

WHAT WERE THE KEY CONSIDERATIONS DRIVING THE UNITED STATES' PIVOT TO ASIA?

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(Submitted May 2017; Reviewed June 2017; Accepted August 2017)

ABSTRACT

The Pivot to Asia was a strategy announced in the autumn of 2011 by the Obama administration. The Pivot was constituted by various elements: increased multilateral diplomatic engagement, economic initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and new military planning. This article argues that the strategy was driven by geostrategic concerns regarding the Asia-Pacific region, considerations of maintaining the United States' historical role as a global leader in international affairs, and long-term economic security concerns. The Pivot was a grand strategy that combined engagement with dissuasion: encouraging the People's Republic of China (PRC) to be a 'responsible stakeholder' in global politics, while discouraging it from disrupting the current status quo. However, the Pivot policy was more than a reaction to the PRC's rise. It was a strategy that aimed to secure the United States' standing in a future world where the US might have to share its powers with other new players. The Pivot strategy attempted to secure the US' standing in the world by establishing and maintaining norms in trade, military, and diplomacy that would allow the US to maintain its leadership role. To conclude, the article questions whether the US reaching out to form partnership with countries based on completely different values might diminish its soft power, that is the power of its liberal values, in the long run.

INTRODUCTION

The Asian Pivot, or the Rebalance to Asia, was a strategy officially announced in the autumn of 2011. The Obama administration announced that it would be expanding and intensifying its role in the Asia-Pacific region (Clinton, 2011; Obama, 2011b). This article examines the key considerations driving the US' Pivot to Asia. It argues that the Pivot was the Obama administration's grand strategy that was not only military, but also economic and diplomatic in orientation, driven by key considerations deriving from geostrategic factors in the Asia-Pacific region, the US' historical role, and economic security concerns. The core argument of the Pivot was that the post-Cold War US should adopt a discriminative policy towards the developing world, concentrating its energies on pivotal areas rather than spreading its attention and resources too thinly (Obama, 2015b).

Since the end of the Cold War, there had been questions about the traditional definition of 'national security'; economic security was seen as more of a threat than military security (Kennedy, 1991, p.177). Warren Cohen noted that since the Bill Clinton administration, foreign policy and economic security policy became increasingly intertwined and inseparable: the US was less interested in the use of foreign policy unrelated to economic issues (Cohen, 2013, p.271). The Pivot appeared to be a continuation of such trends.

The Pivot strategy included different elements. It encompassed regular attendance at various Asian multilateral organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit. Regarding defence, it included the intention to have 60% of US naval assets in the Pacific by 2020,

and the realignment of the US' regional force posture, such as the rotational transfer of Marines to Australia, and the plan to increase forward stationing in Guam (Obama, 2011b; Smith, 2012). Economically, the Obama administration pursued the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and made Asian nations central to its National Export Initiative (Ilias et. al., 2011, p.17).¹

There are three main strands of criticisms regarding the drivers of the Pivot. First, some believed that the Pivot mirrored a 'pivot away' from the Middle East and Europe, reflecting the US' international retrenchment under the Obama administration (Dueck, 2015; Drezner, 2011, p.57-68; Ferguson, 2014; Barnett, 2012, p.78). These critics overlooked the interconnectedness of the contemporary world. This article demonstrates that the US did not 'pivot away' from the security and economic issues the Middle East and Europe faced. Second, in the US, those who expected a major reordering of US priorities criticised the Pivot for its lack of substance and deliberate planning (Friedberg, 2012, pp. 48, 54; Schake, 2014). US critics who focused on the defence aspects of the strategy thought the defence investment in the Asia-Pacific was insufficient (Barnett, 2012, pp.78-9). These critics misunderstood the purpose of the US' military presence in the Asia-Pacific. This article shows that the Pivot aimed to reduce the US' resources overstretch and shift more security responsibilities to its partners. Third, some overlooked the non-military aspects of the Pivot. Some Chinese critics, notably People's Republic of China (PRC) Ministry of National Defence spokespersons and non-official critics and some in the West, asserted a direct relationship between the Pivot and the containment of China's rise (Swaine, 2011, pp.8-9; Nye, 2011; Liu cited in Swaine, 2012, p.9; Ruan cited in Swaine, 2012,

¹ National Export Initiative (NEI), introduced by President Obama in 2010, was a strategy for doubling US exports by 2015 to generate US jobs.

p.9). In turn, it was alleged that the tension in the region contradicted the US' primary aim of enhancing the economic relationship with Asia (Liu, cited in Swaine, 2012, p.9). This group of opinion was over-simplistic in concentrating on the military aspect of the Pivot, and as a US 'grand strategy' of military containment of the PRC (Logan, 2012; Osgood, 2013; Zhou, 2013).

This article explains that the Pivot was not a containment strategy, but a grand strategy that considered the US' influence in the world in the long run, and combined zero-sum and positive-sum considerations.² It most aligns with Hugo Meijer's view that although the PRC posed a central concern to the Obama administration, the Pivot was also a grand strategy that took into account a wider set of objectives (Meijer, 2015, p.6). In addition to Meijer's argument, it demonstrates that the considerations driving the Pivot were beyond the Asia-Pacific region. This research is mainly based on primary sources, including US government publications, published articles and memoirs by policymakers, interviews, declassified letters, speeches, and US Senate hearings. The National Intelligence Council's (NIC) *Global Trends* documents shed a light on the US' long term considerations driving the Pivot. These documents help to place the Pivot strategy in the wider context of the US' global considerations in the contemporary period. This article contributes to the existing scholarship on the Pivot to Asia strategy by utilising the NIC's documents to examine key considerations driving the Pivot beyond myopic views of the future and beyond the Asia-Pacific region.

The National Intelligence Council noted that there were three lessons learnt from the last century: 'leaders and their ideas matter'; geopolitics such as wars, the collapse of empires, and the rise of new powers trigger discontinuities; and there is a strong correlation between rapid economic change and political instability (NIC, 2008, p.5). This article draws on these lessons and explores key considerations driving the Pivot to Asia in military, diplomatic, and economic dimensions. Ultimately, the Pivot as a grand strategy aimed to secure the US' standing in a changing world system in the twenty-first century.

GEOPOLITICS IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

The careful management of the Sino-American relations to maintain the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific was an important geostrategic factor driving the Pivot. There was a consensus in the US that the Sino-American relations were perhaps the most important bilateral tie shaping the future (NIC, 2012, p.4; Obama interviewed by Goldberg, 2016). Obama commented that:

If we get that right and China continues on a peaceful rise, then we have a partner that is growing in capability and sharing with us the burdens and responsibilities of maintaining an international order (Obama interviewed by Goldberg, 2016).

The *Quadrennial Diplomatic and Development Review 2015* noted that the US faced a wide range of challenges, including 'building confidence in the US commitment to peaceful coexistence in Asia through [the] implementation of our strategic rebalance' (US Department of State and the US Agency for International Development, 2015, pp.19-20). The

NIC asserted that both a 'Democratic or Collapsed China' (NIC, 2012, p.ix) would cause an imbalance in the region.

Before the announcement of the Pivot, the PRC was emboldened by the US' perceived weakness and absence in the Asia-Pacific. Some in the PRC sought to take advantage of the doubt around the US' commitment to the region (Clinton, 2014, p.79). Therefore, Thomas Christensen (Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in 2006-8) argued that preserving US military superiority in the Asia-Pacific would contribute to the engagement goal of the strategy:

[T]he maintenance of US military superiority in the region, properly considered, is an integral part of broader engagement strategy, and makes diplomatic engagement itself more effective. The military strength of the United States and its allies and security partners in Asia complements positive US diplomacy by channelling China's competitive energies in more beneficial and peaceful directions (Christensen, 2009, p.91).

Most importantly, the balancing part of the Pivot did not equal containment of the PRC. Hillary Clinton noted that the US-China relationship did not 'fit neatly into categories like friend or rival, and it may never' (Clinton, 2014, p.66). She stressed not pushing too hard on the one hand, and not being too quick to compromise or accommodate on the other hand (Ibid.).

The strong engagement element provided evidence that the Pivot was not a containment strategy. Silove argued that engagement and balancing were symbiotic means towards shaping or dissuasion, in order to reduce the likelihood that the PRC would achieve hegemony (Silove, 2016, p. 81). Nonetheless, the US' deepened engagement with regional partners could be understood as an external balancing act against the PRC. It would increase 'the military capabilities of, and building stronger bilateral interoperability with allies and partners, and encourage allies and partners to develop stronger military relationships and greater interoperability with one another' (Ibid., p. 74). The aim of the external balancing strategy was to 'show the strength of relationships and the strength of commitments among allies and partners' to signal to 'China and others [...] that] their ability to disrupt or interfere or weaken these relationships' would not increase over time (Ibid.). The US' external balancing through its renewed presence in the region was, according to Andrew R. Hoehn (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense and Strategy), to be an important part of dissuading PRC to challenge the status quo in the Asia-Pacific (Hoehn interviewed and quoted by Silove, 2016, pp.74-5).

A FUTURE MULTIPOLAR WORLD

The US enjoyed unipolar power since the end of the Cold War and provided global leadership in the rules-based international system it helped to set up since the 1940s. However, this advantage was not expected to last. The National Intelligence Council (NIC) anticipated a global multipolar system with emerging state powers and non-state actors (NIC, 2008: p.iv). The NIC suggested in 2012 that:

During the next 15-20 years, the US will be grappling with the degree to which it can continue to play the

² In International Relations theory, Liberal Institutionalists believe that international politics can be positive-sum, meaning that both parties could gain from mutual cooperation. The idea of 'zero-sum competition' stems from the Realist tradition, who emphasise relative

gains of state power and hence discourages cooperation between states. For more, see Scott Burchill, 'Liberalism', in Scott Burchill, et al., *Theories of International Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2013), pp.67-8.

role of systemic guardian and guarantor of the global order. A declining US unwillingness and/or slipping capacity to serve as a global security provider would be a key factor contributing to instability, particularly in Asia and the Middle East (NIC, 2012, p.viii).

The NIC predicted that the changing norms in the international system would parallel a 'diffusion of power' (NIC, 2004, pp.ii-iv; NIC, 1997). While the US still enjoyed its unipolar power, it sought to influence the rules and retain a relative advantage in the future multipolar world. The relative decline of the US' power and the gradual shift to a multipolar order was a premise accepted by the US administrations (NIC, 2008, p.82). It paralleled the expectation that Asia was going to exemplify most of the trends shaping the world and dominating the globalisation process (NIC, 1997; NIC, 2004: pp.ii-iv, 28; NIC, 2012: 32). However, the future influence of the US in the international system seemed harder to project (NIC, 2012, p.x). The logic behind the Pivot was to maintain the US' leadership and influence in the Asia-Pacific region (Silove, 2016, p.88). Ensuring relatively few conflicts with major powers 'would smooth the way towards the development of a multipolar system in which the US is the 'first among equals' (NIC, 2008, p.93), implying that the US hoped to be able to retain its historical influence over other global powers. This was predicted to be the most likely scenario, due to US pre-eminence across hard and soft power dimensions, and the legacies of the US' leadership role (NIC, 2012, p.x).

A key concern that drove the Pivot was the redefinition of the US' role in relation to global security. Since the end of the Cold War, the US assumed the role of global security provider. After the Iraq War, the US was in a position of significant strategic and military overstretch, thus, it needed a smarter and cheaper way to sustain global leadership (Brands, 2014). The US encouraged allies and partners to take on a greater share of the international system, and the US 'led from behind' (Gelb, 2012, pp.18-9).³ The US considered most European countries the 'producers of security rather than consumers of it' (US Department of State, 2012, p.3). Hence, the Pivot was 'a strategic opportunity to rebalance the US military investments in Europe, moving from a focus on current conflicts toward a focus on future capabilities' (Ibid.): it was built on the belief that '[i]n keeping with this evolving strategic landscape, [US] posture in Europe must also evolve' (Ibid.). Pivoting towards the Asia-Pacific encouraged new areas of collaboration. The Commander of the US Pacific Command, Harry Harris, spoke before the Senate Armed Services Committee in early 2016 to ask for continued investment from the committee. Harris gave examples of the US' collaborations with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia to demonstrate that the US was 'the security partner of choice in the Indo-Asia-Pacific' (Harris, 2016). Harris also noted that given that four of the five strategic problem sets identified by Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter (China, North Korea, Russia, and ISIL) were in the Asia-Pacific region, Harris believed that the US could not Rebalance fast enough (Ibid.). The US pivoted away from the traditional security provider role and presented itself as a partner in global security as part of the Pivot strategy.

The Pivot was the US' attempt to consolidate historical partnerships and maintain the importance of the US in the Asia-Pacific. Obama said that the partnerships in Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, were critical for the shared future, as the region

was home to a vast population and some of the fastest-growing economies. Leon Panetta, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency in 2009-11 and the US Secretary of Defense in 2011-13, noted that the US' 'efforts to strengthen alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific to advance a common security vision for the future' were essential to the rebalancing strategy (Panetta, 2012, pp.110-5). Thus, a key focus of Obama's foreign policy was to deepen engagement with nations and people in the region. Hillary Clinton discussed in her *Foreign Policy* article the need to update traditional alliances in the Asia-Pacific region. It included treaty alliance for new security demands with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand; building new partnerships to help solve shared problems with China, India, Indonesia, Singapore, New Zealand, Malaysia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Brunei, and the Pacific Island countries (Clinton, 2011, p.58). Obama noted the ASEAN region could set an example of standing up to violent extremism, building interfaith dialogue, and promoting tolerance (Obama, 2015b).

Meanwhile, the rotational deployment of 2,500 Marines to Darwin, Australia, was criticised for being a 'symbolic' gesture, due to its small size (Friedberg, 2012, p.52). It had fuelled criticism of the Pivot because it was one of the few perceived 'concrete' elements of the policy. However, the primary purpose of the deployment was to advance multilateral training in the region, taking advantage of Australia's location and the size of its training ranges (Silove, 2016, pp.76-7; Obama, 2011a). *Marine Corps Times* recorded that: 'The first contingent of 250 Marines arrived in Australia in March 2012 for six months, during which they trained with the Australian Army as well as with forces from Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia' (Fuentes, 2012). According to Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, the strategic reality demands that the US government get better at what is called 'building partner capacity': helping other countries defend themselves or, if necessary, fight alongside US forces by providing them with equipment, training, or other forms of security assistance (Gates, 2010, pp.2-6). The US hoped to upgrade regional partners' military capabilities and to entrust them with increased regional security responsibilities.

In the engagement half of the Pivot, the US encouraged the PRC to share the burden of global security provision. Robert Zoellick, the US Deputy Secretary of State in 2005-06, hoped the PRC would become a 'responsible stakeholder' (Zoellick, 2005). Hillary Clinton claimed that one of the primary goals of the Pivot was to increase the US' involvement in Asian affairs in a way that would advance the US' interests in a more open, democratic and prosperous region, without weakening the US' efforts to build a positive relationship with the PRC (Clinton, 2011, p.79). Furthermore, the NIC anticipated a more conflicted ideological landscape in which the West's concept of secular modernity might not necessarily provide the dominant underlying values of the international system (NIC, 2012, p.32).

Hence, it appeared that collaboration with the PRC in global affairs was a logical step for the US. The PRC engagement strategy encompassed discussion on critical regional and global security issues, including North Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and developments in the South China Sea; and on the economic front, the two powers working together to ensure strong, sustained, and balanced future global growth (Clinton, 2011, p.75). Hillary Clinton commented, however, that China

³ 'Leading from behind' was first used by Ryan Lizza, a White House advisor, in a New Yorker article.

was choosing when to act like a responsible great power and when to assert the right to impose its will on smaller neighbours, as a ‘selective stakeholder’ instead (Ibid.). On the other hand, in 2013, when challenged as to whether the PRC was really willing to help solve crucial problems the world faced, Cui Tiankai, the PRC’s Ambassador to the United States, replied:

[W]e always follow the principle that the affairs of a particular country should be determined by its own people, not by us, the outsiders. It is not up to China or the United States to decide the future of the country (Cui, 2013, p.12).

Such a reaction seemed to be a reflection of the normative differences in the ‘mismatched interests, values, and capabilities’ (Economy and Segal, 2009, p.15), exemplified by the absence of Sino-American cooperation. The US and the PRC did share some foreign policy goals (See Altman, 2009, p.2). Sino-American cooperation on issues such as trade, financial stability, energy security, climate change, and pandemics would also benefit both countries and the rest of the region (Nye, 2011). However, critics believed that elevating the Sino-American bilateral relationship was not the solution, as such a policy would ‘raise expectation for a level of partnership that cannot be met and exacerbate the very real differences that still exist between Washington and Beijing’ (Economy and Segal, 2009, p.15). It was questionable whether the US’ reaching out to an authoritarian state yielded fruitful results.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

The US’ economic security concerns relating to the Asia-Pacific region’s growing importance in the world economy drove the US’ Pivot to Asia. The concerns included the economic potential of the Asia-Pacific region, the mutually dependent relationship between the US and the region, and the region’s impact on the global economy. John Kerry highlighted in his confirmation speech to be the Secretary of State in 2013 the centrality of trade and economic issues to the Pivot strategy. It echoed Obama’s speech before the Australian Parliament in November 2011, where Obama said:

Here, [in Asia], we see the future. As the world’s fastest-growing region – and home to more than half the global economy – [...] Asia will largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or cooperation, needless suffering or human progress (Obama, 2015b).

It was in the US’ interests to ensure US access to the Asia-Pacific markets through the Pivot because of the long-term importance of the region to US economic security. One of the relative certainties pointed out in *Global Trends 2025* was that, ‘the unprecedented shift in relative wealth and economic power roughly from West to East now under way [would] continue’ (NIC, 2008, p.iv). If globalisation became driven by developing countries, it was predicted that the ‘growth in Asian markets would force domestic adjustments on the US and other Western countries that would need to be managed’ (NIC, 2004, p.45). Looking to the future, the US’ Pivot was preparing for a shift in the world’s economic centre. On the other hand, the South China Sea was vital not only to the US’ but also to the regional and global economy. The US’ economic security relied on a stable global economy. The US’ freedom of navigation program was crucial in maintaining regional economic security by maintaining free economic and political access in the region. Free access ‘ensure[d] the ocean remain open to support the full range of economic activities in which countries and their citizens [engaged], including ‘the right to undertake free

commercial trade, finance, banking, direct investment, and government-to-government support’ (Ikenberry, 2010, p.7).

Fundamentally, the Pivot to Asia appeared to be a continuation of the post-Cold War trend of mixing economic security issues with foreign policy decision-making. However, the epistemological bases for the two areas were vastly different. One example of this difference was that the linear economic projection of when emerging states would surpass US’ economy was deterministic (NIC, 2008, pp.5-6). It was in sharp contrast with the NIC’s remark that long-range projection without exploring possibilities which could cause discontinuities often missed major geopolitical events (NIC, 2008, p.5). On the other hand, John G. Ikenberry, a liberal institutionalist scholar, called the worry that the future world would look less liberal a ‘panicked narrative’ that missed ‘a deeper reality’ (Ikenberry, 2011, p.57). In 2011, Ikenberry noted that rising powers were finding incentives and opportunities to engage and integrate into the liberal international order, as doing so advanced their own interests (Ikenberry, 2011, pp.56-7). For these emerging powers, ‘the road to modernity runs through – not away from – the existing international order’ (Ikenberry, 2011, p.61). It appeared that Beijing’s rise was embedded in the established liberal economic system, but less so in other areas. Beijing’s need for resources and export markets, along with its mantra of not mixing business with politics, clashed with the West’s efforts to prevent human rights abuses and improve governance in the developing world (Economy and Segal, 2009, p.16). The PRC responded to international law decisions with aggressive land reclamation and by positioning military forces astride international sea-lanes (Obama, 2015a, p.2). However, the US continued to support the PRC’s rise and encouraged it to be a partner for international security. Jeffrey Bader, the Senior Director for Asian Affairs on the National Security Council in 2009-11, said that the Obama administration’s strategy was neither appeasement, nor containment, but based its strategy on three pillars: a welcoming approach to China’s emergence, a resolve to see that its rise was consistent with international norms and law, and an endeavour to shape the Asia-Pacific environment to ensure that China’s rise was stabilising rather than disruptive (Bader, 2012, p.7). Obama said in an interview that he believed there were going to be times where the US’ security interests conflict with concerns about human rights (Obama interviewed by Goldberg, 2016). The Pivot strategy appeared less liberal because the US put more emphasis on economic liberalism than the promotion of other liberal political values.

CONCLUSION

The key considerations driving the Pivot were preserving the balance of power and status quo in the Asia-Pacific, the promotion of norms beneficial to maintaining the US’ global leadership role, and preserving US economic security. The gradual shift to a multipolar world from the post-Cold War one in which the US enjoyed unipolar power in global affairs underlined the Pivot. The People’s Republic of China’s relative rise posed challenges to the norms and values laid down by the US since the 1940s. Its behaviour also threatened the regional stability of the Asia-Pacific, as well as the US’ and global economic security. The Pivot strategy was partially in reaction to the US’ uncertainty regarding its future. Although the PRC’s rise posed a central concern to the US, the Pivot also took into account a wider set of concerns, including the entire Asia-Pacific region’s importance in the future, as well as the US’ capability and resources. The Pivot prioritised issues and areas most important to the US’ future and avoided the US’ resources

overstretch. The Pivot was a moderate engagement grand strategy built on both liberalism and realism.

The Pivot could be part of the US' longer-term solution in continuing its role as the leader of global security in an increasingly multilateral world. The US recognised that 'leaders and their ideas matter' (NIC, 2008, p.5), and presented itself as the ideal partner and leader of global security. From the realist perspective, US aimed to preserve the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Geostrategic factors in the region were taken into consideration in formulating the Pivot strategy. The perceived weakness of the US, due to the financial and economic crash of 2008 and the Obama administration's foreign policy before the Pivot, had emboldened the PRC to challenge the regional status quo. The careful management of Sino-American relations was vital to the Pivot strategy. The Pivot was crucial in defining the US' trading relationship with the Asian-Pacific states. The region was home to large numbers of working age labour for US businesses, as well as a rapidly expanding middle-class market for US exports. The PRC's rise was primarily based on the liberal economic order laid by the US since the 1940s and was dissuaded from challenging the international trade norms and values. On the other hand, the

engagement part of the strategy bound the PRC in global trade and international institutions, limiting the ways it could exercise its power. However, the Pivot strategy appeared to be a continuation of the post-Cold War trend mixing economic security with foreign policy decision-making, despite the fact that the two areas have vastly different epistemological bases. Nonetheless, reaching out to emerging powers regardless of the ideology or regime could, in the long term, diminish US' soft power; that is, the power of the liberal values the US represents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Professor Peter Jackson from the School of Humanities, University of Glasgow, who supervised this project, for his invaluable guidance and comments on various drafts. The author would also like to thank Dr Andrew Struan, Amy Bromley, Pekki Purppura, Dr Argyro Filippaki, Dr Mark McLay, Yee Man Theodora Cho, and Debbie White for their helpful comments on various drafts of this article.

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