’s economic and military growth spurred a renewed call for assumption of China’s historic great power status. By the time the Obama administration entered office, the PRC held \$1.3 trillion in US sovereign debt, stood as the world’s second largest economy, and pursued a growing military modernization effort.

Secretary of State Clinton’s trip to Asia in February 2009 sought to begin the initial process of engaging with the PRC. Clinton reassured allies and new partners alike in Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia of America’s resolve to engage in the Asia-Pacific region and included a commitment to participate in Asian regional forums, such as ASEAN, with renewed vigor.<sup>61</sup> Once in Beijing, Clinton’s agenda emphasized “cooperation on the global economic crisis, climate change and security issues.”<sup>62</sup> Clinton met with President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen in Beijing and secured agreement to expand the Strategic Dialogue begun under the Bush administration in 2007, into a “strategic and economic dialogue” to be coordinated between the US State and Treasury departments.<sup>63</sup> The only other notable outcome of Secretary Clinton’s trip was commitment to support China’s international exposition scheduled for May 2010. While publicly the Obama administration stated its intent for cooperation within the Asia-Pacific region and specifically with the PRC, no nation had “yet come close to surpassing the United States as the

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<sup>60</sup> Coral Bell, “The Future of American Policy in the Pacific,” in *Asia-Pacific Security*, ed. Gary Klintworth (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 28.

<sup>61</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 52.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 72-73.

most powerful nation in the Asia-Pacific. We were prepared to engage from a position of strength.”<sup>64</sup>

President Obama followed up Secretary Clinton’s trip to the Asia-Pacific region with his own in the fall of 2009 to Japan, Singapore, China, and South Korea.<sup>65</sup> The Obama White House and Asia-Pacific foreign policy team at the National Security Council and Department of State perceived the visit “to consolidate the gains made to date and lay a strong basis for future cooperation” with respect to China.<sup>66</sup> Obama stopped first in Japan and reiterated assurances to US treaty allies anxious about China’s economic, political, and military aspirations in the region. Obama stated that,

America’s treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines – alliances that are not historical documents from a bygone era, but abiding commitments to each other that are fundamental to our shared security.<sup>67</sup>

During meetings with Chinese officials in Beijing, Obama reiterated his call for “cooperation between the United States and China” on a range of security, economic, and climate issues.<sup>68</sup> The traditional friction points over human rights, military sales to Taiwan, and meetings with the Dali Lama added to new issues dealing with Chinese currency manipulation.

In the end, President Obama and President Hu Jintao issued a joint communique. According to Jeffrey Bader, the US point man for negotiation of the joint statement, the Obama administration viewed this as “a realistic statement of the cooperative aspects” of the US – China relationship.<sup>69</sup> Critics of the statement noted apparent concession by the administration on Taiwan

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<sup>64</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 67.

<sup>65</sup> Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise*, 54.

<sup>66</sup> Indyk, Lieberthal, and O’Hanlon, *Bending History*, 32.

<sup>67</sup> Barack H. Obama, “Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall,” *obamawhitehousearchives.gov* (November 14, 2009), accessed February 12, 2017, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall>.

<sup>68</sup> Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise*, 54.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

and Tibet, “the two sides agreed that respecting each other’s core interests is extremely important to ensure steady progress in U.S.-China relations.”<sup>70</sup>The sides reached no consensus on China’s currency valuation but included a mention of the need for the United States to, “take measures to increase national saving as a share of GDP and promote sustainable non-inflationary growth. To achieve this, the United States is committed to returning the federal budget deficit to a sustainable path and pursuing measures to encourage private saving.”<sup>71</sup> On human rights, the statement added that both “sides recognized that the United States and China have differences on the issue.”<sup>72</sup> On a brighter note, President Obama secured support from China in the areas of “climate change, energy, and the environment” for the Copenhagen Conference scheduled for the following month in December 2009.<sup>73</sup> As a *Wall Street Journal* article noted at the time, President Obama’s trip to China “signaled a turning point in relations between a weakened U.S. power and a China that senses its time has come.”<sup>74</sup>

With two high-level visits to China by the Obama administration as background, the administration published its initial *National Security Strategy* in May 2010. The document provided the administration’s clearest articulation to date of its attempt to differentiate itself from the Bush-era. The Obama administration highlighted the need,

to build deeper and more effective partnerships with other key centers of influence – including China...so that we can cooperate on issues of bilateral and global concern, with the recognition that power, in an interconnected world, is no longer a zero sum game.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “US – China Joint Statement, November 17, 2009,” *obamawhitehousearchives.gov* (November 17, 2009), accessed December 12, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/us-china-joint-statement>.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 7-8.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Weisman, Andrew Browne, and Jason Dean, “Obama Hits a Wall on His Visit to China,” *Wall Street Journal* (November 19, 2009), accessed September 12, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB125857743503654225>.

<sup>75</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: Office of the President, 2010), 3.

Acknowledging that America's "relations with China...will be critical to building broader cooperation on areas of mutual interest," the strategy discarded previous language of any 'exacerbating concerns' with the PRC in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>76</sup> China's on-going military modernization, tensions with the RoC over the status of Taiwan, and human rights all earned mention, but the document stated,

disagreements should not prevent cooperation on issues of mutual interest, because a pragmatic and effective relationship between the United States and China is essential to address the major challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>77</sup>

Pursuit of a "positive, constructive, and comprehensive relationship" towards the PRC defined the Obama administration's approach to China and US interests within the Asia-Pacific region. Preventing the rise of a hegemonic challenger, economic integration, and human rights remained the central tenets of American security interests, but the Obama administration muted this language in its NSS.

## The Pacific Pivot: An Assessment

Assessment of the Obama administration's Pacific Pivot strategy at the near side conclusion of President Obama's presidency raises some questions of methodology. First there exists the question of what to assess, the metrics themselves that will offer as clear a picture as possible to answer the research question. The second question relates to the first, against when should the assessment be baselined against? Should the baseline start at the beginning of the Obama administration's first term in office or when the Pacific Pivot strategy was articulated in November 2011? A third question deals with trends, how to account for or adjust for actions or efforts begun under previous US presidential administrations and either continued or completed under the rubric of the Obama Pacific Pivot strategy. A final question that arises in assessment deals with

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

consideration of the efficacy of actions and causality of the results of actions taken by the Obama administration to achieve the objectives laid out in the Pacific Pivot strategy.

## Strengthening Bilateral Security Alliances

For this line of action, the Obama administration completed updated agreements with all five countries with bi-lateral security agreements with the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. Except for Thailand, the other four agreements with Japan, Republic of Korea, People's Republic of the Philippines, and Australia included expanded access to facilities, increased bi- and multi-lateral training exercises, revised operational planning, and updated logistics support agreements. Japan completed revision of its constitution to allow not only deployment of its military forces outside its territorial boundaries but also the overseas sale of military weapons.<sup>78</sup> The Republic of Korea continued development of capabilities to assume wartime operational control of US forces in the event of a conflict with the DPRK.<sup>79</sup> Australia approved the stationing of a rotational United States Marine Corps force near Darwin at Robertson Barracks.<sup>80</sup> The US-Philippine bilateral alliance took steps forward and backward. The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) increased US-Philippine military cooperation since the United States returned military facilities at Subic Bay and Clark Air Base to the Philippine government in the early 1990s. Concluded in 2014 and ruled constitutional by the Philippine supreme court in 2016, EDCA allowed for US military support to

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<sup>78</sup> David McNeill, "Japan's pacifist constitution: After 70 years, nation changes the rules so it can go to war," *Independent* (July 1, 2014), accessed October 24, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/japans-pacifist-constitution-after-70-years-nation-changes-the-rules-so-it-can-go-to-war-9577158.html>.

<sup>79</sup> Ankit Panda, "US, South Korea Discuss Operational Control (OPCON) Transfer," *The Diplomat* (June 17, 2014), accessed October 25, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/us-south-korea-discuss-operational-control-opcon-transfer>.

<sup>80</sup> Wyatt Olson, "Pacific Pivot Makes Modest Gains in Early Years," *Stars and Stripes* (June 29, 2015), accessed October 24, 2016, <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2015-06-29/pacific-pivot-makes-modest-gains-in-early-years>.

the Philippines upon request.<sup>81</sup> The election of President Duterte in 2016 threw the agreement into question characterized by Duterte's colorful retort to President Obama and attempted détente with the PRC.<sup>82</sup> While only the highlights of the completed actions with the US bilateral allies in the Asia-Pacific region, these represent significant actions toward meeting the strategy objectives.

From an assessment perspective, however, the Obama administration strategy in this line partially achieved its objective. With updated bilateral security alliances amongst long-standing allies in the region, no new alliances were concluded despite continual courting by the administration with the two largest democracies in the region, India and Indonesia. Another method of assessment along this line is to examine the security tensions between alliance partners and the threat against which each agreement may be invoked. On the Japan front, the PRC has continued and increased provocations in the East China Sea over sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands, while Russia had become resurgent in the activity around the Northern Territories and refused to conclude a formal peace treaty with Japan to end World War II. The DPRK continued to threaten Japan with military action for support to the United States and fired missiles in the direction of Japan raising concerns over nuclear proliferation by a US ally. On the Korean peninsula, the DPRK violated the territorial integrity of the Republic of Korea through artillery and mine warfare on at least three occasions, continued development of ballistic missile and nuclear weapons technology, and used offensive cyber activity to access Republic of Korea industrial control systems and Sony Entertainment information systems in the United States.<sup>83</sup> All together these actions constituted a steady and increasing threat to the Republic of Korea, United States, and its supporting allies in the

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<sup>81</sup> Renato Cruz de Castro, "Philippine Supreme Court Approves EDCA: Unlocking the Door for the Return of U.S. Strategic Footprint in Southeast Asia," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative* (February 1, 2016), accessed October 24, 2016, <https://amti.csis.org/philippine-supreme-court-approves-edca-unlocking-door-return-u-s-strategic-footprint-southeast-asia>.

<sup>82</sup> See epigraph on page one.

<sup>83</sup> Jonathan Karl and Pierre Thomas, "US Says North Korea Responsible for Sony Hack," *ABC News* (December 17, 2014), accessed October 24, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-north-korea-responsible-sony-hack/story?id=27677015>.



region. No specific geostrategic issues confronted the Australian and Thailand security alliances with the United States per se as both nations' borders and external threats to their security remained benign outside the threat posed from return of Islamic extremists from the Middle East and Central Asia. The US-Thailand bilateral security alliance suffered from US government reduction of military-to-military cooperation following the Thailand military coup in 2014 which allowed the PRC to step into the vacuum. Despite this setback, Thailand provided access to military facilities and overflight rights crucial for US military activities in response to the Nepal earthquake in 2015. The US-Philippine security alliance saw continued threats from Islamic separatists but at a level that allowed the formal end to Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines and disestablishment of the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Philippines in 2015.<sup>84</sup> PRC actions in the South China Sea however, continued to raise the stakes and likelihood for an invocation of the mutual defense treaty despite the diplomatic row between the Philippine and US presidents.<sup>85</sup>

## Deepening Working Relationships with Emerging Powers

The Pacific Pivot strategy's second line of action, deepening working relationships with emerging powers to include China, represented arguably the most ambitious of the administration's efforts. Among the identified emerging powers, the list included China, India, Indonesia, Singapore, New Zealand, Malaysia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Brunei, and the Pacific Island countries.<sup>86</sup> The administration offered no benchmark for how it picked these countries either as emerging powers or as those needed to achieve the administration's strategy, except for China, India, and Indonesia. The strategy's focus on these emerging powers to join the United States "in shaping and

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<sup>84</sup> Sneha Shankar, "US To Dissolve Anti-Terror Group, JSOTF-P, In Philippines After 10 Years Of Fighting Abu Sayyaf," *International Business Times* (June 26, 2014), accessed September 17, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.com/us-dissolve-anti-terror-group-jsotf-p-philippines-after-10-years-fighting-abu-sayyaf-1612340>.

<sup>85</sup> Lyle Goldstein, "Chinese Naval Strategy in the South China Sea: An Abundance of Noise and Smoke, but Little Fire," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011), 343-344.

<sup>86</sup> Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," 59.

participating in a rules-based regional and global order,” appeared directed specifically towards the PRC.<sup>87</sup> The clearest statements laid out as the objectives surrounded PRC actions in the South China Sea, modernization and expansion of its military, and mention of the trade route through the Strait of Malacca.<sup>88</sup> PRC military defense spending increased from \$134 billion in 2010 to \$190 billion in 2015 and expected to increase to \$260 billion by 2020, an increase of nearly 30% and 49% respectively.<sup>89</sup> In comparison with the US Department of Defense budget of \$533.7 billion in 2010 and \$585 billion in 2015 and expected to remain flat into 2020, an increase of 8.8%.<sup>90</sup>

The quest for transparency and intent with respect to the PRC’s military budget remained unfulfilled at the close of the Obama administration. The PRC continued construction of outposts in the South China Sea, at present thought to cover more than 2000 acres or the equivalent of 1500 football fields. A modern US aircraft carrier flight deck measures 4 acres, as some analysts have noted, the PRC construction equated to 500 aircraft carriers or targets, depending on perspective, in the South China Sea. While China announced in 2015 a halt to the construction of artificial islands, the PRC construction of facilities on those islands continued unabated.<sup>91</sup> The PRC’s outsized territorial claims within the South China Sea and continued opaque militarized build-up present an unresolved challenge to the Pacific Pivot strategy.

The Obama administration pursued PRC help with the DPRK’s nuclear programs as part of its efforts to see China as a responsible member of a global and regional rules-based order. The

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” 60.

<sup>89</sup> Katy Barnato, “China defense spending to double by 2020: Report,” *CNBC.com* (September 2, 2015), accessed September 17, 2016, <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/09/02/china-defense-spending-to-double-by-2020-report.html>. Figures for PRC defense spending represent official Chinese government declarations.

<sup>90</sup> Kimberly Amadeo, “FY 2015 U.S. Federal Budget and Spending,” *thebalance.com* (updated March 23, 2017), accessed September 17, 2016, <https://www.thebalance.com/fy-2015-u-s-federal-budget-and-spending-3306304>. Figures for US defense budgets include DoD’s base budget and Overseas Contingency Operations, or OCO, funding supplemental.

<sup>91</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, “Why China Is Stopping Its South China Sea Island-Building (For Now),” *The Diplomat* (June 16, 2015), accessed August 10, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/06/why-china-is-stopping-its-south-china-sea-island-building-for-now>.

administration worked with the PRC to approve additional sanctions against the DPRK regime in response to continued violations of UNSCR on its ballistic missile and nuclear programs.<sup>92</sup> Despite the support for sanctions, the PRC undercut these sanctions and continued to provide economic support to the DPRK regime. The PRC pursued continuation of this support to the DPRK regime as part of its desire for a secure border on its northeastern flank and avoid a regime collapse with the expected mass refugee flows such a collapse would likely entail.

## Engaging with Regional Multilateral Institutions

The Pacific Pivot strategy encouraged engagement with a host of existing multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific region. The institutions included the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and others.<sup>93</sup> Before the November 2011 strategy roll-out by Secretary Clinton, the Obama administration assented to the ASEAN treaty and placed an ambassador, David L. Carden, to the organization in Jakarta, Indonesia.<sup>94</sup> With the ARF, the administration placed the South China Sea, the free flow of navigation and disputed territorial claims, at the forefront of its

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<sup>92</sup> Somini Sengupta and Jane Perlez, “U.N. Stiffens Sanctions on North Korea, Trying to Slow Its Nuclear March,” *The New York Times* (November 30, 2016), accessed December 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/world/asia/north-korea-un-sanctions.html>.

<sup>93</sup> APEC member economies include Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, PRC, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Philippines, RoC, RoK, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, United States, and Vietnam. ASEAN member states include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. ARF participants include ASEAN member states plus Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, DPRK, European Union, India, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, PRC, RoK, Russia, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and United States.

<sup>94</sup> David Carden, “Remarks by Ambassador David Carden on U.S.-ASEAN Engagement at the Asia Foundation,” *U.S. Mission to ASEAN* (September 15, 2011), accessed September 12, 2016, <https://asean.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-david-carden-on-u-s-asean-engagement-at-the-asia-foundation>.

intended agenda. Despite repeated efforts to secure statements within these institutions regarding these concerns, the PRC prevented statements critical of its activities in the South China Sea.<sup>95</sup>

Some analyses of the administration's strategy point to numbers of government officials' trips and funding levels of executive branch offices as indicators of the emphasis placed on the strategy and the outcomes of strategy objectives along this line of action.<sup>96</sup> While these indicators provide an interesting comparison between the Obama administration and previous administrations, these do not answer the question of the outcome or effectiveness of the strategy. Over the eight years of the Obama administration and the six years under the Pacific Pivot strategy, the Obama administration elevated the prestige of its engagement with these organizations but with little effect to leverage multilateral institutions to address the US primary strategy objective directed to broaden diplomatic pressure against PRC actions in the South China Sea.

## Expanding Trade and Investment

The Obama administration's efforts to expand trade and investment marked a departure from Senator Obama's opposition to free trade agreements. While a senator, Obama voted against the Central American Free Trade Agreement and as a candidate actively campaigned against free-trade agreements.<sup>97</sup> Obama explained his vote against CAFTA due to its lack of concern for the "losers from free trade" and the need for trade agreements "to distribute the costs and benefits of globalization more fairly across the population."<sup>98</sup> Obama's support from unions opposed to trade deals must be considered as another explanation for the CAFTA no-vote.

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<sup>95</sup> Chau Bao Nguyen, "ASEAN's uncertain stance in the South China Sea," *EASTASIAFORUM* (November 21, 2015), accessed November 1, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/11/21/aseans-uncertain-stance-in-the-south-china-sea>.

<sup>96</sup> Joshua A. Parker and David A. Anderson, "The Reality of the So-Called U.S. Pivot to Asia," *InterAgency Journal* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2016), 5-13.

<sup>97</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, xv.

<sup>98</sup> Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 176.

As part of the administration's domestic concerns with the US economy following the global financial crisis, the Obama administration saw the economies of the Asia-Pacific region, especially China, as crucial for dealing with the crisis. The US reliance on China to navigate an economic recovery from the financial crisis posed the "central dilemma" for the United States.<sup>99</sup> The PRC leadership and others around the globe saw "America's reputation tarnished" due to the financial crisis brought about largely by itself.<sup>100</sup>

The Obama administration pursued two pillars to address the economic problems: (1) economic integration across the Asia-Pacific region and (2) economic stimulus from the world's largest economies, particularly China. For the first, the Obama administration sought to conclude two trade agreements, the United States-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS-FTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The KORUS-FTA remained from the previous Bush administration and required three years for the Obama administration to secure passage in the US Congress and entered into force in March 2012.<sup>101</sup> The signature piece promoted by the Obama administration to expand trade was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP sought to integrate economies around the Pacific rim and would include Canada, the United States, Mexico, Peru, Chile, New Zealand, Australia, Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Japan.<sup>102</sup> The agreement would account for 40% of global trade and position the United States as the dominant economic power on the global stage and the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Indyk, Lieberthal, O'Hanlon, *Bending History*, 10.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> United States Trade Representative, "U.S. – Korea Free Trade Agreement," Office of the United States Trade Representative Resource Center (n.d.), accessed August 9, 2016, <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/korus-fta>.

<sup>102</sup> Kevin Granville, "Unpacking the Trans-Pacific Partnership Trade Deal," *The New York Times* (May 11, 2015), accessed September 21, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/business/unpacking-the-trans-pacific-partnership-trade-deal.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/business/unpacking-the-trans-pacific-partnership-trade-deal.html?_r=0).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

With the close of the Obama administration, the Trans-Pacific Partnership appears dead. Despite Secretary Clinton's support for the TPP while President Obama's Secretary of State, she actively campaigned against the agreement while she ran for President of the United States in 2016.<sup>104</sup> President Trump also actively campaigned against the TPP and indicated he would not pursue ratification with the US Congress. Within the US Congress, no broad based or bi-partisan support existed for another free-trade agreement particularly with Asia-Pacific nations. What then was the outcome of the administration's mixed achievement toward strategy objectives?

Total US global trade, measured as a combination of exports and imports, stood at \$3.4 trillion in 2008 and \$3.75 trillion at the end of 2015, an increase of approximately 9.6%.<sup>105</sup> Trade with South Korea, object of the KORFUS trade deal, increased by 28% over the period 2011-2015, but a breakdown reveals that US imports outpaced exports to South Korea by 33% to 20% respectively.<sup>106</sup> US trade with countries in the Asia-Pacific region increased from \$1.22 trillion to \$1.37 trillion between 2011 and 2015 an increase of 11%, however the same breakdown shows US imports outpaced total global trade growth and exports at 16% and 0.5% respectively.<sup>107</sup>

What the raw economic data showed is the continued shift in economic trade and importance away from Europe and the Americas toward the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, US trade imbalances continued and grew even with the "smart" trade agreement completed with South Korea.<sup>108</sup> The defeat, to this point, of the TPP also presented an alternative to US economic leadership in the Asia-Pacific region, the PRC. Pursued simultaneously as the US TPP, China

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<sup>104</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 77-78.

<sup>105</sup> Department of Commerce, "U.S. International Trade Data," United States Census Bureau, accessed August 9, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0004.html>.

<sup>106</sup> Department of Commerce, "U.S. International Trade Data," United States Census Bureau, accessed August 9, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5800.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Department of Commerce, "U.S. International Trade Data," United States Census Bureau, accessed August 9, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0016.html>

<sup>108</sup> Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," 61.

pushed its own vision of economic integration through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).<sup>109</sup> The RCEP included the 10 members of ASEAN plus China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and India. On the global stage, China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in opposition to the US-led International Monetary Fund.<sup>110</sup> How then to judge the efforts of the Obama administration and the Pacific Pivot strategy? On balance, Obama's efforts to forge new economic relationships and retain an economic leadership position within the Asia-Pacific region faltered with the inability to gain support for TPP and continued rise in the US trade imbalance with China and other Asian nations.

### Forging a Broad-Based Military Presence

The Obama administration's objective to forge a different military posture in the Asia-Pacific region grew out of campaign promises to end overseas occupations and focus budget priorities on domestic spending. Secretary of Defense Gates worked to secure a predictable budget while he worked with the Obama administration to reduce overhead costs within the department and retain those funds for expanded capability, the agreement totaled \$100 billion over the 5-year fiscal defense program 2012-2016.<sup>111</sup> In 2011, the agreement between the department and the White House collapsed and became "math, not strategy."<sup>112</sup> Early in 2011, Secretary Gates convened a meeting with the senior leaders of the department, he outlined the problem the department and the administration faced:

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<sup>109</sup> Ronglin Yi and Yang Hu, *RCEP, TPP and China's FTA Strategies* (London: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2015), 2.

<sup>110</sup> Jean-Pierre Lehmann, "China And The US: The AIIB Fiasco & America's Colossal Loss Of Face," *Forbes* (April 2, 2015), accessed August 10, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jplehmann/2015/04/02/china-and-the-us-the-aiib-fiasco-americas-colossal-loss-of-face/#50490ba45d4a>.

<sup>111</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 464.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 546.

I am of the view that the budget pressures we are facing are not because of a conscious political or policy decision to reduce our defense posture...As I have said before, this is more about math, not strategic policy decisions.<sup>113</sup>

In the end, the Obama administration cut the Defense budget and ordered a “fundamental review of America’s missions, capabilities, and our role in a changing world.”<sup>114</sup> In July of 2011, Secretary Gates retired and Director of Central Intelligence Leon Panetta assumed the leadership of the Department of Defense. Secretary Panetta faced the twin challenge to reduce the budget and conduct the administration’s military review.

Secretary Panetta directed the department’s strategic review to decide three things: (1) the essential missions DoD must perform, (2) the missions DoD could sacrifice, and (3) the force required to accomplish these missions. In late November 2011, the US Congress voted to sequester future federal budgets under the Budget Control Act, Secretary of State Clinton published the Pacific Pivot strategy in *Foreign Policy* magazine, and the Department of Defense completed its strategic review. The Department of Defense strategic review concluded that (1) the US military could be smaller and leaner, (2) the United States would “rebalance” forces toward Asia, (3) the United States would adopt a “rotational deployment” elsewhere in the world, (4) the United States would maintain the capacity to fight two simultaneous conflicts, and (5) Special Operations Forces, drones, cyber/space capabilities would receive heavy investment.<sup>115</sup>

The Pacific Pivot strategy called for a geographically dispersed, politically sustainable, and operationally resilient force.<sup>116</sup> From the end of 2011, the department worked to achieve these objectives in pursuit of the Pacific Pivot strategy. Basing realignment with allies addressed all three concerns. The US military infrastructure and forces in the Asia-Pacific region in 2011 represented

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 549.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 382-384.

<sup>116</sup> Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” 62.



to a large degree where the US military stopped at the end of World War II, the Korean War, and to a lesser extent, the Vietnam War. Most forces and bases were concentrated in Northeast Asia, particularly on the South Korean portion of the Korean peninsula and Japan. Additional build-up occurred during and following World War II in the Central Pacific, specifically Guam and other locations in the Northern Marianas Islands. To support the strategy's focus, the United States would need to move further south and west.

Secretary Gates announced the permanent basing of four of the Navy's new Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) in Singapore during the "Shangri-La" Asia Security Summit in early June 2011.<sup>117</sup> In November 2011, the United States and Australia agreed to place a rotational force of Marine Corps forces on the northern coast of Australia near Darwin at Robertson Barracks.<sup>118</sup> At the beginning of 2012, the United States and Japan agreed to "decouple" the long-delayed move of Marine Corps forces from Okinawa to Guam from the relocation of aviation units on Okinawa.<sup>119</sup> In late 2015, Secretary of Defense Carter announced the inaugural deployment of the Navy's new P-8 Poseidon submarine hunter aircraft to Singapore.<sup>120</sup>

The DoD rebalance of military forces in support of the Pacific Pivot strategy began with the US Navy announcement to increase the percentage of Navy vessels assigned to the Pacific Fleet. This rebalance would take years, but by 2020, the US Navy should achieve a 60% balance in the

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<sup>117</sup> Andy Yee, "US deployment of littoral combat ships to Singapore," *EASTASIAFORUM* (July 21, 2011), accessed September 8, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/07/21/us-deployment-of-littoral-combat-ships-to-singapore>.

<sup>118</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, "Prime Minister Gillard and President Obama Announce Force Posture Initiatives," *obamawhitehousearchives.gov* (November 16, 2011), accessed September 8, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/16/prime-minister-gillard-and-president-obama-announce-force-posture-init-0>.

<sup>119</sup> Kiyoshi Takenaka, "U.S., Japan decouple Marines' Guam move from Okinawa," *Reuters* (February 8, 2012), accessed October 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-us-marines-idUSTRE8171R020120208>.

<sup>120</sup> David Brunnstrom, "U.S. to deploy spy plane in Singapore amid China tensions," *Reuters* (December 8, 2015), accessed September 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-singapore-southchinasea-idUSKBN0TQ2K720151208>.

Asia-Pacific region.<sup>121</sup> In addition, the Defense department established the Asia-Pacific region as priority for receipt of the services newest and most advanced weapon systems to include the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, Littoral Combat Ships, and aircraft carriers. As part of this rebalance and prioritization, the USS *Ronald Reagan*, one of the Navy's two most advanced Nimitz-class supercarriers at the time, moved to Yokosuka, Japan in 2014.<sup>122</sup> The US Army also elevated the position of its Pacific Army commander to the rank of four-star general in 2013.

Two additional efforts raised DoD's focus on the Asia-Pacific: the Third Offset Strategy and Air-Sea Battle, later renamed the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JCAMGC).<sup>123</sup> The Third Offset sought to extend the US technological advantage over near-peer competitors, the PRC and Russia, while Air-Sea Battle focused on an operational method to fight and win against threats using advanced technologies designed to prevent access and deny areas from US military forces.<sup>124</sup> These concepts addressed the growing concern that the PRC would soon challenge the United States in the Western Pacific, specifically in the maritime areas in and around the East China Sea, Taiwan, and the South China Sea.

The Pacific Pivot strategy suffered some setbacks in implementation. The Navy's LCS vessels deployed to Singapore ran into several mechanical issues, which required each to be taken out of the deployed fleet for extensive repairs and overhaul. The United States Army Pacific reduced its only airborne brigade combat team in Alaska to a reinforced battalion and converted its

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<sup>121</sup> Panetta, "Speech at the Shangri-La Security Dialogue," *cfr.org* (June 2, 2012), accessed September 8, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/panettas-speech-shangri-la-security-dialogue-june-2012/p28435>.

<sup>122</sup> U.S. Pacific Fleet Public Affairs, "Navy Aircraft Carrier Moves Underscore Pacific Rebalance Strategy," *navy.mil* (January 1, 2014), accessed November 4, 2016, [http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story\\_id=78601](http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=78601).

<sup>123</sup> Randy Forbes, "RIP Air-Sea Battle?" *The National Interest* (January 29, 2015), accessed November 4, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/rip-air-sea-battle-12147>.

<sup>124</sup> Bob Work, "The Third U.S. Offset Strategy and its Implications for Partners and Allies Deputy Secretary of Defense Work," *defense.gov* (January 29, 2015), accessed November 4, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606641/the-third-us-offset-strategy-and-its-implications-for-partners-and-allies>.

two Stryker Brigade Combat teams on Oahu back to infantry brigades, largely due to budgetary pressures and force drawdowns. United States Air Forces Pacific also saw the transfer of C-17 aircraft to CONUS based commands.

At first look, the Obama administration appeared to achieve its objectives for the US military in the Asia-Pacific region. US military forces shifted further south and west, the department's most advanced weapon systems deployed to the region, and the balance of deployed forces largely tilted away from Europe and the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. The Department of Defense also pursued an offset strategy and new operational concept for potential confrontation with a near-peer competitor. These achievements however, merely marked measures of performance for the Pacific Pivot strategy.

## Advancing Democracy and Human Rights

The Obama administration's inclusion of the need for advancement of democracy and human rights broke no new ground in the Pacific Pivot strategy. Long a part of US diplomatic efforts globally, the administration declared that America's "most potent asset as a nation is the power of our values – in particular, our steadfast support for democracy and human rights."<sup>125</sup> The Pacific Pivot strategy articulated three goals: improve governance, protect human rights, and advance political freedom. Vietnam, Burma, and North Korea made the short list for mention in the outline of the strategy.

The promotion of democracy and human rights posed a challenge for the Obama administration. During Secretary Clinton's initial trip to China in 2009, she remarked to reporters that the US – PRC relationship was of such vital importance, that the two nations should not allow disagreements over democracy and human rights to prevent progress in areas where the United

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<sup>125</sup> Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," 63.

States and the PRC shared common interests.<sup>126</sup> Whether intended or not as a signal that the United States would drop its long-standing emphasis on these areas, the media and the PRC took the statements at face value.<sup>127</sup> Despite further statements by Secretary Clinton and the administration, the PRC saw the United State position on these issues damaged and further evidence of US decline.

Burma and Thailand presented challenges the Obama administration faced in the Asia-Pacific region. With Burma, ruled by a repressive military dictatorship for decades, the United States looked to pressure the regime for change and saw Aung San Suu Kyi's political activism as a leverage point.<sup>128</sup> The administration pursued a policy of engagement with the military regime and with promises of mutual benefit, saw a change in US – Burmese relations. Elections in 2015 and the lift of Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest began the initial normalization of relations by the United States with Burma.<sup>129</sup> The continued repression of ethnic minorities, particularly the Rohingya, continued to cloud the US relationship with Burma.<sup>130</sup>

Thailand saw a military coup supported by the Thai king overthrow the democratically elected government in May 2014.<sup>131</sup> Despite being the US oldest treaty ally in the Asia-Pacific region and identified in the Pacific Pivot strategy as a nation crucial for its security, the United States condemned the takeover as a coup, cancelled military exercises with the Thai military, and sharply reduced military-to-military engagements. The PRC stepped in and increased its military-

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<sup>126</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 68.

<sup>127</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, 15-17.

<sup>128</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 101-103.

<sup>129</sup> Matthew Pennington, "As Suu Kyi visits, US announces lifting of Myanmar sanctions," *usnews.com* (September 14, 2016), accessed September 14, 2016, <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2016-09-14/sanctions-relief-on-agenda-as-myanmars-suu-kyi-meets-obama>.

<sup>130</sup> Jonah Fisher, "Myanmar's Rohingya: Truth, lies and Aung San Suu Kyi," *BBC.com* (January 27, 2017), accessed February 2, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38756601>.

<sup>131</sup> Thomas Fuller, "Thailand's Military Stages Coup, Thwarting Populist Movement," *The New York Times* (May 22, 2014), accessed August 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/23/world/asia/thailand-military-coup.html>.

to-military engagements with the Thai military which included pursuit of Chinese military hardware.<sup>132</sup> In early 2015, following a massive earthquake in Nepal, the United States concerns about Thai democracy took a back seat to the facilities and access the Thai government provided and made available for US military forces that responded to the humanitarian crisis in Nepal.<sup>133</sup>

Burma and Thailand and the United States responses to their actions show the quandary the Obama administration faced in the region. How far should concerns over democracy and human rights impact US national security concerns in the region? The Obama administration's actions inadvertently sabotaged its objectives in the Asia-Pacific region through signaling that long-time allies would be punished, while nascent democracies with little, if any, strategic value would be praised despite on-going human rights abuses of ethnic minorities. The PRC took notice of the on-again, off-again relationship the United States pursued with its allies and inconsistent application of values and moved to fill the void.

## Conclusion

During the three years that followed publication of the Pacific Pivot strategy in *Foreign Policy*, the Obama administration pursued actions along six lines of effort to achieve its national security and foreign policy goals in the Asia-Pacific region. Despite some successes, the administration's perception of China as a rising, responsible power began to fade. In the administration's second *National Security Strategy* issued in February 2015, themes echoed those from 2010 but with a different tone. While the United States retained the desire to "develop a constructive relationship with China" that "promotes security and prosperity in Asia," the

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<sup>132</sup> Patrick Jory, "China is a big winner from Thailand's coup," *EASTASIAFORUM* (June 18, 2014), accessed August 12, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/06/18/china-is-a-big-winner-from-thailands-coup>.

<sup>133</sup> The author served at United States Pacific Command as the J4 (Logistics, Engineering, and Security Cooperation) Chief of Plans during the response to the Nepal earthquake, named Operation Sahayogi Haat (helping hand).

administration acknowledged the changed nature of the security environment in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>134</sup> The US strategy rejected PRC use of “intimidation in resolving territorial disputes.”<sup>135</sup>

Tensions between China, Japan, and others in “the East and South China Seas” served as reminders of the “risks of escalation.”<sup>136</sup> US strategy,

will manage competition from a position of strength while insisting that China uphold international rules and norms on issues ranging from maritime security to trade and human rights. We will closely monitor China’s military modernization and expanding presence in Asia, while seeking ways to reduce the risk of misunderstanding or miscalculation. On cybersecurity, we will take necessary actions to protect our businesses and defend our networks against cyber-theft of trade secrets for commercial gain whether by private actors or the Chinese government.<sup>137</sup>

While the strategy retained the desire to seek a cooperative relationship, the language expressed a more confrontational stance by the United States with the PRC in the Asia-Pacific region. US security interests in the region remained to prevent a hegemonic challenger, economic integration, and a concern for human rights.

Perhaps the clearest assessment of the Pacific Pivot strategy came from the individual who directed the policy and development of the strategy, former-President Obama. Despite the Pacific-Pivot strategy being the Obama administration’s signature foreign policy initiative, the President did not mention the Asia-Pacific region during his farewell address, letter, or press conference. It may still be too early to assess the impact of the Pacific Pivot strategy in its entirety. The newly inaugurated Trump administration must determine whether it continues the strategy, pursues a modified strategy, or pivots away from the Asia-Pacific region.

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<sup>134</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: Office of the President, 2015), 24.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, ii.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

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