

# Introduction: The United States in the Asia and Indo-Pacific

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After eight years in office in January 2017, Barack Obama's time as president of the United States drew to a close. Obama made history as the first non-white president and the first to have been born outside the continental United States. Yet his leadership is being judged by far more than race and upbringing alone.<sup>1</sup> From an election promise of "Change" and the restoration of America's global standing after George W. Bush's disastrous wars on Iraq and terrorism, Obama embarked upon a host of political projects at home, and leaves a significant footprint abroad. Obama began by negotiating the new START nuclear weapons deal with Russia before restoring diplomatic relations with Cuba, and signing the Paris Climate Agreement as well as a UN Security Council-backed agreement with Iran to halt its nuclear programmes. Equally, the Obama administration failed to close the Guantanamo Bay detention and torture facility; oversaw a dramatic rise in civilian casualties from intensified military drone strikes (including targeted assassinations); backed a virtually unrestrained Saudi war on Yemen; and curtailed Bush-era rises in development aid to sub-Saharan Africa. This is just a hint of the variations and complexities in the set of global legacies Obama's presidency leaves behind.

Obama's international legacy of 2009–17 will be assessed and debated for years, and perhaps nowhere more so than in his engagements with the actors and institutions of the Indo-Pacific – a region which has only recently become more vivid within American political imaginations in the time since Obama left office, and which is now typically imagined to encompass the actors and maritime boundaries traditionally seen to make up the vast Asia Pacific region, from the western coasts of the United States and South America to the territories of East and Southeast Asia and Oceania, and then further west to include the Indian Ocean and its main constituent state actors such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It was the more narrowly defined Asia Pacific which quickly became a key foreign policy priority for Obama as he set about trying to escape the imperial quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan to which so many US resources had been devoted during

the post-9/11 era. Obama's "Pivot" (or "Rebalance") to Asia, formally announced in late 2011, was arguably his administration's key foreign policy programme across two terms in office.<sup>2</sup> The United States, to quote his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, was entering a 'Pacific Century'. This is where the 'future of politics' would be decided, she argued, and the United States was to be 'right at the centre of the action'.<sup>3</sup>

What, then, are President Obama's chief achievements, failures and legacies in the Indo-Pacific? Was there a distinctive underlying philosophy and strategy for the region that guided Obama's thinking and policies, for example a "pragmatic realism", hegemonic ordering/liberal internationalism, or hawkish humanitarianism? And, in its first two years, between early 2017 and early 2019, what has President Donald Trump's "principled realism" meant in practice? How far has the Trump administration progressed in challenging or disrupting Obama's Pivot to Asia? What differences can we discern in the declared or effective US strategy towards Asia and to what extent has it radically shifted or displaced Obama-era legacies? Finally, what might be the longer-term consequences for American power and for Asia more generally of the strategies pursued by the Trump administration and its predecessors?<sup>4</sup> Though we appear to be at a key historical moment, this is hardly the first time American elites have faced uncertainty over grand strategy – either in general or in relation to specific regions.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the stakes now seem a lot higher, as the spectre of economic and military conflict hangs over the region.

In Asia, Kenneth Lieberthal argues, 'Obama moved boldly to shift the center of gravity among the key multilateral organizations in Asia, favoring those that include the United States and leading them to take approaches favored by Washington but are neuralgic for Beijing'.<sup>6</sup> Obama ordered bolder US military moves in the Yellow and South China seas, pressed Beijing to push North Korea to curb its nuclear programmes (to little avail), and advanced US leadership in numerous multilateral organisations, especially ASEAN and the East Asia Summit. Obama also promoted the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (which excluded China) as a strategy of "hegemonic ordering" in the tradition of post-1945 US-led liberal internationalist theory and practice.<sup>7</sup>

This was designed as a system of rules that claimed to bind both hegemon and junior partners in a mutually beneficial regime of transparency, protection of intellectual property rights, labour protections and market-promoting trade rules. Sometimes referred to as the WTO-plus system, the TPP was in practice the adaptation to the Asia Pacific of the hegemonic ordering strategy established in Western Europe during the early Cold War. Enhanced economic, diplomatic and security agreements with numerous Asian states and institutions were illustrative of Obama's efforts to promote a more networked and self-reliant international order, in a region where the United States had traditionally sustained a "hub-and-spokes" system of bilateral relations with Washington at the centre.<sup>8</sup> Its intent was

also partly to force domestic reforms in China, to encourage a weakening of its state-capitalist model and the perceived basis of its economic challenge to US hegemony.<sup>9</sup>

Several of the authors in this book argue that Obama had begun to stiffen Washington's positions on North Korea and China, and that neither ASEAN nor the East Asia Summit lived up to their potential during his time in office. To this extent, change had already begun in ways which came to steer Trump's more aggressive posture after his inauguration in 2017. Obama's "strategic patience" to North Korea was accompanied by additional sanctions and enhanced US weapon sales to the region, much to China's chagrin.

In place of Obama came President Donald Trump in 2017, whose character, personal and business background, and broad approach to global affairs are in stark contrast to those of his predecessor and, indeed, to perhaps every other US president of the recent past.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, the broad importance of great powers in world politics was recognised by the George W. Bush administration, and the shift away from the Middle East towards Asia had to some extent already begun before 2009. This suggests that stark departures are highly unlikely in grand strategy, however heated may be the rhetoric of "Change" from the ineffectiveness, failures and weaknesses of previous administrations.<sup>11</sup> It is in the context of already heightened bipartisan worries about China's role in Asia and the world – from rule taker to rule maker – that the Obama administration's sense of urgency, and the Trump administration's radical and undiplomatic rhetoric, may at least in part be understood.

Yet, their understandings of how US power should work to mitigate upcoming threats (especially from "rising" China armed with a bigger military arsenal, including nuclear weapons, new China-centred international institutions such as the AIIB, and the world-spanning Belt and Road Initiative), require careful study, analysis and interpretation. For instance, after two years in office since 2017, President Trump appears to have had greater success than Obama in leveraging US market access power over China and other trading partners.<sup>12</sup> Hence, there remains broad support for an American policy of "conengagement" with China – a mix of containment with engagement.<sup>13</sup> Trump's tariffs policy has raised the temperature of Sino-US relations and undermined Chinese elites' confidence that the United States will step back from the brink of an all-out trade war, while also generating criticism of Xi in China for being too robust in promoting Chinese leadership ambitions.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, Trump's "America First" principled realism, with its greater focus on 'bilateral transactionalism',<sup>15</sup> may represent an important shift, at least of emphasis, and possibly a return to the hub-and-spokes system in Asia. Only time will tell, but the consequences are likely to be globally significant in character. The overall goal remains a shared one regardless of the specific strategy: to maintain America's global power superiority by subordinating "rivals" like China and "foes" like the EU.

## Aims of the volume

The primary aim of this book is to analyse Obama's two-term record in what is now increasingly referred to as the Indo-Pacific region, between 2009 and 2017, and the legacies he leaves behind. In addition, it is to examine the continuities of, and divergences from, that legacy evidenced under the leadership of Donald Trump in his first two years in office between 2017 and early 2019. The authors of this volume speak to these legacies in the context of both the Asia and Indo-Pacific, to reflect the shifting rhetoric and policy priorities of the two administrations to 2019; inevitably, and because the term "Indo-Pacific" was routinely absent from the lexicon of most scholars and policy makers (both in the United States and the Asian region) during Obama's time in office, the authors individually explore the record of Obama in particular within the Asia Pacific region his administration identified as the most crucial to American interests.

A key focus of this volume, then, is the examination of transition. Within this transition of US foreign policy from Obama to Trump there lie continuities and changes, durabilities and disruptions. To interrogate and make sense of these complex dynamics, the volume draws together the expertise of leading academics in the field and practitioners of international affairs. It identifies and explores US engagements with the key actors and issues of the Indo-Pacific – its nation states, organisations and institutions, as well as the events and developments which have defined America and the region since 2009.

It is significant that no other volume to date exists which explores in detail Obama's presidential record and/or legacy across Asia and the Pacific. The relevant literature includes many fine volumes on Obama's policy approach towards Asia with a particular focus on the Rebalance/Pivot strategy, but not on the entire record.<sup>16</sup> Our volume, therefore, is unique, and offers readers something entirely new. In particular, this volume stands out in three main ways.

First, it offers readers a comprehensive analysis of Obama's policy approach to the region across his full eight-year term as US president, along with the legacies he leaves behind. It does so with attention to Washington's relations with key regional state actors such as China, India, North Korea and Japan, as well as its most significant international institutions such as ASEAN and the East Asia Summit.

Second, it revisits those relations as they evolved throughout approximately the opening two years of the presidency of Donald Trump, to examine the continuities and divergences which appeared, and the extent to which Obama's legacy seems set to endure or dissipate in the region.

Third, it reaches beyond academia to incorporate the views of relevant practitioners – former diplomats, a former naval officer, and leading scholars – who offer their professional views on US policy and presence in Asia and the

Pacific since Obama's inauguration in 2009, including the direction in which they see Washington's regional relationships heading in the future.

## Structure of the volume

The book is organised into three main sections, the first assessing Obama's regional policies and legacies (eight chapters); the second considering Trump's initial forays into the Indo-Pacific across his first two years in the White House (three chapters); and the third providing selected practitioners' views of developments and challenges in the region (three chapters). Of course, reality is hardly so neat. This means that there are critical overlaps and points of connection between the issues and themes pursued in each section, helping make more comprehensible the identified continuities and change in strategy. In the round, then, the volume provides a detailed, systematic study of the United States under Presidents Obama and Trump in the decade between 2009 and early 2019 in its policies, approaches and effects in the Indo-Pacific. It is, we believe, the most informative, detailed empirical analysis in one volume of this globally strategic region's institutions' and states' relations with the world's sole superpower.

In Chapter 1, Turner emphasises that just as the Trump administration emerged from deep roots and developments of US domestic politics, culture and society, let alone America's global hegemony, so the country's relationship with Asia is steeped in its history and culture. This is especially true given the frequent and often violent intrusions of Western colonial empires – British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, German and American – in Asia. Unequal treaties, extra-territorialism, treaty ports won through “opium wars”, orientalist attitudes and assumptions underpinning Western worldviews, all play a role, more or less subtly, in framing relations between the West and the rest, including Asia. This is underlined by, for example, candidate Trump's appeals to ‘socio-racial conservatives (white nativists)’ in his references to ‘Yellow Hordes’ imagery about the Chinese threat (Gries, Chapter 2). It is further evidenced by Obama's Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's complaint about ‘inscrutable’ North Koreans who do not care to provide the United States with the information it wants (Cumings, Chapter 5). Turner provides an analysis of this historical encounter and how it shaped narratives, outlooks and policies. Turner argues that ‘the United States has consistently pursued a position of imperial hegemony throughout the Asia Pacific’, considering itself a local actor but one whose reach creates local resistance requiring a powerful military presence. The significance of race in US foreign affairs in general, and towards Asia in particular, requires serious analysis, especially given the importance of such narratives among policy makers, both historically and today.<sup>17</sup>

The book then moves to study the United States' relations with numerous selected countries: China (Gries), India (Colley and Ganguly, Chapter 3), Japan (Dian, Chapter 4), North/South Korea (Cumings, Chapter 5), and Australia (Kelton and Rogers, Chapter 6); the regional institutions of ASEAN (Parameswaran, Chapter 7) and the East Asia Summit (Cook, Chapter 8); in its regional political/diplomatic, security, and economic strategies (Sutter, Chapter 9; Bisley, Chapter 10; and Mastanduno, Chapter 11); and the perspectives of practitioners with regional experience and expertise (Ljunggren, Chapter 12; Patel and Hansmeyer, Chapter 13; and Bhardwaj, Chapter 14). The aim here is to inject rich empirical detail into the discussion of Obama's Pivot to Asia in practical terms, its legacies, and the platform which that established for the Trump administration which followed.

The contributions individually and collectively paint a portrait of anxiety amid changing power balances and great power strategies that are difficult to read and predict, driven by increased attention to the region by increasingly assertive Chinese and American leaders. That anxiety is driven by the real-world meaning of potentially clashing "Firstisms" – of both America and China. The dilemma is palpable for the United States as well as for its principal allies. The big question is how to manage increased (and largely welcome) economic opportunities created by China's economy, and its several international institutions that are potential future rivals to those of the US-led liberal order, while at the same time handling its undoubted increased naval and military assertiveness. That dilemma became increasingly obvious during Obama's second term of 2009–13, leading to more robust attitudes towards China's military moves and trade rules violations via the offices of the WTO. But it was not China alone that generated anxiety among the region's powers and peoples. Asian states, including India (Colley and Ganguly, Chapter 3) also worried about the sovereignty effects of the Asia Pivot and the hegemonic ordering strategy built in to the TPP. Similar concerns clearly apply to the recently developed US Indo-Pacific naval strategy that Bhardwaj sees as a wrong-headed response to the land-based Eurasia strategy implicit in the Belt and Road Initiative. A land route that connects eastern China to Western Europe via the Middle East, if practicable, would be a significant threat to the sea power based American strategy (Bhardwaj, Chapter 14).

Trump's presidential election campaign and his subsequent administration are seen by our authors to have added unpredictability and even greater anxiety over the future, especially the potentially devastating levels of conflict that may ensue should Trump's aggressive style and trade tariff strategy be followed through with military confrontations (Mastanduno; Sutter; Ljunggren). Obama's policy of "strategic patience" over North Korea did not change with the Asia Pivot, although continued nuclear testing and development by that country led to greater Sino-US cooperation over sanctions (Cumings). From threats of 'fire and fury' to militarily devastate North Korea, Trump's volte-face leading to two historic summits with Kim Jong-un in June 2018 reduced tensions in East Asia, at least in the short term.

Yet, the February 2019 Trump–Kim summit collapsed, which probably indicates how insurmountable are the contradictory aims of the two states, contradictions no leader could resolve, however skilled a deal maker they claimed to be. The twilight of Obama’s more measured, clear, multilateral and hegemonic leadership strategy is lamented either overtly or subtextually by several authors (Sutter; Patel and Hansmeyer; Gries). The resulting ‘vacuum’, it is broadly agreed, is being filled by greater Chinese self-confidence and US allies’ moves to increase cooperation among themselves and explore a rapprochement with China (Dian; Ljunggren; Gries; Mastanduno; Patel and Hansmeyer).

Nevertheless, the picture remains opaque to some authors (Bisley; Bhardwaj). The latter claims that despite rhetoric, Trump has strengthened alliances and retained the One China policy; rhetorical change has not been followed up with radical action or ruptures with the past. Still, it is noted that even the shift of rhetoric and political and diplomatic style has changed the mood music. Seeing the region through bilateral lenses, leaving key ambassadorial posts unfilled, means policy inertia or neglect has recently strengthened China’s positions (Bisley; Gries).

While the United States under Trump is generating anxiety, uncertainty and greater inter-allied cooperation, and though the process began before Trump emerged on the political scene, China is currently seen as the biggest winner in the region. China reaped the benefits of US-led globalisation, including via admission to the WTO in 2001 (Ljunggren), when the United States hoped for China’s transformation into a (junior) global stakeholder (Mastanduno).

Most ominously, it is the responsibility of the Trump administration to manage the dilemma brought about by an undoubted success of the US-led liberal international order. As such, regional consequences will be profound if US–Chinese relations continue to become more confrontational in security, economics, or both. The Asia/Indo-Pacific, it would appear, is not big enough to accommodate two dominant powers (Mastanduno).

The stakes could hardly be higher or articulated more baldly: the future of the region’s societies and peoples is, at least in part, being determined by a “great game” played between Washington and Beijing. Equally, we cannot underestimate the roles of Japan, India, Australia, ASEAN and others as they each seek to steer and influence the contours of arguably the early twenty-first century’s most dynamic and rapidly evolving region.

## Notes

- 1 I. Parmar, L. B. Miller and M. Ledwidge (eds.), *Obama and the World* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 2 O. Turner, ‘The US “pivot” to the Asia Pacific’, in Parmar *et al.*, *Obama and the World*, pp. 210–30.



- 3 H. Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', *Foreign Policy* (11 October 2011), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>, accessed 6 March 2019.
- 4 For an examination of the impacts on allies of Trump's rhetoric and policies, see 'Trump and the Allies' article series, *Foreign Affairs*, 96:5 (2017).
- 5 For an analysis of four major grand strategies discernible in US foreign policy from George Washington to George W. Bush (neo-isolationism, selective engagement, cooperative security, and primacy), see J. J. Hentz (ed.), *The Obligation of Empire: United States' Grand Strategy for a New Century* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kansas, 2004).
- 6 K. J. Lieberthal, 'The American Pivot to Asia', The Brookings Institution (21 December 2011), [www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/), accessed 13 March 2019.
- 7 D. Nexon and I. Neumann, 'Hegemonic-order theory: A field theoretic account', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:3 (2018), pp. 662–86.
- 8 C. Hemmer and P. Katzenstein, 'Why is there no NATO in Asia? Collective identity, regionalism and the origins of multilateralism', *International Organization*, 56:3 (2002), pp. 575–607.
- 9 White House, 'Statement on Steps to Protect Domestic Technology and Intellectual Property from China's Discriminatory and Burdensome Trade Practices' (29 May 2018), [www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-steps-protect-domestic-technology-intellectual-property-chinas-discriminatory-burdensome-trade-practices/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-steps-protect-domestic-technology-intellectual-property-chinas-discriminatory-burdensome-trade-practices/), accessed 13 March 2019.
- 10 C. Laderman and B. Simms, *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).
- 11 B. van Apeldoorn and N. DeGraaff, *American Grand Strategy and Corporate Elite Networks* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- 12 T. Mitchell, 'Trade Wars: China Fears an Emerging United Front', *Financial Times* (11 September 2018), [www.ft.com/content/ee361e2e-b283-11e8-8d14-6f049d06439c](http://www.ft.com/content/ee361e2e-b283-11e8-8d14-6f049d06439c), accessed 13 March 2019.
- 13 Z. Khalilzad, 'The Case for Congagement with China', *National Interest* (19 June 2017), <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-case-congagement-china-21232>, accessed 12 March 2019. Congagement refers to a policy of containment and engagement with China. Arguably, that is what most US administrations have been doing, with differences of emphasis depending on specific circumstances. Even with the shifted balance towards containment and active tariff increases and threats, the 'balance of financial terror' in Sino-US affairs is a major indicator of the interdependence between the two powers. See also A. Friedberg, 'A new economic strategy toward China?', *Washington Quarterly*, 40:4 (2017), pp. 97–114.
- 14 Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, 'A Decade of US-China Relations: From Engagement to Rivalry' (13 September 2018), [www.wilsoncenter.org/event/decade-us-china-relations-engagement-to-rivalry](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/decade-us-china-relations-engagement-to-rivalry), accessed 13 March 2019.



- 15 I. Parmar, 'Behind the Paeans to McCain, A Lament Over New Tactics of Hegemony', *The Wire* (5 September 2018), <https://thewire.in/world/john-mccain-donald-trump-united-states>, accessed 13 March 2019.
- 16 See for example: K. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016); C. Wang, *Obama's Challenge to China: The Pivot to Asia* (London: Routledge, 2016); H. Meijer, *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance Toward Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); CPPR – Centre for Strategic Studies, *The US Rebalance and the Asia Pacific Region* (Kochi, India: CPPR, 2015). On Asian security see for example S. M. Ali, *Asia Pacific Security Dynamics in the Obama Era: A New World Emerging* (London: Routledge: 2012). On China see for example J. A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).
- 17 I. Parmar, 'Racial and imperial thinking in international theory and politics: Truman, Attlee, and the Korean War', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18:2 (2016), pp. 351–69.

