

Humanitarian hawk meets rising dragon: Obama's legacy in US China policy

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Introduction

After seven years of a George W. Bush foreign policy focused on the “war on terror”, Barack Obama came into office in 2009 seeking to “pivot” US foreign policy towards a growing Asia. Together with his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, he was particularly keen to reset a US relationship with China that had withered under a Bush administration engrossed in the Middle East. Working with China, Obama and Clinton hoped, would help resolve a growing list of bilateral, regional and global security challenges.

Instead, the eight years of the Obama administration witnessed an unmistakable deterioration in US–China relations.¹ A variety of academic, policy and media reports all suggest that Obama was repeatedly rebuffed both personally and in his China policy. For instance, at the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao sent a second-tier official to sit in his place opposite Obama. This was widely seen as a snub.² Similarly, Obama's 2009 speech to students in Shanghai, in which he spoke of the importance of political expression and participation, was censored in the Chinese media after a negotiated agreement to not do so. In 2016, Obama was denied a red-carpet reception at Hangzhou Airport and forced to unceremoniously disembark from Air Force One through the belly of the plane.³

By contrast, on his first state visit to China in November 2017, Donald Trump was treated to an ‘unprecedented’ grand red-carpet welcome.⁴ Does that make Obama's China policy a failure and Trump's a success? Two years into the Trump administration, what can we say about Obama's China policy legacy?

Appraising the legacy of an individual or group is relatively straightforward. For instance, The Beatles' legacy can be assessed through the music they left behind. Assessing a bilateral policy legacy is more complex. At the interpersonal level, if a relationship deteriorates then who is to blame? Did one or both parties

do the wrong things, or not try hard enough? One side can do all the right things, but if the other side does not reciprocate the relationship can deteriorate nonetheless. Alternatively, both sides can make an effort and do the right things but circumstances can conspire against them. Inter-nation relations are no different; it takes two, and the right international conditions, to make a successful bilateral relationship.

This chapter will argue that circumstances conspired to undermine Obama's China policy, and that the deterioration of US–China relations during his administration was largely beyond his control. Obama's Pivot to Asia suffered from an inability to extract the United States from the wars in the Middle East he inherited from Bush, and the rise of Chinese nationalism stymied his hopes of resetting US–China relations. Obama's Pivot to Asia did, however, leave both the Trump administration and US allies in a position of relative strength in 2017 Asia.

The chapter further argues that despite an ego-gratifying red-carpet welcome to Beijing in 2017, bilateral relations deteriorated much more during the first two years of the Trump administration. Halfway through his term in office mutual trust is at a new low, talk of a “Thucydides Trap” is increasing, and the spectre of another US–China conflict looms. Meanwhile, an “America First” Trump has turned his back on Asia, not least by rejecting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Trump has undermined the regional position of the United States and its Asian allies, and initiated a damaging trade war with China. Together with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Trump is also undermining stability in the Taiwan Strait.

To make this argument, the chapter begins with Obama and his administration's broader foreign policy orientation. It then examines his Pivot to Asia, and his plans for a reset of US–China relations. It next explores the events of 2008 that conspired to undermine the prospects for improving US–China relations even before the Obama administration began. Trump's volatile China policy and the further deterioration of US–China relations is then interrogated. The chapter concludes with thoughts on the future of Obama's legacy in US China policy.

Obama: Humanitarian hawk

To understand Obama's China policy, one must first understand his broader foreign policy orientation. Obama was no dove. George McGovern and the anti-war activism of Vietnam-era liberals has created the widespread impression that post-Vietnam Democrats are doves and Republicans, hawks. Like many stereotypes, there is some truth to this view: *on average*, Republicans are more nationalistic and militaristic than Democrats.

Averages can hide important differences within groups, however. A plurality of Democrats today are actually ‘forceful idealists’ or ‘humanitarian hawks’, willing to deploy military force to achieve idealistic foreign policy goals.⁵ They want to

defend religious liberty, combat hunger and disease, and promote democracy and human rights around the world, and are willing to use force to do so.

Obama was one such humanitarian hawk. When the Nobel Committee selected him as their 2009 Peace Prize laureate, they likely mistook him for a dovish counterpoint to George Bush's hawkishness. His words and deeds soon proved them wrong. 'Within America, there has long been a tension between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists – a tension that suggests a stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world,' Obama declared during his Nobel lecture in Oslo. 'I reject these choices.'⁶

Instead, like Reinhold Niebuhr and other progressive Christians before him, Obama did not abandon the Social Gospel but adapted it to a hostile world. Following Martin Luther King, he believed that 'love without power is mere sentimentality. Power without love is dangerous. Love plus power equals justice.'⁷ 'Clear-eyed,' he concluded his 2009 Nobel lecture, 'we can understand that there will be war, and still strive for peace.'⁸

Obama chose a fellow forceful idealist – Hillary Clinton – to lead his foreign policy team. 'I've never understood the division between so-called realists and so-called idealists,' Clinton said in a 2011 interview with the *Atlantic*.

I don't know how you get up in the world every day ... if you don't have some sense of idealism, because you have to believe that as hard as it is, you're going to prevent the dictator from oppressing his people, you're going to help to stop the war, you're going to figure out a way to get clean water to thirsty people and cure kids of disease. And at the same time, I don't know how you go through the day and expect to be successful without being very hard-headed and realistic.⁹

Obama and Clinton did not just talk the talk about a hard-headed idealism, they walked the walk. For instance, in March 2011 Obama ordered a military attack on the Libyan army that prevented a massacre in Benghazi. Less than two months later, Obama overrode the objections of Republican Defense Secretary Robert Gates to authorise Operation Neptune Spear, in which US Navy SEALs assassinated Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. But neither Obama nor Clinton saw force as the solution to every global problem. They were both philosophical pragmatists,¹⁰ and that hard-headedness informed their China policy.

China featured prominently in the United States' foreign policy Pivot to Asia. Obama and Clinton sought mutual cooperation, but China was 'one of the most challenging and consequential bilateral relationships the United States has ever had to manage.'¹¹ A long-standing critic of China's human rights record, in 2011 Clinton declared, 'we live in the real world ... [and] we don't walk away from dealing with China because we think they have a deplorable human rights record.'¹²

Obama felt similarly on China policy: tough when needed on humanitarian issues, but pragmatic. His previous life experiences as an African American and

a lawyer likely contributed to his focus on human rights issues in China.¹³ Yet Obama's pragmatism and anti-militarism led him to embrace working with China to resolve bilateral, regional and global security challenges. Like his predecessors, Obama talked tough on China during his election campaign, only to soften his stance once in office.¹⁴ As president, Obama repeatedly claimed that the United States welcomed the rise of China; against many Chinese critics, I believe he truly meant it. Obama viewed China as a potential partner.

Many Chinese, for their part, initially judged the new president as easier to work with than his predecessor. But timing was against the new administration. While the Middle East preoccupied the White House, many Chinese – proud and confident after decades of rapid growth – advocated a more assertive foreign policy as China sought to take its historical place as the leading power in East Asia. Washington's alleged containment policy was seen to stand in the way.

A Pacific president: Obama's Pivot

US–China relations, former Secretary of State Colin Powell declared in 2004, were 'the best they have been since President Richard Nixon first visited Beijing more than 30 years ago'.¹⁵ That is decidedly *not* how Chinese at the time viewed the relationship.¹⁶ Bush had come into office in January 2001 with a team of neoconservatives who were hawkish on China, and the April 2001 Hainan spy plane collision sent bilateral relations to lows not seen since the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989. Then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, muzzled during the delicate negotiations over the release of the plane's US crew, held a press conference immediately upon their release to lambast China and blame the dead Chinese pilot Wang Wei for both the crash and his own death. The Chinese government continued to place full blame for Wang Wei's death on the United States.

Five months later, the US terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 changed everything. The Chinese government sent its condolences, and the Bush administration and its neocons turned their gaze towards Afghanistan and Iraq. Powell is correct that *on the surface* US–China relations seemed to improve, but most Chinese security analysts viewed 9/11 merely as a reprieve from the wrath of the neocons. America, in their view, was 霸道 (hegemonic/ bullying) by nature, and only temporarily directing its innate aggression elsewhere.¹⁷ After seven years of the war on terror and a Bush Doctrine that emphasised unilateralism and a provocative policy of preventative war, Obama ran for president on a platform of extricating the United States from the Middle East. Where Bush was willing to go it alone in Iraq with or without UN support, and even that of US allies, Obama was far more of an internationalist, believing that global problems required diplomatic and multilateral solutions.

Obama billed himself “the first Pacific President” in November 2009, and first announced his Pivot to Asia in November 2011. Michael Green argues that Barack Obama was not actually the first Pacific president, but the first to pursue a genuinely Asia-first strategy.¹⁸ Regardless, it is no coincidence that Obama’s first foreign visitor was Japanese Prime Minister Tarō Aso. South Korean President Myung-Bak Lee received the Obama administration’s first formal state visit, and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s first trip abroad was to Asia.

Having grown up in Indonesia and Hawaii, Obama may have been better placed than many East Coast American statesmen and women to recognise the growing geopolitical importance of a rising Asia, and he and Clinton set about Pivoting to Asia. Kurt Campbell, Obama’s Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and the Pivot’s primary architect, has argued at length that Obama’s Pivot to Asia was a ‘necessary course correction’ after a decade focusing on terrorism and the Middle East.¹⁹ Campbell further argues that as Asia grows the US role in Asia must evolve as well, from a ‘gardener’ dutifully tending to the region, to an ‘orchestra conductor’ coordinating the increasingly independent efforts of Asian states and their multilateral institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).²⁰

Socialised into an anti-imperialist nationalism,²¹ many Chinese feared the Pivot was an effort to block their country’s rise, and yet another effort to humiliate China and deny its rightful place atop the East Asian order. Pointing to Obama’s 2011 announcement of rotations of increasingly larger groups of US Marines through Darwin in northern Australia, these Chinese analysts argued that the Pivot was a policy of balancing against China’s rise, both through a US military build-up and reinforcing US alliances in Asia. Many Chinese considered the economic pillar of the Pivot, the TPP, to have been designed to exclude China and its state-centric economy, while drawing up an American-designed blueprint for regional trade. Many Chinese saw the TPP as a long-term threat to its interests and sought to create alternative economic arrangements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).²² The Pivot, they claimed, was containment with a new name.

The Pivot was about ‘increasing ties to Asia’, Campbell responded to such critics, ‘not containing China.’²³ It sought to embed China policy within a broader regional framework, not to obstruct China’s rise. Campbell would not convince Chinese nationalists, and China’s overreaction to the Pivot only confirmed the worst fears of American nationalists, contributing to a hardening of many US China policies, from cyber security to the South China Sea.²⁴ Indeed, Campbell concludes his book, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia*, with a metaphor: the United States must bolster its Asian partnerships by adding a ‘tire’ to the traditional hub and spokes alliance structure, joining each and every allied spoke.²⁵

For instance, the Obama administration worked hard to reconcile Japan and South Korea, America’s two closest allies in Northeast Asia. Though not

particularly successful at overcoming their misgivings about each other, US efforts to bring Japan and South Korea together do suggest that external balancing against China was one driver of Obama's Pivot to Asia. Indeed, the administration's plans to install the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system in South Korea drew criticism from China. The Obama administration claimed that it was needed to counter the threat of increasing missile launches from North Korea, but Beijing argued that it was actually directed against them. The Chinese government was consistent and systematic in its repeated criticisms of THAAD, extending formal diplomatic protests immediately after its announcement.²⁶ Beijing also allowed major Chinese nationalist protests and boycotts against South Korean companies, and put restrictions on tourism to South Korea, and the import of K-pop. The Obama administration further fuelled Beijing's discontent when it approved arms sales to Taiwan, Singapore and other Chinese neighbours concerned about Beijing's future ambitions. For instance, the Obama administration lifted a half-century embargo on lethal weapons sales to Vietnam.

Ultimately, the Pivot failed to live up to its full potential because Obama could not extricate the United States from the Middle Eastern challenges it had inherited from the Bush administration. Obama, and China's new President Xi Jinping, appeared to strike an early friendship, manifest in the broadly positive messages which emanated from the 2013 Sunnylands Summit in California between the two. Their joint statement described a relationship which had the potential to become more cooperative and mutually beneficial, rather than antagonistic.²⁷ While Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan would continue to occupy Washington's attention, however, China would begin rolling out its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Belt and Road, and other megaprojects, to take the initiative in East Asia.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics

With hindsight, it becomes apparent that two events in 2008, before Obama was even elected, powerfully shaped the prospects for his China policy. The Beijing Olympics and the global financial crisis of 2007/8 were successfully utilised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to boost Chinese nationalism and solidify its legitimacy. They also contributed to a more aggressive turn in Chinese foreign policy in general, and China's US policy in particular.

The CCP used preparations for the Olympics to hammer home the core nationalist message of its post-Tiananmen Patriotic Education Campaign (爱国教育运动): that the CCP had rescued China from Western and Japanese imperialism in the past, and would restore China to its proper place atop the world stage in the future. A Herculean propaganda campaign portrayed the Beijing Olympics as the culmination of a 'century-long Olympic dream' (百年奥运梦) of the Chinese people, restoring their 'dignity', and wiping away the 'Century of

Humiliation' (百年国耻) at the hands of European and Japanese imperialism.²⁸ The placement of countdown clocks in public squares in cities all across China in the years leading up to the Games manufactured an intense personal desire for redemption and recognition among ordinary Chinese. The Games themselves were virtually flawless. The Opening Ceremony, directed by filmmaker Zhang Yimou, was on an awe-inspiring scale, featuring 2008 People's Liberation Army (PLA) performers and spectacular visual effects. The performance highlighted China's five millennia old "Brilliant Civilisation" and its "Glorious New Era" under the CCP. Like a debutante at its ball, China was stepping out into international society to be admired by all, and demanding recognition.

Confronting China's rise from the intimacy of their own homes, Americans appear to have become warier towards China.²⁹ US media coverage of scandals surrounding an underage Chinese gymnast who denied an American a medal, and a lip-syncing girl during the opening events, contributed to an American view of the Chinese as cheats. To add insult to injury, China won the most gold medals at its Olympics, beating out its nearest rival, the United States.

Ultimately, the Beijing Olympics put pressure on US-China relations from both sides. The CCP became a victim of their own success, facing increasing domestic pressure from a nationalist public opinion of its own making and which increasingly demanded that a newly modernised China must be respected. Meanwhile, the Obama administration confronted an American public that increasingly viewed China as a cheat which competed unfairly, threatening US global dominance.

The global financial crisis and a newly assertive China

Later in 2008, the global financial crisis provided yet another opportunity for the CCP to boost its nationalist legitimacy. It was also good for Obama's presidential election campaign as he and his running mate Joe Biden benefited, while their rivals John McCain and Sarah Palin suffered. For Obama, a national economic crisis was good electoral fortune; inheriting Republican George W. Bush's economy, McCain declared in September 2008 that 'the fundamentals of our economy are strong'. That very day Lehman Brothers collapsed, just seven weeks prior to the election.³⁰

The financial crisis was bad news, however, for Obama's subsequent China policy. Like the Beijing Olympics it fundamentally transformed Chinese expectations about their place in Asia and the world. 'China emerged from the global financial crisis cocky on the international stage but insecure at home,' Tom Christensen notes, 'a toxic combination that has made managing relations with it even more difficult than usual.'³¹ Prior to 2008, China had pursued a largely cautious policy of reassurance towards the United States and its East Asian neighbours. In large

part this was because when “China threat” discourse first emerged in Japan and Southeast Asia in the 1990s, Chinese analysts awoke to the dangers of the security dilemma.³² Military policies in the East and South China Seas which China viewed as benign and defensive were viewed with alarm by its Asian neighbours, bringing the possibility of counterbalancing, military build-ups and strengthened alliances, with the potential to undermine China’s security environment.

Reassurance quickly became a guiding principle of Chinese foreign policy. China’s neighbours would be made to understand China’s peaceful intentions, to help ensure they resisted the temptation of working together to obstruct China’s rise. Multilateralism was one way in which China sought to reassure its Pacific neighbours. Having fought against a US-led United Nations force in Korea, Cold War China had long been hostile to international organisations. In the 1990s, however, China began a dramatic reversal, actively engaging ASEAN and other regional and international organisations.

Were China’s neighbours reassured? Some were not, arguing that Deng Xiaoping’s famous dictum of 韬光养晦 or ‘quietly hiding one’s talents and biding one’s time’ suggested that the Chinese policy of reassurance was actually a wolf in sheep’s clothing; once China was strong, its aggressive nature would reveal itself. For the most part, however, the United States and China’s East and Southeast Asian neighbours were reassured, and spent most of the first two post-Cold War decades benefiting from trade and investment relations with China. At first, there was a bipartisan consensus in the United States on engaging China.³³

The financial crisis of 2008 changed all that. Contrasting China’s speedy implementation of a stimulus package and rapid economic recovery to the West’s slower response and more difficult recovery, the CCP engaged in a sustained media campaign to argue to its people that China had emerged on top; the crisis was said to have proven that the “Chinese model”, or “Beijing consensus”, of state-led economic development was superior to the neoliberal “Washington consensus” on the centrality of market-based economic solutions.

The success of this triumphalist CCP propaganda campaign (reminiscent of Liberal triumphalism and the ‘End of History’³⁴ following the demise of the Soviet bloc) was a mixed blessing for Chinese elites. Many Chinese began to brim with self-confidence. Former US Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson relates how as early as 2008 Vice Premier Wang Qishan, China’s anti-corruption tsar, lectured him at length about US economic failings, posing China’s economic model as a superior alternative.³⁵

This was more than just talk. Chinese elites were soon acting on their post-financial crisis confidence. In 2009, PRC Ambassador to the UK Fu Ying threatened the oil company BP over a planned development project with Vietnam, implying that BP’s much larger China business was at stake. At a 2010 ASEAN meeting, then PRC Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi bluntly declared to China’s neighbours that ‘China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a

fact'. He had listened to Southeast Asian diplomats express concerns about PRC military activities in the South China Sea, but was in no mood to respond calmly.³⁶ In Chinese foreign policy after the financial crisis, gentle reassurance was out, and blunt power displays were in.

But the Chinese elite were arguably also the victims of their own propaganda's success. The Chinese people largely appear to have bought into the CCP's post-2008 message that the Chinese economy was now the world's strongest, and they began expecting that their government demand the respect a newly dominant China deserved. For instance, when the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute flared up again between China and Japan in 2012, Beijing's elite foreign policy makers appear to have been forced to toughen their policy towards Tokyo to placate nationalist public opinion. Circumstantial evidence strongly suggests nationalist opinion was a powerful driver of a toughening China Japan policy in 2012–13. Spikes in anti-Japanese sentiment online in Chinese cyberspace, and anti-Japanese protests on the streets of most major Chinese cities, preceded each sequential hardening of China's foreign policies towards its East Asian neighbour. Chinese popular nationalists, furthermore, directed their ire not just at Japan but also the CCP for "weak" responses to perceived Japanese provocations.³⁷ These nationalists, in other words, were directing the party-state's own language of nationalist legitimisation back towards it.³⁸

In short, the 2008 Beijing Olympics and global financial crisis appear to have doomed Obama's attempted reset of US–China relations before he even took office. Washington's conciliatory gestures towards Beijing, Richard McGregor argues, went unreciprocated.³⁹ Following the crisis, Chinese nationalism transformed confidence and influence into hubris and assertiveness.⁴⁰ China recalibrated its foreign policy from Deng Xiaoping's tactic of maintaining a low profile to a new policy of speaking and acting loudly. History is likely to judge the Obama years as the period when China regained its position as the major power in Asia. Towards the end of the Obama administration, a fundamental rethinking of US engagement policy of China was well underway.⁴¹

A China policy under Trump?

During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump blamed China for a variety of American woes, from its trade deficit to unemployment. This was a winning strategy in the Republican Party primaries, as cultural (Christian right), economic (business) and political (libertarian) conservatives are more anti-communist than their liberal counterparts, and as socio-racial conservatives (white nativists) are more prejudiced than civil rights liberals.⁴² Trump thus found a receptive audience in the most conservative Republicans when he floated the old spectres of "Red China" and the "Yellow Hordes" at his campaign rallies.⁴³

In the first two years of Trump's presidency however, his narcissism got the better of him and his China policy has been incoherent, swaying back and forth towards whomever at hand could best satisfy his insatiable need for flattery. As E. J. Dionne and others have noted, Trump's policies from immigration to gun control shift according to whoever is in the room with him.⁴⁴ His China policy is no different.

Taiwan got to Trump's ego first. In December 2016, ROC President Tsai Ying-wen called Trump directly to congratulate him on his election victory. The conversation broke decades of established diplomatic protocol between Washington and Beijing and talk emerged of the Trump administration revisiting the One China policy which China insists upon, and which many Taiwanese from Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party now oppose. In a February 2017 conversation with PRC President Xi Jinping, however, Trump abruptly reversed course, affirming that the United States would continue to support the "1992 Consensus" on One China. "Trump lost his first fight with Xi, and he will be looked at as a paper tiger," Shi Yinhong boasted to the *New York Times*.⁴⁵

In November that year, the CCP rewarded Trump with a lavish state visit to Beijing. Playing to Trump's vanity, the visit was 'unprecedented' in its pomp.⁴⁶ Trump basked in the spectacle, and rewarded Xi by avoiding sensitive issues like human rights, press freedom, and even the American jobs he had promised to defend during his election campaign. Many Chinese lauded Xi's triumph. 'The leader of the world's number one power has just made a pilgrimage to him,' Shanghai pundit Chen Daoyin gloated, 'this is naturally how all Chinese people will see it.'⁴⁷ Just a month later, however, Trump's first National Security Strategy (NSS) described China as 'challenging American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity'. The NSS argued that decades of US engagement with China had not worked, and emphasised US-China competition and possible confrontation.⁴⁸

The January 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) was even more alarmist. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis claimed that China 'seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony ... and displacement of the United States to achieve global pre-eminence'.⁴⁹ Nationalism was now becoming the predominant framework for understanding US-China relations on both sides of the Pacific. The next month, the US Senate unanimously passed the Taiwan Travel Act which Trump promptly signed, encouraging visits between US and Taiwanese officials at all levels. Although non-binding, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned that the Act 'severely violates the one-China principle and the three joint communiques between China and the US'.⁵⁰

The Taiwan issue, largely dormant during the Obama and Ma Ying-jeou administrations, is re-emerging under Trump and Xi as a flashpoint in US-China relations.⁵¹ Seen as a double "window of opportunity", 2019 is shaping up to be a dangerous year in the Taiwan Strait. While President Xi and Chinese nationalists

desperately desire reunification, Trump's isolationist "America First" rhetoric only emboldens such reckless thoughts, while Taiwanese remain passive and unable to confront the threat.

Tensions in the South China Sea continue to mount as well. In January and March 2018, the USS *Hopper* and USS *Mustin* carried out freedom of navigation operations within 12 nautical miles of Scarborough Shoal and Mischief Reef respectively. While the US side claimed they were innocent passages well within international law, the Chinese side responded through the lens of anti-imperialist nationalism.⁵² The United States 'seriously harmed Chinese sovereignty and security', claimed a Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman.⁵³ Angry words were also paired with action. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) paraded its aircraft carrier *Liaoning* and over forty other ships and submarines through the South China Sea in April 2018.⁵⁴ Aboard the PLAN destroyer *Changsha*, Xi Jinping, donning a military uniform, instructed the PLAN to be on 'full alert'.⁵⁵ It is hard to overemphasise how negatively China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea have impacted American public opinion towards China.

Trump pulled out of the TPP at the beginning of his presidency, and in March 2018 he imposed tariffs on steel and aluminium imports. Most of these imports came from US partners like Canada, and Trump's trade policy created as much opposition from close allies as it did from China. On the same day in Chile, eleven Pacific Rim countries signed a revised TPP, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), affirming Obama's vision of regional free trade, and rebuffing Trump's embrace of protectionism. As of early 2019, Trump's narcissism and pugnaciousness has contributed to a new nadir in US–China relations. An 'enormously destructive dynamic' has developed across the Pacific, in which worst-case thinking threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁵⁶

Obama's China legacy revisited

This chapter has argued that circumstances conspired to thwart Obama's China policy, and that the unmistakable deterioration of US–China relations during his eight years in office was largely out of his control. First and foremost, the Middle East demanded continued US attention, inhibiting a full Pivot to Asia and China. Second, the 2008 Beijing Olympics and global financial crisis were successfully utilised by the CCP to boost popular Chinese nationalism, contributing to a toughening of Chinese foreign policy in general, and to its US policy in particular. An American counter-reaction was predictable. The widespread perception of an aggressive turn in Chinese foreign policy, moreover, did not just set US–China relations back. Many of China's neighbours started rethinking their relations with Beijing and sought to strengthen their ties with the United States.

So Obama's China legacy must be understood within the broader context of his Pivot to Asia, which had mixed results. Obama was not able to fully extract the United States from the "forever wars" he inherited, so the Pivot did not live up to its full potential. However, the Obama administration's efforts to put tires on the hub and spoke system of US alliances in Asia, to borrow Bader's metaphor, paid dividends. From Japan to Vietnam, Asian states were driven by their growing fears of China into an embrace of closer relations with both the United States and each other. As a result, Trump was handed a robust network of relationships in Asia within which to engage China.

From the vantage point of early 2019, has Trump squandered this Obama legacy? Yes. The TPP is an illuminating case. Trump withdrew from a partnership Obama had promoted since 2009. The Obama administration viewed the TPP as more than just a trade agreement – it was to be the political cement that kept the United States engaged in Asia. From a political and security perspective, Trump's withdrawal was a major error, ceding leadership in East Asia to China. It was also a blow to one of Obama's China policy successes. Like a zombie, the TPP has also risen from the dead, though without American participation. The signing in March 2018 of the CPTPP by eleven of Washington's important regional partners not only affirms Obama's economic vision of free trade and spurns Trump's protectionism, but supports the Pivot's political vision of an Asia Pacific tied together through open networks and multilateral agreements.

Trump's bellicose threats over trade towards both China and some of Washington's closest and most long-standing allies, to fulfil his narcissistic need for affirmation from his protectionist supporters, threatens to further undermine Sino-American relations and the liberal international order so central to the post-war peace. It is also misplaced; the Trump administration has prioritised balance of trade issues, at the expense of more important problems including Chinese intellectual property theft, non-tariff barriers to free trade, and the probation of foreign investment in selective sectors of its economy.

Trump may be squandering Obama's legacy in Asia, but China also currently appears to be wasting the opportunity Trump presents to take a positive leadership role in East Asia, as Xi's assertiveness alienates a number of China's Asian neighbours. Trump's successor will therefore likely confront an Asia eager to support American re-engagement, and Obama's Pivot to Asia may well re-emerge in a new form.

Notes

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- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 M. Green, *More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 519 and p. 539.
- 19 K. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016), p. 2.
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