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Pivoting from Obama to Trump
In the Indo-Asia-Pacific

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The Obama administration’s “Pivot” (or “rebalance”) to the Indo-Asia-Pacific (IAP) region was the closest thing to a grand strategy that American policy makers have achieved since the end of the Cold War. It was an appropriate response to the tectonic shift in global economic power from west to east. (*Global Trends*, 2010) In accordance with the U.S. Army’s guidelines for the formulation of a grand strategy, the Pivot was based on a realistic balance between ends, ways and means and relied upon multilateral, bilateral and unilateral initiatives to bolster American influence in the IAP region. (*Bartholomees*, 2012) America’s ‘hub and spokes” network of treaties and defense agreements served as the foundation for Obama’s outreach to the nations of the IAP region. Over time the U.S. succeeded in bolstering this network of defense pacts, with new forms of security cooperation, including a new base access agreement with Australia, port access arrangements with Singapore, the Philippines and India, and enhancements in the military capabilities of America’s two most important IAP allies, Japan and South Korea. (*Stuart*, 2016) The Obama team also relied on diplomatic, economic and informational elements of American power to achieve its goals.

Members of the Obama administration understood before the President was inaugurated that Washington would have to accord priority to the IAP region, but they could not fully and publicly commit to the Pivot until the immediate problems associated with the 2008 financial crisis were managed. By 2011, the administration had concluded that enough progress had been made with the economy so that the Pivot could be officially launched. Over the next three years the Obama administration’s Pivot campaign was quite successful, in part because key IAP governments were supportive of increased American involvement in their region. By 2015, however, the Pivot had begun to lose both momentum and focus, and by the time that President Obama left office the strategy was under attack from a number of directions. (*Stuart*, 2017) Candidate Donald Trump contributed to these attacks and made it clear that if he was elected he would not restart the Pivot.

But if not the Pivot, then what? This essay will speculate on the prospects for American foreign policy in a post-Pivot IAP region. My arguments will be built around ten recommendations by the Asia Foundation in the fall of 2016. (*Asian Views...*, 2016) The ten recommendations, which are presented in no order of importance, are summarized and illustrated on Table 1. For each recommendation I will begin with some comments on the successes and failures of the Obama administration and then discuss the policies and statements of the Trump administration to date and the challenges that President Trump is likely to face.

* The author is very grateful to The Asia Foundation for permission to focus upon its ten recommendations in this article.
Table I

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 45TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE CONGRESS THAT ASSUMES OFFICE IN JANUARY 2017 TO ADOPT:

1. Maintain a robust, sustained, and consistent American presence in the Asia-Pacific.
2. Support Asian regional architecture and institutions.
3. Ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).
4. Rethink U.S. strategy on the Korean peninsula.
5. Pursue a balanced approach towards China.
7. Work with India to address South Asian security.
8. Do not abandon Afghanistan.
9. Continue to play a leading role in nontraditional security.
10. Continue to project American "soft power."
1. **Maintain a Robust, Sustained and Consistent American Presence in the Asia-Pacific**

   Hal Brands has observed that the essence of strategy is “ruthless prioritization.” (Brands, 2014, p. 4) The Obama team attempted just such a ruthless prioritization of the IAP region. They soon discovered, however, that many IAP governments harbored deep suspicions of America’s reliability and commitment to the region. (Tow & Stuart, 2014) The Obama team was able to reassure many of America’s regional friends and allies by military, diplomatic and economic initiatives, including:

   - **Modification of America’s global military presence so that 60% of U.S. naval and air assets will be based in the IAP region by 2020 –** a significant increase over the previous deployment of 50% of U.S. naval and air platforms in the IAP region. In support of this move to a 60/40 military posture the Pentagon initiated “the four biggest construction projects since the Cold War” to harden and diversify U.S. and allied bases across the region. (Davidson, 2014) Over the next few years the U.S. will also deploy its most modern air and naval assets to the IAP, including Littoral Combat Vessels, DDG-1000 stealth destroyers, and F-35 Joint Strike Aircraft. (Asia-Pacific Maritime, 2015)

   - **Regular participation by high level American policy makers at meetings of ASEAN and other Asian regional forums. The U.S. also joined the ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting and signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). These actions convinced many ASEAN leaders that the U.S. was according greater status and influence to Southeast Asia.** The American commitment to TAC also cleared the way for Washington to join the East Asia Summit (EAS), which has become one of the most important institutions for political and security dialogue in the IAP.

   - **Arguably the most important act of reassurance by the United States was the Obama administration’s leadership of the negotiations which culminated in the 2015 signing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement.** As envisioned by the signatory members, the TPP would bring together 12 governments representing 40 percent of the world’s GDP and a third of world trade. Kurt Campbell contends that the TPP was also expected to reduce the vulnerability of IAP governments “…to economic coercion by China” and facilitate security cooperation among IAP nations. (Campbell, 2016, pp. 266-68)

     As Asian governments became more confident of America’s long-term interest in regional peace and prosperity they began to assist Washington in strengthening the hub and spokes network and experimenting with their own forms of “minilateral” defense cooperation. Australia entered into “cross spoke” security cooperation agreements with Japan and Indonesia. (Wesley, 2017, pp. 59-63) New Delhi also pursued new forms of cross spoke collaboration with Canberra and other nations in Southeast Asia, as part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s “Act East” campaign. These and other positive developments encouraged many American commentators to conclude that the U.S. was “pushing on open doors” in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. (Keatley, 2013)

     By 2015, however, Asian concerns about America’s long-term reliability began to resurface, as Washington found it increasingly difficult to maintain its focus on the IAP region. This was due in part to developments in Europe and the Middle East that demanded American
attention. It was also an American response to China’s campaign of global activism, which included economic and diplomatic outreach to Latin America and Africa and Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which was designed to establish Beijing’s economic leadership from Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean, across South and Central Asia, and ultimately to Europe.

Donald Trump’s statements during the 2016 presidential election campaign, and his policies since taking office, give no indication that he will make an effort to restart the Pivot to the IAP region. While it is still early in the Trump presidency it seems clear that his approach to foreign policy will be reactive and transactional. He will respond to events as they surface in any region of the world, guided by no particular priority other than “making America great again” and negotiating trade deals that favor the U.S. President Trump’s expressed support for an increased defense budget and a second-to none military may result in the U.S. fulfilling The Asia Foundation’s call for a robust American presence in the IAP. But there is no reason to expect American foreign policy in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region to be either sustained or consistent. It is at least possible that an unpredictable and inconsistent American presence in the IAP will encourage key IAP governments to take greater responsibility for regional security. But it is more likely that The Asia Foundation will be proven correct in its warning that “A precipitous reduction of engagement in Asia would....trigger massive destabilization of the regional order.” (Asian Views..., 2016, p. X)

2. Support Asian Regional Architecture and Institutions
In a speech at West Point in 2014, Barack Obama stated that “There are a lot of folks, a lot of skeptics, who often downplay the effectiveness of multilateral action....I think they’re wrong.” (Wilner, 2014) His commitment to multilaterism represented a major break with his predecessor, who was deeply suspicious of “going it with others”, particularly after the 9/11 attacks. (Wolfers, 1962) It was also a break from the policies of Bill Clinton, who became increasingly critical of multilateral forms of cooperation throughout his term in office. Obama was particularly attracted to multilateral arrangements in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. The aforementioned U.S. engagement with the various ASEAN institutions, Washington’s leadership of the TPP discussions, and the Obama team’s efforts to encourage various forms of minilateral collaboration are notable examples of this approach to foreign policy. In some cases, particularly in his interactions with ASEAN, the President was vulnerable to the criticism that he was mistaking talk for action and process for product. It can nonetheless be argued that Obama left the United States in better shape, with more opportunities for influencing developments in the IAP region, as a result of his efforts to work with, and through, regional institutions.

Many of Donald Trump’s comments during the 2016 campaign cast doubt on his interest in multilateralism. Since taking office, however, the President has attended some major multilateral meetings, including a NATO summit and a G-20 conference. More importantly for this essay, President Trump has agreed to attend three upcoming IAP summits in November – the U.S.–ASEAN summit and the East Asia Summit in the Philippines and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Vietnam. The White House has confirmed that the President looks forward to discussing trade, security and the situation in the South China Sea while he is in Asia. (“Pence confirms”, 2017) This is an encouraging sign, but it remains to be seen whether
the President will use these meetings to communicate American interest in regional peace and prosperity or as opportunities to put various governments on notice about burden sharing (the NATO precedent) or to communicate American opposition to some universally accepted policy or principle (the G-20 Climate Change precedent).

Regardless of how the President performs at these upcoming IAP meetings, there can be no doubt that he believes that the “art of the deal” is best served by one-on-one interactions, particularly with partners that are not strong enough to put up a fight. The Obama team encouraged multilateral cooperation as a good in itself and as a way of strengthening the network of America’s regional friends and allies in order to “shape” Chinese interests and behavior. One-on-one deliberations with key IAP governments may be effective at obtaining short term trade benefits for the United States, but it will be difficult for Washington to patch together these bilateral deals in a way that effectively influences Beijing and bolsters regional order. In order for bilateral negotiations to be successful in the long term they must be placed in a strategic context, which leads us back to the question – if not the Pivot, then what?

3. Ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)
TPP was the most visible, and potentially consequential, component of the Obama administration’s Pivot campaign. If President Trump had continued every other element of his predecessor’s Pivot strategy but cancelled American participation in TPP his foreign policy would have been fundamentally incompatible with Obama’s. By scrapping TPP President Trump cleared the way for China to establish itself as the undisputed sponsor of a new regional economic order. Beijing has moved quickly to market its own Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in the IAP and to encourage Asian governments to join the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Indeed, with 56 members and 24 prospective members, the AIIB has gone in a matter of a couple of years from being an Asian regional organization to being a powerful global institution. (Asian Infrastructure website) Washington is conspicuously absent from this organization.

Donald Trump was not the only influential American critic of TPP, of course. During her tenure as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton claimed that “This TPP sets the gold standard in trade agreements.” (Carroll, 2015) But when she was faced with challenges from the left wing of her own party during her presidential campaign she reversed her position on TPP. Her criticisms of the agreement tended to focus on its purported negative impact on jobs and wages in the United States. Missing from her arguments, however, and missing from Donald Trump’s criticisms of the pact, was any serious consideration of the geopolitical consequences of cancellation of TPP for the United States and its regional friends and allies. As Robert Blackwill and Theodore Rappleye have argued, “Without TPP, the United States will be less equipped to protect its allies from Beijing’s pressure. Furthermore, U.S. allies in Asia saw TPP as a symbol of the U.S. commitment to the region. Without it, they are more likely to increasingly doubt America’s willingness to defend them and therefore be tempted to acquiesce to China’s hegemonic agenda.” (Blackwill & Rappleye, 2017)
4. Rethink U.S. Strategy on the Korean Peninsula

The Korean peninsula is the most dangerous of the eight potential flashpoints that Zbigniew Brzezinski has identified in the IAP region. (Brzezinski, 2012, p. 158) For over six decades the threats posed by Pyongyang have provided the primary rationale for Washington’s extensive military presence in South Korea and one of the most important rationales for the massive American basing network in Japan. The North Korean threat also made it possible for Washington to develop an implicit form of anti-Chinese containment in Northeast Asia. For a number of reasons, however, the status quo on the peninsula may no longer be sustainable.

The record of the Obama administration regarding the Korean peninsula is mixed. The President expected the Pivot to reassure Seoul about the U.S. extended deterrent. But after maintaining hair-trigger military preparedness since 1953 some South Korean policy makers and experts were hard to reassure. To the extent that the Pivot was associated with big changes in U.S. foreign policy some South Koreans feared that it might actually make the military balance on the peninsula less stable and less predictable. As Changsu Kim has observed, “... Obama’s rebalance strategy has generally been seen as not very different from what has already occurred on the peninsula....the United States has already pivoted toward the Korean peninsula in response to North Korea’s security challenges and military provocations.” (Kim, 2015, p. 91)

Pyongyang contributed to these fears from time to time, most notably in 2010, when North Korea sunk a South Korean naval vessel and then engaged in artillery attacks on Yeonpyeong island. Washington convinced Seoul to exercise restraint in its responses to these provocations, but South Korean President Lee Myung-bak subsequently put the North (and the United States) on notice that it would engage in “manifold retaliation” rather than a “controlled response” in the event of future attacks. As Michael McDevitt noted at the time, “This change in declaratory policy has potentially profound implications because it signals Pyongyang that Seoul is now equally willing to run the risks and face the possibility of escalation.” (McDevitt, 2011)

President Obama had even less success in his efforts to push or pull Pyongyang off of the path that it has been on since 2003 to acquire deliverable nuclear weapons. Obama soon discovered what his two predecessors had learned – that Pyongyang could not be trusted to keep an agreement, that it was difficult to coerce and dangerously unpredictable, and, most importantly, that Pyongyang viewed the acquisition of nuclear weapons and long range missiles as the surest guarantee of regime survival. Over the next eight years the Obama team dabbled
with both carrots and sticks in a frustrated effort to influence Pyongyang, while working with South Korea to bolster deterrence against North Korean aggression.

The problems faced by the Obama administration in its effort to contain and control Pyongyang became more serious when Kim Jung-un became North Korea’s “Supreme Leader” in December, 2011 and began a campaign of purges and repression which has convinced many commentators that he is mentally unstable. Since coming to power Kim has accelerated North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and testing of long range missiles.

Obama’s critics accused him of “strategic patience” – usually meant to imply complete paralysis - in the face of North Korea’s provocations. In fact, the Obama team tried many policies – most notably, economic sanctions – while working with or through South Korea, Japan, China, and the United Nations to influence Pyongyang. In spite of these efforts, three months before the end of the Obama administration James Clapper, the President’s Director of National Intelligence, stated that “The notion of getting North Koreans to denuclearize is probably a lost cause.” (Davenport, 2017) The fact that the situation has reached this point is certainly frustrating, but it is incumbent on those who criticize Obama’s ‘strategic patience’ to put forward a better approach.

For the time being, the best option for Washington is to continue to work with Seoul to present Pyongyang with a united front, while cultivating regional and international support for an effective form of coercive diplomacy. Unfortunately, threats by the Trump administration that the U.S. might renegotiate the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, and hints that Washington might pressure Seoul to increase its financial support for American bases in South Korea were precisely the wrong messages to send to Moon Jae-in just prior to the start of his term as South Korea’s President. The U.S. comments about the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system were particularly problematic for Seoul, since China was already placing intense diplomatic and economic pressure on South Korea over its decision to host the missile defense system. As Adam Mount (2017) has noted, “…the drama surrounding the deployment has already turned THAAD from a source of strength into a political liability.”

Several commentators have questioned the reliability of America’s South Korean ally, citing Seoul’s economic stake in cooperation with Beijing and statements by President Moon in support of a new “sunshine policy” toward North Korea. Such criticisms fail to take into account the difficulty and fragility of South Korea’s strategic situation. Indeed, it can be argued that
President Moon faces the toughest job in the world. Under the circumstances it is not surprising that some South Korean policies seem to be contradictory. While extending olive branches to Pyongyang and cultivating economic and diplomatic ties with Beijing, Moon has increased defense spending and accelerated some programs begun by his predecessor to provide South Korea with new capabilities for preemption, missile defense and retaliation. (Mizokami, 2017) Above all, President Moon cannot allow his disagreements with Washington to push him toward policies which will undermine, or appear to weaken, the U.S.-South Korea alliance relationship. Frustration with President Trump’s comments led Moon to state on June 1 that South Korea “will take the lead in dealing with Korean peninsula issues without relying on the role of foreign countries.” (Mount, 2017) Since Seoul has more skin in the game than any other nation, it makes sense that it should take the lead on various issues relating to North Korea. But it is essential that any South Korean policies of engagement with or compellence toward Pyongyang be anchored in close policy coordination with the United States.

5. Pursue a Balanced Approach Towards China
Most U.S. commentators and policy makers support close cooperation between Seoul and Washington on the North Korean problem. They also agree with Doug Bandow (2016) that “progress in Pyongyang must go through Beijing,” This is only one of several issues that demand Sino-American cooperation. The Obama Pivot campaign was moderately successful in cultivating bilateral cooperation on a number of topics, including climate change, Iran’s nuclear program, and confidence building and conflict avoidance measures. (Xinhua, 2017) But the fact that the U.S. had to rely upon the San Francisco network of alliances and defense agreements as the foundation for its policies in the IAP reinforced Beijing’s suspicion that the Pivot was just a new form of military containment. (Stuart, 2012) China confronted the U.S. with double digit increases in its annual defense budgets during most of the Obama era, with the result that by the time that President Trump was inaugurated Beijing had the second largest defense budget in the world, and the largest navy in the Pacific. China had also made significant progress in the development of military facilities in contested territories in the South China Sea, giving Beijing an enhanced capability to blockade essential sea lanes and threaten American naval and base assets in the Western Pacific. Washington has responded with increased funding for weapons systems that are specifically designed to eliminate Chinese anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities.
As the two governments continue to ratchet up their military forces and engage in risky air and naval maneuvers, Graham Allison warns that the two sides are inching closer to the “Thucydides Trap”, which he defines as the “…natural, inevitable discombobulation that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power.” (Allison, 2017) For a time, U.S.-China economic ties were viewed as a mitigating factor – encouraging a mutual stake in cooperation. By the time that Obama left office, however, Beijing’s economic activities were interpreted by most American commentators as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. One special source of concern for Washington was the announcement by the International Monetary Fund that China had replaced the United States as the largest economy in the world (based on purchasing power parity). (Allison, 2017, p. 10) In his keynote address to the World Economic Forum, just three days before Donald Trump’s inauguration, Chinese President Xi Jinping made it clear that Beijing was ready to play the role of leader of the global economy for the foreseeable future. (“President Xi’s Speech,” 2017) Some commentators have been encouraged by the recent downturn in the Chinese economy to question Beijing’s ability to sustain a leading role in the global economy, but Beijing’s status as the largest trading partner with 130 countries, its sponsorship of the aforementioned AIIB and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its still-impressive GDP growth (6.7% in 2016) make these predictions sound like wishful thinking. (Allison, 2017)

“Leading from behind” in the global economy will not come easily to the Trump administration, and it will be tempting for Washington to rely upon military instruments of power to influence China. President Trump will also be tempted to accord priority to military elements of power to retain the support of America’s regional friends and allies. Harry Harding and Ellen Laipson note that “On balance, many Asians prefer a U.S.-China relationship that, while not conflictual, is moderately competitive, since that would give their countries greater maneuverability between the two regional superpowers without forcing them to choose sides or serve as pawns in the Sino-American rivalry.” (2016, p. 44) As China’s economic influence continues to grow, Washington will have to work harder to reassure IAP governments that the costs and risks of continued support for the United States are manageable and worth the investment.

President Trump has made several threats of punitive economic policies against China, including threats during his campaign of a 45% increase in tariffs on Chinese imports. But as Ryan Hass and David Dollar have argued (2017) any such actions by the U.S. will run up against a
“leverage deficit” that will limit the impact of such actions on a Chinese economy that is much more diversified and much less dependent on exports to America than was the case a decade ago. Furthermore, unless such actions are carefully coordinated with America’s friends and allies in the IAP region they will have damaging ripple effects on the economies of these governments. Hass and Dollar conclude that “Given the stakes involved and the need to ensure that any action generates more benefit than loss to the U.S. economy, the Trump administration should tread carefully before taking unilateral actions that could have broad and direct impacts on U.S. interests.” (Hass & Dollar, 2017) Ironically, American leadership of the Trans-Pacific Partnership might have been the safest, the most flexible and the most appropriate means of getting Beijing’s attention regarding trade issues.

The Asia Foundation’s call for “balanced” American relations with China would be difficult for any president faced with the prospect of being displaced by Beijing within the global economy. But formulating and sustaining a balanced foreign policy is likely to be especially difficult for a President who is prone to mercurial, ad hoc, and often contradictory statements and policies. Donald Trump’s hints at a reassessment of the One China policy and his comments on the need for key Asian allies to contribute more in support of the U.S. military presence in the IAP region have been walked back by members of the Trump administration. But these are the kinds of gratuitously provocative statements that cannot, and will not, be forgotten by Asian governments in general, and China in particular. It is safe to predict that we are in for a bumpy ride.


In the first year of his presidency Barack Obama began an ultimately unsuccessful campaign to press the Senate to ratify the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). His two predecessors in the White House had engaged in similar campaigns and experienced similar frustrations. All three presidents had assumed that by making military, diplomatic, and economic arguments in support of a treaty signed by 168 nations they could overcome the concerns of key senators about infringements on American sovereignty. They were misinformed. It is not yet clear, but not likely, that President Trump will make the same mistake.

Critics of the UNCLOS treaty (many of whom prefer the acronym LOST) are driven by more than a knee-jerk antipathy to all international agreements. They worry about the powers
that would be wielded by the administrating Authority, whose “purpose isn’t to be helpful. It is to redistribute resources to irresponsible Third World governments with a sorry history of squandering abundant foreign aid.” (Bandow, 2004) Opponents of the treaty are also concerned about the constraints that UNCLOS would impose on U.S. deep seabed mining operations. “Mining approval would be highly politicized and could discriminate against American operators.” (Bandow, 2004) Finally, opponents have warned that “All indications are that if we joined the Law of the Sea treaty, that all kinds of meritless environmental lawsuits would be brought against us.” (Groves, 2016)

Weighing against these concerns are the arguments of Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama that treaty ratification would create opportunities for American leadership on issues of maritime transit and seabed mining. Supporters of the treaty also note that the U.S. already abides by the rules of the treaty, but is not able to derive influence from such activities since it is not a signatory to the Convention. These arguments have been reinforced by a succession of military leaders and national security policy makers who have testified as to the benefits that the U.S. would derive from being able to refer to UNCLOS in support of freedom of navigation and dispute settlement. UNCLOS’s importance as a mechanism for dispute settlement was recently demonstrated by the Philippine’s recourse to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in support of its challenge to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Washington contends that such territorial disputes should be resolved by multilateral negotiations. This is certainly preferable to the unilateral position espoused by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during his confirmation hearings, when he asserted that “...access to those islands ... is not going to be allowed.” (Forsythe, 2017) But as Christopher Mirasola has argued, this American position is undermined by its failure to ratify UNCLOS “the most comprehensive mechanism for multilateral resolution of maritime disputes.” (Mirasola, 2015) A recent article in People’s Daily also claimed that Washington’s “outsider position” with regard to the treaty “…undercuts its message as it urges China to respect global maritime norms.” (People’s Daily, 2016)

In the last months of his second term President Obama gave voice to his frustration over the UNCLOS issue. “If we’re truly concerned about China’s actions in the South China Sea...the Senate should help strengthen our case by approving the Law of the Sea convention, as our military leaders have urged.” (Obama, 2016) As President Trump looks for ways to compensate
for America’s “leverage deficit” in its relations with Beijing, he would be well advised to take seriously the arguments of his predecessor.

7. **Work With India to Address South Asian Security**

Robert Kaplan has observed that “As the United States and China become great power rivals, the direction in which India tilts could determine the course of geopolitics in Eurasia in the twenty-first century. India, in other words, looms as the ultimate pivot state.” (Kaplan, 2012, p. 228) While Indian policy makers are acutely aware of the risks and opportunities presented by U.S.-China competition, they also recognize that the complexity of India’s situation demands a much more nuanced strategy. Indeed, New Delhi’s efforts to develop a comprehensive strategy that takes into account a number of states playing a number of different and changing roles harks back to the extraordinary complexity of the *Arthashastra*, written over 2000 years ago. This Indian treatise is often associated with the aphorism that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. But the *Arthashastra* goes well beyond this simple proposition to discuss how to deal with a number of different actors – an ally’s ally, an enemy’s ally’s ally, etc. (Singh, 2013, p. 5) The need for a multidirectional and long range Indian strategy has become more acute as China has developed its string of pearls network of ports and access arrangements facing the Indian Ocean and its Belt and Road Initiative which will extend across the Indian Ocean and through South Asia and Central Asia to Europe.

Even before the Pivot to Asia was officially launched, members of the Obama administration had begun efforts to improve U.S.-India relations. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was the first head of state to pay an official visit to Washington in the Obama era. When the U.S. President spoke to the India Parliament a year later he predicted that the bilateral relationship “will be one of the defining partnerships of the 21st Century.” (“Barack Obama’s Speech”, 2010) While New Delhi appreciated the American attention, Indians resisted U.S. efforts to press for more explicit support of the Pivot. In the face of an increasingly influential and assertive China, however, an important debate took place within the Indian policy community, which culminated in the publication of the *Nonalignment 2.0* report in January of 2012. In clear, frank and insightful prose, the report wrestled with a number of strategic issues, including:

- The nature of the international system – “…power itself is becoming far more diffused and fragmented…” (*Nonalignment 2.0*, 2012, p. 9)
- The appropriate Indian strategy for a changing international order –
  “The core objective of a strategic approach should be to ... enhance
  India’s strategic space and capacity for independent agency.”  (Nonalignment
  2.0, 2012, p. 8)

- India’s place in South Asia – “India is the major power in the region....
  On the other hand,...India’s neighbors fear it or chafe at its perceived
  Condescension....India will have to constantly go the extra mile to
  Reassure its neighbors.  (Nonalignment 2.0, 2012, p. 16)

- The principal strategic challenges to India – “China will, for the fore-
  seeable future , remain a significant foreign policy and security
  challenge.”  (Nonalignment 2.0, 2012, p. 13)  “Pakistan’s ‘all-weather friendship’
  with China shields it against adverse international fall-out from the pursuit of its
  anti-India policies.”  (Nonalignment 2.0, 2012, p. 18)

- India’s options vis-à-vis the U.S. – “...it may be tempting to conclude
  that the U.S. is a likely alliance partner. But this conclusion would
  be premature....The U.S. can be too demanding in its friendship and
  resentful of other attachments India might pursue.”  (Nonalignment 2.0, 2012, p.
  32)

Over the next two years three developments helped to convince New Delhi that, in spite of the
risks, India had to be more explicit and ambitious in its support of security cooperation with
Washington: The continued efforts by the Obama administration to recruit Indian support,
including the U.S. designation of New Delhi as a “Major Defense Partner”; the acceleration of
Beijing’s economic, diplomatic and military activities in Southeast, South and Central Asia; and
the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May of 2014. Modi was much more willing
than his predecessors to pursue an active foreign policy in the IAP region. His elevation of
India’s “look east” policy to an “act east” policy and his support for various forms of minilateral
defense cooperation with IAP governments were major contributions to the Obama Pivot. Modi
capped these initiatives with the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with
Washington in August of 2016. Described by then-Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter as a
“substantial enabler” of bilateral security cooperation, the LEMOA will facilitate future sharing
of facilities for refueling and supply activities. (Panda, 2016)
To date, President Trump has continued the campaign of active recruitment of India that characterized his predecessor. The President has stated that “There won’t be any relationship that will be more important to us” than U.S.-India ties. (Rogin, 2017) The President also went beyond rhetoric during Modi’s visit to the White House, where the two sides discussed cooperation against “radical Islamic Terrorism” and announced plans for the largest-ever maritime exercises in the Indian Ocean, which will include Japanese warships. The U.S. also agreed to sell New Delhi 22 Predator Guardian drones at a cost of $2 billion. (“Trump and Modi Hug, 2017) It is nonetheless important to note that New Delhi is still concerned about American reliability and still committed to “the core objective...to give India maximum options in its relations with the outside world.” (Nonalignment 2.0, 2012, p. 8) It remains to be seen if the Trump administration can exercise the patience and quiet persistence that will be required to cultivate this bilateral relationship.

8. Do Not Abandon Afghanistan

A major test of future U.S.-India ties will be the way that Washington handles relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan. These impoverished and fragile South Asian states have taken on greater geopolitical and geoeconomic importance in the context of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing has backed up its diplomatic outreach to Afghanistan and Pakistan with impressive infrastructure investments, most notably Beijing’s commitment of U.S. $46 billion in support of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The concept of the “new silk road” was actually launched by then-Secretary of State Clinton in Chennai, India in July of 2011. It was envisioned by the Obama administration as part of a soft power strategy for getting U.S. troops out of Afghanistan while enhancing American influence in the region. Six years later, the United States is still trapped in a war in Afghanistan, but with far fewer U.S. troops on the ground. Since the start of that conflict it has been clear that Washington needed Pakistan to achieve its goals. But it also became clear over time that Pakistan was actively supporting members of the Haqqani network and the Afghan Taliban while cooperating with the U.S. on other counterterror and counterinsurgency operations.

To date, the Trump administration’s policies regarding both Afghanistan and Pakistan are similar to the Obama administration’s approach. Both Presidents have concluded that they cannot simply walk away from Afghanistan, that they must avoid an open-ended military commitment, and that they have no choice but to continue to work with Islamabad. (Lake, 2017)
Taken together, unfortunately, these precepts do not add up to a strategy. The President has registered his frustration with this situation, threatening to fire General John Nicholson, the commander of American forces in Afghanistan. But members of his administration were quick to assure the media of the President’s continued confidence in Nicholson.

Secretary of Defense James Mattis informed Congress that his office would complete a strategy document by mid-July, but this deadline has passed. When the document is launched, it is quite possible that it will boil down to “keep calm and carry on,” with recommendations for a modest increase in the current U.S. troop strength of 8,400. This is not the worst outcome for the time being, since any precipitous action by Washington risks generating new problems for the U.S. and its allies beyond the Afghanistan/Pakistan borders. It would be especially damaging to American and allied interests if the Trump administration were to summarily leave Afghanistan. As noted by The Asia Foundation report, “Poor governance is often the cradle of terrorism and instability, and to counter such instability the U.S. must continue to promote the rule of law, build civil society, and support economic and development measures that increase Afghanistan’s national capacity to effectively govern and to provide for its own security.” (Asian Views..., 2016, p. XII)

9. Continue to Play a Leading Role in Nontraditional Security

The authors of The Asia Foundation report list disaster response, humanitarian assistance, and “mitigating the effects of climate change” as some of the areas in which Asian states “…want the United States to continue to lead and to facilitate cooperation.” (Asian Views..., 2016, p. XII) As Kurt Campbell reminds us, the IAP region is especially vulnerable to these threats. “Today, Asia is home to nine of the top ten countries in terms of casualties attributable to natural disasters, and its people are twenty-five times more likely to be affected by a natural disaster than are Americans or Europeans.” (Campbell, 2016, p. 61) The Obama administration’s responses to these problems helped Washington to overcome Asian suspicions of the American Pivot.

If Congress supports the Trump administration’s proposed budget cuts for 2018 it will eviscerate some of the agencies that have been at the forefront of efforts to mitigate the damaging effects of natural disasters and humanitarian crises in the IAP region, including the U.S. Agency for International Development and its subordinate Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance agency (OFDA). A one third reduction in the OFDA budget will make it impossible for
the agency to fulfill its mission to “prepare for, respond to, and recover from” approximately 65 humanitarian crises each year. (OFDA Website, no date given)

The Asia Foundation report also takes special note of the priority that the Obama administration accorded to climate change, and its leadership in efforts to convince selected IAP governments (in particular, India) to support the 2015 Paris Accord. (Asian Views..., 2016, pp. XII and 7) President Trump has already overturned the Obama administration’s commitment to the Paris Accord – a decision that will seriously undermine U.S. foreign policy in the IAP. Just as the U.S. rejection of the TPP has cleared the way for China to become the economic leader of the IAP region, Trump’s rejection of the Paris Accord invites Beijing, New Delhi and Tokyo to shape the future of regional and global cooperation on climate change. The U.S. will also find it difficult to compete with key Asian governments for the lucrative market in renewable energy sources. Finally, Washington will be subjected to intense criticisms as the world’s biggest emitter or carbon (on a per capita basis) as Asian governments experience climate-related droughts, monsoons and coastal flooding.

10. Continue to Project American “Soft Power”

President Trump inherited a complex and challenging cluster of issues in the IAP region, made more difficult by an increasingly influential and assertive China. Washington’s ‘leverage deficit” in Asia should have convinced the President of the need to rely even more than his predecessor on global and regional institutions to bolster American influence. Instead, the Trump administration has pursued an “America first” campaign that has included a proposed 31% reduction in U.S. support for global organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank, rejection of the Paris Climate Accord and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and warnings to traditional allies that the U.S. will demand more financial and diplomatic support in the future. In a period of six months, President Trump’s policies and statements have resulted in a dramatic decline in support for the United States across the IAP region. According to a Pew Research Center poll published on June 26, 2017, confidence that the U.S. president would do the right thing in world affairs dropped dramatically among America’s most important Asian allies in the first few months of the Trump administration: from 88% to 17% in South Korea, from 84% to 29% in Australia, and from 78% to 24% in Japan. (Wike, et al, 2017) Unless there is a fundamental reversal of the direction of American foreign policy, support for the United States is likely to continue to decline across the IAP region.
**Conclusion**

The Obama administration’s Pivot to Asia had lost much of its focus and its momentum by the time that Donald Trump was elected. The foundational assumptions of the Obama strategy were nonetheless still valid, and the interests of the United States and of its friends and allies in the IAP region would still be best served by a campaign to restart the Pivot. This option appears to never have been considered by the Trump administration. It is at least possible that under some circumstances President Trump’s transactional approach to policy making may generate breakthroughs. For example, one can imagine a situation in which one of the President’s unscripted comments resonates with the leadership in Beijing and leads to productive dialogue between the two governments. Unfortunately, it is much more likely that the President’s anti-strategic foreign policy will reinforce Asian suspicions about America’s reliability and encourage these governments to look for alternatives to a U.S.-sponsored security order.
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