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# America's Pivot to Asia

## A Eulogy or an Interim Report?

Douglas Stuart

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**Abstract:** When Barack Obama designated the Indo-Asia-Pacific region as his top strategic priority, it was considered an ambitious foreign policy initiative. Between 2011 and 2015, Obama's "pivot to Asia" was quite successful, but by the end of his term in office the pivot had lost some of its momentum and direction. This study begins by placing the Obama pivot in historical context. Next, it presents an audit of the successes and setbacks of the Obama pivot. The article then discusses the prospects for a renewal of the pivot to Asia by the Donald J. Trump administration, arguing that restarting the pivot will be difficult but worth the effort.

**Keywords:** Pivot to Asia, Open Door, San Francisco system, Nixon Doctrine, collective self-defense, defensive modernism, trustpolitik, proactive deterrence, terminal high altitude area defense, THAAD, Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons, JAM-GC, Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP, Chinese defense spending, Thucydides Trap, Anti-Access/Area Denial, A2/AD, One China policy

**F**ormer President Barack H. Obama's designation of the Indo-Asia-Pacific (IAP) region as his top strategic priority will be remembered as his most ambitious foreign policy initiative. It represented an appropriate response to the global shift in economic power from West to East, and between 2011

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and 2015 this “pivot to Asia” was relatively successful. By the end of President Obama’s term in office, however, the pivot campaign had lost some of its momentum and direction. It will be up to President Donald J. Trump to decide whether to invest the time and effort needed to restart the pivot. This article surveys the successes and setbacks of the Obama pivot and makes the case that the IAP region still deserves to be America’s top priority.

## **America as a Pacific Power**

The Obama pivot is the most recent stage in a process of American adjustment to its Pacific identity that has been ongoing since the late nineteenth century. During the initial stage in this process, U.S. policies were guided by the Open Door doctrine, which put the major European powers and Japan on notice that, as Secretary of State John M. Hay wrote in 1899, “what is ours we shall hold; what is not ours we do not seek” in the Western Pacific.<sup>1</sup> The idea of the Open Door was actually sold to Washington by Great Britain, as a key element of London’s campaign to obtain the support of the United States for its global responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> While the Open Door was usually explained in terms of American access to markets and resources, it was also a form of insurance against any great power, or combination of great powers, obtaining control over a substantial portion of what Sir Halford J. Mackinder described as the Eurasian “Heartland.”<sup>3</sup> As noted by the other great geopolitician of this period, Alfred Thayer Mahan, “The Open Door is but another way of expressing Balance of Power.”<sup>4</sup>

The fragility of the Qing government in China posed the greatest threat to U.S. interests in Asia during this period. Without a direct and influential American presence in the region, China was in danger of being carved up by the imperial powers. This concern contributed to the U.S. decision to hold on to the Philippines as a military staging area in the Pacific. It also contributed to the decision to deploy U.S. troops in response to the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 and to send a deterrent message to European and Asian governments in the form of the Great White Fleet (comprising 16 American battleships) in 1907–9. During the next three decades, the logic of the Open Door led U.S. policy makers to focus on the threat posed by Japan, culminating in an American campaign of *quarantine* in 1937 and, ultimately, war.<sup>5</sup>

Since the end of World War II, American involvement in the IAP has gone through four phases. The first phase was a brief period of adjustment, which ran from the American occupation of Japan until the creation of the San Francisco system of bilateral and trilateral alliances in September 1951. The victory of the Chinese Communist forces in 1949 was the most consequential development during this period, because it overturned postwar American assumptions about the relative security of the Western Pacific. Prior to the establishment

of the People's Republic of China, U.S. policy makers had viewed China as a secure platform for threatening Russia along its southeastern border, thereby taking pressure off of Western Europe. With Mao Tse-tung's victory, however, Washington not only lost its so-called fist in Russia's back, it also had to deal with a vast and militantly Communist enemy with a geographic reach that extended from Northeast to Southeast Asia and deep into South and Central Asia. For many U.S. defense planners, this new Communist threat was more immediate and more alarming than the Soviet Union—an opinion that was confirmed by the direct involvement of Chinese forces in the Korean War in October 1950.

The loss of China and the start of the Korean War set the stage for the second phase in U.S. involvement in the IAP from 1951 until 1973. This was the era of militarized anti-Communist containment and the quest for American dominance in the Western Pacific. The three most important American policies during this period were the establishment of the aforementioned San Francisco system's network of alliances, the Korean War, and most important, the Vietnam War. In 1951 in San Francisco, the United States signed the Mutual Security Treaty with Japan, the Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines, and the ANZUS Pact with Australia and New Zealand. Over the next 65 years, the hub-and-spokes San Francisco network of defense agreements underwent significant changes, with additions (South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization [SEATO]) and deletions (Taiwan, the Philippines, and SEATO), but it has survived. Like the motto of Paris, France, the U.S.-sponsored alliance network has been "tossed by the waves but never sunk."<sup>6</sup> The durability of the San Francisco system was first tested by the Korean War and then by America's slide into war in Vietnam.

The human and economic costs of the Vietnam War, and the damage done by that war to the American psyche, set the stage for the third phase in America's involvement in Asia, from 1973 until the end of the Cold War. The most important development during this period was the Richard M. Nixon administration's extraordinary reversal of the U.S. position with regard to China. "What the opening to China accomplished," according to Henry Kissinger, "was an opportunity to increase cooperation where interests were congruent and to mitigate differences where they existed."<sup>7</sup> By normalizing relations with China, the United States reduced the regional threat level, making it possible for Washington to scale back its obligations and shift more of the burden of extended deterrence to its Asian allies, a strategy that became known as the Nixon Doctrine. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been adapting to the dramatic rise in the importance of Asian governments within the international system. Special attention has been accorded to China's changing position in the global economy during this period. Kurt Campbell notes that, in a period of 20

years, Beijing went from being the 10th largest economy in the world in 1990 to the 6th largest in 2000, then grew to 2d largest in 2010.<sup>8</sup> Each American president since the end of the Cold War has pursued policies designed to influence China's decisions about the management and application of its growing economic power, but it was not until the arrival of the Obama administration that the United States developed a comprehensive strategy for influencing Chinese behavior, marking the fourth phase of America's involvement in the IAP. At the core of this strategy was a two-pronged approach to the IAP: seeking opportunities for bilateral cooperation with Beijing while working with China's neighbors to create both an encouraging and a cautionary environment for Chinese regional behavior. As Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton noted at the start of the Obama presidency, "China is the big story, no doubt. But for us to be successful, we're going to have to work with others more effectively. We've got to embed our China policy in a larger Asia strategy."<sup>9</sup>

### **Obama's Pivot**

Obama's advisors began to plan for the pivot before the president was inaugurated, but they recognized that the administration could not make the pivot the centerpiece of its foreign policy until it had addressed more immediate economic problems associated with the financial crisis of 2007–8. By 2011, the administration had concluded that the domestic economic situation was sufficiently under control to allow a shift in focus to the IAP. The Obama team understood that to influence the strategic decisions of key IAP governments they would have to use all the elements of U.S. national power, but they also realized that the nation was at a considerable disadvantage in terms of diplomatic and economic power in the IAP. Many regional governments doubted Washington's will and ability to keep its focus on the IAP over the long term, and most IAP states were especially critical of the United States for what they viewed as Washington's responsibility for both the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2007–8 economic collapse.<sup>10</sup> Under these circumstances, U.S. policy makers had to place their emphasis on military instruments of power, including the massive resources of the U.S. Pacific Fleet and the formal and informal defense agreements with IAP governments.

The Obama team also recognized that for the pivot to succeed it would need to accord top priority to the two anchor points of the San Francisco security network—Tokyo and Seoul. As the host to 85 American military facilities, including the headquarters for the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet and the III Marine Expeditionary Force, Japan is America's most important Pacific ally.<sup>11</sup> It is not surprising that under these circumstances Washington began to lay the groundwork for enhanced security cooperation with Tokyo one month after President Obama took office. U.S.-Japan security cooperation increased

significantly following the election of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in December 2012. Prime Minister Abe has committed his nation to increased coordination with the United States in the areas of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, air and missile defense, and maritime security.<sup>12</sup> He has backed up these commitments with significant improvements in his nation's military capabilities, including plans to purchase 42 Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II fighter aircraft and an offer to host a squadron of American Northrop Grumman E-2D Advanced Hawkeye early warning aircraft. In accordance with his government's new concept of *collective self-defense*, Abe also has agreed to extend the range of U.S.-Japan security cooperation to the IAP region. He is also the first Japanese prime minister to visit all 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in an effort to bolster Tokyo's regional influence. The most controversial manifestation of this new activism is the participation of Japanese maritime patrols in the South China Sea. At least part of the rationale for Japan's assertiveness in the South China Sea is that it reinforces Tokyo's credibility in its dispute with Beijing over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.<sup>13</sup>

Robert Cooper coined the term *defensive modernism* to describe the process by which a nation grudgingly abandons an unsustainable foreign policy that eschews the use of hard power instruments to protect or advance its national interests.<sup>14</sup> Washington can be encouraged by Abe's campaign to adjust Japanese foreign policy to the demands of defensive modernism, but the United States must also remain alert to the possibility that Tokyo will mismanage its actions toward China or North Korea as it relearns the game of hard power politics. There is also a risk that as Japan becomes more assertive it will be harder for the United States to encourage cooperation between Tokyo and other IAP governments that still harbor suspicions against Japan that date back to the Second World War. Finally, Washington must remain aware that Abe has not yet convinced the Japanese public of the merits of a campaign of defensive modernism, and it is possible that key elements of this campaign will be reversed by Abe's successors.

Because of its distinct geographic situation and its history, South Korea has responded differently from Japan to the American pivot campaign. With a dangerously unpredictable enemy to its north, Seoul must assess the merits of the American pivot in terms of its impact on a 24/7 deterrent posture. Under these circumstances, any significant doctrinal change by the United States poses the risk of raising doubts about the priority that Washington accords to South Korean security. South Korean policy makers must be constantly on guard about a replay of the so-called Acheson problem—the 1950 statement on U.S. defense policy in Asia by then-Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson, which did not mention the Republic of Korea (ROK) as a strategic priority and is viewed as a contributing factor in the North Korean decision to invade

South Korea.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, because of its geographic proximity to China, Seoul views its relations with Beijing differently from Washington. China is already South Korea's largest trading partner, and in June 2015, the two nations entered into a new free trade agreement that will eventually eliminate tariffs on 90 percent of the goods that are traded between them.<sup>16</sup> Seoul also recognizes that no real progress in North-South Korean relations can be achieved without the support of Beijing.

Edward Luttwak has cited Chinese-South Korean cooperation to support his claim that the ROK is an “unfit” ally of the United States.<sup>17</sup> This is an unfair judgment against a nation that faces extraordinarily complex strategic challenges and has proven itself to be a reliable security partner for the United States for more than six decades. Recent ROK defense plans call for improved missile capabilities, acquisition of advanced aircraft, and the transformation of “a largely coastal patrol force into a blue-water navy.”<sup>18</sup> According to *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment*, the ROK Army is also undergoing significant improvements and “is finally obtaining unqualified advantage over the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) in terms of modern weapons, widespread mechanization, and net-centric command, control, communications, and information (C3I), thereby permitting non-linear maneuver warfare as an alternative to the historical, bloody war of attrition in the mountains along the demilitarized zone (DMZ).”<sup>19</sup>

It is not surprising, however, that Seoul has often responded to its multiple security challenges with complex—and at times contradictory—policies. Under President Park Geun-hye, Seoul attempted to pursue a *trustpolitik* campaign of outreach toward Pyongyang while at the same time sustaining a *proactive deterrence* posture toward North Korea.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, in its relations with Beijing, the South Korean government has pursued both diplomatic and economic forms of cooperation, while incurring Chinese anger for its decision to host a terminal high altitude area defense, or THAAD, battery and for its participation in annual military exercises with the United States. The bilateral exercises, which took place in March 2016, were the largest ever, involving 300,000 South Korean and 17,000 American troops.

Between 2011 and 2015, the pivot campaign achieved some impressive results, not just in terms of U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK relations but throughout the larger IAP region. Key regional actors responded positively to Washington's policies of reassurance and recruitment, including the announcement of plans for reposturing 60 percent of its naval and air assets to the IAP “in a steady, deliberate and sustainable way” by 2020.<sup>21</sup> Washington also began work with regional allies on “the four biggest construction projects since the Cold War” to diversify and harden regional military facilities in accordance with the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons.<sup>22</sup> Washington's

strategy of playing to its strength as a military power was rewarded not merely with expressions of support but also with new security commitments from key allies and partners. These included Canberra's offer to host up to 2,500 U.S. Marines in northern Australia on a six-month rotational basis, Singapore's offer of base access for American littoral combat ships, and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between Washington and Manila, which provided for U.S. access to five Philippine military bases.<sup>23</sup>

The Obama administration also made steady progress in defense cooperation with India, in recognition of the two nations' shared interest in maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region and a mutual concern about the rise of China. President Obama described the U.S.-India relationship as "one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century" and backed up his rhetoric with diplomatic, economic, and military activities designed to overcome New Delhi's traditional preference for *strategic autonomy*.<sup>24</sup> Prime Minister Narendra Modi rewarded Washington for its efforts by signing a major defense cooperation agreement with the United States in August 2016. The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement provides for mutual access, on a case-by-case basis, to each other's facilities for supplies and repairs. The two governments also predicted that the agreement will "facilitate additional opportunities for practical engagement and exchange."<sup>25</sup> The prime minister also has pursued his Act East campaign of defense cooperation with various governments in the IAP region in ways that support the American pivot strategy.

President Obama also made progress in terms of diplomatic and economic engagement with IAP governments, most notably the U.S. signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with the members of ASEAN. Signing the TAC made it possible for Washington to become a member of the East Asia Summit, which is an increasingly important institution in the IAP. The most important diplomatic and economic accomplishment of the Obama team was the successful negotiation of the 12-nation TPP agreement. Sean Mirski observed at the time that "the TPP is not just about economics, and that it has the potential to be a pillar of American grand strategy in the Asia-Pacific for decades to come."<sup>26</sup>

The Obama team's plan was to weld the disparate elements of the pivot campaign into a single multifaceted strategy that would be accepted by a large number of IAP governments and would "make room for China" on U.S. terms.<sup>27</sup> Between 2011 and 2015, the president made measurable progress toward this goal. Arguably his most notable success was in his management of the contradictory demands of containment of and engagement with China. The United States maintained a posture of confident resolve in the face of double-digit increases in Beijing's defense spending, making modest improvements in American military capabilities in the IAP region, while at the same



time cultivating new forms of defense cooperation with and among its Asian security partners. Washington also continued to *walk on two legs* in its relations with Beijing, constantly looking for opportunities for cooperation with Beijing while hedging against a growing Chinese threat.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of 2015, however, the pivot began to lose some of its momentum and its coherence. Beijing had become increasingly assertive in its claims to territory in the South China and East China Seas. Washington had lost its ability to prioritize the IAP region as a result of several developments, including Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine and tensions within NATO about issues of burden sharing. In spite of Obama's efforts to keep the Middle East at arm's length, developments in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria had dragged the United States back into that region.<sup>29</sup> The Obama administration also found it necessary to engage in a globalized foreign policy in response to Beijing's ambitious campaign of soft power diplomacy in South Asia, Central Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America.

As the Obama team began to lose its focus on the IAP region, some Asian governments started to hedge their bets about the pivot. The most damaging reassessment took place in Manila with the election of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in May 2016. Prior to Duterte's election, the Philippines was one of the most important elements in the American pivot campaign. The Philippines holds a special place in U.S. littoral defense plans because it represents a geostrategic bridge between Northeast and Southeast Asia. Under these circumstances, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, signed in 2014, was a major accomplishment for U.S. diplomacy. As noted by Julio Amador III, the agreement cleared the way for the two governments "to undertake high-impact and high-value security cooperation exercises, joint and combined training activities that promote interoperability, and capacity building."<sup>30</sup> All of this U.S.-Philippines cooperation has been cast into doubt as a result of Duterte's election. The Philippine president has hinted that he intends to cut the cord with Washington. He also informed his Chinese hosts during a visit in October that "I've realigned myself in your ideological flow and maybe I will also go to Russia to talk to Putin and tell him that there are three of us against the world."<sup>31</sup>

The dramatic downturn in U.S.-Philippines relations was preceded by another setback to the pivot in Southeast Asia, when Washington found itself caught between a desire to sustain and expand defense cooperation with Thailand and its commitment to democratic principles. Washington felt compelled to impose sanctions on Thailand following a military coup in May 2014. The United States also scaled back its annual Cobra Gold military exercises with Thailand following the coup. Even before these actions, Bangkok was more inclined than most of its neighbors to favor China, but this tendency has in-

creased since the coup. As Kitti Prasirtsuk and William Tow have noted, “Bangkok no longer regards China as a probable national security threat and, unlike other ASEAN members, it neither shares a contiguous border with China nor does it entertain territorial claims that involve Chinese counter-claims.”<sup>32</sup>

The setbacks to the pivot in the Philippines and Thailand took on special significance because these are Washington’s two formal treaty allies in South-east Asia. But the most serious setback to the pivot campaign occurred within the United States itself in 2016, when both of the candidates for president announced plans to oppose the aforementioned TPP trade agreement. The Obama team accorded high priority to the negotiations that culminated in February 2016 with the approval of TPP by 12 Pacific Rim governments. The TPP was a key soft power element of the pivot, designed to reestablish Washington as a regional economic leader. Prime Minister Abe’s statement that “success or failure [of TPP] will sway the direction of the global free trade system and [shape] the strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific” now seems like a particularly disturbing prophecy.<sup>33</sup>

## **President Trump’s Options**

In spite of the military, diplomatic, and economic problems that the United States confronted in the last two years of the Obama presidency, the balance sheet of the pivot strategy was still positive when President Trump entered the White House. China was increasingly capable of projecting power across the region and increasingly inclined to engage in a *diplomacy of command* toward its neighbors.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, most IAP governments still recognized the value of working with the United States to gulliverize China.<sup>35</sup> It remains to be seen, however, whether Trump will be willing to put in the effort required to sustain this regional support. Indeed, it is not yet certain that Trump is willing and able to engage in long-term strategic planning. His general approach toward foreign policy appears to be alarmingly neoisolationist, with a decisional style that is reactive, tactical, and transactional rather than strategic. But it will require a willful disregard of reality for Trump to not pay attention to the risks and opportunities in the IAP region, and it will be especially difficult for the new president to disregard China as a regional and global actor.

In the months leading up to his inauguration, Mr. Trump’s statements and actions cast doubt on the incoming president’s commitment to three of the four foundational elements of the Obama pivot: he appeared to be spoiling for a fight with Beijing; he reinforced his campaign commitment to scrap the TPP; and he made comments that indicated a willingness to renegotiate America’s alliance relationship with Japan and South Korea. The only statements by Trump during this period that built on the efforts of his predecessor in the IAP region were in the area of defense modernization. Since taking office, he has made

some encouraging adjustments in his policies toward Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul, but he also has delivered on his promise to reject the TPP.

Prior to his inauguration, Mr. Trump's statements regarding China were starkly confrontational. The president-elect accused Beijing of "raping our country" with its economic policies, and he described China's trade with the United States as the "greatest theft in the history of the world."<sup>36</sup> During his confirmation hearings, Rex W. Tillerson, Trump's candidate for secretary of state, stated that Beijing's development of islands in the South China Sea will not be permitted: "We're going to have to send China a clear signal that first, the island-building stops, and second, your access to those islands [is] also not going to be allowed."<sup>37</sup> Tillerson did not offer any advice about how the United States might or should accomplish these policy goals.

It is certainly true that Beijing poses more of a threat to its neighbors and to American national interests than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Chinese defense spending, as a percent of GDP, has slowed as a result of the nation's economic downturn. But it still grew by 7.6 percent in 2016 (to \$146 billion) according to official Chinese government sources.<sup>38</sup> These funds have been used, in part, to support the most ambitious reform of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) since the 1950s. According to the *2016 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, these changes will improve the PLA's "capability to fight regional conflicts at greater distances from China through integrated joint operations."<sup>39</sup> The annual report also notes that "China's ability to conduct conventional strikes against U.S. regional facilities reached an inflection point in 2015 with the fielding of new intermediate-range ballistic missiles able to reach Guam, providing a benchmark for evaluating China's expanding A2/AD [Anti-Access/Area Denial] buildup."<sup>40</sup> Beijing also has made significant improvements in its ability to back up its diplomacy of command in the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China Seas with hard power.

China's increased regional assertiveness, combined with its rapidly modernizing military, have led the authors of the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *Strategic Survey 2016* to conclude that "it has become increasingly apparent that their [Beijing's] long term goal is to displace American power in the Western Pacific, to establish China as the new regional hegemon."<sup>41</sup> China would prefer to accomplish this without war, and to this end it has been pressing the case for an alternative to the U.S.-led security community in the IAP, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia. Although the United States has observer status in this organization, Chinese spokespersons have made it clear that Beijing's goal is to replace the San Francisco alliance network with a new security architecture that is conducive to Chinese interests and influence. The challenge for the Trump administration will

be to preserve regional support for the San Francisco system while avoiding gratuitously provocative actions toward Beijing that might convince some of America's regional security partners that it is safer to side with China.

To reassure its regional friends and allies, the United States will have to undertake selective enhancements of its military forces in the IAP region. President Trump is committed to increasing U.S. defense spending, and since 60 percent of U.S. naval and air assets will be in the IAP in the future, this region will be the principal beneficiary of a comprehensive effort at military modernization. Defense improvements capable of offsetting China's A2/AD capabilities should be given priority. However, the recent Rand Corporation report, *War With China*, is correct that "a heavy dose of common sense is needed in contemplating such preparations." The report warns that threatening Chinese A2/AD assets in the first stage of a conflict "could undermine crisis stability, predispose the Chinese toward preemptive strikes, and heighten the danger of automaticity and inevitability of fierce fighting from the outset." With this in mind, the Rand study recommends that the Department of Defense accord priority to "improving the ability to sustain severely intense military operations" and "shifting toward more-survivable platforms" in the IAP region.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time that it is bolstering its military presence in the IAP, the Trump administration must not lose sight of the fact that the greatest threat to peace is an inadvertent conflict between the United States and China that neither party seeks. This is the most important lesson of the now-famous Thucydides Trap, which warns of the historically confirmed likelihood of conflict between a rising power and a dominant status quo power, even in situations where both parties make an effort to cooperate.<sup>43</sup> Avery Goldstein's assertion in 2013 that the U.S.-China relationship "might be even more dangerous" than the U.S.-Soviet Cold War standoff is even more true today, for three reasons.<sup>44</sup> First, the two sides have fallen into a pattern of mutual provocation over the territories that have been developed by Beijing in the South China Sea. Second, both capitals are experiencing domestic pressures that may lead to rash decisions. In Beijing's case, the Chinese leadership under President Xi Jinping must manage the relative decline in the Chinese economy while preparing for a potentially contentious 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in the fall. Both of these factors could encourage nationalistic behavior to bolster domestic support. In Washington's case, the new president will be under some pressure to back up his anti-Chinese rhetoric with actions to pump up his public opinion ratings.<sup>45</sup> Third, both China and the United States may find themselves being pulled into unwanted confrontations as a result of the actions of junior partners who are becoming more assertive, aggrieved, or simply unpredictable.

North Korea poses the most immediate threat of a spillover crisis that

could lead to war between Washington and Beijing.<sup>46</sup> North Korean leader Kim Jong-un accelerated both his nuclear testing and his test launches of ballistic missiles in 2016, and his regime has already attempted to provoke the Trump administration by launching intermediate-range missiles into the Sea of Japan. The president has stated that Pyongyang's development of a nuclear weapon capable of reaching the United States "won't happen," but he has given no guidance about what the country might do in response to this challenge.<sup>47</sup> To date, neither bribes nor sanctions have convinced Mr. Kim to abandon his nuclear ambitions. In light of North Korean intransigence and the acceleration of Pyongyang's nuclear program, Doug Bandow has identified two options: first, "a grand bargain" with China that might involve the removal of U.S. forces from the peninsula and the creation of a unified Korean state that would be militarily neutral; second, a game of "international poker" involving the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Seoul and Tokyo to intimidate Pyongyang.<sup>48</sup> Bandow is to be commended for forcing the Washington policy community to face the fact that neither positive nor negative inducements have been successful with North Korea. But neither of his extreme policy recommendations should be seriously considered by the Trump administration. Instead, the new administration should sustain its predecessor's policy of *strategic patience* while working with Tokyo and Seoul to achieve the goal proposed by Jonathan Pollack: "To disabuse Pyongyang of any belief that its capabilities provide it added advantage or protection from the consequences of future actions that it might contemplate."<sup>49</sup>

The Trump administration also will have to find a way to work with Beijing to manage the North Korean situation. Nor is this the only issue that will require U.S.-China cooperation. The president would be wise to build upon the modest progress that has already been made in bilateral cooperation. A recent report by China's State Council Information Office notes that the two nations have been able to work together on a wide range of political and security issues, including "climate change, the Korean and Iranian nuclear issues, Syria, and Afghanistan." The report also lists examples of Sino-American military cooperation, including mutual-confidence-building mechanisms, high-level meetings among military leaders, and Chinese participation in the 2016 Rim of the Pacific exercises. The Information Office concludes that Beijing is willing to "work with the new U.S. administration to follow the principles of no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect and mutually beneficial cooperation."<sup>50</sup> In spite of Beijing's growing assertiveness, it is in America's interest to continue to cultivate these and other areas of cooperation with China.

It is therefore unfortunate that Mr. Trump sent such unnecessarily confrontational messages to Beijing prior to his inauguration. The president-elect's

hint at a fundamental change in the American position regarding the One China policy was the most provocative and ill-conceived example of this behavior. When Trump broke with decades of U.S. policy by engaging in a phone conversation with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, Beijing attempted to soft-peddle the issue by interpreting it as a diplomatic error by a foreign policy novice. But the president-elect doubled down on the phone call by stating, “I fully understand the ‘One China’ policy, but I don’t know why we have to be bound by a ‘One China’ policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade.”<sup>51</sup> Since his inauguration, President Trump has informed President Xi in a phone conversation that he now accepts the One China principle, but having raised this issue in public it is likely to hover in the background during future U.S.-China negotiations. If the president views the One China policy as a card to be played to obtain leverage with Beijing in future trade talks, he is laboring under a fundamental misreading of how China regards its national interests as well as a dangerous miscalculation of American national interests.

President Trump also has made his job harder by cancelling the TPP within the first week of his presidency. By removing the United States from the 12-nation trade agreement, he has abandoned the field to President Xi on issues of regional economic cooperation. China can now move forward with its campaign in support of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a proposed 16-nation free trade agreement that will involve 30 percent of the world economy.<sup>52</sup> Since President Trump has explained his rejection of TPP as the first step in a more ambitious campaign of opposition to multilateral trade agreements in general, he may already have cleared the path for Beijing to replace Washington as the leader of the global economy. Xi demonstrated his readiness to take on this role in his recent keynote address to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.<sup>53</sup> The Chinese leader also has backed up his rhetoric with nine ambitious infrastructure projects under the auspices of the 57-member Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.<sup>54</sup>

Since President Trump has made it clear that he intends to focus his efforts on bilateral trade negotiations, he would be well advised to start with Japan, the world’s third-largest economy.<sup>55</sup> The TPP was an essential component of Prime Minister Abe’s campaign of economic liberalization, so he is likely to be interested in trade talks with Washington that preserve key elements of the TPP agreement.<sup>56</sup> If managed properly, Abe also can present aspects of these negotiations—in particular, Japanese reductions in nontariff barriers—as a positive response to U.S. calls for increased burden sharing by its most important IAP ally.

During his first weeks in office, President Trump has been looking for

ways to smooth over some of his more critical comments about Japanese and South Korean free riders. But like his comments on the One China policy, his preinauguration criticisms will not be forgotten by America's Northeast Asian allies. As Mira Rapp-Hooper recently argued, "Trump was apparently unaware of the fact that Japan and South Korea are the least expensive places in the world (including the United States) to base U.S. forces because of Tokyo and Seoul's financial contributions."<sup>57</sup> It is to be hoped that some of the president's key national security advisors will convince him of the strategic value of these two anchor states in the San Francisco system. It is encouraging in this regard that Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis's first official overseas trip was to Tokyo and Seoul.

Continued careful cultivation of U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK relations are essential, since both Asian nations are dealing with difficult domestic and international situations. In Japan's case, Abe's campaign of defensive modernism has not yet taken root among the Japanese public. A 2016 survey of three polls concluded, "Strikingly, as the debate [over reform of Japan's pacifist constitution] gains more momentum . . . the percentage of opposition to constitutional revision in all three surveys marked the highest this year."<sup>58</sup> Abe will also have to deal with the fact that some of Tokyo's neighbors are still ambivalent about the prospect of a more active and assertive Japan. Both the domestic political debate over Japan's defense identity and the regional responses to a Japan that seeks to become a "more normal" diplomatic and military actor will be influenced by the policies pursued by the Trump administration.

The direction of South Korean domestic politics and foreign policy is also likely to be greatly affected by Washington. President Trump comes to office at a time when South Korean politics have been turned upside down by the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye. President Park's impeachment paved the way for the election of center-left Democratic Party candidate Moon Jae-in, a former human rights lawyer who is deeply committed to the ultimate goal of North-South Korean reunification. He also has expressed support for a parliamentary review of South Korea's commitment to host the aforementioned THAAD system. The Trump administration will have to work closely with President Moon on these issues. Both Washington and Seoul must also remain alert to the possibility that Pyongyang will take advantage of an unstable political situation in South Korea to engage in the kind of provocative behavior that took place in 2010.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

President Obama's pivot to the IAP region was a play in four acts: good intentions, limited capabilities, distractions, and mixed results. Will there be a fifth act? Obama's successor comes to the presidency with a relatively clean slate

in the IAP region. If he chooses to restart the pivot campaign, he will have to accord a great deal of time and attention to the formulation of a coherent and comprehensive strategy for the IAP region. Based on his comments to date, he does not seem to be interested in such an effort. Whether he chooses to reset the pivot or not, however, President Trump will confront the same reality that his predecessor had to deal with: an IAP region that is increasingly demanding of American attention and increasingly indispensable in world affairs. As Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner have noted, “The history of the twenty-first century will be written largely in the Asia-Pacific.”<sup>60</sup>

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