

## **The Politics of Power Projection: The Pivot to Asia, Its Failure, and the Future of American Primacy**

Of all his foreign policy initiatives, President Obama's "pivot" (or "rebalance") to Asia attracted the most attention from scholars of International Relations.<sup>1</sup> Although some analysts raised objections about the pivot's implementation (arguing, for example, that it was insufficiently resourced<sup>2</sup> or that it would unnecessarily worsen relations with a rising China),<sup>3</sup> most tended to agree that a renewed focus on Asia was a judicious response to changing geopolitical circumstances in a critical region of the world.<sup>4</sup> Yet no matter how compelling the strategic rationale for expanding America's presence in Asia, the pivot had become a dead letter by the time Obama left office.<sup>5</sup> His successor, Donald Trump, made a point of jettisoning key aspects of the

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<sup>1</sup> For book-length treatments of the pivot to Asia, see Chi Wang, *Obama's Challenge to China: The Pivot to Asia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016); Inderjeet Parmar and Oliver Turner, eds., *The United States in the Indo-Pacific: Obama's Legacy and the Trump Transition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); and William T. Tow and Douglas Stuart, eds., *The New US Strategy towards Asia: Adapting to the American Pivot* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015.)

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 98. For an overview of criticisms of the pivot, see Nina Silove, "The Pivot Before the Pivot: US Strategy to Preserve the Balance of Power in Asia," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 45-88, at 45, fn. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Robert S. Ross, "US Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and US National Security Strategy for East Asia," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (2013): 20-40; Robert S. Ross, "The Problem with the Pivot," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 6 (2012): 70-82.

<sup>4</sup> David Shambaugh, "Assessing the US 'Pivot' to Asia," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (2013): 10-19; Thomas J. Christensen, "Obama and Asia: Confronting the China Challenge," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2015): 28-36; Kevin Rudd, "Beyond the Pivot: A New Road Map for U.S.-Chinese Relations," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 2 (2013): 9-15; Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, "'Here, We See the Future': The Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia" in Edward Ashbee and John Dumbrell, eds., *The Obama Presidency and the Politics of Change* (New York, NY: Springer, 2016), pp. 307-327.

<sup>5</sup> On the pivot as an example of foreign policy failure, see Laura Southgate, "The Asia Pivot as a Strategy of Foreign Policy: A Source of Peace or a Harbinger of Conflict?," paper presented at the International Studies Association annual conference, June 2017; and Michal Kolmaš and Šárka Kolmašová, "A 'Pivot' that Never Existed: America's Asian Strategy under Obama and Trump," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2019): 61-79.

pivot – most notably, its economic centerpiece, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – in a deliberate attempt to clear the deck for a new, “America First” approach to Asia.<sup>6</sup>

At first glance, the pivot’s failure can appear puzzling. Given the widespread perception that East Asia will be the fulcrum of 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitics, the supposed wellspring of regional support for a robust US presence in the Asia-Pacific in light of China’s rise, the (still) considerable material resources at America’s disposal, and the conventional wisdom that presidents enjoy substantial leeway in the making of foreign policy compared to domestic policy, there were powerful reasons to believe, *ex ante*, that Obama’s proposed reorientation of US strategy toward Asia would have gone as planned. Why, then, did it not? In what follows, we provide an explanation for the pivot’s undoing that connects political dysfunction within the United States to a loss of “usable power” on the world stage.<sup>7</sup> We argue that, in general terms, America’s capacity to project power overseas has eroded due to three domestic-level factors: (1) hyper-partisanship in Washington, DC; (2) the lack of an overarching foreign-policy narrative to make power projection attractive to a broad slice of the political class and domestic public; and (3) a growing perception that US overseas engagement has harmed the economic fortunes of ordinary Americans rather than creating jobs, raising wages, and lowering the cost of living. We suggest that, in the case of the pivot, each of these domestic stumbling blocks were operative, making it all but impossible for Obama to win sufficient backing for the pivot at home. Simply put, the Obama administration’s plans for reinvigorating US strategy in the Asia-Pacific could not overcome intensifying divisions

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<sup>6</sup> Whereas the pivot sought to promote multilateralism, economic cooperation and integration, and a stable relationship with China, Trump’s “America First” approach to Asia was unilateralist, mercantilist, and openly antagonistic toward Beijing.

<sup>7</sup> In making this argument, we draw on Peter Trubowitz and Peter Harris, “The End of the American Century? Slow Erosion of the Domestic Sources of Usable Power,” *International Affairs* 95, no. 3 (2019): 619-639.

and polarization at home. We consider the implications of these domestic trends for the future of US primacy in East Asia and beyond.

In making our argument, we improve upon a range of existing explanations for the pivot's failure: that it was hampered by tight international constraints on American grand strategy; that it was undermined by inconsistent goals or poor execution; and that it fell victim to Donald Trump's election and mercurial leadership style. None of these explanations are wrong. But all of them are incomplete without attention to the domestic factors analyzed here. For example, while the pivot certainly faced some international constraints to its execution – opposition from China, for example, and the emergence of pressing security problems in Europe and the Middle East – we argue that the pivot would have faced significant challenges even if attempted under permissive international conditions. And although we accept that the pivot suffered from some incoherence and stalled execution, we go beyond this truism to explain both why it was not pursued in a more effective manner and what it would have taken for the pivot (or any other ambitious attempt at power projection) to succeed, answers that can only be found at the domestic level of analysis. Finally, we suggest that the fundamental weakness of the pivot was not that Trump refused to implement his predecessor's planned Asia strategy, but that domestic dissension during the Obama years prevented the pivot from becoming institutionalized as a programmatic approach in the first place. In fact, we argue that the problem of a fractured political landscape at home persisted into the Trump years, rendering yet another US president unable to implement a comprehensive and enduring set of foreign policies in East Asia. The experiences of the Obama and Trump administrations foreshadow challenges for President Joe Biden. Biden has pledged to restore American leadership in the Asia-Pacific (and rest of the world). However, he will face the same

constraints on using American power unless he can adopt a significantly different approach to domestic politics than his two predecessors.

Why focus on the pivot? We argue that the pivot is an intrinsically important case for those interested in American foreign policy because it is the most recent example of a US president attempting (and failing) to introduce a new and comprehensive policy of overseas power projection, which we define here as the intentional, programmatic, and sustained application of political, economic, and military power abroad in a way meant to encourage foreign actors to adopt policies that better suit US interests.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, America's capacity to engage in power projection has been weakened.<sup>9</sup> For analysts wanting to understand this breakdown, the disintegration of the pivot is a reasonable place to begin looking because of its contemporary relevance, policy significance, and the conspicuousness of its failure. If domestic politics prevented the Obama administration from enacting its preferred long-term strategy of expanded overseas engagement in the Asia-Pacific, does this mean that US commitments to other world regions are similarly vulnerable to collapse? The answer, we submit, is that the pivot's undoing is indeed suggestive of general dysfunction within the US political system, and that the era of sustained, reliable, and wide-ranging power projection outside of North America could well be nearing its end unless the country undergoes a period of domestic reform, renewal, or realignment.

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<sup>8</sup> President Trump's term was marked by some significant changes (and attempted changes) to US foreign policy such as his opening to North Korea, proposed drawdowns in the Middle East, and various attempts to undermine the "liberal" international order. But none of these foreign-policy initiatives meet the definition of power projection used here because they were plagued by indecision, inconsistency, and fitful implementation. See, for example, Brian Harding, "The Trump Administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Approach," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2019): 61-67; and Lindsey W. Ford, "The Trump Administration and the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'", Brookings Institution, May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-trump-administration-and-the-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, Ronald R. Krebs, and Randall Schweller, "The End of Grand Strategy: America Must Think Small," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 3 (2020): p.107-117; Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich, "Does Donald Trump Have a Grand Strategy?" *International Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2017): 1013-1037; Kenneth A. Schultz, "Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2017): 7-28; Paul Musgrave, "International Hegemony Meets Domestic Politics: Why Liberals Can Be Pessimists," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 451-478.

The problem is not that the United States lacks power in absolute terms, or even that its power is declining in relative terms vis-à-vis its great-power challengers, but rather that the US political system has become a weak foundation upon which to build any expansive foreign-policy superstructure. Existing commitments many linger on because of path-dependency, but they must be considered vulnerable to domestic challenges. New international commitments are unlikely to succeed unless they can also serve as a means to repair and rebuild these domestic supports.

The remainder of the article is divided into two sections. In the first section, we provide an overview of the pivot's main features, offer a brief account of its failure as a grand-strategic endeavor, and evaluate three prevalent explanations for the pivot's foundering. In the second section, we justify the selection of the pivot as a case for exploring the wider breakdown of US power-projection capabilities, advance our own argument for the pivot's failure, and provide evidence that this explanation is more complete and generalizable than the alternatives. We briefly summarize the implications of our analysis in the conclusion. As we note, America's domestic dysfunction has implications for its ability maintain global primacy in the face of competition from China, Russia, India, and other great power challengers.

### *The Pivot and Its Problems*

At its core, the Obama administration's pivot to Asia was an attempt to reassert America's geopolitical influence in East Asia amid a shifting balance of power in the region caused by China's rise.<sup>10</sup> By the time of Obama's inauguration in January 2009, China had already overtaken Germany to become the world's third-largest economy and was well on the way to surpassing

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<sup>10</sup> On the interrelated purposes of the pivot, see Van Jackson, "Red Teaming the Rebalance: The Theory and Risks of US Asia Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 3 (2016): 365-388.

Japan, too. Most economists predicted that China would eclipse the United States by mid-century. It was also clear that Beijing was determined to assume a leading role in international affairs, both regionally and beyond its immediate neighborhood. And critically from America's perspective, China's military power was growing alongside its burgeoning economic might and international ambitions.

Insider accounts suggest that President Obama and his closest advisers acknowledged these geopolitical realities and were determined to overhaul all aspects of Asia-Pacific policy with a view to expanding and deepening US ties to the region.<sup>11</sup> As articulated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, writing in the *Foreign Policy* article that would give the "pivot" its name, the stakes were high: in remaking its Asia strategy, the Obama administration was not just recalibrating US relationships across the Pacific, it was also signaling its assessment that Asia would be the center stage of world politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region," she wrote.<sup>12</sup>

#### THE PIVOT: ITS MAJOR COMPONENTS

The opening salvos of America's new Asia strategy came early in Obama's first term. To begin with, the new president placed special emphasis on improved relations with China. In the years

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<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012); Kurt Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York, NY: Twelve, 2016)

<sup>12</sup> Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century>. In fact, this ambition dated to Obama's presidential campaign. See Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*; and Campbell, *The Pivot*.

that followed, however, the broader contours of the pivot became apparent. Stronger bilateral ties with China remained a goal but the administration's overtures to Beijing were matched with a programmatic upgrading of US alliances and strategic partnerships with states living in the shadow of China's rise; a push for economic integration among the economies of the Pacific Rim; enhanced engagement with multilateral regional organizations; and the strategic redeployment of military assets.<sup>13</sup>

Obama's efforts to strengthen the US-China relationship were among the first to bear noticeable fruit. In February 2010, Secretary Clinton used her inaugural trip as America's chief diplomat to highlight the importance of Asia to the new administration.<sup>14</sup> Two months later, Obama and China's President Hu Jintao announced the creation of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue framework, a significant upgrade in diplomatic contacts.<sup>15</sup> Obama also postponed Bush-era arms sales to Taiwan and cancelled a meeting with the Dalai Lama.<sup>16</sup> In September 2009, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg gave a label to the Obama approach of welcoming "China's arrival as a prosperous and successful power" while finding ways to smooth Beijing's relations with its neighbors: *strategic reassurance*.<sup>17</sup> After a summit with Xi

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<sup>13</sup> On the two-track nature of the pivot, combining diplomatic and economic engagement of Beijing with hedging against Chinese military power, see Jean Garrison and Marc Wall, "The Rise of Hedging and Regionalism: An Explanation and Evaluation of President Obama's China Policy," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 43, no. 2 (2016): 47-63.

<sup>14</sup> CNN, "Clinton: Chinese human rights can't interfere with other crises," CNN Politics, 22 February 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/02/21/clinton.china.asia>.

<sup>15</sup> The new framework for high-level talks was organized into two tracks: one to coordinate strategic cooperation and one to focus on economic issues, with Secretary of State Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner responsible for representing U.S. interests in each sphere. For an evaluation, see Mercy A. Kuo, "Assessing the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue," *The Diplomat*, 20 July 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/assessing-the-U.S.-china-strategic-and-economic-dialogue/>.

<sup>16</sup> De-Yuan Kao, "China Policy," in Robert P. Watson, Jack Covarrubias, and Tom Lansford, eds., *The Obama Presidency: A Preliminary Assessment* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), p. 267. The meeting with the Dalai Lama was later rescheduled.

<sup>17</sup> Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2015), p. 252.

Jinping, Obama seemed to go further, pledging to respect China's "core interests"<sup>18</sup> – a phrase that China-watchers in the United States worried would be interpreted as giving a greenlight to Chinese repression at home and expansionism abroad.<sup>19</sup> Some commentators even discussed (although most dismissed) the possibility of a "G2" between the United States and China.<sup>20</sup> And while optimism that the US-China relationship might become the engine house of global governance eventually faded, the overall goal of engaging China lasted well into Obama's second term.<sup>21</sup> Even in the face of a more assertive Chinese foreign policy under Xi's leadership, the Obama administration generally preferred to manage disagreements in private rather than exert public pressure on Beijing. The overall theme was to develop cooperation in areas where China seems to be receptive to US overtures (such as climate policy) while straining to avoid any disputes from rupturing the broader bilateral relationship.<sup>22</sup>

But *engaging* China was only one component of the pivot. Other strands of the administration's approach to Asia were aimed at *balancing against* China in military terms. This was to be done using both "internal" and "external" means. Drawing on America's own military resources, the administration ordered increased deployments of troops to the Asia-Pacific and for 60 percent of US warships to be concentrated in the Pacific by 2020. The Pentagon announced plans to dispatch 2,500 marines to Darwin in northern Australia, add 800 soldiers and over 40

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<sup>18</sup> "U.S.-China Joint Statement," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 17 November 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/us-china-joint-statement>.

<sup>19</sup> Mutual recognition of "core interests" was an integral part of Xi's "New Model for Great Power Relations." In 2013, Obama went on record as lending his support to that doctrine. See Paul Gewirtz, "A Re-Opening to China?", *ChinaFile*, 5 June 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/re-opening-china>.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth C. Economy and Adam Segal, "The G-2 Mirage: Why the United States and China are Not Ready to Upgrade Ties," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 3 (2009): 14-23.

<sup>21</sup> In 2013, for example, Obama hosted Hu's successor, Xi Jinping, at Sunnylands in California, with the two engaging in high-level talks on North Korea, the South China Sea, US arms sales to Taiwan, and other critical issues. Gewirtz, "A Re-Opening to China?"

<sup>22</sup> Robert Sutter, "Barack Obama, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump—Pragmatism Fails as U.S.-China Differences Rise in Prominence," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 24, no. 2 (2017): 69-85, at 77-78.



battle tanks to US forces in South Korea, ~~relocate thousands of troops from Okinawa to Guam,~~ and redeploy B-1 and B-52 bombers and Global Hawk drones from the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> New military doctrines such as the Air-Sea Battle concept were devised to assert US power, reassure nervous allies, and deter Beijing from pursuing expansionist foreign policies.<sup>24</sup> The creation of INDOACCOM, finalized in May 2018 under President Trump but began under President Obama, reflected the newfound significance that the wider Indo-Pacific region had assumed in official circles.

These military moves were matched by diplomatic and political outreach to Asian capitals. On Obama's watch, the United States improved bilateral relationships with Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos, for example, while bolstering existing alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. America's participation in regional institutions such as ASEAN, APEC, and the East Asia Summit was accorded greater prominence, with Obama hosting an ASEAN summit in February 2016 (becoming the first president to hold a meeting with ASEAN leaders on US soil) and upgrading US-ASEAN ties to the level of "strategic partnership." Obama was the first US president to attend the East Asia Summit and only the second (after Bill Clinton) to host an APEC summit. The intended message was that the United States was committed to remaining a Pacific power, and to offer regional actors a credible alternative to bandwagoning with a rising China.

In economic terms, the signature component of the pivot was the TPP, a proposed free trade agreement to encompass 12 Pacific Rim economies.<sup>25</sup> Negotiations had begun in 2005

<sup>23</sup> ~~During this period, the US also relocated thousands of troops from Okinawa to Guam,~~

<sup>24</sup> Matteo Dian, "The Pivot to Asia, Air-Sea Battle and Contested Commons in the Asia-Pacific," *The Pacific Review* 28, no. 2 (2015): 237-257; Jackson, "Red Teaming the Rebalance."

<sup>25</sup> During the Obama administration, the states involved in negotiating the TPP were Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States (participation terminated under President Trump), and Vietnam.

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between Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore, but took on a new impetus in 2008 with the announcement by the Bush administration that the United States would join the ongoing talks. Upon entering office, Obama lent his full support to the TPP, which he came to frame as a means of cementing American leadership in East Asia and guarding against an alternative future in which China enjoyed economic dominance in the Asia-Pacific. In January 2015, for example, Obama used his State of the Union address to ask Congress for authority to write the global rules on trade—implying that, without the TPP, the United States would be choosing to cede a leadership role to Beijing.<sup>26</sup>

To supporters and critics alike, these efforts comprised a concerted attempt to check a rising China, even as Obama sought to improve certain aspects of the bilateral relationship. At least for a time, it seemed as though the pivot would produce an augmented version of the so-called “San Francisco system” of bilateral alliances that had underpinned US defense policy in Asia during the Cold War<sup>27</sup> while also enmeshing the region in a multilateral economic framework dominated by the United States at China’s expense. Supporters viewed all of this favorably, portraying the pivot as necessary to secure US interests and insure against great power rivalry with China. Critics, on the other hand, worried that balancing behavior would only antagonize Beijing<sup>28</sup> and called for more restraint instead of deeper engagement.<sup>29</sup> What both sides agreed upon was that the pivot would constitute a major and programmatic set of changes to US policy if implemented in full and

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<sup>26</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, “The State of the Union: Obama’s Challenge to China,” *The Diplomat*, 22 January 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/01/the-state-of-the-union-obamas-challenge-to-china/>.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas Stuart, “San Francisco 2.0: Military Aspects of the US Pivot Toward Asia,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 39, no. 4 (2012): 202-218.

<sup>28</sup> Lanxin Xiang, “China and the ‘Pivot,’” *Survival* 54, no. 5 (2012): 113-128; Wei Ling, “Rebalancing or De-balancing: US Pivot and East Asian Order,” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 35, no. 3 (2013): 148-154.

<sup>29</sup> Ross, “US Grand Strategy”; Ross, “The Problem with the Pivot”; Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

if maintained over the long haul. It was, in other words, a sweeping attempt at renewed power projection in Asia.

#### WHY THE PIVOT FAILED: THREE SUPPOSED PATHOLOGIES

The pivot to Asia failed. To be sure, it was not a *total* failure; the Obama administration managed to make some important alterations to America's approach to the Asia-Pacific – especially in terms of relations with Southeast Asia.<sup>30</sup> But such achievements, while significant, were outweighed by conspicuous failures in other important areas: relations with China worsened,<sup>31</sup> the planned military rebalance to the Indo-Pacific was only partial at best, some key partnerships such as the US-Philippines alliance became weaker during the Obama years, and American participation in the TPP could not be secured.<sup>32</sup> Most fundamentally, the pivot was never fully institutionalized domestically. As we argue below, the strategy succumbed to a series of domestic obstacles and pitfalls that make programmatic foreign policy challenging irrespective of the international target, the party in control of the White House, or the president's temperament and decision-making style.

In the next section, we advance our argument for why the pivot failed. But it is important to take stock of existing explanations first. We focus on three criticisms in particular: (1) that the pivot was being pursued amid unpropitious international conditions; (2) that it was incoherent or underfunded; and (3) that it fell victim to the unexpected election of President Trump, suggesting

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<sup>30</sup> Michael J. Green, "The Legacy of Obama's "Pivot" to Asia," *Foreign Policy*, 3 September 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/03/the-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia>.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, James Johnson, *The US-China Military and Defense Relationship during the Obama Presidency* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> See Victor Cha, "The Unfinished Legacy of Obama's Pivot to Asia," *Foreign Policy*, 6 September 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/06/the-unfinished-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia/>.

that its success had depended too much upon who occupied the White House.<sup>33</sup> All of these explanations for the pivot's failure have some truth to them. However, none can be considered a sufficient explanation for the strategy's breakdown.

First, it is possible that the pivot failed because of an unfavorable international environment. One version of this argument focuses on geopolitics outside of East Asia. According to this narrative, the pivot was wrongheaded because it was premised on the idea that security conditions in Europe and the Middle East were sufficiently placid to allow for a meaningful rebalance of attention and resources to the Asia-Pacific.<sup>34</sup> Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014 put paid to such a reading of the international context, as did the Islamic State's sweeping territorial gains across northern Iraq in June 2014. Faced with these unexpected developments, it is argued, the Obama administration was forced to put its strategic ambitions in East Asia on hold while it dealt with the new exigencies in Eastern Europe and Iraq (and Syria).

Another international-level explanation for the pivot's failure is that its architects misjudged structural conditions in East Asia. Whereas proponents of the pivot believed that China could be both reassured (through engagement) and deterred (through balancing behavior), some of the strategy's earliest critics argued that the pivot would only serve to antagonize Beijing and precipitate exactly the sort of pushback from China that US foreign policy ought to be calibrated

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<sup>33</sup> Hugo Meijer argues that the pivot was support mostly by a few high-ranking Obama officials such as Hillary Clinton, Tom Donilon, Kurt Campbell, Jeffrey Bader, and Michael Steinberg. See Hugo Meijer, "Introduction – The Reconfiguration of American Primacy in World Politics: Prospects and Challenges for the US Rebalance toward Asia," in Meijer, ed., *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance Toward Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic Dimensions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> As Hal Brands argued, "a key premise of the Asia pivot—and of Obama's overall defense strategy—was that Europe would remain quiescent." Hal Brands, "Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2017): 101-125, at 115.

to stop.<sup>35</sup> When China began to assert itself more forcefully in the South China Sea and elsewhere during Obama's two terms in office, these critics claimed vindication. From their view, the Obama administration had been wrong to attempt the pivot in the first place; instead of pouring military assets into East Asia, the United States should have been focused on retrenchment and restraint, a strategic approach that would have had a much stronger chance of managing US-China relations amid conditions of shifting power.<sup>36</sup>

These arguments have some merit to them. The pivot would, indeed, have been badly flawed if it had been predicated on the assumption that security challenges in Europe and the Middle East had been put to rest. And it is at least plausible that Obama's plans to augment the US presence in East Asia ignited a self-defeating conflict spiral with China. But blaming international conditions for the pivot's undoing is difficult to square with the chronology of events. If the pivot failed because the Obama administration became distracted by developments in Europe and the Middle East, then the first half of 2014 should have been a turning point. But as we show below, the implementation of the pivot had stalled well before 2014. Similarly, Chinese assertiveness in East Asia predated the pivot by several years, with the controversial "nine-dash-line" map being submitted to the United Nations in May 2009, for example.

We accept that the pivot likely worsened relations with Beijing by contributing to the perception that the United States was bent on "encircling" or otherwise containing China. But even it does not follow that if it is accepted that the China's reactions to the pivot had the unintended consequence of pushing US-China relations over the precipice, Beijing's reactions against the

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<sup>35</sup> Ross, "US Grand Strategy." For a retrospective evaluation of this point, see Georg Löfflmann, "The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint: President Obama's Conflicted Grand Strategy in Asia," *Asian Security* 12, no. 2 (2016): 92-110.

<sup>36</sup> Some realists argue that China faces strong incentives to cooperate with the United States, or at least avoid outright confrontation. This assessment leads them to caution against an exaggeration of the Chinese threat to US interests. See Joshua Shiffrin, "The Rise of China, Balance of Power Theory, and US National Security: Reasons for Optimism?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 2 (2020): 175-216.

~~pivot cannot easily be were to blamed~~ for the strategy's ~~ultimate demisefailure~~. Not least of all, a focus on international events is unable to account for why the Obama administration did not leverage the potential threat posed by China to build domestic support for the pivot. In the past, US presidents have used challenging international circumstances in this way – ~~that is, as fodder in domestic politics, and as~~ justifications for why controversial foreign policies were urgently needed.<sup>37</sup> ~~Why did It should have been possible for Obama not to follow suit – that is, to use the “China threat” as a specter to coax domestic actors into support the pivot? eoaeseing around a set of policies to defend US security interests in Asia. The answer to this question cannot be found at the international level. But Obama chose not to pillory China before domestic audiences even though doing so might have solidified US support for the pivot. Rather, Obama’s reluctance to turn China into a bête noire was, by his own admission,<sup>38</sup> largely a product of domestic circumstances – namely, the exigencies imposed by the 2008-2009 financial crisis, which pushed the President into accepting cooperation with China so as not to jeopardize America’s fragile economic recovery.<sup>39</sup> Analyses of the pivot that are pitched solely at the international level cannot adequately account for why Obama did not reach for the “China card” in this way.~~

<sup>37</sup> Consider, for example, the Truman administration’s use of the Korean War as a justification for its pursuit of an expensive military buildup. Fred Block, “Economic Instability and Military Strength: The Paradoxes of the 1950 Rearmament Decision”, *Politics and Society* vol. 10, no. 11 (January 1980): 35–58. The George W. Bush administration’s decision to demonize and invade Iraq has also been described as an attempt to generate domestic support for a partisan foreign-policy agenda. See Jack Snyder, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, “Free Hand Abroad, Divide and Rule at Home?,” *World Politics* vol. 61 (January 2009): 155–87. On American leaders’ usage of China as a mobilizing issue in domestic politics during the early Cold War, see Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> See Jeffrey Goldberg, “Why Obama Fears for Our Democracy,” *The Atlantic*, 16 November 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/why-obama-fears-for-our-democracy/617087>.

<sup>39</sup> The Obama administration’s framing of the TPP stands out as a notable exception. Obama repeatedly tried to convince his detractors that the TPP was a way to cement US leadership in Asia in response to China’s rise, especially during the final two years of his presidency. See fn. 25. But even this rhetoric fell well short of portraying Beijing as a menace to US national or economic security and was undercut by other comments that suggested Obama was open to China joining the TPP. See, for example, Sarah Wheaton, “Obama: China might join trade deal – eventually,” *Politico*, 3 June 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/06/barack-obama-china-join-trade-deal-118598>.

**Commented [H2]:** It seems that Beijing’s opposition may have dual effects, on the one hand, it may add obstacles to the implementation of the pivot, on the other hand, it may offer justifications for the pivot, which may help to mobilize domestic support.

**Commented [H3]:** Do you think Obama’s promotion of TPP at home was a case for him to play “China card”?

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[We explore the importance of domestic politics below.](#)

Finally, blaming the pivot's breakdown on an unforgiving international environment risks overlooking the extent to which the pivot might have failed even if geopolitical conditions had been permissive. This is an important consideration, for if the goal is to understand when and why the United States is (un)able to project power abroad then it is necessary to explore counterfactual scenarios in which US leaders faced fewer external constraints. Would the pivot have succeeded under such circumstances? We argue below that this cannot be taken for granted, and that a singular focus on the international system risks masking the more fundamental causes of the pivot's failure.

Another set of explanations for the pivot's failure focus on its allegedly poor execution and insufficient resources. For example, some critics argue that it was always a losing proposition to attempt to engage and balance against China at the same time. These two strategic ambitions are inherently inconsistent, the argument goes, and so it was inevitable that the pivot would collapse once these contradictions had to be reckoned with. Other critics have argued that the pivot was a reasonable package of foreign policies, but that the Obama administration neglected to provide sufficient funds and materiel to support the pivot's execution. These are incompatible explanations of the pivot's undoing, but what they have in common is a focus on the pivot's design and implementation.

Again, however, these arguments are incomplete explanations of the pivot's failure. Even if it is accepted that the pivot suffered from some internal contradictions and if, with the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to say with certainty that it was not pursued in a way that was effective, domestic-level explanations that focus on mistakes in formulation and implementation are unsatisfying because they raise the obvious question of *why* the pivot was not carried out more

effectively. Was it an idiosyncratic failure of the policymaking process? Or does the pivot's sputtering point to a more general problem with how American leaders are able to make and implement foreign policy? Below, we argue that the pivot's failure was caused by a general and longstanding pattern of political dysfunction in the United States, and that its shortcomings should not be treated as *sui generis*.

The final explanation for the pivot's failure is that it was undone by unique and unexpected domestic circumstances – namely, the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States. From this view, it would be wrong to blame the Obama administration for any sort of political or policy missteps because nobody could have foreseen the election in 2016 of a president who was so outspoken in his disdain for international engagement. The counterfactual claim is that the pivot would have taken root if only Hillary Clinton had succeeded Obama.

It is true that Trump's election was the final nail in the coffin for the pivot, as with so many other Obama-era initiatives. And so, in this sense, it is fair to describe Trump as the proximate cause of the pivot's demise. But it would be wrong to blame the pivot's failure on Trump alone. Not only is there clear evidence that the pivot was in trouble before Trump came to office,<sup>40</sup> but the suggestion that Clinton would have implemented the pivot in its entirety is questionable at best. As a candidate, Clinton had been forced to distance herself from the TPP and there is a strong likelihood that she would have faced domestic challenges over other aspects of the pivot, too. This notion is reinforced by the experiences of the Trump administration, which found it challenging to enact an alternative vision of what America's approach to the Asia-Pacific should look like, despite tearing down core components of the pivot with relative ease. Clinton's experience during the

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<sup>40</sup> Brands, "Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy," 117. David C. Kang, "Trump's First Year in Asia: Accelerating a Long-Term Trend," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 25, no. 2 (2018): 198-220.



2016 Democratic primary, evidence from the 2020 primary contest (during which leading Democrats repeatedly called for a more slender version of US overseas engagement),<sup>41</sup> and events during the Trump presidency all point to an endemic set of problems in the US political process that are limiting America's ability to project power in a programmatic fashion. In the next section, we turn to discuss what these problems are, and how they undermine America's usable power.

### *The Pivot's Domestic Underside*

We argue that three domestic-level pathologies undercut President Obama's ability to muster America's latent power assets and convert them into usable power on the world stage:<sup>42</sup> (1) hyper-partisanship in Washington, DC; (2) the lack of an overarching foreign-policy narrative to make the pivot intelligible and attractive to a broad slice of the political class and domestic public; and (3) the failure to sell the pivot as a programmatic endeavor to boost the economic fortunes of ordinary Americans.<sup>43</sup> We do not entirely dismiss the importance of the alternative explanations for the pivot's failure reviewed above, but we maintain that our argument about the domestic erosion of usable power has greater explanatory power and, furthermore, offers a more general explanation of when and why programmatic efforts at US power projection can be expected to fail.

As noted in the introduction, we believe the pivot is a particularly compelling case for exploring the causes of grand-strategic failure in the US context because of its relevance, significance, and the conspicuousness of its breakdown. Of course, there is a ceiling to what a

<sup>41</sup> Colum Lynch, "For the 2020 Democrats, It's America First, Too," *Foreign Policy*, 4 December 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/04/2020-elections-democrats-america-first>.

<sup>42</sup> On "usable power" in this context, see Stanley Hoffman, "Obstinate or Obsolete? The Fate of the Nation-State and the Case of Western Europe," *Daedalus* 95, no. 3 (1966): 862–42. [The Obama administration's framing of the TPP stands out as a notable exception. Obama repeatedly tried to convince his detractors that the TPP was a way to cement US leadership in Asia in response to China's rise, especially during the final two.](#)

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single-case study can provide in terms of explanatory power. And we recognize that selecting a case for analysis with reference to the dependent variable (in this case, the success or failure of a grand-strategic design) imposes some limitations.<sup>44</sup> To boost confidence in the generality of our argument about the domestic erosion of usable power, therefore, we take special care to assess competing explanations for pivot’s failure, and use both counterfactual analysis and a brief comparison with the Trump presidency to assess what would have happened – and, indeed, what *has* happened – under a range of different circumstances. It is also important to note that the present analysis is part of a larger research program into the erosion of US usable power,<sup>45</sup> which attenuates some of the limitations usually associated with a single-case study.<sup>46</sup> Overall, we are confident that, while the pivot is not quite the ideal “critical case” for a single-case study (“if our theory holds here, it will hold anywhere”), it nevertheless provides a suitable opportunity to illustrate and test our general explanation of US strategic inefficacy.

In the case study that follows, our most basic task is to ascertain whether any or all of the three factors outlined above – hyper-partisanship, the absence of a compelling strategic frame, and the lack of an inclusive economic agenda – can be observed during the Obama years. This is the bare minimum that ought to be expected if our theory holds water. Second, however, it is also incumbent upon us to show exactly how, when, and where these symptoms of domestic-political dysfunction undercut the pivot as a programmatic approach to Asia. As we note above, the pivot was not a complete failure; some of its components fared better than others. It should therefore be

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[years of his presidency. See fn. 25. But even this rhetoric fell well short of portraying Beijing as a menace to US national or economic security and was undercut by other comments that suggested Obama was open to China joining the TPP. See Sarah Wheaton, “Obama: China might join trade deal – eventually.” \*Politico\*, 3 June 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/06/barack-obama-china-join-trade-deal-tpp-118598>.](https://www.politico.com/story/2015/06/barack-obama-china-join-trade-deal-tpp-118598)

the case is “sufficiently data-rich to permit process tracing.” We rely on the latter criterion to justify our case selection in this instance.

<sup>45</sup> Trubowitz and Harris, “The End of the American Century?”

<sup>46</sup> Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 211.

possible to connect our diagnosis of America's dysfunctional political system to specific difficulties faced by the Obama administration in terms of setting and implementing Asia policy (e.g., its failure to win domestic support for the TPP and its stalled efforts at redeploying military assets to the Asia-Pacific). We argue that our theory can be observed to clear each of these empirical bars – that is, we find evidence in the form of both *variable-scoring observations* and *process-tracing observations*.<sup>47</sup> Finally, it should strengthen confidence in our argument if we can simultaneously demonstrate that alternative explanations do not square with some or all of the available evidence. In the following section, we augment this analysis of the pivot with a series of brief counterfactual scenarios and comparative vignettes, which lend additional support to our argument that domestic dysfunction is causing a secular decline in America's usable power and, by extension, its growing inability to project power overseas.

#### HYPER-PARTISANSHIP

Scholars of US foreign policy tend to agree that bipartisanship at home makes for more durable and more credible commitments abroad.<sup>48</sup> Yet during President Obama's time in the Oval Office, the two parties in Congress were further apart in terms of ideology than at any time since 1945. The problem of hyper-partisanship was not new, of course. It had been building since at least the end of the Cold War, resulting in several observable patterns of political behavior that hampered presidents' ability to conduct foreign policy: opposition parties tended to refuse to endorse presidential uses of force or ratify treaties; the voting public was unable to learn properly from

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<sup>47</sup> Joachim Blatter and Markus Haverland, *Designing Case Studies: Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> Trubowitz and Harris, "The End of the American Century?", 623-627.

foreign-policy missteps because of an uncritical allegiance to their preferred party; there was a measurable decline in US credibility in the eyes of adversaries and allies alike; and the specter of foreign intervention in US domestic politics became a reality.<sup>49</sup>

Without doubt, President Obama felt the effects of hyper-partisanship keenly, despite some efforts on his part to cultivate bipartisan agreement on foreign and defense policy.<sup>50</sup> During his first term, Republicans wasted no time slamming the President for his so-called “apology tour.”<sup>51</sup> Then, he was criticized for his handling of the Arab Spring (of “leading from behind” in Libya, for abandoning Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and for failing to intervene decisively in the Syrian civil war, among other alleged missteps). In 2013, a government shutdown in Washington prevented Obama from attending the APEC summit in Bali.<sup>52</sup> And just a few months earlier, the President had been forced to back away from plans to launch airstrikes against the Syrian regime because of opposition from (mostly) Republican lawmakers, many of whom would later support President Trump for taking military action against the Assad regime. One of the most striking manifestations of partisanship came in March 2015, when Senator Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) and all 46 other Senate Republicans sent a letter to the leaders of Iran, pledging to undo any nuclear agreement concluded between Tehran and the Obama administration.<sup>53</sup> Faced with such domestic opposition to his international agenda, Obama turned to negotiating international agreements such as the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate accords in ways that would obviate the need for the Senate’s

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<sup>49</sup> Schultz, “Perils of Polarization.”

<sup>50</sup> Obama nominated the Republican governor of Utah, Jon Huntsman, to be his first ambassador to China, for example, and appointed two Republicans as Secretary of Defense: Robert Gates (kept in office as a holdover from the George W. Bush administration) and Chuck Hagel.

<sup>51</sup> Obama was accused of “apologizing” for US foreign policy in speeches in France, Latin America, and Turkey. See Kevin A. Stein, Matthew H. Barton, Michael K. Ault, and Janies R. Briscoe, “Apologist-in-Chief? Newspaper Kategoria and Antapologia following Barack Obama’s “Global Apology Tour,”” *Iowa Journal of Communication* 45, no. 1/2 (2013): 39-63.

<sup>52</sup> Yuen Foong Khong, “Primacy or World Order? The United States and China’s Rise—A Review Essay,” *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2013/2014): 153-175, at 174-175.

<sup>53</sup> This was a promise that President Trump later followed through on.

advice and consent – a move that raised serious doubts about the durability of America’s commitment to these deals.<sup>54</sup>

This domestic context placed constraints on what could be achieved in terms of the pivot to Asia – a problem that worsened after the Republican Party gained control of the House of Representatives in 2010 and then the Senate in 2014. During Obama’s first term, lawmakers’ inability to agree on fiscal policy led to the imposition of across-the-board cuts to public expenditure (“sequestration”), including caps on defense spending. These cuts had been legislated for—and scheduled to come into effect on 1 January, 2013—as a mechanism to induce Congress to agree upon a bipartisan spending plan.<sup>55</sup> In other words, the cuts were never meant to happen; the looming threat of an automatic budgetary sequestration (and defense cuts in particular) was supposed to constitute such an undesirable outcome that lawmakers would be cajoled into working with one another in order to forestall its occurrence. But in the event, not even the need to avoid arbitrary, unplanned, un-strategic, and unwanted military cuts was enough to induce a cross-party agreement in Congress.<sup>56</sup>

The onset of sequestration was a stark manifestation of partisan disagreement getting in the way of programmatic foreign policymaking during the Obama years. While the administration tried to shield the pivot from the mandated spending cuts,<sup>57</sup> there is evidence that sequestration placed severe limits on what could be achieved in terms of a major reorienting of foreign policy.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Indeed, President Trump undid US participation in both the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate agreement during his first year in office.

<sup>55</sup> The cuts were later postponed to March 1, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Cindy Williams, “Accepting Austerity: The Right Way to Cut Defense,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 6 (2013): 54-64.

<sup>57</sup> Scott W. Harold, “Is the Pivot Doomed? The Resilience of America’s Strategic ‘Rebalance’”, *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2015): 85-99, at 90.

<sup>58</sup> Todd Harrison, “What Has the Budget Control Act of 2011 Meant for Defense?” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1 August 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-has-budget-control-act-2011-meant-defense>; and Robert E. Kelly, “The ‘Pivot’ and Its Problems: American Foreign Policy in Northeast Asia,” *The Pacific Review* 27, no. 3 (2014): 479-503;

Department of Defense official Katrina McFarland was blunt, confiding as late as 2014 that, “right now, the pivot is being looked at again, because candidly it can’t happen.”<sup>59</sup> And although some of the caps on defense spending were later addressed, the overall shrinking of the US military budget during the Obama administration made the rebalance to Asia complicated to say the least. Even if a higher percentage of America’s military assets could be sent to the East Asian theater, this did not necessarily mean an improvement in absolute numbers of forces.<sup>60</sup> To be clear, the point is not that the pivot fell victim to scarce resources. On the contrary, the United States possessed ample resources to finance the pivot to Asia and, at least nominally, neither party wanted to see cuts to the military budget take effect. But hyper-partisanship in the US Congress – manifesting, in this case, in fights over policy far removed from the pivot to Asia – severely limited the Obama administration’s ability to convert potential resources at its disposal into usable power.

Hyper-partisanship hurt Obama’s trade policy, too, and ultimately contributed to the gutting of the pivot’s central economic component, the TPP. At first, there were some signs of bipartisanship in this area. The Obama administration relied upon Republican votes to approve a free trade agreement between the United States and South Korea in October 2011, for example, and the GOP’s leadership in the House and Senate worked together in Obama’s second term to afford the President “fast-track” authority to negotiate the deal. Had the Democrats been in favor of the TPP, bipartisan support for its negotiation and passage might well have been forthcoming. But the two parties in Congress were far apart on the issue of trade. From Harry Reid to Nancy Pelosi, leading Democrats argued that a new free trade deal would come at the cost of American jobs. This opposition from Obama’s own party prevented the White House from securing fast-

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<sup>59</sup> Katrina McFarland quoted in Meijer, “Introduction,” p. 11, citing Zachary Fryer-Biggs, “DOD Officials: Asia Pivot ‘Can’t Happen’ due to Budgetary Pressures,” *Defense News*, March 4, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine*, pp. 98-99. See also Charles Morrison, “The Asia Pivot in Theory and Practice,” American Enterprise Institute, 9 July 2013, <https://www.aei.org/articles/the-asia-pivot-in-theory-and-practice>.

track authority and, ultimately, ensured that the TPP was not finalized and approved during Obama's presidency. In January 2015, just weeks after a Republican majority had assumed control of the US Senate, an exasperated Obama used part of his State of the Union address to implore Congress to approve the TPP, arguing that the United States ought to take the initiative in writing global rules instead of letting others (China) proceed unopposed. His calls went unheeded – laying bare, again, the connection between Congressional gridlock and the administration's faltering foreign policy.

But if dissension in Congress stymied Obama's efforts to implement the pivot while in office, it was the election of his successor that brought to light the true extent of hyper-partisanship's effects on foreign policymaking. To be sure, the pivot would have been in trouble even if a Democrat had succeeded Obama. There is no evidence to suggest that a Clinton presidency would have done much to narrow the gap between the two parties in Congress. But Trump's election all but ensured that the pivot would not survive. Indeed, Trump set about dismantling the pivot to Asia almost immediately. One of his first actions as president was to end any hope of US participation in the TPP, a move that caused great anxiety about the future of US leadership in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>61</sup> Trump subsequently launched into a trade war with China, withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement,<sup>62</sup> and veered from recklessly provoking North Korea to threatening to abandon US allies in service of a US-North Korean concordat. In 2017, Trump departed the East Asia Summit early (widely interpreted as a snub to his counterparts in the Asia-

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<sup>61</sup> Sheldon Simon, "Abandoning Leadership," *Comparative Connections* 19, no. 3 (2018): 41-52. Trump has shown little interest in moving forward the TTIP and, indeed, has turned his attention to renegotiating existing trade deals such as NAFTA instead of pursuing new and transformative international economic agreements in Europe and Asia. On the implications of US withdrawal from the TPP and the stumbling of the TTIP, see Melissa K. Griffith, Richard H. Steinberg, and John Zysman, "From Great Power Politics to a Strategic Vacuum: Origins and Consequences of the TPP and TTIP," *Business and Politics* 19, no. 4 (2017): 573-592.

<sup>62</sup> The conclusion of the Paris Climate Agreement is related to the pivot in the sense that China's critical participation was ensured, in part, thanks to the Obama administration's steady management of the US-China relationship.

Pacific) and in 2018 and 2019, the President skipped the East Asia Summit altogether. While Trump did attend the 2017 APEC meeting, he was criticized for using the occasion to promote a nationalistic “America First” foreign policy rather than stressing the importance of economic cooperation. As a result of all this, the best available research suggests that US allies now doubt the durability of US commitments to Asia and that adversaries have reason to question US resolve.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, when Trump missed the 2018 APEC summit, other leaders are reported to have used his non-attendance as an occasion to “savagely” US foreign policy.<sup>64</sup>

Trump might have been more committed to the pivot to Asia – or, it might have withstood his opposition – if the strategy had enjoyed bipartisan support. It did not. And so while President Obama might have been right in January 2014 to emphasize his expansive powers as head of the Executive Branch (“I’ve got a pen, and I’ve got a phone”), it takes more than presidential willpower to implement an ambitious foreign policy over the long haul. What is needed—and what was sorely lacking during the Obama years—is bipartisan legislation and agreement on spending limits, domestic support for treaty-making and participation in relevant international organizations, a unity of purpose to convey credible resolve to foreign actors, and a national conversation about foreign policy that takes place within clearly delineated bounds such that “massive swings” in America’s external relations do not take place whenever there is turnover in the White House.<sup>65</sup>

In her 2011 article for *Foreign Policy*, Secretary Clinton acknowledged that the pivot to Asia would require bipartisan support. “The success of this turn requires maintaining and

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<sup>63</sup> Jeremiah Cha, “People in Asia-Pacific regard the U.S. more favorably than China, but Trump gets negative marks,” Pew Research Center, 25 February 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/25/people-in-asia-pacific-regard-the-u-s-more-favorably-than-china-but-trump-gets-negative-marks>; Mark Beeson, “Donald Trump and Post-Pivot Asia: The Implications of a “Transactional” Approach to Foreign Policy,” *Asian Studies Review* 44, no. 1 (2020): 10-27.

<sup>64</sup> The 2019 APEC year was canceled because of protests in Chile.

<sup>65</sup> Writing in the first year of the Trump presidency, Ken Schultz pointed to the problem of hyper-partisanship producing “massive swings [in policy] from one administration from the next.” Schultz, “Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy,” 9.



advancing a bipartisan consensus on the importance of the Asia-Pacific to our national interests,” she wrote. “[W]e seek to build upon a strong tradition of engagement by presidents and secretaries of state of both parties across many decades.”<sup>66</sup> Clinton was right: the success of the pivot *did* hinge upon the existence of a bipartisan consensus in domestic politics. It is just that no such consensus was maintained or hammered into place during the Obama years.

#### THE PIVOT UNSOLD

Another (related) reason for the pivot’s failure is that it was never adequately sold to the electorate (or even the political elite)<sup>67</sup> as an intelligible and attractive foreign-policy agenda—that is, as a raft of policies obviously designed to further the national interest. This was an important shortcoming given that ambitious foreign policy agendas tend to rely upon “big ideas” to galvanize public opinion. After all, requesting that Americans tolerate high levels of defense spending and an elevated risk of war—not to mention, at times, actual wars—is a big ask. Politicians who advocate wide-ranging programs open themselves up to criticism from the opposing side. The success of such agendas therefore relies upon the skillful framing of foreign policy choices using domestic narratives.<sup>68</sup> Foreign policies must be presented in ways that bolster political support and undercut potential objections. Ideally, political attacks must be rendered prohibitively costly for would-be critics to even consider.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century.”

<sup>67</sup> Meijer “Introduction,” 10.

<sup>68</sup> On this dimension of foreign policymaking, see John Gerard Ruggie, “The Past as Prologue? Interests, Identity, and American Foreign Policy,” *International Security* 21, no. 4 (1997), pp. 89–125; and Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>69</sup> As we explain elsewhere, “Presidents use heresthetics to set the parameters of acceptable political debate among political elites, as well as to win over the hearts and minds of electors. At the elite level, heresthetics can thus be considered a form of agenda-setting power, a way of structuring the political conversation in ways that aim to

President Obama never structured the domestic conversation over Asia policy in a way that adequately insulated the pivot from domestic criticisms. Indeed, the most visible selling points of Obama's foreign policy had little to do with Asia at all: a campaign-era commitment to "avoid long and costly military conflicts,"<sup>70</sup> an attempt to prioritize American "values" in contradistinction to popular impressions of the Bush administration, a commitment to focus on counterterrorism (especially in Afghanistan), an early promise to smooth relations with adversaries like Russia, Cuba, and Iran, and a general desire to cut the cost of foreign policy, to name just some.<sup>71</sup> These broad objectives certainly had their supporters in domestic politics, but anti-militarism, an emphasis on diplomacy, and an injunction to focus on domestic renewal were hardly rationales for expanding American engagement in Asia.

In fact, Obama's public messaging on foreign policy might even have served to *limit* his ability to make a successful case for the pivot to Asia. By emphasizing the importance of counterterrorism while a candidate for office,<sup>72</sup> for example, Obama arguably ended up creating a path-dependent scenario whereby his administration found it difficult to portray any region of the world as more critical to US security than the Greater Middle East. Consider the relative speed and ease with which Obama responded to the Islamic State's territorial gains in Iraq and Syria during 2014: Obama was reluctant to send more US troops to Iraq and to intervene in the Syrian civil war, but he was able to undertake such moves without incurring major domestic opposition. By contrast, there was no grand-strategic narrative to justify the redeployment of thousands of troops to the

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deprive the opposition of potential allies and otherwise promising lines of attack." See Trubowitz and Harris, "The End of the American Century?", 627-633, at 628.

<sup>70</sup> James Goldgeier and Jeremi Suri, "Revitalizing the U.S. National Security Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2016): 35-55, at 38.

<sup>71</sup> As Colin Dueck puts it: "American grand strategy under Barack Obama emphasizes international retrenchment and accommodation, in order to allow the president to focus on securing liberal policy agendas at home." Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Trevor McCrisken, "Ten Years On: Obama's War on Terrorism in Rhetoric and Practice," *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 781-801.

Asia-Pacific. On the contrary, Obama's anti-militarism and his explicit calls for "nation-building here at home" undercut the rationale for a major programmatic effort to respond to China's rise.

It is worth noting that Obama *could* have built support for the pivot by portraying China as a geopolitical rival that needed to be confronted just as the United States had contained the Soviet Union during the Cold War.<sup>73</sup> This would have allowed Obama to use China's perceived assertiveness in East Asia to his domestic advantage; Beijing's actions could have been used as justifications for why Americans all political stripes ought to support a national endeavor to preserve international security. In this counterfactual scenario, Obama's critics would have been forced to explain why they opposed efforts to deal with an existential threat to core US national interests. Obama refused to demonize China because he wanted to retain the freedom of maneuver to engage Beijing over matters of mutual concern.<sup>74</sup> As Obama himself has since explained, "if we hadn't been going through a financial crisis, my posture toward China would have been more explicitly contentious around trade issues. But I couldn't have a trade war in 2009 or 2010. At that point I needed the cooperation of China as well as Europe as well as every other potential engine, just to restart the global economy."<sup>75</sup> This decision had obvious benefits, and perhaps could not have been avoided, but it left the President bereft of a unifying leitmotif to induce domestic support for the pivot.

Obama could also have sold the pivot as part of a global grand strategy to promote geopolitical pluralism, tapping into the long and storied US history of seeking to prevent the emergence of a dominant power in Eurasia. Indeed, the Obama administration's efforts to envelop

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<sup>73</sup> Drezner, "Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy? Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (2011): 57-68, at 67.

<sup>74</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Jeffrey Goldberg, "Why Obama Fears for Our Democracy," *The Atlantic*, 16 November 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/why-obama-fears-for-our-democracy/617087/>.

*both* ends of Eurasia in US-dominated “mega free trade agreements” – namely, the TPP and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) – are consistent with such an interpretation. Meanwhile, it is worth remembering that the pivot was never meant to come at the cost of a robust military presence in Europe or the Middle East. Instead, by upgrading America’s alliances in East Asia, the goal was to ensure that the United States and its allies dominated the three most critical sub-regions of the Eurasian landmass: Europe would remain part of a “North Atlantic” security community (institutionalized in the form of an enlarged NATO), East Asia would be made part of an “Asia-Pacific” or, better yet, “Indo-Pacific” system of alliances aimed at containing Chinese influence, and the Middle East would be subjected to continuous US involvement as part of ongoing counterterrorism operations. Presented in this broader Eurasian frame, the pivot might have been sold as part of a coordinated global effort to keep the peace.

Had Obama articulated such a grand vision of US power and purpose in Eurasia, he could have grafted the pivot onto the long history of American involvement in Asian affairs. After all, the United States has been actively engaged in the Western Pacific since the mid-nineteenth century. Early on, America’s leaders sought to involve themselves across the Pacific mostly for economic reasons. Today, questions of trade and investment remain high priorities for those charged with crafting US policy toward Asia. But ever since the attack on Pearl Harbor, US leaders have viewed the Asia-Pacific through the lens of national security as well as economic opportunity—that is, as a region that must be kept devoid of peer competitors who might once again strike at the US homeland, as Japan did on December 7, 1941. Defending America’s security interests in East Asia has been a costly endeavor: for over 70 years, America has purchased primacy in the Western Pacific—and, in turn, security for itself and its major allies—only through an expansive system of security relationships and overseas military bases designed to deter

adversaries and reassure allies. No fewer than 255,000 US soldiers have died in America's East Asian wars since 1941.<sup>76</sup> Viewed in this context, Obama's Asia strategy was not alien to US politics; it could have been portrayed as a necessary continuation of what the United States had always done for over 70 years.

Clearly, earlier US leaders had somehow managed to convince domestic audiences that what happens in the Asia-Pacific is of the utmost importance to ordinary Americans. Obama, however, did not make these connections in a way that resonated in domestic politics. Instead, there is evidence to suggest that the pivot remained an elite-level preoccupation during the Obama administration.<sup>77</sup> At worst, it was a programmatic endeavor run out of the White House but without much political buy-in even among elected officials. Either way, the result was that Obama had a difficult time overcoming opposition to the pivot's various components during his two terms as president, and that President Trump was able to undo so many of the pivot's achievements without incurring much in the way of effective opposition. Simply put, the domestic debate over the pivot was never structured in such a way as to impose political costs on those who opposed it. This was plainly evident during the 2016 presidential election campaign to succeed Obama, when both candidates found it expedient and cost-free to distance themselves from the pivot's economic centerpiece, and in Donald Trump's case, reject notions of multilateralism, rules-based international order, and US leadership altogether.

#### INCLUSIVE GROWTH

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<sup>76</sup> The United States lost 161,000 in the Pacific War (1941-1945), 36,516 in the Korean War (1950-1953), and 58,220 in Vietnam (1955-1975). The toll grows even higher if America's post-9/11 wars in Central and Southwest Asia are included.

<sup>77</sup> See Bastiaan van Apeldoorn and Nana de Graaff, *American Grand Strategy and Corporate Elite Networks: The Open Door Since the End of the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 219-225. On the pivot's support among bureaucratic elites, see Harold, "Is the Pivot Doomed?"

Obama's neglect or inability to articulate a compelling narrative of US leadership in the Asia-Pacific was compounded by a more tangible failure to connect the pivot with economic results on the home front. Transformative foreign-policy agendas are easier to sell to voting publics and their elected representatives when there is an intelligible "pay-off" in domestic terms.<sup>78</sup> But during Obama's presidency, domestic support for economic openness – one of the pivot's central values – showed noticeable signs of fraying. This meant that politicians in both parties had to be careful about supporting public policies that were viewed as neoliberal or "anti-jobs," which is how critics sought to portray the TPP. In this sense, the pivot fell victim to a broader dissatisfaction among the US electorate with internationalism, at least when pursued in a form that emphasized economic integration and trade liberalization.

Skepticism toward free trade was particularly strong in the Democratic Party. In the Senate, leading liberals such as Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders railed against the TPP for its investor-state dispute resolution mechanism, which they accused of giving private corporations far too much power over sovereign states,<sup>79</sup> and for making it easier for US firms to relocate operations overseas.<sup>80</sup> In the House, Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi declared her opposition to the TPP in July 2016,<sup>81</sup> having previously encouraged her members to deny fast-track authority to President Obama. Even Obama's first-term Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, came out in opposition to the

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<sup>78</sup> Trubowitz and Harris, "The End of the American Century?", 633-637.

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Warren, "The Trans-Pacific Partnership clause everyone should oppose," *The Washington Post*, 25 February 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kill-the-dispute-settlement-language-in-the-trans-pacific-partnership/2015/02/25/ec7705a2-bd1e-11e4-b274-e5209a3bc9a9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kill-the-dispute-settlement-language-in-the-trans-pacific-partnership/2015/02/25/ec7705a2-bd1e-11e4-b274-e5209a3bc9a9_story.html).

<sup>80</sup> Bernie Sanders, "So-called 'free trade' policies hurt US workers every time we pass them," *The Guardian*, 29 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/29/so-called-free-trade-policies-hurt-us-workers-every-time-we-pass-them>.

<sup>81</sup> The previous year, Pelosi had joined with Republicans to kill Obama's request for fast-track authority on trade. Lauren French, "Pelosi bucks Obama on trade," *Politico*, 12 June 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/06/nancy-pelosi-president-obama-trade-118941>.

TPP as part of her bid to secure the Democratic Party's nomination for the 2016 presidential contest. Four years later, Obama's own Vice-President, Joe Biden, would do the same thing as part of his own bid for the White House.<sup>82</sup>

In the past, Democratic presidents had been able to rely upon the Republican Party to help enact free trade agreements. Under President Clinton, for example, both NAFTA and permanent normal trading relations with China were made possible only because of Republican support in Congress. The same was true for the free trade agreement between the United States and South Korea that was concluded during the Obama presidency.<sup>83</sup> But even when the Republican Party controlled both Houses of Congress in 2015-2017 (the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress), the Obama administration had no luck securing passage of fast-track authority. One sticking point was that some GOP lawmakers, responding to pressure from grassroots organizations like the Tea Party,<sup>84</sup> were reluctant to delegate authority to President Obama – whom it had become typical for Republicans to accuse of overstepping his authority.<sup>85</sup> In this sense, opposition to trade liberalization interacted with hyper-partisanship to deny Obama any progress on the TPP.

In sum, Obama lacked domestic support for a foreign economic policy of “openness” in the Asia-Pacific. This much is clear. But why did the President not pursue a more protectionist approach – one that would have stood a greater chance of securing domestic approval? Part of the explanation, of course, is that protectionism is not what America's allies in the Asia-Pacific were

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<sup>82</sup> Adam Behsudi and Doug Palmer, “Biden says he would renegotiate TPP,” *Politico*, 1 August 2019, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/morning-trade/2019/08/01/biden-says-he-would-renegotiate-tpp-464000>.

<sup>83</sup> The KORUS trade deal passed the House of Representatives with 59 votes in favor from Democrats (130 nays) and 219 votes in favor from Republicans (21 nays). In the Senate, 15 senators voted against the agreement, 14 of whom were Democrats.

<sup>84</sup> Judson Philips, “Trade and the Tea Party: Washington insiders remain clueless,” *The Hill*, 24 February 2014, <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/198942-trade-and-the-tea-party-washington-insiders-remain>.

<sup>85</sup> Jeff Spross, “The Trans-Pacific Partnership: How Tea Party rage could actually help American workers,” *The Week*, 11 February 2015, <https://theweek.com/articles/538640/transpacific-partnership-how-tea-party-rage-could-actually-help-american-workers>.

asking for. Governments in the region were looking to the United States to help liberalize and integrate the economies of the Pacific Rim, not scale back international cooperation. Another reason is that, because Obama came to office during the 2008-2009 financial meltdown, he was under extreme pressure to stabilize the US economy. Perhaps as a result, Obama accepted the need to pursue a relatively conservative (foreign) economic policy.<sup>86</sup> His support for the principle of economic openness,<sup>87</sup> as evidenced by his pursuit of free trade agreements such as KORUS, the TTIP, and the TPP,<sup>88</sup> and his support in international forums such as the G8/G7 and the G20, can all be viewed in this light: an approach to international politics and economics intended to restore economic growth at home and abroad.<sup>89</sup>

Whatever the reason for his orthodox foreign economic policy, Obama's embrace of multilateral trade deals opened the door to criticisms from the populist right and left. Not only did Obama fail to secure passage of the TPP during his presidency, but it seems clear that, in the 2016 election, Donald Trump's opposition to economic globalization played a decisive role in helping him to victory in "Rust Belt" states such as Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.<sup>90</sup> Trump's victory demonstrated that, at least by 2016, it was possible to win power in the United States by opposing

<sup>86</sup> Obama has since argued that many of his "earliest choices [as President] were premised on the very specific circumstances of being in a global financial meltdown and trying to avert a depression," adding that he would "probably make those same choices again." Goldberg, "Why Obama Fears for Our Democracy." See also fn. 72743.

<sup>87</sup> van Apeldoorn and de Graaff, "Obama's Economic Recovery Strategy Open Markets and Elite Power: Business as Usual?" *International Politics* 54, no. 3 (2017): 356-372.

<sup>88</sup> On the TPP as a relatively conservative "instrument of crisis management," see Tom Chodor, "The Rise and Fall and Rise of the Trans-Pacific Partnership: 21st Century Trade Politics Through a New Constitutionalist Lens," *Review of International Political Economy* 26, no. 2 (2019): 232-255.

<sup>89</sup> Moreover, it is worth noting that, at least in part because of Obama's efforts, the international community *did* succeed at maintaining an open world economy; as Daniel Drezner has put it, "the system worked." Drezner, *The System Worked: How the World Stopped Another Great Depression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>90</sup> Antipathy to corporate elites and economic globalization had been building in the Republican Party for some time. See Chip Berlet, "Taking Tea Parties Seriously: Corporate Globalization, Populism, and Resentment," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 10, no. 1 (2011): 11-29; and David H. Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon H. Hanson, "The China shock: learning from labor market adjustment to large changes in trade", NBER Working Paper 21906, January 2016, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w21906>. By 2016, both parties were increasingly influenced groups skeptical of economic globalization, creating obvious problems for implementing a grand strategy predicated on freer trade with Asia (and other parts of the world).



economic interdependence and free trade. In turn, this meant that foreign policies of protectionism, economic nationalism, and unilateralism were back on the table – that is, the exact opposite mix of policies that Obama packaged as part of the pivot.<sup>91</sup>

The rejection of the pivot’s economic component raised serious questions about the future of America’s broader commitments in the Asia-Pacific. After all, part of the original (post-World War II) reason for the United States agreeing to guarantee the security of nations like Japan and South Korea was to preserve an open international economy in this critical region of the world. But after the failure of the TPP (and TTIP), it is no longer clear that a decisive portion of the US political class retains economic openness as a goal of US foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific – at least not reliably so. If the economic rationale for “deep engagement” in Asia has eroded, what does this mean for the security commitments that have long been entwined with economic motives? If the Trump administration’s foreign policy has been any guide to the future, it might well mean that those commitments have become less important – and, indeed, dispensable.

*How might the pivot have succeeded? Counterfactuals and comparisons*

The empirical record offers support for our argument that the Obama administration pivot fell short because of the domestic-level obstacles posed by hyper-partisanship, lack of an overarching narrative about American purpose, and political opposition to an international economic agenda perceived as exclusionary. Our case study has also cast doubt on the completeness of alternative explanations for the pivot’s failure – namely, that its architects misjudged international-level

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<sup>91</sup> Some research suggests that, by the time Obama left office, traditional bases of support for free trade (such as multinational corporations) had weakened in the United States, whereas protectionist coalitions had gained in relative influence. Jesse Liss, “Social and Political Drivers of the Reorientation of U.S. Trade Policy: The Case of U.S. Withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership,” *Social Currents* 6, no. 3 (2019): 199-218.

conditions, that the United States was hamstrung by resource scarcity or poor leadership, and that the election of President Trump was something of a “black swan” event. But the question remains: Could the pivot have been saved? Would it have fared better if domestic dysfunction had not been so pronounced during the Obama years? Our argument implies that the pivot would have stood a greater chance of succeeding if domestic politics had been conducive. Of course, it is impossible to provide concrete answers to these questions with singular reference to the pivot itself. We can, however, get some leverage on these questions and the general causes of strategic failure through counterfactual analysis and comparative cases.

Elsewhere we have argued that the most successful grand strategies in American history were those that enjoyed broad-based domestic support.<sup>92</sup> Teddy Roosevelt’s bid to institutionalize America’s imperial ambitions, FDR’s liberal internationalism, and the bipartisan strategy of containing the Soviet Union stand out as examples of when presidents succeeded at putting in place the domestic conditions for converting America’s latent power assets into usable power. They assembled bipartisan coalitions, articulated inclusive grand narratives for why Americans should invest themselves in a common international endeavor, and ensured that the economic payoffs of America’s world role were distributed equitably. By contrast, the United States has failed to project its power abroad when domestic dysfunction has prevented the country from deploying its latent power assets in programmatic ways. President Wilson’s ill-fated plans for US leadership of the League of Nations is perhaps the archetypal example of such a failure. Nixon’s pursuit of “détente” with the Soviet Union and the post-9/11 “global war on terrorism” are other examples.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Trubowitz and Harris, “The End of the American Century?”, 624-625, 628-630, 634-635.

<sup>93</sup> Phil Williams, “Détente and US Domestic Politics,” *International Affairs* 61, no. 3 (1985): 431-447; Barry Buzan, “Will the ‘Global War on Terrorism’ be the new Cold War?” *International Affairs* 82, no. 6 (2006): 1101-1118.

Would a more forgiving domestic environment have permitted the Obama administration to embed the pivot as an “operational code”<sup>94</sup> in US politics? And what would it have taken for Obama to enjoy (or manufacture) similar domestic circumstances to America’s most successful foreign-policy presidents? Consider the issue of hyper-partisanship. Obama did make a non-trivial effort to cultivate bipartisanship over foreign and defense policy, at least initially.<sup>95</sup> Yet he was rebuffed by Republicans, whose leaders in Congress had resolved to withhold bipartisan cooperation as a strategy to embarrass and undermine the new president.<sup>96</sup> As a practical matter, meaningful bipartisanship was probably out of reach during the Obama years. But had circumstances been different – had Republican leaders concluded that bipartisanship was in their electoral self-interest, for example, or if the median Republican lawmaker had been more closely aligned with the president’s party – then it stands to reason that bipartisanship in Congress would have made it easier for Obama to entrench the pivot as an enduring operational code. For one thing, it is far less likely that sequestration would have occurred under conditions of bipartisanship as opposed to hyper-partisanship. In turn, confidence that the legislature would not succumb to gridlock might well have freed Obama to use his authority as commander in chief to redeploy military assets to the Asia-Pacific in a more effective manner than was possible in the actual event. Bipartisanship at home might also have made it easier for Obama to project US resolve in a more credible fashion.<sup>97</sup> For example, research suggests that hyper-partisanship in Congress dissuaded Obama from pursuing treaties as a form of international agreement, despite treaties being a superior tool to executive agreements when it comes conveying resolve and imposing binding

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<sup>94</sup> Alexander L. George, “The ‘Operational Code’: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 13, no. 2 (1969): 190–222.

<sup>95</sup> See fn. 47498.

<sup>96</sup> Michael Grunwald, *The New New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012): 146-149.

<sup>97</sup> The President would not have been forced to miss the 2013 APEC summit, for example.

obligations upon other states.<sup>98</sup> Had it existed, bipartisanship could have restored treaty-making to the arsenal of powers available to the presidency during Obama’s time in office. All things being equal, these differences would have strengthened Obama’s hand in implementing an enduring strategy of power projection toward the Asia-Pacific.

However, it is important to recognize the limits of bipartisanship alone. First, domestic opposition to the TPP – one of the biggest stumbling blocks to the pivot’s implementation – did not just come from the fringes of the Republican and Democratic parties. Centrist candidates also found something to dislike about this “mega-regional” free trade agreement (and its counterpart, the TTIP). The challenge was not just to secure bipartisanship, but rather to engender a specific type of bipartisan consensus: one that would lend stable backing to an internationalist agenda even in the context of domestic skepticism over the benefits of free trade. This was a tall order indeed, given that during Obama’s presidency, economic anxiety about free trade cut across sectors and geographic regions, creating strong headwinds for any politician who might otherwise have supported trade liberalization.<sup>99</sup> Second, is it not clear that greater cooperation between Democrats and Republicans in Congress would have forestalled the rise of anti-internationalists like Donald Trump. Indeed, bipartisanship might even have fueled the populist, anti-interventionist wings of America’s two parties by creating opportunities for candidates such as Trump and Bernie Sanders to paint themselves as even more compelling alternatives to “globalism” or “business as usual” in

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<sup>98</sup> Jeffrey S. Peake, Glen S. Krutz, and Tyler Hughes, “President Obama, the Senate, and the Polarized Politics of Treaty Making,” *Social Science Quarterly* 93, no. 5 (2012): 1295-1315.

<sup>99</sup> Research shows that public opinion on trade ~~are~~ is shaped, in large part, by perceptions over how trade policies benefit the country as a whole. Edward D. Mansfield and Diana C. Mutz, “Support for Free Trade: Self-Interest, Sociotropic Politics, and Out-Group Anxiety,” *International Organization* 63-, no. 3 (2009): 425-457.

Washington.<sup>100</sup> Again, this suggests that what the pivot's proponents needed was not bare bipartisanship, but a deeper and more enduring root system in American politics.

Could the Obama administration have disciplined domestic actors and kept the country focused on the importance of the pivot if it had deployed a more compelling strategic frame? We argue yes, but with some caveats. Drawing on US history, it seems likely that the portrayal of China as a present danger to national security, for example, could have galvanized support for the pivot (or an amended version of it) and dissuaded Obama's domestic opponents from attacking him on his signature foreign policies. Had Obama embraced the idea of a new "cold war" with China then he might have created the conditions for greater domestic unity. At least, the political costs of opposing the pivot would have risen if the strategy had been cast as critical to defending US influence, values, and security in the face of China's rise.

Here, too, there are limits to what Obama could realistically have achieved with a more forceful strategic narrative. For one thing, a domestic strategy of demonizing China would have tied Obama's hands in foreign policy. In effect, the administration would have had to cut the pivot in half: efforts to bolster America's military presence in Asia might have fared better in domestic politics in the context of a new cold war with China, but only at the cost of cooperation with Beijing and likely, the support of key allies in the region (e.g., Japan, Australia, South Korea) with close economic ties with China. Insider accounts indicate that this was not an exchange that the Obama team was willing to make.<sup>101</sup> Second, even a strategic narrative that fixed America's attention on security threats emanating from East Asia would have run the risk of becoming a domestic liability for Obama. If Obama had committed himself to a vision of foreign policy that elevated China to

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<sup>100</sup> Douglas Schrock, Alexander Adams, Ryan Bausback, Pierce Dignam, Benjamin Dowd-Arrow, Kristin Erichsen and Hale Gentile, "Trumping the Establishment: Anti-Establishment Theatrics and Resonance in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election," *Race, Gender, & Class* 25, nos. 3-4 (2018): 7-26.

<sup>101</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*; Campbell, *The Pivot*.

the position of “enemy no. 1,” he would have opened himself up to criticisms that he was blind to the simultaneous threats posed by Russia and the Islamic State during his second term. Without a broad bipartisan consensus in place, the vicissitudes of international politics would always have made it difficult for Obama to place the pivot beyond reproach in domestic politics. Incentivizing the party out-of-power to forgo opportunities to criticize the president on national security is never an easy task.<sup>102</sup>

What if the Obama administration had managed to sell the pivot as a strategy to promote broad-based, inclusive economic growth at home? There is reason to believe that such a framing – if matched with actual results – could have been decisive in terms of the pivot’s prospects for success. Historically, foreign policies that promise to improve the economic fortunes of ordinary Americans have been among the country’s most successful.<sup>103</sup> In the case of the pivot, this would likely have taken the form of a credible plan to raise wages, lower the cost of living, return manufacturing jobs to the United States, and generate new economic opportunities for struggling regions of the country. If Obama’s foreign economic policy had been visibly and credibly connected to domestic priorities in this way, the chances would have been greater that moderates in both parties could have insulated themselves against challenges from their more radical co-partisans. A broad cross-section of the electorate and political class would have been given an incentive to back the pivot, not just during the Obama years but into the future, too. President Obama was constrained in how far he could mold the economic component of the pivot (the TPP)

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<sup>102</sup> For a series of successful and unsuccessful examples, see Trubowitz and Harris, “The End of the American Century?”, 627-633.

<sup>103</sup> Trubowitz and Harris, “The End of the American Century?”, 633-637.

into the flagship policy of an inclusive domestic agenda.<sup>104</sup> Future presidents, however, will have to do better if they want to restore America's usable power.

Consideration of these counterfactuals suggests that the three symptoms of political dysfunction examined in this article are interrelated and reinforcing. This interrelatedness matters. In Obama's case, the unfavorable domestic conditions analyzed here compounded one another, leaving the President with barely any foundation for an enduring reorientation of American grand strategy. The multifaceted and interconnected nature of America's political dysfunction also hobbled US strategy toward China during Donald Trump's presidency. To be sure, Trump has enjoyed greater bipartisan support on the question of China than Obama did.<sup>105</sup> Unlike Obama, Trump appeared willing to sacrifice the goal of conciliating Beijing if this would help shore up a domestic consensus in favor of a robust approach to America's nearest peer competitor.<sup>106</sup> Worries about China's geopolitical ambitions in Eurasia meant that Trump entered office better positioned to craft a more compelling strategic narrative for an expanded American presence in the "Indo-Pacific" region. Finally, Trump enjoyed much greater leeway to implement a populist economic agenda to redistribute wealth and opportunity in favor of American workers.

Yet Trump missed his opportunity to enact a coherent approach to Asia. Whatever bipartisan agreement might have existed on the question of China, Trump was unable to mount an

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<sup>104</sup> For one thing, Obama inherited the TPP from the Bush administration, and had to deal within the parameters that 11 other sovereign nations would accept. The Obama administration did insist upon some significant labor and environmental protections being included in the TPP, but there were limits to what could be achieved in a multilateral setting. Moreover, Obama came to office amid a major economic crisis and recession. His priorities were, understandably, to revitalize the world economy – not necessary to remake it.

<sup>105</sup> By the end of Trump's term, most Americans (including a majority of Republicans and a plurality of Democrats) regarded China's rise as a "critical threat" to the United States. See Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, "Do Republicans and Democrats Want a Cold War with China?", Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 13 October 2020, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/lc/c/do-republicans-and-democrats-want-cold-war-china>.

<sup>106</sup> This was evident in Trump's "trade war" with China and his unabashed blaming of China for the Covid-19 pandemic.

“America First” vision of foreign policy upon it.<sup>107</sup> One reason is that Trump singularly failed to generate a unifying foreign policy narrative. Too many Americans were alienated by his disdain for US alliances and his apparent closeness to authoritarian leaders such as Russia’s Vladimir Putin, North Korea’s Kim Jong-un, and, at times, China’s Xi. Nor did Trump deliver on his promise to ensure inclusive economic growth. On the contrary, his “trade war” with China imposed heavy costs on several sectors of the US economy.<sup>108</sup> In this sense, the Trump experience echoes Obama’s: Trump’s failure to connect foreign economic policy with tangible benefits on the home front made it difficult to sustain bipartisanship and, indeed, gave his detractors ample incentive to stake out positions that contrasted starkly with those of the White House. The overall result is that like Obama, Trump failed to embed his preferred approach to Asia domestically.

What chance is there of a Biden presidency restoring America’s usable power, in East Asia and beyond? As yet, there is little evidence to suggest a trend away from hyper-polarization in domestic politics. This means that, even with his personal reputation as a bipartisan dealmaker, Biden will find it difficult to knit together a cross-party coalition willing to support a coherent and ambitious foreign policy agenda. On the other hand, Biden might find it easier than either Obama or Trump to create a persuasive strategic frame for renewed engagement with the rest of the world, including the Asia-Pacific, ~~given that the~~ The Trump years witnessed a resurgence in domestic

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<sup>107</sup> For one thing, hyper-partisanship continued to obstruct the Trump administration from mobilizing available resources and converting them into usable (military) power. See Ellen Mitchell, “Mattis slams Congress for ‘inhibiting’ military readiness,” *The Hill*, 13 June 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/337533-mattis-slams-congress-for-inhibiting-military-readiness>; and Annie Lowrey, “Why Sequestration Is Poised to Kill Trump’s Budget,” *The Atlantic*, 16 March 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/donald-trump-meet-sequestration/519798>.

<sup>108</sup> Ryan Haas and Abraham M. Denmark, “More pain than gain: How the U.S.-China trade war hurt America,” *SupChina.com*, 29 July 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/07/29/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-u-s-china-trade-war-hurt-america/>.



support (and both Democrats and Republicans) for foreign alliances and US leadership.<sup>109</sup> ~~And even as they eye the benefits of more trade with China, America's European and Asian allies are apprehensive about Beijing's intentions. If Biden is to avoid the failures of his predecessors, he seems essential that Biden needs to~~ offer his supporters and opponents alike a vision of America's world role that ~~clearly aims to strengthen the~~ enhances the economic fortunes of a broad cross-section of citizens. ~~He will face an uphill struggle, however, and the experiences of the past two presidents offer little cause for optimism that America's usable power can be restored at pace.~~

*Conclusion: Whither American Primacy?*

We have argued that Obama's pivot to Asia foundered on the rocks of domestic discord. Hyper-partisanship, disagreement over the purpose of US primacy, and the perception that signature trade policies were designed to elevate the greed of the few over the needs of the many – each of these three factors contributed to a political climate where power projection was impossible to implement. The United States was wealthy and powerful enough to assert itself overseas even in the face of opposition from hostile actors in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Its leaders could, under the right conditions, have fashioned a programmatic foreign policy that was properly resourced and free from internal contradictions. But in the event, dysfunction at the domestic level threw up too many barriers to a sustained policy of power projection – a pattern that has hamstrung presidents in the past and will almost certainly do so again in the absence of domestic reform, renewal, or realignment.

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<sup>109</sup> Dina Smeltz, Ivo H. Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, Marshall M. Bouton, Craig Kafura, and Brendan Helm, "Divided We Stand: Democrats and Republicans Diverge on US Foreign Policy," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 17 September 2020, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/lcc/divided-we-stand>.

The fate of the pivot has global implications. At least, there is every reason to believe that the problems of hyper-partisanship, divided national purpose, and rising anti-globalization sentiment could undermine America's commitments in regions beyond East Asia. The US presence in the Middle East, for example, has already been revealed as vulnerable to fractious domestic politics, with sizable factions in both parties now questioning the purpose of US military involvement in conflicts from Iraq and Afghanistan to Syria and Yemen.<sup>110</sup> Even the longstanding US military presence in Europe—especially Eastern Europe—cannot be regarded as solid.<sup>111</sup> America's allies know this, and might in the future become encouraged to look past the United States when it comes to fashioning their defense policies. So do America's adversaries, who are liable to test US resolve if they believe that the United States is constrained in terms of how it can respond to international challenges. In time, the United States might find itself choosing to withdraw from some of its longstanding commitments to international security and stability, not by virtue of having implemented a new grand strategy more befitting of changed circumstances, but by default; because its political system is simply incapable of supporting a foreign-policy superstructure that requires domestic convergence over a shared national purpose.

Some analysts of US foreign policy would welcome American retrenchment in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. There is a reasonable argument to be made that geopolitical conditions have shifted so much since the end of the Cold War that deep engagement across the entire span of Eurasia has become a costly anachronism or, worse still, a dangerous set of unnecessary

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<sup>110</sup> America's longstanding strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia has come under intense scrutiny, especially in the wake of the assassination of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi and public opposition to the Saudi-led coalition's conduct in Yemen's civil war. So too has support for Israel in the US Congress become more of a partisan issue than it was in the past, with multiple Democrats breaking ranks with the leadership—divisions that pro-Israeli politicians in the Republican Party have been eager to exploit.

<sup>111</sup> At the very least, President Trump's reluctance to endorse NATO's Article 5 has spurred European leaders to reconsider whether an independent European America's military might be necessary to safeguard their security interests. At most, NATO itself faces the long-term risk of collapse as America's basic ability (and desire) to uphold credible commitments dwindles.

entanglements. But whatever their merits, such arguments were not the ideas that motivated opponents to the pivot. Nor were they the animating ideas behind the Trump administration's inconsistent pushes for retrenchment, which, in any case, have already fallen afoul of some of the same domestic pathologies that we have pinpointed as causes of pivot's failure. Instead, both the pivot and Trump's "America First" approach to Asia have collapsed against the wishes of those in charge. The lesson is that, no matter how America's leaders prefer to wield the country's power on the world stage – whether they might wish to return to the business of power projection in Eurasia, pursue a leaner strategy of offshore balancing in East Asia, or commence a wholesale retrenchment of US forces from regions outside of North America – they will need to address the domestic-political pathologies identified here. Unless and until they do so, US leaders will experience great difficulty trying to convert American power into international influence.