

**State-Defense Cooperation and the Making of US Foreign Policy in East Asia in  
the First Clinton and Obama Administrations**

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A Thesis submitted to

The Faculty of  
The Elliott School of International Affairs  
of The George Washington University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

May 18, 2014

Thesis directed by

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*To my grandfather, who forged my will with both affection and prejudice,*

*and my mother, who gave me all,*

*with sincere appreciation.*

## Abstract of Thesis

### State-Defense Cooperation and the Making of US Foreign Policy in East Asia in the First Clinton and Obama Administrations

As questions about the future of the US “pivot,” or “rebalance,” to Asia increasingly abound as events in Europe and the Middle East unfold, the roles of the State Department and the Defense Department as the key actors in the implementation of the “rebalance” have received considerable attention. Disagreements exist, however, as to whether and to what extent the two agencies could continue to coordinate their actions in East Asia, and how that might affect the direction of US policy in the region in the coming years. This paper looks at the roles of and interaction between the State Department and the Pentagon in shaping US East Asia policy during the first Clinton and Obama administrations to further understanding of these two key players in US foreign policy making in the region.

One noteworthy observation about US policy making in these two periods is that with the increased involvement of other actors in the decision making process, the State Department and the DOD had to operate with much less leeway. Against this backdrop, however, the State Department and Pentagon could more often than not enhanced their respective roles and bring about major changes in US policy in East Asia when coming together. Moreover, State-Defense coalition, once formed, has often fostered an approach to East Asia that heralded broad engagement with the region but placed more emphasis on alliances and partnerships with nations that accepted American leadership. When US policy appeared to deviate from this geostrategic approach, as seen during the first Clinton administration, or to take on a different prescription of emphasis, as seen during the first Obama

administration, State-DOD acting in tandem would reverse the course. With strategic assessments and institutional incentives helping to foster their alignment, the State Department and DOD in the first Clinton and Obama administrations apparently contributed to ensuring a more coherent course of US policy in East Asia through both continuity and change.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Questions about the future of the US “Asia pivot”, or “rebalance”, have been floating since John Kerry expressed his skepticism to the endeavor at his Senate confirmation hearing, but a couple of months ago most observers would rather take a wait-and-see approach to assessing the new US secretary of state’s policy inclinations. As Kerry’s preoccupation with Middle Eastern events and his relative inattention to Asia becomes increasingly apparent as events unfold in the Middle East and elsewhere, many concerned about US interests in Asia have begun to turn their eyes to the Pentagon, which has avowed a commitment to continuing the “rebalance” despite budget austerity. While many have recognized that the implementation of the “pivot” now largely lies in the hands of those at the US Defense Department (DOD),<sup>1</sup> there have been different inferences about the implications of the State Department’s wavering enthusiasm for its own initiative. One commentator, for example, contends that diminished attention to Asia at Foggy Bottom would enable the Pentagon to overplay its hands in the region,<sup>2</sup> while another postulates that Kerry’s “obsession” with the Middle East would hinder US military leaders’ efforts to concentrate on Asia.<sup>3</sup>

Still others are less worried about whether the Pentagon could continue the “pivot” than they are about whether it should be main player executing the “pivot.” Some have claimed that US policy in Asia has for several decades been dominated by US defense interests,

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<sup>1</sup> Ely Ratner, “Has Foggy Bottom forgotten Asia,” *Foreign Policy*, July 2, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/02/john\\_kerry\\_asia\\_pivot\\_middle\\_east](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/02/john_kerry_asia_pivot_middle_east); Robert D. Kaplan, “Kerry’s Middle East obsession,” *Forbes*, September 25, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stratfor/2013/09/25/kerrys-middle-east-obsession/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ratner, “Has Foggy Bottom.”

<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, “Kerry’s Middle East.”

pointing to the maintenance of the US “hub-and-spoke” system of alliances – especially the US-Japan alliance – as the most vivid illustration of the Pentagon’s dominance in the making of US Asia policy.<sup>4</sup> US Asian alliances, so the argument goes, have been kept in place and have been championed as a defining feature of US engagement in Asia to help the US military to retain its regional bases, pay its soldiers and sell more weapons.<sup>5</sup>

These speculations and contentions raise an interesting question about State-Defense cooperation and the making of US policy in East Asia. How has State-Defense cooperation – or lack thereof – helped to shape US policy in the region? Many studies have taken an exogenous approach to explaining post-Cold War US policy towards East Asia, attributing perceived changes in US posture in East Asia to developments in the global and regional security environments and US perceptions of its power and status as a unitary actor in the international system.<sup>6</sup> There have been some attempts to shed lights into the interagency process in the making of US foreign policy, but little attention has been paid to reviewing the coordination – or lack thereof – between the State and Defense Departments as the

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Glain, “By choosing arms over diplomacy, America errs in Asia,” *The New York Times*, December 15, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/16/opinion/sunday/costly-military-expansion-in-asia.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/16/opinion/sunday/costly-military-expansion-in-asia.html?_r=0); Stephen Harner, “US-Japan-China relations: With the Pentagon making policy, Caroline Kennedy’s confirmation is irrelevant,” *Forbes*, September 16, 2013, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stephenharner/2013/09/16/u-s-japan-china-relations-and-caroline-kennedys-confirmation-with-dod-making-policy-the-u-s-ambassador-is-irrelevant/>.

<sup>5</sup> Harner, “US-Japan-China.”

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Dennis C. Blair and John T. Hanley Jr., “From wheels to webs: Reconstructing Asia-Pacific security arrangements,” *The Washington Quarterly* 24(1) (2000): 7-17; Joe R. Campbell, “US foreign policy towards Northeast Asia. *Perceptions* 17(4) (Winter 2012): 3-26; James Gannon, “Engaging in Asia: The evolving US approach to regional community building,” accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/PacificNation/Gannon.pdf>; Kai He, “The hegemon's choice between power and security: Explaining US policy toward Asia after the Cold War,” *Review of International Studies* 36, 1121-1143; Jae Jeok Park, “The US-led alliances in the Asia-Pacific: Hedge against potential threats or an undesirable multilateral security order?,” *Pacific Review*, 24(2) (May 2011): 137-158.

(presumably) two key actors in the making and implementation of post-Cold War US policy in East Asia.<sup>7</sup>

This paper looks at the roles of and interaction between the State Department and the Pentagon in defining US East Asia policy to further understanding of the domestic sources of US policy in this part of the world. Although a full account of State-Defense cooperation is desirable, such an account is beyond reach of this paper. Arguably, however, an examination of the development of US East Asia policy during the first Clinton and Obama administrations could provide a good snapshot of State-Defense cooperation as it plays into the internal dynamics of the making of US policy in East Asia, since those were the periods when the region received substantial attention and major policy adjustments were observed. How did State-Defense cooperation help to shape US policy in East Asia as seen during the first Clinton and Obama administrations? In seeking to answer this question, this study will take stock of the retreat on Clinton's aggressive trade-human rights agenda and the development of the "Asia rebalance" during the first Obama administration as it traces the progression of State-DOD cooperation and its effect on those policy changes.

One major caveat, however, should be noted. Since the State Department and the DOD during these two periods (as always) did not operate on their own accord but were just two actors among others in the US foreign policy decision making process, the study will have to take into account the roles and interactions of other players in the US national security

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Glain attempted to take stock of State-Defense relations in defining US foreign policy in the post-WWII world in his 2011 book "State vs. Defense: The battle to define America's empire," but he only touched slightly upon the making of policy in East Asia after the Cold War. See Stephen Glain, *State vs. Defense: The battle to define America's empire* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011).



scene. With American foreign policy making increasingly scattered, there have been limits to the importance of the respective roles of the State Department and the Pentagon and their cooperation in influencing US policy, as will be shown in the discussion below. Nevertheless, as it seeks to situate State-Defense cooperation during these two periods in the broader context of US policy making, the study will emphasize the convergence/divergence of the two departments' views and interests when such convergence/divergence were manifest and played into the making of US policy in East Asia.

## II. STATE-DEFENSE COOPERATION AS DRIVER OF CONTINUITY? STATE-DEFENSE COOPERATION DURING THE FIRST CLINTON ADMINISTRATION

### 1. Clinton's world and the setting of US East Asia policy at the outset

The world as the United States entered the post-Cold War era looked both steady and unsettled. The collapse of the Soviet Union had apparently vindicated the superiority of the US liberal democratic model as well as the political and economic values underpinning it. The decisive victory achieved by the US-led coalition in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the first major test of US resolve and capability to anchor the post-Cold War world, further reinforced confidence in US military supremacy and America's international leadership ability.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, while eliminating an existential threat long straining US nerves and resources, the end of the Cold War had also removed what had been a rallying

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<sup>8</sup> Robert G. Sutter, "The US Congress: Personal, partisan, political," in *Making China policy: Lessons from the Bush and Clinton administrations*, ed. Ramon H. Myers et al. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 84.

point for US policy at home and abroad and raised uncertainties about the desirable US posture in a new global juncture. Meanwhile, the demise of the bipolar system that had helped check virulent nationalism and bitter ethnic tensions around the world had arguably unleashed many new sources of insecurities. Such was the fluidity of the post-Cold War environment that gave rise to reminiscence of the “long peace” premised on Cold War antagonism and speculation of “the next pattern of conflict” with far-reaching implications for the Western liberal order Washington had shepherded.<sup>9</sup> A weakened economy, hastened into recession by the loss of business and consumer confidence during the Gulf crisis, had also bred in many Americans a sense of US decline and disorientation as the international milieu evolved.<sup>10</sup>

This curious mixture of triumphalism and declinism in American outlook proved to be a potent source of domestic vacillation ahead of the 1992 US presidential election. George H. W. Bush’s high approval ratings during the Gulf War, which peaked with the victory of the US-led coalition against Iraqi forces, apparently cemented public perception of the incumbent American president as “unbeatable” in the forthcoming presidential race and lent credence to the triumphalist narrative of American position in the new global order.<sup>11</sup>

The subsequent plummeting of the senior Bush’s approval ratings as US economic recovery

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<sup>9</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “Why we will soon miss the Cold War,” *The Atlantic* 266(2), August 1990, 35-42; Samuel P. Huntington, “The clash of civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72(3), Summer 1993, 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Leonard Silk, “Economic scene: The impact of the Gulf War,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 1991, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/22/business/economic-scene-the-impact-of-the-gulf-war.html>; Miller Center, University of Virginia, “American President: George H. W. Bush: Campaigns and elections,” accessed April 30, 2014, <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/essays/biography/3>; Norman J. Ornstein, “Foreign policy and the 1992 election,” *Foreign Affairs* 71(3), Summer 1992, 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Michael A. Genovese, *Encyclopedia of the American presidency* (revised edition) (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 560; Miller Center, “American President.”

appeared sluggish, however, seemed to reflect a shift in American public perception that was more in line with the declinist view of American power.<sup>12</sup>

Yet this simple description of American popular sentiments in the 1990s would overlook the more complex divarication of view that was to shape the debate on American foreign policy direction in the new era. Most triumphalists of American power saw (continued) active American leadership in world affairs a requisite for the maintenance of a global order favorable for US national interests. Convinced that the disintegration of the Soviet Union had created a global power vacuum not to be filled by any formidable force in the near to medium term, the triumphalists argued forcefully for the constant exercise of both US hard power and its soft power to entrench the very basis of those powers – the promotion of democracy and human rights. Among American declinists of the early 1990s, however, there was much less unanimity. The declinists often identified with the “America First” or “neo-isolationist” school considered American engagement in international activities a major cause of US overextension and hence decline; they therefore advocated a pullback in military spending and commitments overseas, as well as a withdrawal from the many security and economic institutions and arrangements that allegedly allowed other countries to free-ride on American efforts. Yet another group of what might be called the “cautious” or “status quo” declinists perceived sustained US engagement with traditional allies and partners to be a solution to manage the relative American decline as pressing domestic

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<sup>12</sup> Miller Center, “American President;” Ornstein, “Foreign policy;” Chih-Hann Chang, *Ethical foreign policy? US humanitarian intervention* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 53.

problems constrained US ability to attend to international affairs, much less to shape events overseas to US liking.<sup>13</sup>

Though sharing a rather pessimistic outlook of American providence with the “neo-isolationist declinists,” therefore, the “cautious declinists” were in more agreement with the triumphalists on the appropriate path to move their country forward. A winning foreign policy platform in such context thus ought to bend in the direction of activeness even as it was to acknowledge the limit of American power. Both the incumbent Bush and candidate Bill Clinton seemed to understand the challenge, and both would underscore engagement as the major foreign policy theme of their presidential campaign. Yet intriguingly but not quite surprisingly, the battle-hardened and foreign affairs-seasoned Bush that had been a prime source of American triumphalism appeared determined to stay on the side of the “cautious declinists” favoring continued US presence wherever deemed necessary and US cooperation with whoever willing to collaborate.<sup>14</sup> Though confident in “the triumph of freedom” and America’s “preeminent position of world leadership,” the Republican Party’s platform of 1992 proposed “a new strategy of collective engagement” and “a new agenda” for “leadership through partnership” to meet the challenges of the post-Cold War world. In essence, however, such new strategy affirmed continuity over change in US approach of nurturing allies and partners that helped grant victory to “the forces of freedom.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Robert G. Sutter, *US-Chinese relations: Perilous past, pragmatic present* (2nd edition) (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 100-101.

<sup>14</sup> Sutter, “The US Congress,” 83.

<sup>15</sup> See Republican Party Platform of 1992, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25847>.

Clinton, on the other hand, was inclined to experiment a more aggressive form of engagement that focused not on “securing” and “managing the peace” but on “restoring America’s economic greatness” and “advanc[ing] democracy’s triumph in the Cold War.” “Engagement for democracy” and a “renewed authority to use America’s trading leverage” were thus the foreign policy chants of the Democratic Party’s platform in 1992.<sup>16</sup> A foreign affairs novice, the Arkansas governor apparently was not to examine the substance and merits of the various divergent views on the desirable US foreign policy in the new era, but to look for the common denominators that could help him win the Oval Office.<sup>17</sup> In 1992, the biggest one of those was the concern for America’s economic wellbeing.<sup>18</sup> While rejecting the neo-isolationists’ call for disengagement and retreat, Clinton was ready to accept their interpretation of American relative decline that revolved around undue advantages given to other countries at the cost of American sacrifice in the existing global trading arrangements. In seeking to “put [America and its people] first,” the Democratic candidate was indicating more change rather than continuity in US engagement policy.<sup>19</sup>

This was to have significant implications for US policy in East Asia in particular. The senior Bush’s team did not shy away from elaborating a rather detailed plan for US policy in the region, the overarching theme of which was the maintenance of US military presence and relations with key allies and partners in the region including Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. On the other hand, the only thing the Democratic camp in the summer 1992

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<sup>16</sup> See Democratic Party Platform of 1992, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29610>.

<sup>17</sup> James Mann, *About face: A history of America’s curious relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 274-275.

<sup>18</sup> Ornstein, “Foreign policy,” 1-4.

<sup>19</sup> Democratic Party Platform of 1992; Pietro S. Nivola, “Commercializing foreign affairs? American trade policy after the Cold War,” in *US foreign policy after the Cold War*, ed. Randall B. Ripley and James M. Lindsay (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 250-251.

avowed to maintain in East Asia was a US troop presence in South Korea “as long as North Korea present[ed] a threat.” Japan was mentioned only to emphasize that the Democratic candidate was determined to “take back the advantage” hitherto ceded to the Asian ally in research, technology and economic growth overall.<sup>20</sup> Yet nowhere was the contradiction in the two camp’s rhetorical approaches with regard to East Asia as marked as when it came to China. While Bush and his supporters pledged to sustain a positive relationship with China as a way to prod the Asian giant into conducting itself in more conformity with the Western liberal standard, Clinton was apparently prepared to adopt hard measures to rush the Chinese to concede on political and economic liberalization. The Democratic candidate appeared bent on making China policy the hallmark of his departure from the conciliatory approach of “coddling dictators” of which Bush was accused.<sup>21</sup> As one of the earlier draft of US post-Cold War military strategy prepared by the Pentagon in 1992 reveals, the administration of George Bush was, in fact, focused more on preventing the rise of “potential competitors” in East Asia and elsewhere than on courting them.<sup>22</sup> Yet Bush’s experience in China had helped encourage the endorsement of a more nuanced approach to dealing with China that stressed continued dialogue as a way to monitor and check Chinese behavior. The logic of such an approach was apparently not appreciated by Clinton, who

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<sup>20</sup> *Democratic Party Platform of 1992*.

<sup>21</sup> David Martin Jones, Nicholas Khoo and M. L. R. Smith, *Asian security and the rise of China* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2013), 16.

<sup>22</sup>The Draft Defense Planning Guidance penned in the last year of the elder Bush’s administration under the direction of then Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz informs US military planning for the post-Cold War world to prepare for the prevention of the rise of “potential competitors” and to discourage advanced countries “from challenging our leadership.” Controversy erupting after the draft was leaked subsequently forced the Pentagon to settle with more diplomatic language. See Richard K. Betts, “US national security strategy: Lenses and landmarks,” November 2004, accessed April 30, 2014, <https://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/papers/betts.pdf>, 24.

was set on pursuing the policy lines of the Democratic leadership in Congress and challenging the Chinese leadership whom he had rarely met head-on.<sup>23</sup>

Thus if Clinton's campaign rhetoric was to foreshadow anything in his administration's East Asia policy, it was that Washington would adopt a decidedly more active posture towards both established partners and perceived competitors than had previously been the case. In the immediate post-Cold War atmosphere of fluid and uproarious debates about US national security and foreign policy, any such venture would apparently take a lot of the newly elected president's determination and commitment to follow through. George Bush, arguably one of the most experienced American foreign policy leaders, had a clear view of and strong commitment to what he saw was the right course with China. That the elder Bush's China policy was swamped with criticisms from various sides after the 1989 Tiananmen incident has been considered to illustrate the difficulty of charting a coherent foreign policy in a post-Cold War America deeply divided over its own comportment overseas.<sup>24</sup> To some extent, this might suggest that to embark on a new approach to China in particular and East Asia in general Clinton had to possess a vision and sense of purpose that was as sharp as Bush's, if not stronger, especially since Clinton had contributed to fanning much of the criticisms of Bush's policy in Asia. Yet the fact that Clinton had won the 1992 presidential election on an agenda focusing on domestic issues would offer two seemingly contradictory precautions. One of such was that Bush did not necessarily lose the election on the foreign policy front, and the modest percent of popular vote Clinton was able to marshal apparently indicated that the 42<sup>nd</sup> US president would have to work resolutely to

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<sup>23</sup> Mann, *About face*, 274.

<sup>24</sup> Sutter, "The US Congress," 81-82.

get more domestic buy-in for his new foreign policy approach. Alternatively, the outcome of the 1992 presidential election might suggest that foreign policy did not matter as much so long as the new American president could get the US house in order, in which case the new White House occupant ought to concentrate on domestic matters.<sup>25</sup>

Clinton apparently took it to be the second case. Soon after he assumed office, the new American president relegated foreign affairs to his subordinates. His interest in the formulation of US foreign policy only went as far as it concerned American economic interests, to which he established a National Economic Council (NEC) overseeing and coordinating the economic policy making process and broadened the National Security Council (NSC) membership to include the secretary of the Treasury, the special assistant to the president for economic policy (the national economic adviser, NEA), the White House chief of staff, the US ambassador to the United Nations, the national security advisor (NSA) and his deputy, and the vice president's national security advisor.<sup>26</sup> Other than economics, Clinton displayed no enthusiasm for foreign policy of any kind.<sup>27</sup> Whether his inattention to foreign policy issues resulted from a conviction that security should play second fiddle to economic goals as America faced no overriding threats in the post-Cold War world or it was due to his lack of confidence in delving into an area in which he had limited experience was unclear. In any case, Clinton was set to carry out his campaign pledge of focusing "like a

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<sup>25</sup> Orstein, "Foreign policy," 9-10; Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "The Clinton years: The problem of coherence," in *Making China policy: Lessons from the Bush and Clinton administrations*, ed. Ramon H. Myers et al. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 48.

<sup>26</sup> David Auerswald, "The evolution of the NSC process," in *The national security enterprise: Navigating the labyrinth*, ed. Roger Z. George and Harvey Rishikof (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 43-44.

<sup>27</sup> Tucker, "The Clinton years," 45-46, 69-70; Mann, *About face*, 275-276; James M. Lindsay, "The State Department complex after the Cold War," in *US foreign policy after the Cold War*, ed. Randall B. Ripley and James M. Lindsay (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 76.



laser beam” on internal politics and was willing to rely on his knowledgeable cabinet members when it came to foreign policy making.<sup>28</sup>

These predilections would beleaguer the Clinton foreign policy approach with two big contradictions. First, Clinton wanted to pursue a stronger and more active US posture overseas, but he was content with a weak control of the mechanism that was supposed to carry it out. Second, the new American president was attentive to domestic politics and believed that there was a political consequence at home for any US move abroad, yet he was reluctant to recognize the nasty interagency politics that would be playing out within his foreign policy team and inclined to accommodate the bureaucracy instead. The root of such contradictions was manifold. It might have lain in Clinton’s inherent tendency to shore up his credibility by relying on established authority, a tendency he had displayed during the presidential race by aligning himself with the view of the leadership in the Senate and which he continued into office by deferring to veteran foreign policy officials in his cabinet on important foreign policy issues.<sup>29</sup> It obviously stemmed in no small part from the fact that his preoccupation with domestic issues dictated a willful negligence to either tough foreign policy choices or troublesome bureaucratic disputes.<sup>30</sup> More importantly, however, it might have arisen out of Clinton’s desire to avert the kind of antagonism and rivalry that had often

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<sup>28</sup> Zaki Laïdi, *Limited achievements: Obama’s foreign policy*, trans. Carolyn Avery (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 5; Robert L. Suettinger, “US “management” of Taiwan Strait “crises”,” in *Managing Sino-American crises: Case studies and analysis*, ed. Michael D. Swaine et al. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), 279-280; Peter W. Rodman, *Presidential command: Power, leadership, and the making of foreign policy from Richard Nixon and George W. Bush* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 203-204; Joyce P. Kaufman, *A concise history of US foreign policy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 125.

<sup>29</sup> Mann, *About face*, 274-276.

<sup>30</sup> Rodman, *Presidential command*, 203-204; Suettinger, “US “management”,” 279-280.

characterized State Department-NSC relations, especially during the Carter years, by giving more recognition to the institutional roles of the secretaries of state and defense.<sup>31</sup>

Clinton's intention to keep a balance between the White House and the State Department appeared genuine. At first Clinton had preferred to choose Samuel Berger, his closest foreign policy aide, to be his national security advisor. Heeding Berger's advice, however, he appointed Anthony Lake to the post. The decision was surprising to many, even though Lake had served as one of Clinton's chief foreign policy advisers during the 1992 election campaign, since he was supposedly not as close to the new president as Berger, who had known Clinton since 1972.<sup>32</sup> The choice of Lake, a more experienced foreign affairs pundit in Berger's words, apparently gave the White House advisory system more credentials. It might also have been intended to signal that the new president valued his national security staff's expertise and readiness to work as a team in implementing his broad foreign policy guidelines more than he cherished a White House-centered model of national security system formed on personal long-term relationships.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Max Boot, "Clinton's Carter-look foreign policy team may mix old idealism, new pragmatism," *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 29, 1992, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1992/12/29/29013.html>; John Dumbrell, *Clinton's foreign policy: Between the Bushes, 1992-2000* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 15, 19; Maurizio Massari, "US foreign policy decision-making during the Clinton administration," *The International Spectator* Vol. XXXV, No. 4, October-December 2000, 96-97.

<sup>32</sup> Auerswald, "The evolution," 43-44.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, "The transition: Clinton's new foreign policy thinkers: Like-minded ex-Carter teammates," *The New York Times*, December 23, 1992, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/23/world/transition-clinton-s-new-foreign-policy-thinkers-like-minded-ex-carter-teammates.html>; Steven A. Holmes, "Choice of national security adviser has a long-awaited chance to lead," *The New York Times*, January 3, 1993, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/03/us/choice-for-national-security-adviser-has-a-long-awaited-chance-to-lead.html>; James P. Pfiffner, *The modern presidency* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 114; Jerel A. Rosati and James M. Scott, *The politics of United States foreign policy* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010), 119.

Intriguingly, Lake held views that were both conflicting and identical to those of Clinton. Unlike Berger, who shared the president's strong sensitivity to the foreign policy's domestic implications, Lake deemed it desirable that politics be left out of national security policy making.<sup>34</sup> Yet Lake was also in agreement with Clinton that the national security adviser should play the role of an honest broker as Scowcroft did during the Bush administration. Having witnessed firsthand the bitter struggle for influence between Cyrus Vance and Zbigniew Brzezinski when he was Vance's Director of Policy Planning in the 1970s, Lake opted for a low public profile as he became Clinton's national security adviser and exhibited due respect to Warren Christopher, whom Clinton had chosen to be his secretary of state. The harmony Lake managed to have with Christopher would help create in the early years of the Clinton presidency a balanced relationship between the White House and the State Department befitting the president's desire for collegiality within his foreign policy team.<sup>35</sup>

Yet the rapport developed between Lake and Christopher also turned on another dynamic, which was seemingly reflected in the former's managerial style at the NSC. Although Lake was seen as having no obvious ideological axes to grind, he was not without any political convictions. The national security advisor had been a strong proponent of the moral high ground in US foreign policy, something Christopher and many of his staff at the State Department also relished. Thus there was inherently a policy advocate in Lake even as he

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<sup>34</sup> Massari, "US foreign policy," 95-97; Auerswald, "The evolution," 43.

<sup>35</sup> Auerswald, "The evolution," 43-44; Pfiffner, *The modern presidency*, 114; Rosati and Scott, *The politics*, 119; Bradley H. Patterson Jr., *The White House staff: Inside the West Wing and beyond* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2000), 74; David Mitchell, *Making foreign policy: presidential management and the decision-making process* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 143-144.

was determined to act as a neutral broker of the American foreign policy process.<sup>36</sup> Political scientists have argued that a White House advisory system organized along functional lines will serve the president better than one structured along specialty lines because specialists are more likely to seek for consensus in policy development than generalists who are less conflict-averse and less reluctant to raise contrasting views.<sup>37</sup> Insofar as senior NSC members were more often assigned to chair interdepartmental working groups dealing with foreign policy and national security issues than departmental officers, the Clinton White House system seemed to mirror a function-based system.<sup>38</sup> Lake, however, could not be said to have started leading the NSC as a true generalist, since he and his deputy Sandy Berger initially opted to preside over a consensual policy-making process that aimed at presenting unified positions to the president. Although such an approach would change in later years, Lake and Berger was often criticized for a consensus-driven advisory process that supposedly slowed policy development.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Although he saw his role to be an honest broker of the foreign policy process, Lake also considered it important to present the president with his own recommendations because “if you don’t have views, you shouldn’t be doing the job.” Mitchell, *Making foreign policy*, 143; Auerswald, “The evolution,” 43; Tucker, “The Clinton years,” 47.

<sup>37</sup> James P. Pfiffner, “Presidential decision making: Rationality, advisory system, and personality,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35(2), June 2005, 224.

<sup>38</sup> As provided in the Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 2, Organization of the National Security Council, issued on January 20, 1993, the chairmanship of those interdepartmental working groups (IWGs) – the lowest significant level of the interagency process in the Clinton administration to review and address national security issues before those issues were brought to the Deputies Committee and Principals Committee – could go to representatives of the relevant departments, the NEC or the NSC staff. Bradley H. Patterson Jr., however, contended that most often an NSC senior director was assigned to chair those IWGs rather than a departmental officer. Patterson, *The White House staff*, 52; Richard A. Best Jr., “The National Security Council: An organizational assessment,” CRS Report for Congress, December 28, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL30840.pdf>, 21; John P. Burke, *Honest broker? The national security advisor and presidential decision making* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 339.

<sup>39</sup> Rosati and Scott, *The politics*, 119; Burke, *Honest broker*, 356.

The relationship between the White House and Pentagon was more fluid. Clinton's appointment of Les Aspin, a former opponent of the Vietnam War and ex-chair of the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, as secretary of defense was considered deeply affected by the partisan politics of the 1990s.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, Aspin shared with Clinton a disinclination to focus on military threats and to emphasize the military's role in the post-Cold War world, which allegedly helped him earn his nomination as Clinton's defense chief. In 1993, Aspin argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union called into question the Pentagon's long-standing reason to exist and demanded a revision of US force structure and defense budget.<sup>41</sup> This put him on the same page with Clinton but at odds with the US armed forces. It has been argued that two decades after Vietnam, the Pentagon had cast off much of the can-do attitude that was hitherto its institutional trait and become more cautious about military involvements because almost all top positions in the US military were then occupied by people who had served directly in Vietnam and had continued to ruminate over the US failure in Indochina in the 1970s.<sup>42</sup> While memory of Vietnam might still linger, however, American success against Saddam Hussein in 1991 apparently changed the mood inside the Pentagon a lot. If anything, the US armed services had by the early 1990s grown so resistant to reform and redefining their role in a new security era.<sup>43</sup> The uneasy relationship that existed between Aspin and the US armed forces, as well as Aspin's own managerial ineptitude, would lead to his early departure from the Pentagon in 1994. Aspin's replacement, William Perry, was respected for his experience

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<sup>40</sup> Dumbrell, *Clinton's foreign policy*, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Paul N. Stockton, "When the bear leaves the woods: Department of Defense reorganization in the post-Cold War era," in *US foreign policy after the Cold War*, ed. Randall B. Ripley and James M. Lindsay (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 108-109.

<sup>42</sup> David Halberstam, *War in a time of peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 37.

<sup>43</sup> Stockton, "When the bear," 109.

working under Secretary of Defense Harold Brown under Jimmy Carter and his expertise in high-tech military procurement.<sup>44</sup> Yet as Clinton would find out, Perry had little empathy for the kind of preoccupation Clinton had when it came to foreign policy.

All of this gave mixed indicators of the level of influence the State Department and Pentagon was to wield over US foreign policy under Clinton. On the one hand, Clinton's intent to refocus US foreign policy on an economic agenda apparently undercut the State Department and DOD's efforts to influence US foreign policy making. On the other hand, the president's inattention to foreign policy and his preference for collegiality also provided more room for the departments and bureaucracies to operate and get their voice heard. Support from Foggy Bottom and the Pentagon was even more critical given that Clinton was to embark on a revisionist foreign policy that would raise eyebrows at home and abroad. Whether the State Department and the DOD would choose to support his enterprise was another matter.

## **2. The impulse for change**

As pundits often predicted at the end of the Cold War that the Asia-Pacific would replace Europe to become America's new center of gravity, many were imagining a new era of heightened American cooperation with countries in the region, of reaping the economic opportunities presented by a more firmly secured international peace, rather than increased tensions. Some were thus hoping in late 1992 that the new winner of the presidential elections would abandon his campaign position on China and allow American

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 119; Dumbrell, *Clinton's foreign policy*, 18; Steve Chapman, "Who should bear the blame for 'Madeleine's war'?", *The Chicago Tribune*, May 13, 1999, accessed March 30, 2014, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1999-05-13/news/9905130102\\_1\\_madeleine-albright-foreign-policy-kosovo](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1999-05-13/news/9905130102_1_madeleine-albright-foreign-policy-kosovo).

companies to continue their quest for the emerging Asian market.<sup>45</sup> In East Asia, the mood was different, but the conclusion was relatively the same: Seeing a strong neo-isolationist impulse capturing some sections of the US political elite, many watchful Asian governments was anxious about a possible US withdrawal from the region.<sup>46</sup> It was of great irony that they were not alone in thinking they were about to be left on their own: At the same time the Japanese were worrying that post-Cold War America would set all its eyes on Europe, many Europeans were tossing in their beds anticipating that the US was going to avert its attention from Europe to Asia.<sup>47</sup>

In any case, many in America and East Asia apparently shared a perception that Washington was not likely to pursue a revisionist agenda in the region. After all, the president-elect seemed fixated on no strategic vision of US foreign policy per se.<sup>48</sup> He apparently did not have an elaborate plan for settling relations with the Chinese except his politics-driven campaign rhetoric.<sup>49</sup> In fact, he was not even prepared to deal with China as a foreign policy priority, not to mention East Asia as a whole. At his Little Rocks “study camp” before taking the oath of office, he was briefed on Russia, Somalia, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Haiti, Lebanon, Israel and the world trade talks. China did not get to the list of top issues to which his foreign affairs gurus and intelligence experts thought the president-elect should attend.<sup>50</sup> Many of

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<sup>45</sup> Jöhn Dosch, “The United States in the Asia-Pacific,” in *The new global politics of the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Michael K. Connors, Remy Davison and Jöhn Dosch (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 17, 21.

<sup>46</sup> Dosch, “The United States,” 20; Dumbrell, *Clinton’s foreign policy*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Mastanduno, “The United States: Regional strategies and global commitments,” in *Security politics in the Asia-Pacific: A regional-global nexus?*, ed. William T. Tow (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 79.

<sup>48</sup> Keith Philip Lapor, “Introduction,” in *After the Cold War: Essays on the emerging world order*, ed. Keith Philip Lapor (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), xxx.

<sup>49</sup> Tucker, “The Clinton years,” 45.

<sup>50</sup> Mann, *About face*, 275.

the growing East Asian economies might have been mentioned when it came to the world trade topic, yet it is doubtful if they had commanded Clinton's attention as much as the members of NAFTA. If anything, that America had come out of the Cold War not as a strong power as it used to be was a reality that might as well signal that Washington might not be able to contemplate assertiveness in East Asia and elsewhere even if it wanted to. Clinton did, indeed, sound a restrained tone in December 1992: Responding to those who were either eager or anxious about his foreign policy agenda, he assured American allies and partners that "even as America's administrations change, America's fundamental interests do not" and hinted that radical change was not forthcoming in his foreign policy as his foreign policy team "underst[ood ]the need to pursue stability even as [it] pursue[d] new growth."<sup>51</sup>

Within the next few months, however, Clinton's action would indicate a much different story. For one thing, Clinton apparently embraced a firm view of American strength, even as it was a prevalent sense of American decline that got him elected. The end of the Cold War had removed American need for the counterweight to Soviet power China once offered.<sup>52</sup> Besides, as Clinton often pointed out during the presidential transition and well into his first year in the White House, the huge trade surplus that China had been able to claim with the US each year was a reminder that the Asian giant was economically more dependent on America than the vice versa.<sup>53</sup> In the case of Japan, whose alliance with the US had long

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<sup>51</sup> Cathleen Decker, "Clinton calls for continuity until January, reassures allies," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1992, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-11-05/news/mn-1578\\_1\\_clinton-aides](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-11-05/news/mn-1578_1_clinton-aides).

<sup>52</sup> Tucker, "The Clinton years," 50; T. G. Fraser and Donette Murray, *America and the world since 1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 273.

<sup>53</sup> Mann, *About face*, 276.



constituted the linchpin of American strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific, the situation seemed more or less the same: With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the impetus for America to continue to incur considerable economic loss to prop up an ally that could help check Soviet expansion in the Far Eastern front no longer seemed justified.<sup>54</sup> Early signs that the US-Japan alliance relationship was coming under increasing strain had appeared since the Soviet Union was beginning to disintegrate: Public polls in 1989 revealed that more Americans considered Japanese economic power a bigger threat than Soviet military power. For all talks of American decline, moreover, by the time Clinton came to office it had become clear that the bigger economic trouble was on Japan, not the US.<sup>55</sup> Thus despite speculation that the twin forces of guaranteed security primacy and imperiled economic primacy were the drivers of Clinton's revisionist agenda, it was more likely the case that the new US president was motivated by a confidence in American relative power in both economic and security terms as he reconsidered US posture in East Asia in the following months. Indeed, such was Clinton's confidence in American ability to call the tune of global politics and business that he did not waver, when approached by a businesswoman trying to convince the president-elect not to execute his campaign plan of imposing conditions on China's most-favored-nations benefits, in his belief that Washington could apply pressure to get Chinese concessions on both economic and political fronts.<sup>56</sup>

It was in this context that the Department of State began to exert its influence over US East Asia policy. In the early days of the Clinton administration, the driving force for change in

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Yahuda, *The international politics of the Asia-Pacific* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 246.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>56</sup> Mann, *About face*, 275-276.

US approach to East Asia to a more ardent tone of assertiveness came from two key individuals at Foggy Bottom: Warren Christopher and Winston Lord. Christopher, who also worked in the State Department as deputy secretary during the Carter years, had apparently collected from his involvement in the establishment of diplomatic relations with China in the 1970s a fair level of understanding of the Chinese system as well as searing experience of the State Department's limited success in shaping US approach to dealing with that system. Often perceived as lacking direction, Christopher nevertheless took the highest post at the State Department in 1993 with a strong preference for the cause of human rights and democracy. In this regard, he found robust support from Winston Lord, his assistant secretary for East Asia and the Pacific.<sup>57</sup>

Like Lake and Christopher, Lord was no stranger to China. Indeed, he was perhaps the most informed on China among the trio, with a record of experience dating back to the early 1970s when, as a special assistant to Henry Kissinger, he played an important role in propelling the historic American opening to China. Lord's profile as an experienced hand in dealing with the Asian country was further bolstered in the late 1980s when he served as ambassador to China for the Reagan and (briefly) Bush administrations. Yet what brought Lord first to the Clinton presidential campaign and later to the State Department in 1993 was perhaps not his China expertise per se, much less his affiliation with previous Republican administrations. That Lord was an established name in the American foreign policy elite might have endeared him to Clinton, but more telling was the fact that Lord had since 1990 been a fervent critic of the Bush administration's allegedly conciliatory approach to China and had advocated for the idea of using MFN benefits to discipline China on human

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<sup>57</sup> Suettinger, US "management", 280-281; Halberstam, *War in*, 174.

rights practice.<sup>58</sup> Lord was apparently shocked at the unfolding of the Tiananmen incident in the summer of 1989, shortly after he left China. Perhaps the former US ambassador to China was still disturbed by the unfair blame he incurred for the embarrassment of the Fang Lizhi affair during Bush's visit to Beijing in February 1989.<sup>59</sup> Whether his renunciation of the Reagan-Bush stand on China was a result of moral conviction or personal anguish or both, by the time he joined the Clinton foreign policy team Lord had professed a strong commitment to the promotion of human rights that dovetailed with Lake's and Christopher's preference.<sup>60</sup> Thus the appointment of Lord to the job of assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, the official tasked for daily management of US policy toward China, was a harbinger of the sweeping change that was to come.

The dynamics at the Pentagon were apparently very much different. Although Aspin had no particular interest in or expertise on China, Deputy Defense Secretary William Perry and Assistant Secretary of Defense Charles Freeman had been strong proponents of increased cooperation between the US and China. Perry, who would replace Aspin to become secretary of defense in February 1994, had been involved in the establishment of diplomatic relations with China under Carter, while Freeman was the chief interpreter accompanying Nixon during his historic trip to China in 1972. Both men had ever since maintained ties in Beijing and a special interest in seeing continuity in US military relationship as well as overall rapport with China.<sup>61</sup> So long as US security interests continued – presumably – to

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 281; Mann, *About face*, 277.

<sup>59</sup> Michael L. Evans, "The US "Tiananmen papers:" New documents reveal US perceptions of 1989 Chinese political crisis," June 4, 2001, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB47/>.

<sup>60</sup> Tucker, "The Clinton years," 47.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 50; Mann, *About face*, 288.

dictate greater collaboration with the People's Republic, the DOD was not to succumb to either the economic or moral rationale of the get-tough-with-China rhetoric that pervaded the White House and State Department.<sup>62</sup> Nor was the Pentagon ready to let commercial impulses complicate the US security relationship with Japan. US defense planners argued that the shift of global power toward Asia meant that Japan's strategic value was increasing, not decreasing.<sup>63</sup> Extraregional actors such as the European Union, it has been argued, might also have to balance the pursuit of economic opportunities and the promotion of human rights when reaching out to China, but in their maneuvering in Asia they have not been bound by strategic responsibilities to ensure regional security. The US, on the other hand, has to be watchful of the balance to be drawn in its relations with China and Japan lest perceived inclination to one side produces negative implications for its dealing with the other.<sup>64</sup> This consideration seemed to underlay Perry's view of US role in East Asia as he endeavored to build positive relations with both China and Japan.<sup>65</sup>

The State Department, however, started rolling up its sleeve for the makings of change early. In February 1993, Clinton set out his agenda for US-China relations, which came down to utilizing MFN status as a tool to exhort China on human rights and democratization. Shortly after his confirmation hearing, Lord began to led an administration effort to persuade members of Congress to drop a new MFN legislation on China and support an

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<sup>62</sup> Tucker, "The Clinton years," 50; Mann, *About face*, 288-289, 331-332.

<sup>63</sup> Renato Cruz de Castro, "Whither geoeconomics? Bureaucratic inertia in US post-Cold War foreign policy toward East Asia," *Asian Affairs* 26(4) (Winter 2000): 214.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Yahuda, "The European Union: A separate voice," in *Making China policy: Lessons from the Bush and Clinton administrations*, ed. Ramon H. Myers et al. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 232.

<sup>65</sup> Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "William J. Perry," accessed April 30, 2014, <http://history.defense.gov/perry.shtml>.

executive order containing similar, if not laxer, conditions on the renewal of China's MFN. The task was not easy, but it was achievable. Since 1979 after Deng Xiaoping's crackdown on the Democracy Wall movement in China, Congress had on several occasions registered its displeasure with China's human rights record by seeking to impose restrictions on the Asian country's trade benefits. Those Congressional attempts, however, were repeatedly vetoed by the executive branch.<sup>66</sup> Thus the difficult part of Lord's assignment was to persuade members of Congress to pass the torch to the White House and come to an agreed stand on China's trade benefits that would lend credence to the administration's policy agenda. With both the House and Senate still controlled by Democrats in the 1992 elections, that nonetheless was not infeasible, since what the administration was proposing did not go against the opinion of the majority in Congress. Contrary to some conservative Republicans who had pushed for a harsher measure of withdrawing trade benefits to China altogether, most Democrats in Congress favored putting conditions on China's MFN status rather than the revocation of it.<sup>67</sup>

The job for Lord and his subordinates, therefore, would boil down to getting Congress on board with an administration initiative that was largely congruent with the preference of the leaders on the Hill, which definitely was more doable than preventing an action the legislative branch was set to pursue. When Democrats held both houses of Congress in the 1970s during the Carter presidency, as historian and White House insider Scott Kaufman contends, Carter might get much of what he wanted endorsed if he was prepared to play the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 48; Yahuda, *The international politics*, 249-250.

<sup>67</sup> Mann, *About face*, 278.

game of give-and-take with Congress.<sup>68</sup> The failure of many of Carter's initiatives was attributable to his refusal to engage in a give and take with Congress, and Clinton was apparently determined not to commit such a blunder.<sup>69</sup> In April and May, Lord and his team convened several rounds of talks with George Mitchell and Nancy Pelosi, the Senate majority leader and House representative who had sponsored MFN legislation in the previous years. The negotiations resulted in a major success for the State Department and Lake, who followed the discussions between Lord and Mitchell closely. Not only did the two Congressional members agree to step aside and entrust the White House to hold China accountable to its human rights conduct, but they also accepted a softer line on the MFN linkage that Clinton administration officials deemed reasonable to entice Chinese acquiescence to American demands.<sup>70</sup> Beijing, read the proposed executive order, would only be required to make demonstrable progress on human rights by, inter alia, "releasing and providing an *acceptable* accounting" for Chinese political dissidents imprisoned for their participation in the Democracy Wall and Tiananmen Square movements. China would not be obliged to free *all* political prisoners as would have been required in the congressional legislation. Neither would it need to show improvements on trade and arms proliferation as several members of Congress had theretofore insisted. Although the executive order did assign the secretary of state and "other appropriate officials" to "ensure that China abides by its commitments to follow fair, nondiscriminatory trade practices" and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and other armaments, such observances were not

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<sup>68</sup> Scott Kaufman, *Plans unraveled: The foreign policy of the Carter administration* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 16.

<sup>69</sup> Miller Center, University of Virginia, "Jimmy Carter," accessed April 30, 2014, <http://millercenter.org/president/carter/essays/biography/print>.

<sup>70</sup> Tucker, "The Clinton years," 48; Mann, *About face*, 279-281.

listed as a factor determining whether China would have made “overall, significant progress” that would allow it to gain greater access to the US market.<sup>71</sup>

When Clinton signed his executive order on MFN conditionality on May 28, 1993, critics were quick to excoriate it as being too soft to converge with the rhetoric Clinton had used on the campaign trail.<sup>72</sup> Years later an informed journalist would also point out that Clinton’s MFN order was doomed on the outset because the manner in which it was produced was problematic: The administration, so the argument goes, was focused on “making peace with Congress” rather than on enlisting broader public support, especially from the American business circle, for what Clinton was set on pursuing.<sup>73</sup> Given the extent of compromise Lord and his colleagues were able to extract from Mitchell and Pelosi, it was more likely that the White House and State Department had striven to take the lead on China policy and scored a victory over congressional influence rather than to make peace with the legislative branch. The administration did seem, however, to try to make peace with Congress in one case, and such an attempt would appear to contribute to a further deviation from the established US position on a regional hotspot: that which concerned Taiwan.

Clinton’s frequent visit to Taiwan and the business ties he developed on the island when an Arkansas governor left the new president with pleasant memories of the Republic of China

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<sup>71</sup> Mann, *About face*, 280. Full text of Clinton’s 1993 executive order on China’s MFN status is available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=61546>.

<sup>72</sup> Mann, *About face*, 282.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

(ROC).<sup>74</sup> Yet the Taiwan policy review that the administration initiated in its early days in office was often seen as a response to increasing Senate pressure to enhance the American relationship with the island. Growing strong as America's sixth-largest trading partner and soaking up twice as much American exports than China did in 1993, Taiwan's promise as a business partner seemed not to be lying in the future like China's but was glittering day by day.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, with the first open elections of the Legislative Yuan, the unicameral legislature of the ROC, held on the island in December 1992, Taiwan was proving to be a thriving democracy deserving to be lauded and supported.<sup>76</sup> As the State Department started to conduct a comprehensive reappraisal of US policy toward the island in early 1993, one of the objectives of the Clinton administration was apparently to mollify Congress to get more breathing room in dealing with China.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, for all his assertions to part ways with realpolitik, Lord did not discard altogether his Kissinger-era pragmatism when it came to China: In his confirmation hearing, the assistant secretary of state apparently hinted at the possibility of a trade-off with China whereby Beijing could be assured of US observance of its "one China" principle if it could satisfy US demand on human rights.<sup>78</sup> In any event, the policy review quickly generated speculation that Washington was about to upgrade relations between the US and Taiwan, which apparently set America on an even

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 274; Suettinger, "US "management"," 280.

<sup>75</sup> James C. P. Chang, "US policy toward Taiwan," June 2001, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://programs.wcfia.harvard.edu/fellows/files/chang.pdf>, 8.

<sup>76</sup> International Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Taiwan (ICFHRTW), "Change of guard at the White House: The disappointing Clinton years," *Taiwan Communiqué* No. 94, December 2000, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.taiwandc.org/twcom/94-no3.htm>.

<sup>77</sup> Stephen M. Goldstein and Randall Schiver, "An uncertain relationship: The United States, Taiwan and the Taiwan Relations Act," in *Taiwan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: A retrospective view*, ed. Richard Louis Edmonds and Stephen M. Goldstein (New York: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001), 156.

<sup>78</sup> Mann, *About face*, 277-278.



more divergent course in its policy toward China.<sup>79</sup>

China, however, was not the only one to feel the heat of a more assertive US attitude in East Asia. Whilst taking the lead in reorienting US China policy, Christopher and Lord also threw support to an aggressive trade promotion agenda, championed by the White House and the Department of Commerce (DOC), to redress the trade imbalance supposedly caused by unfair trade practices US allies and major trading partners in the region had pursued in its economic relations with America. Starting in January 1993, the Clinton administration had begun floating ideas of trade expansion, voluntary export restraints by US Asian trading partners, sector-by-sector trade arrangements attached with concrete quantitative indicators and threats of sanctions against countries that did not meet Washington's market-opening demands. In the following months, an alliance seemed to have emerged between the State Department and Clinton's new economic team to implement this agenda.<sup>80</sup> Before Lord and his colleagues embarked on negotiations with Congress on Clinton's MFN order, Robert Rubin, the chairman of Clinton's National Economic Council, had contacted Mitchell and Pelosi to discourage the Senate's majority leader and House representative from wheeling a separate MFN legislation process.<sup>81</sup> With loosened conditions for China's MFN renewal than what would supposedly have been contained in the US Congress's MFN legislation, the MFN order that Lord negotiated was apparently worthy of support from avid trade promoters in and out of the administration, at least initially. In return, Christopher and Lord would line up behind the administration's tough trade policy toward Japan and its various attempts to pry open other regional economies for

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<sup>79</sup> ICFHRTW, "Change of guard."

<sup>80</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 203-204.

<sup>81</sup> Mann, *About face*, 279.

US goods and services.<sup>82</sup>

As US trade deficit with Japan swelled to approximately \$60 billion in 1993 – the largest bilateral deficit the US had thus far had with any country – Japan became the main target of the Clinton administration’s trade expansion campaign.<sup>83</sup> During Japanese prime minister Kiichi Miyazawa’s visit to Washington in April 1993, Clinton made explicit the new US government’s intention to put trade and economics at the center of US partnership with its long-time ally.<sup>84</sup> Earlier in January, Christopher had given the Japanese a glimpse of what was to come in the following months when he asserted during his confirmation hearing that "economic competition is eclipsing ideological rivalry" after the Cold War and pointed to Japan, China and South Korea as countries that had put up measures inimical to trade.<sup>85</sup> Confirming Christopher’s statement that the administration’s priority was market opening in East Asia, the Commerce Department led efforts to score economic concessions from Japan: better access for US vehicle manufacturers, as well as medical equipment and insurance providers, apples producers, and glass and cellular phones manufacturers in the Japanese market, increased market shares for US-made auto parts in Japan, as well as Tokyo’s agreement to allow non-Japanese firms to participate in the bidding process for Japanese government procurement in telecommunications.<sup>86</sup> As Japan borne the brunt of US trade expansion campaign, other countries also shared the sting. While the DOC plunged

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<sup>82</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 205; Laïdi, *Limited achievements*, 6.

<sup>83</sup> US International Trade Commission, "US trade shifts in selected industry: Merchandise, 1994 Annual report," September 1995, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.usitc.gov/publications/docs/pubs/332/PUB2924A.PDF>, 2-23.

<sup>84</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 213.

<sup>85</sup> Susumu Awanohara, "Reorientation process: New US secretary of state outlines Asia policy," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 156 (4), January 28, 1993, Proquest.

<sup>86</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 204.

itself into incessant talks with Tokyo, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) undertook to raise the highly contentious issue of intellectual property rights with China, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and stood for US business in accusing South Korea of imposing unfair restrictions on agricultural imports. Whilst the DOC and USTR were riding roughshod over their counterparts in the region, Lord lent credence to their efforts by reaffirming, in his March 1993 speech to Congress, that “economics is increasingly supplanting military considerations on American foreign policy agenda.”<sup>87</sup>

All the while the State Department was playing an active role in shaping a tougher US posture in East Asia, the Pentagon was growing increasingly uneasy. In April 1992, the Safeguards Agreement signed between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), which commits the latter to undertaking all nuclear safeguards measures required by the IAEA including full reporting of its nuclear activities to ensure such activities are peaceful and compliant with the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), came into force. Initial IAEA inspection in North Korea commenced the following month, however, revealed that North Korea was storing more plutonium than declared in its report to the IAEA. Subsequent IAEA request for further inspections in early 1993 met with refusal from the DPRK and on March 12, 1993, North Korea announced its decision to withdraw from the NPT.<sup>88</sup> A crisis was thus looming large on the Korean peninsula, as North Korea’s withdrawal from the NPT would not only

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>88</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency, “Fact sheet on DPRK nuclear safeguard,” accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iaeadprk/fact\\_sheet\\_may2003.shtml](http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iaeadprk/fact_sheet_may2003.shtml). The full text of the Agreement of 30 January 1992 between the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the Application of Safeguards in Connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons is available at <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infcircs/Others/inf403.shtml>.

undermine the credibility of the NPT regime but also render inoperative a lever on which the international community had relied to prevent North Korea from going nuclear.<sup>89</sup> From the Pentagon perspective, these developments rang high alarm: If left to fester, war on the Korean peninsula could become unavoidable and American lives would be risked unnecessarily.<sup>90</sup>

Pentagon officials, while prepared to consider war, were tempted to avoid taking military actions as long as possible and exhaust diplomatic means before resorting to force. The Defense Department was thus keen on calling the help from China, North Korea's only de facto ally, to work out a diplomatic solution to the issue. When he was called up to a meeting in the White House Situation Room as Pyongyang began to stir trouble in East Asia, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin tabled a proposal to solicit China's cooperation on the Korean peninsula. As the only country having influence with the DPRK, it was argued, China could act as an intermediary dissuading the Kim regime from taking reckless actions that could invite war. Tony Lake, however, promptly rejected Aspin's suggestion, contending that it would be politically unacceptable in the tense environment of human rights and trade disputes to have such a discussion with China. This lack of interest in active dialogue with China was shared between Lake and Lord throughout the first year of the Clinton presidency.<sup>91</sup>

Inside the Pentagon, there were also other considerations that pressed for a more

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<sup>89</sup> National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), "US security policy for East Asia: The eight years under the Clinton administration," *East Asian Strategic Review* (2001), 285-286, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.nids.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2001/east-asian\\_e2001\\_8.pdf](http://www.nids.go.jp/english/publication/east-asian/pdf/2001/east-asian_e2001_8.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> Mann, *About face*, 288.

<sup>91</sup> Tucker, "The Clinton years," 51-52.

conciliatory China policy. Since the early months of the new administration, many in the DOD had been hoping for a resumption of US-China military contacts, which had been severed after the unfolding of the Tiananmen Square incident. Military ties with the PRC, it was argued, would enable the United States to keep a closer watch on China's military developments and better read its intention.<sup>92</sup> If anything, evidence that China was transferring missile material to Pakistan, which had occurred during the last year of the Bush administration and became clear in summer 1993, seemed to further highlight the need for greater dialogue between the US and China to assuage mutual suspicions and dissuade the latter from devolving into a threat to regional and global stability.<sup>93</sup> Much as Washington had been concerned about China's moves and its military modernization programs, Beijing was seemingly drawing from the display of American power in the 1991 Gulf War, George Bush's decision to sell Taiwan F-16 fighter aircrafts in late 1992 and Clinton's MFN order as well as apparent move to elevate US relations with Taiwan in 1993 the conclusion that Washington had definitely the ability and likely the will to hamper China's accession to great power status. Alleviating this Chinese threat perception of the US, which was running high among the Chinese leadership and intellectual circle in the early 1990s, would require active engagement with China, and from the Pentagon's perspective, China's positive transformation should be fostered from within by cultivating important constituencies of the country's future leadership including the Chinese military establishment. With Perry in the forefront, the DOD thus began fervent efforts to urge the

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<sup>92</sup> Mann, *About face*, 288.

<sup>93</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 206.

White House to deal more amiably with China.<sup>94</sup>

The Pentagon's concerns were widely shared in East Asia. Japan was among the earliest to voice unease with what was seen as the Clinton administration's overemphasis on economics in relations with Japan and its underemphasis of the same theme in its approach to China. Shortly after Clinton took office, an anxious Japanese foreign minister Michio Watanabe rushed to Washington to learn of Japan's place in the new US foreign policy agenda and push for a summit between Clinton and Japanese prime minister Miyazawa in April 1993. Unsettled by early signs that the new US administration was deviating from the established course of cooperation with Japan, Japanese officials had been seeking early visits with the new US administration to remind Clinton and his foreign policy team that the bedrock of US-Japan partnership had been security rather than economics.<sup>95</sup> The Japanese also contemplated, moreover, that while pressing for market opening in other regional countries, Washington seemed to have forgotten China's enormous economic potential in its pursuit of human rights and democracy promotion. Since the early 1990s, Japanese leaders had been concerned about repeated threats from the US Congress to withdraw China's MFN status. To Tokyo, China was too important a country to be isolated and engagement was a more proper way to induce democratization in China – a perception that had underlain the Japanese low-key approach to prodding China on human rights. This message was relayed to Clinton and US administration officials during Watanabe's trip to Washington in February

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<sup>94</sup> Mann, *About face*, 288-289.

<sup>95</sup> Merrill Goozner, "Japan's foreign minister hopes for US assurances," *Chicago Tribune*, February 11, 1993, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1993-02-11/news/9303177803\\_1\\_foreign-minister-michio-watanabe-us-japan-bitter-trade-war](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1993-02-11/news/9303177803_1_foreign-minister-michio-watanabe-us-japan-bitter-trade-war).

1993 and subsequent visit by prime minister Miyazawa in April.<sup>96</sup>

Across Asia, many other countries were also troubled by the new American foreign policy direction. The Clinton administration's trade agenda created intense pressure for many Southeast Asian countries that had based their economic development on a model of state capitalism and were surely yet slowly opening their economies to foreign goods.<sup>97</sup> As a case in point, ASEAN states participating in the APEC meeting in Seattle in November 1993 rejected as premature US proposal for setting a timetable for regional trade liberalization.<sup>98</sup> In addition, US declaration in 1993 that commercial interests had replaced security considerations as drivers of US attention to Southeast Asia and that ASEAN countries mattered to America as far as their economic values rose apparently shook the foundation of US-ASEAN partnership built for the last several decades. Throughout the Cold War, ASEAN members had looked to the US for protection against potential security threats from within and without the region while America relied on ASEAN cooperation to check communist expansion in Asia. Although some ASEAN states, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, had certain concerns about the potential destabilizing effect of US military presence in the region after the Cold War, the fact that the then six ASEAN member states decided at the 1992 ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in Manila to call on the United States for the first

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<sup>96</sup> Ming Wan, *Human rights in Chinese foreign relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 91-96; Seiichiro Takagi, "The Asia-Pacific nations: Searching for leverage," in *Making China policy: Lessons from the Bush and Clinton administrations*, ed. Ramon H. Myers et al. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 243-245.

<sup>97</sup> While there certainly are significant differences in development experiences among the East Asian economies, analysts have concurred that the regional model of economic development share one discernible feature: the role of the government in regulating market operations. See, for example, Jong H. Park, "The East Asian economic development and developing countries," *Journal of Developing Societies* 18(4) (December 2002), 330-53, accessed April 30, 2014, doi: 10.1177/0169796X0201800403; Martin Khor, "Serious threat to Asian economic model," accessed April 30, 2014, <http://triplecrisis.com/serious-threat-to-asian-economic-model/>.

<sup>98</sup> Takagi, "The Asia-Pacific nations," 259.

time to maintain a secure military balance in the region demonstrated those states' confidence in the value of their partnership with the US.<sup>99</sup> In this context, Washington's pursuit of human rights and democratization in the region apparently shattered that confidence and created an acute sense among Southeast Asian countries that they were being dictated by the US.<sup>100</sup> At a time when Asian leaders, especially Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Mahamad Mahathir, were advocating their own version of human rights based on community-oriented "Asian values" in contrast to Western ideas of individual freedom and liberty, the Clinton administration's human rights agenda was perceived as a "campaign of interference, cultural imperialism and an irritant to most Southeast Asian states' sensitivities."<sup>101</sup>

Yet even more frustrating to many regional countries than US cultural insensitiveness was an obvious US failure to grasp realities. Singapore was among the most vocal about this problem, pointing out that isolation was a misguided approach to China. Australia joined in the barrage as it stressed a focus on development and engagement should guided efforts to push for democratization in China. To Canberra, shaping Beijing's future trajectory was more important than punishing it for its current deeds. When the Australian view was put forward to Christopher, however, the US secretary of state rejected it.<sup>102</sup> Thus the Clinton administration continued to pursue a human rights and geoeconomic agenda that was

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<sup>99</sup> Liselottle Odgaard, *The balance of power in Asia-Pacific security: US-China policies on regional order* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 69.

<sup>100</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 208.

<sup>101</sup> Ming Wan, *Human rights*, 92-93; Renato Cruz De Castro, "Managing "strategic unipolarity": The Asian states' responses to the post-Cold War environment," in *Southeast Asian perspectives on security*, ed. Derek Da Cunha (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), 66; Michael Cox, *US foreign policy after the Cold War: Superpower without a mission?* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995), 100.

<sup>102</sup> Takagi, "The Asia-Pacific nations," 253-255.



becoming increasingly unpopular in East Asia. Such a move not only alienated US allies and partners in the region but also pitted the State Department, the White House and various economic agencies in the administration, on the one hand, against the Pentagon, on the other. The tensions that it produced would set the stage for reconsiderations at the State Department and the Pentagon that would foster revision of US policy in the region.

### **3. The return to geopolitics**

By mid-1993, it had become clear that the new US foreign policy was producing backlash both at home and abroad. Beijing had made plain that the State Department's efforts to promote human rights in China would produce nothing but irritation during Lord's visit to Beijing in early May. The visit was likely intended either to test the water or to provide the final warnings before the Clinton administration embarked on issuing its MFN executive order. In any case, Lord's message was ignored and the assistant secretary was instead forewarned that any decision to attach conditions to China's MFN status would jeopardize ties between the two countries.<sup>103</sup> As disputes with China intensified and other countries in East Asia increasingly registered their own discord with US human rights and trade promotion agenda, the Pentagon was also pressing hard for a revision of US policy in the region.<sup>104</sup> In July 1993, the State Department submitted to the White House a proposal for a modified approach centered on what Lord initially called "enhanced engagement" with

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<sup>103</sup> Sheila Tefft, "Limits on China trade likely, US says," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 13, 1993, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1993/0513/13062.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Mann, *About face*, 289.

China.<sup>105</sup> Intended to offer “a broader framework” for dealing with China as Clinton desired, the proposal envisaged increased interactions with the People’s Republic through “high-level meetings, much more intensified dialogue, negotiations, and visits back and forth with China” to revitalize the bilateral relationship with the PRC. Following discussions of the new approach at Principals Committee meetings in July and August, “comprehensive engagement” replaced “enhanced engagement” as the watchword of the new China policy, which was packed in an “action” Memorandum for the President that Clinton signed in mid-September.<sup>106</sup>

The proposal seemed well-timed, not least because it came about as pressure was mounting for a change in US China policy. As NSA Lake was pondering an ideational child to fill the vacuum left by George Bush’s lack of “the vision thing” and, perhaps more importantly, to respond to growing criticism that the foreign policy of his own administration lacked focus, the DOS’s proposal provided a reality check of which recommendation would be incorporated into the White House’s strategic design for US posture overseas.<sup>107</sup> The idea that Lake – and, by its contribution, the State Department – came up with, “engagement and enlargement,” seemed a fair bargain between pragmatic considerations and moral impulse, “a neo-Jeffersonian unity of ideas and interests” as one commentator has put it.<sup>108</sup> The new strategy came in a two-part package, which was delivered first by Warren Christopher in a speech at Columbia University on September 20 and later by the national security adviser

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<sup>105</sup> Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The politics of US-China relations, 1989-2000* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2003), 178.

<sup>106</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 178; David M. Lampton, *Same bed, different dreams: Managing US-China relations, 1989-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 135.

<sup>107</sup> Tucker, “The Clinton years,” 47.

<sup>108</sup> Dumbrell, *Clinton’s foreign policy*, 42.

himself in his remarks at Johns Hopkins University the following day. Together Christopher and Lake refuted isolationism and containment as US strategy for the post-Cold War world and introduced a policy that would “combine our broad goals of fostering democracy and markets with our more traditional geostrategic interests.” While acknowledging that “engagement [was] essential” and remained “a worthwhile investment,” Lake insisted that “engagement itself [was] not enough” and sought to infuse a sense of purpose into renewed US commitment to engagement abroad with “a strategy of enlargement” that aimed to “strengthen the core of major market democracies” and “help democracy and market economics take root in regions of greatest humanitarian concern.”<sup>109</sup>

To some extent these efforts seemed to prevent further rift within the administration between the State Department and the White House, on the one hand, and the Pentagon, on the other, about the direction of US-China relations as well as general US posture in the region. The reemphasis on the value of engagement with China enunciated in the action memorandum presented to Clinton in September 1993 would not have come about without active State-White House-Defense collaboration: In the previous months Lord had teamed up with Freeman at the Defense Department and Kent Wiedemann at the NSC to lay the groundwork for the new approach. In unison they apparently convinced Lake, who had thus far been halfhearted about active dialogue with Beijing, to initial the memorandum for the president on “comprehensive engagement” with China.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, it might be argued

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<sup>109</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 178-179; Warren Christopher, “Building peace in the Middle East,” Address at Columbia University, September 20, 1993, in Warren Christopher, *In the stream of history* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 81-90; Anthony Lake, “From containment to enlargement,” Remarks at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, DC, September 21, 1993, accessed April 30, 2014, <https://www.fas.org/news/usa/1993/usa-930921.htm>.

<sup>110</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 178.

that with the near-simultaneous introduction of a “comprehensive engagement” China policy and a strategy of “engagement and enlargement” guiding US action overseas broadly speaking, a temporary alignment had been reached between the State Department, the White House and the Pentagon – or at least a general understanding of each party’s respective positions that allowed for a modus vivendi when it came to East Asia. In pledging to “counter the aggression and support the liberalization of states hostile to democracy and market,” for example, Lake recognized that “our strategy must be pragmatic” since “our interests in democracy and markets do not stand alone” and “other American interests at times will require us to befriend and even defend non-democratic states for mutually beneficial reasons.”<sup>111</sup> The DOD, in return, elaborated in its Report on the Bottom Up Review of US defense strategy released in October 1993 that “continued [American] willingness” to “remain the leading security partner” in East Asia and elsewhere was contingent on the case that “our allies be sensitive to the linkages between a sustained U.S. commitment to their security on the one hand, and their actions in such areas as trade policy, technology transfer, and participation in multinational security operations on the other.”<sup>112</sup>

This understanding, however, proved short-lived for two reasons. A flurry of events in the summer of 1993 presented major impediments for the administration to even focus on “enhanced” – not to mention “comprehensive” – engagement with China. In July 1993, there was sufficient, albeit indefinite, evidence that confirmed US intelligence discovery the previous fall that China had shipped M-11 missile parts to Pakistan. Whether in retaliation for the Bush administration’s F-16 sales to Taiwan or not, the transfer apparently violated

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<sup>111</sup> Lake, “From containment.”

<sup>112</sup> Les Aspin, “Report on the Bottom-up Review,” October 1993, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/administration\\_and\\_Management/other/515.pdf](http://www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/administration_and_Management/other/515.pdf), 3.

the Missile Technology Control Regime, which was punishable in American law, and necessitated US action. Clinton had reassured Congress when he signed his MFN executive order in May that his administration would “take action” if the shipment was confirmed. After Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs Lynn Davis’ travel to Beijing in mid-July failed to wrest information from China about the suspected shipment while congressional pressure was building up for a tough US response to China’s behavior, the administration announced on August 25 its decision to impose sanctions on China for its 1992 transfer of undisclosed equipment to Pakistan, which forbade American companies from selling advanced electronics and satellite technology to China in two years.<sup>113</sup> While the M-11 issue was creating a diplomatic headache, American intelligence submitted yet another report in mid-July 1993 that a Chinese containership called Yin He was allegedly carrying a large amount of chemicals banned by the Chemical Weapons Convention on its way through Southeast Asia to dock at Bandar Abbas, Iran. Alarmed at the possibility of another Chinese breach of another nonproliferation agreement, the Clinton administration decided to go all out to pressure Beijing for full inspection of the Yin He. By the time it was discovered that there were no chemicals aboard the Chinese ship and American intelligence analysts had failed either to gather accurate information or to account for possible Chinese countermoves that rendered earlier US intelligence data off base, the Yin He case had become a major international incident that caused considerable embarrassment and uproar in Washington.<sup>114</sup> The final straw came when the House of Representatives passed in August 1993 a resolution against China’s bid

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<sup>113</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 171-174; Mann, *About face*, 285-286.

<sup>114</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 174-177.

for hosting the 2000 Olympic Games.<sup>115</sup>

Those developments were not incited by or in full control of the administration. The State Department was reluctant to decide on sanctions against China for its M-11 transfer and to provoke Beijing to halt the progress it had made on other nonproliferation issues, but was forced to act to soothe Congress. Some of those events, indeed, helped set in motion the administration's China policy review in July 1993.<sup>116</sup> Yet the blizzard of those happenings contributed to further estrangement between the US and China that made Beijing skeptical of the "comprehensive engagement" policy Washington subsequently announced in September. Adding to Chinese suspicion was the seemingly contradictory message conveyed in Lake's September 21 speech, which to many Chinese constituted a veiled attempt to ostracize and further contain China: While the US national security adviser vowed to pursue engagement, China noted that it was lumped with Iran, Iraq, Myanmar and North Korea as "backlash states" in Lake's view. China's decision to detonate a small nuclear weapon in October 1993, widely seen as a response to US sanction on its M-11 transfer in August, spoke of increasing Chinese frustration and defiance that complicated the implementation of the new US policy and the maintenance of a united view driving it in Washington.<sup>117</sup>

The second factor that affected the new consensus on East Asia was the continued pursuit of different goals of the departments and agencies within the executive branch. Even with the reintroduction of engagement in US approach to China, there remained fundamental

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<sup>115</sup> Mann, *About face*, 289.

<sup>116</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 171-173, 177-178.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-180.

divergence between the State Department, the Department of Commerce and the Pentagon as to what should be the priority of US foreign policy. Persistent in their belief that Washington should keep pressing for China's human rights improvements when reaching out to Beijing, Christopher and Lord was seen as "principled engagers" among those supporting the new US policy. Seeing American commercial interests trumping all other imperatives, Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and members of the NEC and the US Trade Representatives (USTR) stood as "economic engagers" who advocated engagement with China for the sake of US "economic security." Perry and Pentagon officials, meanwhile, might be called "defense engagers" who saw engagement primarily as a way to enlist Chinese cooperation on North Korea, arms sales and proliferation risks. As the ultimate goals that the departments attached to their efforts in East Asia generally and China particularly – human rights, economic prosperity and security – were not necessarily compatible and, in fact, might work against each other, concurrent pursuits of them created confusion at best and friction at worst.<sup>118</sup>

Further muddling the water were increasingly complex schisms and realignment of stands between the agencies. When Clinton's MFN executive order was introduced in May 1993, it received support from the administration's economic officials and was widely, if mildly, endorsed by the business community. As the loss of access to the Chinese market to European competitors became increasingly visible in the ensuing months, US companies began to have second thoughts. The imposition of US sanction on China in August, which reportedly caused American corporations selling missile technology to China to incur serious profit shortfalls, was the final straw that broke any remaining patience among the

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<sup>118</sup> Tucker, "The Clinton years," 46-47.

American business circle. Mounting pressure from big business giants, which were bringing their dissatisfaction directly to the administration as well as to Congress, eventually convinced the DOC to submit a recommendation to Clinton in December 1993 for relaxing the restriction on American satellite exports to China, thus shattering the mutual support enjoyed between the State Department and the economic engagers in the early days of the Clinton presidency.<sup>119</sup> Hence on China, the State Department found itself confronted by the DOC, the USTR and the Pentagon. Yet in its active pursuit of positive security relations with key Asian allies, most notably Japan, the DOD was still challenged by the State Department's continued cooperation with US economic agencies in pushing for the "enlargement of democracy and market economics."<sup>120</sup>

Working at cross-purposes, the departments were unable to help move US policy to a coherent course. As a case in point, shortly after Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs John Shattuck visited Beijing in mid-October 1993 warning the Chinese that there was little chance they could get MFN renewal in the following year with their poor performance on human rights, Assistant Secretary of Defense Charles Freeman conveyed US enthusiasm to renew military-to-military ties with the PLA in his trip to China in November.<sup>121</sup> The confusion was widely felt in East Asia. As Robert B. Zoellick recalled in a testimony before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the US House of Representatives in 1996, in one month "the USTR might bash China on intellectual property, Commerce might hustle investment deals, State might attack on human rights, and Defense urge military-to-military talks," which undoubtedly confused both US allies and friends in

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<sup>119</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 173; Mann, *About face*, 286-287.

<sup>120</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomic," 206-209.

<sup>121</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 180-181.



the region.”<sup>122</sup> Clinton’s encounter with Asian leaders at the Seattle APEC meeting in November proved the point. Japanese and ASEAN leaders used the occasion to voice their growing concerns with US attempts to “micromanage trade” in the region.<sup>123</sup> Chinese president Jiang Zemin, in his private summit with Clinton on the sideline of the APEC meeting conducted as part of the US government plan in September 1993 to enhance engagement between the two countries, resisted the American emphasis on the human rights-trade linkage. As Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen indicated in a meeting with the American press one week before the Clinton-Jiang summit, Beijing viewed the trade-human rights linkage as a tactic to “exert pressure... left over from the Cold War.”<sup>124</sup>

The event that laid a more stable foundation for State-Defense cooperation and helped reinvent American policy in East Asia, paradoxically, came in the form of a setback for the State Department in holding its grip on China policy. In early 1994, discontent with Clinton’s MFN order seemed to peak both within and outside the administration. Members of the administration’s economic team frequently expressed their skepticism with the dual pursuit of human rights and trade in China in both public and private. US business executives, in Lord’s eyes, “were not only not supporting us, but they were undercutting us with the Chinese.”<sup>125</sup> Disagreement also wriggled to the NSC, as Lake remained supportive of the elevation of the human rights cause in China while deputy NSA Sandy Berger grew more

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<sup>122</sup> Castro, “Whither geoeconomics,” 209.

<sup>123</sup> Takagi, “The Asia-Pacific nations,” 258-259; Yoji Akashi, “An ASEAN perspective on APEC,” Kellogg Institute Working paper #240, August 1997, accessed April 30, 2014, <https://kellogg.nd.edu/publications/workingpapers/WPS/240.pdf>, 11-14.

<sup>124</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 181-183; Patrick E. Tyler, “China may allow Red Cross to visit dissidents in jail,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1993, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/10/world/china-may-allow-red-cross-to-visit-dissidents-in-jail.html>.

<sup>125</sup> Mann, *About face*, 296.

sympathetic to US business leader's unease with the MFN conditionality. Even the State Department's man in China, ambassador Stapleton Roy, was seen as "undercutting" the policy of his own home base. Dismayed to see luring business contracts in China increasingly going to Canadian and European companies as a result of Clinton's MFN order, a fact that Chinese leaders had often skillfully reminded American officials, Roy declared in an interview with the New York Times in January 1994 that China had made "dramatic" progress in the area of human rights – an observation that was in stark contrast to Shattuck's conclusion when he visited the Asian country few months earlier – and challenged the administration to "define what it views as significant progress" that could qualify for MFN renewal.<sup>126</sup> With its human rights agenda in obvious peril, Christopher and the State Department decided to make one last venture to prod Beijing on human rights before the MFN expired by scheduling a visit by the secretary of state to China in March 1994.

The failure of Christopher's trip in pressing for more Chinese cooperation on human rights marked the end of the State Department's control over US China policy in the first Clinton administration. Many accounts of the event took the view that such a failure had been foreshadowed by the debacle created after assistant secretary John Shattuck, in his February 1994 visit to Beijing to prepare the ground for Christopher, held a "secret" meeting with a prominent Chinese dissident that was leaked to the press and prompted fierce response from Chinese authorities.<sup>127</sup> China might have been mulling over some steps to burnish its human rights record to satisfy both American and Chinese domestic demand

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 295-296; Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 180-181, 184.

<sup>127</sup> Raymond Cohen, *Negotiating across cultures: International communication in an interdependent world* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2002), 157.

for political reforms, as one analyst has argued, but Shattuck's rendezvous courted Beijing's infuriation and changed the course China was about to take.<sup>128</sup> Alternatively, contends another observer, Beijing might be stiffening its stand, realizing from watching increasing US internal disagreements over China policy that it could defy the Clinton administration's human rights conditions, and Shattuck simply provided an occasion for the Chinese leadership to fan outrage at foreign meddling in China's domestic affairs and communicate its resolution to hold firm against US pressure.<sup>129</sup> In any case, the stern response Christopher got from Beijing during his visit and Clinton's refusal to publicly accord his support for Christopher's mission made the secretary of state realize, as early as he was on the way back from China, that the MFN linkage was doomed to collapse. With Berger and NEC officials subsequently taking from Lord the chairmanship of the Clinton administration's interagency meetings on China, "principled engagers" at Foggy Bottom were virtually sidelined after Christopher's return to Washington.<sup>130</sup>

On the one hand, Clinton's eventual retreat on the MFN linkage in May 1994 signaled deeper troubles Washington was getting into in East Asia. China apparently took the MFN delinkage as a sign of further American weakness. Not only did Beijing continue to flout human rights norms after the MFN conditions were withdrawn but, having proved that Western pressure could not coerce it into making the concessions Washington wanted, the PRC was able to boast a victory of China's "principled stand" against what it called America's "bluff" when it comes to human rights promotion. Across Asia, other governments also seemed to take the cue from the Clinton administration's MFN reversal. The Suharto regime in Indonesia, for

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<sup>128</sup> Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 185-187.

<sup>129</sup> Mann, *About face*, 299-300.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

example, concluded that it no longer had to worry about a possible US sanction against its treatment of political opposition and dissenting voices in the Indonesian press, since China had shown that the Americans were more preoccupied with their economic interests than the oft-championed cause of human rights. Characterized in Indonesia and elsewhere as American “hypocrisy,” Washington’s human rights agenda was thus courting more derision than promoting American credibility and leadership.<sup>131</sup> Meanwhile, Washington’s geo-economic agenda compounded the crisis in American foreign policy in East Asia in early 1994 by arousing increasing resentment among US Asian allies and friends. Continued American quest for more market share in Japan had led to Japanese prime minister Morihiro Hosokawa’s “No” to Clinton’s demand on market opening in February 1994.<sup>132</sup> Clashes with other Southeast Asian nations over trade barriers and labor standards also bred accusations of American “unilateralism and playing a zero-sum game in its economic relations with its allies.”<sup>133</sup> Taken together, these tensions and distrusts indicated that the US was losing ground in the region.

Yet on the other hand, the end of the debate on China’s MFN status also created conditions for reflection and a real overhaul of US policy in East Asia that was to commence shortly thereafter. That the State Department had lost control over US China policy afforded Lord more time for other regional issues. One such issue would present itself a few days after Clinton announced his decision to relinquish the MFN linkage, when North Korea reportedly tested a new cruise missile, which could help Pyongyang send chills to its neighbors further ashore, while continuing working on a nuclear weapons development program despite

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 311-312.

<sup>132</sup> Takagi, “The Asia-Pacific nations,” 259; NIDS, “US security policy,” 271.

<sup>133</sup> Castro, “Whither geoeconomics,” 208.

warnings from the United Nations.<sup>134</sup> Notwithstanding the detriment inflicted on the State Department's authority as well as Lord's and Christopher's personal credibility, moreover, the MFN debacle also enabled Lord to take a step back and reassess US priorities in the region. When less bounded by a professed commitment to moral and geoeconomic mantras, it was easy to see the problems American policy was creating in the region. As soon as he could sense where the MFN denouement was heading and turned his attention to the bigger picture, Lord summed up the situation in a memorandum to Christopher in late April 1994, "A series of American measures threatened or employed risk corroding our image in the region, giving ammunition to those charging we are an international nanny, if not bully. Without proper course adjustments, we could subvert our influence and our interests."<sup>135</sup>

Hence implied in Lord's lines was apparently a recognition of the need to rework US relations with allies and friends that the Pentagon had long advocated. Such necessity was underlined as the North Korean nuclear crisis came to the fore in the summer 1994, when it was realized that relations with South Korea and Japan could be exempt from "the primacy of economics" because "fundamental US national interest in alliance and partnership" with the two Asian allies should prevail.<sup>136</sup> At the same time, another issue presented itself to bring the State Department and the Pentagon closer in mapping out US strategy in East Asia. As China's defense budget swelled and its military modernization program caught more attention, many at the Pentagon became more wary that growing Chinese military

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<sup>134</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "North Korea tests cruise missile designed to sink ships," *The New York Times*, June 1, 1994, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/01/world/north-korea-tests-cruise-missile-designed-to-sink-ships.html>.

<sup>135</sup> Lampton, *Same bed*, 43.

<sup>136</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 211; Winston Lord, Statement before the Committee on International Relations of the House of Representatives, June 27, 1995, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://archive.org/stream/futureofusforeig00unit/futureofusforeig00unit\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/futureofusforeig00unit/futureofusforeig00unit_djvu.txt).

capability could upset the security environment in East Asia and portend ill for US ability to shepherd the regional security order. A more skeptical view of China's potential as a partner of the US in Asia was therefore emerging within the DOD, reinforced by a naval confrontation between the US aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk and a Chinese Han-class nuclear submarine in the Yellow Sea in October 1994 and a later report from the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment warning that China had grown into a credible military threat to the US with its military modernization program.<sup>137</sup> Thus by late 1994, not only had the State Department come to appreciate the Pentagon's emphasis on maintaining positive relationships with US allies in the region, but a growing number of US defense planners had also begun to share a skepticism that had long been held at Foggy Bottom about the desirability of adopting a conciliatory policy toward China. As the two organizations' perceptions became more aligned, there was increasing impetus to act in concert to foster a reemphasis on the geopolitics agenda that was of mutual concern.

Other forces were also at work to help the State Department and Pentagon fine-tune their views and bring about more revisions in US policy in the region. Throughout the first year of the Clinton presidency, efforts to press Tokyo to "manage" trade with the US had reportedly played into the hands of a Japanese right-wing faction that was calling for Japan's rearmament and a more independent defense posture.<sup>138</sup> As the crisis on the Korean peninsula escalated and the realization that the Japanese Self-Defense Forces could not be utilized in case of a regional conflict involving no direct attack on Japan gained ground among Japanese policymakers, however, Tokyo became more set on ratcheting up

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<sup>137</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 215; Mann, *About face*, 332-333.

<sup>138</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 208.

cooperation with Washington and reinvigorating the US-Japan alliance to cope with increasing uncertainties in its surrounding milieu.<sup>139</sup> This apparently gave a boost to the return to geopolitics being contemplated at the State Department and the Pentagon. Back in Washington, another presumably adverse event that also contributed to a reassessment of US policy in the region was the Republican takeover of Congress in November 1994. On the one hand, the Republican electoral victory in 1994 dealt a severe blow to the Clinton administration not only through its revelation of public discord with the administration's policy record but also with its implication for the latitude in policymaking the executive branch was to retain in the remaining years of the Clinton presidency. On the other hand, as the outcome of the congressional elections compelled Christopher to ruminate about whether US foreign policy in disarray precipitated the Republican seizure of Congress, such an event provided another imperative for policy reconsiderations at Foggy Bottom as well as the Pentagon.<sup>140</sup>

By the end of 1994, the State Department and the Pentagon had begun to form an active coalition to oppose the trade hawks of the USTR and the DOC, as well as the doves at Foggy Bottom and the Treasury, to push for a modulation in their trade promotion campaign lest US security interests in the region suffered. One of the first signs of a moderation of the Clinton administration's geoeconomic agenda appeared in late 1994 when the administration decided to drop its insistence on setting numerical benchmarks for Japan's market opening.<sup>141</sup> At the outset of 1995 Lord made explicit the State Department's changed attitude when he stated that

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<sup>139</sup> NIDS, "US security policy," 273.

<sup>140</sup> Halberstam, *War in a time*, 298-299.

<sup>141</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 210-211.

To be sure – as the North Korean situation reminds us – security remains central, but economic interests are ascendant and the spread of freedom enhances both. In the post-Cold War environment, our fundamental interests remain, but we have a more difficult task in assigning their priorities... In some instances, we must make exacting short-term trade-offs, but that is not always the case, and over the long run, I am convinced that our goals of security, prosperity, and liberty are mutually reinforcing.<sup>142</sup>

The preparation to reinstate geopolitics in the center of US foreign policy had nevertheless started out in 1994. As the North Korean issue simmered throughout the first months of 1994, a conference held in Tokyo by the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee in March 1994 concluded that “after the Cold War, in order to maintain stability in the Asian and Pacific region, US and Japan ought to reinforce on the alliance relationship which was based on the security alliance guarantee treaty between US and Japan.”<sup>143</sup> In August 1994, a Japanese government advisory panel on defense issues headed by Higuchi Hiroto submitted a report on Japanese defense posture and the redefinition of the US-Japan alliance to Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi (the Higuchi report). Recognizing the futility of Japan’s “checkbook diplomacy,” the report proposed that the development of Japan’s defense capability be geared toward multilateral security cooperation including active participation in UN peacekeeping operations, a recommendation that was later incorporated into Japan’s National Defense Program Outline in late 1995. This prioritization of multilateral cooperation over the US-Japan alliance, detectable in American eyes by the organizational structure of the Higuchi report in which the section on multilateral security cooperation was placed ahead of the section reaffirming the US-Japan alliance, raised many

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<sup>142</sup> Winston Lord, “Building a Pacific community,” Statement before the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, California, January 12, 1995, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/eap/950112.html>.

<sup>143</sup> Yingjie Wang, “Study on US policy toward Japan after the Cold War,” *Asian Social Science* 7(5) (May 2011), doi:10.5539/ass.v7n5p176, 177.



eyebrows among East Asian experts in the US.<sup>144</sup> Alarmed by what was seen as a Japanese shift toward multilateralism to the detriment of the bilateral alliance, in September 1994, Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Defense Secretary William Perry met their Japanese counterparts to reaffirm the centrality of the US-Japan security alliance in the two countries' bilateral relations as well as in the maintenance of regional peace and stability. Meanwhile, newly appointed Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye began making arrangements for a bilateral security policy review that led in February 1995 to a New Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region confirming America's return to traditional alliance diplomacy throughout the region.<sup>145</sup>

The real test for State-Defense cooperation and its ability to move US policy in the region to a course reflecting both the departments' concerns and interests, however, was no other than one that concerned the US relationship with China. Compared to China, Japan would prove an easy case because both the State Department and the Pentagon had identical interests in moving the US-Japan relations forward in pushing for the reconfirmation of geopolitics in US agenda. Yet even if security considerations were to guide their assessments in East Asia, the State Department and the Pentagon still had difficulties coming to a common view of how China would be featured in US geopolitics agenda in late 1994. After the MFN debacle, Christopher, still embittered by the treatment he received in China, showed little enthusiasm in dealing with the Asian giant, hence depriving his subordinate Winston Lord of the ability to regain control of China policy in the interagency process. With Lord's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs significantly weakened, the

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<sup>144</sup> Yamaguchi Noboru, "Redefining the US-Japan alliances," May 11, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nippon.com/en/features/c00204/#back10>.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.; Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 214.

State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor began to exert influence with a forceful campaign drawing attention to China's poor human rights record that effectively dismissed China as a strategic partner.<sup>146</sup> Meanwhile at the Pentagon, the atmosphere was fluid. An alarmist view of China, as noted above, had emerged at some sections of the DOD, with Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell, a staunch Taiwan's defender, seeking to facilitate military assistance to Taiwan to fend off Chinese aggression.<sup>147</sup> Yet at the top level of the Pentagon, efforts to build cooperation with China continued, with Perry travelling to Beijing in October 1994 to applaud closer military-to-military contacts with the PLA and solicit Chinese help on the North Korean issue.<sup>148</sup>

It has been argued that this failure to define a strategic vision in dealing with China allowed outside forces to hijack China policy subsequently and create misadventures the Clinton administration could have avoided. Plagued by bureaucratic inertia, the result of the Taiwan policy review that came out in September 1994 generated frustration and disillusionment rather than cheers among the Taiwanese and pro-Taiwan members of Congress who had led their expectations run high as the review loitered. Seeing the review as reaffirming the Clinton administration's adherence to the one-China policy that Beijing advocated rather than signifying change that they desired, Taiwanese officials sought to line up support from Congress.<sup>149</sup> The effectiveness of outside forces in snatching control of events from the

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<sup>146</sup> Tucker, "The Clinton years," 55; Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 216.

<sup>147</sup> Tucker, "The Clinton years," 63-64.

<sup>148</sup> Mann, *About face*, 331-332.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 319-322; Tucker, "The Clinton years," 55-56; Richard C. Bush, "Taiwan policy making since Tiananmen: Navigating through shifting waters," in *Making China policy: Lessons from the Bush and Clinton administrations*, ed. Ramon H. Myers et al. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 186-187.

Clinton administration became evident, or so it seemed, when the administration acquiesced to granting Taiwanese president Lee Teng Hui a visa to attend a reunion at his alma mater Cornell University in 1995. Despite some warnings within the NSC and State Department about potential harm to US-China relations if Lee was given a visa and Christopher's promise to the Chinese not to let that happen, administration officials eventually concurred that Lee should be allowed to visit Cornell lest a more assertive Congress exercised legislative powers forcing the administration to permit Lee's trip.<sup>150</sup> Thus a downward spiral in US-China relations was set in motion, which hit a nadir with the crisis at the Taiwan Strait in 1995-96.

The policy deliberations within the administration before the decision on Lee's visa was made was in fact complicated, with Clinton himself preferring to grant Lee a visa after his retreat on China's MFN and the NSC wrestled with how to balance the relationship with China and support for a fledgling democracy that was Taiwan.<sup>151</sup> Yet when China's maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait became inimical and ferocious subsequent to Lee's visit to the US, active State-Defense cooperation and coordination with the White House led to timely US response that curbed China's assertiveness and restored the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. When news of China's missile firing into the waters north and south of Taiwan – presumably to send a strong warning to the island as it prepared for its first democratic presidential election – reached the Clinton administration while State Department and NSC officials were conducting discussions with Beijing officials on

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<sup>150</sup> Lampton, *Same bed*, 105; James Mann, "Congress and Taiwan: Understanding the bond," in *Making China policy: Lessons from the Bush and Clinton administrations*, ed. Ramon H. Myers et al. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 207-211.

<sup>151</sup> Mann, *About face*, 322-325.

improving US-China relations in the spring of 1996, Lake, Christopher and Perry confronted the Chinese and decided on a showdown of force that effectively put a check on tensions in the Taiwan Strait. With the dispatch of two aircraft carrier battle groups into the waters near Taiwan in March 1996, the Clinton administration sent China a somber message about restraint and reassured the people of Taiwan and neighboring Asian states.<sup>152</sup>

The effective management of the situation at the Taiwan Strait obviously benefited from an active role played by Lake during the crisis. After the MFN debacle, the national security adviser had hesitated about getting involved in the making of China policy and wanted to avoid encroaching on the State Department turf in East Asia, not least because he had already done so in Central Europe and Haiti and was reluctant to be perceived as an “empire-builder on the Brzezinski or Kissinger model.”<sup>153</sup> By the end of 1995, with encouragement from his friends in and outside of the US government, he had undertaken a more active role in steering US policy toward China, and that apparently proved a great service to the management of US policy in the region when crisis did occur.<sup>154</sup> Yet to the extent that Christopher and Perry, who had been reluctant to infuriate Beijing before and after Lee’s visit, both turned to strongly support a US show of force in the Taiwan Strait in March 1996, it could be argued that State-Defense speaking in unanimous voice with the White House had helped giving more weight to and hastening the decision that eventually brought stability back to the Taiwan Strait. Indeed, Perry had even considered putting American ships into the Taiwan Strait, but his chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff advised

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 335-337; Yahuda, *The international politics*, 260.

<sup>153</sup> Tucker, “The Clinton years,” 54-55.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 56-57; Suettinger, “US “management”,” 282.

against doing so.<sup>155</sup>

Further review at the State Department and the Pentagon of the strategic environment in East Asia and the uncertainties posed by China to the configuration of the balance of power in the region would shift US China policy away from the conciliatory course often characterized by many after the MFN retreat. After the crisis in the Taiwan Strait was subdued, Lake's continued effort to exert the White House's control of China policy, which focused on mending ties with Beijing, arguably gave the administration a new beginning with China.<sup>156</sup> However, while not yet considering China as a direct military threat to the US, an increasingly alarmed Pentagon that had kept a close watch on China's military modernization began to pull the safety belt over efforts to reach out to China. Through refusing to point the finger to China as a threat, PACOM continued to monitor Chinese movements in the South China Sea and publicly indicated in 1995 that the US government would not tolerate any impediment to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea or any threat or use of force to resolve the Spratly Islands disputes.<sup>157</sup> Secretary of State Christopher also chose to put some reservations on the relationship with China when he decided to use the word "partnership" instead of "cooperation" to describe US-China relations in 1996, considering the latter to be too cozy to reflect the reality.<sup>158</sup> Meanwhile, the State Department and the Pentagon worked together to further elevate the US-Japan alliance as a linchpin of regional security, culminating in the signing of the Clinton-

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<sup>155</sup> Tucker, "The Clinton years," 56.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>157</sup> Castro, "Whither geoeconomics," 216-217.

<sup>158</sup> Christopher, *In the stream*, 514.

Hashimoto declaration in April 1996.<sup>159</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Absent presidential leadership, the involvement of many actors in American foreign policy making during the first Clinton administration apparently resulted in increased challenges for the State Department and the Pentagon in shaping US policy in East Asia. As the State Department in the early days of the administration devoted itself to an aggressive trade-human rights agenda and joined the economic bandwagon trumpeted by US economic agencies, the Pentagon struggled with little success to keep US East Asia policy grounded on geopolitical considerations. The temporary realignment between the bureaucracies marked by the reintroduction of “engagement” in late 1993 after tensions with China ran to a noticeable level, however, did not produce a significantly more coherent US policy that responded to broad regional dynamics because the State Department, the Pentagon and economic agencies continued to pursue different goals in their approach to East Asia. Clinton’s retreat on China MFN linkage while the administration continued to press other friends and allies in the region for economic and human rights concessions thus created even deeper troubles for US position in East Asia, as US policy seeded resentment and perceptions of American “hypocrisy” and weakness among regional states.

Only when both the State Department and the Pentagon had comprehended the concerns held by many US friends and allies in the region about US commitment to regional security, as well as the kind of leadership that was expected of America, did an effective State-

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<sup>159</sup> Mann, *About face*, 338; Castro, “Whither geoeconomics,” 214.

Defense coalition emerge to shift US East Asia policy to a steadier course. By the end of Clinton's first term in office, State-Defense cooperation had heralded the return of US policy in East Asia to an emphasis on geopolitics. Such geopolitical agenda would continue to elevate traditional bilateral alliances, especially the one with Japan, as the cornerstone in US approach to the region. With regard to China, the most consequential country in the region, the Clinton administration would trail a middle course familiar with its predecessor(s) that eschewed explicitly anti-China orientation but embraced realistic expectations. This hedging policy toward China would inject further momentum to the US relationship with Japan and brought back the order of the old days when power politics rather than economics or human rights dictated US posture in East Asia.

### III. STATE-DEFENSE COOPERATION AS DRIVER FOR CHANGE? STATE-DEFENSE COOPERATION DURING THE FIRST OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

#### **1. Obama's world and the setting of US East Asia policy at the outset**

When Obama won the Oval Office in 2008, America was once again besieged by a prevalent sense of American decline. The declinist mood had germinated at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the sufferings of 9/11, slightly faded away when US forces' quick capture of Kabul and Baghdad created a moment of sanguinity, and worked its way up again as US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq turned into never-ending entanglements. Then when American forces were bogged down in two wars in the Middle East, a financial crisis came in full force. As it swept through the globe, the financial crisis that maxed out in 2008 – the worst since the 1930s Great Depression – seemingly accelerated what has been billed “the

trends that [were] shifting the world's center of gravity away from the United States.”<sup>160</sup>

Certainly many had refused to accept such an idea, but both within and outside the US, the return of declinism was noticeable and it was apparently picking up steam.<sup>161</sup>

As political polarization at home turned for the worse and US economic conditions continued to falter, Obama took office vowing to reclaim the “success of [the US] economy,” to “responsibly leave” the task of nation-building in Iraq to its own people and restore American power through “its prudent use,” “the force of our example” and “the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.” Yet unassuming as those words of “humility” and “restraint” might sound, upon undertaking the lead of the “most powerful nation on Earth, he pronounced that America “[was] ready to lead [the world] once more” not only by fostering “greater cooperation and understanding between nations” but also by “not giv[ing] ideals] up for expedience’s sake,” much less “afford[ing] indifference to suffering outside [US] borders.” If anything, the new US Commander-in-Chief was bold enough to declare that “our nation is at war” and swear to “defeat” American enemies as the United States “came forth to meet” the challenges ahead.<sup>162</sup>

Those varied and seemingly contradictory goals presented an intrinsically difficult case for those who watched Obama deliver his first inaugural address and wondered what sort of

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<sup>160</sup> Roger C. Altman, “The great crash, 2008: A geopolitical setback for the West,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63714/roger-c-altman/the-great-crash-2008>.

<sup>161</sup> See, for example, Fareed Zakaria, “The future of American power: How America can survive the rise of the rest,” *Foreign Affairs* 87(3) (May/June 2008), 18-43; Richard N. Haass, “The age of nonpolarity: What will follow US dominance,” *Foreign Affairs* 87(3) (May/June 2008), 44-56; Kishore Mahbubani, “The case against the West: America and Europe in the Asian century,” *Foreign Affairs* 87(3) (May/June 2008), 111-124; Laïdi, *Limited achievements*, 1-4.

<sup>162</sup> Barack Obama’s inaugural address, January 20, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html?pagewanted=all>.



foreign policy tenet he would adhere to during his term in office. Yet the uncertainty was not only on Obama to blame. As he arrived at the White House in 2008, Obama, like Bill Clinton and George W. Bush before him, joined a long list of US presidents with modest record of prior experience in foreign affairs.<sup>163</sup> Yet compared to Obama's, Clinton's world definitely looked more lenient even as the two Democrat presidents both confronted perceptions of American decline. Despite the uncertainties that arose when bipolarity was shaken off, the end of the Cold War allowed the George Bush and Clinton to enjoy a brief "unipolar moment" of remarkably wide latitude in foreign policy before the junior Bush committed the US to the global war on terrorism. When General Collin Powell lamented during the Gulf War that the US was "running out of enemies," the issue for consideration was what to spend American power on, not how to spend American power to meet a given set of challenges.<sup>164</sup> In other words, the options for America in the early 1990s were more open. With two major wars carrying global implications to shoulder and a financial crisis and a massive deficit to attend to, Obama had much less leeway.

The extent of constraints imposed on Obama and his foreign policy was not lost on anyone. With his record of serving eight US presidents including Barack Obama, Robert Gates, Obama's holdover defense chief, had contemplated at the beginning of his journey with the new administration that "it [was] hard to think of a president who entered office facing

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<sup>163</sup> Laidi, *Limited achievements*, 15; Michael Nelson, "Person and office: Presidents, the presidency, and foreign policy," in *The domestic sources of American foreign policy*, ed. James M. McCormick (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 186. Walter Russel Mead offers a list of US presidential experience in foreign affairs from George Washington to George W. Bush in Walter Russel Mead, *Special providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 13.

<sup>164</sup> Mel Gurtov, *Pacific Asia? Prospects for security and cooperation in East Asia* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 191.

more challenges of historic magnitude than Obama.”<sup>165</sup> Comprehension of the scope of challenges that limited the range of options for Obama was also reflected in the 2008 Democratic presidential platform. Both candidate Obama in 2008 and his predecessor Bill Clinton in 1992 promised to renew the American leadership (if not in slightly twisted phrases), but only Clinton was able to seek new grounds for that leadership – at least initially. With the biggest old foe gone and no overriding threats presented, Clinton could talk about redefining the basis of American predominance by replacing security commitments with a “renewed authority to use America's trading leverage against the most serious problems.”<sup>166</sup> On the other hand, with no endgame in sight many of the problems confronting America in the late 2000s – most importantly the war against terrorism that had no clear exit even as Obama promised to “bring the Iraq war to a responsible end” and “forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan” – defied American ability to revise existing security partnerships on its own term, much less to act alone as the global security milieu evolved. Thus when speaking of “renewing American leadership” in 2008, Obama and his fellow Democrats were intent on “renew[ing US] partnerships to promote our common security” and “rebuild[ing] the alliances, partnerships, and institutions necessary to confront common threats.”<sup>167</sup> Underlying those lines was a recognition of the limit of American power, a limit that had been much more tightened from when the Cold War’s end brought American clout to its zenith.

At the same time, any presidential aspirant in 2008 might well be aware that the task is theirs to lay the groundwork for America to bounce back from the multiple crises that were

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<sup>165</sup> Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at war* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 323.

<sup>166</sup> Democratic Party Platform of 1992; Laïdi, *Limited achievements*, 5.

<sup>167</sup> Barack Obama’s inaugural address, 2009.

raging on. That required thwarting and reversing “a sapping of confidence across [American] land, a nagging fear that American decline [was] inevitable” that was impinging “no less profound” impact on American ability to bounce back than the detrimental effects brought to American strength by the ongoing crises. That also required reinforcing confidence in American stewardship abroad, for “it [was] only leadership if others join America in working toward our common security.” Thus it was also the order of the day, at least in the view of Obama and his team, to project an image of strength. Since “success [in meeting America’s challenges] has depended on national leadership that can move the country forward with confidence and a common purpose,” that image of strength apparently was not only about America as a leading nation on earth but also about Obama as its leader.<sup>168</sup>

What this came down to was a pressure for Obama to strike a balance between acting cautiously and appearing weak when shaping US posture overseas. Such a balance was particularly important in Asia, where Obama and the Democratic camp had pledged not only to be “committed to US engagement” in the region but also to “lead in Asia.”<sup>169</sup> Early into his presidential candidacy Obama had recognized that America’s future prosperity would largely be decided in Asia given the region’s vast economic potential; at the same time, he was cognizant that China would be a “country of consequence” for the US-led global order. Thus if American leadership was to be renewed, it must start with where both the greatest opportunity and the greatest challenge to the United States lay but America had

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<sup>168</sup> Barack Obama, Remarks at campaign event in Flint, Mich., June 16, 2008, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/18/AR2008061802510.html>.

<sup>169</sup> See 2008 Democratic Party Platform, August 25, 2008, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=78283>.

appeared distracted.<sup>170</sup> The crucial question in seeking to reengage with Asia was how to promote partnerships and at the same time underscore American leadership in the region. Neither one of the two objectives could be successfully pursued without the other, given America's mixed bag of troubles elsewhere and the general perception in Asia when Obama got elected that the US had been both losing sight of Asia and economically weakened.<sup>171</sup> Nor, for that matter, was it desirable to either emphasize leadership over partnerships or concede leadership to achieve partnerships: the former reeked of unilateralism, while the latter hinted at appeasement, both of which would erode the incentive for other states to cooperate. Increasing American engagement with Asia as a whole and enhancing US presence there, which would spur partnerships and elevate confidence in American leadership, was therefore Obama's chosen policy course from the outset.<sup>172</sup>

At a cursory glance Obama's approach seemed a clear departure from US policy during the eight years of George W. Bush. Bush started out as a China-basher, bluntly labeling the PRC as a "strategic competitor" rather than a "strategic partner" of the US, and vowing to do "whatever it takes" to defend Taiwan. Only when America became engulfed in the war on terrorism did the Bush administration begin to have second thoughts about the value of cooperation with China.<sup>173</sup> As Bush and his foreign policy team worked to maintain positive

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<sup>170</sup> Martin S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Bending history: Barack Obama's foreign policy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2012), 24-26; Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's rise: An insider's account of America's Asia strategy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2012), 9.

<sup>171</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 1-2.

<sup>172</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 25-26.

<sup>173</sup> Jianwei Wang, "From "strategic competitors" to "stakeholders": US-China relations during the Bush administration," in *China: The rising power*, ed. Gunther Hauser and Franz Kernic (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2009), 42-46; Robert G. Sutter, *US-China relations: Perilous past, pragmatic present* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 123-131; James Mann, *The China fantasy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 85-86.

engagement with China, they were also attentive to the management of US relations with key US Asian allies, most notably Japan, whose contribution to the war on terrorism was greatly appreciated.<sup>174</sup> Yet whether it choose not to lead because of preoccupations elsewhere or it took leadership in Southeast Asia for granted, the Bush foreign policy team largely ignored Southeast Asia. Later in the day the Bush administration extended the war on terrorism to Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, but other parts of East Asia remained far from the limelight.<sup>175</sup>

Obama, in contrast, was determined not to commit many of Bush's perceived Asia policy blunders. Candidate Obama recognized China as a "country of consequence" and decided from the start to treat it as such, first and foremost by choosing not to repeat "the unhappy history of presidential transitions," as Obama's Asia policy advisor and later Senior Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council Jeffrey Bader put it, that had recurred in previous presidential elections when opposition candidates for the Oval Office often resorted to harsh lines against China to discern themselves from the White House incumbents. Wanting to avoid causing unnecessary damage to US-China relations that would be onerous to undo once in office, Obama did not make China an issue in his election campaign, even though he did on occasion voice concerns about the negative effects of

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<sup>174</sup> Richard P. Cronin (Coordinator), "Japan-US relations: Issues for the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress," Issue brief for Congress, December 2, 2002, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/16158.pdf>, 3-4; Saori N. Katada and Mireya Solis, "Under pressure: Japan's institutional response to regional uncertainty," in *Northeast Asia: Ripe for integration?*, ed. Vinod K. Aggarwal et al. (Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 2009), 116-117.

<sup>175</sup> Joseph Chinyong Liow and See Seng Tan, "Southeast Asia," in *From superpower to besieged global power: Restoring world order after the failure of the Bush doctrine*, ed. Edward Kolodziej and Roger E. Kanet (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 124-131; John Feffer, "US policy toward Asia: For a policy of equitable engagement," in *Mandate for change: Policies and leadership for 2009 and beyond*, ed. Chester Hartman (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 411-412; Joseph Gerson, "Reinforcing Washington's Asia-Pacific hegemony," September 13, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://fpif.org/reinforcing\\_washingtons\\_asia-pacific\\_hegemony/](http://fpif.org/reinforcing_washingtons_asia-pacific_hegemony/).

imports from China and Chinese trading practices.<sup>176</sup> Furthermore, understanding the need to pay more attention to the rest of Asia, Obama was ready to “forge a more effective framework in Asia that [went] beyond bilateral agreements, occasional summits, and ad hoc diplomatic arrangements.”<sup>177</sup> As it talked about an “open and inclusive infrastructure with the countries in Asia,” the Obama team appeared willing to rectify the “diplomatic absenteeism” that had marred US policy in a Southeast Asia long enthused about multilateral community-building.<sup>178</sup> Thus what was signaled was apparently comprehensive engagement rather than the more checkered form of engagement Bush had applied in Asia.

A close scrutiny, however, would reveal more resemblances rather than divergence in Obama’s tentative approach and Bush’s. Such similarities certainly included a continued emphasis on traditional bilateral alliances and relationships with the major countries in East Asia, which were recognized by Bader as “generally sound” under Bush and could provide the basis for further cooperation as Bush’s successor took on devising Asia policy.<sup>179</sup> Yet the connection between Bush’s Asia policy and Obama’s was not confined to that only. More importantly, Obama’s engagement policy in Asia took after Bush’s substantially in its emphasis, even as it differed from Bush’s approach in its reach. After 9/11, relations with China commanded the utmost attention of the Bush administration in

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<sup>176</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 18-20; Robert Sutter, “Domestic American influences on US-China relations,” in *Tangled titans: The United States and China*, ed. David Shambaugh (Lanham: Rowman& Littlefield, 2013), 113-114.

<sup>177</sup> 2008 Democratic Party Platform, August 25, 2008.

<sup>178</sup> Welcoming then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, Indonesia in 2009, then ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan remarked that “[Clinton’s] visit shows the seriousness of the United States to end its diplomatic absenteeism in the region.” US Department of State, “Beginning a new era of diplomacy in Asia,” Press release, February 18, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/02/119422.htm>.

<sup>179</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 1, 7-8.

Asia. As laid out by Bader, in the post-9/11 world America could not handle other enemies or a rift with China.<sup>180</sup> The PRC was then expected to become a “responsible stakeholder” of the international system whose cooperation was needed not only in the US-led war on terrorism but also in giving Washington some breathing room in Asia while America had its hands full in the Middle East.<sup>181</sup> That continued to be the case when Obama prepared to enter the Oval Office, as Obama’s foreign policy agenda not just in Asia but also around the globe required Chinese cooperation, from fostering global economic recovery to curbing the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs, incapacitating al Qaeda’s network in Afghanistan and Pakistan, ending civil unrests in Africa, and tackling global climate change.<sup>182</sup> Cooperation from other countries on the aforementioned issues was also appreciated, but positive response from China was all the more critical to American efforts.

Thus even as Obama announced that his team’s grand strategy to “lead in Asia” would “begin with maintaining strong relationships with allies,” “deepening [US] ties with vital democratic partners” and “forging a more effective framework in Asia” that was more “open and inclusive,” China was the one country that was invited to “help lead in addressing the common problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>183</sup> By implication, while the rest of Asia were considered actual or potential partners, China was approaching, or seen as approaching, the position of a “co-leader” of the US in the emerging regional, if not global, order. The co-

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>181</sup> US Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick first called on China to become a “responsible stakeholder” of the international system in a speech in 2005. See Robert B. Zoellick, “Whither China: From membership to responsibility?,” Remarks to National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, New York City, September 21, 2005, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.

<sup>182</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 21.

<sup>183</sup> 2008 Democratic Party Platform, August 25, 2008.

leader rank purportedly accorded to China suggested the greater importance attached to the management of US-China relations that dovetailed well with Bush's policy. Although Bush did not wholly succumb to a "China-first" approach in East Asia, as his decision to continue US arms sales to Taiwan testified, he was nevertheless more attentive to the dynamics of US-China relations than to US ties with other parts of Asia. As Obama sought to simultaneously raise US cooperation with China and elevate US interaction with the rest of the region from their previous levels, therefore, the order of priorities on the American agenda in Asia remained unaffected. To great extent, this signified that consolidation and continuity, rather than transformation, would be the opcode of US Asia policy under Obama. Indeed, acknowledges Bader, the Obama team at the outset did not seek dramatic changes to reverse the trend of Asia policy under Bush.<sup>184</sup>

The task of continuing and perhaps elevating a chosen policy course would have been easier than executing change had US Asia policy not been placed in the bigger picture of what was seen as a rather mediocre record of American foreign policy achievements during the eight years of Bush. Since Obama and his team took the view that the diminution of US influence and leadership in Asia resulted from the spillover of misguided US policies elsewhere in the world rather than from Asia-specific policy errors, a sober and thoroughgoing approach to policy making was apparently required to ensure that every US move overseas would contribute to the overall effectiveness of US foreign policy.<sup>185</sup> This might sound like banal logic, but Obama was seemingly serious about making the right foreign policy decisions from the start. As Gates would later recalled, Obama often told his first secretary of defense

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<sup>184</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, xvii.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*



that in decision-making, “I can’t defend it unless I understand it.”<sup>186</sup> Thus while also burdened by his own domestic agenda, Obama approached foreign policy making with great attention to details and serious contemplation of his policy choices’ consequences.<sup>187</sup> His drive for full information, careful reflection and thorough deliberation when it came to foreign policy making would lead to what has sometimes been seen as a paradox, if not contradiction, in his approach to decision-making.

On the one hand, Obama’s desire to explore all policy options before settling on a final course of action induced him to bring a “team of rivals” to foreign policy making that would supposedly push the president out of his comfort zone and curtail the danger of groupthink.<sup>188</sup> When a presidential candidate, Obama had tossed about the “team of rivals” idea, claiming that his “attitude is that whoever is the best person for the job is the person I want.”<sup>189</sup> His appointments of several key Cabinet posts once in office apparently demonstrated his seriousness about creating a “team of rivals” that fit the president’s wish. With Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden – his chief rivals during the presidential race – taking the job of secretary of state and vice president and Robert Gates – a self-described Republican

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<sup>186</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 299.

<sup>187</sup> James P. Pfiffner, “Decision making in the Obama White House,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41(2) (June 2011), 260-261.

<sup>188</sup> Obama reportedly told Time magazine during the 2008 presidential campaign, “I don’t want to have people who just agree with me. I want people who are continually pushing me out of my comfort zone.” Glenn Thrush, “Locked in the Cabinet,” *Politico Magazine*, November 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/11/locked-in-the-cabinet-99374.html#.U0N7Mca3EpE>.

<sup>189</sup> Michael James, “Obama proposes “team of rivals” cabinet,” *ABC News*, May 28, 2008, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2008/05/obama-proposes/>.

old hand – kept at the Pentagon, Obama, it would seem, could get opposing viewpoints at the table whenever he wanted.<sup>190</sup>

On the other hand, Obama's aspiration to see his agenda executed apparently led to his propensity to put into key government branches "agents of trust" that could help prevent his agenda from going astray at various level of the US government apparatus. When it came to realizing his objectives in Asia in particular, Obama made plain his intent to build a constructive relationship with China by appointing Jeffrey Bader and Jim Steinberg, two seasoned experts on US-China relations who had worked for the Obama campaign in 2008, to be senior director for East Asian affairs at the National Security Council and deputy secretary of state.<sup>191</sup> The two pundits apparently shared Obama's vision in Asia, but their appointments were not all greeted with enthusiasm. Since Steinberg was not Hillary Clinton's choice as deputy, his appointment created unease for the secretary of state and constituted a constant source of tension between Clinton and the White House staff. If anything, Obama's decision to make Steinberg a member of the Principals Committee (PC) – the "senior interagency forum for consideration of policy issues affecting national security" reserved for Cabinet-level officers – in order to pursue him to take the job apparently disturbed both Clinton, who often found her voice at PC meetings contradicted by her deputy, and Gates, who was skeptical about the State Department having two seats at the

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<sup>190</sup> Lillian Cunningham, "Doris Kearns Goodwin reflects on Obama's team of rivals, writing about Lincoln, importance of historians," December 2, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.masslive.com/living/index.ssf/2012/12/doris\\_kearns\\_goodwin\\_reflects\\_on\\_obamas\\_team\\_of\\_rivals\\_writing\\_about\\_lincoln\\_importance\\_of\\_historia.html](http://www.masslive.com/living/index.ssf/2012/12/doris_kearns_goodwin_reflects_on_obamas_team_of_rivals_writing_about_lincoln_importance_of_historia.html); Associated Press, "Gates: Military looks to accelerate Iraq pullout," December 2, 2008, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/28022197/#.UySs7lyPBfM>.

<sup>191</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 30.

principals' table.<sup>192</sup>

Many observers, noting how Obama had also often chosen to fill other government agencies with people loyal to him, contend that Obama's "team of rivals" was more appearance than reality. It has also been argued that in selecting big names such as Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden for top cabinet positions as well as in keeping veteran Republican Robert Gates, Obama might in fact be looking to get more political buy-in for his policies from across party lines.<sup>193</sup> In that sense, Obama's emphasis on "multiple advocacy" might have been undercut by his own political calculations and his drive for authority. This seemed to be reinforced by the fact that, despite welcoming differences of views among members of his national security team, Obama only relied on a handful of trusted advisers, most notably Tom Donilon, his deputy national security adviser.<sup>194</sup>

Yet the quest for a broad range of views and the search for consensus in Obama's decision-making need not be mutually exclusive. In seeking to control Asia policy by sending Steinberg to Foggy Bottom, Obama could at the same time advance multiple advocacy at both the State Department and NSC meetings. Likewise, in assembling a cabinet "team of rivals" consisting of strong characters with distinct views that could create multiple advocacy in decision-making, Obama also gathered a group of people that share his attitude, if not his vision, when it came to foreign policy making and drive them together by a shared

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<sup>192</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 289; Best Jr., "The National Security Council," 23.

<sup>193</sup> Albert R. Hunt, "Flawed political persona may be Obama's greatest challenge," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/03/us/03iht-letter03.html>; Scott Wilson, "Gates's criticism of Obama in 'Duty' shows risks of initial 'team of rivals' approach," *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/gatess-criticism-of-obama-in-duty-shows-risks-of-initial-team-of-rivals-approach/2014/01/08/550427c0-7875-11e3-b1c5-739e63e9c9a7\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/gatess-criticism-of-obama-in-duty-shows-risks-of-initial-team-of-rivals-approach/2014/01/08/550427c0-7875-11e3-b1c5-739e63e9c9a7_story.html).

<sup>194</sup> Pfiffner, "Decision making," 248; Laïdi, *Limited achievements*, 21; Thrush, "Locked in."

sense of purpose. As Gates would later recall, he and Obama had “a similar approach to dealing with national security issues,” which arguably was an embrace of pragmatism.<sup>195</sup> Similarly, Hillary Clinton confessed to Gates in their early days working for the Obama administration that she would never do anything that yielded no results, which apparently signals her pragmatic approach to foreign affairs.<sup>196</sup>

In any case, what this suggests is less of a president encumbered by complex politicking than of one seeking heavy control of foreign policy. As Obama admitted twelve days into his presidency, “What I know concerns me. What I don’t know concerns me even more. What people aren’t telling me worries me the most.”<sup>197</sup> By having both his trusted advisers and his opposites in the room, he could get to hear the most of what people would not otherwise have told him either because of their own political considerations or due to their cognitive bias. Holding trusted advisers or not, Obama had decided since the beginning of his term not to appoint honest brokers but to act as his own honest broker and to have all serious policy options fully examined before making decisions.<sup>198</sup> In that sense, Obama undertook to be both the principal thinker and decider of policy while members of his team, loyalists and non-supporters alike, were mainly the doers and implementers helping him to push in the direction that he chose.

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<sup>195</sup> Bob Woodward, “Robert Gates, former defense secretary, offers harsh critique of Obama’s leadership in ‘Duty,’” *The Washington Post*, January 7, 2014, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/robert-gates-former-defense-secretary-offers-harsh-critique-of-obamas-leadership-in-duty/2014/01/07/6a6915b2-77cb-11e3-b1c5-739e63e9c9a7\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/robert-gates-former-defense-secretary-offers-harsh-critique-of-obamas-leadership-in-duty/2014/01/07/6a6915b2-77cb-11e3-b1c5-739e63e9c9a7_story.html).

<sup>196</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 329. Jeffrey Bader also contends that “like Obama, our foreign policy team dealing with Asia was resolutely pragmatic and nonideological.” Bader, *Obama and China*, 5.

<sup>197</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 300.

<sup>198</sup> Pfiffner, “Decision making,” 244; Laïdi, *Limited achievements*, 24.

The setting of US policy making in Asia at the outset of the Obama administration, therefore, was arguably one that contained more certainties than that which emerged at the beginning of Clinton's term. First, there was a president who chose to control the details of policy-making; his pragmatism allowed him to be open to compromise but once he had made up his mind he was committed to his selected course of action. Second, there was a clear chosen course of policy in Asia that signaled continuity and emphasized accommodation, especially towards China. Third, the Obama team was widely acknowledged as being "resolutely pragmatic and nonideological" in dealing with Asia, which would arguably help forestall big vacillations in policy unless strongly required.<sup>199</sup> All these suggest a higher degree of difficulty for the departments to sway Asia policy.

## **2. The pursuit of continuity**

By many insiders' accounts, Obama moved swiftly to execute his foreign policy visions upon assuming office.<sup>200</sup> Undoubtedly, the conditions under which Obama began refocusing US foreign policy on Asia were not all favorable, despite his keen interest in Asia and the rave response with which his election victory was received in Asia in 2008. That was not least because the 44<sup>th</sup> American president had no discernible background on China when entering the presidential race and his few childhood years in Indonesia, though perhaps useful for his campaign rhetoric, were hardly sufficient for Obama to command a fair grasp of the Asian regional dynamics.<sup>201</sup> Even as Obama proved to be a quick learner of foreign affairs, many other challenges demanded the president's time and therefore the time of his

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<sup>199</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 5.

<sup>200</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 9; Indyk et al, *Bending history*, 31.

<sup>201</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 24; Bader, *Obama and China*, xviii.

national security team. That Iraq constituted the topic of the first Obama National Security Council meeting on January 23, 2009 was telling of how tense the pressure was on the Obama team to respond to situations in locations other than Asia since its first days in office.<sup>202</sup> Nonetheless, the Obama administration made clear its intention to heighten American presence in Asia in general, and the East Asian region in particular, early. If anything, the fact that the new administration continued to be encumbered with the contours of events elsewhere further underscored the need, as many in the Obama foreign policy team were aware, of affirming US commitment to the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>203</sup>

Beginning in 2008, many in the US policy and academic circles noted a growing view within China that American power was on the wane.<sup>204</sup> By early 2009, it had become evident that the ongoing global financial meltdown, with its resultant impacts on the American economy, and the quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan were feeding perceptions within the Chinese elites and media that the US had been significantly weakened vis-à-vis China, which had weathered the global recession relatively well and became America's biggest financier. Across Asia, many Asians' reading of the American situation was more or less the same: that the US was in decline and/or distracted by the global war on terrorism and events in the Middle East.<sup>205</sup> How to respond to and rectify such common narrative of American decline that had permeated into the American public perception at the time was an issue that had

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<sup>202</sup> Joseph Pika and John Anthony Maltese, *The politics of the presidency* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.) (Los Angeles: CQ Press, 2013), 467; Gates, *Duty*, 323-324.

<sup>203</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 9; Donna Miles, "US will stand by deep commitments in Asia, Gates pledges," May 31, 2008, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=50056>.

<sup>204</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 80-81; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "American and Chinese power after the financial crisis," *The Washington Quarterly*, October 2010, accessed April 30, 2014, <https://csis.org/files/publication/twq10octobernye.pdf>.

<sup>205</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 2.

significant implications not only to American position abroad but also, and perhaps more importantly, to American revival at home.

Yet while the reemergence of American declinism in the late 2000s made the atmosphere at the beginning of the Obama presidency rather similar to that when Bill Clinton took office, it also highlighted the discrepancies between the Obama administration's point of departure and the Clinton team's as to how such phenomenon was perceived and handled. Whereas Bill Clinton looked at China's trade surplus with the US as a sign of greater Chinese vulnerability to American economic and political leverage, Obama apparently saw in increasing US trade deficits with China and the economic shamble at home a reminder of the limit of American power. Clinton and his advisers all too quickly assumed rational calculations of Sino-American asymmetrical interdependence would compel Beijing to bend to US demands, but informed China specialists in the Obama NSC and State Department were more mindful of the fact, also proven in the initial phase of the Clinton presidency, that China hardly knuckled under overt foreign pressure.<sup>206</sup> Alert China watchers and Asia experts in the Obama administration were also perhaps not oblivious to the fact that the last time perception of American decline resurfaced, such a perception did not reverberate the way they did across Asia two decades later – definitely not in Beijing, which was still startled after the American performance in the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>207</sup> More confident in American power and less concerned about negative reactions in Asian capitals, the trade-

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<sup>206</sup> Laïdi, *Limited achievements*, 5, 17; Bader, *Obama and China*, 3; Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, 198.

<sup>207</sup> David Scott, *China stands up: The PRC and the international system* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 86-87; Robert G. Sutter, *US policy toward China: An introduction to the role of interest groups* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 39; Ronald L. Tammen and Jacek Kugler, "Power transition and China-US conflict," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1(1), accessed April 30, 2014, <http://cjp.oxfordjournals.org/content/1/1/35.full>.

human rights bandwagon under Clinton could embark on an agenda of change that corroborated its unconcern with Asian opinions. Aware that it was dealing with a different landscape in Asia where America-in-decline had become a widely held belief, the Obama administration struggled not only to communicate increased American attention to Asia but also to demonstrate its attentiveness to regional views and perceptions.

Attempts to demonstrate American preparedness to continue engagement with Asia not just on US terms but also with due consideration to regional views apparently began first and foremost with China, the most important regional player from which Obama sought cooperation on a wide range of regional as well as global issues. Recognizing China's predilection for symbolism and also wanting to build a "safety net" for positive and sustained engagement, the Obama administration spent its first few months hammering out the designation and institutionalization of the US-China relationship.<sup>208</sup> The results that came out incrementally added up to signify a clear prioritization of China in the Obama foreign policy team's shopping list in Asia. The first step taken was Obama's phone call to President Hu Jintao shortly after taking office; after leaders of key US allies in Europe and Asia, Hu was the first foreign head of state to receive a phone call from the new American president.<sup>209</sup> Obama also sought to utilize every diplomatic opportunity provided at various multilateral fora of which both the US and China are members to directly engage the

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<sup>208</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 21.

<sup>209</sup> Obama had also reached out to Hu previously, telephoning the Chinese president within days after the election. Bader, *Obama and China*, 23.



Chinese leader. At their first face-to-face meeting during the April 2009 G-20 summit in London, Obama informed Hu of his interest in a visit to Beijing in November that year.<sup>210</sup>

More importantly, after their first meeting on April 1, 2009, Obama and Hu Jintao announced the establishment of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), a venue for annual consultation between the US and China on security and economic policies, as well as other issues of mutual concerns. As Jeffrey Bader, who was involved extensively in the incubation and development of the S&ED, acknowledges, the fact that there had never existed a similar dialogue mechanism between the US and other countries before speaks of how important China was viewed by the new US administration.<sup>211</sup> Less tangibly and more symbolically, but not least significantly to the Chinese nevertheless, American and Chinese officials also worked out a new name badge for the US-China relationship. Labeled “positive, constructive, and comprehensive,” the new description replaced the terms “constructive, cooperative, and candid” employed during the Bush era because China had reportedly frowned on how the word “candid” might enable the two sides to criticize each other.<sup>212</sup>

With those initial steps, the Obama team arguably achieved a large part of what it looked for in its first year in office with regard to China, which was to articulate general themes and lay the framework for US-China relations going forward.<sup>213</sup> The Obama administration’s arrival at the abovementioned, however, was not without haggling and disagreements. As the first

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<sup>210</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 24; Indyk et al, *Bending history*, 31.

<sup>211</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 22.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 23; Andrew Higgins and Anne E. Kornblut, “For Obama, as with his predecessors, defining China is challenge,” *The Washington Post*, November 12, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/11/AR2009111118779.html>.

<sup>213</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 31.

year of the new administration was considered the time to define the leitmotifs of an important American relationship with a rising power, it was also the time for the individuals and bureaucracies in the Obama foreign policy apparatus to lay out their policy views and define their role in shaping how the relationship should be rolled forward as well as in actually moving it forward. To a great extent, the deliberation of several steps taken to establish the modalities of the US-China relationship under Obama during the first few months of 2009 demonstrated the personal involvement of Obama himself as well as the domination of the China hands in his administration who favored a conciliatory approach toward Beijing, most notably Bader and Steinberg, in policy making.

Bader has postulated from his experience dealing with China that while Americans often prefer to build a relationship from a base of concrete and quantifiable elements of cooperation, the Chinese tend to start from the general to the specifics, insisting on general expression of goodwill before moving on to particular areas of cooperation.<sup>214</sup> The discrepancy between American and Chinese ways of thinking and how understanding of such discrepancy guided Bader's forceful and successful attempts to drive US China policy away from potential glitches were vividly displayed during the deliberation of Obama's trip to China in November 2009 as well as during the discussion on the characterization of the US-China relationship going forward. In the latter case, Bader rationalized efforts to develop a new catchphrase for the US-China relationship with informed contextualization: "It's something we have always had with the Chinese, dating back to the 1970s... You can't really go through an administration without having some label that provides a general

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<sup>214</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 23.

characterization.”<sup>215</sup> Thus while Obama did not feel at all comfortable with the Chinese routine of repeating the phrase “positive, constructive, and comprehensive” at every encounter, he was apparently convinced of the need to go along with what China considered significant.<sup>216</sup> In the former case, the NSC senior director for Asia suggested and encouraged Obama to tell Hu Jintao during their meeting in April 2009 of his interest in making a trip to China in November. Despite Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s contention that the administration should insist on seeing concrete Chinese cooperation efforts on some issues before committing to a visit, Bader argued, and Obama concurred, that the visit should not be attached to any preconditions that would likely backfire in Beijing.<sup>217</sup>

Besides the meeting at which Clinton and Bader found themselves on different pages regarding the possibility of Obama’s visit to China in late 2009, Clinton also found her voice contested while Bader’s role underscored in designing the premier channel of interaction between the US and China, although the challenge that Clinton confronted was not a direct result of Bader’s active efforts to shape US-China relations. Under the Bush administration, the central mechanism for US-China interaction was the so-called semiannual strategic economic dialogue headed on the US side by Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, while political and security issues were discussed annually at the subcabinet level. Clinton considered Bush’s was a flawed model that failed to give adequate consideration to political and security issues, and made clear from the start of the Obama administration that she wished to put those issues on par with economic matters in bilateral talks with China. Some in the administration, including Bader, apparently also hoped to encourage a recognition on

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<sup>215</sup> Higgins and Kornblut, “For Obama.”

<sup>216</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 23.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

the part of China that US security and economic policies, as well as those concerning energy and climate change, were integrated and formulated in toto. As neither State nor the Treasury Department was willing to cede the dominant role in the dialogue to the other, an interagency deputies' meeting packed with officials from the largest collection of agencies ever seen in Bader's account was held in early 2009 to work out the solution. The consensus reached was a special format wherein the secretaries of State and Treasury would preside over an annual dialogue discussing both security and economic issues with the Chinese, which was later sold to the leadership in Beijing by Bader.<sup>218</sup>

In early bureaucratic infighting and debates on China policy, Clinton could have bolstered her position with support from the Defense Department, given the rapport she quickly developed with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates since both began to take their job. Part of the reason for their alignment might be Clinton's awareness of lingering displeasure in the Obama camp with Clinton and those supporting her during the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, despite Obama's signifying "total trust" in his secretary of state.<sup>219</sup> Part of it might also be the fact that with their profiles and prestige, which arguably made the two "un-fireable," Clinton and Gates working in tandem could represent "the only independent power center" in an administration where decision-making authority was largely concentrated in the White House.<sup>220</sup> In any case, Gates was convinced since early that the secretary of state and he would be able to work closely together, and Clinton did indeed side with Gates on every major foreign policy issue during her first two years at

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>219</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 287; Steven Lee Myers, "Hillary Clinton's last tour as a rock-star diplomat," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/magazine/hillary-clintons-last-tour-as-a-rock-star-diplomat.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>220</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 289.

Foggy Bottom.<sup>221</sup> An old political survivor, Gates apparently had a greater say in decision-making, especially given that most senior officials at the White House had little executive branch experience in national security affairs and always treated the defense chief with respect, and he knew when to say it most effectively to get Obama's attention.<sup>222</sup>

Yet on China and Asia in general, Gates chose not to say much. Although he noted the perception of American distractedness in Asia and welcomed the Asia itinerary of Clinton's first foreign tour as secretary of state, at the start of 2009 Gates had set his priorities to be the war in Afghanistan and the restructuring of defense forces and budgets to tackle contingencies of the kind America was experiencing in the Middle East.<sup>223</sup> As far as China was concerned, the defense secretary was a proponent of regular contacts between the US and Chinese armed forces, many of which had been suspended after the 2008 US arms sale to Taiwan. Nonetheless, his experience working to promote military-to-military ties during the Bush administration left Gates an impression that "Chinese military leaders were leery of a real dialogue."<sup>224</sup>

Two events in early 2009 nevertheless raised the level of attention to Asia at the Pentagon. The first was a naval incident in March 2009, in which Chinese vessels harassed the US Navy ship *Impeccable* while the latter was conducting ocean surveillance in the South China Sea.

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.; Laïdi, *Limited achievements*, 23; Ryan Lizza, "Obama: The consequentialist," in *The domestic sources of American foreign policy: Insights and evidence*, ed. James M. McCormick (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 435.

<sup>222</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 290-295.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 327, 303-304.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 413-414; James R. Holmes, "What Robert Gates leaves behind: China," *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/10/what-robert-gates-leaves-behind/?img=2#postImage>.

The incident raised American anxiety about another military confrontation similar to the 2001 collision between a US EP-3 reconnaissance plane and a Chinese Navy F-8 fighter plane, as well as American concerns about US maritime access in the western Pacific.<sup>225</sup> The second was North Korea's launch of a long-range missile across the Pacific in April 2009. The US intelligence community got information about Pyongyang's plan for the missile test in February 2009, yet stern warnings from the State Department did not dissuade the North from carrying out the rocket launch.<sup>226</sup> To many Pentagon officials, both these developments underlined the need for continued positive engagement with China.

In spite of suggestion by a Chinese scholar that the Impeccable incident was "a sign of new robustness in China's dealing with the West," Gates took it to be the case that the incident was instigated by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) without the knowledge of the civilian leadership in Beijing.<sup>227</sup> After Pentagon reports of increasing Chinese harassment of US ocean surveillance ships, including the USNS Impeccable, in the Yellow Sea and South China Sea surfaced in March 2009, recommendations for negotiating with the PLA an "Incidents at Sea" (INCSEA) protocol similar to the 1972 INCSEA with the Soviet Union was refuted by the US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Gary Roughead, on the ground that a separate and exclusive agreement with the PLA would "set the PLA apart when all militaries ought to adhere to the same international "rules of the road," and define the relationship with the

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<sup>225</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser, "The diplomatic relationship: Substance and process," in *Tangled titans: The United States and China*, ed. David Shambaugh (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 164.

<sup>226</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 30-34; Choe Sang-Hun and David E. Sanger, "North Korean launches rocket over the Pacific," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/05/world/asia/05korea.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>227</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 414; The Economist, "China and the West: A time for muscle-flexing," March 19, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/node/13326082>.

PLA as abnormal, aggressive, and a specter of that with the Soviet Union.”<sup>228</sup> The better solution, it was perceived, was to enhance military-to-military relationship with China, and in April 2009, Admiral Roughead travelled to Beijing.<sup>229</sup> Similarly, although China was reluctant to condemn North Korea’s missile launch and a series of other provocations taken by Pyongyang in the first half of 2009, Beijing’s concurrence on punitive actions against the North was considered important to make those actions work. While preparing to respond to a possible attack from North Korea, therefore, Gates also tried to push for Chinese cooperation on the issue when General Xu Caihou, vice chairman of China’s Central Military Commission, led a group of senior Chinese military officials to visit the US in October 2009.<sup>230</sup> Thus despite their potential to derail US-China relations, disconcerting developments in early 2009 were handled in a way that ensure stability and promote collaboration in the US bilateral relationship with China.

The administration did not forget the rest of Asia. No matter how the American decline assumption was received in Asia in the early 1990s, when Bill Clinton thrust an aggressive trade-human rights promotion agenda on East Asia, he was forcing China and other regional countries to explicitly recognize what they had implicitly apprehended: the preeminence of US power in the post-Cold War world. With the Chinese and many other Asians more convinced of the continued rise of China and less certain about American staying power two decades later, and with many encumbrances that could not be handled by the US alone weighing on its shoulder, the Obama administration could hardly embark on a crusade to

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<sup>228</sup> Shirley A. Kan, “US-China military contacts: Issues for Congress,” CRS Report for Congress, November 20, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32496.pdf>, 30-31.

<sup>229</sup> Thomas Christensen, “Shaping the Choices of a Rising China: Recent Lessons for the Obama Administration,” *The Washington Quarterly* 32(3) (July 2009): 100.

<sup>230</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 37; Gates, *Duty*, 414.

vindicate that America was still prime. The more feasible and desirable course, in Obama's view, was to work with others to prove that America was still willing to lead.<sup>231</sup> Yet the paradox of the willingness to lead through cooperation and rational accommodation, especially in dealing with an apparently more confident China, was that it could be interpreted as the willingness to concede and could entrench perception of American decline. Thus the other part of the Obama administration's East Asia strategy – engagement with the rest of the region – was apparently a hedging strategy to ensure China as well as other regional players including North Korea get the right calculus of the power play that defines Asia's present and future.<sup>232</sup>

Such a strategy was also to reassure US allies and partners, most notably Japan, of US long-term commitment to the security of those allies and partners. The Obama team recognized that many Asians were more skeptical of US Democratic administrations' attention to the maintenance of alliances and security partnerships in Asia.<sup>233</sup> The administration took several steps to demonstrate that it cared about those alliances and partnerships since early 2009. Soon after it took office, the administration decided to give Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso the first chance to visit President Obama in the Oval Office in February 2009. Also in February 2009, Secretary of State Clinton made her first overseas trip to Asia; her first stop was Japan, followed by Indonesia, South Korea and China. In each of the three first destinations, Clinton affirmed US commitment to deepen cooperation with the respective countries and enhance US engagement in the region, which was apparently confirmed by the US-South Korea "Joint Vision for the Alliance" in June 2009 and subsequently by US

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<sup>231</sup> Barack Obama, "Renewing American leadership," *Foreign Affairs* 86(4) (July/August 2007), 11-13.

<sup>232</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 37-39.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.



accession to the ASEAN-crafted Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in July 2009.<sup>234</sup> Arguably, the appointment of Kurt Campbell as assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific also signified consideration for a balanced Asia policy in the State Department and the Obama administration in general. Campbell, who had worked with then Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye to upgrade the US-Japan security alliance during the Clinton administration, was widely known and respected in Japan.<sup>235</sup> Seen as a “Japan hand,” the new assistant secretary of state apparently added an important complement to the “China hands” Jim Steinberg and Jeffrey Bader in the Obama team.<sup>236</sup>

These attempts to seek a balanced East Asia strategy, however, did not outpace efforts to promote US bilateral relations with China in the second half of 2009. The Obama administration worked assiduously with China in late 2009 to ensure support for large stimulus programs necessary to manage the global financial crisis, elicit Chinese cooperation on constraining North Korea’s intransigence (Bader and Steinberg traveled to Beijing on June 5 to discuss the North Korea issue), and prepare for Obama’s trip to China in November that year.<sup>237</sup> Along the way, the administration apparently gestured in the direction of maintaining positive engagement and further accommodation toward China. In September 2009, the House of Representative passed a currency bill (H. R. 2378) that sought to address China’s weak-currency policy. The Obama administration did not publicly

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 9-15, 41; The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Joint vision for the alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea,” Press release, June 16, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea).

<sup>235</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 40.

<sup>236</sup> Peter Lee, “US learns hard lessons of Asia ‘pivot’,” *Asia Times Online*, October 27, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/NJ27Ad01.html>.

<sup>237</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 31-32, 36-37; Bader, *Obama and China*, 37-39, 54-57.

indicate whether it supported or opposed H. R. 2378, but administration officials made clear that congressional involvement on the issue was welcomed so long as legislative proposals would not complicate US ongoing bilateral and multilateral negotiations with China on the issue.<sup>238</sup> More noticeably, to ensure the boat would not be rocked during his trip to Beijing in November 2009, Obama opted out of a meeting with the Dalai Lama when the latter visited the US in October 2009 – the first time a sitting US president had done so since 1991.<sup>239</sup> The accession of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to power in August 2009 apparently presented unexpected complications to the administration’s pursuit of a “China first” policy in East Asia, as the Hatoyama government’s talks of a more “balanced” foreign policy that in essence signified a tilt toward China and increased detachment from the US raised alarm among American policymakers, especially the US defense community, about the shaking basis of American presence and power in the region.<sup>240</sup> Nevertheless, while Obama and administration officials were pressing for Tokyo’s recognition of the centrality of the US-Japan alliance, Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg introduced the idea of “strategic reassurance” with China in September 2009.

When raised by Steinberg at a September 2009 speech at the Center for New American Security, the concept of “strategic reassurance” had not been approved by the Obama NSC as an official policy, although it had been discussed at Deputies Committee meetings and

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<sup>238</sup> Wayne M. Morrison and Marc Labonte, “China’s currency policy: An analysis of the economic issues,” CRS Report to Congress, July 22, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21625.pdf>, 14-19.

<sup>239</sup> John Pomfret, “Obama’s meeting with the Dalai Lama is delayed,” *The Washington Post*, October 5, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/04/AR2009100403262.html>.

<sup>240</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 46; Bader, *Obama and China*, 43-44; Martin Fackler, “Cables show US concern on Japan’s disaster’s readiness,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/04/world/asia/04japan.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/04/world/asia/04japan.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

mentioned in discussions between Chinese and NSC officials.<sup>241</sup> Whether or not Steinberg was trying to get more buy-in after the fact by organizing his speech without first clearing it in the interagency process, the introduction of “strategic reassurance” ignited heated debates as to the nature of the “core, if tacit, bargain” in the US-China relationship laid out by the deputy secretary of state.<sup>242</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell’s reference to the idea of “strategic reassurance” in a remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations in late October 2009 indicated the concept was widely endorsed in the State Department, even though Steinberg reportedly did not clear his September speech with the Department’s Asia bureaucracy either. Campbell’s interpretation of “strategic reassurance” erred on the side of emphasizing Chinese seriousness about cooperation and “recognition of where red lines are.”<sup>243</sup> As commentators increasingly voiced suspicions that “strategic reassurance” was to herald more American yielding to China and send wrong signals to US allies, however, “strategic reassurance” was not uttered during Obama’s November 2009 visit to China.<sup>244</sup> Nevertheless, mutual reassurance was provided in the text, negotiated by Bader, of the Obama-Hu joint statement on November 17, 2009, which pledges that “respecting each

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<sup>241</sup> Glaser, “The diplomatic relationship,” 154; Josh Rogin, “The end of the concept of ‘strategic reassurance’?,” *The Cable*, November 6, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/11/06/the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_concept\\_of\\_strategic\\_reassurance](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/11/06/the_end_of_the_concept_of_strategic_reassurance).

<sup>242</sup> Higgins and Kornblut, “For Obama.”

<sup>243</sup> Kurt M. Campbell, “The US and China in 2025,” Keynote address at the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, October 19, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-2025-keynote-iii-us-china-2025/p20481>.

<sup>244</sup> Rogin, “The end;” Kelley Currie, “The doctrine of ‘strategic reassurance,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704224004574488292885761628>; Robert Kagan and Dan Blumenthal, “‘Strategic reassurance’ that isn’t,” *The Washington Post*, November 10, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/09/AR2009110902793.html>.

other's core interests is extremely important to ensure steady progress in U.S.-China relations."<sup>245</sup>

In early 2010, US-China relations were strained by various issues, including US arms sale to Taiwan in January and the Dalai Lama's visit to the White House in February 2010. The Obama administration had taken care to inform the Chinese in late 2009 that it would both proceed with the arms sale and allow the Dalai Lama's visit to the White House in the early part of 2010, but Beijing's reaction when the administration followed its words with deeds in 2010 was fierce. China asserted that US actions were neither consistent with the letter and spirit of the November joint statement nor acceptable given the new basis of US-China relations, and moved to suspend previously agreed military exchange programs, refuse to commit to participate in the first Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) that Obama announced for in April 2010 and decline to specify a date for Hu Jintao's summit visit to the US in 2010 (which had been consented to in principle in November 2009).<sup>246</sup> Several steps were then taken to smooth over the situation, including a press conference in which Jim Steinberg undertook to reaffirm America's "one China" policy and welcome China's support for a UN sanctions resolution on Iran. In response, Hu declared in early April that he would attend the NSS slated for a couple of days later.<sup>247</sup> Further ameliorating tensions was Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner's announcement in early April that the Treasury would not list China as a currency manipulator, despite demands from members of Congress. Although both sides apparently had more reasons than just bending to the other's pressure – Hu

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<sup>245</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, US-China joint statement, November 17, 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-china-joint-statement>.

<sup>246</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 40.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

probably recognized the dent his failure to attend the NSS would put on China's image as a major global power and Geithner understood any flexibility China could contemplate on currency reform would end the day he named it a manipulator – these steps indicated significant mutual compromises to keep US-China relations from further downturns.<sup>248</sup>

Inside the Pentagon, however, the patience with China was waning. Gates had considered that as long as Washington ensured the arms package sold to Taiwan consisted only “defensive” items, the deal would not create serious rupture in the US-China relationship. Given the growing disparity in military capability between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, it was argued, the US could hardly provide Taiwan with weapons sufficient for its defense. Arms sales to Taiwan thus served to give the Taiwanese the means to withstand a possible Chinese attack before America could come to the rescue and to signal US commitment to Taiwan's security as well as US assurance to other regional friends and allies in case of crisis.<sup>249</sup> In any event, Beijing's decision to suspend military exchange programs with the US after the arms sale was announced created no small deal of frustration at the Pentagon. More disappointing to Gates, China also retracted its invitation for the US secretary of defense to visit China in 2010, despite his insistence on going ahead with the plan in the spring 2010. When attending the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) in Singapore in June 2010, Gates decided to tackle the thorns in the US-China military relationship head-on, chastising the PLA's failure to follow up with the commitment to “advance sustained and reliable military-to-military relations” made by Obama and Hu in 2009. A response by a retired PLA general to Gates's comment that China had overreacted

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 41; Bader, *Obama and China*, 78.

<sup>249</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 415; Bader, *Obama and China*, 71.

to the 2010 US arms sale, however, caused further disquiet. The Chinese general contended that China could no longer tolerate the Taiwan arms sale because “now we are strong.”<sup>250</sup>

At the same time, events in the region also called for a reconsideration of US strategic posture. Despite Hatoyama’s pledge to improve Sino-Japanese ties and China’s keen efforts to catch the momentum, long-standing problems in the China-Japan bilateral relationship still festered. In March, April and June 2010, China conducted several naval operations and maritime activities in the waters near Japan that were seen as provocative and got considerable coverage in the Japanese media.<sup>251</sup> In September, after Japanese authorities detained a Chinese fishing captain whose trawler collided with Japanese patrol boats in the disputed Sensaku/Diaoyu Islands, Beijing suspended ministerial dialogue with Tokyo and cut off crucial rare earth exports to Japan. Concomitantly, the plummeting of Hatoyama’s popularity rate and his eventual downfall in May 2010 brought Japan back to its pro-US, pro-alliance stance.<sup>252</sup> Meanwhile, the contours of things on the Korean peninsula turned for the worse in March 2010 with the sinking of the South Korean navy ship Cheonan in the Yellow Sea. As Pyongyang evaded responsibility for the Cheonan incident, which took 46 South Korean lives, and Beijing refused to press its quasi-ally on that issue, South Korea’s president Lee Myung Bak went all out to urge for Japan’s support against North Korea.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 415-416; Kan, “US-China,” 5-6.

<sup>251</sup> In March and April, China dispatched flotillas through the Miyako Strait to conduct “confrontation exercise” in the Pacific, which raised Japanese unease as the transits were accompanied by provocative PLA Navy helicopter maneuvers toward Japanese surveillance vessels deployed nearby. In June, Japan’s Ministry of Defense reported similar sighting of Chinese naval transit near Yakushima (in Kagoshima Prefecture). Paul J. Smith, “China-Japan relations: Competition amidst interdependence,” in *East and South-East Asia: International relations and security perspectives*, ed. Andrew T. H. Tan (New York: Routledge, 2013), 70.

<sup>252</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 47; Bader, *Obama and China*, 45-47.

<sup>253</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 46.

Much as the crisis on the Korean peninsula, which protracted until late 2010 with North Korea's launch in November of an artillery barrage onto the Yeonpyeong Island administered by the South, provided a wake up call for Tokyo about Japan's difficult geostrategic position and the importance of the alliance with America, it also compounded the Pentagon's misgivings about China. During a trip to Tokyo in December 2010, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, attributed Pyongyang's "reckless behavior" to China's continued shielding of North Korea.<sup>254</sup>

Meantime, China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea drove a wedge between China and many Southeast Asian nations. As Vietnam, the Philippines and many Southeast Asian nations staged diplomatic campaigns to bring US attention to mounting unrest in the South China Sea, the State Department began to recognize that a more active US role in settling the various disputes that were raging in the region was called for. By mid-2010, many China-watchers had noted the emergence of an assertive China, which perhaps was pumped up by a Chinese narrative that American actions in early 2010 revealed US determination to preclude China's rise and delay America's decline.<sup>255</sup> Clinton had apparently felt the need to assist US allies and friends in the region to resist Chinese pressure since early of her tenure as secretary of state.<sup>256</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, who had argued in favor of US arms sale to Taiwan in early 2010, also perceived

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid.; Larry Shaughnessy, "Mullen: China must do more to end North Korea's 'reckless behavior'," *CNN*, December 1, 2010, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/12/01/mullen.china.nkorea/>.

<sup>255</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 40; Bader, *Obama and China*, 79-82.

<sup>256</sup> Greg Sheridan, "US loses its focus on Asia," *Real Clear World*, February 8, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2013/02/08/us\\_loses\\_its\\_focus\\_on\\_asia\\_100539-full.html](http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2013/02/08/us_loses_its_focus_on_asia_100539-full.html); Michael O'Hanlon, "Missing Hillary's hand in Asia," *Politico Magazine*, December 13, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/12/did-obama-forget-about-asia-101139\\_Page2.html#.UxSsMf2PBfP](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/12/did-obama-forget-about-asia-101139_Page2.html#.UxSsMf2PBfP).

that a new, more comprehensive articulation of US maritime interests and policy in the region was necessary. In early 2010, Campbell and Bader decided to hold an interagency meeting on the South China Sea. The conclusion reached at that meeting was incorporated into the text of the statement Campbell and his staff drafted for Clinton to deliver at the 17<sup>th</sup> meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Hanoi in July 2010.<sup>257</sup>

Identifying freedom of navigation and open access to Asia's maritime commons as a US "national interest," Clinton declared on July 23 that "the United States supports a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving the various territorial disputes without coercion."<sup>258</sup> The previous day, in her remarks on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the US-Vietnam relations, the US secretary of state had announced that "the Obama administration [was] prepared to take the US-Vietnam relationship to the next level, [seeing] this relationship not only as important on its own merits, but as part of a strategy aimed at enhancing American engagement in the Asia-Pacific and in particular Southeast Asia."<sup>259</sup> According to Bader's account, he and Campbell had prior to the ARF-17 meeting contacted other delegations to the forum to urge them to talk about international rights in the South China Sea.<sup>260</sup> Other Southeast Asian nations, especially Vietnam, which chaired the forum in 2010, apparently also played an active role in pushing for discussions on the South China Sea issue at the closed-door meeting, despite China's pre-meeting attempts to prevent ASEAN from raising the issue at the table. In any case, those efforts led to a

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<sup>257</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 71-72, 104-105.

<sup>258</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks at press availability, Hanoi, July 23, 2010, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

<sup>259</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks with Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem, Hanoi, July 22, 2010, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145034.htm>.

<sup>260</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 105.



concerted demonstration of regional concerns about the situation in the South China Sea when 13 foreign ministers participating in the event echoed US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's declaration of US support for freedom of navigation and a peaceful resolution for the South China Sea issue.<sup>261</sup>

Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's negative reaction to such concerted efforts apparently entrenched perception among many that China's increasing assertiveness was indeed increasing. After leaving the meeting in fury after US and other delegations raised the South China Sea issue, Yang later returned to remind other participants that "China is a big country... and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact." If representatives from other "small countries" were startled by this blunt assertion, Clinton might not have been less so. Thus by late 2010, it had become apparent that the China-first policy had lost much attraction. Many regional countries were increasingly registered their displeasure, and both the State Department and the Pentagon had come to grasp the need for a revised approach. Such developments would set the stage for another major shift in US policy in East Asia.

### **3. The push for change**

Throughout the rest of 2010, the American pushback on China's assertiveness continued. In October 2010, Gates joined in the rebuke against China's overreach in the East and South China Seas at the inaugural ASEAN Defense Ministers-plus (ADMM+) meeting in Hanoi.

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<sup>261</sup> Tran Truong Thuy, "Recent developments in the South China Sea: Implications for regional security and cooperation," accessed April 30, 2014, [https://csis.org/files/publication/110629\\_Thuy\\_South\\_China\\_Sea.pdf](https://csis.org/files/publication/110629_Thuy_South_China_Sea.pdf), 16.

Reiterating Clinton's line in July, Gates pressed for the need to observe freedom of navigation and respect international law in the South China Sea, and reaffirmed US support for a "collaborative diplomatic process" to settle the various competing claims in the region.<sup>262</sup> Recognizing the "topic of particular importance for all nations [at the forum then was] maritime security," however, Gates took the American position a step further. When in Hanoi in July 2010, Clinton had declared US support for "a collaborative diplomatic process" to resolve the South China Sea dispute and announced that Washington "is prepared to facilitate initiatives and confidence building measures consistent with the [2002 ASEAN-China declaration on the conduct of parties in the South China Sea]."<sup>263</sup> Many analysts have contended that the expression of "collaborative" in Clinton's remarks was deliberate, but the Obama administration failed to clarify the difference between "collaborative" and "multilateral." Clinton indeed never mentioned the term "multilateral" in her speech, and it has been argued that the administration had carefully chosen the word "collaborative" to convey its view that the South China Sea dispute should be tackled by the parties concerned in a positive manner rather than to herald its support for a multilateral dispute settlement process in which the US might play a role (as China seemed to interpret).<sup>264</sup>

Gates, however, apparently shrugged off whatever reservation there might have been in US position in July 2010 as he told Chinese and other Asian defense ministers in October,

We are encouraged to see claimant nations in the South China Sea making initial steps to discuss the development of a full code of conduct, in line with the 2002 ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of

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<sup>262</sup> Robert M. Gates, Remarks at ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, Hanoi, October 12, 2010, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4700>.

<sup>263</sup> Clinton, *Remarks*, July 23, 2010.

<sup>264</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 49.

Parties. We applaud this *multilateral* approach and we stand ready to help facilitate such initiatives.”<sup>265</sup> (Emphasis added)

The clarification provided was therefore that the US was seeking an active role in coordinating a regional response to Chinese overreach in the South China Sea, although both Gates’s statement as well as Clinton’s never mentioned China, “restricting [themselves] to principles” as Bader would later point out.<sup>266</sup>

The administration confirmed its readiness to play an active role not only in responding to China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea but also in shaping the environment around China throughout the late months of 2010. After the September 2010 Japanese capture of a Chinese fishing captain whose trawler rammed Japanese patrol boats in waters claimed by Japan created a diplomatic furor, with Beijing reportedly arresting four Japanese businessmen in western China and stopping Chinese shipping of rare earth minerals considered vital for Japanese electronics industry in retaliation, President Obama and Secretary Clinton held talks with Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan on September 23 on the margins of a UN General Assembly meeting in New York. Although the US took no position on the territorial dispute between China and Japan, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mullen, Clinton and Bader later went out to show solidarity with Japan and to reaffirm US obligation under the 1960 US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Security and Cooperation to defend all areas administered by Japan, including the Sensakus. “Obviously we very, very strongly support our ally [Japan],” stated Admiral Mullen.<sup>267</sup> Apparently the American statements

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<sup>265</sup> Gates, *Remarks*, October 12, 2010.

<sup>266</sup> Bader, *Obama and China’s rise*, 105.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-108. Secretary Clinton also proposed on October 30 trilateral talks between the US, Japan and China over the disputed Sensaku/Diaoyu Islands, but China rejected the offer. Robert G. Sutter et al.,

were meant as much to reassure Tokyo as they were to console an enraged Japanese public and prevent nationalistic impulses from escalating Sino-Japanese tensions, considering that such statements were uttered before Japan released the Chinese captain but after Washington had secured Japanese agreement to do so.<sup>268</sup> Nevertheless, those statements constituted a show of support much expected of America in the face of Chinese bullying. Then in late November, in response to North Korea's shelling of Yeonpyeong Island after South Korea conducted a regular live-fire exercise near the demarcation line, the USS George Washington was deployed to the Yellow Sea to signal to both Pyongyang and Beijing that North Korean provocations could not go on unchecked. The deployment was also to communicate long-held determination in Washington that the US would not bend to China's demand – contrary to the UN Law of the Sea Convention – that foreign military vessels could not operate within its EEZ without Beijing's permission.<sup>269</sup>

The American moves to curb China's "willful blindness" and intimidation towards its neighbors apparently yielded some expected results.<sup>270</sup> Few weeks after the ARF-17 concluded, it was observable that Clinton's pitch for freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute had fostered some reflection and reconsideration in Beijing on the desirability of pursuing an assertive policy in East Asia. The first sign of such reflection appeared when Chinese officials and scholars began to jettison the characterization of the South China Sea as a Chinese "core interest" on par with Taiwan and

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*Balancing acts: The US rebalance and Asia-Pacific stability* (Washington, DC: Elliott School of International Affairs, August 2013), 33.

<sup>268</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 107.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 89, 105.

<sup>270</sup> Mark Landler, "Obama urges China to check North Korea," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2010, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/world/asia/07diplo.html>.

Tibet.<sup>271</sup> High-ranking Chinese officials reportedly first attached the “core interest” label to the South China Sea during a private meeting with Bader and Steinberg in Beijing in March 2010, and then brought the claim of such an interest to a higher level at the second S&ED in May 2010. By late July, however, Chinese officials had started to refrain from asserting such a claim in a public setting, although they did not openly deny it, not least out of reluctance to inflame the Chinese public with what could be perceived as a chicken action.<sup>272</sup> By September, as preparations for the second US-ASEAN Leaders meeting were under way, Beijing signaled China’s willingness to begin expert talks on a code of conduct in the South China Sea.<sup>273</sup> In the fall 2010, Chinese news media was also ordered to stop feeding public debates on whether the South China Sea fell into the Chinese “core interests” category, which had erupted after Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo broadened the definition of Chinese “core interests” to include maintaining China’s political system, defending its sovereignty claims and promoting its economic development.<sup>274</sup>

If the low-profile approach with which Beijing tackled the “core interest” issue in the immediate period after ARF-17 suggests continued disagreement among the Chinese leadership on the matter as well as on the general direction of Chinese policy, in October 2010 it appeared that proponents of a more cautious foreign policy had somewhat prevailed in China. When Gates and seven other defense ministers spoke of the need to resolve disputes in the South China Sea and other international waters peacefully in clear

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<sup>271</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 106.

<sup>272</sup> Edward Wong, “China hedges over whether South China Sea is a ‘core interest’ worth war,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/world/asia/31beijing.html>.

<sup>273</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 105-106.

<sup>274</sup> Wong, “China hedges.”

reference to China at the ADMM+ meeting on October 12, 2010, Chinese defense minister Liang Guanglie, in Gates's account, "just sat and took it." Liang later reached out to Gates on the sidelines of the ADMM+ in Hanoi to invite the latter to visit China in early 2011. The visit, which took place in January 2011, saw the full restoration US-China military-to-military ties.<sup>275</sup> Finally, in arguably the most explicit move to signal a change in China's policy course, in early December 2010 State Councilor Dai published an article on the Chinese Foreign Ministry's website defending the wisdom of Deng Xiaoping's traditional policy of prudence, modesty and caution. Dai, supposedly with Hu Jintao's support, also called into question the desirability of a more assertive policy allegedly advocated by some Chinese hardliners, thus paving the way for what Bader considers "a more accommodationist approach toward the United States."<sup>276</sup>

Arguably, therefore, it was American diplomatic pressures backed by concrete military demonstrations along the way that helped precipitate China's policy reassessment in late 2010. Yet while Beijing's adoption of a more accommodating tone and Washington's assumption of a more active role were notable, the change in US approach in late 2010, as in China's, was tactical adjustment rather than sea change. Accompanying the pressure on China to rein in its assertiveness in the latter part of 2010 was a continued American effort, mainly executed by the White House, to engage the PRC and keep the US-China relationship on track. Thus while the State Department and the Pentagon were preparing for a diplomatic showdown with China at regional fora in mid-2010, at their meeting in June 2010 at the G-20 summit in Toronto Obama invited Hu Jintao to the United States for a state

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<sup>275</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 419; Bader, *Obama and China*, 122-123, 125.

<sup>276</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 123.

visit, in reciprocation to China's reception of Obama in November 2009. The fact that Obama chose to extend the invitation even as he recognized welcoming high-level visits by Chinese leaders at such a sensitive time would almost certainly cost him political capital at home indicates the high value he continued to place on building the US relationship with China.<sup>277</sup>

The enormous care and attention to detail that went into planning for the Hu visit were further indicative of how important Obama and his advisors see a positive relationship with China to be. In September 2010, Tom Donilon, who was to replace James Jones as National Security Advisor in a couple of days later, and Larry Summers, Director of the National Economic Council, traveled to Beijing to prepare for the visit. The pairing of two Obama's key advisors for the trip was unprecedented, and it was intended to convey the level of presidential concern and interest in the US-China relationship as it went through a rocky period. Shortly after Donilon and Summers returned from Beijing, many interagency meetings were also held to discuss the organization of Hu Jintao's visit, one goal of which was to "ensure that the Chinese leader would go home with a sense of satisfaction that the relationship served his political needs as well."<sup>278</sup> Eventually when Hu arrived in Washington, DC, in late January 2011, the joint statement made by the two presidents "reaffirmed their commitment to building a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive U.S. - China relationship for the 21st century," "respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 115-121.

integrity” and “work[ing] further to nurture and deepen bilateral strategic trust to enhance their relations.”<sup>279</sup>

The pleasure Hu took home afterwards apparently proved to Obama administration officials that American attentiveness had paid off.<sup>280</sup> Thus at the end of 2010 and well into early 2011, US policy in East Asia remained a dual pursuit of positive engagement with China and cooperation with the rest of the region. What had changed was apparently the level of consideration given to other parts of the region, as demonstrated most vividly by American words and deeds at regional fora and seascape in late 2010, but that had not affected the attention paid to the maintenance of positive engagement with China. As the level of attention given to China remained unchanged, increased American responsiveness to the views and perceptions of other players in the region arguably brought the rest of the region closer to China in order of priority, creating more balance in US policy in East Asia.

Ensuring that both wheels – engagement with China and cooperation with the rest on the region – was moving concomitantly in late 2010 was apparently the intention of the White House foreign policy apparatus that came under the stewardship of Tom Donilon in October 2010. Donilon had been a stout proponent of increased US presence and visibility in East Asia since the first day of the administration, and his elevation to the post of national security adviser ensured an even higher degree of attention given to East Asia after the departure of James Jones in September 2010. Having served as chief of staff for Secretary of State Warren Christopher in the 1990s, Donilon was particularly interested in China and in

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<sup>279</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, US-China joint statement, January 19, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/19/us-china-joint-statement>.

<sup>280</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 127-128.



forging relations with Beijing; at the same time, he was concerned about the strategic dilemma posed by the rising state. As he sought to play a central role in shaping US China policy as well as US posture in East Asia, Donilon had apparently mulled over the question of how best to engage China and simultaneously deter it from playing heavy-handedness in the region.<sup>281</sup>

By the time he was appointed National Security Adviser, it seemed that Donilon had decided to continue pursuing the hedging strategy that entailed both increased engagement with China and deepened commitment to work with others to develop the regional playground in which China could be encouraged to play by the rule. Shortly after Obama invited Hu to the United States, Donilon had begun in July 2010 to plan for a trip to China to discuss Hu's visit and come up with the idea of bringing Summers along the way. It was during his trip to Beijing in September 2010 that Donilon pushed the Chinese to resume high-level US-China military contacts and to arrange for a long postponed visit by Secretary Gates to China.<sup>282</sup> At the same time, Donilon threw his weight behind the White House's decision to join the East Asia Summit (EAS), the primary forum for strategic dialogue in the region that had been promoted by ASEAN and Australia (as a founding member). Obama had pondered over the possibility of joining the EAS after Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd and Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono pushed for US participation in their meetings with the US president in January and June 2010 respectively, but Donilon's support for the idea apparently encouraged Obama to move forward when the administration was mired in

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 115; Peter Ennis, "Failure to fill key Asia posts hinders Obama administration," April 29, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.dispatchjapan.com/blog/kurt-campbell/>.

<sup>282</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 115-117.

intense debates on the desirability of such an endeavor.<sup>283</sup> Prior to the Obama-Hu summit in January 2011, Obama's ten-day Asia tour in November 2010, which included stops at India, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan, was also meant to send a strong signal of US devotion to strengthening alliances and partnerships even as America strived to maintain a positive relationship with China.

Apparently the vision embraced by Donilon and possibly Bader in late 2010 was for US engagement with China and US cooperation with the rest of East Asia to move in tandem. The State Department and to a lesser extent the Pentagon, however, were poised to position themselves largely at the second front of US policy, which increasingly involved not only reassuring US allies and partners of American commitment in East Asia as a whole but also restraining China's behavior, given the unease China's assertive policy was creating in the region. Knowing that China preferred to deal with those issues bilaterally so that it could intimidate whichever country it was dealing with, Clinton took the lead in demonstrating active US support for multilateral dialogue to settle regional security issues involving China, and Gates was also keen on adopting such an approach.<sup>284</sup> The State Department also advocated for US participation in the EAS, despite objections from economic agencies fearing elevation of the EAS would undercut APEC's relevance and also from some in the White House reluctant to add more commitments to the president's already busy schedule.<sup>285</sup> As the administration was preparing to welcome Hu Jintao to the US, furthermore, Clinton undertook to plan a trilateral meeting with Japanese and South Korean foreign ministers in early January 2011 to demonstrate allied solidarity in the face of North

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>284</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 416-17.

<sup>285</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 96.

Korean provocations.<sup>286</sup> Meanwhile, the Pentagon-funded Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment began propagating in October 2010 an “AirSea Battle” concept (ASB) to “offset the PLA’s unprovoked and unwarranted military buildup” and “[preserve] US power-projection capabilities in the face of growing anti-access/area-denial challenges [including] the most formidable challenge... posed by the Chinese military” in order to “deter China from acts of aggression or coercion in that region and, if necessary, to respond effectively in the event deterrence fails.”<sup>287</sup>

Many observers have posited that identifying China as a threat was a way to protect defense dollars favored by some in the Pentagon, including Gates and his successor Leon Panetta, as the prospect of sizeable Pentagon budget cuts loomed large. In this context, the development of the ASB seemed suited to the narrative that China’s military capabilities provided a convenient justification for continued investment in defense procurement.<sup>288</sup> Gates had indeed by the end of 2010 been frustrated by pressures from both Congress and the White House to trim down the US defense budget.<sup>289</sup> The call for investment on Air Force and Navy stealthy long-range strike and support platforms in the ASB also resonated with Gates’s earlier argument, raised in an article on Foreign Affairs in January 2009, for “shifts from short-range to longer-range systems” to better “project [US] power and help [US] allies

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>287</sup> Jan Van Tol et al., “AirSea Battle: A point-of-departure operational concept,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, May 18, 2010, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.csbaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/2010.05.18-AirSea-Battle.pdf>.

<sup>288</sup> Indyk et al., 57; Christopher M. Twomey, “Military developments,” in *Debating China: The US-China relationship in ten conversations*, ed. Nina Hachigian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 159.

<sup>289</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 453-465.

in the Pacific.”<sup>290</sup>

For all the evidence that might suggest the US defense chief’s readiness to pick on China in order to secure funding for the Pentagon, however, Gates did not try to drum up enthusiasm for a major showdown with China as he worked out defense budget plans in 2009 and 2010. In fact, since 2007, Gates had resolved to fight against what he considered a tendency among civilian and military leaders at the Pentagon to concentrate on planning for future potential wars, i.e. wars with other nation-states, that was allegedly to the detriment of US military services’ ability to handle the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>291</sup> In his article on “reprogramming the Pentagon for a new age” on *Foreign Affairs* in January 2009, Gates rejected the possibility of America having to fight a conventional ground war or a major power conflict, arguing instead that “we must not be so preoccupied with preparing for future conventional and strategic conflicts that we neglect to provide all the capabilities necessary to fight and win conflicts such as those [in Iraq and Afghanistan] the United States is in today,” even though he acknowledged the need for some restructuring in US defense systems in the Pacific to meet the challenge posed by a more capable Chinese military.<sup>292</sup>

Things seemed to be gradually changing in early 2011. Throughout 2010, the Pentagon continued to monitor Chinese military modernization and in a March 2010 testimony to Congress, Admiral Robert Willard, head of the US Pacific Command, disclosed that China’s

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<sup>290</sup> Robert M. Gates, “A balanced strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a new age,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2009, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63717/robert-m-gates/a-balanced-strategy?nocache=1>.

<sup>291</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 114-119, 142-143.

<sup>292</sup> Gates, “A balanced strategy.”

military development had been “pretty dramatic.”<sup>293</sup> In his trip to China in January 2011, Gates was provided with a more vivid reminder of such development when a PLA’s test of a new J-20 stealth fighter aircraft was reported in the Chinese press just hours before his meeting with Hu Jintao. Hu’s surprise when questioned by Gates about the J-20 flight and his later confirmation that the test had not been timed in connection with the schedule of Gates’s visit did not mitigate the US defense secretary’s concern; on the other hand, Gates was even more troubled by the apparent paucity of communication between the Chinese military and its civilian leadership, if not by the degree of boldness and freedom of action the PLA had seemingly acquired.<sup>294</sup> Thus as Bader and perhaps a number of other administration officials were relishing “a sense of satisfaction” after the Hu Jintao visit went off smoothly a couple of days later, Gates was more mindful of the fact that “the US-Chinese relationship face[d] serious challenges.”<sup>295</sup> This apparently prompted a revision of his earlier assumption in 2009 that “US air and sea forces have ample untapped striking power should the need arise to deter or punish aggression – whether on the Korean Peninsula, in the Persian Gulf, or across the Taiwan Strait.”<sup>296</sup> As 2011 set in, it was Gates’s realization that “a robust American air and naval presence in the Pacific, especially in East Asia, will continue to be necessary to reassure our friends and allies but also to ensure peaceful resolution of disputes.”<sup>297</sup>

To the extent that there indeed existed a tendency among Pentagon leaders to focus on

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<sup>293</sup> Edward Wong, “Chinese military seeks to extend its naval power,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2010, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/world/asia/24navy.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>294</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 527-528.

<sup>295</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 130; Gates, *Duty*, 528.

<sup>296</sup> Gates, “A balanced strategy.”

<sup>297</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 528-529.

potential conflicts with major nation-states as Gates suggests, it might be fair to say that large defense spending cuts did as much to aggravate US defense planners' anxiety about growing Chinese military capabilities as China's military buildup compounded unease within the Pentagon about having a smaller paycheck. In any case, with increased budget strain, China was viewed as more of a challenge than a potential partner and allied cooperation deemed more important at the Pentagon. The *AirSea Battle: A point-of-departure operational concept* released by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in October 2010 spells out that for the ASB to work, "allies such as Japan and Australia, and possibly others, must play important enabling roles in sustaining a stable military balance." In his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore and later before Congress in June 2011, Gates repeatedly referred to the threat posed by China's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy as he discussed US defense priorities and force structure for the future.<sup>298</sup> In his first Pentagon news conference one month after he took over from Gates as defense chief, Leon Panetta picked up the line about the need to ensure US ability to project power in the world "in order to make sure that rising powers understand that the United States still has a strong defense" even as America faced fiscal austerity. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, who joined Panetta at the conference, pointed out, China's military buildup was "an area of great concern," since the PLA was developing "other capabilities that [were] not just defensive [in nature]" as the

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<sup>298</sup> Robert M. Gates, Remarks at Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 4, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1578>; Robert M. Gates, Opening speech on Budget request before Senate Appropriations Committee, Washington, DC, June 15, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1585>

Chinese were claiming.<sup>299</sup>

While the Pentagon was beginning to view China in a darker light, two personnel changes at the State Department and the NSC altered the dynamics of US policy toward China as well as toward the broader East Asian region. In the spring of 2011, Bader and Steinberg left office. The departure of the two China specialists who had managed to keep US-China relations within a constructive framework left no China experts at the level of bureau chief or higher in the State Department, National Security Council or the Pentagon, which apparently gave rise to a more alarmist, less accommodating view of China that had been developing at the State Department since late 2009.<sup>300</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell apparently brought such a view to Japan on several occasions in late 2009 and early 2010 as he pressed for Japanese cooperation and agreement to keep the US air base at Okinawa, telling the government of prime minister Hatoyama that “the United States and Japan [were facing] the most challenging security environment in the history of the alliance” and urging Tokyo to take China’s military rise more seriously.<sup>301</sup> With Bader and Steinberg gone, Clinton and Campbell gained more control of Asia policy.<sup>302</sup>

Arguably, as many have noted, all the members of Obama’s Asia team in 2009-2010, including Bader, Steinberg, Donilon, Clinton and Campbell, understood and agreed on the

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<sup>299</sup> US Department of Defense, “DOD news briefing with Secretary Panetta and Adm. Mullen from the Pentagon,” News transcript, August 4, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4860>.

<sup>300</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 56-57.

<sup>301</sup> Fackler, “Cables show.”

<sup>302</sup> Sheridan, “US loses;” Zachary Keck, “Help wanted: Who will run US China policy,” *The Diplomat*, June 8, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/06/help-wanted-who-will-run-u-s-china-policy/>.

need to enhance US presence in Asia, to reinforce American alliances there and to affirm continued American commitment and leadership in the region. Yet Bader, and perhaps Steinberg, was apparently more understanding of China and less empathetic to other lesser states in East Asia. When tensions in the South China Sea ran high in 2009-2010, Vietnam was one of the most active countries seeking US diplomatic support to bring the South China Sea issue to multilateral fora. Perhaps judging from Hanoi's activism, Bader was quick to single out Vietnam as the only one country in the region that wished to see the US entangled in a confrontation with China.<sup>303</sup> The Vietnamese were in fact too mindful of great power politics and too conscious of their geostrategic situation to harbor such a desire, but Bader's postulation reveals that he might not have been as attentive to other dynamics in the region as he was to the dynamics of the US-China relationship. Clinton, on the other hand, had since the early days of the Obama administration proved to be keener on bolstering American role in East Asia by cultivating ties with other countries in the region and supporting allies and friends that feel threatened by China – as often as not in a way that Beijing might not prefer. Campbell was also a stalwart supporter of US Asian alliances and had been favoring increasing America's footprint in Southeast Asia. It was Campbell who encouraged Clinton to become to first US secretary of state to visit the ASEAN headquarters and to announce the appointment of the first US ambassador to ASEAN – to be confirmed in 2011 – during her Asia trip in February 2009.<sup>304</sup> The State Department had also reportedly wanted to lend a greater hand to the Philippines in the face of China's bullying but was stopped by the White House. With the leadership of the White House on issues relating to China and the broader East Asia coming loose as Bader and Steinberg left,

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<sup>303</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 103.

<sup>304</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 14-15.



Clinton and Campbell apparently had more leeway to foster ties with American allies and friends in the region and more room to stand up to China as deemed fit.<sup>305</sup>

The first sign that the State Department's position with regard to China and the broader East Asian region was beginning to shift gear apparently appeared in March 2011. In a testimony on US foreign aid policy in the Asia-Pacific, Clinton told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "We are in competition for influence with China. Let's put aside the humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in. Let's just talk straight realpolitik. We are in competition with China."<sup>306</sup> By mid-2011, an effective State-Defense alliance had obviously been established to drum up American presence in East Asia and augment US cooperation with regional allies and partners in a way that spoke more competition and challenge to China. In his speech at the 2011 Shangri-La Dialogue in which he touted the AirSea Battle concept that envisions allied cooperation as the prerequisite for sea control and support operations in the eastern Indian Ocean, Oceania and the South China Sea to counter China's A2/AD strategy, Gates not only reiterated the mantra of his remarks at the 2010 SLD that the US was pursuing a defense posture in Asia that was "more geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable" but he also went a step further to define what that posture should look like: As Gates declared, it was "a posture that maintains our presence in Northeast Asia while enhancing our presence in Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean." The declaration was backed up by Gates's announcement that the US would deploy to Singapore four newly developed littoral combat ships (beginning in April 2013), which would enable US forces to operate closer to shorelines and

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<sup>305</sup> O'Hanlon, "Missing Hillary's hand;" Sheridan, "US loses."

<sup>306</sup> Jones et al., *Asian security*, 30.

collaborate with partner militaries.<sup>307</sup> In September 2011, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert Scher and Vietnam's Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh signed a memorandum of understanding for "advancing bilateral defense cooperation."<sup>308</sup>

In late October 2011, Leon Panetta used his trip to Asia to discuss the realignment of US forces in Japan and raised further warnings about China's growing military capabilities.<sup>309</sup> Meanwhile, Kurt Campbell and State Department officials were apparently working on the conceptualization of increased American effort to boost up alliances and partnerships and heighten US presence in East Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia. In November 2011, Secretary Clinton became the first to spell out the American "pivot" to Asia as she wrote of "America's Pacific century" in an article on Foreign Policy. Describing the "pivot" as a "strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific," Clinton mapped out an integrated economic, diplomatic and military strategy covering the broader Asia-Pacific from the Indian subcontinent to East Asia that reflected Campbell's desire for, and Gates's earlier emphasis on, enhanced US presence in Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean.<sup>310</sup> Recognizing that "China represents one of the most challenging and consequential bilateral relationships the United States has ever had to manage," Clinton then called for "an approach to China on our part that is *grounded in reality, focused on results, and true to our principles and interests,*" which was elaborated as that "we will continue to *embed our relationship with China in a broader*

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<sup>307</sup> Gates, *Remarks*, June 4, 2011.

<sup>308</sup> Sutter et al., *Balancing acts*, 34.

<sup>309</sup> US Department of Defense, "Joint press conference with Secretary Panetta and Japanese Minister of Defense Ichikawa in Tokyo, Japan," News transcript, October 25, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4912>.

<sup>310</sup> Bader, *Obama and China*, 15.

*regional framework of security alliances, economic networks, and social connections.*<sup>311</sup>

(Emphasis added)

Apparently, there were also other forces at work to shift US policy toward China and East Asia in late 2011. As the US presidential election neared, it was observable that pressure from the GOP camp, which was professing a tougher stance on China, induced Obama and his advisors to bend US China policy in that direction. That the Obama administration undertook to provide private assurance to China before the “pivot” was announced indicates that the administration was anticipating such pressure as the election drew near.<sup>312</sup> Additionally, China’s behavior throughout 2011 continued to show that there were limits to its willingness to work with regional countries to resolve regional disputes peacefully and maintain stability in East Asia. After agreeing to begin talks on a code of conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea, China was slow to join in the discussion with ASEAN on the CoC, at times even seeking to delay attempts by ASEAN members to move forward with a final draft CoC agreement. Beijing’s approach to the CoC indicated that it was not serious about resolving the South China Sea dispute multilaterally, and that the more “accommodationist” posture it took on in late 2010 was also a tactical response to American and regional pushbacks on China’s assertiveness rather than a strategic shift in its thinking as multiple actors in the Chinese leadership hierarchy continued to jostle for influence in policy-making.

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<sup>311</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas\\_pacific\\_century](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century).

<sup>312</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 61.

Meantime in the South China Sea, Chinese behavior continued to elicit regional outcries.<sup>313</sup> It has been argued that tensions in the South China Sea were often escalated as a result of Beijing's poor management of Chinese maritime agencies. Operating far from government's supervision, many Chinese actors on the scene often pursued narrow, nationalist agendas that fit their outlooks but complicated central policy.<sup>314</sup> It should not be ruled out that some top Chinese military officials might also have encouraged China's bold moves to expand PLA leaders' influence in the coming power transition in China.<sup>315</sup> These maneuvers apparently complicated policy deliberations at the upper echelons in China: Despite the temptation to avoid any major foreign policy review in a sensitive political year, the Beijing leadership was seemingly under pressure not to appear weak in domestic eyes.<sup>316</sup> In any event, China's actions in 2011 only gave impetus to other countries in the region to step up their diplomatic efforts to reject China's push in the South China Sea and to line up US support for their endeavor.

These developments apparently gave impetus to the "pivot" introduced in late 2011. Shortly after rolling out the "Asia pivot," Clinton embarked on a marathon tour to Hawaii, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea and Burma, during which she often repeated the term "pivot" in describing American efforts in the region. Finally, the "pivot" was

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<sup>313</sup> In May and June 2011, for example, Chinese vessels chased and cut the cable of a Norwegian-flagged ship hired by PetroVietnam in what Hanoi claimed was within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone. Vietnamnet, "Vietnam's vessel Viking 2 'harassed' many times," June 10, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/politics/9328/vietnam-s-vessel-viking-2--harassed--many-times.html>.

<sup>314</sup> Timothy Adamson, "China's response to the US Asia-Pacific "rebalance" and its implications for Sino-US relations" (MA thesis, The George Washington University, 2013), 43-44.

<sup>315</sup> Peter Mattis, "How much power does China's 'People's' Army have?," *The Diplomat*, July 13, 2012, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/china-power/how-much-power-does-chinas-peoples-army-have/>; J. Michael Cole, "Militarization of China's civilian leader?," *The Diplomat*, August 29, 2012, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/china-power/the-militarization-of-chinas-civilian-leaders/>.

<sup>316</sup> Indyk et al., *Bending history*, 61.

officially endorsed at the highest level when the White House, in a press backgrounder for Obama's November 2011 trip to Asia released on November 16 referred to the "pivot" as "a rebalancing of the U.S. commitment and footprint in the world, manifested in [US] diplomatic efforts, our security efforts, and our economic efforts."<sup>317</sup> Obama used the trip to push the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – an economic initiative that aims to further liberalize the economies of the Asia-Pacific region, announce plans for new US troop deployments to Australia, and attend, for the first time, the East Asia Summit. After Obama returned from his week-long journey to Asia, NSA Tom Donilon joined in to boost public buy-in for the "pivot" with an article on Financial Times declaring that "America is back in the Pacific and will uphold the rules."<sup>318</sup>

As 2012 began, the Pentagon continued to back US diplomatic efforts in late 2011 to promote the "pivot." In January 2012, the DOD released a new "Strategic Guidance" anchoring US military posture in the new global milieu. Titled "Sustaining US global leadership: Priorities for 21st century defense", the document asserted that "we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region", defining the focus of US attention as "the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia".<sup>319</sup> At around the same time, the DOD also began circulating a "Joint Operational Access Concept" (JOAC) to counter anti-access/area-denial challenges supposedly posed by

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<sup>317</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Press briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes and NSC Senior Director for Asia Danny Russel," Press release, November 16, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/16/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-deputy-national-security-advis>.

<sup>318</sup> Tom Donilon, "America is back in the Pacific and will uphold the rule," *Financial Times*, November 27, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4f3febac-1761-11e1-b00e-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2w3OiwXZz>.

<sup>319</sup> US Department of Defense, "Sustaining US global leadership: Priorities for 21st century defense", January 2012, accessed May 8, 2013, [http://www.defense.gov/news/defense\\_strategic\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf).

China.<sup>320</sup> In late April, the Pentagon announced plans to deploy four US Marine Air Ground Task Forces to US bases in Japan, Guam, Hawaii and Australia.<sup>321</sup>

Although private assurances received during meetings with top US leaders and preoccupation with the country's power transition in 2012 initially encouraged China to refrain from voicing a strong response to the "pivot," Beijing was surprised at the extent of US activism in late 2011-early 2012 and was wary of US intentions in drumming up alliances and partnerships in Asia.<sup>322</sup> While the official response was largely restrained, pressures built up in the Chinese civil society and blogosphere for China to take a stronger stance. "Unofficial" commentaries by the Chinese media, scholars and bloggers often defined Washington's efforts to increase American presence and visibility in the Asia-Pacific as part of a grand US scheme to "contain" China.<sup>323</sup> In mid-2012, then Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai expressed doubts on a Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: "What is the motive behind these moves? What signals do they want to send to China and the region?"<sup>324</sup> A

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<sup>320</sup> US Department of Defense, "Joint operational access concept (JOAC)", January 17, 2012, accessed May 8, 2013, [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/JOAC\\_Jan%202012\\_Signed.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/JOAC_Jan%202012_Signed.pdf).

<sup>321</sup> Sutter et al., *Balancing acts*, 34.

<sup>322</sup> Indyk et al, *Bending history*, 61-62.

<sup>323</sup> See, for example, Lin Liyao, "US 'Pivot' in Asia-Pacific signals new, complex era," February 26, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2012-02/26/content\\_24722893.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2012-02/26/content_24722893.htm); Zhou Fangyin, "Friendly advice to Japan, US," *China Daily*, September 27, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2012-09/27/content\\_15785954.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2012-09/27/content_15785954.htm); Joseph S. Nye, "Work with China, don't contain it," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/26/opinion/work-with-china-dont-contain-it.html>; Liu Aming, "China weighty factor in US pivot policy," *Global Times*, March 4, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/765683.shtml>.

<sup>324</sup> Adamson, "China's response," 36.

Chinese Ministry of Defense spokesman was blunter, asserting that US efforts to ramp up Asian alliances were “an expression of Cold War mentality”.<sup>325</sup>

The Obama administration seemingly took note of these developments and gradually dropped the term “pivot”, opting instead to describe heightened US engagement in Asia as a “rebalancing”. In a speech at the Asia Society in March 2013, National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon never at once referred to the word “pivot”. Rather, Donilon discussed a vision of sustained US leadership, accelerated economic development and “defense of international rules and norms across the Asia-Pacific region” that was to be achieved through “a comprehensive, multidimensional strategy: strengthening alliances; deepening partnerships with emerging powers; building a stable, productive, and constructive relationship with China; empowering regional institutions; and helping to build a regional economic architecture that can sustain shared prosperity.”<sup>326</sup> In line with the administration’s terminology, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2012, Defense Secretary Panetta depicted the shift in US policy as a “rebalancing” aimed at increased cooperation with the region, including with China.<sup>327</sup>

The “pivot” away from China and toward other allies and partners in East Asia, however, continued. In response to the Philippines’ call for American support during a naval standoff with China that began in April 2012 at the Scarborough Shoal, over which both Beijing and

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<sup>325</sup> Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese leadership and elite responses to the US Pacific pivot”, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM38MS.pdf>.

<sup>326</sup> Tom Donilon, “The United States and the Asia-Pacific in 2013,” March 11, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/11/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisory-president-united-states-a>.

<sup>327</sup> See Leon E. Panetta, Remarks at Shangri-La Security Dialogue, June 2, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1681>.

Manila claim sovereignty, the US dispatched the USS North Carolina – a Virginia class fast attack submarine – to the Philippines, while Clinton and Panetta undertook to reaffirm US commitment to mutual defense with the Southeast Asian state.<sup>328</sup> After declaring at the June 2012 SLD a reallocation of US naval forces from a 50-50 split between the Atlantic and the Pacific to a 60 percent concentration in the latter by 2020, Panetta traveled to India and Vietnam to discuss enhanced cooperation with the two countries. Later in June, the US and South Korea held their first ever Foreign and Defense Ministers meeting.<sup>329</sup> In July 2012, Clinton took another trip to Asia, visiting Japan, Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia before attending the ARF, the EAS Foreign Ministers Meeting, and the US-ASEAN Business Forum. In October, Vietnamese security and government officials boarded the USS George Washington and joined their American partners in a tour around troubled waters in the South China Sea.<sup>330</sup> In late September, as tensions flared up in the East China Sea after China sent six patrol boats to the waters near the Sensaku/Diaoyu islands to carry out “law enforcement over China’s maritime right” following the Japanese government’s announcement that Tokyo would purchase from a private owner three of the five islands (called Sensaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China) disputed between Japan and China, two US aircraft carriers, the USS George Washington and the USS John C. Stennis, were deployed to the East China Sea.<sup>331</sup> In November, a US-Japan joint military exercise was conducted to

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<sup>328</sup> Floyd Whaley, “US reaffirms defense of Philippines in standoff with China,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 2012, accessed May 8, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/02/world/asia/us-reaffirms-defense-of-philippines-in-standoff-with-china.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/02/world/asia/us-reaffirms-defense-of-philippines-in-standoff-with-china.html?_r=0); Daniel Wagner, Edsel Tupaz and Ira Paulo Pozon, “China, the Philippines, and the Scarborough Shoal,” *The Huffington Post*, May 20, 2012, accessed May 8, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-wagner/china-the-philippines-and\\_b\\_1531623.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-wagner/china-the-philippines-and_b_1531623.html).

<sup>329</sup> Sutter et al., *Balancing acts*, 34.

<sup>330</sup> Chris Brummitt, “US aircraft carrier cruises disputed Asian seas,” October 20, 2012, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/us-aircraft-carrier-cruises-disputed-asian-seas-121558251.html>.

<sup>331</sup> Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman, “Regional overview: 2012 ends with echoes of the past,” *Comparative Connection* 14 (January 2013), accessed May 8, 2013, <http://csis.org/files/publication/1203q.pdf>, 13; Kirk Spitzer, “Big US fleet nears disputed islands, but



improve “interoperability... to effectively defend Japan or respond to a crisis in the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>332</sup> Later in the same month, Clinton accompanied Panetta and then Obama on several trips to Australia, Thailand, Burma and Cambodia.<sup>333</sup>

China was apparently agonized by what appeared to be US attempts to test Beijing’s restraint. Not backing down in the East and South China Seas, in July 2012 China exercised influence over Cambodia, the ASEAN Chair of 2012, and secured the latter’s agreement not to raise the South China Sea issues at an ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting, which was later concluded with no joint communiqué – the first time in ASEAN’s history. In November 2012, China again sought to preclude discussions on the South China Sea issue at the EAS using the same tactic Beijing had employed several months earlier. China also used the EAS to advocate for a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership that, with more flexible requirements, could rival the high-standard TPP. Meanwhile, Beijing increasingly exercised coercive diplomacy toward neighbors in dispute with China.<sup>334</sup> As 2012 drew to a close, however, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta released an article entitled “America’s Pacific rebalance” reaffirming that “America is focused like never before on working with our allies and partners in South and Southeast Asia” and on “modernizing [US] posture [in Northeast Asia]” while the US continues to build “a healthy, stable, and continuous military-to-military

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what for?,” *Time*, September 30, 2012, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://nation.time.com/2012/09/30/big-u-s-fleet-nears-disputed-islands-but-what-for/>.

<sup>332</sup> BBC News, “US and Japan begin military drills amid China tension,” November 5, 2012, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-20202357>.

<sup>333</sup> Sutter et al., 35.

<sup>334</sup> In May 2012, for example, the Chinese Ambassador to ASEAN warned Manila to be prepared for trade sanctions if tensions over the Huangyan Island/Scarborough Shoal continued. Adamson, “China’s response,” 45-46.

relationship with China.”<sup>335</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

During the first Obama administration, the State Department and Pentagon faced considerable challenges to their ability to influence US foreign policy making because of the centralization of power in the White House. The Pentagon’s preoccupation with the American wars in the Middle East and its desire to build a positive relationship with China prompted the DOD to concede to White House control of US East Asia policy, which put emphasis on a China-first approach to the region, during the administration’s first year in office. Left on its own to contend with the White House control of East Asia policy, the State Department was unable to move US policy in the region to a more balanced trajectory even as it did not always see eye to eye with the White House on how to deal with China and approach Asia as a whole.

As regional events heightened regional unease about China’s posture and showed limits to both US-China mil-to-mil talks and PLA restraint, parallel assessments at the State Department and the Pentagon about the need to reaffirm US credibility and commitment to security in East Asia prompted State-DOD joint efforts to elevate US presence and engagement with the rest of the region. Facilitated by the loosening of the White House control of Asia policy with the departure of key China experts from the US government, those efforts contributed to expedite America’s turn to a reemphasis on US alliances and

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<sup>335</sup> Leon E. Panetta, “America’s Pacific rebalance,” December 31, 2012, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/renewing-the-us-commitment-to-the-asia-pacific-region-by-leon-e-panetta>.

partnerships in East Asia in ways that helped Washington send strong message of US leadership to the region.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The above analysis presents a complex picture of US policy making in East Asia during the first Clinton and Obama administrations. Such complexity apparently stemmed in no small part from the fact that increased interests in East Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific during these periods brought into the American foreign policy making scene actors with diverse views and entrenched convictions about the desirable US strategy in the region, creating increased pressure on the conduct of US policy. As far as the roles of the State Department and the Pentagon were concerned, this broadening and/or strengthening of the voices that had influence in US foreign policy making when it came to East Asia meant that the State Department and the DOD had to operate with much less leeway.

Apparently, the sources of constraints on the bureaucracies during Clinton's first term in office and those in the first four years of the Obama presidency were very much different. The "resurgent" Congress of the 1990s brought greater challenges to the overall executive apparatus in shaping foreign policy, thereby putting greater strain on the State Department and the Pentagon as they sought to move US East Asia policy in the direction desired. Adding to the difficulties faced by the bureaucracies under Clinton was the president's insufficient attention to foreign policy and excessive focus on domestic politics; the former resulted in a shortage of guidance while the latter invited more competing voices to foreign policy making as Clinton tried to accommodate various constituencies making up his

political base, both of which intensified the pressure on the executive agencies as they charted US East Asia policy.

In contrast, the constraints faced by the State Department and the DOD in exercising influence over US foreign policy in East Asia during the first Obama administration came not from congressional activism or public scrutiny but largely from the extensive control of the White House in foreign policy making. Although Congress did attempt to check presidential command and inject its influence into foreign policy making during the first Obama administration, a number of factors limiting congressional focus on East Asia, including the deterioration of the situation in the Middle East, the sheer magnitude of the fiscal crisis at home, or a general decline of interest and expertise among congressional members when it came to foreign policy, could have given the executive agencies entrusted with foreign and national security policy more room to shape US East Asia policy.<sup>336</sup> Yet even as Obama successfully shielded US East Asia policy from congressional pressure, his determination to centralize control of policy and the resultant dominance of the White House in foreign policy making apparently imposed considerable limits on the level of authority each departments in the executive branch could wield.

Arguably, the general lack of focus on foreign policy that Clinton displayed during his first term in office left more room for trials and experiments as his agencies sought to figure out a desirable policy in East Asia than did the centralized, disciplined approach to foreign policy making that Obama embraced in the first four years of his presidency. Yet for every

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<sup>336</sup> On the decline of congressional interest and expertise when it comes to foreign policy, see Kay King, "Congress and national security," Council on Foreign Relations, November 2010, accessed April 30, 2014, [http://i.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Congress\\_CSR58.pdf](http://i.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Congress_CSR58.pdf).

move the executive bureaucracies under Clinton made along the way as they tried to shape US policy in East Asia, there always were critical eyes watching and checking on them. Thus none of the bureaucracies – neither the State Department nor the Pentagon, or any other agencies – could hijack policy as some have argued. The analysis in this paper showed that US East Asia policy as seen during both the first Clinton administration and Obama’s first term in office more often than not came out from a process of constant revisions and adjustments as the bureaucracies struggled to respond to external developments and provide inputs for foreign policy making.

While the complex interplay of interests, perceptions and institutional constraints described in this paper indicates that the State Department and the DOD were not always the prime movers of US policy in East Asia, however, it is observable that major changes in US policy in the region during the first Clinton and Obama administration often came about as a result of effective cooperation between the State Department and the Pentagon.

Although it has often been considered a growing tendency among many at the State Department to avoid risk taking and creative thinking, the DOS of the first Clinton and Obama administrations proved to be capable of bold thinking as it sought to drive US East Asia policy.<sup>337</sup> Indeed, possibly in order to elevate its stature and relevance in the national security arena in general and when it came to East Asia in particular, the State Department

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<sup>337</sup> Some analysts consider this “subculture” of refraining from voicing innovative ideas that existed among many State Department officials as stemming from an desire to “play it safe” in order to obtain regular promotions and ensure career advancements. Others attribute it to training and temperament that forge an inclination among those officials to favor diplomacy and working with others over other policy options. See Marc Grossman, “The State Department: Culture as interagency destiny,” in *The National security enterprise: Navigating the labyrinth*, ed. Roger Z. George and Harvey Rishikof (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 80; James M. McCormick, *American foreign policy and process* (5th ed.) (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010), 372.

showed an inclination to push for a new agenda and/or a revision of strategies that reflect(s) a reassertion of American power, as seen in its attempts to promote an aggressive trade-human rights agenda during the first Clinton administration and its more recent efforts to drum up the “pivot to Asia.” At the same time, perhaps because of its unique advantage of being the first channel in the chain through which regional states often register their feedbacks on US policy in the region, the DOS proved to be an astute and rather quick observer of the regional dynamics when those dynamics called for a modification in US approach. Winston Lord’s memorandum in early 1994 calling for a reassessment of the Clinton administration’s trade promotion agenda and Kurt Campbell’s initiation – together with Jeffrey Bader – of a policy review in response to China’s assertiveness in 2010 prove the case.

As it sought to project an image of effective leadership while attending to regional views and perceptions, the State Department through trial and error often came to recognize the need to support allies and partners when it was deemed necessary to demonstrate American credibility while keeping realistic expectations in engagement with China. That recognition dovetailed with what the Pentagon also reckoned as the situations evolved. Striving both to maintain a credible force posture in East Asia and to minimize the possibility of military engagement in the region, the Pentagon during Clinton’s first term in office as well as Obama’s sought to emphasize traditional alliances and forward deployment and to pursue at the same time engagement with other militaries in the region, especially the PLA. As the DOD learnt in both times, however, sustaining military contacts with the PLA was difficult when military-to-military relations with the biggest country in the region

were often subjected to “the vagaries of political weather.”<sup>338</sup> Thus strengthening alliances and forging new partnerships continued to be the Pentagon’s priorities in East Asia even as it kept seeking military contacts with China. As a result, State-Defense coalition, once formed, has often fostered an approach to East Asia that heralded broad engagement with the region but placed more emphasis on alliances and partnerships with nations that accepted American leadership. When US policy appeared to deviate from this geostrategic approach, as seen during the first Clinton administration, or to take on a different prescription of emphasis, as seen during the first Obama administration, State-DOD acting in tandem would reverse the course.

The record of State-Defense endeavors in East Asia in the first Clinton and Obama administrations thus shows a remarkable degree of creativity and cooperation between the two departments as they jostled with other bureaucracies for influence in American foreign policy making. Such cooperation often took time to come about; nevertheless, it did come about eventually because both departments had parallel incentives to preserve an emphasis on geopolitics that would respond to regional concerns and highlight their respective roles in US policy making. With strategic assessments and institutional incentives helping to foster their alignment, the State Department and DOD in the first Clinton and Obama administrations apparently contributed to ensuring a more coherent course of US policy in East Asia through both continuity and change.

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<sup>338</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 415.

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