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## The Pivot, Past And Future

Obama's signature foreign policy initiative is in (largely homegrown) trouble.

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By **Bates Gill**

In November 2009, on his first visit to Asia as president, Barack Obama declared in Japan: "There must be no doubt. As America's first Pacific president, I promise you that this Pacific nation will strengthen and sustain our leadership in this vitally important part of the world."

Two years later, standing before the Australian parliament in Canberra, he presented a more detailed vision of America's commitment to the Asia-Pacific, saying, "So let there be no doubt:

In the Asia Pacific in the 21st century, the United States of America is all in.” A month earlier, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s high-profile article in *Foreign Policy* on “America’s Pacific Century” explained why and how the country must “pivot to new global realities” and fully embrace the opportunities of the dynamic Asia-Pacific in the 21st century.

In introducing the “pivot” – the word itself evoking muscularity, athleticism, agility – the Obama administration set a very high bar for American influence and action in the Asia-Pacific. The policy can point to many successes. But as Obama’s time in office comes to an end, the pivot looks like it is in trouble. President-elect Donald Trump now faces a range of challenges for U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific, many of them self-inflicted.

### **The Concept**

The world came to interpret the pivot as a signal that America was “back” in the region. Of course, as a Pacific nation in its own right, the United States had never “left,” and successive U.S. administrations in the post-Cold War era oversaw and encouraged a steady deepening of American engagement and presence in the Asia-Pacific. As Nina Silove argues in *International Security*, a “pivot before the pivot,” in response to China’s growing power and influence in the region, was a key aspect of the Bush administration’s foreign policy.

But Obama can justifiably claim a distinctive and unusually energetic approach to the region. Drawing from his experience living and traveling in the region as a boy – in Hawaii, Indonesia, Japan, and Australia – he had a unique and personal commitment to engagement in the Asia-Pacific.

Even more importantly, in pursuing the pivot, the Obama administration aimed to set itself apart from predecessors in three important ways.

First, the pivot to Asia was intended to demonstrate Obama’s commitment to wind down the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and instead give greater priority to focusing U.S. power and resources toward the dynamic Asia-Pacific region.

Second, the Obama administration made a concerted all-of-government effort to present a detailed strategic case for the importance of the Asia-Pacific to the long-term domestic and foreign policy interests of the United States.

Third, a plan of action was put forward to bolster American influence in the region through deepened economic interaction, greater diplomatic engagement, stronger efforts to promote human rights and democratization, and a strengthened U.S. military presence.

As the “pivot” (later termed the “rebalance”) toward the Asia-Pacific took shape, it became one of the Obama administration’s most prominent – and most critiqued – foreign policy initiatives.

### **Putting Plans Into Action**

Under the Obama administration, American policy in the Asia-Pacific achieved many “firsts.” Much of this was driven by the president’s own commitment of time and energy. In his eight years in office, Obama made 11 separate trips to the Asia-Pacific, visiting a total of 14 countries, some of them multiple times: Australia (2 times), Cambodia (1), China (3), India (2), Indonesia (2), Japan (4), Laos (1), Malaysia (2), Myanmar (2), Philippines (2), Singapore (1), South Korea (4), Thailand (1), and Vietnam (1). He made the most visits to this region of any sitting U.S. president to date, and would have made more were it not for the government shutdown, which kept him away from the East Asia Summit and other regional travel in the autumn of 2013.

Beyond the important commitment of presidential time, the Obama administration took a number of other unprecedented steps to deepen American diplomatic and political engagement with the region. Particular emphasis was given to Southeast Asia, a part of the Asia-Pacific which received comparatively little American attention in the recent past.

The United States acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2009, established a dedicated diplomatic mission to the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Jakarta in 2010 – the first ASEAN dialogue partner to do

so – and also joined the annual ASEAN-led East Asia Summit process in 2011.

The annual U.S.-ASEAN Leaders Meeting was launched in 2009, involving the heads of all 11 countries. In 2013, the “leaders meeting” was upgraded to a “summit,” the third of which, in November 2015, announced the establishment of a “strategic partnership” between the United States and ASEAN. At Obama’s invitation, a “Special ASEAN-U.S. Summit” was convened in Sunnylands, California, in February 2016. It was the first time all ASEAN leaders had met with the U.S. president in the United States.

In an effort to expand American trade and investment in Southeast Asia, the United States and ASEAN launched the Expanded Economic Engagement initiative in 2012 and the U.S.-ASEAN Connect program in 2016.

U.S. relations with Myanmar and Vietnam underwent particularly positive transformations during Obama’s tenure. American engagement – from the president, the secretary of state, the U.S. embassy, and U.S. NGOs – was critical in fostering the historic democratic transition in Myanmar from 2014 to 2016. The July 2015 visit by the secretary general of the Communist Party of Vietnam to Washington, and Obama’s return visit to Vietnam in May this year, were unprecedented and important political advances for U.S.-Vietnam relations.

As to the American military presence in the region, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced in 2012 that by 2020 the 50-50 balance of forces between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans would be shifted to a 60-40 split in favor of the Asia-Pacific region. This shift includes the increased rotational deployment of U.S. forces and equipment through facilities in countries such as Australia, the Philippines, and Singapore and through enhanced defence cooperation agreements with key allies and other security partners.

In September this year, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter hosted his 10 ASEAN counterparts in Hawaii; this followed on the first such meeting held in the United States by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel in 2014. At the 2016 meeting, and

in an article in Foreign Affairs in November, Carter described a “principled and inclusive security network” in the Asia-Pacific. According to Carter, with U.S. support, this network allows regional militaries to “do more, over greater distances, more efficiently” and “take coordinated action in response to humanitarian crises and natural disasters, address common challenges such as terrorism, and ensure the security of and equal access to the commons, including vital waterways.”

In 2016, the United States began allocating funds under the Maritime Security Initiative to assist countries in Southeast Asia in expanding and improving their capacities in maritime domain awareness. In the first tranche, approximately \$140 million will be spent: \$79 million will go to the Philippines, \$40 million for Vietnam, \$20 million for Indonesia, and \$2.5 million for Malaysia. These funds will help support the transfer of patrol vessels, surveillance systems, and training and, importantly, allow these countries to share information on the region’s maritime security picture. Remaining funding of approximately \$285 million is to be allocated over subsequent fiscal years.

During Obama’s visit to Vietnam in May 2016, it was announced Vietnam would purchase 18 coastal patrol boats from the United States and that the U.S. arms embargo on the country was fully lifted to allow for further U.S. defense equipment and weapons exports in the future.

Defense and security ties with Japan deepened further during the Obama years. The two allies issued new U.S.-Japan defense guidelines – their first update since 1997 – during the visit of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Washington in 2015. The guidelines envision a wider range of security-related cooperation between the two countries, to encompass missile defense, peacekeeping, intelligence, maritime security, weapons development, and working with third parties in the region – such as the Philippines and Vietnam – to build their defense and security capabilities.

U.S. alliance relations with South Korea also edged closer, especially in recent years. Earlier this year, Washington and Seoul launched discussions on the joint deployment of a U.S. Terminal

High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea. In spite of strenuous objections by China, the Park Geun-hye government announced in July it would go forward with the deployment.

### **Means, Yes, But to What End?**

From these and many other examples, it is clear the Obama administration devoted significant time and resources toward the rebalance policy and deepened and diversified U.S. political, diplomatic, economic, and security ties in the region. If the measure of success for the rebalance is the maintenance and, in many cases, expansion of American attention, presence, involvement, and influence in the Asia-Pacific, then it can be considered an overall win.

But attention, presence, involvement, and influence should be understood as means toward a strategic end. The strategic end in the case of the rebalance should be ensuring American primacy in the Asia-Pacific and with it the U.S.-led regional order, which has been in place for the past 70 years. By this measure, the rebalance faces many challenges and still falls short.

To begin, the Obama administration's expectation that it could wind down American involvement in "George W. Bush's wars" never came to pass. If anything, in the wake of the Arab Spring, the emergence of the Islamic State, and the continuing chaos in Syria and Iraq, the Middle Eastern quagmire has become an even greater distraction for American leaders.

In the region, China and North Korea have become bigger challenges for the United States. Indeed, China's greater assertiveness is in part a response to the U.S. rebalance, which Beijing is predisposed to see as all about "containing" – or, at best, "shaping" – China. And who can blame them for thinking that way?

With its growing wealth and power, China has increasingly asserted its interests in the Asia-Pacific. For example, in establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, launching the ambitious "One Belt, One Road" initiative, building and militarizing artificial islands in the South China Sea, Beijing is

probing and raising doubts about U.S. primacy, leadership, and staying power in the region.

The challenge from North Korea has also worsened over the past eight years. Four of North Korea's five nuclear tests were conducted on Obama's watch, as were multiple missile tests, including one from a submarine earlier this year. As a result, the Kim Jong-un regime has inched closer to having a rudimentary capability to deliver a nuclear weapon against its nearest neighbors and possibly against U.S. targets as well. With Pyongyang showing no intention of bargaining its nukes away, the incoming administration may well be faced with the extremely difficult dilemma of either accepting that reality or using force to prevent it.

China is closely complicit in these developments, owing to its unwillingness and inability to fully rein in its obstreperous neighbor. This is yet another example of how Beijing complicates and undermines U.S. influence and interests in the region.

### **Self-Inflicted Damage**

These regional and extra-regional challenges will continue to plague U.S. primacy and influence in the Asia-Pacific. But it must be said that some of the biggest challenges for U.S. strategy arise not in the region, but from within America itself.

The effects of the global financial crisis and the Great Recession – self-inflicted setbacks on a colossal scale – continue to impose constraints on American economic wherewithal and the resources needed to support a full-fledged diplomatic, political, and military rebalance to the Asia-Pacific.

Likewise, the failure of Obama and Congress to secure U.S. participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership is a major blow to American leadership and influence in the Asia-Pacific. The president was right to argue for the TPP not just on its economic merits but on strategic grounds as well. In pushing for the TPP late last year, Obama said, “Without this agreement, competitors that don't share our values, like China, will write the rules of the global economy.” He added, “With this Trans-Pacific Partnership, we are

writing the rules for the global economy. America is leading in the 21st century.”

U.S. Trade Representative Michael Froman also spoke of the “strategic logic” of the TPP: “The positive power of trade, and of TPP in particular, is one of our most important tools for dealing with one of this century’s greatest challenges,” which is to “revitalize the rules-based order and to do so at a time when there are competing visions for the global economy.” Even the U.S. secretary of defense argued the strategic case for the TPP, saying, “In terms of our rebalance in the broadest sense, passing TPP is as important to me as another aircraft carrier.”

These views are echoed across the region, where the U.S. failure to support the TPP has generated widespread concern – except in China, whose leaders have been quick to fill the leadership void and promote their own trade and investment mechanisms best suited to Chinese interests.

In the end, the TPP fell victim to a larger and ongoing domestic debate about America’s role in the world. This debate came into sharp relief during the U.S. presidential campaign, exposing a growing nationalist and “America first” sentiment across much of the American electorate. Reflecting that mood, all of the leading candidates for president – Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump – spoke out strongly against the TPP.

More broadly, and also reflecting a growing sentiment for American retrenchment, candidate Trump made several disconcerting statements about America’s role in the world and in the Asia-Pacific in particular. Speaking in separate interviews to the Washington Post and the New York Times, he voiced great skepticism about the benefit of American alliances with Japan and South Korea. This view was mostly based in his belief that they are not paying enough in support of the alliance. He also expressed support for the idea of Japan and South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons so they could defend themselves against North Korea.

While on the stump and in formal policy documents of his campaign, Trump repeatedly said he would declare China a currency manipulator “on day one,” impose a 45 percent tariff on

Chinese imports, and instruct the U.S. trade representative to bring trade cases against China. Whether or not he would actually be able to put these measures in place, he appeared willing to launch economic warfare against America's largest trade partner, biggest holder of U.S. foreign debt, and growing source of investment in the United States.

It is too early to know with any certainty whether these and other ideas put forward during the election campaign will survive as policy under a Trump presidency. These views reflect an emergent mood of retrenchment in the United States that eschews global agreements, questions the value of alliance commitments, blames China for many of America's economic ills, and more narrowly defines American interests to the detriment of its traditional partners. Whether and how these views get translated into policy in the coming years will have serious implications for American power, leadership and interests in the Asia-Pacific.

### **Looking Ahead**

Once in office, President Trump will have little choice but to seriously rethink such positions. Initial evidence suggests he is doing just that. It makes a lot of sense, as across the Asia-Pacific there are high hopes and expectations of a continued U.S. focus of economic, diplomatic, and security-related resources on the region. There is, overall, a gravitation toward the United States, as Asia-Pacific players look to balance a more muscular China. A sustained, coherent, and carefully crafted U.S. engagement strategy should take advantage of this clear demand for a stronger American presence.

Moreover, the challenges to American interests in the region are not going to sit still. It is entirely plausible that one of the first major foreign policy crises for the Trump administration will come from North Korea, probably in the form of further nuclear tests. A U.S. strategy to prevent the emergence of a nuclear-armed North Korea will demand extremely sensitive and well-coordinated negotiations with all the concerned players, especially South Korea, Japan, and China. Even a narrowly-defined military strike – to be successful and limit to the greatest extent possible the chance of

sparkling a region-wide conflagration – could not be done unilaterally. Clearly a new approach is needed, but “going it alone” cannot be the mantra.

In the case of North Korea as well as across most of the other potential hotspots in the region, the China factor looms large as it becomes an increasingly influential economic, diplomatic, and military player in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. In spite of all the sharp campaign rhetoric about China, from his first day in office Trump will confront the same dilemma as his predecessors regarding U.S.-China relations. How to strike the right balance between cooperation and competition with China while avoiding a serious deterioration into crisis or conflict?

This conundrum will not become any easier. Chinese leaders will continue to assert the country’s influence and interests, through both hard and soft power means, in ways that will challenge and look to weaken American leadership around China’s periphery. It seems unlikely that Xi Jinping would take any rash steps in the run up to the 19th Communist Party Congress at the end of 2017. But by the same token he cannot be seen as weak-willed or overly-accommodating in the face of American actions which encroach on Chinese interests. If, coming out of the Party Congress, Xi is successful in gaining a strong mandate for his second five-year term and populates the Politburo with loyal acolytes, Trump may face an even more emboldened and risk-taking leadership in Beijing come 2018.

The strategic logic that drove the pivot is as indisputable as ever. Long-term, proactive, and effective American engagement in the Asia-Pacific is not only a fundamental imperative for the security and prosperity of the United States. It is also strongly encouraged and welcomed by American allies and partners across the region. It would be the height of strategic folly to think and act otherwise.

Whatever name it goes by, we should demand and expect a strategy which seeks to sustain American leadership and interests in the Asia-Pacific while engaging with and hedging against a rising China. But it will not be easy for the new president. Such a strategy, while critically necessary, will not only have to face down

challenges in the region. It will also need to overcome the calls at home for American withdrawal from the world.

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