System Effects and the Origins of Strategy: The Case of the Pivot to Asia

Nicholas D. Anderson
Yale University
nicholas.anderson@yale.edu

Victor D. Cha
Georgetown University
chav@georgetown.edu

Abstract: The Obama administration's much-discussed Asia strategy—the so-called “Pivot to Asia”—has been the subject of intense debate, with some going as far as to argue that it has been an abject failure, and others claiming it as a glowing success. In this article, we argue that the Pivot has been neither as abject a failure as its harshest critics might suggest, nor as shining a success as its most steadfast supporters may claim. Yet rather than evaluating the strategy in-and-of-itself—evaluating its logical rigor, execution, and preliminary results in the region—we argue that a proper understanding of the Pivot to Asia requires an examination of its origins and emergence over time. Drawing on complex systems theory and literature on “system effects,” we argue that the Pivot to Asia was a midcourse correction to an early Obama administration Asia policy characterized by surprise, mistakes, and inattention. Seen in this light, while the strategy may have been “born of (relative) failure,” the administration reacted admirably to a complex set of challenges, which eventually culminated in what is now known as the Pivot to Asia.


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Nicholas D. Anderson is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at Yale University. Victor D. Cha is director of Asian Studies and the D.S. Song Chair in the Department of Government and School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. The authors thank an anonymous referee for helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this article. One author’s (Anderson) research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada.

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From almost the moment it was announced, the so-called “Pivot” or “Rebalance to Asia” under President Barack Obama generated a great deal of commentary, both negative and positive. Critics have variously argued that the Pivot is unrealistically sanguine about the ability of the U.S. to manage a complex region, that it needlessly antagonizes the region’s emerging great power, China, that it lacks resources and substance, that parts of the policy are “badly misguided,” and that it has failed to successfully manage regional major power relations. As Michael Green notes (while recognizing its few significant achievements), the Pivot thus far consists of “sub-par performances,” “lost opportunities,” and “dangerous incompletes.” Supporters of the Pivot, in contrast, have argued that it is an important recognition of the region’s rising potential, that it is a sensible reaction to global geostrategic realities, that it is in the national interest of the United States, that it has played an important role in reassuring regional allies, and that it has been generally well-executed under
extremely difficult circumstances. As Scott Harold sums it up, “the rebalance is a low-cost, durable, fundamentally sound, and strategic policy based on the national interests of the United States.”

In this article, we argue that the Pivot has been neither as abject a failure as its harshest critics might suggest, nor as shining a success as its most steadfast supporters may claim. Yet rather than evaluating the strategy in-and-of-itself, we argue that a proper understanding of the Pivot to Asia requires an examination of its origins and emergence over time. Rather than evaluating the strategy’s logical rigor, execution, and initial results after its announcement in 2011, our primary aim here is to focus on its origins in the years leading up its formal unveiling. Drawing on complex systems theory and literature on “system effects,” we argue that the Pivot to Asia was a midcourse correction to an early Obama administration Asia policy characterized by surprise, mistakes, and inattention. Seen in this light, while the strategy may have been “born of (relative) failure,” the administration reacted admirably to a complex set of challenges, which eventually culminated in what is now known as the Pivot to Asia.

In making these arguments, we will first briefly outline what the Pivot is and what its proponents hoped it would achieve. Then we will examine the literature on complex systems theory in international relations, and will indicate its relevance to the making of strategies such as the Pivot. Then we will detail the origins and emergence of the Pivot to Asia, showing how it was a midcourse correction to a variety of system effects resulting from the Obama administration’s inauspicious early-Asia policy. Finally, we will examine and evaluate some of the achievements of the Pivot,

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13 Harold “Is the Pivot Doomed?” 85.
before concluding with a discussion of the implications of our arguments for international relations theory and U.S. foreign policy.

*The Pivot to Asia*

There has been some confusion over just what exactly the Pivot to Asia is and what it has been intended to achieve in the region. While there have been a number of statements and restatements of the Pivot’s core tenets, here we’ll focus on two of its original formulations from its greatest proponents, former U.S. President Barack Obama and former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

President Obama announced the Pivot during a speech to the Australian parliament in November of 2011. As he put it, “the United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation,” and was therefore turning its “attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region.” As President Obama laid it out, the Pivot consisted of three broad categories of approaches the United States intended to take to the region. The first revolved around security, which included upholding international laws and norms, maintaining U.S. regional defense spending and military presence, building the capabilities of allies and partners, strengthening alliances, engaging regional organizations, and building a cooperative relationship with China. The second core tenet of Obama’s articulation of the pivot was prosperity, which focused mainly on free and fair trade, and environmentally sustainable growth. The third tenet of the Pivot was human rights, indicating the U.S.’s intention to champion freedoms of speech, of the press, of assembly, of religion, and of citizens to choose their own leaders. In sum, in President Obama’s view the Pivot consisted of a tripartite U.S. commitment to security, prosperity, and human rights in the Asia-Pacific.

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A slightly more detailed vision of the Pivot to Asia was put forth by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in an article for *Foreign Policy* magazine in October of 2011.\(^\text{18}\) In Secretary Clinton’s formulation, the Pivot consisted of six pillars which added up to an abiding commitment to what she referred to as “forward-deployed” diplomacy in the region. The first pillar of the Pivot strategy for Clinton was strengthening U.S. bilateral security alliances with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand. The second pillar was a deepening of working relationships with emerging regional powers, including India, Indonesia, but most importantly, China. Third, the Pivot was intended to reengage the United States with regional multilateral institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Fourth, according to Clinton the expansion of U.S. trade and investment in the region would be given a higher priority, particularly through trade agreements such as the Korea-U.S. Free-Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). A fifth pillar of the Pivot would be the security and stability provided by the continued presence of U.S. military personnel in places such as Japan and South Korea, and their addition to places like Australia and Singapore. Finally, Clinton’s outline of the Pivot to Asia included efforts toward the advancement of regional human rights and democracy as its final pillar, particularly in places such as Burma, North Korea, and Vietnam.

In short, the Pivot as articulated by its chief proponents and others consisted of a threefold strategic commitment to regional security—including a sustained military presence, strengthened alliances, cooperative relations with emerging powers, and engagement with regional institutions—to regional prosperity—centered mostly on free and fair trade and investment—and to regional human

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rights—focusing on democratic progress and individual political rights—in the Asia-Pacific. Now that the basics of the Pivot to Asia are understood, we need to lay out our theoretical approach to the strategy.

**Complex Systems in International Politics**

What does it mean to take a complex systems approach to the study of international relations? International politics is often thought of as being analyzable at one of a number of “levels of analysis,” most prominently, the individual-, state-, and systemic-levels. Among systemic-level theories of international relations, there are a variety of ways in which the nature and structure of the system itself can be understood. Scholars of international relations have variously argued that the structure of the system is characterized by anarchy, by hierarchy, by an ideational or normative structure, or by a relational or networked structure, among many others.

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20 For a recent discussion, see: Mathias Albert, Lars-Erik Cederman, And Alexander Wendt, eds., *New Systems Theories of World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).


Complex systems theory is yet another branch of systemic-level international relations theory, which recognizes at least four fundamental attributes of any system of reasonable complexity. The first is interconnectedness: the recognition that there is a dense web of interconnections between most actors in any system, and therefore that changes in some actors or their behavior will have effects on most or all other actors in the system. The second is adaptiveness: that the units in the system are strategic actors that learn from their mistakes and experiences, try to anticipate the actions of others, and plan for the future. The third attribute is embeddedness: the idea that different levels of politics are embedded or “nested” within each other—that there are social systems embedded within domestic political systems, which are embedded within regional systems, which are embedded in the international system. The fourth attribute of complex systems is system-level emergence: the idea that the system itself will exhibit properties and behaviors that are different from its individual units—that the whole will be different from the sum of its parts.

This combination of interconnectedness, adaptiveness, embeddedness, and emergence—the fundamental complexity of the system—leads to what are known as “system effects,” four of which are important for our purposes here. First, the effects of actions will always be multiple, and indirect effects will frequently be more important than direct effects. Policies directed at a particular target will always have implications for and effects on third, fourth, fifth, etc., parties, and these may be more important than the direct effects of a given policy. Second, there will be a frequent decoupling between intentions and outcomes. Actions taken with a given intention will often have results that

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were unintended by any of the central agents involved. Third, there will be interactions between systems at different levels. Changes at the domestic system-level will have implications for changes at the international system-level, which may then reverberate back on the domestic system, and so on. Fourth and finally, international politics will have a dynamic quality. Any action taken will change the structure of the system, which will in turn influence future action, which will then change the system further, and so on. While some actions will lead to countervailing, negative feedback effects, others will lead to amplifying, positive feedback effects.

What does this all have to do with the Pivot to Asia, and to state strategy more broadly? While we don’t take complexity theory as far as it can go methodologically—implementing systems models of international politics—we do argue that the theoretical lens of complexity theory and a recognition of system effects are useful starting points from which to examine the formation of state strategies, and in this case, the Pivot to Asia. Rather than taking the strategy as it stands, and examining its logical rigor, implementation, or eventual results, our goal is to examine the emergence of the strategy itself. Thus, just as Lars-Erik Cederman has urged us not to take the existence of territorial states for granted in our examination of international politics, we too argue here that the simple existence of strategies should not be taken for granted. Rather than treating the strategy as an independent variable—which produces further political outcomes—we’ll treat it as a dependent

33 Cederman, *Emergent Actors in World Politics*, 3-36.
variable—as the culmination of a complex set of historical processes, many of which are out of the control of any individual leader or state.

**The Origins of the Pivot to Asia**

President Obama’s last trip to Asia in September of 2016 marked the final lap in his acclaimed Pivot to Asia. The narrative of this policy, as trumpeted by former administration officials, was predictably positive, expounding the bold but careful execution of a strategy that had been planned from Day One in the Oval Office. However, the origins of the strategy itself, we contend, show it to not be the result of rational planning and strategic foresight on the part of the Obama administration. As the following case demonstrates, a combination of inattention, surprise, and mistakes characterized the early years of Asia policy under President Obama. A variety of system effects confounded the efforts of the administration to conduct a coherent strategy in the region. Despite this inauspicious beginning, however, the Obama administration reacted well to each of these obstacles, and these midcourse adjustments culminated in the Pivot.

**Early Obama Administration Asia Policy**

The Asia that President Obama expected when he took office was not the Asia that he got. Confronted with a global financial crisis, ongoing wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and policy priorities of climate change and healthcare reform, America’s first president with roots in the Pacific did not exactly have the luxury of looking east. There is also little evidence from Obama’s presidential candidacy that the Pivot was planned from the beginning. Asia came up rarely in candidate Obama’s major foreign policy addresses, and when it did, it was usually mentioned in passing, when discussing other topics such as terrorism, the war in Iraq, global climate change, or his

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The priorities for the administration’s early approach to Asia were not laid out in any formal document, largely because the goals were so modest. Based on numerous conversations with members of the Obama team during the 2008 campaign and in the first year in office, we delineate four “priorities” they brought to the region.\footnote{Based on one author’s (Cha) many conversations with members of the Obama administration foreign policy team.} First, the administration wanted to deeply engage China. Second, they intended to strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance. Third, there was a desire to try to address the North Korea nuclear issue. And fourth, the administration planned to reevaluate free trade agreements.

Obama wanted to implement a new cooperative strategy that offered strategic security reassurances to Beijing as it encouraged the country to partner with the U.S. in solving common global problems. In a November 2009 speech in Tokyo that marked the President’s first major statement on Asia, President Obama struck a conciliatory tone, claiming that “the United States does not seek to contain China” and that “the rise of a strong, prosperous China can be a source of strength for the community of nations.”\footnote{“Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall,” The White House, 14 November 2009, \url{https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall} (accessed 20 March 2017).} This conciliatory approach led many commentators and
experts to write of a new “G2” relationship between the two states. As gestures of this more cooperative strategy, the Obama White House undertook a number of initiatives meant to signal their sincerity. First, the administration initiated the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in April 2009, a forum through which to discuss a wide variety of issues of bilateral concern. Second, the administration decided not to approve arms sales to Taiwan during its first year in office, an action that had always rankled relations with China. And third, the president refused to meet with the Dalai Lama during his administration’s first year, who has long been seen as a symbol (though not an active supporter) of the Tibetan independence movement.

A new G2 relationship with China had to be balanced by strong alliance relations, and so the Obama administration placed continued faith in the U.S.-Japan alliance, its longest-standing alliance partner in the region. To strongly signal this, President Obama sent then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Tokyo for the very first foreign visit of her tenure. This was followed very shortly thereafter by the administration welcoming the Japanese prime minister, Taro Aso, as the first foreign head of state to the White House in February 2009. This, in turn, was followed by President Obama visiting Tokyo in November of that year, making Japan the first country in the

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region he would visit as president. As Obama noted during his major address of the visit, American foreign policy in the region would “be rooted, in no small measure, through an enduring and revitalized alliance between the United States and Japan.”

Obama also wanted to deal with one of the most vexing problems in the region by reaching out to North Korea. By the time the president came to office, North Korea had conducted one failed nuclear test, and the Six-Party Talks on North Korean denuclearization hadn’t met in over a year. During his inaugural address in 2009, the president famously announced that his administration would be willing to “extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist,” a statement that was taken to be a strong signal to regimes in Iran and North Korea. The president also penned a personal message to North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in late 2009, which was delivered by Special Representative for North Korea Policy Stephen Bosworth. The exact contents of the letter are still unknown, but the gesture was seen as a signal of the administration’s willingness to move forward with high-level bilateral denuclearization negotiations.

Finally, the politics of the Democratic Party compelled the president to call a timeout on all pending trade deals. In the Asia-Pacific, this meant putting the KORUS FTA on hold, along with two other pending agreements with Panama and Columbia. These deals, which had been signed under the Bush administration, had not been enacted by the 110th Congress (2007-2009), due to concerns over union rights in Colombia, taxation in Panama, and in the case of South Korea, trade

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45 “Remarks by President Obama at Suntory Hall,”
in autos. The Obama administration decided it would renegotiate portions of these deals with their respective countries in order to assuage the concerns of Democrats in Congress.

Thus, the early Obama administration’s relatively modest Asia strategy consisted of engaging a rising China, strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance, reaching out to North Korea, and reevaluating regional trade deals. However, in each case, the White House met with unexpected twists and turns, and events in the first 18 months of Obama’s presidency undermined each of these objectives. The effects of systemic complexity confounded even the administration’s modest early goals in the region.

System Effects and Asia Policy Slipups

In the case of China, Beijing disappointed America’s G2 policy through a variety of actions which came to be known as the country’s “new assertiveness.” A first indication of this was in March 2009, when the U.S. Navy monitoring vessel the USNS Impeccable was harassed in the South China Sea by a group of People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels. Then, while Beijing did respond favorably to North Korea’s second nuclear test in May 2009, backing UNSC sanctions and using strong language against its junior ally, in the wake of the test it went back to business as usual, strongly supporting the regime politically and economically. A further indication of this new assertiveness was China’s refusal to accept any specific emissions targets at the Copenhagen climate conference in December 2009, during which a relatively junior member of the Chinese delegation


50 Christensen, “The Advantages of an Assertive China,” 57.
reportedly “shout[ed] and wag[ged] his finger at President Obama.”\textsuperscript{51} China also reacted sharply to the administration’s decision to approve a package of arms sales to Taiwan in January 2010 and to allow the Dalai Lama to visit the White House in February. But perhaps nothing was as clear an indication of China’s newly assertive stance as its launching of an unprecedented set of territorial claims in the South and East China Seas. In March of 2010, the Chinese reportedly referred to their claimed territory in the South China Sea as a “core interest,” prompting Secretary of State Clinton to respond a few months later at the ASEAN Regional Forum that the United States “has a national interest in freedom of navigation… in the South China Sea.”\textsuperscript{52} And in the fall of 2010, China and Japan stood toe-to-toe for nearly two weeks after a Chinese fishing trawler captain was detained after ramming a Japanese Coast Guard patrol boat in the East China Sea.

President Obama’s disillusionment with his China policy was evident as early as November 2009, as his principal Asia advisor Jeffrey Bader later recounted,\textsuperscript{53} when he was reportedly angered by Beijing’s haughty attitude and its efforts to disrupt his online conversations with the Chinese people during his first summit trip to the country. And things seemed to only get worse from there. While there is a great deal of debate as to what exactly caused this marked shift in Chinese behavior (or whether there even has been a shift\textsuperscript{54}), many point to a combination of the appearance of a U.S. relative decline following the global financial crisis, China’s relative rise in the same period, and a slowing of Chinese growth, leading to a looming legitimacy crisis in Chinese domestic politics.\textsuperscript{55}


\textsuperscript{53} Bader, \textit{Obama and China’s Rise}.

\textsuperscript{54} Johnston, “How New and Assertive is China’s New Assertiveness?”

Therefore, in important ways it was system effects that undermined the Obama administration’s approach to China: factors that were out of the relatively short-run control of the administration were crucial in confounding its early strategy of engagement.

More than China, however, the biggest strategic surprise in Asia was domestic-political change in Japan. The displacement of six decades of pro-U.S., conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) rule with the more progressive Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) shook the alliance to its core. The DPJ, along with its leader Yukio Hatoyama, were elected after their campaign to place the U.S.-Japan alliance on a more “equal footing,” to improve Japan’s ties with China, and to lighten the American military footprint on Japan. Hatoyama’s short tenure as prime minister was followed by that of Naoto Kan and then Yoshihiko Noda, both of whom proved to be more pragmatic with regards to the U.S.-Japan alliance. But the net effect of the years of DPJ leadership not only undermined implementation of existing base agreements but also halted ongoing military cooperation in Afghanistan. And the March 2011 tsunami and nuclear crisis in Fukushima that came amid this domestic political churn effectively cut Japan loose as the U.S. strategic anchor alliance in Asia as the country reverted inward.

Much like China’s shift toward a more assertive foreign policy, this dramatic change in Japanese politics was deeply overdetermined. However, what is clear is that some combination of dissatisfaction with the LDP’s multi-generational tenure, the economic “lost decades” in Japan since


the early 1990s, and the more acute effects of the global financial crisis drove the Japanese to vote for the DPJ in 2009, bringing important changes to the U.S.-Japan relationship. This is a classic example of what Paul Pierson refers to as a political process driven by “long causes” but resulting in relatively “short outcomes,” much like an earthquake. Here, again, system effects reared their heads: the interaction between Japan’s domestic political and economic systems and the international system confounded the administration’s approach to Tokyo.

North Korea presented its own set of challenges. Shortly after President Obama was inaugurated, promising to extend a hand to the North, two American journalists were detained along the North Korean border with China in March 2009, and were only released after former President Bill Clinton traveled to Pyongyang for a personal meeting with Kim Jong-il. This was followed the same year by the North launching a long-range ballistic missile in April, and conducting their second nuclear test—far more successfully than the first—in May. Even after Obama’s personal letter to the North Korean leader at the end of 2009, the regime responded with a submarine attack on the South, sinking the South Korean naval corvette the ROKS Cheonan in March of 2010, and an artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island in November.

Thus, in North Korea, the Obama administration’s open hand was met with a clenched fist. The drivers of North Korean security behavior have long been a subject of intense debate, which can’t be adjudicated here. While much of the regime’s decision-making is shrouded in mystery, what is clear from the Obama administration’s early experience is that North Korea—arguably the most isolated government on earth—was faced with a U.S. administration that was more forward-leaning and pro-engagement than any other had been in decades, and yet it chose the path of continued

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provocation.\textsuperscript{62} Systemic complexity seemed to play a role here as well. The administration had a clear set of intentions in its engagement strategy toward North Korea, but for a variety of reasons, mostly beyond its control, these were undermined by Pyongyang’s early belligerence.

Finally, there were issues regarding trade. While Asian leaders had showered Obama with praise immediately after his inauguration, during his first presidential trip to Singapore for the 2009 APEC Leaders’ summit, the administration was pelted with criticisms over its lack of a coherent trade policy. The Mexican President claimed in a speech that the U.S.’s economic approach in recent years had “run counter to free trade,” and that “protectionism [was] killing North American companies.”\textsuperscript{63} If these policies continued, claimed former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew, the United States would be “out of the economic race” in the region.\textsuperscript{64} Similar criticisms were lobbed by the Chinese and the Russians, among others. Indeed, according to one report, one of the themes of the conference was that the “United States talks a good game on free trade but too often lets politics interfere.”\textsuperscript{65}

Thus, with trade—just as with China, the U.S.-Japan alliance, and North Korea—the administration’s early approach was met unfavorably in the region. The need for the president to appease many members of his own party in Congress had clear ripple effects outward, which eventually washed up on the shores of the U.S.’s allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific. Here we see system effects both in the form of unintended consequences of action and in the form of interacting systems—the U.S. domestic political and the international.

\textsuperscript{65} Higgins and Kornblut, “On Obama Trip.”
**Pivoting in a Complex System**

Thus, on China, on Japan, on North Korea, and on trade, the Obama administration got off to a rocky start. However, presidencies are often remembered not for their plan coming into the Oval Office, but for how they react to the surprises thrown their way. And in this regard, President Obama responded with worthy midcourse adjustments; adjustments that would culminate in the Pivot to Asia.

China’s “new assertiveness” was an important part of the security motivations for the pivot.\(^6^6\) The need to reassure regional allies and partners led the administration to prioritize the maintenance and even enhancement of its regional military presence, and its focus on the need to strengthen its existing alliances in the region. China’s actions likely also motivated the administration to reach out to other non-allied emerging powers, such as India, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. The political earthquake in Japan with the DPJ’s rise to power and the 3/11 disasters similarly led the Obama administration to think more broadly in terms of its regional alliance strategy, looking to Australia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand. The failure of its North Korea engagement strategy led both to a change in strategy vis-à-vis the North, but also encouraged the administration to look elsewhere to promote democratic change and individual political rights, such as Burma, Laos, and Vietnam. China’s newly assertive behavior and the U.S.’s diversifying of focus beyond Japan and North Korea also likely influenced the administration’s policy toward regional security institutions, as it became more closely engaged with organizations such as ASEAN, APEC, and the East Asia Summit (EAS). And finally, the criticisms of the early approach to regional trade appear to have been taken to heart, as the president became an eager champion of both the KORUS-FTA and the

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TPP. In short, each early regional failure appears to have lead it in a relatively direct way to a component of what has become known as the Pivot to Asia.

In terms of its military presence, the Obama administration added noticeable manpower to the region, going from just under 117,000 troops in late 2008 to 168,000 in 2016.\textsuperscript{67} In 2012, the administration began rotating roughly 2,500 Marines through bases in Darwin in northern Australia. After falling to just double digits in the early 2000s, U.S. troops also redeployed in significant numbers to the Philippines beginning in 2012, and further deployments in bases near the South China Sea were planned.\textsuperscript{68} And in Singapore, the U.S. planned a rotational deployment of four littoral combat ships as early as 2017.\textsuperscript{69} The U.S. also aimed to strengthen the military capacity of many of its allies and partners in the region, with its annual average arms sales to the Asia-Pacific going from roughly $2 billion during the Bush years to approximately $3.1 billion from 2009 to 2016.\textsuperscript{70}

The administration also moved to strengthen its alliances in the region. The White House’s critical but unseen coordination with the Japanese government during the Fukushima meltdown, followed by the more public Operation Tomodachi—the major assistance operation undertaken by the U.S. military in the wake of the Fukushima disaster—played important roles in tightening the U.S.-Japan Alliance. And the return of the LDP to power under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, after over three years in the opposition, helped to restore the reservoir of trust in the alliance.\textsuperscript{71} The


White House also elevated relations with other partners like South Korea and Australia, both of whom were willing to contribute on signature Obama projects like climate change, nuclear security, and global health.

After being rebuffed by North Korea early on, the Obama administration swiftly transitioned from engagement to containment—what became known as “strategic patience”—helping to erect a comprehensive multilateral sanctions regime. And while unsuccessful with Pyongyang, the administration demonstrated positive and historic diplomatic advances with other regional states. In 2012, Hillary Clinton became the first Secretary of State to visit Laos since 1955, and this was followed by a first ever sitting presidential visit by Barack Obama in 2016, unveiling a “Comprehensive Partnership” between the two nations. Relations with Vietnam too, have become increasingly cooperative, led by the 2013 “U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership,” and the joint statements that followed in 2015 and 2016. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, under the Pivot the Obama administration restored full diplomatic relations with Burma in early 2012, where it hadn’t had ambassadorial-level representation since 1990, and President Obama hosted Burmese President Thein Sein to the White House the following year.

The administration’s early failures to cooperatively engage China and North Korea, and to deepen its alliance with Japan, also likely encouraged it to cooperate more closely with the region’s multilateral institutions. In July of 2009, the administration signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and assigned a dedicated mission to the organization in 2010, with its first Ambassador.

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being appointed in 2011. That same month, the U.S., along with Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam (and eventually, Burma), formed the Lower Mekong Initiative, an organization intended to enhance cooperation in a variety of areas, including environment, health, and development. The U.S. also officially joined the EAS in 2011, which was also the first time a U.S. president has ever attended the organization’s annual gathering.

On trade, after a disappointing regional reception early on, President Obama engineered an astounding turnaround that linked the nation’s economic recovery and job creation to export promotion. As he put it his 2010 State of the Union speech, if “America sits on the sidelines while other nations sign trade deals, we will lose the chance to create jobs on our shores,” and therefore he announced the National Export Initiative—an ambitious initiative to double U.S. exports over the following five years. And while the administration fell short of this lofty goal, it did see an important increase in U.S. exports, going from $1.6 trillion in 2009 to nearly $2.3 trillion in 2015.77 The president himself also came out strongly in favor of regional free trade agreements, overseeing the passage of the KORUS FTA and the championing of the 12-member TPP. And once the United States went “all-in” on joining the East Asia Summit, the Obama White House played a leading role in creating an informal division of labor between this region-wide summit and APEC, making the former the arena for political-military discussions and the latter the arena for trade and investment liberalization.

Perhaps most important from the Asian perch, the Obama administration has just given more “face time” to Asia. During the Obama administration the president or secretary of state visited an

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average of nearly seven Asia-Pacific countries annually for bilateral meetings, whereas under both the Clinton and Bush administrations this number was closer to four. Beyond bilateral meetings, President Obama himself spent a great deal more time in the region. He broke the tradition of one annual trip to Asia after the U.S. joined the East Asia Summit in 2011, and could be found traveling beyond the typical Northeast Asia circuit to Indonesia, India, and Australia as part of a larger G20 strategy that incorporated the Asia-Pacific more broadly. The last trip to Asia for President Obama in September 2016 was the sixteenth of his presidency, exceeding Bill Clinton’s eleven and George W. Bush’s ten (see Figure 1, above). These adjustments were part and parcel of the administration’s Pivot as announced in the president’s speech to the Australian parliament in 2011.

Figure 1: Presidential Visits to Asia, 1980-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BY REGION</th>
<th>TOTAL NUMBER OF VISITS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ronald Reagan (3)</td>
<td>Northeast Asia 1, Southeast Asia 1, South Asia 1, Australasia 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George H.W. Bush (2)</td>
<td>Northeast Asia 1, Southeast Asia 1, South Asia 0, Australasia 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Clinton (11)</td>
<td>Northeast Asia 6, Southeast Asia 2, South Asia 2, Australasia 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George W. Bush (10)</td>
<td>Northeast Asia 6, Southeast Asia 2, South Asia 2, Australasia 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barack Obama (16)</td>
<td>Northeast Asia 10, Southeast Asia 6, South Asia 2, Australasia 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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79 Figure 1 data from “Presidential and Secretaries Travels Abroad.” Two Obama trips added for 2016.
The Legacy of the Pivot

Much as the administration deserves credit for re-orienting U.S. strategy to the Asia-Pacific, however, the legacy of the Pivot still is only partially complete. And it is on the China account, where there remains much work. On the one hand, the administration responded well to its initial disappointment with G2 by returning “normalcy” to its relations with China in Obama’s second year. As noted above, the president stopped refusing meetings with the Dalai Lama, and it resumed authorizing arms sales to Taiwan. More generally, it implemented a nuanced strategy balancing pockets of competition and cooperation with Beijing that resulted in significant agreements on climate change in Paris (December 2015), maritime risk reduction protocols, counter-proliferation (Iran and North Korea), and cybersecurity. Any administration official who’s asked will recite the number of hours the president and National Security Advisor Susan Rice have spent with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Washington, Sunnylands, Beijing, and elsewhere to build the type of

Kissingerian relationship with the Chinese that could lead to such deals. However, these accomplishments are bookended by continued Chinese land reclaims and military infrastructure building in the South China Sea, and aggressive patrolling in the East China Sea, in spite of international opprobrium and U.S. freedom of navigation operations, with U.S.-China relations arguably in as dangerous a position as any other since the rapprochement of 1971. Thus, what Americans see as a principled strategy, Beijing seems to associate with a “new model of great power relations,” that assigns Beijing a sphere of influence and military advantage in Asia in return for Chinese support of the U.S. on global issues. In this regard, the best metric of the Pivot’s success lies less with what any U.S. administration claims to be its policy accomplishments and more with the degree of confidence that America’s allies in Asia have with regard to Washington’s staying power and commitment to the region.

Moreover, North Korea remains a blemish on the Pivot legacy. Under Obama, North Korea has conducted an unprecedented four nuclear tests and 60 missile provocations. By comparison, there was one nuclear test and 17 missile provocations during the previous three presidential terms of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. North Korean nuclear capabilities will have evolved during the span of the Obama administration from a fledgling program to an estimated stockpile of at least 21 nuclear bombs (and likely more), solid-fuel propellants, road-mobile ballistic missiles, developmental SLBM capabilities, and according to the North’s own testimony, a

“standardized nuclear warhead” design.\textsuperscript{86} All of this may amount to a capability to reach the West Coast of the United States or further with a nuclear-tipped missile, and potentially a survivable deterrent, within the next few years. While the Pivot’s defenders might argue that little more could have been done to stop China or North Korea, historians are often less sympathetic, associating arguably unavoidable outcomes with negligent policy.

Under-resourcing the Pivot remains one of the often-cited critiques of the policy from Asia, as the United States operates in an era of budget sequestration.\textsuperscript{87} This extends not just to big ticket military items such as the Navy’s 60-40 asset rebalance to Asia and the deployment of more capable weapons platforms to the Pacific, but also to less-expensive cultural and educational programs. The 100,000 Strong program (to reach that number of Americans studying in China), constitute the Pivot’s encouragement for young Americans to learn more about Asia. However, while recent polls show that over 70 percent of Americans in the 18-35-year-old demographic see Asia as important to their future, the U.S. Department of Education in the last grant cycle (2014-2017) cut in half the number of Title VI federal grants to American universities to teach about Asia.

Yet, the Pivot’s legacy ultimately will be tied to the fate of the TPP, whose future at the time of writing is bleak to say the least. The 12-member free trade pact, the first to include the world’s second and third largest economies, is not just important for business. As a high-standards agreement it has the potential to impact more than just tariffs, reaching deep into member countries to create conformity on labor, environment, food safety, intellectual property, cyber security, the digital economy, development, and other standards.\textsuperscript{88} Were China to join TPP, conformity with these


clauses would have a transformative strategic effect on the nature of the Chinese state. Though a distant outcome at the moment, it is not implausible. At a speech on the Pivot at Georgetown University on November 20, 2013, Susan Rice openly invited China to join. Even Beijing’s mild interest in TPP would go a long way to undercutting the oft-stated criticism that the Pivot’s primary accomplishments—exemplified by the Navy’s 60-40 rebalance to Asia, Marines in Darwin, and military agreements with Philippines and Vietnam—amounts to a thinly-veiled containment strategy against China.

When President Obama sauntered through Asia in September 2016, he encountered more questions about TPP than he cared to answer. Unfortunately, the fate of Asia’s most significant new institution is now beyond his control and in the hands of a president who has withdrawn from the deal. Historians undeniably will give Obama credit for the strategic priorities his presidency gave to Asia, but the president may indeed find himself in another campaign as a private citizen to resuscitate TPP, and thus complete his legacy in Asia.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we’ve argued that the Obama administration’s Pivot to Asia has been neither the colossal failure its detractors claim, nor the glowing achievement its defenders have argued. Rather than evaluating the strategy simply in terms of its logic, implementation, and preliminary results, we’ve argued that a full understanding of the Pivot necessitates an examination of its origins. Using the theoretical lens of complex systems theory, we’ve shown how the Pivot to Asia was a midcourse correction to an early Obama administration Asia policy consisting of surprise, mistakes, and inattention. Understood in this way—as a strategic adjustment after initial failures—the Pivot to Asia appears to be a praiseworthy reaction to a not-so-praiseworthy start for the administration in the Asia-Pacific.
In terms of broader theoretical and policy implications, our analysis supports what Richard Betts has long argued: that strategy is often (though not always) an “illusion.”\(^{89}\) As David Edelstein and Ronald Krebs recently argued, in “the complex and highly uncertain world of international politics, it is all but impossible to identify the ideal strategy ahead of time.”\(^{90}\) In a complex system, few strategies survive their initial implementation, and most will evolve considerably over time. These arguments echo what the 19\(^{th}\) century German Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke once claimed: that “No battle plan survives contact with the enemy.”\(^{91}\) A plainer statement of this sentiment was put forward by former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson: “Everyone has a plan ‘till they get punched in the mouth.”\(^{92}\)

This isn’t to say that strategizing is impossible, and that we are resigned to simply “make it up as we go along.”\(^{93}\) Clearly strategies have been and can be made and implemented in a relatively straightforward, rational manner.\(^{94}\) But any appraisal of a given strategy will be incomplete without a full understanding of its origins and early evolution over time. And we’ve contended that the Pivot to Asia is no different in this regard. Born of (relative) failure, the strategic adjustments which culminated in the Pivot can claim some important successes for the U.S. foreign policy in the world’s most consequential region.


\(^{93}\) This is apparently how former president Bill Clinton described his administration’s strategy. See: John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 77.