

ELITES, DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS, AND AMERICA' S PIVOT TO ASIA

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During its first term, the Obama administration embarked on the largest peacetime structural adjustment of foreign policy in the history of the United States. Originally called the “Asia Pivot,” the administration sought to reprioritize America’s economic, diplomatic, and military relationships in the broad region known as the Asia-Pacific. This ambitious agenda elicited a mixed response from the US Congress and the American public, thus encouraging the question: Why did the Obama administration choose to pivot to Asia in 2011? Despite weak support at home and no immediate impetus abroad, what motivated President Barack Obama, Secretary Hillary Clinton, and others to push for such a substantial strategic overhaul? This paper discusses this question, relates it to extant research, and then provides an examination of the international and domestic contexts in which the Pivot was launched. Although intended to be used as a teaching case study, this paper is also relevant to the broader scholarly debate over the role that elites play in US foreign policy formulation.

Keywords: US foreign policy, domestic politics, public opinion, pluralism, elites, strategic adjustment, Presidential-Congressional relations, Asia-Pacific

INTRODUCTION

The Asia Pivot was intended to be a broad strategic adjustment to U.S. foreign policy that subsumed new approaches to diplomacy, trade, and national security strategy in the region known as the Asia-Pacific. The use of the term “pivot” implied that America would ease its focus on the Middle East at the expense of an enhanced concentration on an area that stretches across the Indian and Pacific Oceans. If fully realized, the Pivot would have resembled wholesale change in strategy. It would have also prompted adjustments in Chinese, Japanese, and Indian foreign policy, among others. The Pivot surfaced in internal discussions in 2009 and gained public attention in 2011; significant parts were suspended or reversed within the first few months of the Trump administration. Today, the future of the Asia Pivot is less than certain.

In 2011, the Pivot caught the attention of America’s allies, partners, and competitors across the world. Perhaps a testament to the impact that US foreign policy has abroad, foreign concerns about whether the Pivot will happen and what shape it may ultimately take dominated foreign policy debates globally over the next six years. Despite the high stakes, research and commentary by the scholarly community struggled to go beyond normative debates and prognostication. This, despite the fact that the emergence of the Asia Pivot brought with it a host of theoretical and practical puzzles that international relations scholars and foreign policy analysts are well equipped to solve.

One puzzle that sticks out above the rest is the motivations of the Obama administration. What prompted the Obama administration to focus on the Asia-Pacific? Why 2011? America’s fascination with the Asia-Pacific dates back to the late nineteenth century; Americans have a long tradition of believing that the future of the country lies in the Far East. This only confounds our understanding of the timing of the Asia Pivot.

Another puzzle found in the timing of the Asia Pivot stems from a realist interpretation. A neo-realist answer to the “why now” question points to long-term shifts in the global distribution of power, from Europe to the Asia-Pacific. It is difficult to dispute the claim that the region, especially East Asia, is more important to the global economy and global politics than at any previous time under the Westphalian state system. China’s slow and steady military modernization is also a robust sign of its growing influence. At the same time, the rising salience of East Asia has caught no one by surprise. If we have known about the ascent of East Asia for decades, why were policymakers only motivated to act in 2011?

There are a host of plausible explanations for any foreign policy decision.¹ One way of organizing the wealth of theories and models is to separate them into two broad categories: structural explanations and agent-based explanations. This paper explores how these two ways of thinking about foreign policymaking contrast by explaining plausible explanations from both approaches.

Perhaps the most notable structural theory of international politics is neo-realism.² Neo-realist theories disagree on many important assumptions about state behavior, but they share substantial common ground. Among these common assumptions are: the overarching effect of international structural anarchy, the prime objective of state survival, the accumulation of power as the primary means to achieve security, and the relative assessment of power among states. Taken together, they present a clear explanation for why the United States would undergo a structural adjustment to its grand strategy in 2011. In short, neo-realism would claim that the Asia Pivot was a reaction to changes in the distribution of power in the international system. The neo-realist explanation treats the state as a unitary actor, meaning that when the United States makes foreign policy, the unique qualities of the Obama administration (and any potential agency therein) are overcome by the causal impact of structural factors, e.g. the distribution of power among states.

The broad family of theories and models known as foreign policy analysis dispute the claim that the state is a unitary actor. Instead, they point to various individual, group, and government-level factors that have the potential to shape foreign policy in spite of structural factors. Traditionally, these explanations are organized by discipline and ontological tradition.³ This paper focuses on two schools of thought within the agent-based realm: pluralism and elite theory. Both point to the domestic political process as pivotal in the determination of foreign policy.

The idea of pluralism extends beyond foreign policy analysis. It maintains that democratic politics is based on not common interest, but multiple interests that compete with each other to

¹ Valerie Hudson, "Foreign Policy Analysis: Actor-Specific Theory and the Ground of International Relations," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1, no. 1 (2005) 1-30

² Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, reprint. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 (1959); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979; Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984; John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.

³ Hudson, "Foreign Policy Analysis"; Richard Snyder, H.W. Bruck, Burton Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision Making, Revisited*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

influence policymaking.⁴ The extension to foreign policymaking is simple; there is not one national interest, but instead multiple parochial interests that vie with each other. Thus, according to the pluralist model of foreign policymaking, US foreign policy does not reflect a so-called national interest but instead is the preference of the winning coalition in American politics.

Opposed to the democratic ideal of the pluralist model is the elite model. It posits that foreign policymaking is unlike regular politics, due to the specialized nature of the topic, the need for expertise on foreign countries and international issues, and most importantly, because of the existence of a shared national interest. Thus, this approach avers that US foreign policy is the product of a stable “foreign policy establishment” that transcends parochial interests or the temporary whims of public opinion.

The case study that follows explores three plausible explanations for the Obama administration’s decision to pursue the Asia Pivot. The first is a realist hypothesis that suggests changes to the distribution of power played a central role. The second is a pluralist hypothesis that claims the Pivot is policy preference of a winning coalition in American politics. The third is an elite hypothesis which suggests that the Pivot is the preference of the foreign policy establishment despite its unpopularity among the American public. The case study considers these plausible explanations while looking at the international and domestic contexts in which the decision to launch the Asia Pivot was made in 2011.

This paper proceeds in two parts. First, it provides an overview of the Asia Pivot that highlights its ambiguous goals and its uncertain end state. Next, this paper compares realist, domestic-political, and individual-level contexts of the making of the Pivot. It concludes that individual motivations overrode domestic political hesitation to launch the Pivot, which also explains why the Pivot is being so easily undone by a new administration.

⁴ Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961

CASE STUDY: ELITES, DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS, AND THE PIVOT TO ASIA

WHAT IS THE ASIA PIVOT?

The Asia Pivot, also known as the Asian Pivot, the “pivot to Asia,” the “turn towards Asia,” “Asian rebalancing,” or simply “rebalancing,” is a bit of a mystery to those that study U.S. foreign policy as well as those that practice it. This section identifies two defining characteristics that can help us better understand what the Pivot is and how it was conceived by the Obama administration.

To borrow the words of Arnold Wolfers, the Pivot is an ambiguous symbol.⁵ Much like Justice Stewart’s claim about obscenity, we all know the Pivot when we see it. Yet, the Pivot means different things to different people and, consequently, we have had little productive debate over what could be the defining foreign policy decision of our generation.

So, what is the Pivot? At its most basic, it is a deliberate attempt by the Obama administration to shift the American gaze further eastward. In the post-Cold War era, foreign policymakers have suffered from an attention deficit. The 1990s saw a renewed focus on Europe with the enlargement of NATO and the containment of ethnic violence as key issues. That attention continued to drift to the southeast, resting on the Middle East and Central Asia after the 9/11 attacks. Two wars later, U.S. foreign policy debates today seem to be between an urge to look inward and a plea to concentrate on the Asia-Pacific.

The Pivot is more than a call to provide some consistency to U.S. grand strategy. It stems from a desire to more deeply engage the wide swath of the globe that includes India, Australia, Chile, Canada, Japan, China, and Myanmar and everything in between. Engagement, however, has a particular meaning in this context. The Pivot seeks to place the United States in the center of this region, making it an indispensable member and net contributor to its development and security.

The Obama administration proposed the pivot to Asia in 2011, but had been working on a deeper engagement of the Asia-Pacific as early as 2009. In a sense, the American push eastward had been in place even earlier. As a matter of deliberate strategy, however, it seems that the Pivot really got its start in Barack Obama’s first term and under the leadership of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

In 2011, the Pivot went public and got its name, although curiously the White House prefers

⁵ Arnold Wolfers, “National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol.” *Political Science Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1952) 481-502

to the term “rebalancing” today.⁶ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proposed that the Pivot should rest upon three pillars: diplomacy, economics, and security. She argued that the United States would not be able to achieve its global goals in each domain unless it becomes more engaged in the development of the Asia-Pacific in all three.⁷

While being mindful of the lack of precision that each pillar entails, the Pivot can be reduced to a few tangible foreign policy goals. Regarding diplomacy, the Pivot includes the development of international regimes, both formal and informal, on the scale seen in Europe and North America. This “rule-building” initiative dovetails with a stated desire to transform the American experience in the Asia-Pacific from a series of bi-lateral relationships to something more multi-lateral or, at least, tri-lateral. The Obama administration seeks to insert the United States into regional organizations and to play a pivotal role within them as they seek to provide greater governance. Indeed, these initiatives are already underway. Before the Pivot was a term, the Obama administration signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and joined the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. In short, the White House wants ASEAN to do more heavy lifting and it wants the United States to be an indispensable part of it.

The Pivot also entails concrete economic goals. The most notable among these is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a proposed free-trade agreement among the United States and its NAFTA partners, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and a handful of Southeast Asian countries. It is distinct among other recent FTAs because it focuses on resolving regulatory barriers to trade as much as it reduces tariffs. On one hand, the TPP emblemizes the Pivot’s goal to institutionalize trade relationships and to make America’s regional presence permanent. On the other hand, it is also an attempt to capture market share in an increasingly vital regional economy.

New and renewed security initiatives are at the heart of the Pivot. They also are controversial at home and abroad. In the broadest sense possible, the military pillar of the Pivot consists of a change in force posture that seeks to maintain America’s naval superiority in the Asia-Pacific. American policymakers and analysts assert that China’s rapid growth and military modernization pose a credible challenge to U.S. maritime dominance and require a firm response.

⁶ Weitz writes that by using the term “rebalancing,” the Obama administration seeks to convey a sense of continuity with previous administrations. See Richard Weitz, “Pivot Out, Rebalance In” *The Diplomat* (May 3, 2012)

⁷ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Affairs* 189, no. 1 (November 2011) 56-63

On one hand, China's naval strategy has not changed significantly since the time of Mao. Its naval strategy consists of an asymmetric "offshore active defense," which avoids fleet-on-fleet battle and instead seeks to wear down its enemy. In this sense, the U.S. Navy will not be challenged in blue water anytime soon. On the other hand, an impressive modernization has given China the capacity to plausibly conduct an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) campaign against any fleet seeking to operate within 1500 km of littoral waters. The PLAN is faster and more lethal now; its older frigates and destroyers are equipped with Nth generation YJ-82/83 anti-ship missiles; its new Type-022 Houbei Fast Attack Craft is as fast as 36 knots; and retrofitted ground-based supersonic cruise missiles can strike an aircraft carrier on the far side of Taiwan. When combined with Chinese anti-satellite missiles and cyber capabilities, the PLA has the potential to deny the U.S. Navy access to a large swath of ocean extending from the Malay Peninsula to the Sea of Japan.

The Pentagon's response to this perceived threat is the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC), an emerging naval doctrine intended to counter Chinese A2/AD abilities. In short, it seeks to cancel the disruptive abilities of A2/AD by developing a force that is dispersed across the Asia-Pacific but can quickly converge on points and use overwhelming force to win what it calls an "Air-Sea Battle." Such a transformation requires a significant modernization, integration, and relocation of naval assets. One estimate of this undertaking is as high as \$450 billion spread over the next seven years.⁸

These official changes are key to the security dimension of the Pivot, but are not the only new and revised goals therein. Under the umbrella of the Pivot, the Obama administration has sought to forge stronger alliances in the region. Some of these initiatives are in progress. The Pentagon is currently negotiating with the Philippines and Vietnam to reopen Cold War facilities at Subic Bay and Clark AFB in the former and Cam Ranh Bay in the latter. In 2013, the U.S. announced it would install X-band radar, a critical asset for missile defense systems, in the Philippines and Japan. Other projects are already well under way. Over the last decade, the U.S. Navy has used Singapore as a refueling station and munitions depot and it deployed its first two Littoral Combat Ships there as a mostly symbolic gesture. For the last three years, 2,500 U.S. Marines have rotated through northern Australia every six months. U.S. military ties with Indonesia have deepened significantly; U.S.

⁸ Benjamin Schreer, *Planning the Unthinkable War: Air-Sea Battle and Its Implications for Australia*. Barton, Australia: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2013

Special Forces are averaging over 200 training operations and confidence-building measures annually in a country that historically harbors a deep mistrust of American intentions. When taken as a whole, it seems that U.S. foreign policy is digging in for the long duration.

When taken together, these specific initiatives subsumed by three pillars provide a better picture of what the Pivot actually is. Whether the efforts seen under the Obama administration have any staying power, however, remains to be seen.

The Asia Pivot is a complex formulation of grand strategy. It is also uncertain if this broad shift will have any staying power. There are at least three reasons to doubt that the Pivot will actually be implemented: an unclear structural imperative; geographic ambiguity; and domestic constraints. To be fair, there are also two strong reasons to think that it is more than a passing fad: it requires relatively few new resources and much of the heavy lifting has already been done or is underway.

If achieved, the Asia Pivot would be a strategic adjustment of historical importance because it is not prompted by a structural change. The 1890s, 1940s, and 1990s all saw significant shifts in U.S. grand strategy, but each of those instances happened at times of major social upheaval, either to the international system or within American society. When strategic adjustment stalled or failed, e.g. the interwar period of the 1930s, there was no accompanying structural shift. It is unclear if there is any substantial structural shift underway now, thus begging the question of whether or not the Pivot is actually here to stay.

The belief that we are entering a Pacific century can only be assured in hindsight. In the 1980s, fears of Japan's economic ascent prompted a strong reaction from academic and policy circles, best represented by Paul Kennedy's iconic *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*.⁹ Henry Kissinger saw opportunity and liability among the four "Asian tigers" in the 1970s. Even as Henry Luce was proclaiming the dawn of the "American Century" in 1941, he claimed that the world's future struggles lie in the Pacific. It is plausible to think that the Pivot is just following in a long tradition of Americans looking eastward.

Doubts surrounding the Pivot focus on its ambiguous geographic focus. Bisley and Philips write that "the rebalance clearly implies a broader conception of Asia than has previously been used."¹⁰ Indeed, Obama administration officials have clearly expanding policymakers' notion of Asia.

⁹ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. New York: Vintage, 1989

¹⁰ Nicholas Bisley and Andrew Philips. "A Rebalance to Where? US Strategic Geography in Asia," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 55, no. 5 (2013) 95—114, 96.

What previously was understood as Japan-Korea-China now includes South Asia, the Indian Ocean, Oceania, and when it comes to the TPP, Latin America. With such a large area to cover with one strategy, it is unlikely that policymakers and analysts will grasp the cacophony of issues and interests at stake. In order to stay relevant to the big, new Asia-Pacific, policymakers must reduce the Pivot to such an abstract level that is too ambiguous to implement.

THE PIVOT DURING THE OBAMA YEARS

Despite strong support for the Pivot in the White House, other parts of the US government were less enthusiastic about the nascent initiative during Obama's two terms in office. In February 2014, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid proclaimed the TPP dead when he refused to hold a vote to fast-track negotiations. In the same month, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel halted the procurement of Littoral Combat Ships after only two have been completed, effectively cancelling what was seen as a key weapon in countering China's A2/AD systems and for keeping shipping lanes in Southeast Asia open. Replacing Clinton at State, John Kerry spent more time and energy on the Middle East than anywhere else, a clear departure from his predecessor.

Other factors hampered the Pivot's launch. There were deep fiscal constraints on the Pentagon, as seen in the recent rounds of sequestration that shut down routine cruises in the Pacific. Public opinion was increasingly wary of any intervention or expansive foreign policy. There were plenty of reasons to doubt that the Pivot was a *fait accompli* during the Obama years.

To be fair, there were also strong signs that the Pivot would carry on long after 2016. Military analysts conceded the rebalancing to Asia was a bit of a misnomer; it should actually be called a rebalance *within* Asia because most of the big investments are already there, but just in the wrong place. The centerpiece of the JOAC and Air-Sea Battle is interconnectivity of naval assets, which draws upon a research and development program begun decades ago under the banners of Future Combat Systems and the even more esoteric Revolution in Military Affairs.¹¹ While Chuck Hagel famously set the goal of 60% of America's ships and planes being in the Asia-Pacific in 2012, he neglected to mention that this would be accomplished as soon as U.S. forces exit Afghanistan in 2014.

¹¹ Richard A. Bitzinger and Michael Raska, "Policy Brief: The AirSea Battle Debate and the future of Conflict in East Asia. *RSIS Policy Brief* (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University) February 2013

These factors eased the Pivot's introduction.

The diplomatic and economic pillars of the Pivot gained significant momentum during the Obama years. America's greater involvement in ASEAN, was met with approval from both parties. The unfolding rapprochement with Myanmar (Burma) enjoyed wide support, as evidenced by the bipartisan decision in the Congress to not renew sanctions. Even amid doubts over the TPP, Congressional leaders proposed alternatives (e.g. the resumption of bi-lateral FTAs) that were more amenable to domestic constituencies while still serving the Pivot's higher order strategic goals.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: PULLING THE PIVOT FORWARD

Any discussion of the international sources of foreign policy starts with realism, and in the contemporary sense, the realist school of thought begins with neo-realism. While ambivalent on the petty divisions within the theory (e.g. offensive, defensive), this approach points to changes in the distribution of power within the international system as the sources of foreign policy behavior. Quite simply, when relative power shifts, states react by adjusting their strategies. This is particularly central to John Mearsheimer's claim that the primary goal of a great power is to prevent the rise of (a) a challenger within its region and (b) a great power that dominates more than one region.¹² Thus, a neo-realist would expect strategic adjustment like the Asia Pivot when another great power has the capacity to dominate its home region.

This explanation makes a lot of sense. After decades of unprecedented economic growth, China now possesses the latent power necessary to assert itself as a regional hegemon. In the ten years preceding the public launch of the Asia Pivot, China's defense budget grew from 52.83 billion to 146.154 billion (in 2011 USD) for an overall 276% increase in military spending.¹³ In a comparative sense, China had no Asian rival when it comes to budget size, including Japan.¹⁴ What China had been doing with a bigger budget also mattered. It actively upgraded its armed forces qualitatively and quantitatively over the last decade, by importing foreign technologies from Russia and also by developing new indigenous systems. By 2012, it seemed as if China's armed forces were becoming

¹² John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001

¹³ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Military Expenditure Database," accessed on March 7, 2014 at http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database

¹⁴ *Ibid*

capable of regional domination.

Yet, this military buildup focused on weapons and strategies, like A2/AD, that did not signal a desire to project power across the Asia-Pacific. Christian Le Mière writes “Beijing... has developed a formidable capability to deter and potentially defeat any intervention by US forces in its near abroad. Both China and its neighbors have invested heavily in what might be called anti-access/area-denial (A2/ AD) capabilities. These are largely defensive systems characterized by denial rather than control.”¹⁵ This contraindicates the likelihood of China would become a regional hegemon and challenger to American global dominance during Obama’s watch. On the contrary, its military modernization was just as likely to be a continued reaction to America’s mastery of the Pacific. The only thing that has changed is China’s ability to react.

Even if Chinese military growth was not intended to achieve regional domination by 2011, it still could have upset the regional balance of power—another tenet of the neo-realist approach to foreign policy behavior. Realists see international relations as a zero-sum game, meaning that even a gain in China’s defensive abilities means a loss in American offensive abilities. The neo-realist perspective expects a net American loss to precipitate a reaction to rebalance, hence JOAC and the three-pillar approach to the Asia Pivot.

The neo-realist approach, which focuses on sources of foreign policy behavior beyond the water’s edge, is compelling. In fact, it is too compelling. If the rationale to act is so clear, then there should have been little dissent among American policymakers. Yet, there was considerable resistance within elite circles (as well as between elites and popular sentiment) over the usefulness and process of the Asia Pivot. A look American politics is necessary to gain an accurate assessment of the current and future status of the Pivot.

THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT: PUSHING AGAINST THE PIVOT

A neo-realist interpretation of the Asia Pivot dominates scholarly and practical discourses.¹⁶ Yet, there is no account for the pushback that the Obama administration faced in 2011. An alternate

¹⁵ Christian Le Mière, “The Spectre of an Asian Arms Race,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 56, no. 1 (2014) 139-156, 139.

¹⁶ Doug Stokes and Richard Whitman, “Transatlantic Triage? European and UK Grand Strategy after the US Rebalance to Asia,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 5 (2013), 1087-1107, 1087-8.

framework, one that focuses on domestic politics, provides a richer interpretation of the American push eastward.

A domestic politics approach subsumes myriad theoretical perspectives and scores of potential causes of foreign policy behavior. With this in mind, this section provides an overview of the most plausible explanations and provides some supporting evidence for each. It includes behavioral, institutional, and rational theories of politics and foreign policymaking at the state level of analysis, also known as Waltz's second image.¹⁷ All of these theoretical perspectives agree that there is no inter-subjective definition of the national interest and that foreign policy always reflects the interests of the winners of a contentious political process and *not* the interests of the entire nation-state. In simpler terms, these explanations for America's Asia Pivot begin with the assumption that not all Americans prefer it. Consequently, a necessary condition for the Pivot's ability to survive and thrive is the suppression of domestic political opposition.

American Public Opinion

During the Obama years, American public opinion was significantly divided over the future of U.S. foreign policy. In this regard, the issue of the Pivot was no different. In the years following the Iraq and Afghan Wars, the public was fatigued and weary of foreign interventions. Whether this fed into a broader desire to disengage globally, however, remains uncertain.

According to a 2013 Pew study, the American public was nearly divided on the issue of foreign engagement. "52% say the United States 'should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own.' Just 38% disagree with the statement."¹⁸ This opposition to engagement was at its highest point since the Vietnam War and it reflected a decade-long skepticism of American hegemony. Americans increasingly rejected the self-image of a powerful, respected, and admired global leader.¹⁹ Such doubt over America's role in

¹⁷ J. David Singer, "The Levels of Analysis Problem in International Relations," *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (October 1961), 77-92. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.

¹⁸ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Public Sees U.S. Power Declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips." (December 10, 2013) Accessed on March 1, 2014 at <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips>

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¹⁹ Ibid

the world fed into resistance to the Asia Pivot just when the administration was rolling it out.

Interestingly, American doubts seemed to be limited to a disdain for engagement on transnational and security issues. When it came to the global economy, however, Americans continued to be anything but isolationist. The same Pew study reported that over two-thirds of Americans were in favor of greater American involvement in the global economy.²⁰ This distinction boded well for the future of the Pivot's economic initiatives at the time, but as politics would play out over the next four years, the TPP would be one of the first elements of the Pivot to be jettisoned by Congress.

Another trend in public opinion during the Obama years was a growing concern about fiscal responsibility. In fact, the push towards greater austerity came from elites as well as grassroots over the last five years of the Obama administration. As a result, public sentiment turned against a long tradition of unchecked defense spending. A 2012 poll by the Stimson Center found that seven out of every ten Americans supported cuts to the Pentagon's budget.²¹ Support for budget cuts was extremely high among Democrats (over 90%) while split evenly among Republicans.²² Considering that key initiatives in the Asia-Pacific (e.g. JOAC) would be costly, policymakers were certain to find stiff resistance among their constituencies, thus jeopardizing one of the key elements of the Pivot.

President Obama's lack of public support at home might have also explained why the Pivot was pushed down the administration's foreign policy agenda during the second term. Pew reported that 56% of the public disapproved of the president's handling of foreign policy and national security in general.²³ Some irregularities show up in the data, however. 52% of Americans claimed that the President was doing a poor job with US-China relations. This might have indicated disapproval of the Pivot, but 51% of all Americans polled also felt that Obama was not tough enough on foreign policy issues while only 5% saw the President as being too tough.²⁴ These figures painted a messy picture; was the Obama administration engaging too much or not being tough enough?

How these data connected to policymaking and the Pivot specifically is a matter of debate.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Steven Kull, et al. "Consulting the American People on National Defense Spending: A Study by the Program for Public Consultation in Collaboration with the Stimson Center and the Center for Public Integrity." (May 10, 2012) accessed on March 1, 2014 at http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/may12/DefenseBudget_May12_rpt.pdf

²² Ibid

²³ Pew Research Center, "Public Sees U.S. Power Declining"

²⁴ Ibid

Two commonly accepted models reach very different conclusions. The pluralist model of public opinion avers that policymakers, especially those that are elected officials, are responsive to changes in public opinion.²⁵ As a matter of political survival, policymakers consider the wishes of the public before any consideration of the national interest. The pluralist model would predict that if public opinion continues to turn against intervention and engagement and towards neo-isolationism, current and future administrations will de-prioritize the Pivot.

The elite model of public opinion and foreign policy suggests a different outcome. It maintains that public opinion is not more than an agitating factor in the foreign policymaking process. It posits that policymakers are less sensitive to public sentiment and actually have the capacity to influence the public and not vice versa. One recent example of this was the Bush administration's (43) "Victory in Iraq" campaign.²⁶ Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi claim that the White House successfully framed the discourse on Iraq so that public opposition softened just enough to make the 2007 Iraq Surge politically feasible.²⁷ Accordingly, the elite model tells us that the Obama administration was able to push through parts of the Pivot by launching a public campaign to inform the public of its importance. Quite simply, as long as the White House used its "bully pulpit," it could sustain the Pivot.

Bureaucratic Influences

The Pivot's success during the Obama years depended, in part, on the federal bureaucracy. Bureaucracy can be viewed in two separate, but interdependent, spheres of responsibility. In terms of foreign policy substance, it has a potential impact on policymaking by providing intelligence and expertise to policymakers. In terms of foreign policy process, the bureaucracy is tasked with policy implementation. In both realms, a cooperative and capable bureaucracy was a necessary condition for the Pivot's success.

Daniel Carpenter suggests that bureaucracies are most influential when they have the

²⁵ For an overview of the classic pluralist approach, see Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972.

²⁶ The White House, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*. Washington, DC: Government Publications Office, 2005.

²⁷ Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the Iraq War," *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/2006) 7-46.

capacity to act autonomously and when they possess specialized expertise.²⁸ This might explain the influence that the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment had on the origins of the Pivot. Kai Liao writes that the ONA, as the Pentagon's internal think-tank, owns a unique mission and commands uncommon independence within the defense policy community. It is charged with anticipating future challenges to national security and draws upon national security experts from respected organizations, e.g. RAND. In his study, Liao finds that the ONA pioneered the Revolution in Military Affairs, the precursor to the JOAC and the Air-Sea Battle Concept.²⁹ As early as 2000, it shaped the Pentagon's conversation on the Asia-Pacific when it claimed that the region would be multi-polar by 2010. In the last decade, ONA strongly advocated for a greater American military presence in East Asia.³⁰ Its influence on the Obama administration's Asia-Pacific policy can be seen in the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, a document published by the Office of the Secretary of Defense that has been central to the Pivot's design.³¹ The Strategic Guidance closely resembled previous documents put out by the ONA on the future of the Asia-Pacific.

The story of the ONA is only an example of how the bureaucracy was a powerful ally of the Pivot and the White House. In terms of process, however, there seems to be reason to believe that the bureaucracy might have hindered the Pivot's rollout. Michael Horowitz's Adoption-Capacity Theory maintains that a state is only able to integrate new military technologies if it possesses the requisite material capacity *and* if it has a flexible bureaucracy.³² If Horowitz is correct, then the military aspect of the Pivot would have only thrived if the Pentagon and branches of the armed forces were able to adapt. Horowitz avers that bureaucracies ossify over time, creating rules and routines that are resistant to change. Considering that U.S. policy towards the Asia-Pacific had been fairly static since the end of the Cold War, it is reasonable to believe that it would have taken a lot of effort to overcome an ossified bureaucracy that is set in its ways. One example of this bureaucratic inertia was the Pentagon's inability to relocate 5,000 troops from Okinawa to Guam in a timely

²⁸ Daniel Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862-1968*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

²⁹ Kai Liao, "The Pentagon and the Pivot" *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 55, no. 3 (2013) 95-114

³⁰ *Ibid*, 100.

³¹ United States Department of Defense. *Sustaining Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. Washington, DC: Government Publications Office, January 2012

³² Michael Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

fashion.

Bureaucratic turf wars were another potential constraint on the successful formation of the Pivot. As it began to gain momentum in 2010, parochial interests and bureaucratic infighting within the Department of Defense intensified. One notable example is the struggle over the future of the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization. The Pentagon created JIEDDO during a time when the U.S. Army was waging fierce counter-insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, where ground troops were particularly vulnerable to enemy IEDs.³³ With the Iraq War over and the Afghan War winding down, JIEDDO was looking to reinvent itself as an important player in the development of the Air-Sea Battle Concept. Not surprisingly, this came after its budget and mission were on the chopping block.

JIEDDO survived by jumping on the Pivot bandwagon. In October 2012, then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Ash Carter announced that JIEDDO would begin to work in earnest on defending U.S. ships from waterborne IEDs.³⁴ To date, the only example of a waterborne IED attack on an American vessel was the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000. This begs the question as to whether, in Horowitz's words, JIEDDO is an example of a flexible bureaucracy or if, in a more parochial sense, this is an example of an Army-dominated agency adapting not out of national interest but out of its own need to survive. Either way, it seems as if support for the Pivot's rollout depended upon a delicate balance of interests in the bureaucracy.

Institutional Incentives and Constraints

The rules that American leaders are compelled to follow when making foreign policy matter. These institutions can also incentivize or constrain support for the Obama administration's launching of the Pivot. The persistent tension between the branches of government is paramount among these influences.

Aaron Wildavsky's Two-Presidencies Thesis maintains that a sitting president is better

³³ Gordon Lubold, "Whither JIEDDO?" *Foreign Policy's National Security Blog* (September 25, 2012) accessed on March 12 at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/25/whither_jieddo

³⁴ Gordon Lubold, "The pivot to Asia and the urgent fight against waterborne IEDs" *Foreign Policy's National Security Blog* (October 15, 2012) accessed on March 12 at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/15/the_pivot_to_asia_and_the_urgent_fight_against_waterborne_ieds

equipped to influence foreign policymaking than domestic policymaking.³⁵ Assuming that the executive branch is always engaged in a zero-sum game with Congress for power and influence, Wildavsky posits that a President will default to his foreign policy agenda when it struggles to work with Congress. While this thesis applies to inter-branch relations regardless of which party is in power, it rings truer in times of divided government.

Since the start of the 112th Congress in 2010, the federal government had been practically divided between parties. For all intents and purposes, the Republican-majority House of Representatives held a veto over the President's Democratic agenda and it proved to be especially antagonistic over the Obama administration's domestic agenda. Following Wildavsky's logic, the White House shifted its focus abroad over the last four years in order to find easier political victories. Considering the amount of time and energy still dedicated to domestic agenda items like health care reform, this case does not seem to fit the theory. On the other hand, the Pivot did arrive at the same time that Republicans took the House. The Asia Pivot, which has been more popular among Republican hawks, has indeed found an audience in the Congress at a time when there was little common ground elsewhere. Perhaps the fact that the Pivot was an easier sale to a recalcitrant Congress than alternatives influenced its rise to the top of the foreign policy agenda.

There are other institutional effects on policymaking that had the potential to obfuscate the Pivot during the Obama years. Foremost among these, the U.S. Senate must ratify all international treaties. Formal and informal Senate rules make the ratification of any treaty less than certain, however, even when there is a supporting majority. Individual Senators, either by tradition or through personal power, can wield disproportionate influence on the policymaking process. Senator John McCain's (R-AZ) emphatic opposition to the Pivot has been a thorn in the Obama administration's side and has made it difficult for the Pentagon to secure funding for some Asia-Pacific initiatives.³⁶ Regardless of whether the government was divided or not, the House of Representatives' exclusive power to initiative appropriations legislation gives it a first-mover advantage in defense and foreign policy funding battles. Finally, as evidenced by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's (D-NV) refusal to hold a vote to give the White House fast track authority over

³⁵ Aaron Wildavsky, "The Two Presidencies," *Society* 35, no. 2 (January/February 1998), 23-31

³⁶ Josh Rogin, "Burns and McCain Square Off on Syria and the Asia Pivot," *Foreign Policy's The Cable (blog)* (December 8, 2012) accessed on March 14, 2014 at

http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/12/08/burns_and_mccain_square_off_on_syria_and_the_asia_pivot

TPP negotiations, the U.S. Congress had the potential to complicate track one negotiations with foreign governments.

Public opinion, the federal bureaucracy, and institutional constraints were but a few of the many complex ways that domestic politics hampered the Obama administration's Pivot. Others to consider include the impact of interest groups; the rise of the austerity agenda; the role of epistemic communities; and the influence of linked issues like the national debt, US policy towards MENA, unemployment, and climate change policy.

One downside of a domestic-political analysis like this is that it is potentially misleading. American domestic politics like an isolated ecosystem; actors and events beyond the water's edge shape what happens domestically. This paper focuses on the domestic sources of policymaking discussed above because they are most likely to be influential drivers of the Pivot, but we cannot conclude that they alone shape policy.

This brief introduction to the domestic side of policymaking provides a complicated view of the politics behind the Pivot. How could an administration push something through without solid support, especially when it was as substantial as the Pivot? More importantly, why would an administration push something so big with so much resistance? The answer might lie in the individual convictions of the president and his key advisors.

Elite-Driven Foreign Policy in the Era of Divided Politics

This short analysis of the Obama administration's decision to launch the Asia Pivot presents a mixed result. International factors, namely the rise of Chinese power in East Asia, enabled the Obama administration's attempt to strategically adjust US foreign policy. On the other hand, the domestic political context was so divided that it is difficult to claim that it helped or hindered the Pivot during Obama's two terms.

The election of Donald Trump clouds this picture further. Responding to his supporters and their Jacksonian view of international politics, President Trump withdrew the United States from the proposed TPP and announced his intention to confront China on a host of military, economic, and diplomatic initiatives. In a strange way, he is now accelerating the some parts of Pivot while stalling or intentionally suspending others. The brief story presented in this paper, as well as the recent actions of the Trump administration, lead one to believe that in an era of divided politics, presidential

leadership is the indispensable key to any foreign policy initiative. While not a new observation, it nonetheless provides guidance to future studies on this paper's specific topic.

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