

**The Asia Pivot as a Strategy of Foreign Policy: A source of peace or a harbinger of conflict?**

**Abstract**

*The Obama Administration's Asia Pivot strategy has sought to strengthen the United States' (US) bilateral security alliances in Asia, intensify working relationships with regional states and the US, and boost regional trade and investment. This paper investigates whether the Obama administration's Asia Pivot has fulfilled its strategy of enhancing peace and cooperation in the Pacific, or whether it has in fact magnified the potential for regional conflict. In doing so, it seeks an answer to the following, interrelated questions: What have been the costs and benefits of the Asia Pivot strategy for the United States and regional actors? Is the Asia Pivot strategy an example of foreign policy success, or failure? For the purpose of this paper, foreign policy is understood as a multi-dimensional concept that takes into account degree of goal attainment, the costs to the user; the costs to the target; and an identification of who has most at stake in the issue. In doing so it will argue that the costs of the Asia Pivot strategy have largely outweighed the benefits, thus having a negative impact on peace in the Asia Pacific.*

**Introduction**

In an address to the Australian Parliament on 17 November 2011, President Barack Obama first formally outlined his Asia Pacific foreign policy strategy.<sup>1</sup> This strategy reflected a 'broader shift'<sup>2</sup> away from a focus on the Middle East, to what President Obama referred to as 'the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region'.<sup>3</sup> As the world's fastest growing region, President Obama confirmed that he had:

Made a deliberate and strategic decision – as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with our allies and friends.<sup>4</sup>

President Obama highlighted five core underlying principles, which would shape the United States' strategic shift towards Asia. The first was an emphasis on the United States' commitment to security in the region. This would be maintained by a strong regional military presence, strengthened alliances with Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asian states, the allocation of resources to project power and deter threats, and a pledge that reductions in US defense spending would not come at the expense of the Asia Pacific.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament, Parliament House Canberra, Australia. The White House Office of the Press Secretary, November 17, 2011. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Second, President Obama confirmed that the US would reengage with regional organisations, most notably the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Third, the United States would continue its effort to build a cooperative relationship with China, by seeking more opportunities for greater communication to avoid miscalculation.<sup>6</sup> Fourth, President Obama pledged to advance US-Asia shared prosperity, through free and fair trade, and economic partnerships such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).<sup>7</sup> Finally, President Obama reiterated the United States' support for fundamental rights of every human being.

President Obama's address to the Australian parliament was not the first instance that this policy had been presented. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first outlined the Administration's pivot strategy in her October 2011 article "America's Pacific Century," written for *Foreign Policy*.<sup>8</sup> Here, Clinton stated that 'the United States stands at a pivot point', and that a 'strategic turn to the [Asia] region fits logically into...[the United States'] overall global effort to secure and sustain America's global leadership'.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to assess the foreign policy decision-making and implementation of the Asia Pivot. In order to do so, it will address the following, interrelated research questions:

1. Is the Pivot an example of foreign policy success, or failure?
2. What have been the costs and benefits of the Pivot for the US and regional actors?

By using an analytical framework designed to compare policy options, this analysis will highlight the successes and failures of the Pivot strategy. In doing so, it will seek to demonstrate the wider implications of foreign policy implementation for state credibility, which if damaged can adversely affect regional and international peace and security.

### **The definition and dimensions of foreign policy 'success'**

In order to test the success of the Asia pivot as a foreign policy strategy, David Baldwin's analytical framework as detailed in his 2000 *Annual Review of Political Science* article "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy" has been adopted.<sup>10</sup> Baldwin uses a common set of concepts to help facilitate 'policy-relevant foreign policy evaluation', and clearly specify the conditions for success or failure.<sup>11</sup>

As Baldwin notes, estimating success or failure becomes challenging because the very concept of success is so 'slippery'.<sup>12</sup> However, his loose definition is a useful starting point for our analysis, where success is defined in terms of favourable or desired policy outcomes, without excessive costs. Any assessment of success therefore relies upon a consideration of both costs and benefits.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011.  
<http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> David A Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," *Annual Review Political Science*, Vol.3 (2000), pp. 167-82

<sup>11</sup> Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," p. 167

<sup>12</sup> Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," p. 171

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

'Success' is understood as a multi-dimensional concept, that takes into account the following dimensions of success to which foreign policy judgments may be made:<sup>14</sup>

- Effectiveness/degree of goal attainment, whereby policy makers pursue multiple goals with respect to multiple targets. Despite this 'success is often measured solely in terms of primary goals and targets'.<sup>15</sup>
- Costs to the user. Of relevance here is the extent to which maximising goal satisfaction was efficient, and exceeded any costs incurred.<sup>16</sup>
- Costs to the target, where 'the higher the costs for noncompliance that an instrument of statecraft inflicts on the target, the more successful it is'.<sup>17</sup>
- Identification of who has most at stake in the issue, the user? Or the target? As Baldwin highlights, 'the bigger the stakes, the more valuable is the degree of achievement and the more successful is the influence attempt'.<sup>18</sup>

Importantly, failure to ask all of these questions can lead to serious policy mistakes.<sup>19</sup> The ensuing analysis will use Baldwin's analytical framework to evaluate the success or failure of the Asia Pivot strategies' five core underlying principles. It will then consider some of the wider implications of the policy for state credibility and regional security.

### **Analysis of the Pivot as a strategy of foreign policy**

Before evaluating the pivot strategy, it is important to note that this analysis is based on the Obama administration's *stated* foreign policy goals in Asia. Any unstated goals, such as countering the rise of China and/or maintaining the regional balance of power, have been omitted from the analysis due to a lack of supporting empirical data.

#### United States' commitment to security in the region

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Obama administration's pivot strategy, and the most controversial, was the renewed commitment to enhancing security in the region. It began with a 2011 announcement to expand US military presence in the region, with a deployment of 2,500 Marines to a de facto base in Darwin, Australia.<sup>20</sup> The United States Navy also announced an intention to station several new coastal combat ships at Singapore's naval facility.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, it was announced that the United States and Singapore had agreed on the first deployment of the US P8 Poseidon spy plane.<sup>22</sup> The Obama administration also sought out new areas of military cooperation with the Philippines, including an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement

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<sup>14</sup> Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," pp.173-176

<sup>15</sup> Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," p.173

<sup>16</sup> Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," p.174

<sup>17</sup> Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," p.175

<sup>18</sup> Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," p.176

<sup>19</sup> Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," p.180.

<sup>20</sup> Jackie Calmes, "A US Marine Base for Australia Irritates China," *New York Times*, November 16, 2011. Found at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/17/world/asia/obama-and-gillard-expand-us-australia-military-ties.html>

<sup>21</sup> Andrea Shalal-Esa, "US Navy eyes stationing ships in Singapore," *Reuters*, December 15, 2011. Found at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/usa-navy-asia-idUSL3E7NG06I20111216>

<sup>22</sup> David Brunnstrom, "US agrees spy plane deployment in Singapore amid China tensions," *Reuters*, December 7, 2015. Found at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-singapore-southchinasea-idUSKBN0TQ2K720151207>

(EDCA) signed in 2014, which allows US troops and equipment wide access to Philippines' military bases.<sup>23</sup>

In a January 2012 'strategy review', the Obama administration endorsed the continued deployment of 11 aircraft carriers (although deployments and maintenance issues have often reduced this number).<sup>24</sup> The strategy also supported continued production of attack submarines.<sup>25</sup> In an effort to maintain a visible presence in the region, particularly around the waters of the South China Sea, the United States has engaged in a number of Freedom of Navigation patrols, including sailing warships within 12 nautical miles of features claimed by China. The United States' Department of Defense also sought to enhance and diversify US power projection capabilities through the development of a strategic initiative called the Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept. The purpose of the ASB was 'to increase the joint operating effectiveness of US naval and Air Force units, particularly in operations for countering anti-access strategies'.<sup>26</sup> With a focus on equipping the US armed forces to effectively deter threats posed by advanced weapon systems, the doctrine appeared to represent a plan for countering China's enhanced military capabilities.<sup>27</sup>

The costs of these initiatives for the United States should not be underestimated. If China was to perceive an enhanced US presence in Asia as a threat, it could risk sparking an arms race and regional security dilemma. As it stands, China has responded to these initiatives by accelerating its military modernization, in addition to the pace of island-building in the South China Sea.<sup>28</sup> China's actions to counter the US presence seem to have come at little cost, with the United States failing to provide a robust response to Chinese expansionism. Whilst in many ways this has helped prevent an escalation of conflict in Asia, it has left regional allies unsure of the reliability of the United States' commitment to regional security.

#### Building a cooperative relationship with China

From the outset, the Obama administration emphasised the importance of developing a diplomatic partnership with China. In 2009, President Obama stated that the US does 'not seek to contain China's rise. On the contrary, we welcome China as a strong and prosperous and successful member of the community of nations'.<sup>29</sup> He emphasised the need to forge closer ties to address a host of international challenges, of mutual interest to the United States and China. These included lifting the global economy out of a recession, combatting climate change and seeking to counter nuclear proliferation.

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<sup>23</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, "A Big Deal? US, Philippines Agree First 'Bases' Under New Defence Pact," *The Diplomat*, March 19, 2016. Found at: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/a-big-deal-us-philippines-agree-first-bases-under-new-defense-pact/>

<sup>24</sup> Richard Sisk, "US Navy Down to Five Aircraft Carriers at Sea, None in the Mideast," *Military.com*, 4 November 2015. Found at: <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2015/11/04/us-navy-down-to-five-aircraft-carriers-at-sea-none-the-mideast.html>

<sup>25</sup> Mark E. Manyin et al, "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "Rebalancing" Towards Asia," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress* 7-5700, March 28, 2012, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Manyin et al, "Pivot to the Pacific?" p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Amitai Etzioni, "The Air-Sea Battle 'concept': A Critique," *International Politics*, Vol.51, No.5 (2014), pp. 577-596

<sup>28</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, "Chinese Strategy and Military Modernisation in 2016: A Comparative Analysis," *CSIS Final Review Edition*, December 5, 2016. Found at: [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161208\\_Chinese\\_Strategy\\_Military\\_Modernization\\_2016.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161208_Chinese_Strategy_Military_Modernization_2016.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Barack Obama, "Obama answers questions from Fudan University students and the internet," *America.gov*, 16 November 2009. Found at: <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/November/20091116095135eafas0.900326.html>.

On these fronts, the Obama administration had mixed results. Positive steps were made towards a joint response to the threat posed by climate change. President Obama and President Xi Jinping met at the Sunnylands retreat in 2013, where they signed an agreement to cooperate on eliminating hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs).<sup>30</sup> In November 2014, the US and China released a Joint Announcement on Climate Change and Clean Energy Cooperation.<sup>31</sup> This was followed in September 2015 and March 2016 by Joint Presidential Statements on Climate Change,<sup>32</sup> and the announcement that both the US and China would ratify the Paris Climate Change Agreement in September 2016. The United States and China also displayed a degree of cooperation whilst negotiating the Iran nuclear deal. Both President Obama and President Jinping praised each other for their role in the negotiations, with the Chinese President highlighting the close communication and coordination between the two.<sup>33</sup>

However, not all cooperation attempts between the United States and China have been successful. Despite a number of agreements to cooperate in restraining North Korea from developing nuclear and ballistic missiles, the feeling from within Washington was that China was not doing enough to leverage North Korea.<sup>34</sup> Economic cooperation also reflected a degree of competition, with China left out of the TPP, and the United States refusing to join the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China has also been forced to respond to the United States' pivot strategy, which has undoubtedly strained cooperation between the two. As Ross notes, "the new US policy unnecessarily compounds Beijing's insecurities" in the region.<sup>35</sup> China has responded with its own regional initiatives, including expansion and military build-up in disputed waters in the South China Sea, a renewed diplomatic charm offensive in East and Southeast Asia, and \$900 billion of planned investments linked with its 'One Belt One Road' project.<sup>36</sup> In many respects, these initiatives are in direct competition with the Obama administration's pivot strategy, and have failed to enhance cooperation between the two states. This has negatively impacted on the degree of US goal attainment, whilst inflicting costs on both parties.

#### Advance US-Asia shared prosperity

The advancement of US-Asia shared prosperity has had a similar mixed success, and has been one of the more controversial policies of the Obama administration's pivot. A number of bilateral deals were struck between the United States and Asian countries. These included a free trade deal with South Korea in 2011, commercial deals with Vietnam worth \$16 billion, a \$21.7 billion jet deal between Boeing and Indonesia's largest private carrier, Lion Air, several commercial

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Economy, "The Xi-Obama Summit: As good as expected – and maybe even better," *The Atlantic*, June 11, 2013. Found at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/06/the-xi-obama-summit-as-good-as-expected-and-maybe-even-better/276733/>

<sup>31</sup> The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "US-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change and Clean Energy Cooperation," November 11, 2014. Found at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/11/fact-sheet-us-china-joint-announcement-climate-change-and-clean-energy-c>

<sup>32</sup> The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "US-China Climate Change Cooperation Outcomes," September 3, 2016. Found at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/03/fact-sheet-us-china-cooperation-climate-change>

<sup>33</sup> Yang Jiemian, "US-China Cooperation on Iran Signals a New Day in Global Governance," *The World Post*. Found at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yang-jiemian/us-china-iran-\\_b\\_7965180.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yang-jiemian/us-china-iran-_b_7965180.html)

<sup>34</sup> David E Sanger and Choe Sang-Hun, "US Prods China on North Korea, Saying Soft Approach has Failed," *The New York Times*, January 7, 2016. Found at: [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/08/world/asia/us-tells-china-that-soft-approach-to-north-korea-has-failed.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/08/world/asia/us-tells-china-that-soft-approach-to-north-korea-has-failed.html?_r=0)

<sup>35</sup> Robert Ross, "The Problem With the Pivot," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.91, No.6 (November/December 2012), p.72.

<sup>36</sup> Tom Hancock, "China encircles the world in One Belt, One Road strategy," *Financial Times*, May 4, 2017. Found at: <https://www.ft.com/content/0714074a-0334-11e7-aa5b-6bb07f5c8e12>

deals between Malaysian and American companies worth \$2 billion, and deals worth around \$10 billion with India, including an engine contract for General Electric.

Despite these deals, it is clear that the cornerstone of President Obama's economic policy in Asia was the TPP. The regional trade agreement, signed by a number of Asian member states, including Brunei, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Japan, was designed to lower tariffs to promote economic growth, enhance innovation and productivity, reduce poverty and promote transparency.<sup>37</sup> Despite China's willingness to consider joining the TPP, it seems clear that the purpose of the TPP was to counter China's increasing economic power in the region. As president Obama confirmed, "When more than 95 percent of our potential customers live outside our borders, we can't let countries like China write the rules of the global economy".<sup>38</sup> This only served to enhance China's fears that the United States was seeking to contain it. Additionally, the TPP received little domestic support, even within the Democrat party. It was unclear whether president Obama would have succeeded in convincing Congress to pass the deal, and it subsequently became a target in the 2016 election campaign, with both Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump opposing the agreement.

Ultimately, with the election of Donald Trump, the TPP has fallen by the wayside. Abandoning the trade deal has left signatories let down by the United States' lack of commitment and reliability, and concerned for the future of the agreement. Whether China's own regional projects, such as the AIIB or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, will benefit from the fallout remains to be seen. The United States' inability to follow through on the TPP could cost the US significantly, with China as the main beneficiary.

#### Reengage with regional organisations

One of the more successful policies of the pivot strategy was the Obama administration's determination to reengage with regional organisations. In July 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), Southeast Asia's regional peace treaty. At a news conference before signing the agreement, Clinton declared that 'the United States is back in Southeast Asia'.<sup>39</sup> Following this, in November 2011, president Obama became the first American president to attend the East Asia Summit (EAS).<sup>40</sup>

The Obama administration sought to enhance ASEAN engagement in recognition of the organisation's increasing importance as a powerful economic actor. The 10 countries of ASEAN represent the United States' fourth-largest trading partner, with \$216 billion in two-way goods trade in 2014.<sup>41</sup> The ASEAN-US relationship was elevated to a strategic partnership in

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<sup>37</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Summary of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement," October 2015. Found at: <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2015/october/summary-trans-pacific-partnership>

<sup>38</sup> Sara Hsu, "China and the Trans-Pacific Partnership," *The Diplomat*, October 14, 2015. Found at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/china-and-the-trans-pacific-partnership/>

<sup>39</sup> Dean Yates and Arshad Mohammed, "U.S. signs ASEAN treaty, boosts engagement," *Reuters*, July 22, 2009. Found at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-usa-idUSTRE56L11920090722>

<sup>40</sup> Matt Compton, "President Obama at the East Asia Summit," *The White House*, November 18, 2011. Found at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/11/18/president-obama-east-asia-summit>

<sup>41</sup> The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: US-ASEAN Economic Engagement," November 21, 2015. Found at: <https://asean.usmission.gov/fact-sheet-u-s-asean-economic-engagement/>

November 2015.<sup>42</sup> Three months later, in February 2016, President Obama met with the ten members of ASEAN for a two-day summit at the Sunnylands estate in Rancho Mirage. This was the first US-ASEAN summit to be hosted by the United States.<sup>43</sup> On the agenda were discussions related to the strengthening of trade and economic partnerships, as well as enhanced security cooperation, particularly with respect to the South China Sea.

Overall, President Obama had a good degree of success at enhancing regional engagement. This has generally benefitted both the United States and regional states, which have gained economic and security benefits from an enhanced US role. However, it must be noted that by escalating engagement in Asia, the Obama administration has risked increasing tensions with China, which has observed the US charm offensive with a degree of mistrust and trepidation. As such, the long term costs of miscalculation could outweigh the short term benefits of enhanced engagement.

### Support for fundamental human rights

It can be argued that support for human rights, whilst an important component of the Asia Pivot, did not constitute a primary foreign policy goal. As such, United States' support for human rights in Asia following the pivot can be best described as a 'mixed bag'.<sup>44</sup> The Obama administration imposed sanctions on the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and a further fourteen of the reclusive state's top officials for human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, forced labour and torture.<sup>45</sup> This was part of Barack Obama's wider strategy to isolate and punish North Korea for its continued efforts to develop nuclear and ballistic missiles.

Obama was initially criticised for his warm embrace in January 2015 of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, once denied a visa to the United States on the grounds that he had participated in the subversion of religious-freedom.<sup>46</sup> However, this was somewhat redeemed when President Obama drew attention to human rights during his visit, calling for religious tolerance and an end to gender discrimination.<sup>47</sup> In haste to engage with Myanmar following democratic elections in 2015, the United States pledged to lift all sanctions imposed on the country. A number of human rights groups labelled this move as premature, given the slow pace of reform in the country.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in Vietnam, President Obama announced an end to the United States' arms embargo

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<sup>42</sup> Joint Statement on the ASEAN-US Strategic Partnership, 21 November 2015, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Found at: [http://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/27th-summit/statement/ASEAN-US%20Joint%20Statement\\_Adopted.pdf](http://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/27th-summit/statement/ASEAN-US%20Joint%20Statement_Adopted.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Laura Southgate, "US seeks closer ASEAN ties, spelling conflict with China," *Global Risk Insights*, 28 February 2016. Found at: <http://globalriskinsights.com/2016/02/us-seeks-closer-asean-ties-spelling-conflict-with-china/>

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Roth, "Barack Obama's Shaky Legacy on Human Rights," *Foreign Policy*, January 4, 2017. Found at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/04/barack-obamas-shaky-legacy-on-human-rights/>

<sup>45</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Obama Places Sanctions on Kim Jong-un and Other Top North Koreans for Rights Abuses," *New York Times*, July 6, 2016. Found at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/07/world/asia/obama-puts-sanctions-on-north-korean-leaders-for-human-rights-abuse.html>

<sup>46</sup> "Obama gets warm welcome from Narendra Modi in India," *The Guardian*, 25 January 2015. Found at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/25/obama-warm-welcome-india-narendra-modi>

<sup>47</sup> Peter Baker and Ellen Barry, "As Visit Ends, Obama presses India on human rights and climate change," *New York Times*, January 27, 2015. Found at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/28/world/asia/obama-ends-visit-with-challenge-to-india-on-climate-change.html>

<sup>48</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Obama pledges to lift all sanctions against Myanmar," *New York Times*, September 14, 2016. Found at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/15/world/asia/myanmar-obama.html>

in 2016. He did so, despite tangible evidence of any improvement in the country's human rights record, once so integral to US enhanced engagement with Vietnam.<sup>49</sup>

Ultimately, the Obama administration appears, in some instances at least, to have relaxed its focus on human rights in favour of enhanced relations with states that are considered of geo-strategic importance. This would not be the first time the United States has favoured geopolitics over human rights, and the benefits of this approach arguably exceed any potential costs incurred to the United States' reputation.

#### Analysis of the Pivot: A Summary

Having examined the various United States' policies that constitute the pivot strategy, it is clear there was a mixed degree of goal attainment, with excessive costs to the United States and its regional allies, and limited costs to China, which often appeared as the target of US state policies. Considering what was at stake if the US Asia pivot policy was to fail – namely United States relevance as a Pacific actor - this lack of success is surprising. At the core of the Obama administration's pivot strategy was a desire to reinforce the United States position in the Asia Pacific, by bolstering regional alliances, and enhancing regional security and joint economic prosperity. However, policies implemented to achieve these goals have in some cases had the opposite effect. The United States' efforts to commit more troops and resources in the Asia Pacific have been countered by Chinese expansion in the region, which has only succeeded in escalating regional tensions. The costs of this escalation for all parties are significant. Alliances forged by Barack Obama during this time have also floundered, with the Philippines in particular having turned toward China following the election of Rodrigo Duterte in 2016.

Economically, the Obama administration's flagship regional trade agreement has failed, and the smaller bilateral arrangements agreed during this period fail to compensate for this. Regional allies which signed onto the agreement have borne the brunt of the TPP's failure, as has the United States' image as a reliable regional actor and alliance partner. This has cost both the United States and regional states, whilst benefitting China, which will undoubtedly take advantage of the TPP's failure to push its own economic initiatives in the region. Ironically, this outcome is the opposite of what president Obama was striving for. Despite president Obama highlighting areas of mutual cooperation between the US and China, the pivot strategy has strained these great power relations. Unsure of US intentions, China has had little option but to assert its role in the region, and has done so at the pivot's expense. Regional actors, hopeful that the Asia pivot would restore a balance of power to the region, have been left unsure as to the United States continued commitment, and how this will impact their own relations with China.

#### **Wider Implications of the Asia Pivot**

Using Baldwin's framework to analyse the various components that constituted the Asia pivot, we can determine that despite some successes, the policy as a whole was not a successful strategy. Since 2009, tensions in the Asia Pacific have escalated, which has been of little benefit to the United States, its regional allies, or China. The long term costs of the pivot have yet to be seen, but raise some interesting questions about the implications for the making of foreign policy.

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<sup>49</sup> Krishnadev Calamur, "Why Obama is Overlooking Human Rights Worries in Vietnam," *The Atlantic*, May 24, 2016. Found at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/05/vietnam-arms-embargo/484112/>

In many respects, the Asia pivot was based in sound decision making,<sup>50</sup> with objectives and policies that were feasible and that would not incur excessive costs. Indeed, a number of the policies that constituted the pivot reflected a degree of foreign policy *continuity* from previous administrations, most notably the Bush administration. The TPP, which became the cornerstone of President Obama's economic policy in Asia, had its origins in the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership, which the Bush Administration joined in late 2008.<sup>51</sup> The pivot also continued with a number of Bush-era policy commitments in Asia, including rotational military deployments in the region and strengthened partnerships with India and Vietnam.<sup>52</sup>

Analysing the Obama administration's framing of the pivot suggests two factors, which may have contributed to the lack of foreign policy success. First, whilst the decision to shift focus towards Asia was arguably a sound one, the Obama administration displayed a degree of naiveté with respect to China's response. Any attempts to enhance US-China cooperation, whilst simultaneously strengthening United States' military presence in the Asia Pacific, was going to be met with some degree of resistance by China. It is conceivable that policy makers viewed this as a calculated risk, with any arising misperceptions or tensions to be resolved through diplomacy. Instead, China responded tit for tat, which escalated tensions in the Asia Pacific. Crucially, the United States lacked an effective response to this escalation.

This was compounded by errors in the implementation of the pivot as a foreign policy strategy. The Obama administration unveiled the pivot strategy in a high profile manner, through a series of presidential visits, announcements, speeches and articles.<sup>53</sup> It was clear from the outset that the pivot was to be the Obama administration's defining foreign policy for the Asia Pacific region. In doing so, the United States committed itself to an approach which would require a lot of time, attention and resources, all of which, it soon became apparent, were in short supply. The United States was not able to turn its back on the Middle East, and the Obama administration was not prepared for China's pace of militarisation in the South China Sea. The end result was a pivot which did not fully live up to its own hype. Had the Obama administration merely promised to enhance engagement with the Asia-Pacific region, without the narrative of the pivot, expectations would not have been raised, only to be repeatedly let down.

To quote Richard Haas, "in foreign policy 80 percent of life is following up", and in the case of the pivot, "inconsistent US policy was to leave the Asia-Pacific in a sort of limbo, stable on the surface but unsure of its future".<sup>54</sup> The wider implications of this are that the United States has lost its reputation as a reliable and credible regional actor. In the long run, this credibility is something which the United States might struggle to regain.

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Haas, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), p. 181

<sup>51</sup> Deborah Elms, "The Origins and Evolution of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Trade Negotiations," *Asian Survey*, vol.56, No.6 (2016), pp. 1017-1018

<sup>52</sup> Mark Manyin et al., "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "rebalancing" toward Asia," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, 7-5700, Mar 28, 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Manyin et al., "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "rebalancing" toward Asia," p.9

<sup>54</sup> Haas, *A World in Disarray*, p.181



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**Southgate, L.**

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