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*Claremont McKenna College*

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Claremont McKenna College

Obama, Trump, and Xi: Three South China Sea  
Strategies in the U.S.-China Battle for Global  
Hegemony

submitted to  
Professor Minxin Pei

by  
Adam Singer

for  
Senior Thesis  
Spring 2020  
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## Introduction and Overview

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China and its seemingly unhaltable progress have been at the forefront of media coverage in the United States. Before its slew of reforms began in the late 1970s, China's economy was dictated by policies that rendered it inefficient, stagnant, and poor. By quickly identifying the socialist economic system that stymied its growth, China changed course in 1979 and opened itself to foreign trade and instituted free-market reforms. Since then, China has been one of the world's fastest growing economies with an average forty-year GDP growth of an astonishing 9.5%.<sup>1</sup> Emboldened by his country's economic success, President Xi Jinping, who came to power in late 2012, veered away from his predecessors' risk-minimization policies in favor of more assertive geopolitical behavior designed to protect the country's core interests in sovereignty and territorial control. These new geopolitical moves present themselves in many ways: attempts to unify Taiwan, maritime disputes, quelling unrest along ethnic borders of Tibet and Xinjiang Province, and addressing calls for democracy in Hong Kong. Perhaps most significantly, Xi Jinping has taken a more aggressive stance towards challenging U.S. presence in East Asia, in the apparent belief that a U.S. weakened by more than a decade of wars in the Middle East and South Asia, the effects of the Great Recession, and escalating political dysfunction would not be able to push back against China. As 120 countries' main trading partner and the largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity, China can afford to take bigger risks as more countries become reliant on its

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<sup>1</sup> "China's Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States." *Congressional Research Service*, June 25, 2019.

manufacturing and exports, and cannot risk losing such a big player in their individual economies.<sup>2</sup> The time since Xi's coming to power, in particular, has proven especially eye-opening for the United States and its allies across the globe. In 2014, China took its most noticeable step in challenging U.S. authority by building – and then militarizing --seven artificial islands in the South China Sea, directly challenging American security interests in East Asia. China's aggressiveness signals its intent to control the region and contest the United States' long-standing hegemony. As the only power capable of pushing back against China's rapid ascension, the United States finds itself in a precarious position with its future inexorably linked to China's. Most recently, the South China Sea dilemma challenged Obama and Trump's foreign policy and national security competence that saw each embark on their own unique, vastly different approaches to quelling Chinese advancement.<sup>3</sup>

## **The South China Sea Dispute and Chinese Interests**

Located between six Southeast Asian countries<sup>4</sup>, the South China Sea is one of today's most contentious regions, land or sea. Due to its rich resource reserves, large fisheries, and important international shipping lanes, China's increasing boldness in the South China Sea is reason for concern.<sup>5</sup> To understand the recent escalation of the conflict, it is important to understand the claim to the territory from China's perspective and its interests in the region. Presently, China bases its claim on a statement issued by Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence, Susan. "China, U.S. Leadership, and Geopolitical Challenges in Asia," December 22, 2014, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. "Timeline: U.S. Relations With China 1949–2020."

<sup>4</sup> Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam

<sup>5</sup> "The South China Sea in Strategic Terms | Wilson Center."

premier Zhou Enlai in 1951 that proclaimed rights to the South China Sea and its islands. Since then, the Chinese government has issued several statements with similar language that stress China's "indisputable sovereignty" over the islands and its waters.<sup>6</sup> To illustrate its alleged domain, China continues to use the "nine-dash line" (jiǔduànxiàn; 九段线) initially drawn on an official Republic of China map in 1947 and has continued to appear on People's Republic of China maps ever since. For reasons still unknown, but likely to create strategic uncertainty, neither institution has ever officially defined the "nine-dash line" for the rest of the world, and rarely is the term used in government documents. While the five neighboring countries also lay claims to areas of the South China Sea, China's "nine-dash line" encompasses nearly eighty percent of the territory with complete disregard for the sovereignty of its neighbors. With regards to sovereignty and the loose claims to different parts of the sea, there is existing legal basis intended to cover these concerns. According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), each country has an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that extends two hundred nautical miles off its coasts, within which that country wholly reserves the right to conduct affairs. However, UNCLOS goes on to prohibit a country from restricting access to the waters for ships to sail within the EEZ under freedom of navigation.<sup>7</sup> This small yet particularly vague clause is the path along which China is pushing the limits of regional order. Under the guise of freedom of navigation, China is sailing through the EEZs of other countries and using its superior military vessels to block them from gaining full access to their respective EEZs.

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<sup>6</sup> Fravel, Taylor. "China's Strategy in the South China Sea." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 292–319.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea," December 10, 1982.



From harassing civilian fishermen to brushing up against foreign naval vessels, China's actions expectedly raised tensions to an all-time high.

China's interest in the South China Sea can be understood along three categories: economic, military, and national security. Economically, full control of the South China Sea would allow China sole access to roughly 105 billion barrels of oil and natural gas.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, nearly eighty percent of China's oil imports arrive through those waters in addition to about one-third of all global trade flowing between Europe and the Americas.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as the world's largest energy consumer, projected at twenty-two percent of the world energy consumption by 2040, China is looking for any new resources it can get its hands on.<sup>10</sup> With regards to its military, an expansion into the South China Sea would allow China to control access to Asia and further thwart U.S. military encroachment, while also patrolling the shipping lines running through the area.<sup>11</sup> By building up military bases on the region's islands, China is accomplishing its strategic and tactical objectives. Strategically, Beijing wants to undermine American credibility because if the United States is unable to punish China then other countries will begin doubting U.S. resolve. Tactically, these islands are useless against an American military that could destroy them in seconds, but they are potent against the smaller nations that do not have the military strength to counter China. Military bases will also allow China to quickly mobilize troops while jointly giving it rapid-strike capabilities with missiles and other weaponry in the event of a need for reactionary or preemptive attacks. Military bases on these islands will also act

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<sup>8</sup> Fravel, Taylor. "China's Strategy in the South China Sea." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 292–319.

<sup>9</sup> Pham, Peter. "Why Is Tension Rising In The South China Sea?" *Forbes*.

<sup>10</sup> BP Energy Outlook, China – 2019

<sup>11</sup> América Latina en movimiento. "South China Sea, the Geopolitical Pivot to Control Asia."

as resupply and refueling points for Chinese military ships and aircraft that otherwise would not have the range to operate within the entirety of the South China Sea. Moreover, the installation of reconnaissance equipment on the islands, paired with various aircraft, will give China surveillance capabilities over all its neighboring countries.<sup>12</sup> From a national security perspective, surveillance of all possible threats is of utmost priority. Additionally, as a country that has seen many attacks arrive from the sea throughout its history, China's interest in controlling the South China Sea becomes increasingly clear. With land-based invasions unlikely thanks to natural geological borders to the South and the East, and ally Russia to the North, gaining control of the surrounding seas is the only factor separating China from rivals Japan and the United States.<sup>13</sup>

## **Great Power Competition Theory**

*"Great power competition [...] is now the primary focus of US national security"*

*-Jim Mattis, U.S. Secretary of Defense*

Perhaps familiar to some, the idea of "great power competition" has been thrown around the realm of geopolitics for centuries. Since the Napoleonic Wars, great powers have maneuvered for control of the entire world order, with several instances, such as World War II, tipping over into full-scale combat.<sup>14</sup> While the significance of great power competition is clear, the explanation of the driving force of this phenomenon is three-

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<sup>12</sup> "What China's 'Militarization' of the South China Sea Would Actually Look Like." Accessed February 17, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Rudra, Eshita. "China's Strategic Interests in the South China Sea: Power and Resources." *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 13, no. 1 (May 11, 2017): 102–4.

<sup>14</sup> Staley, Oliver. "The US Is Talking about 'Great Power Competition.' What Does That Mean?" Quartz.

pronged. First, power transition theory has revealed in the past that an overtaking among great powers corresponds with major wars. While this theory postulates that if China were to become the leading power without significant demands asked of the international system, then war will be averted; this reality is likely not the case.<sup>15</sup> By looking through history, power transition theory has unveiled that “war is most likely and of greatest magnitude when a dissatisfied challenger and a dominant power enter into approximate power parity”.<sup>16</sup> This concept of power parity helps to unpack the second prong of great power competition: balance of power theory. As a state continues to ascend, it will naturally leave others in its wake. As the growing state becomes stronger, the ‘declining’ states are inclined to react because they anticipate a future where the now more powerful state will wage war with superior capabilities or coerce them into concessions that compromise their security.<sup>17</sup> It should also be noted that a sub-category of the balance of power within the international system reveals itself in the form of a balance of resources. When a state aggrandizes its power, it requires more resources to function effectively, leaving it no choice but to upset the present distribution of resources among states.<sup>18</sup> When this balancing unravels, a larger state will react in such a way to expand its dominion – “the self-sustaining dynamic system” corrects itself.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, according to esteemed

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<sup>15</sup> Lemke, Douglas, and Ronald L Tammen. “Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China.” *International Interactions* 29, no. 4 (October 18, 2010): 269–71.

<sup>16</sup> Lebow, Richard Ned, and Benjamin Valentino. “Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory.” *International Relations* 23, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 389–410.

<sup>17</sup> Shiffrinson, Joshua. “The Rise of China, Balance of Power Theory and US National Security: Reasons for Optimism?” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 2 (February 23, 2020): 175–216.

<sup>18</sup> Niou, Emerson M.S., and Peter C. Ordeshook. “A Theory of the Balance of Power in International Systems.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 30, no. 4 (December 1, 1986): 685–715.

<sup>19</sup> Valki, Laszlo. “On the Balance of Power Theory.” *Annales Universitatis Scientiarum Budapestinensis de Rolando Eotvos Nominatae: Sectio Iuridica* 25 (1983): 227–44.

scholar Hans Morgenthau, a state that chooses to undo the balance of the system must either “conquer the world, or perish”.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, an increase in great power competition can be explained through the security dilemma created by rival powers. This theory of war and peace via interactions among states is used to explain most major events in the contemporary era. The most compelling catalyst of a security dilemma is the “universal sin of humanity” – fear; fear of actions taken by a rising state causes another state to feel insecure and triggers an expansion of power, typically in the form of military and defense buildup.<sup>21</sup> The primary source of this fear is a state’s uncertainty and anxiety about the motives and intentions of its rivals. Due to the vicious cycle of constantly accumulating power, states experiencing a security dilemma often lead to tragic consequences such as threats of war, or war itself.<sup>22</sup>

## **U.S Interest in the SCS**

The United States’ interests in the South China Sea are three-fold: economic, political, and military. Following World War II, the United States has been on a continuing mission to promote a liberal rules-based global order to maximize economic growth and prosperity without the threat of war. With so much of the world’s trade passing through the South China Sea, a hostile power controlling these waters would pose a serious threat to U.S. economic security and its position as the international hegemon and the guarantor of peace in East Asia. With the United States’ power “predicated on the uninterrupted flow

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>21</sup> Tang, Shiping. “The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis.” *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (September 18, 2009): 587–623.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 594.

of goods internationally,” it is easy to see why the South China Sea is becoming such a flashpoint in the greater Sino-U.S. competition.<sup>23</sup> Strategically, the United States has three treaty allies (Japan, South Korea, the Philippines) in the region in addition to a handful of current, emerging, or potential partner countries. As China continues to acquire power and flex its muscle, the United States, both out of its self-interest and commitments to its allies, has no choice but to stand firm in its security commitments. Should the United States fail to honor its commitment to its allies and smaller nations, there is a good chance that these countries will gravitate towards China.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, from a military perspective, the United States must prevent the bilateral balance of maritime power from developing disproportionately in favor of China.

Since 2014, China has threatened U.S. interests with brazen combative tactics. Ranging from illegal construction of military island-bases to haphazard claims to regions outside of countries’ Exclusive Economic Zones, China is intent on not allowing the United States on gaining strong footholds in the region. China’s strategy also includes overt intimidation of neighboring countries and the harassment of both government and civilian vessels sailing through the South China Sea.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Center, Jewish Policy. “The South China Sea: Flashpoints for U.S. Interests.” *Jewish Policy Center* (blog), January 22, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> O’Rourke, Ronald. “U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress,” n.d., 105.

<sup>25</sup> Mackubin Thomas Owens, Bradley Bowman. “Dangerous Waters: Responding to China’s Maritime Provocations in the South China Sea.” Text. *The National Interest*. The Center for the National Interest, December 20, 2019.

## President Obama's Foreign Policy

President Obama's national security legacy will be marked as one of caution and patience – characterizations that proved to be both detrimental and beneficial to the goals of the United States. He greatly stressed taking action alongside the United States' allies as a sort of coalition and encouraged the country to "lead from behind".<sup>26</sup> He often traveled to foreign countries to meet with their leaders to open discussions about ongoing issues around the world. Despite his best intentions at peaceful resolutions, he, for the most part, fell short of many of his aspirations and expectations. Obama's approach to national security may be best described within the post-partisan leadership framework that saw him attempt to bring together Americans on both sides of the aisle. Concerning China specifically, Obama stressed a rebalancing in the region that would see the United States "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific.<sup>27</sup> While the shift to the region may not have been as intense as its name suggests, it was a calculated move that served to remind China that the United States was keeping tabs on developments in the area with little provocation. Obama's overall approach to China, and more specifically the South China Sea, is one of distant monitoring, collaboration with allies, and reiterating to Beijing the potential proportionate punishments for its increasing assertiveness; very diplomatic in nature. Despite the lengths Obama went to ensure peaceful relations, many critics believe that his reluctance to engage

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<sup>26</sup> Tierney, Dominic. "Obama and Trump: Foreign Policy Opposites or Twins? - Foreign Policy Research Institute." Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 13, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> O'Hanlon, Michael E. "Obama the Carpenter: The President's National Security Legacy." *Brookings* (blog), May 21, 2015.

militarily in other regions of the world has emboldened direct rivals of the United States, such as Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.<sup>28</sup>

## **President Trump's Foreign Policy**

Having been unimpressed with the Obama Administration's handling of national security issues, Trump essentially reversed course on much of the strategies Obama set out on; though not to the complete failure that many expected. Painting himself in the light as a sort of Obama alter ego, Trump champions the idea of a strong United States. On multiple occasions, he has shown disdain to countries within the allied coalition that Obama helped build and he has pursued a relatively abrasive foreign policy strategy that has resulted in the erosion of some security alliances, all in the hopes of forging a stronger United States capable of tackling concerns singlehandedly.<sup>29</sup> Most notably to this point, Trump has withdrawn from more treaties and organizations than all the post-Cold War U.S. presidents combined.<sup>30</sup> His foreign policy decisions at times appear to be dictated by his personality, leading to a chiefly incoherent agenda. However, out of all the apparent chaos, emerges foreign policy that is at times oddly effective. When looking at China, Trump displays a vehement desire to stymie its power projection. In general, he believes that the most promising pathway to peace is the display of the United States' might. He promotes a much-needed toughening of policy towards China that the country lacked in yesteryears.

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<sup>28</sup> Horsley, Scott. "Patient Diplomacy And A Reluctance To Act: Obama's Mark On Foreign Policy." NPR, September 20, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Metz, Steven. "The Flaws in Trump's Strategic Approach to U.S. National Security." World Politics Review, July 5, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Tierney, Dominic. "Obama and Trump: Foreign Policy Opposites or Twins? - Foreign Policy Research Institute." Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 13, 2019.

From harsh sanctions and increased naval activity in the South China Sea, Trump appears ready to prevent China from gaining any sort of advantage over the United States on his watch.<sup>31</sup> The “America first” slogan Trump campaigned with on his journey to the Oval Office rings true.

## **China’s Reaction**

In response to the United States’ constant reinforcement of freedom of navigation, China has continued to express “strong dissatisfaction” and “resolute opposition,” according to Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang.<sup>32</sup> China believes that the United States’ actions infringe upon Chinese sovereignty and disrupt the stability of the seas, and urges the United States to cease all of its seemingly provocative actions. In 2014, Xi signaled his dissatisfaction by proposing an Asian Security Concept stressing that “it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia”.<sup>33</sup> In the same year, a Chinese Vice-Foreign Ministry publicly criticized the United States’ treaty allies in Asia, saying that “strengthening bilateral alliances would easily worsen divisions and confrontations in the region”.<sup>34</sup> Further down the line, Xi reinforced his ideology at a 2017 United Nations speech in Geneva where he called for a “community of shared order” with “no interference in countries’ internal affairs” while

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<sup>31</sup> Blackwill, Robert. “Trump’s Foreign Policies Are Better Than They Seem.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, no. 84 (April 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Welle (www.dw.com), Deutsche. “China Warns US after Warships Sail in Disputed South China Sea | DW | 06.05.2019.” DW.COM. Accessed April 5, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence, Susan. “China, U.S. Leadership, and Geopolitical Challenges in Asia,” December 22, 2014, 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 2.



having the “right to independently choose their social system and development path”.<sup>35</sup> These comments were undoubtedly calling to question the United States’ democracy promotion across the globe. Furthermore, using language mirroring that of Obama’s speech in Vietnam, almost as if to mock the United States, Xi proclaimed that “big countries should treat smaller ones as equals and not [...] impose their will on others”.<sup>36</sup> Scattered intermittently throughout these years, China has accompanied its diplomatic discussions and speeches with physical actions in the South China Sea. In response to the United States’ continuing unwillingness to back down, China deployed the DF-26 missile system capable of destroying hefty naval vessels with both conventional and nuclear warheads. This deployment falls in line with the overall theme of China’s response as significant military buildup in line with the A2/D2 strategy – anti-access/area denial – that deters other countries from entering the region.<sup>37</sup> It seems as though with every instance of U.S. ships passing through the South China Sea, Beijing will send more of its ships and planes to the pseudo-bases on contested islands. Interestingly, Xi Jinping conducted China’s largest-ever naval parade near the islands as a show of his commitment to claiming the territory. At a more micro level, China has also been known to approach foreign vessels to force them to leave the area. On one occasion, the Chinese destroyer, Lanzhou, came within 40 meters of the USS Decatur, with the U.S. Navy describing the encounter as “a series of increasingly aggressive maneuvers accompanied by warnings for Decatur to

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<sup>35</sup> Lawrence, Susan V, Caitlin Campbell, Rachel F Fefer, Jane A Leggett, Thomas Lum, Michael F Martin, and Andres B Schwarzenberg. “U.S.-China Relations,” September 3, 2019, 61.

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence, Susan V, Caitlin Campbell, Rachel F Fefer, Jane A Leggett, Thomas Lum, Michael F Martin, and Andres B Schwarzenberg. “U.S.-China Relations,” September 3, 2019, 61.

<sup>37</sup> Lawrence, Susan. “China, U.S. Leadership, and Geopolitical Challenges in Asia,” December 22, 2014, 3.

depart the area”.<sup>38</sup> These actions are a significant step beyond simply verbal warnings and teeter on recklessness that could lead to unfortunate conflicts.

## **Great Power Competition in the South China Sea**

With a political system that is the antithesis to most other countries, peaceful acceptance of China as the global hegemon is difficult to imagine. Competition between major international actors is fundamentally different from rivalries between smaller actors or between smaller actors and major actors. Since major actors, like the United States and China, have such huge scopes of global influence, whoever can emerge as the most influential state will likely be able to shape the international system in their image; actions of minor powers will be inherently tied to them. Additionally, the theory of great power competition holds that major powers are both more conflict-prone than other actors and more escalatory than asymmetric crises, thus providing a possible explanation for the recent intensification of clashes in the South China Sea.<sup>39</sup> Unlike a clash between a minor actor and a major actor, there is no scenario where two major actors can backdown without suffering significant reputational costs. This theorization paints a grim outlook on the crisis at hand. From a Western point of view, the championing of a liberal international order leads the world to be a safer and less hostile place. However, China has long realized that this liberal system has always, and continues to, pose an existential threat to its regimes.<sup>40</sup> There are simply too many aspects of liberal regimes that can undermine China’s

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<sup>38</sup> CNN, Brad Lendon. “China’s Reaction to US Navy Operation: We Have Missiles.” CNN.

<sup>39</sup> Hensel, Paul, and Thomas Sowers. “Territorial Claims, Major Power Competition, and the Origins of Enduring Rivalry.” *Department of Political Science*, September 1998.

<sup>40</sup> Wright, Thomas. “The Return to Great-Power Rivalry Was Inevitable.” *Brookings* (blog), September 12, 2018.

authoritarian rule; Beijing decided to push back. In response to the pushback, it should come as no surprise that both Obama and Trump, regardless of partisanship, were unwilling to accommodate an emerging China. With abhorrence and skepticism tracing back to the Cold War, there seems to be no future in sight for the two countries' ideologies to coexist.

### **Focus of Thesis**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the strategies undertaken by the Obama administration and the Trump administration in the face of China's expansion as a whole, and then specifically related to the South China Sea. The thesis also examines Xi Jinping's rise to power and how his foreign policy has challenged both American presidents' approaches. Using a wide range of government documents, media reports, and past academic research, this qualitative study concludes with assessing the effectiveness of the three presidents' strategies and provides an outlook for what the future of the South China Sea conflict and greater Sino-U.S. relations will look like.

## The Obama Administration and the South China Sea

*“America’s first Pacific President”*

*-President Barack Obama, Tokyo, November 2009*

### The Return to Asia

When President Obama first assumed his role in the Oval Office, he was determined to distinguish his foreign policy from that of his predecessor, President George W. Bush. While President Bush’s foreign policy is characterized as unilateral and Middle East-centric, Obama saw the Asia-Pacific as the perfect intersection of his two objectives of promoting multilateralism and shifting foreign policy attention.<sup>41</sup> Riding the coattails of two major decisions in the killing of Osama Bin Laden and ending U.S. involvement in the Iraq War, Obama needed a comparably grandiose statement for his second term to address China’s growing influence in Asia that would divert the nation’s attention away from Bush’s waning War on Terror. To accomplish this goal, the Obama Administration outlined a strategic “pivot to Asia” that called for a considerable reorienting of foreign policy resources to restore U.S. leadership in the region.<sup>42</sup> While a concentration on Asia is not necessarily new given the United States’ constant presence since World War II, the focus of U.S. presence has been shifted towards the security sphere. From a realist perspective, the refocus on Asia makes perfect sense and is fueled by the existence of six of the world’s ten largest armies housed in the region, three of whom possess nuclear

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<sup>41</sup> Tan, See Seng. “Change and Continuity in America’s Asia Pivot: US Engagement with Multilateralism in the Asia Pacific.” In *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance toward Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic Dimensions*, 55–79. The Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Castro, Renato Cruz De. “The Obama Administration’s Strategic Pivot to Asia: From a Diplomatic to a Strategic Constraintment of an Emergent China?,” n.d., 20.

weapons.<sup>43</sup> While the ‘pivot’ to Asia is not so much a pivot as it is a rebalancing of attention, Obama’s strategies that make up the framework of this movement emphasized multilateralism to promote an order based in mutual security alliances, not one where “big nations bully the small.”<sup>44</sup> Obama’s vision thus became not a question of whether the United States should or should not lead, but how it should lead.

## **Together We Can – Multilateralism**

In a 2011 speech to the Australian Parliament, President Obama made his vision known:

“We (the US) stand for an international order in which the rights and responsibilities of all nations and all people are upheld. Where international law and norms are enforced. Where commerce and freedom of navigation are not impeded. Where emerging powers contribute to regional security, and where disagreements are resolved peacefully”.<sup>45</sup>

The message to the world was clear – the United States was not looking for material gains or profits. Its goal is to uphold the norm of global peace and cooperation through established multilateral institutions. To attain this vision of the future, the Obama Administration’s most notable policy decision was its emphasis on cooperative engagement and “burden sharing”.<sup>46</sup> He recognized that the United States did not have unlimited resources and power, so it should not be expected to dictate the outcome of events around the world. This step back from the unilateral strategies of his predecessor revealed

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<sup>43</sup> David, Steven R. “Obama’s Realist Policies.” Obama: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Obama, Barack. “Policy Speech at Queensland University,” Brisbane, Australia. 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Obama, Barack. *Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament* (White House: Office of the press secretary), 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Löfflmann, Georg. “The ‘Obama Doctrine’ – Vision for Change?” In *The American Grand Strategy under Obama*. Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

Obama's commitment to "hegemonic restraint" and his belief that the American image could be restored through a strong network of allies and partnerships.<sup>47</sup> In practice, this 'burden sharing' came to fruition in Obama's reinforcement of U.S. participation in Asia's multilateral institutions such as the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Regional Forum, a security dialogue between twenty-seven countries and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an enormous proposed trade agreement. Active and diligent participation in these institutions was viewed with utmost priority by the Obama Administration because it allowed the United States to maintain an influential voice in discussions regarding the security and economy of the region. Where once ASEAN was dismissed as a simple formality, the Obama Administration spurred attendees to discuss relevant security issues.

#### ASEAN and U.S. Relations with Smaller Southeast Asian Nations

The creation of ASEAN offers a unique opportunity for the smaller countries of Asia to build a sense of identity and community. With China growing at an incredible rate, the ten ASEAN nations cultivated a sense of security amongst themselves with China as a common worry. ASEAN creates a network of mutual trust amongst its members – trust being a tough commodity to come by with an ever-unpredictable Beijing looming overhead. In his foreign policy, Obama discovered the value of this trust network and the possible dividends of the United States' incorporation into that network. At its core, ASEAN has

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<sup>47</sup> Loffmann, Georg. "The 'Obama Doctrine' – Vision for Change?" In *The American Grand Strategy under Obama*. Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

always been a pro-U.S. institution; ASEAN leaders convene and speak in English, member states adopted free-market economies, and states welcome American investments with open arms. Furthermore, following a terrible display of Chinese diplomacy in which Beijing blocked an ASEAN communiqué, Obama felt the benefits of his rapprochement to Asia as ASEAN members drifted away from China and closer to the United States. In the security realm, the pursuit of ASEAN involvement allowed the United States to re-promote past talks between Southeast Asian nations and China regarding the South China Sea. In 2002, ASEAN members and China signed the “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” (DOC) that was later bolstered in 2011 by the signing of the “Guidelines for the Implementation of the DOC” – an agreement for all nations to respect the South China Sea status quo.<sup>48</sup> With American support, ASEAN nations are more readily willing to make stances, albeit small, towards China in their efforts to reclaim territory. The formalization of these codes dictating behavior is just one step in the right direction. At the end of the day, ASEAN acts as a mechanism for balancing the powers in the region. Extending outward to the ASEAN+3 and +6 talks, ASEAN can decide the circumstances under which a larger power may enter the discussions, making it necessary for them to work through ASEAN to further their interests. Perhaps the criteria most relevant to the South China Sea is that all ASEAN convinced all Asia-Pacific powers to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) that legally commits them to not use armed force in the region. By working through ASEAN, Obama hoped that these powers could simultaneously strengthen their positions while also acting as each other’s checks

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<sup>48</sup> Amer, Ramses. “The South China Sea: Challenge for Asean,” n.d., 2.

and balances.<sup>49</sup> Obama's working with small Southeast Asian countries makes clear how ASEAN can challenge China.

In a visit to Hanoi, President Obama vehemently backed Vietnam's territorial claims in the South China Sea. As if this support was not enough to alarm China, Obama also lifted a decades-long arms embargo. With this embargo out of the picture, the United States is allowed to sell weapons to Vietnam, with Obama quickly taking the opportunity to promise "more access to security equipment" to improve its security, defend its territorial claims, and most importantly protect its sovereignty.<sup>50</sup> With their Communist roots, Vietnam views China as its most valuable bilateral partner; however, China's actions in the South China Sea have put a huge strain on their relationship that has seen Vietnam cozy up to the United States. Agreeing to warm up to Vietnam is a calculated, strategic military play for the United States to regain formal naval access to part of the region as the U.S. Navy has not been allowed to enter since it used Vietnamese ports as bases during the Vietnam War. Cam Ranh Bay, in particular, is Vietnam's closest port to the South China Sea and is just one example of a port without U.S. Naval access for decades.<sup>51</sup> To formalize their relationship, the United States and Vietnam signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation which included maritime security as the main focus. This shift away from China by Vietnam is significant because it reveals that Vietnam's wariness of China's territorial expansion trumps their historical partnership. As

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<sup>49</sup> Kun, Zhai. "The ASEAN Power." In *The Architecture of Security in the Asia-Pacific*, edited by Ron Huisken. ANU Press, 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Holmes, Oliver. "Obama Backs Vietnam in South China Sea Dispute with Beijing." *The Guardian*, May 24, 2016, sec. World news.

<sup>51</sup> News, A. B. C. "How Obama's Vietnam Visit Became About China." ABC News. Accessed March 27, 2020.



a show of improved relations, the General Secretary of Vietnam's Communist Party made the position's first-ever visit to the United States in 2015.

Similarly, Obama looked to President Duterte of the Philippines to bolster resistance against China. In 2014, the United States and the Philippines signed an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement that allows the United States to rotate troops throughout the island nation and build facilities on already existing Filipino bases.<sup>52</sup> However, Obama lent a helping hand to the Philippines long before this agreement came to fruition. In 2011, the United States sold a handful of considerably sized Coast Guard ships that were set to be decommissioned but were instead retrofitted by the Philippine Navy as part of President Aquino's defense modernization movement. Furthermore, Obama continued to ensure that annual *Balikatan* – meaning 'shoulder-to-shoulder' – military training exercises take place.<sup>53</sup> In 2015, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced the Southeast Asia Maritime Initiative that pledged more exchange of military equipment, training, and intelligence to Southeast Asian nations, with the Philippines as a main beneficiary. At the end of the day, the United States is bound by treaty to help the Philippines should its territory come under attack, but what that help will look like with regards to the South China Sea remains uncertain.

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<sup>52</sup> Lake, Eli. "The Philippines Just Blew up Obama's Asia Pivot." Text. The Straits Times, October 24, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Fisher, Richard D. "Defending the Philippines: Military Modernization and the Challenges Ahead." Center for a New American Security, 2012.

## Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)

The United States, and mainly Japan, continued to challenge China's increasing boldness by reaffirming their propensity to display leadership through the creation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership – the biggest regional trade accord in history. The United States' main reasoning for joining the TPP is such that it does not become marginalized from the ever-shifting regional power dynamics in Asia. Joining the TPP would also reassure American allies and partners that it can be a “multidimensional power” capable of delivering stability and security.<sup>54</sup> In short, the TPP aims to reduce a slew of tariffs between countries in Southeast Asia and the Americas, while striving to uphold a global economic culture of high standards on labor, the environment, and intellectual property.<sup>55</sup> This trade agreement between twelve countries, and excluding China, set new terms for the \$28 trillion in trade and investments flowing between the signatories. Furthermore, it would put the United States in the driver's seat for writing the rules of a group that represents 40 percent of the world's trade.<sup>56</sup> This cooperation naturally made China uneasy because it hinted at the possibility of future rules of the global economic system to be heavily influenced by U.S. ideals. Moreover, smaller powers in the region will be reeled in closer to the United States and will begin to rely less on China. The TPP posed a dilemma for China because joining the agreement would mean conceding to a western-based standards system that would require China to significantly reassess and rework its

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<sup>54</sup> Solís, Mireya. “The Case for Trade and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.” In *Brookings Big Ideas for America*, edited by Michael O’Hanlon. Brookings Institution Press, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Hsu, Sara. “China and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.” *The Diplomat*, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Fergusson, Ian F, Brock R Williams, Shayerah Ilias Akhtar, Bill Canis, Ben Dolven, Rachel F Fefer, James K Jackson, et al. “The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP): Key Provisions and Issues for Congress,” n.d., 93.

economic opening, economic regulation, and economic diplomacy.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, choosing to not participate in the TPP would see China lose an estimated \$100 billion in exports.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, joining the TPP would strip China of the competitive advantage it enjoys in its labor force by obligating Beijing to adhere to new labor laws. Though framed as a harmless trade agreement, the ulterior motive of the TPP's creation was clear. As stated by Obama himself, "[the United States] can't let countries like China write the rules of the global economy" when "95 percent of the [United States'] potential customers live outside [its] borders".<sup>59</sup> These statements add truth to the allegations that the United States was using the TPP as a means of challenging China. From a competitive perspective, the TPP creates a pseudo-ultimatum that forces Asian countries to pick a side – China or the United States – in the event of a bilateral conflict between their two spheres of influence.

## **Alliance Building**

### U.S.-Japan

Shortly following Japan's surrender in World War II, the United States conducted a military occupation to permanently stomp out fascism and ensure the future of Japan aligned with the United States' trajectory. For years, the United States worked tirelessly to win Japan as an ally because, as George Kennan stated, "Japan [was] the key to Asia, just as Germany was the key to Europe".<sup>60</sup> With help from the United States, Japan was

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<sup>57</sup> Naughton, Barry, Arthur Kroeber, Guy De Jonquieres, and Graham Webster. "What Will the TPP Mean for China? – Foreign Policy." *Foreign Policy*, October 7, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Sikdar, Chandrima, and Kakali Mukhopadhyay. "Economy-Wide Impact of TPP: New Challenges to China." *Journal of Economic Structures* 6, no. 22 (2017).

<sup>59</sup> Hsu, Sara. "China and the Trans-Pacific Partnership." *The Diplomat*, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Cha, Victor. "Informal Hierarchy in Asia: The Origins of the U.S.–Japan Alliance." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 1–34.

on track to emerge as the leading military-industrial power in East Asia. Perhaps even more so than the United States, Japan feels the pressure of a rising China and recognizes the importance of maintaining strong security ties with the West. To help alleviate the United States' security burden, and to ensure its own protection, Japan entered into a "Special Measures Agreement" and pays Washington roughly \$2 billion every year to cover some of the costs associated with stationing U.S. troops in Japan. Additionally, Japan provides financial compensation to localities that host U.S. troops and also pays rent for the bases that are built.<sup>61</sup> The most contemporary example of bilateral cooperation between the United States and Japan comes in the form of a Joint Statement for Defense Cooperation agreed upon at the conclusion of the 2013 2+2 meeting of U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense and Japan's Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Defense. This Joint Statement reaffirmed the critical role of the alliance in maintaining balance and security in the region based on shared values of "democracy, the rule of law, free and open markets and respect for human rights".<sup>62</sup> Obama welcomed the idea of challenging China by exercising a "collective self-defense" of Japan and U.S. assets stationed there, while also committing to increasing defense spending allowing Japan to defend its "sovereign territory".<sup>63</sup> Concerning ongoing territory disputes with China, the U.S. and Japan together pushed Beijing to play a "responsible and constructive role" in the region's stability, "adhere to international norms of behavior," and increase "openness and transparency"

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<sup>61</sup> Chanlett-Avery, Emma, Mark Manyin, and Brock R Williams. "U.S.-Japan Relations," n.d., 3.

<sup>62</sup> Przystup, James J. "The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Review of the Guidelines for Defense Cooperation." Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, March 1, 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

regarding its military modernization and investments.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, the United States pledged a heightened defense position to Japan by increasing the frequency and scope of bilateral training such as missile defense and military simulations. In 2014, Obama made clear to Beijing that he considered the Senkaku Islands (in the East China Sea) to be protected under the U.S.-Japan security treaty. This statement saw Obama become the first sitting U.S. president to formally acknowledge the islands and set a precedent for the U.S. perspective of the contested islands in the South China Sea.<sup>65</sup> To strengthen this commitment, the United States and Japan reworked the language in their Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM) that saw a shift from substance-less generalizations to a more robust plan to manage future crises jointly without escalating to the use of military forces.<sup>66</sup> The ACM acts as a U.S.-Japan governing body that can rapidly respond and adapt to any contingency using all relevant government agencies. Like NATO, the ACM gives the U.S.-Japan alliance a formalized command structure that offers more stability while allowing for more flexibility; the ACM was previously only convenable in states of war.<sup>67</sup> This change puts forth a solution to handling events in “gray zone” scenarios.

### U.S.-Australia

Though not itself situated in the South China Sea, Australia is another example of a country in the Asia-Pacific with some muscle committed to helping the United States’

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<sup>64</sup> Przystup, James J. “The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Review of the Guidelines for Defense Cooperation.” Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, March 1, 2015.

<sup>65</sup> “Abe and Obama: Reconciliation and the Rebalance | Council on Foreign Relations.”

<sup>66</sup> Storch, Thomas. “Putting ‘Meat on the Bones’ of the U.S.-Japan Alliance Coordination Mechanism.” *Sasakawa USA*, no. 2 (2015): 17.

<sup>67</sup> Chanlett-Avery, Emma, Caitlin Campbell, and Joshua A Williams. “The U.S.-Japan Alliance,” n.d., 58.

causes. Where once the relationship became stagnant, it surged back to life under the Obama Administration and was exemplified by Australia sending troops and equipment to the Middle East to assist the United States thwart the advancement of the Islamic State. Playing along the line of his recommitment to the region, Obama used the tensions in the South China Sea to station 2500 U.S. Marines in the coastal city of Darwin. These troops, located a mere 500 miles from the southern tip of Indonesia, are set up to be able to respond to any conflict within the region at a moment's notice. This decision came as a response to increased military mobilization by China where they continued to develop new ballistic missile capabilities and hinted at deploying nuclear submarines into the Pacific Ocean. Their stationing was a symbolic move by Obama that would ensure "the security architecture for the region is updated for the 21st century" – a decision that shortly followed a 2010 Australia-United States Ministerial Consultation looking to explore "options for enhanced joint defense cooperation on Australian soil".<sup>68, 69</sup> The following 2015 ministerial saw Australia back the United States' discontentment of China's land-grabs and called for all claimant states to cease construction and militarization. Both nations jointly emphasized the importance of maintaining lawful use of the seas and skies, and were instrumental in coaxing ASEAN into forming their Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.<sup>70</sup> The strengthening of the U.S.-Australia relationship under Obama served to remind the world that these two countries have stood side by side in conflicts throughout history and it paints a hopeful picture that they will do the same for future conflicts. Should

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<sup>68</sup> Bohan, Caren, and James Grubel. "Obama Boosts U.S. Military in Australia, Reassures China." *Reuters*, November 16, 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Casey, Steven. "Obama's Alliances." Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Vaughn, Bruce. "Australia: Background and U.S. Relations," n.d., 31.

conflict break out in the Indo-Pacific, Obama is certain that the United States' "most stalwart ally (when it comes to troop deployment)" will step up in a big way.<sup>71</sup> As the cornerstone of Anglo-Saxon culture in Asia, the United States and Australia's alliance appears to be set in stone.

### U.S.-India

During his two terms in office, President Obama set new standards for U.S.-India relations. Not only did he make two trips to India – a feat never done by any U.S. president – but he also hosted Indian leaders at the White House a record number of times; Prime Minister Singh thrice and Prime Minister Modi twice.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, Obama advocated for India's inclusion in the United Nations Security Council, a recognition that not only acknowledged India's path to attaining great power status but also acknowledged India as a top global player.<sup>73</sup> Simply put, Obama was coming to terms with India's rise in China's shadow and was anticipating the best way to take advantage of its growing presence. At the beginning of his first term, Obama used Secretary Clinton to establish a "high-level U.S. strategic dialogue" on capacity building and democratic institutions, two things that would be "hard to discuss with China," the other major power in the region.<sup>74</sup> On the security front, the Obama years saw the United States conduct more military training

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<sup>71</sup> "Obama Reassures Turnbull US-Australia Alliance Will Transcend 'Party Politics.'" *The Guardian*, November 20, 2016, sec. World news.

<sup>72</sup> "Strengthening Ties with India Was Barack Obama's Priority: US." *Economic Times - India Times*, January 18, 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Riedel, Bruce. "Obama and South Asia." In *Avoiding Armageddon: America, India, and Pakistan to the Brink and Back*. Brookings Institution Press, 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Kumar, Radha. "New Potential for US-India Relations Under Obama." *The International Spectator* 44, no. 4 (January 13, 2010): 21–26.

exercises with India than with any other country in the world; nearly fifty per year.<sup>75</sup> The two nations came together to produce a Joint Statement that expanded collaboration per the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) intended to give India license-free access to a host of American defense technology. Shortly thereafter, India signed a deal to purchase \$1.1 billion of U.S. maritime patrol planes. Together, the United States and India have committed to \$11 billion worth of defense contracts since Obama came into office; a staggering increase of two thousand percent.<sup>76</sup> As a show of support for Obama's refocus to Asia, Prime Minister Modi embarked on a new diplomacy dubbed "Act East," an effort to increase cooperation with other Southeast Asian countries as a contest to China's growing influence.<sup>77</sup> To thwart Chinese maritime advances, Prime Minister Modi funneled nearly \$8 billion into a port project in Bangladesh that was previously funded by a Chinese engineering company.<sup>78</sup> In the end, India's growing influence in Asia is an appealing gateway through which the United States can reinstate itself as China's bane.

As the three largest powers in the Asia-Pacific (excluding China), it makes sense that Obama looked to strengthen ties across all fronts with these nations. To deter China from acting out of line in the South China Sea, the United States reaffirmed security commitments to all three nations. Individually, none of the three nations possess enough military strength to keep China at bay, however, with the United States' backing it seems possible to keep China at bay for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>75</sup> Desai, Ronak D., "US-India Relations Under the Second Obama Administration." HuffPost, 29:40 500.

<sup>76</sup> Kronstadt, K Alan, and Shayerah Ilias Akhtar. "India-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress," n.d., 43.

<sup>77</sup> "As Obama Visits, Signs That India Is Pushing Back against China." *Reuters*, January 21, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*



## **Obama in Troubled Waters**

As a whole, President Obama's approach to the South China Sea was very cautious. While he ordered several of Freedom of Navigation Operations, China decided to take advantage of Obama's pacifist attitude and challenge the United States by ramping up its island-building. To the dismay of many, Obama's response consisted of very little physical rebuttals and instead centered on public statements urging Beijing to stop their actions. Even with all the talk about potential consequences if China keeps building, Obama never actually enforced anything. However, everything changed after Obama hosted Xi at the White House and reportedly conveyed the gravity of the South China Sea situation. While it is not known what exactly was said during their discussion, China quickly withdrew its ships from the Scarborough Shoal. Many scholars believe that Obama finally took a red-line stance and showed Xi that claiming that particular set of islands would result in military conflict with the United States. In the days following that turning point meeting, the United States ramped up military flyovers in the region using planes traditionally used for combat, not surveillance.<sup>79</sup>

## **Conclusion**

President Obama's Asia policy decisions can be best summarized as non-inflammatory. His administration openly welcomed China, albeit under the many aforementioned conditions. His "pivot to Asia" and choice to work closely with the nations surrounding China is a calculated move meant to strengthen ties within the region without

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<sup>79</sup> Sevastopulo, Demetri, Tom Mitchell, and Geoff Dyer. "Obama Forced Xi to Back down over South China Sea Dispute." *Financial Times*, July 12, 2016.

setting off Beijing. He realized that addressing China's rise would not be possible without the support of these other nations, and even still may not be enough to stop Beijing. Wary that his country's actions will likely be interpreted by Beijing as attempts to contain China, Obama played off many of his strategic moves as byproducts of cooperation that were taking place before China's expansion into the South China Sea began. From joint military exercises to the exchange of equipment, the United States insisted that it was simply maintaining its long-standing defense agreements and treaties.

## **The Trump Administration and the South China Sea**

*“China is neither an ally or a friend -- they want to beat us and own our country.”*  
- President Donald Trump, Twitter, 2011

When stacking up Trump’s approach to the South China Sea with Obama’s, the difference is clear. While Obama approached the region with a clearly laid out plan, Trump’s strategy was largely incoherent. As a man committed to American nationalism and protectionism, it is unsurprising that Trump has backed away from multilateral institutions and has not put effort into strengthening relationships with key U.S. allies that Obama started on. Despite dialing up bilateral confrontations with China on all fronts, his tactics addressing the economic and military issues have proven somewhat effective. While his seemingly erratic behavior unnerves U.S. allies and partners, there may be some ‘method to the madness’ as Trump’s Asia policies have caused some noticeable headaches for Beijing.

### **The Return *from* Asia**

The tweet above, even so many years before he was elected to office, should have made clear Trump’s attitude towards China. When President Trump ran for office in 2016, his constituencies and campaign slogans reverberated with chants of “America First” and “Make American Great Again”. He envisioned a world in which he could protect the United States and its interests from outside actors looking to undermine its position as the world’s most powerful country. From the get-go, Trump ditched Obama’s noninflammatory tone with repeated attacks and accusations of China’s wrongdoings. Upon taking office in early 2017, Trump set aside the United States’ relationships in favor of a confrontational approach to China while maintaining enough leeway for deal-making.

In a show of defiance of the global status quo, Trump accepted a phone call from Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen; a clear questioning of the “One China” policy and favoring a regional policy less deferential to Beijing.<sup>80</sup> In dealing with the South China Sea, Trump’s rhetoric and approach is the polar opposite of that of Obama. Rather than promote multilateralism, Trump opted for a unilateral foreign policy stance reminiscent of the last Republican president, President George W. Bush. His desire is for more countries to step up and share some of the burdens that the United States bears to maintain security in the region; Trump is tired of free riders. In his eyes, past presidents, Obama in particular, were not nearly hard enough on China; a softness that only allowed for China to continue to grow without significant obstacles. Trump’s appointment of General James “Mad Dog” Mattis as his Secretary of Defense all but signified his desire to impose American might on China. Firmly believing in the United States as the world’s example of freedom and democracy, Trump adopted a foreign policy doctrine that framed the “geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order,” with his greatest weapon being his notorious unpredictability and knack for building suspense in the face of negotiations.<sup>81</sup>

### **The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)**

The Trump Administration’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, at the surface, appears similar to Obama’s ‘pivot’ to Asia; however, it differs starkly by putting

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<sup>80</sup> Sutter, Robert. “Barack Obama, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump – Pragmatism Fails as U.S.-China Differences Rise in Prominence.” *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 24, no. 2 (October 2017): 69–85.

<sup>81</sup> Fly, Jamie. “Trump’s Asia Policy and the Concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific.’” *Research Division Asia*, no. 2 (October 2018).

competition with China front and center. The main tenant of the FOIP was clear – provide Southeast Asia with a competitive alternative to Beijing’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Trump’s pushback on the BRI is reminiscent of Cold War rhetoric in which he describes China as a “revisionist power” looking to unseat the United States as the global hegemon using approaches and tactics that come at the expense of the United States and other countries.<sup>82</sup> In a speech given before visiting the region, Vice President Mike Pence pledged the United States’ “steadfast and enduring commitment” to the Indo-Pacific and made clear to China and its neighboring countries that Southeast Asia should be a region where “sovereignty is respected, where commerce flows unhindered and where independent nations are masters of their own destinies”.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, in an apparent address to China specifically, he made clear that one of the three FOIP pillars was the security of freedom of navigation and overflight, and capped off his speech by asserting that “authoritarianism, aggression, [and empire] have no place in the Indo-Pacific”.<sup>84</sup>

#### Defense Contestations under FOIP – Peace through Strength

To promote a free and open region, Trump brought the United States forward as the guarantor of peace in the region. Though not a fan of multilateralism, Trump did see the benefits of providing Southeast Asian countries with the means necessary to promote regional freedom on their own accords. In 2017, the United States sold \$9.42 billion worth of arms and provided more than \$500 million in security assistance to regional states – more than double the amount in 2016 under Obama. These sales, however, were not

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<sup>82</sup> Storey, Ian, and Malcolm Cook. “The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: America’s Asia Policy Crystalizes.” *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute*, no. 77 (2018): 8.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

without their setbacks. After agreeing to bolster the defenses of Southeast Asian nations, his encouraging them to act on their own led to many leaders scrambling to come up with home-grown solutions as a result of Trump's non-committal attitude.<sup>85</sup> In response to Chinese advances in the South China Sea, it is clear that Trump favors direct, unmistakable signals. When reports came in of China deploying anti-ship missiles to its manmade islands, Trump promptly proceeded to rescind the PLA-Navy's invite to the biennial Rim of the Pacific naval exercises in Hawaii. Doubling down on its concerns, the United States directly called for China to remove those missiles at the U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue. Additionally, Trump is adamant about enforcing maritime and aviation laws and understandings, highlighted by twenty Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) since his inauguration, with Pence even using his own flight to Singapore to send the same message.<sup>86</sup> Trump has given much more authority to the Pentagon to carry out these operations as a strategic move meant to add swiftness to decision-making from experts in the field. The Trump administration also called for other nations, Japan in particular, to carry out their own FONOPS to curtail the growing Chinese fleets. In terms of military buildup of his own, Trump planned to increase the number of ships in the Navy from 276 to 350 and upgrade all in-service ships' equipment. The new numbers behind Trump's FONOPs mark a clear departure from Obama's operations of the same nature. By February 2019, Trump's FONOPs amounted to more than twice as many as Obama conducted in his eight years. Trump's operations also bring U.S. navy vessels within just

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<sup>85</sup> Mishra, Vivek. "Looming US Retreat Under Trump: Implications for Asian Security." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 14, no. 1 (2019): 58–69.

<sup>86</sup> Storey, Ian, and Malcolm Cook. "The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: America's Asia Policy Crystalizes." *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute*, no. 77 (2018): 8.

twelve nautical miles of the islands. For reference, a country has sovereignty rights over most affairs extending two hundred nautical miles from its shores, but other countries may still sail through those waters depending on their purpose and subject to the rule of international maritime law. Twelve nautical miles, however, is as close as the U.S. can get to ‘Chinese’ islands before China has outright authority to take action against those ships; Trump is toeing the line.<sup>87</sup>

### **Trade War et al.**

President Trump’s skepticism of multilateralism as a solution to an assertive China is best exemplified by his decision to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. A businessman by trade, Trump must have had strong concerns about the efficacy of this trade agreement in a region that accounts for sixty percent of U.S. exports.<sup>88</sup> He believed that the TPP would undermine American economic superiority by taking domestic jobs and moving them overseas. As tensions in the South China Sea rose, one of Trump’s top economic advisors, Peter Navarro, pointed out trade as a likely medium for China to undermine U.S. security. He expressed concerns that China was “weaponizing” its investments in the United States to “vacuum up U.S. industrial capabilities” with the goal of “turn[ing] its own technology against [it] in an effort to erase [U.S.] security advantage”.<sup>89</sup> Such a strategy by China, combined with various other alleged economic malpractices, led Trump to use the economy as a means of forcing China to think twice

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<sup>87</sup> “U.S. Maritime Limits & Boundaries.” Office of Coast Survey - National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration – U.S. Department of Commerce.

<sup>88</sup> Tow, William. “Trump and Strategic Change in Asia.” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Liu, Tao, and Wing Thye Woo. “Understanding the U.S.-China Trade War.” *China Economic Journal* 11, no. 3 (2018): 319–40.

about its previously weakly contended advances in Southeast Asia. In his second year in office, Trump imposed punitive tariffs on \$250 billion of Chinese products while adding restrictions to Chinese investments and its purchases of U.S. technology. This decoupling from China is an ambitious attempt to cut off China from the global supply chain by forcing Western companies to look at other Southeast Asian nations to relocate their overseas production, and ultimately crippling the Chinese economy.<sup>90</sup> Without a strong economy, Trump argued, China will need to stop its militarization and island-building to shift its focus away from the South China Sea back to saving its economy. In short, the trade war is meant to squeeze China to the point where they have no choice but to play by the rules written by the United States and western liberal order. In addition to a trade war, the United States has embarked on less blatant economic endeavors. In 2018, Congress passed the Better Use of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act that merged a handful of institutions to form a financial corporation capable of supporting projects in developing countries with investments and by helping U.S. companies relocate.<sup>91</sup> Given the timeframe in which it was created, the BUILD Act is seen as the Trump Administration's counter to the BRI. By offering economic opportunity, Trump hopes to dissuade smaller nations from relying on China for their development goals.

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<sup>90</sup> Heydarian, Richard Javad. *The Indo-Pacific: Trump, China, and the New Struggle for Global Mastery*. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Colby, Elbridge A., and A. Wess Mitchell. "The Age of Great-Power Competition: How the Trump Administration Refashioned American Strategy Essays." *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 1 (2020): 118–30.



## **A Hint of Bilateralism...and Minilateralism?**

### U.S.-Japan

Despite criticizing the alliance earlier in his presidency, Trump reversed course and praised the U.S.-Japan relationship and called for its strengthening on its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. However, similarly to his criticism of other nations, Trump believes that Japan should be pulling more weight and not only convinced them to cover more costs of stationing U.S. troops but also suggested that Japan should acquire its own nuclear deterrence. Perhaps more influential was Trump's ability to help Abe rework Japan's security agreement framework to balance out the defense alliance. Before, if Japan were to be attacked, the United States was required to come to its defense in full force, but the same could not be said the other way around. Now, if U.S. troops were to be attacked, say in the South China Sea, Japan must come to its defense. In discussions with Prime Minister Abe, Trump encouraged Japan to indirectly bolster the U.S.-Japan alliance by building more robust bilateral security relationships with smaller Southeast Asian nations in a U.S.-like fashion.<sup>92</sup> As one of the most militarily capable countries in the region, Trump was shocked to learn that Japan only spends half the amount (in percentage) of what other high-income countries spend on defense buildup – 1 percent of GDP compared to an average 2.4 percent GDP.<sup>93</sup> While all these points come across as Trump's unhappiness with Japan's side of the alliance, they come from a good place. When Abe visited the United

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<sup>92</sup> Atanassova-Cornelis, Elena, and Yoichiro Sato. "The US-Japan Alliance Dilemma in the Asia-Pacific: Changing Rationales and Scope." *The International Spectator* 54, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 78–93.

<sup>93</sup> Lind, Jennifer. "The Art of the Bluff: The U.S.-Japan Alliance Under the Trump Administration." In *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Robert Jervis. Columbia University Press, 2018.

States, Trump assured the world that their alliance is the “cornerstone of peace and stability in the Pacific region,” an alliance that was “unwavering” and “unshakeable”.<sup>94</sup> The two also came out of the meetings with a formal, written declaration that the islands in the East China Sea were protected under the U.S.-Japan security treaty. This declaration may set a precedent for future U.S. views of the islands in the South China Sea.

### U.S.-South Korea

President Trump’s approach to South Korea should come as no surprise. Despite calling South Korea the “linchpin” of his administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy, Trump criticized South Korea for allegedly “free-riding” and claimed that Washington gets “practically nothing compared to the cost” of the alliance.<sup>95</sup> Like Washington’s other alliances, Trump is pushing for South Korea to share more of the burden and is doing so by circumventing the decades-old negotiation process and making “exorbitant” demands to tell Seoul it must double its annual contributions to the cause.<sup>96</sup> South Korea currently pays about \$1 billion to support the military bases in its territory, but Trump is looking for a five-fold increase.<sup>97</sup> With these new contributions, Trump will look to add to the already 30,000 U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula, right on China’s doorstep. In confronting China, Trump and South Korean President Moon have a great weapon their disposal: the

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<sup>94</sup> Lind, Jennifer. “The Art of the Bluff: The U.S.-Japan Alliance Under the Trump Administration.” In *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Robert Jervis. Columbia University Press, 2018., 242.

<sup>95</sup> Work, Clint. “Beyond North Korea: Fractures in the US-South Korea Alliance.” *The Diplomat*, 2020.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> O’Hanlon, Michael E. “What Is Going on with the United States Alliance with South Korea?” *Brookings* (blog), November 27, 2019.

wartime Operational Control (OPCON). As the United States' most tightly woven integrated command system in the world, OPCON is the crux of U.S.-South Korea burden-sharing. In the event of a war in the Peninsula, South Koreans would command Americans and vice versa.<sup>98</sup> Through this security realm, Trump pushed South Korea to choose between its primary economic partner (China) and its security guarantor (USA). The fact that South Korea should have to choose at all is a reason for Trump to address the economic tensions between the two nations.<sup>99</sup> Upset with the U.S. goods deficit with South Korea, Trump initially threatened to remove the United States from the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA). At one time, negotiations between Seoul and Washington seemed a long way off; however, an announcement from North Korea wanting to participate in the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics brought the two sides to the negotiation table. The new 2018 KORUS FTA focused on reducing the U.S. trade deficit by reducing automobile safety standards on U.S. vehicles and reworking the South Korean importation process to address U.S. complaints regarding customs procedures and fair pricing and reimbursement on certain products.<sup>100</sup>

### U.S.-India

Similar to Japan, Trump's view of India was initially unclear yet critical. His predecessors viewed India as a long-term investment for the United States, but Trump's much more transactional diplomacy originally worried Delhi as they were uncertain as to

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<sup>98</sup> O'Hanlon, Michael E. "Don't Gut the US-South Korea Alliance." *Brookings* (blog), January 23, 2020.

<sup>99</sup> Fuchs, Michael, and Abigail Bard. "How to Create a Durable U.S.-South Korea Alliance." Center for American Progress. Accessed May 4, 2020.

<sup>100</sup> Overby, Tami, Scott Snyder, Troy Stangarone, and Ellen Swicord. "Stabilizing the U.S.-Korea Trade Agenda Under Trump and Moon." Council on Foreign Relations, 2020.

what he might want them to put on the table. However, after a year in office, the Trump-Modi relationship showed great promise. After welcoming Prime Minister Modi to Washington in 2017, Trump highlighted the importance of maintaining a strong partnership between the Indo-Pacific's two "democratic stalwarts".<sup>101</sup> In his first two years, Trump greatly increased security and defense cooperation dialogues including, but not limited to, high-level exchanges, expansion of military exercises, and technology transfer. Interestingly, Trump granted India status as only the third country to receive Strategic Trade Authorization – Tier 1; a designation that eases regulations and licenses for high-tech defense and aerospace exports. Not wasting any time, the United States sold 72,000 assault rifles, 24 anti-submarine helicopters, 24 Predator drones, and 111 Navy utility helicopters.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, the United States and India use these exchanges to conduct military exercises and, like under Obama, continue at the rate of around fifty times per year. A new aspect came about in 2019 when Trump and Modi agreed to a "mega tri-service amphibious exercise" marking only the second time in its history that India has involved all three branches of its military in an exercise with a foreign country.<sup>103</sup> Trump recognizes the importance of India's status as a growing power to balance China's growth. His need for India is well exemplified by his willingness to capitulate certain matters such as granting India a six-month waiver from Iran oil sanctions. As a man who prides himself on protecting American interests, his willingness to manage differences all but reveals the importance he believes India can play in stopping China. Elsewhere in the world, Trump

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<sup>101</sup> Madan, Tanvi. "Trump and Modi: Prospects for U.S.-India Burden Sharing." *Institute of South Asian Studies*, South Asia Discussion Papers, n.d.

<sup>102</sup> Smith, Jeff M. "Modi 2.0: Navigating Differences and Consolidating Gains in India-U.S. Relations." *The Heritage Foundation*, no. 3425 (n.d.): 31.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

made decisions that played to India's interests in hopes that India would stand behind the United States in the South China Sea. In Pakistan, Trump withdrew \$300 million in aid under accusations that it was harboring terrorists; a move that was quite pleasing to Delhi. Finally, like with Japan, Trump wishes to extend nuclear deterrence. In 2019 at the ninth India–U.S. Strategic Security Dialogue, the two nations' leaders signed an agreement for U.S. firms to build six nuclear power plants in India and add an Indian representative to the U.S. Defense Innovation Unit Experimental that funds private companies that explore defense technologies.<sup>104</sup>

Despite making progress military, Trump's discussions with India have worsened the economic relationship. Early in his tenure, Trump hit India with a couple of punches: threatened sanctions on Indian companies importing oil from Iran, decision to impose tariffs on metal products from India, and threatened sanctions for "significant transactions" with Russia's defense industry (India's main military equipment supplier). These trade frictions now make up the largest part of disagreements between the two countries, seeing India place retaliatory tariffs of up to seventy percent on nearly thirty U.S. products. The United States also suffers from a significant trade deficit with India which resulted in Trump trying to work out a trade deal with Delhi. However, no trade deal was successfully negotiated, and the United States revoked India's Generalized System of Preference (GSP) status in 2019. The GSP is designed to give duty-free market access to exports from developing countries and India is the largest beneficiary; this revocation painted

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<sup>104</sup> Smith, Jeff M. "Modi 2.0: Navigating Differences and Consolidating Gains in India–U.S. Relations." *The Heritage Foundation*, no. 3425 (n.d.): 31, 11.

Washington in a very bad light in India's eyes. Overall, Trump's vision of the U.S.-India alliance is dominated militarily while maintaining economic autarchy.

### The 'Quad'

Though the Quad is not his brainchild, Trump did not hesitate to dip his toe into this example of minilateralism. Started originally as a group of responders to the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and earthquake, the Quad is a discussion between the United States, Australia, Japan, and India – the four biggest players in Asia (barring China). Having collectively committed 40,000 troops and humanitarian workers to the affected region, Japanese Prime Minister Shinto Abe recognized a golden opportunity for these four large powers to come together and address all four of their biggest concerns – China. Policy documents from the White House affirmed the United States' full commitment to the Quad, with Trump signing The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act that outlines the country's four interests in the Quad as being: promoting a rules-based order, respect for international law, and a free and open Indo-Pacific.<sup>105</sup> The best way of understanding the Quad's efficacy might be to understand it as a network of bilateral and trilateral dialogues, of which there are six and three respectively. For the United States particularly, its boosting of military influence in Asia is helped along by Japan's joining in the U.S.-Australia exercise "Talisman Saber" and the reestablishment of "2+2" defense dialogues with India.<sup>106</sup> The most worrying aspect of the Quad for China is the number of exchanges underlying the Quad. Today, these four countries experience unprecedented

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<sup>105</sup> "Quad 2.0: New Perspectives for the Revived Concept: Views from The Strategist." Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019.

<sup>106</sup> Buchan, Patrick Gerard, and Benjamin Rimland. "The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 2020, 11.

levels of information, intelligence, military, and diplomatic exchanges. As it aligns with his Asia policy position, Trump should be pleased with the amount of military engagement taking place within the Quad. The Quad countries now conduct more joint military exercises and training than ever before; a sign of growing mutual trust and buying into similar interests between like-minded democratic partners. The Quad's greatest strength is the signal that it sends to Beijing.

The Quad appears to be Trump's favorite vehicle in confronting China over the South China Sea, and he has made efforts over the past few years to increase its role. In an important milestone, Trump publicly referenced the "Quad Initiative" during his speech alongside Indian President Modi; a rare leader-level endorsement of the four-way alliance that was mainly discussed between lower levels of governments.<sup>107</sup> In his meeting with Modi, Trump explained that their talks covered the use of the Quad to expand cooperation on cybersecurity and maritime security to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific. He also expressed his excitement to provide India with the world's best military equipment and technology. To continue boosting the Quad, Trump attended meetings with Japanese and Australian leaders to discuss participation in joint FONOPs, while also convincing Japan to purchase more American military equipment. Furthermore, in his meeting with these leaders, Trump is insistent on impressing upon them that regional stability will not be possible without a regional power bloc. However, Trump is surprisingly careful with how he goes about discussing the Quad as he knows these leaders want to stay in China's good graces due to its huge economic influence. In summation, Trump uses the Quad primarily

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<sup>107</sup> Panda, Ankit. "Trump, in India, Hints at Revitalized 'Quad' Initiative." *The Diplomat*, February 2020.

for military means, not a multilateral approach, to increase the size and frequency of military forces patrolling the region based out of democratic nations.

## **Conclusion**

While initially hinting at a serious retrenchment from Asia, Trump's actual policies in practice ended up incorporating America's allies more than anticipated, though not nearly to the same extent as Obama. Whereas Obama opened up to Southeast Asia with a bear hug, Trump settled more for a tip of his hat. Rather than total cooperation, Trump saw the benefits of drastically strengthening military, defense, and security partnerships in the region as a direct counter to China's territorial claims. Increasing physical displays of military prowess with the three largest powers in the region further signal to China the United States' resolve on the issue.



## **The Rise of Xi Jinping**

Understanding China's ambitions to control the South China Sea and rise to the top of the metaphorical food chain is impossible without understanding the man calling all the shots: China's President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping. The star of an underdog official's burgeoning into the world's most powerful man, Xi Jinping's rise is nothing short of extraordinary.

### **Humble Beginnings**

Born in 1953, Xi Jinping grew up during incredibly tumultuous and uncertain times – circumstances that would serve to shape the strongman ruler he would later become. All seemed well and good for Xi whose father was a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, everything changed for Xi when his father was purged from the party for allegedly supporting anti-Maoist propaganda. Like many other 'privileged' urban youths at the time, Xi was sent to the rural countryside in Shaanxi province as part of the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement" re-education campaign to learn the hardships of farmers. The tough conditions of the countryside did not sit well with Xi, so he fled back to Beijing only to be imprisoned for six months. Realizing that the countryside was the lesser of two evils, he fled again to the revolutionary base in Yan'an where he lived alone in a self-dug hillside cave.

These six years of living in poverty without the mentorship of a father forced Xi to become very independent, adaptable, and resilient. By this time, the Cultural Revolution was winding down and the CCP's ideology began to retake its shape. According to one of his friends, Xi chose to become "redder than red" to survive – so began his political

campaign. Before joining the CCP, it reportedly took Xi ten attempts before finally being accepted, likely due to his family background of a purged father. After bouncing around for years at different levels of leadership around the country, he finally settled into his most formative role as party chief of Zhejiang Province. While there, he saw strong economic growth that allowed him to win the support of political elites and high-ranking officials. Shortly after, he was unexpectedly named as the new Communist Party boss of Shanghai – China’s most prosperous city. While in Shanghai, Xi kept a notoriously low profile so that no dirt could be dug up on him. Given his very laidback leadership style while in Shanghai, it remains a mystery as to how he was eventually promoted to the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee, and then again to vice-president as the likely successor to Hu Jintao. Many scholars attribute his success to being an opportunistic candidate taking advantage of presenting himself as a safe compromise between the two frontrunners Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao who at the time were butting heads.<sup>108</sup> As a man who laid in wait for so long, quietly buying his time, it should come as no surprise that there was an agenda brewing within him.<sup>109</sup>

## **Setting the Stage for Strongman Rule**

After nearly three decades of calamitous rule under Chairman Mao Zedong, China needed to move in a new direction both politically and economically to regain the trust of the people that was lost during the Mao years. Since 1979, the successes of China’s

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<sup>108</sup> Pei, Minxin. “China: From Tiananmen to Neo-Stalinism.” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (January 2020).

<sup>109</sup> Zhou, China Watch: Part 2-Christina, and Sean Mantesso. “‘No Room for Mercy in This System’: Xi Jinping’s Rise from Cave Dweller to Post-Modern Chairman.” Text. ABC News, March 6, 2019.

economic reforms have been unquestionable, putting them on track to become the world's largest economy. Where past Chinese presidents were more than ready to take chances in their domestic affairs, the international stage posed a significant issue: the United States. Until Xi was appointed as president in 2013, China was still incapable of putting up a strong challenge to U.S. hegemony. For three decades, the Chinese political system was governed by a collective leadership with shared decision-making authority. This system was very inefficient because blame could be assigned, responsibility for failures could be shared, and bargaining could take place within the committee. In the era of Hu Jintao, active self-censorship efforts were made to not create misunderstanding and suspicion on the global stage. In one speech, the first iteration mentioned China's "peaceful rise" only to later be changed to "peaceful development".<sup>110</sup> Hu's governing motto soon became clear in a 2008 speech where he revealed he ruled by the phrase – "don't rock the boat".<sup>111</sup> This philosophy was incredibly disappointing to Xi, who recognized the growing capabilities of China. As the last standing major communist power, Xi was determined to flip the script on the United States to assert China as a global powerhouse. He was about to take China from a risk-averse country to a risk-maximizing country.

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<sup>110</sup> Shen, Simon. "How Xi's Bluntness Contrasts with Hu's Risk Aversion." ejinsight, January 2015.

<sup>111</sup> Jiangtao, Shi. "President Hu Jintao's Legacy Seen as One of Stability but Stagnation." South China Morning Post, September 2012.

## **Xi's Power Grab, Agenda, and 'Revolution'**

*"We will never relinquish our legitimate rights and interests or allow China's core interests to be undermined. We should firmly uphold China's territorial sovereignty, maritime rights and interests and national unity."*

- Xi Jinping, November 2014

### Power Grab

Xi Jinping's consolidation of power is best described with words such as swift, stealthy, and cunning. His first and most significant strategy was the launching of an enormous anti-corruption campaign dubbed "fighting tigers and flies". This campaign was essentially a large-scale purge that eliminated potential challengers to his authority, weakened other political factions, and to ensure top political posts would be filled in by his loyalists. Victims of this massive anti-corruption campaign were present at every level of every branch of the government; from ex-Politburo members to military generals to corporation chairmen – nobody was safe.<sup>112</sup> In just four years, the number of people disciplined by the CCP skyrocketed from 150,000 to 400,000.<sup>113</sup> These numbers highlight not only the broad scope of Xi's campaign but also its acceleration; a sign that Xi has no intention of giving up power any time soon.

As a symbolic gesture of his intent, Xi went to Shenzhen to make one of his first public appearances in the same location of Deng Xiaoping's 'Southern Tour' of the same nature.<sup>114</sup> In the two short years following that trip, Xi already proposed sixty economic,

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<sup>112</sup> Wang, Zhengxu, and Jinghan Zeng. "Xi Jinping: The Game Changer of Chinese Elite Politics?" *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 4 (2016): 469–86.

<sup>113</sup> Economy, Elizabeth. "China's New Revolution: The Reign of Xi Jinping." In *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Wang and Jinghan, 474.

political, and social changes.<sup>115</sup> Most notably, Xi a point to completely centralize authority by making himself the leader of all the most important committees, functionally becoming the ‘chairman of everything’. At the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi further solidified his power by adding more allies and loyalists to the top governing parties while also codifying his ideology – “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” – in the CCP’s constitution; a privilege that had not occurred since Mao. This CCP first since Mao is incredibly telling of Xi’s political philosophy. In Mao’s China, the “penetration of society” was a defining feature of the state compared to Deng’s China that was noticeable for its withdrawal from that philosophy. In Xi’s China, he is reverting to Maoist ways; no element of political, social, or economic life has remained untouched by his hand. Now, with China’s growing economic clout, Xi appears set to take this Maoist philosophy to the international stage.<sup>116</sup> Moving away from China’s traditional low-profile foreign policy, Xi seeks to shape international norms and institutions in pursuit of the “Chinese Dream,” which in Xi’s eyes, is the “rejuvenation of Chinese nation”.<sup>117</sup> In a speech given in 2014, Xi told the world that China should be allowed to “construct international playgrounds” and “create the rules” of activities taking place there.<sup>118</sup> China’s foreign policy today is the polar opposite of what it was just a decade ago. At the core of Xi’s agenda is a clear nationalist revival with strong anti-West sentiments. Xi

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<sup>115</sup> Osnos, Evan. “Born Red: How Xi Jinping, an Unremarkable Provincial Administrator, Became China’s Most Authoritarian Leader since Mao.” *The New Yorker*, n.d.

<sup>116</sup> Economy, Elizabeth. “China’s New Revolution: The Reign of Xi Jinping.” In *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>117</sup> Montemalo, Michael. “Assessing the Leadership of the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China: Xi Jinping.” *International Relations Commons* 16, no. 5 (2015): 11.

<sup>118</sup> Economy, 65.

continues to sell China as a victim of Western modernization and uses the blame to gain domestic supporters who have experienced a great economic revival since Xi stepped into power. The power and appeal of Xi's rhetoric about rejuvenated China into a prosperous country with a powerful military should not be underestimated. Faced with a population and officials that expect Beijing to stand up for itself, Xi likely feels compelled to push harder on many issues.

### An Ambitious Agenda

As could be expected by his lack of noticeable actions leading up to his presidency, Xi began his term in office with a clear agenda. This agenda covered three key aspects of Chinese resurgence: protecting national interests, peaceful development (with a catch), and creating an external environment that serves China domestically. While protecting national interests is a core goal of any country, Xi made the bold assertion that peaceful development would not impede on Chinese national interests. In a sense, Xi appeared to imply that China was unwilling to forego its national interests for the sake of peace. In a speech given to the People's Liberation Army, he called for the acceleration of military modernization and stated that China "long[s] for peace, but at any time and under any circumstances, [it] will not give up defending [its] legitimate national interests and rights, and will not sacrifice [its] core national interests".<sup>119</sup> This attitude is a significant step away from past ideas of 'hiding and buying one's time' and it reveals Xi's concern that a commitment to peaceful development will hinder China to take more questionable actions

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<sup>119</sup> Zhang, Jian. "China's New Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping: Towards 'Peaceful Rise 2.0'?" *Global Change, Peace & Security* 27, no. 1 (2015): 5–19.

to protect its interests. The topic of this thesis covers the most clear-cut display of Xi's new assertiveness: the South China Sea. Secondly, Xi has new expectations of the international community. In apparent swipes at the United States and other Western powers, Xi said that China can only commit to peaceful development if other countries reciprocate and commit to peace as well. This move by Xi is taking China out of the backseat and putting it at the forefront of international rules creation. Before Xi, 'peaceful development' was a way of reassuring other countries' concerns about a rising China, but now Xi is essentially letting the world know that there is no stopping the train and they must play along to avoid any escalations. Lastly, Xi implanted a new idea of "top-level design" in foreign policymaking to shape China's external environments in a way that is beneficial domestically. 'Top-level design' includes further centralization of planning and policymaking accompanied by greater coordination between all levels of government involved in China's foreign relations. Most related to the South China Sea conflict, Xi established the "Working Conference on Peripheral Diplomacy" in 2013 that gathered all members of the Politburo Standing Committee (and many other officials) to plan China's peripheral diplomacy for the next decade that would involve strengthening ties with neighboring countries to create the aforementioned favorable external environment. Institutionally, Xi formed the National Security Commission to streamline national security strategy and coordination; he named himself as the head. A product of "top-level design" is a 'policy' of an opposite name – "bottom-line thinking". In the administrations leading up to Xi, Chinese leaders always expressed their hopes for what other countries should do. Now, under Xi, China's "bottom-line" is essentially a red line that is straightforward in telling other countries what sort of actions Beijing will not tolerate. At

the 2014 Boao Conference for Asia, Premier Li Keqiang addressed the South China Sea dispute by asserting that China will “respond firmly to provocations” by “repaying kindness with kindness and meeting wrongdoing with justice”.<sup>120</sup>

### ‘Revolution’

With his agenda laid out, Xi Jinping’s subsequent actions can be viewed as a ‘revolution’ against the international order and status quo. As Napoleon once said, Xi recalled that “China is a sleeping lion” and the “world will shake [when she wakes]”.<sup>121</sup> Xi’s assertiveness on behalf of China is multi-faceted and difficult to nail down. From high-profile endeavors like the Belt and Road Initiative and island-building in the South and East China Sea to intervention in humanitarian conflicts, China is becoming increasingly engaged on the world stage. In 2013, Xi launched his incredibly ambitious Belt and Road Initiative that aimed to act as a modern revival of the Silk Road. The breadth of this project is incredible, and the numbers are staggering – 900 projects with over 80 percent contracted to Chinese firms, 76 ports and terminals in 34 countries, \$90 billion of Chinese investments, and \$6 trillion in trade. Furthermore, quite ironically, all of Xi’s rhetoric about nationalism and sovereignty is contradicted by his foreign policy actions that see him consciously violate the latter. In conjunction with increased engagement in the United Nations, China put up a ten-year, \$1 billion Peace and Development Fund, established an 8,000-troop peacekeeping force, and increased involvement in humanitarian

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<sup>120</sup> Zhang, Jian. “China’s New Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping: Towards ‘Peaceful Rise 2.0’?” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 27, no. 1 (2015): 5–19.

<sup>121</sup> Economy, Elizabeth. “China’s Imperial President: Xi Jinping Tightens His Grip.” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (December 2014): 80–91.



operations. While intervening in humanitarian crises is a reason for violating a country's sovereignty, it is difficult to ignore the ulterior motive of China's decision to get involved. Furthermore, not only has China begun to send peacekeeping forces to crisis hotspots like South Sudan, but China imposes its communist ideology long after the fighting is over by implementing training programs for the infant governments on the ways of Chinese ruling parties.<sup>122</sup> Increased engagement on the peacekeeping front is becoming just another checkbox on the road to unseating the United States at the top of the world order.<sup>123</sup>

### **Territorial Assertiveness – ‘South China Xi (Sea)’**

Given the large quantities of natural resources and trade routes in the South China Sea, it should come as no surprise that Xi is using his platform of unwillingness to capitulate on peace in order to protect China's national interests. Just days after Xi's inauguration, the PLA Navy held an arms exercise and symbolic ceremony off the coasts of Malaysia and Brunei vowing to defend China's sovereignty claims. The following year, China acted on its own initiative and deployed an oil rig (HYSY-981) in the Paracel Islands and escorted it with one hundred ships and a handful of fighter jets. This escort for one oil rig may seem excessive, and it is, but it emphasizes Beijing's resolve in consolidating its irredentist claims. This 'above and beyond' resolve is clear as Xi uses all resources at his disposal to make small gains that, in the long run, together will be a major strategic change for China. By using resources ranging from military equipment down to civilian boats, Xi

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<sup>122</sup> Sun, Yun. "Political Party Training: China's Ideological Push in Africa?" *Brookings* (blog), November 30, 1AD.

<sup>123</sup> Poh, Angela, and Mingjiang Li. "A China in Transition: The Rhetoric and Substance of Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping." *Asian Security* 13, no. 2 (2017): 84–97.

is employing a ‘tough to crack’ territorial expansion tactic known as ‘salami-slicing’ and ‘cabbage patch’. ‘Salami-slicing’ the South China Sea involves reclaiming small portions of the disputed territory to minimize confrontations and, at the end, add up all the new pockets to unveil full claim the entire region. However, protecting these new ‘slices’ is not easy to do without setting off rival militaries, so China employs its ‘cabbage patch’ technique – surrounding the recently claimed islands with multiple layers of civilian vessels to deter foreign militaries from launching an attack.<sup>124</sup> Overall, Xi uses his close relationship with the military to realize his goals in the South China Sea; constant parades of ships, military exercises, and close calls with foreign vessels sum up his approach.

## **Conclusion**

Xi Jinping’s rise to power from a common citizen to one of the world’s most powerful men is remarkable. His uncanny ability to maneuver his way up the ranks of the CCP, purge corrupt officials, and surround himself with diehard loyalists built a platform from which he can act swiftly and unilaterally across the board. Xi Jinping’s foreign policy strategy reflects China’s strong desire to rebuild its image after years of humiliation and turmoil and establish itself as the world’s largest power. Before Xi, Chinese leaders were too cautious of the West’s abilities and opted to tone down their foreign policy initiatives so as not to raise alarms in the United States. Now, with one of the world’s most powerful militaries and a strong economy behind him, Xi is beginning to step on more toes because there is little another country can do to stop China without in turn harming itself.<sup>125</sup> Xi’s

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<sup>124</sup> Chan, Irene, and Mingjiang Li. “New Chinese Leadership, New Policy in the South China Sea Dispute?” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 2015): 35–50.

<sup>125</sup> “Here Are the World’s 25 Most Powerful Militaries - Business Insider.”

strategy of incremental gains in the South China Sea reveals a carefully calculated plan that avoids escalating to a situation requiring forceful U.S. action while also taking advantage of the smaller nations incapable of putting up a fight.

## Conclusion – Evaluating the Strategies

### Obama

When Obama announced his administration’s “pivot to Asia” foreign policy, he sought to expand American presence within the Asia-Pacific by forging closer military, trade, and diplomatic ties with various states across the region. He recognized the future of the world would likely be centered in the region, so he looked to invest the United States in the “Asian century”.<sup>126</sup> Having concluded his time in office, we have the benefit of hindsight to assess his strategies and evaluate their effectiveness in countering Beijing’s muscular foreign policy. Concerning the South China Sea, this section will evaluate Obama’s strategy across two dimensions – military and economic – as they are the two most pertinent factors driving the outcome of that specific conflict.

#### Military

In this realm, the main focus of Obama’s rebalancing strategy was to build stronger alliances and relationships with Southeast Asian countries to boost both the United States’ and Southeast Asia’s military presence in the region to act as a counterweight to China’s increased assertiveness. To accomplish this goal, Obama looked to enhance existing military agreements with established powers – Australia, Japan, South Korea – while also building new ties with emerging powers such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Additionally, the Department of Defense pledged \$425 million to boost Southeast Asian countries’ maritime surveillance capabilities through the Maritime Security Initiative.

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<sup>126</sup> Marston, Hunter. “Examining the US Rebalance in Southeast Asia after Obama.” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2017): 47–56.

Lastly, Obama continued joint military exercises with countries in the region to prepare for escalation and to demonstrate American resolve.<sup>127</sup>

Despite these accomplishments, Obama's strategy only come up with mixed results. In terms of the United States' bilateral security alliances, his objective was only partially achieved. While he was able to update long-standing alliances, he missed out on forging new alliances, particularly with the two largest democratic nations in the region, India, and Indonesia. Concerning the emerging powers, the Obama administration set out to use these smaller nations as tools to push Beijing to participate in the global rules-based order. An ambitious strategy, corralling the emerging powers to bandwagon behind the United States did not prove as effective as Obama would have hoped. After a long-winded international tribunal in the Hague, President Duterte of the Philippines expressed that he was willing to "set aside" the arbitral decision in pursuit of strengthening his relationship with Beijing, whom he sees as the future 'victor' in the Sino-U.S. standoff for hegemony. Similarly, Vietnam and Malaysia began downplaying their conflicting territorial claims with China after realizing the economic benefits that accompany a tighter relationship with Beijing. Furthermore, Obama looked to use these nations to push for more transparency from Beijing to follow his lead and curtail its military spending. However, under Obama, the U.S. Department of Defense budget rose from \$534 billion in 2010 and \$585 billion in 2015, an increase of 9%, but was expected to remain flat into 2020. China, meanwhile, saw its defense spending increase from \$134 billion to \$190 billion in the same five-year period and expected it to increase to \$260 billion by 2020, an increase of nearly 30% and

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<sup>127</sup> Galace, Uriel. "In Retrospect: Assessing Obama's Asia Rebalancing Strategy." *Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies* 3, no. 16 (2016).

50% respectively. Moreover, the money was being flooded into the South China Sea. Beijing continued to order the construction of islands throughout Obama's tenure, but at the end of his presidency announced that it would stop. While the island-building came to an end, the construction of military facilities on the artificial islands continued seemingly unchallenged.<sup>128</sup> Lastly, the overall strategy of focusing a majority of U.S. military might in the Asia-Pacific only serves to put China on high-alert and give it a reason to accelerate its military mobilization and modernization.<sup>129</sup>

### Economy

On this front, Obama looked set to make some headway in containing China. His preferred method for tackling China's huge economy was by working through and strengthening multilateral institutions such as ASEAN. While he was able to elevate American prestige within these institutions by building rapport with different leaders, the increased engagement did little to leverage the institutions to add pressure on China to abide by global rules and norms. Going beyond diplomatic pressure, the hope was that by engaging other leaders, the United States could convince them to come under its economic umbrella, not China's. To accomplish this goal, Obama proposed his promising Trans-Pacific Partnership that would involve nearly half the world's global trade and position the United States as the world's outright dominant economy. However, the exclusion of China from this unprecedented trade deal encouraged Beijing to pursue and advance its own economic programs like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure

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<sup>128</sup> Galace, Uriel. "In Retrospect: Assessing Obama's Asia Rebalancing Strategy." *Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies* 3, no. 16 (2016).

<sup>129</sup> World Economic Forum. "How America's Relationship with China Changed under Obama." Accessed May 2, 2020.

Investment Bank. The expansion of these projects around the world and the growing dependence of other countries on Chinese investments highlights the TPP having the opposite effect, instead motivating China to continue expanding to gain an upper hand.

Overall, the Obama administration was not very effective in containing China, nor was it successful in stopping its advances in the South China Sea. Although Obama's approach caused a few headaches for Beijing, his policies did not significantly worsen the external environment that Xi Jinping sought to preserve. Additionally, smaller countries having to pick sides only has short-term effects and they realize that they benefit most from taking a stance right between the two. Lastly, the effectiveness of Obama's China strategy can be evaluated from a domestic opinion perspective. The fact that Donald Trump, the polar opposite of Obama, won the next presidential election is a clear sign of public discontent with Obama's China policy, among other factors.<sup>130</sup>

## **Trump**

Throughout his presidential campaign and into his time in office, Trump long criticized the former administration's attitude towards China as being too timid and insufficiently robust. In Trump's eyes, the former way of conducting business through a bilateral relationship favored China and put the United States at a disadvantage for attaining global leadership. Looking to take the country in a new direction, Trump adopted a 'zero-sum'-ish, 'America first' approach. Off the bat, Trump's strategy to push back against China's expansion lacks the same coherence that Obama's had. However, Trump's

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<sup>130</sup> Canrong, Jim. "How America's Relationship with China Changed under Obama." World Economic Forum, December 14, 2016.

strategy is an example of there being a ‘method to the madness’. Despite placing trade barriers and increasing military buildup in the region, it is unclear what the Trump administration’s real objectives are – alter Chinese behavior on specific issues, decouple the two economies, or obstruct China’s rise? Similar to the last section, this section will evaluate Trump’s approach across the military and economic dimensions.

### Military

Donald Trump fully buys into the idea of American military superiority, and his dealings with China on that matter are no exception. To challenge China, Trump aimed to not only dramatically increase U.S. military presence in the region, but also build strong bilateral military agreements with the region’s major powers to motivate them to increase their presence as well. In his first year in office, Trump spent double the amount of money that Obama did in his last year towards security assurances to Southeast Asian states. The Trump administration also noticeably increased the size and frequency of its Freedom of Navigation Operations near the contested islands to signal a hardline approach to Beijing; America’s military was ready at a moment’s notice. Concerning increased engagement from other nations, Trump looked to the Quad – a strategic alliance of the region’s biggest powers – for support. Now, these powerful nations conduct more joint military exercises than ever before; a sign of trust and working towards a common goal of containing China.

Despite Trump’s seemingly erratic decisions, he has been successful in maintaining robust security relationships with traditional U.S. allies. The United States and its allies continue to increase the frequency and size of their military exercises, and Japan is set to become the largest non-U.S. buyer of the newest line of U.S. fighter jets. In the South



China Sea, China has stopped its island-building altogether and its construction of facilities on those islands, while not stopped, has slowed – all that changed when the coronavirus pandemic swept across the globe. In what appears to be an attempt to capitalize on a distracted world with reduced capabilities, Beijing restarted its activities in the South China Sea. Despite American efforts urging China to focus on supporting pandemic relief, China seems set on accomplishing its long-term strategic goals. Though its resources are stretch thin, the United States continues to show off its military in the region, but to little avail.<sup>131</sup>

### Economy

Trump’s economic pushback against China is highlighted by the U.S.-China trade war. Trump’s imposition of punitive tariffs on China is aimed at decoupling it from the global economy and forcing U.S. companies to look elsewhere to establish their supply chains, ultimately crippling the Chinese economy. The second major economic change under the Trump administration was the withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in hopes of incentivizing Southeast Asian nations to diversify, to look for their own ways, to have conversations and negotiations in which [the U.S.] will not be participants”.<sup>132</sup>

So just how effective were Trump’s economic policies towards China’s rise? At first, he got off to a rocky start by withdrawing the United States from the TPP, as being party to it would have reduced tariff and nontariff barriers to U.S. exports in Asia. It also offered smaller Southeast Asian nations trade alternatives to their dependence on China. Unwilling to limit themselves to Asian nations, U.S. manufacturers are looking elsewhere

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<sup>131</sup> Valencia, Mark. “US FONOPs in the South China Sea: Intent, Effectiveness, and Necessity.” *The Diplomat*, 2017.

<sup>132</sup> Solís, Mireya. “Trump Withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership.” *Brookings* (blog), March 24, 2017.

to diversify their supply chains. While this diversification is not without its costs, it is an investment that in the long-run will make the global economy more competitive and resilient.<sup>133</sup> This withdrawal occurred without much explanation, but the Trump administration soon released statements that provided strong reasonings, such as China's use of "economic inducements and penalties," "implied military threats to persuade other states" to heed its agenda," and "predatory economics".<sup>134</sup> About the trade war, the hardline approach of imposing steep tariffs startled Beijing. After many tit-for-tat responses from Beijing and Washington, it is clear that Trump has succeeded in pressing China as they signed 'Phase 1' of a U.S.-China trade deal that will hopefully halt economic malpractices. The deal also commits China to crack down on theft of American intellectual property, increase spending to close the trade deficit, and avoid currency manipulation. Should the agreement hold and evolve into the next phase, the United States will be in a much less compromising position.<sup>135</sup>

## **Xi**

When compared to Obama and Trump, Xi's policies of assertiveness in the South China Sea appear to be the most effective of the three. Of course, effectiveness and success are in the eye of the beholder, but placing oneself in the shoes of all three leaders will lead to the understanding that China is 'winning' the contest. Keeping consistent, this section will evaluate Xi's military and economic approaches.

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<sup>133</sup> Autry, Greg. "Opinion: President Trump's China Policy Is Working, but You'd Never Know That from Media Reports." Los Angeles Times, September 20, 2019.

<sup>134</sup> Blackwill, Robert. "Trump's Foreign Policies Are Better Than They Seem." Council Special Report. Council on Foreign Relations, April 2019.

<sup>135</sup> Institute for Security and Development Policy. "Trump's China Policy & The National Security Strategy."

## Military

In this domain, China has an outright more effective strategy. Without having to bear the burden of being the world's police and protector of right and wrong, China is perfectly content with challenging international rule of law. By taking advantage of its situation, Xi used China's military to capture the disputed territories without any real risk of conflict with the United States. By acting swiftly, China has fully established itself in the region by surrounding the islands with layers of military vessels and by constructing Chinese military facilities on them, too. Now, there is no real way that foreign countries can attempt to reclaim those islands without escalating to armed conflict. Furthermore, whenever China develops new military technology, it makes sure to parade the new ships and planes in the South China Sea to highlight where its focus is.

## Economy

While the trade war certainly hurt China, it will eventually bounce back in the long-run and come out in better shape than the United States. With so much of the world's supply chain located in China, Xi's decision to create the Belt and Road Initiative to outsource Chinese production to other countries serves to increase countries' dependence on China for their economic survival. Furthermore, the sheer number of new initiatives that Xi puts out makes it very difficult for the United States to put together a comprehensive response. Xi's willingness to forego short-term economic interests in favor of long-term strategic goals also makes his strategy difficult to nail down.

## **Closing Remarks and the Future**

At the end of the day, both administrations had mixed results in tackling the daunting rise of China. The Chinese Communist Party, and its leader Xi Jinping, is a formidable beast capable of rapidly adapting to the tactics that the United States employs against it. It is often forgotten that China has been a civilization far longer than the United States and they have had to endure centuries of both hardship and prosperity. When it comes down to it, neither Obama nor Trump was markedly successful in stopping China's expansion, although it would seem Trump's incoherent strategy reaped more benefits than Obama's 'grand strategy'. Whereas Obama, and administrations before him, attempted to reshape China into a responsible global actor, Trump realizes that changing the state's behavior is likely an impossible task and simply deals with China for who it truly is. While not the most experienced president, his decision to ramp up military activity and engage in a trade war certainly hurt China, so when it comes to U.S.-China relations Trump may actually be the most effective in the last few decades. The United States' inability to tackle China may be more of an institutional and structural issue, as our democratic nation cannot act on a whim nor without domestic consent when facing China. Furthermore, as the world's largest economy, the United States is far too intertwined with many markets to risk damaging those relationships beyond repair by escalating conflict with Beijing. As pessimistic as this outlook may be, it is difficult to envision a scenario in the future where the United States can emerge on top without resorting to armed conflict. Slowly but surely, China appears set to 'salami slice' and take full control of the South China Sea.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Shangguan, Ariel. "Opinion – Trump's Effective China Strategy." *E-International Relations*, 2019.

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