

American Foreign Policy Strategies Toward the Asia- Pacific

Political Patterns and Future Expectations

James Peterson

The main focus of this paper will be to anchor the Obama thrust within the framework of American diplomatic and defense priorities of the recent past. How will that emphasis survive the presidential transition in January 2017? The campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump offer little evidence about their priorities, other than their mutual desire to exit the Trans-Pacific Partnership. However, Asian pressures will impinge into the new President's decision-making, and it will not be too soon in April 2017 to summarize what we will know so far about the Asian direction of the new administration. The decision of President Obama to "pivot" towards Asia in his second term in office was in tune with the decisions of previous administrations. Perhaps he was looking for a fresh policy focus, after years of frustration with Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and other nations of the Middle East. It is also probably the case that the economic dynamism of Asia was a draw, and the parallel focus of Russia's President Putin on priorities in Asia offered competition as well.



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Introduction

American foreign policy has vacillated between Asia and Europe for over a century. During World War I, the involvement was entirely in Europe, and President Wilson's focus in his Fourteen Points was on incorporation of East and Central Europe into a democratic framework. There was a twin focus on Europe and Asia during World War II, but the event that precipitated American entry into the war was an attack from Japan on Pearl Harbor. During the second half of the 1940s, the focus was entirely European with an eye on helping to rebuild it in light of the emergent Soviet threat in the region. Attention switched back to Asia with involvement in the Korean War of the 1950s and in the Southeast Asian War of the 1960s and 70s. President Nixon entered office in 1969, and he declared that it was time to return to the natural allies in Europe. The Southeast Asian War did continue to preoccupy his administration, but the SALT diplomacy had again an entirely European flavor. When Ronald Reagan took over the reins of leadership in 1981, he decided that it was time to look west again and emphasize the value of the Pacific region and the nations on its shores. Such a spotlight did not continue for long, as the break-up of the communist world riveted the West on Southeast Europe and the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, with the United States leading the way. The 9/11 attacks pulled both Presidents George W. Bush and Obama towards Afghanistan and Iraq, while the Arab Spring called for attention to a wide variety of countries in the Middle East. The Ukrainian crisis that began in 2014 led to a renewed focus on Russia and the nations of East Europe.

Thus, the decision of President Obama to 'pivot' towards Asia in his second term in office was in tune with the decisions of selected previous administrations. Perhaps he was looking for a fresh policy focus, after years of frustration with Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and other nations of the Middle East. It is also probably the case that the economic

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America looks west across the Pacific during the Obama administration

There were actually two pivots or rebalances in the renewed policy towards Asia of the Obama Administration. One involved a switch from the preoccupation with earlier wars in that region and a new focus on building connections and bridges. The second entailed the move away from the difficult involvements in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other wounded nations from the Arab Spring.

Even though America was preoccupied with Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine in 2011 and again in 2014, President Obama called for a pivot to Asia. In part, there were renewed dangers such as that provided by North Korea, but there were also economic opportunities and expanded markets with the strengthening economies in China and India.¹ With the strong American military presence in Japan, there was a continued preoccupation with its policies and future challenges. Links to Taiwan were an inheritance from the Chinese Communist victory on the mainland in 1949, while the relations with Pakistan were under the heavy influence of unending challenges in the Afghan War. Conflict brewed in the South China Sea, and this brought the U.S. into a common front with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and others.

Conflict with North Korea

With American troops located in South Korea as a deterrent to North Korean aggression, any military tension between the two Koreas sucked in the United States and required a show of solidarity with its

southern ally. In 2010, forty-six South Korea sailors lost their lives after North Korea sunk one of their ships with a torpedo. The Kim Jong-Il regime in the north claimed that the ship had violated their territorial waters, but proof for that assertion was uncertain. The response by Seoul later in the year entailed live fire exercises in the direction of the north, and America sent more forces there in a show of force. The transition at the end of 2011 to the new North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un intensified the militancy of the north. For example, in 2013 North Korea tested long-range missiles that could reach the United States. By 2015, North Korea had the fourth largest military in the world with 1.9 million active troops. South Korea possessed only 655,000, and so the 28,500 from the United States helped to balance the power equation on the peninsula.² President Bush had listed that regime as one of the threats on the Axis of Evil in 2002, and probably that perception of the situation did not change much through the Obama Administration.

In February 2016, South Korea decided to halt cooperative work on North Korean territory to construct a huge jointly-run industrial park. North Korea reacted quickly by declaring that they would turn over the entire site to their military. Earlier in the month Pyongyang had fired a long-range rocket that seemed to be part of development of their missile technology. America responded somewhat later with low flights of four of its F-22 stealth fighters over South Korea and commenced discussions with its ally about deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). Additionally, the joint military drills later in the spring were to be the largest ever.³ Thus, the pivot to Asia was partly based on security needs, even though the Cold War threat from China had abated.

China and India

Beginning in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center, Chinese-American relations began to improve. China's leader Jiang Zemin visited the United States in 2002, and there were supportive public statements made about their bilateral relationship by American leaders such as Secretary of State Colin Powell. China was willing to support the American invasion of Afghanistan but not that of Iraq. China did not veto UN resolutions for reconstruction of Iraq, and in 2007 they signed agreements with Iraq itself for cooperation in human resource training, economic cooperation, and technical cooperation. For its part, the Bush Administration toned down criticism of China

on the issues connected with Taiwan, Tibet, and its missile sales. President Bush also visited China in 2002, and that provided an opportunity for further discussions about the future of the relationship.⁴ Of course, China has been forceful in its trade policy, and by 2005 the U.S. had a \$200 billion deficit with China.⁵ A symbolic event occurred in 2015, when China passed Germany and Japan to become the second largest global economy behind only the U.S. Although China worked to build up its trade links with America beyond what they were, they also expanded trade ties to Japan, South Korea, and Australia. That resulted in making the U.S. pivot to Asia even more challenging.⁶

American policy has focused as well on India in the hope that they will become a reliable anchor in an improving relationship with China. The mutual work with India has included projects that nurture them in the direction of peaceful nuclear development.⁷ However, support for them also included the U.S. role as chief arms supplier to India. It was the U.S. hope to build on this security relationship to develop expanded trade ties that would be of mutual benefit to both.

Japan and Pakistan

Japan had achieved enormous economic success with a dynamic trade policy in earlier decades, but their economic primacy in Asia had suffered with the rise of China and India in economic success and trade ties with the West. There were still 38,000 American troops in Japan mainly as a deterrent against a thrust from North Korea. However, in 2010 Japan enunciated a new defence strategy that focused more on the threat from China against islands that were contested between the two nations.⁸ There were also tensions with its U.S. partner over the presence of so many American troops in Okinawa, especially after scandals over crimes committed against Japanese youth by American soldiers. However, trade ties between Japan and the U.S. remained strong ones, and Japanese automobiles on every road in America were a reminder of that fact.

Pakistan was a critical but sometimes complicated partner of the United States in the regional war on terrorism. They had joined the nuclear club at the same time that India did in 1998, and the result was imposition of sanctions on them. After the 9/11 attacks, America lifted the sanctions and instead provided economic and security assistance that totalled \$3.5 billion in the plan for 2009–14.⁹ However, there was considerable tension between the United States and Pakistan over

prosecution of the war in Afghanistan. Taliban forces continued to find sanctuary in the northwest corner of Pakistan, and the national government had never been really able to establish controls in that area. During the Obama Administration, drone attacks took place on the Pakistani side of the border, and some civilian lives were lost. At one point, Pakistan raised the costs of transportation of needed goods and military equipment through their territory that America sought other routes. Finally, the discovery that Osama bin Laden had been living in a relatively visible area of Pakistan for some time intensified American concerns about the reliability of ISI, the Pakistani intelligence service.¹⁰

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Trouble in the South China Sea

One challenge for America in the general overture to Asia has been continuing challenges from China in the sea off its coasts. In the background of the recent expansion by the Chinese navy in 'far sea defence'¹¹ are the examples of American military activities in other theatres. Chinese leaders were concerned that the American Missile Shield proposal would undercut China's nuclear deterrent, and so they expanded their own ICBM development. Having watched the use of American military capabilities in Kosovo and Iraq, China worked on expansion of its MIRV capabilities as well. Their long-range missiles could hit U.S. cities, while short-range ones had Taiwan in their scope. In 2011, they sent a naval vessel to be stationed off the coast of Libya during the NATO air attacks on the Gadhafi forces.¹²

Energy needs in part drove their heightened interest in more control in the South China Sea. In 2014, they had moved a huge oil rig close to the Paracel Islands which Vietnam claimed were over their continental shelf and exclusive economic zone. After protests and the dispatch to the site of 30 Vietnamese coast guard and fisheries vessels, China pulled the rig back in the summer of the year.¹³ Partly in response to that new Chinese aggressiveness, President Obama portrayed the U.S. as a better partner for Africa on his four-day trip to the continent a year later. He indirectly portrayed China as seeking exploitation of African resources while American efforts centred on contributions to continental development as well.¹⁴ Later in the fall, China's agenda shifted to military construction on reclaimed islands in the South China Sea.

At an APEC Summit meeting in the Philippines, Obama called on China to stop that construction and submit that issue to arbitration among the nations of Southeast Asia.¹⁵ Terrorism was also on the agen-

da of the ASEAN Summit two days later, due to the recent attacks in Paris, Lebanon, and Mali.¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, the United States and Japan commenced a large military training exercise in the seas south of Japan. There were 30 warships and many planes involved in the exercise, and it was in part a message to China that there was sharp disagreement about Chinese claims to territorial control of that waterway.¹⁷ In the month of December, the Pentagon flew two B-52 bombers near contested islands, and this led China to call for an end to provocative actions.¹⁸ Early in the new-year, the U.S. sent the guided missile destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur near the islands under the label of a 'freedom of navigation operation.'¹⁹ President Obama hosted an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in southern California in mid-February 2016, and China was certainly on the agenda although not represented there. The ASEAN leaders had become more suspicious of Chinese motives due to the recent conflicts in the South China Sea. President Obama offered the alternative of his Trans-Pacific Partnership as another choice on the table.²⁰ President Obama's opening day speech called for development of 'accountable institutions', and he encouraged the others to work towards an international order in which global rules such as freedom of navigation were upheld.²¹ Although the joint statement at the end of the Summit did not mention the aggressive actions of China in the South China Sea,²² China sent a message on the last day of the conference by deploying surface-to-air missile launchers on the Woody Island in the contested Paracel Islands. That is an island that China, Vietnam, and Taiwan all claim as their rightful territory.²³

Overall, hopes dominated fears in the projected pivot to Asia during the Obama Administration. Prospects for expanded trade benefits were particularly high for the overtures to China and India, but they were also meaningful for its ties with Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. Security issues did exist with Pakistan, but they were likely to fade with the end of the war in Afghanistan. The biggest threat clearly was the one from North Korea, but an emerging one existed in the tension with China over their claims in the South China Sea. However, multilateral diplomacy was occurring for each of those two threats with the six-party talks on the Korean issue and ASEAN discussions on China's hostile moves. In the background was the American-Russian rivalry and the question of how much their tensions on other issues would carry over to the Asian setting.

American presidential transition of 2016–17

After the APEC Summit, the presidential transition in the United States began in earnest, for by April Donald Trump had nearly locked up the Republican nomination. Of course, President Obama continued to have the full power of the office, but increasingly on policy issues he looked over his shoulder to see what the counterpoint might be from eventual candidate Trump. Future policy towards Asia was certainly not the main debate theme of the campaign, but the Obama pivot towards that region heightened the significance of striking events that happened westwards across the Pacific Ocean. In particular, the China chord resonated continuously and demanded a hearing across many fronts and nations in the region.

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The transition to President Trump and the pivot to Asia: the question of alliance partnerships

Soon after his election victory, Donald Trump announced on a YouTube video that he would end U.S. participation in the TPP on his first day in office. He expressed a preference for bilateral agreements that would bring jobs to the United States. While German Chancellor Angela Merkel reiterated her conviction that a multilateral approach was a necessity in Asia, China celebrated its own future role in Asian leadership.²⁴ Very de-stabilizing also was the willingness of President-Elect Trump to receive a congratulatory telephone call from President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan, a nation that the One China Policy of 1979 had pushed into the background. China itself lodged a formal complaint with the United States. The informality of the Trump response was as controversial as his violation of the western One China Policy.²⁵

In mid-December, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stirred the pot even more with comments on controversial islands with visiting Russian President Vladimir Putin. Abe expressed an interest in resolving the decades-long controversy over the Kurile Islands.²⁶ Renewed conversations of that sort between Japan and Russia would make the continuation of the American pivot towards Asia even more complicated. However, Abe continued a delicate balancing act. At the end of December, there was a balancing move by Abe in a trip to Pearl Harbor. He actually visited Pearl Harbor, a first for a Japanese leader. In a sense, this paralleled the spring visit of President Obama to Hiroshima. The healing of emotional wounds could reinforce the centrality and en-

during nature of Japanese-American links. President-elect Trump had called for more Japanese spending on defence, and he had also criticized President Obama for visiting Hiroshima without mentioning the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.²⁷ With its economic strength and the political longevity of Prime Minister Abe, it was not surprising that Japan would play a more central role in working towards a political balance in its own home region.

China was also active in the last month of 2016, after the Trump election but prior to his installation as the new American leader. U.S. intelligence revealed that China had installed defensive capabilities on seven of its outposts in the Spratly Islands archipelago. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) had issued the report, and the evidence was based on satellite images taken and compared between June/July and November.²⁸ At about the same time, a Chinese warship captured a U.S. Navy underwater drone operating in the South China Sea. The American leadership issued a diplomatic protest and called for return of the drone.²⁹ Chinese provocations continued, as on Christmas Day China's first aircraft carrier headed out for a training exercise in the Western Pacific. As with the drone capture, the Chinese move could have been a warning to incoming President Trump, for there was the possibility that the carrier Liaoning would glide past Taiwan. Further, the presence of the carrier would project Chinese power in the highly contested South China Sea region.³⁰

Equilibrium theory and President Trump in office

The inauguration of Donald Trump meant that equilibrium theory replaced the priority of alliance partnerships as the cornerstone of American foreign policy, and this was very evident in the Asian theatre. Economists use equilibrium theory to analyse choice that consumers make. Consumers are interested in obtaining the 'most satisfaction (or utility) possible, given the budget constraint'³¹ He or she will sacrifice purchase of other goods if prices are prohibitive and the desired good within price range. Purchases will continue as long as the price continues to equal marginal benefit. When the price exceeds that standard, then attention will shift to other needed goods whose prices are within range. Thereby, the consumer meets the goal of equilibrium between expenditures or prices and the value of the desired product. In a sense, consumers are contributing to estimations of the public good as they weigh the balance or equilibrium between marginal benefits to them

and the voluntary contribution they make through purchases. As a result, the public good becomes a function of the balance between the price per unit of a good and the quantity of the good needed or demanded by the consumer.³²

Many people were startled as they watched the newly elected President hammer traditional allies such as Australia, Sweden, Mexico, Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, China, and even the NATO alliance. However, the President was not following the traditional model that allies who had shared collective security obligations for decades should continue to communicate ideas and plans in understanding ways, with broader outcomes like heightened global security the objective. His comments on allies and treatment of foreign leaders were based on assessments of what they could contribute to American objectives and how that was related to the cost of working with them. Would there continue to be an equilibrium that guaranteed that America would gain advantages in return for the expenses encountered? From the vantage point of equilibrium theory, trade-offs were central in importance, and there would be a need to downplay connections to nations and leaders whose demands and needs exceeded the American ability to pay for them. Continuous bargaining and uncertainty would characterize the American approach to allies and enemies, as marginal costs were always shifting in relation to profits gained for America.

As a result, after the Donald Trump inauguration on January 20, 2017, there were initial signs of change from the Obama Administration's pivot to Asia. Three days after assuming the Presidency, Trump pulled America out of the TPP. This was an expected development but undid all of President Obama's careful stitching work to get a coalition of nations behind the agreement. Protection of American jobs was the principal motivation of the new American President, but there was also an implicit attack on a decades-long commitment of the United States to lower trade barriers when possible. The negotiations between the United States and its allies had taken eight years, but the Obama Administration had never submitted it to Congress, in fear of its defeat.³³

The Trump Administration also openly broke with earlier policy towards China in early February. They supported Japan's claim to tiny uninhabited islands over which China also claimed sovereignty. Their name in Japanese was Senkaku and in Chinese Diaoyu. The new Secretary of Defense James Mattis had made the claim on behalf of Japan during his initial trip to Asia. Trump support for an Obama Adminis-

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tration decision to deploy a missile defence system to South Korea also received criticism from Chinese leaders.³⁴ On February 19, the Trump Administration sent the USS Carl Vinson again into the South China Sea. China claimed sovereignty over the area, and they were critical of the naval intervention. Freedom of navigation was the value stressed by American leaders such as the new Secretary of Defense, but that clashed with Chinese sovereignty claims.³⁵

President Trump met in March and April with two principal Asian leaders whom he had earlier criticized. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from Japan came to Mar-a-Lago in March and the two repaired some of the earlier damage due to President Trump's remarks about Japan's low level of defence spending. In early April, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the same Trump Winter White House, and they discussed trade practices as well as regional defence issues. It was no doubt helpful to the discussion that President Trump had returned to the traditional U.S. 'One China' policy after receipt of the controversial phone call from the Taiwanese leader.³⁶

During the same time period, concern about the threat from North Korea remained high on the President's agenda. On March 6, North Korea had launched four ballistic missiles that travelled 600 miles into the Sea of Japan. Several weeks later, on March 22 they had attempted another launch that was a failure. Just prior to the Trump/Xi meeting in Florida, Pyongyang test-fired another ballistic missile into the Sea of Japan. One result was the American decision to redirect the aircraft carrier strike group headed by the USS Carl Vinson directly towards the Korean Peninsula.³⁷ Clearly, a show of force on both sides intimidated at escalation of tensions that would require new bargaining skills by the American President either to restore the previous equilibrium or create a new one. North Korean leaders were sharply critical of the American strike on the Syrian air base after use by the regime of chemical weapons. In part, this may have reflected their fear of a similar U.S. attack on their territory. There was also awkwardness in the fact that the attack occurred at precisely the time that President Trump was hosting a dinner in Mar-a-Lago for President Xi and his entourage.³⁸

Vice President Mike Pence made a 10-day trip to Asia in mid-April in an effort to firm up support with key allies in part due to the increased threat from North Korea. In Seoul, he commented that the threat from the north underlined the continued importance of the American-South Korean defence linkage. Other key nations on his itinerary

included Japan, Indonesia, and Australia.³⁹ In part, the meeting with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull aimed at re-establishing good communications after the spat between the Prime Minister and President Trump over an Obama-era refugee resettlement plan. However, the two leaders also discussed cooperation with an eye on convincing China to put more pressure on North Korea to surrender its nuclear weapons program.⁴⁰

There are a number of potential steps that might have the effect of containing the threat from North Korea. Full implementation of the November 2016 U.N. Security Council sanctions would be one step in the process. Those sanctions had the intention of limiting sales of North Korea's sale of conventional weapons and natural resources. A second step would be limitations on the Chinese supply of large trucks used in North Korea's transport of missiles. Third, there was some evidence that Chinese companies may have provided North Korea with industrial equipment and materials that included mercury and lithium hydroxide. Given the role of lithium 6 in nuclear weapons production, there was perhaps a need to put pressure on China to control these types of exports across the border. Fourth, it might be possible to push for a ban on the dispatch of North Korean workers into foreign countries, with their profits going back home to help fund the nuclear program. The November U.N. Resolution had called for vigilance over this type of activity, but a ban would be even stronger. A fifth step would entail a U.S. orchestrated coalition of nations that would all impose tough sanctions on company officials outside North Korea who did business with leading figures in North Korea and China on military production. Sixth, access to the U.S. financial system in banking could be restricted to any entities that did business in North Korea. This would be an extreme measure but would capture the connections between the foreign companies and their North Korean counterparts.⁴¹

Any of the above steps would fit into the parameters of equilibrium theory, for there would be a calculation of the costs of permitting North Korean nuclear developments to proceed against the backdrop of reluctance by the global community to move towards an even deeper conflict with the pariah state. Work between the Trump Administration and foreign partners could establish measurements of probabilities of those two eventualities, and decisions about which steps to utilize would thereby be evident. In that way, equilibrium theory

could drive the decisions, but it would do so in a way that intermeshed with traditional alliance formations and patterns of doing business.

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Theoretical implications of the American foreign policy transition towards the Asia-Pacific: future expectations in light of past political patterns

Pertinent theoretical components of American foreign policy in the Asian setting

Over time a key underlying continuity in American strategy towards Asia has been the devotion to liberal internationalism. In fact, such a priority has been a consistent one since the creation of the new world order after 1945. At that time, there was an emphasis on creation of a 'loose array of multinational institutions' in an effort to promote both world order and American interests.⁴² This 'transformational grand strategy' served American national interests in later decades with mixed results. Its idealistic thrust has entailed alliance partnerships with like-minded Asian states but also serious efforts to expand the network of liberal-democratic nations within the region.⁴³ Attempts to expand this philosophical framework to the northern part of the Korean Peninsula in the 1950s and the counterpart strategy towards Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s were expressions of the liberal democratic thrust. In spite of the frustrations with those two efforts, recent approaches to Russia and China reflect the same central directive. However, such efforts regarding those two superpowers call for caution, and some observers admonish that it may be better to rely on liberal democratic allies in the region such as South Korea and Japan to take the lead on these kinds of overtures.⁴⁴

It is also the case that the theory of realism, a rival to that of liberal internationalism, may offer supplementary possibilities for preserving the influence of the United States in the Asian theatre. As Richard Haass articulates this view, he comments on the appropriateness of the 'World Order 1.0' as focusing exclusively on the 'protection and prerogatives of states.' However, he concludes that 'World Order 2.0,' with its emphasis on sovereign rights but also 'those states' obligations to others' better fits the current Asian setting at the moment. This latter perspective is one that rests on the realistic proposition that 'sovereign obligation' is the most reliable and trusted Asian strategy for the near future. Its features entail a respect for existing borders and a reluc-

tance to use force to either push them back or transform their existing contours.⁴⁵ Stronger foundations for promotion of world order may be a result. It is also possible to fit this realistic theoretical thrust into attempts over time to establish something of an American Empire in Asia. Such conceptions are softened by definitions that include thinking about such aspirations as a 'relational social totality embedded within global capitalism.'⁴⁶ suggests that such an approach represents a materialistic perspective that links American realism to its central role in the development of capitalist economies in Asia and elsewhere.

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Additional theoretical approaches can help clarify the general evolution of American policy ambitions and prospects in Asia. Preservation of the credibility of the United States has been a guiding force since the end of World War II.⁴⁷ Such a motivation may have had much to do with involvements in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, but it may also have been a guiding force in post-Cold War interventions such as the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Others have even suggested that the Kennan immediate post-Cold War recommendation of a 'strategy of containment and deterrence' may be useful in anticipating future policy towards North Korea.⁴⁸ It is certainly true that outside powers have isolated that nation and confined its political influence within the borders of the Korean peninsula. However, its acquisition of nuclear weapons that can reach well beyond their own region, have made deterrence of the regime and its military forces problematic. Containment has worked in the political sense but not in the military aspect. Theory has also guided consideration of the concrete role of the United States and its diplomatic/military strength in the region. With the postwar order 'in decline,' it is in part up to America to clarify what its own 'responsible behavior' would be in the region as new power centers and balances emerge.⁴⁹ In that sense, the transition from President Obama to President Trump has been puzzling to many interested elites and observers in the region. With President Trump having articulated an 'America First' perspective, other American key publics have called for preservation of the nation's commitment to a liberal international order in which the United States preserves firm ties to Asia-Pacific nations that possess 'common values, shared interest, and mutual vulnerabilities.'⁵⁰

All of these theoretical expressions bring to the table important questions of the meaning of President Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' as well as its aftermath. Following this nuanced policy shift, a series of ag-

gressive challenges to American policy took place in and near the region. In 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine and turned it into a new Republic with their own political systems. At about the same time, China began its acquisition of contested islands in the South China Sea. After coming to power in 2011, Kim Jong Un in North Korea commenced his waving of nuclear capabilities and threats to many in the outside world. Thus, the Obama 'pivot' entailed quite different consequences than the expectations of dynamic new trade partners and a setting aside of the troubles further west in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Arab Spring nations of the Middle East. In fact, the Obama Administration soon renamed its new thrust the Asian 'rebalance' strategy.⁵¹ Their focus was two-fold, to include a balance that upgraded the importance of Asia in relation to traditional ties to Europe and also to incorporate a role as a potential balancer within the Asian region itself. The fact that a perception developed that the pivot 'came up short' led in part to the eventual Trump emphasis on a much more America-focused effort in the region.⁵²

The challenge from China and application of political theories

Proposals abound for the application of key theories to the challenge of rising Chinese power in East Asia. This is an important and profound change from a past in which China had enormous power but contented itself with a self-perception as the Middle Kingdom that was mainly self-contained and was the place to which other less significant players came to pay respects. Even during the early communist period, there was little evidence of Chinese aggression towards its neighbors, particularly in comparison with the adventurousness of the Soviet Union along its border. In the recent period of more active Chinese moves abroad, there has been a mixed response by neighboring states. For example, the maritime ASEAN nations have been more sharply critical of Chinese moves in the South China Sea than have been the mainland members of that organization. To a certain extent, regime changes can change those postures, for the rise of President Duterte in the Philippines led to a strategy by that maritime nation of the wooing of China after 2016. One result of that duality has been that China felt empowered to play one Asian nation off against another, a classic illustration of the use of the balance of power theory.⁵³

The proliferation of regional organizations, both informal and formal, has also shaken pre-existing global power structures. In the late

Cold War and in its immediate aftermath, the United States, the European Union (EU), and Japan made up a 'triad' of power that possessed considerable power to enact changes and create reactions within the Asian region. However, the rise of China as well as India has led to a more complex multi-polarity of influences within the region. APEC, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and others add to the policy mix and stimulate the growth of additional regional connections that 'exist *alongside* and *against*' American goals and interests.⁵⁴ Efforts to contain bold Chinese moves to declare its sovereignty over the land formations within its 'nine-dash line' benefit from attention to the states actually threatened by such claims. Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam all have competing claims with China over those territorial waters and islands. All five states welcome limited American initiatives to assist them in preventing Chinese hegemony in the turbulent waters of the South China Sea. A more forceful American strategy in the area might include concrete efforts to halt Chinese land reclamation, their building of new infrastructure, and the ensuing militarization of facilities on the islands themselves.⁵⁵

It is also possible to be much more specific about potential American policy steps that might utilize its 'network of alliances and partnerships in Asia' to both protect American interests and channel China's ambitions in more positive directions. A bolder U.S. strategy could preserve the existing network of Asian alliances, utilize sanctions against Chinese industries on a selective basis, acknowledge the pluralism of interests with the Chinese political system, push open the door to more communications with China, and avoid actions that might needlessly exacerbate the existing antagonisms in the region towards China.⁵⁶ Such a multifaceted strategy might well maintain the traditional American presence in the region in a political form rather than primarily one that rests on military capabilities. Such an approach would also have the potential to preserve the essence of past political patterns, while meeting expectations for policy adjustments in the near future.

Containment of and responsiveness to Chinese interests and initiatives rests on the assumption that China has become a 'disruptive power but not a revolutionary one' as it was in the days of Mao's leadership. China is not part of the liberal-democratic ethos that much of the West shares and it has promoted competitors to existing alliances.⁵⁷ From that perspective, a meaningful and coherent American balanc-

ing strategy is a necessity. However, concerns about the spreading of Chinese communist values are no longer a Western assumption, as it was during the heart and heat of the Cold War. One illustration of the deeply changed Chinese position is its advocacy of economic openness at the Davos Conference of global powers in January 2017.⁵⁸ Their approach at the same meeting in early 2018 was parallel and even timelier in light of the presence of Donald Trump, an advocate of a tightened American policy, at the same meeting. No American President had personally attended that important global economic conference since 2000. With the involvement and changes of the new American President in traditional Asian policies, China had a golden opportunity to play on American inconsistency and increase its own influence in the regional balance of power.⁵⁹ Realist theory is also an important factor in the anticipation of future expectations about that critical balance. As Joseph S. Nye, Jr.⁶⁰ reminds, the U.S. still ranks 1st in the world on 'soft power' capabilities, while China ranks 28th. Further, China's economy is 61% that of the size of the American. Thus, American prospects in the Asia-Pacific region are not gloomy but require a very adept and consistent pattern of policy-making.

Key security issues

In light of the altered challenge from China, it is incumbent upon the United States to offer its 'credible and demonstrable force' on behalf of the threatened ASEAN nations. Without the leverage of American power in support of their national interests and security, those nations would have no choice except to accommodate Chinese demands.⁶¹ Since U.S. military spending was in fact 41% of the world's total outlay, the use of their enormous reserves as a deterrent would be impressive.⁶² Such utilization of American security capabilities could include military exercises but also 'soft power' components such as diplomatic meetings and pressures that would not entail the use of force.⁶³ However, America cannot act along in the Asia-Pacific region, and stronger security partnerships with Indonesia, Myanmar, and Vietnam will be particularly significant in the future. Each of those three nations presents a particular challenge to American values, whether it be the authoritarian features of rule in Myanmar or the continued communist rule in Vietnam. Indonesia, with its huge population and Muslim majority, has many domestic challenges in addition to the desire to help control Chinese ambition. However, their pragmatic need for se-

curity and even survival pushes them closer to the protectiveness of American security capacities.⁶⁴ Further, U.S. support for Brunei, the Philippines and Taiwan is vital as well, for they all have overlapping claims with China in the tumultuous arena of the South China Sea. Strengthened alliances with Japan and Australia would enhance the ring of alliance partners that have containment of Chinese ambition as a common concern.⁶⁵

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It must be admitted that pan-Asian organizations that also challenge American-led trade initiatives have emerged in recent years, and that adds a mist of confusion to the single-minded effort to develop alliance networks that center their efforts on managing relations with China. One is the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which the United States is no longer part of, and another is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In 2013, China initiated the Belt and Road Infrastructure Project, and that is a tempting fit or model for certain Asian nations. It also entails an exercise of China's economic muscle that is competitive with that of the United States.⁶⁶ In that scenario, it may be possible for the United States to create 'ad hoc groups of states' that can focus on single issues instead of trying to cope with the entirety of the Chinese challenge. One result of that approach may be to provide more of a proactive and initiating momentum to American policy in the region, which could counteract a certain tendency by U.S. leaders mainly to react to Chinese moves along their vast borders. It is also true that the advent of Donald Trump into the Presidency in 2017 has stirred the already boiling waters of the region. Sometime adversaries like China may desire to test the new administration in ways that differ from the past, while traditional allies in the region may be more uncertain about American intentions.⁶⁷

Impact of the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency

Amidst the theoretical swirl of pivot or re-balance tactics, realist theory, the overall balance of power, the spread of liberal democratic influences, the emergence of World Order 2 with its emphasis on sovereign obligations, containment, and the protection of American credibility; what is the impact of the advent of the Trump Administration that emerged at the beginning of 2017? A number of observers have maintained that one result of the announced 'America First' campaign will be an accelerated movement of affected nations also

to put themselves first.⁶⁸ Others have affirmed that anticipating his responses to policy crises ahead of time will be very difficult or next to impossible.⁶⁹ Yahri-Milo⁷⁰ points out that some have characterized the Trump approach as ‘Rationality-Irrationality.’ His comments both about the North Korean leadership and about Chinese policy moves have at times involved seemingly apparent and sudden emotional reactions, with the result that he has undercut the American reputation for possessing a consistent ‘signaling reputation.’

For many Asian leaders and interested publics, the theoretical impact of this sudden change in American policy has been to end apparently the American traditional role as the ‘guarantor of the liberal world order.’ President Trump’s demonstrated indifference to identical values within the political and social setting of the United States reinforces that growing and collective picture. American alliances designed for containment of a variety of foes have become shaky, with their partners no longer able to perceive American guidance within the framework of an ordered strategic environment.⁷¹ Some analysts of the new American President have gone even further to suggest that he represents and contributes to a ‘foundational rupture in the United States.’ American elites that have been in power for decades have less legitimacy than they did in the years prior to his inauguration, while the representative institutions within have become to sway and even crack.⁷² As a result, the American state no longer possesses the abiding and historical ‘globalist orientation’ that has been the heart and soul either of its re-balance under Obama towards Asia or even the sovereign obligation contract that was part of the World Order 2 perspective.

Trade relations are part of the issue in this new season of complexity and confusion, for President Trump as so far taken ‘a more mercantilist, or zero-sum’ approach to trade questions. As a result, the long-standing commitment of the United States to open trade with its attendant supporting policy steps is in question, and that changes the traditional American multilateral approach to trade and lowers the credibility of policy statements and intentions from the western side of the Atlantic Ocean.⁷³ This picture of new American economic commitments, in combination with the other modifications of traditional theoretical approaches, sets the state for a very uncertain policy in regard to the growing security threat that emanates from North Korea. The traditionally cautious commitment to a steady strategy of deterrence that characterizes the long-standing western approach to

nuclear questions yields to unpredictability with its intensification of anxiety throughout the Asia-Pacific Region.⁷⁴

Containing the threat from North Korea

One writer has characterized the explosion of dialogue between the two Presidents of the United States and North Korea as constituting a new Missile Crisis that compares with the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Unfortunately, the current conflict involves two unpredictable leaders rather than only the Cuban leader Castro in the earlier tension-ridden situation.⁷⁵ American policy options exist but have shrunk in the Trump Administration. Working to 'leverage Chinese involvement' may help to use the considerable power of that state to contain the aggressiveness of North Korea, and provision by America of intelligence on the matter to China may even be a help.⁷⁶ Use of financial tactics against North Korea may assist in containment and help to restore the reputation and credibility of the United States on the issue. For instance, the United States in 2016 responded to the fourth nuclear test of Pyongyang with the freezing of financial assets of two hundred North Korean entities. As the crisis has intensified, the Trump Administration has considered and enacted even more sanctions that penalize and severely limit the financial transactions within and from the pariah Asian state.⁷⁷

One observer proposed that the United States has three military options in the crisis with North Korea. They include 'acceptance, military intervention, or more creative diplomacy.' He specifically proposes that North Korean leaders may consider a halt to testing of warheads and a freeze on existing nuclear capabilities in return for sanctions relief and a formal agreement that ends the Korean War.⁷⁸ Given the deep involvement in the Korean War from 1950-53, it would enhance American strength and respect to call for a conference that would officially end that war.⁷⁹ It is also the case that other affected nations such as South Korea have openings to take creative action as well. President Moon Jae-in of South Korea in his early months in office accomplished a limited number of joint activities with North Korea in the February 2018 Olympics Games held in Pyeongchang, South Korea. They included a march together behind the same flag in the opening ceremonies, a joint women's ice hockey team, a large North Korean cheering squad, an orchestra that played several concerts, and a taekwondo demonstration team.⁸⁰ Such a move by South Korea is reminiscent of the early

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1970s 'ping pong' diplomacy that helped pave the way for more formal diplomatic moves between the United States and Communist China. Whether it will have the same effect will depend in large measure on the willingness and ability of the Trump Administration to begin to engage with allies in the ways outlined by pre-existing theoretical approaches to the dynamic Asia-Pacific Region!

Conclusion

Was there an overall vision behind the pivot of the Obama Administration towards Asia after the wind-down of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, or was that policy re-orientation simply an expression of the desire for a fresh start after the exhaustion that accompanied difficult conflicts further west?

On the one hand, there were clear economic and defence policy goals to which America could provide new energy. Expanded trade with the growing economies in India and China would be one way of coping with the need to pull the United States out of the recession that hit in 2007 and continued in the following years. In that sense, expanded trade agreements might jump-start the American economy and bring new jobs to the domestic economy. At the same time, there was a need for an expanded defence focus against regional and global dangers that had taken on an ominous tone in the region. The emergence of Kim Jong Un in North Korea in 2011 had brought the issue of their nuclear capability to the fore in a way that had not been true under his father, whose policies often seemed to be random reactions to on-going events. Chinese thrusts in the South China Sea provided security risks to U.S. allies in the region such as the Philippines, South Korea, Japan, and perhaps Vietnam. American contributions to resolving those threats could be significant ones, if U.S. leaders possessed the time and energy to make Asian issues a top priority.

On the other hand, within America there was exhaustion with more than a decade of war after the 9/11 attacks and a corresponding hope to focus on domestic needs for the near future. Thus, there would not have been much excitement about new ventures in a recently ignored region. However, there was a desire of most Americans that their nation has leverage and influence in its foreign policy. With results so nebulous in the Middle East and in the nations where Americans had fought so long, the move to Asia might have seemed like a clean and welcome break. Unfortunately, the pivot to Asia might have been sim-

ply a turning of the American head without a carefully planned agenda behind it. Multinational discussions within the G-7, G-20, ASEAN, and APEC offered the beginnings of a plan, but creation of the TPP was quite problematic and did not clearly link American domestic needs to cooperation within that framework. The new emphasis on Asia bore the elements of fresh thinking, but the policy goals were quite fragmented and hinged to the emergent threats of the moment. In contrast, the planning for the Afghan War after 9/11 was more organized in terms of rallying the American public and establishing links with allies who promised to make their own contributions to the effort. Perhaps the War on Terror nurtured a more coherent and focused security response than did the Asian emphases on economic prospects and containment of unrelated new threats from North Korea and China.

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Unfortunately, the end of the Obama Administration came before a full-fledged and coordinated new Asian policy could emerge. The initial signals that flashed from President-elect and, then, President Trump were unconvincing about prospects that a coherent policy would follow-up on the pivot to Asia. He ended American participation in planning for the TPP right away and then provided evidence that he did not take the One China policy that the West had supported, very seriously. He did host the Japanese Prime Minister in Washington and Florida in the first month of his administration, and perhaps that was a signal that he would take some traditional alliances in the region seriously. However, the evidence of a coordinated policy towards Asia that might flesh out the Obama pivot was limited. Such coordination might take the form of traditional alliance politics. More likely, its framework would approximate equilibrium theory with its continued measurement of the rising costs of chosen policies against the price of alternatives that might prove to be cheaper. In either scenario, serious observers would need to wait and hope that the new foreign policy team would come up with an Asian strategy that was more clear and coherent than the 'America First' slogan of the Trump campaign!



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