

# Half-Pivot: Why the Obama Pentagon Could Not Shift to the Pacific

by John Q. Bolton

*Policymakers tend to live within existing constraints rather than challenging them.<sup>1</sup>*

*Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad*

This article examines the Pentagon’s attempts to refocus American military power to the Asia-Pacific region as part of the Obama Administration’s 2009 to 2014 “Pivot to Asia.” The effort, known variously as the “rebalance”, “adjustment”, and, most notably, the “Pacific Pivot,” sought to re-vitalize diplomatic ties to Asia’s regional powers, shift military resources, and improve American economic linkages to the region. Often unsaid by officials – but built into the strategic logic of the Pivot – was an emerging need to balance growing Chinese power.

But change proved elusive. The Pivot’s diplomatic and economic achievements notwithstanding, military power was largely unchanged by the end of the administration. Defense spending, force structure, and security cooperation efforts proceeded haphazardly and, by 2016, only partially reflected administration rhetoric from 2011-2012 about prioritizing the Pacific. Most apparent to regional powers wary of China, the administration failed to aggressively deter Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Lingering wars in the Middle East, budget fights, increasing partisanship, and other frictions combined to stifle the Pivot.

The Pivot was not without critics. Some argued the Pivot masked a shirking of American leadership; superpowers, Kagan argued, “don’t get to retire.”<sup>2</sup> Some critics accused the administration

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of executing a “branding exercise” to mask retrenchment from the Middle East using existing Bush Administration initiatives as cover.<sup>3</sup> Others said Obama was needlessly provoking China by claiming hegemony within China’s traditional sphere of influence.<sup>4</sup>

## Much criticism of the Pivot was unfair and often partisan.

Much criticism of the Pivot was unfair and often partisan. Indeed, some commentators called the Pivot a “failure” as early as 2012.<sup>5</sup> Some accurately accused the Obama Administration of muddled messaging and unclear prioritization.<sup>6</sup> Others accused Obama of ambivalent leadership.<sup>7</sup> Yet even former administration officials called the Pivot “incomplete” or “unfinished.”<sup>8</sup> Even Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell (2009 to 2013) conceded there was a persistent challenge explaining the Pivot and “delivering on [the Pivot’s] promise.”<sup>9</sup>

These shortcomings included:

- the U.S. Navy did not place 60 percent of its ships in the Pacific Fleet until 2017, six years after Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta (2011-2013) announced the goal in 2012;<sup>10</sup>
- the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact proceeded without the United States;<sup>11</sup>
- regional states remained pro-China in policy, if not sentiment.<sup>12</sup> No smaller Asian state except Vietnam forthrightly challenged China’s island-building campaign;
- without a comprehensive Pivot plan, public or otherwise. Consequently, implementation varied across departments, agencies, and military commands and over time. The disconnect between U.S. messaging and action confused regional leaders.

Explaining why the Pivot fell short is a

complicated interaction of domestic politics, changing power dynamics, and bureaucratic friction. But for the Pentagon, the limitations came about due to a bureaucracy unable to shift funding and focus from the Middle East to the Pacific. And without clear prioritization, existing efforts prevailed over changes.

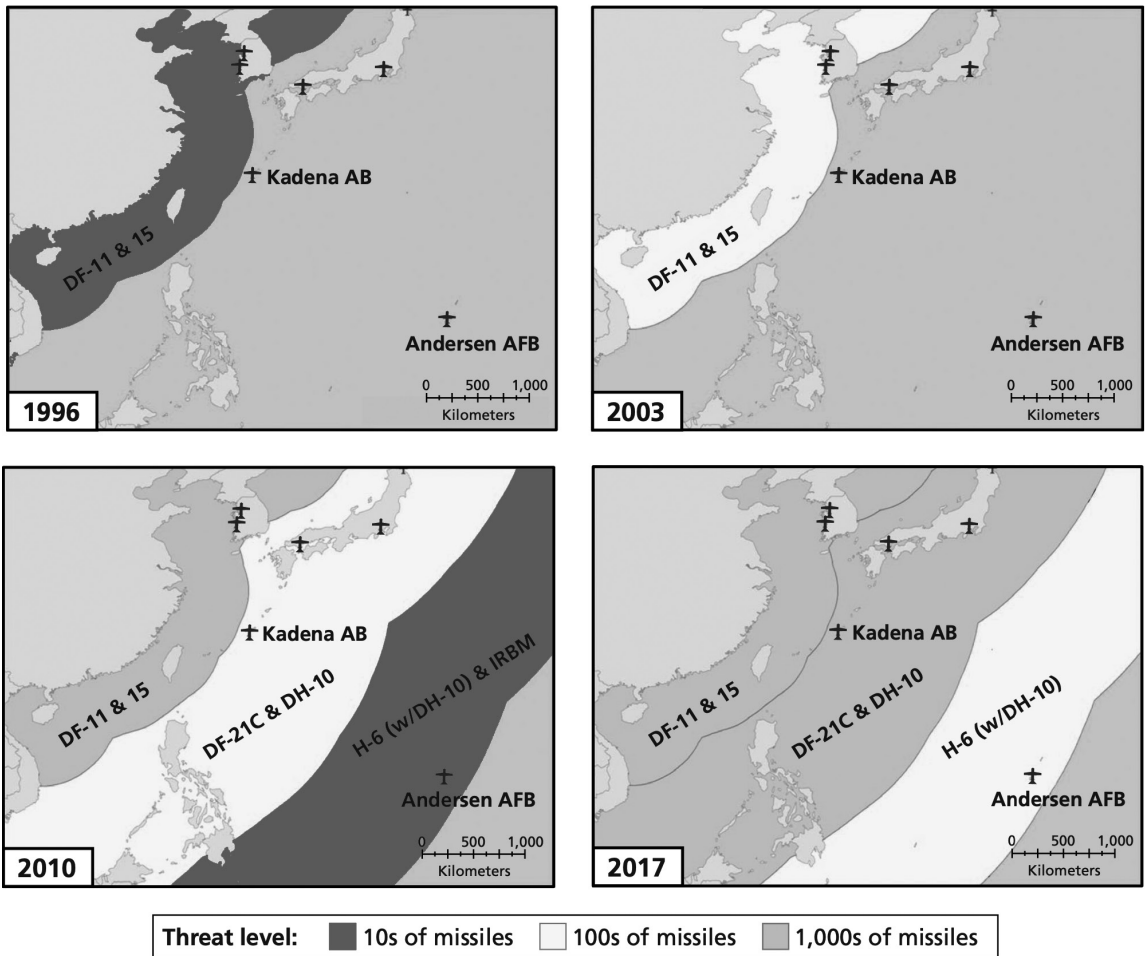
Three factors influenced this stasis. First, the 2008 economic crisis and lingering decisions regarding Afghanistan limited the administration’s decision-making space through 2009.<sup>13</sup>

Second, nascent shifts in funding were largely upended when the new Republican Congress aggressively cut spending including a previously off-limits Pentagon. Arguably the administration failed to protect Pivot programs via the budget process, but sequestration would have affected any policy.

Last, bureaucratic processes built over the previous decade to support military deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Greater Middle East remained entrenched. Without senior leader’s support, these processes ended up largely unchanged.

The Pivot’s challenges were not entirely process-based or bureaucratic. The Pivot also encountered exogenous challenges. Regional states continued to hedge between the PRC and the United States, fearing Chinese economic backlash. In 2014, the rise of ISIS had returned U.S. troops to Iraq. Coupled with Russia’s invasion of Crimea that year, the Pivot effectively ended with the administration focused on these crises amid reduced resources.

The Pivot is a compelling case study of strategy implementation.<sup>14</sup> Despite presidential endorsement and Congressional support, interagency and national security processes failed to translate produce substantive action. The Pivot shows that how well a presidential administration *implements* a strategy is as important as *conception*. Thus, studying the Pivot offers important lessons learned and



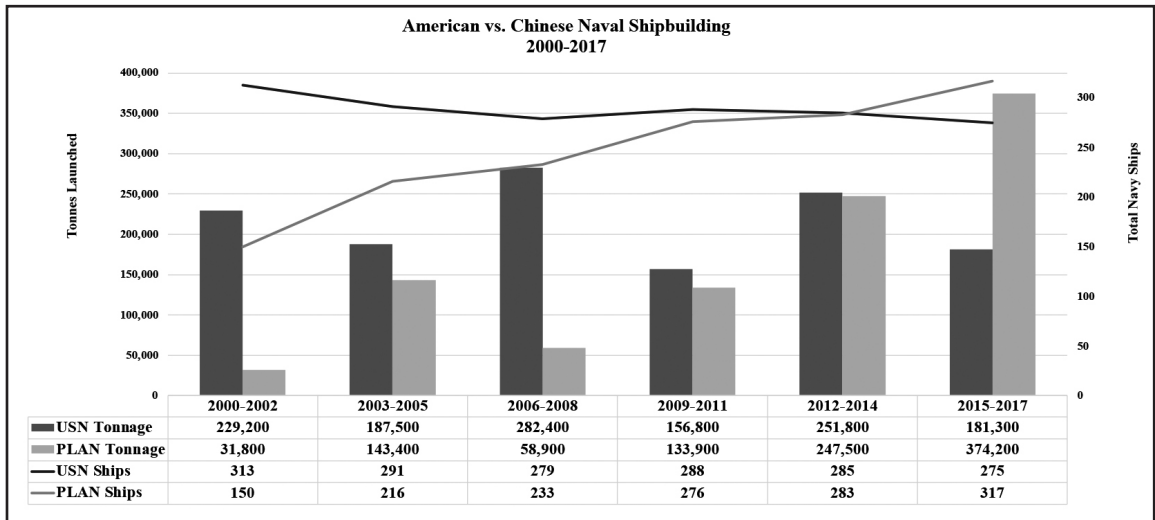
**Figure 1. PRC Missile Capabilities 1996-2017<sup>22</sup>**

insights into effective strategy development and execution.

While the Pivot was indeed a comprehensive set of policies to shape U.S. actions along diplomatic, security, and economic lines of effort, the security aspect is easiest to assess. Pentagon spending, force structure, and military exercises are generally measurable. To explore the Pivot, the paper proceeds as follows: First, we briefly review the strategic logic behind the Pivot; second, we assess defense and security cooperation efforts; third, we examine some of the bureaucratic and messaging surrounding the Pivot. The paper concludes that the Pivot was limited by bureaucratic processes built for operations in the Middle East.

### **The Pivot as Conceived by the Obama Administration**

That Obama would conduct foreign policy differently from President George W. Bush (2001 to 2009) was clear during the 2008 presidential election. But the administration made a deliberate choice to focus on Asia.<sup>15</sup> Obama Administration officials shared a conviction “that the Asia-Pacific region had not been accorded a policy prominence commensurate with its true importance.”<sup>16</sup> Asia’s economic growth portended increasing importance while China’s expanding military capabilities and deep economic ties threatened longstanding American interests in Asia, namely military and economic access.<sup>17</sup> China’s economy increased nineteen-



**Figure 2. American vs. Chinese Naval Shipbuilding, 2000 – 2017**

*Source: DOD Comptroller; U.S. Naval Heritage Command; International Institute for Strategic Studies.*

fold from 1985 to 2010 and weathered the 2008 financial crisis well, outpacing the United States’ growth by nearly 1,000 percent (80 percent to 7.3 percent from 2007 until 2014).<sup>18</sup> But it was Chinese military capabilities which posed a substantive challenge to U.S. power in Asia.

Most pressing was China’s Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) system, a formidable network of sensors and missiles which could strike ships and aircraft up to 1,000 km away, as far as American and Japanese military bases in Japan and Guam.<sup>19</sup> The U.S. Navy would now “pay an increasingly high – perhaps prohibitive – price” to operate in the Western Pacific.<sup>20</sup> After 2008, Chinese foreign policy also became less benign; People’s Republic of China (PRC) naval and coast guard ships increasingly encroached into neighboring economic and territorial waters. While these disputes were longstanding, the nature of PRC actions had changed. To Pentagon leadership, it appeared China was no longer “concealing its capabilities and biding its time.”<sup>21</sup>

China was also building a larger, now-expeditionary navy, though the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) still trailed the U.S. Navy in per-ship capabilities. China’s refurbishment of a Russian aircraft carrier in the 2000s made news, but the PLAN was on

pace to surpass an older, shrinking U.S. Navy, which decreased to just 222 warships in 2016, by 2030.<sup>23</sup>

Given the strategic situation in 2009, some degree of “pivot” was inevitable.<sup>24</sup> However, the Obama Administration went further, broadcasting the Pivot to Asia as a *de novo* policy change.<sup>25</sup> The Pivot’s strategic logic was simple: Asia’s ripening economic potential represented the future of global commerce as well as area where the United States had margins to improve ties. The Pivot would improve U.S. economic, diplomatic, and military influence, thus strengthening American power while hedging against China. Politically, increasing American ties to the Pacific provided strategically sound, politically plausible, and budgetarily justifiable rationale for reducing military commitments in the Middle East.<sup>26</sup>

Prioritizing Asia began early in the administration in 2009 and peaked in late 2011. Clinton made her first overseas trip in February 2009 to Asia.<sup>27</sup> Following that trip the United States signed the ASEAN Amity Treaty and joined the East Asia Summit. Doing so, Clinton said, was “just the beginning” of a new web of diplomacy tying the United States to Asia.<sup>28</sup> Clinton was not alone in her outreach, both the

president and other officials increased travel to Asia. For example, Clinton's visits to Asia outpaced both her predecessors Colin Powell (2001-2005) and Condoleezza Rice (2005-2009).<sup>29</sup> Obama made over 60 trips to Asia himself.

Beyond showing up, American diplomats made commitments. During ASEAN 2010, Clinton condemned China's expansive South China Sea claims, calling freedom of navigation an American interest.<sup>30</sup> This implied the United States would be actively involved in long-standing South China Sea disputes (at least that is how regional powers understood the Pivot). Though denouncement of Chinese behavior remained limited, states such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia were receptive toward American overtures.<sup>31</sup>

## The Year of the Pivot

The formalization of the Pivot in late 2011 followed the administration's response to the Arab Spring and tortured decisions to intervene in Libya. The effort started with Clinton's October 2011 *Foreign Policy*. Giving the Pivot, the United States, Clinton said, was "at a pivot point," calling the next 100 years "America's Pacific Century."<sup>32</sup>

In November, Clinton and Obama hosted APEC leaders in Hawaii, a bastion of American power in the Pacific. Speaking to the Australian Parliament the following week, Obama echoed Clinton, the United States, he said, was "turning [to] the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region," by embracing TPP, and rotating U.S. Marines to Darwin.<sup>33</sup> Critically, Obama promised budget cuts would not "come at the expense of the Asia Pacific."<sup>34</sup>

Though nine speeches and documents would eventually outline the Pivot, Clinton's article and Obama's speech formed its core.<sup>35</sup> Engagement would, senior officials believed, ensure American access.<sup>36</sup> Second, Obama believed a more powerful, coherent "institutional

architecture" would help shape how rising powers, especially China, behaved.<sup>37</sup> More generally, the Obama team were firm believers in multilateralism and pursuing rules and norms. American presence at multilateral bodies such as ASEAN and increased military ties to regional states would benefit the United States.<sup>38</sup> The administration also sought to improve tri-lateral coordination between the United States and its Pacific allies.

## The interagency mechanisms behind the Pivot were insufficient or nonexistent.

Rhetoric aside, the Pivot resulted in few *actual* structural changes to the U.S. Military's force posture and Pentagon processes. The interagency mechanisms behind the Pivot were insufficient or nonexistent.<sup>39</sup> There were, for example, no programs to develop regional specialists or Sinologists as the United States did during the Cold War.<sup>40</sup>

Notably, the Pivot never received a formal strategy document (public or otherwise) outlining its various components or strategic logic, nor were tradeoffs discussed. Because there was not a "clear-cut decision among distinct options, departments and agencies assumed they were authorized to pursue their preferred course of action."<sup>41</sup> As we will see, sometimes these actions supported the Pivot; in other cases, subaltern actions merely continued the status quo.

This was the fate of the Pivot. It became whatever subordinates wanted it to be – simultaneously everything and nothing. Without guidance, however, officials and diplomats were unable to adequately explain the Pivot to American allies, partners, and potential partners in Asia. As a result, regional leaders would increasingly see the Pivot as mere rhetoric.<sup>42</sup> And China saw the Pivot as militarized containment.



## The Pentagon and the Pivot

**Accordingly, while the U.S military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific.**<sup>43</sup>

**Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, June 2012**

While a wholistic assessment of the Pivot requires analyzing Obama Administration actions encompassing all elements of national power, doing so is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>44</sup> The following analysis considers the defense and security cooperation actions taken in support for the Pivot. This includes qualitative and quantitative accounting of spending measured by regions and recipient states.<sup>45</sup> Additional insight was provided by over a dozen interviews with senior defense officials.

The Pentagon initially embraced the Pivot, rhetorically at least. Panetta had extensive experience in government and, as a Congressman from California, had travelled extensively in the region. His January 2012 strategic guidance document and remarks at the June 2012 Shangri-La Defense Forum made clear this intent. Specifically, Panetta promised the U.S. Navy would place sixty percent of its ships in the Pacific.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Obama’s 2009 “surge” to Afghanistan was scheduled to end in 2012, giving the Pentagon additional resources.

But funding was lacking. Nominally, the Pentagon spent approximately \$700 billion annually by 2009. Nominal amounts, however, do not account for *real* change. The real defense budget shrank by over fifteen percent from 2010-2015.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the use of Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funds meant

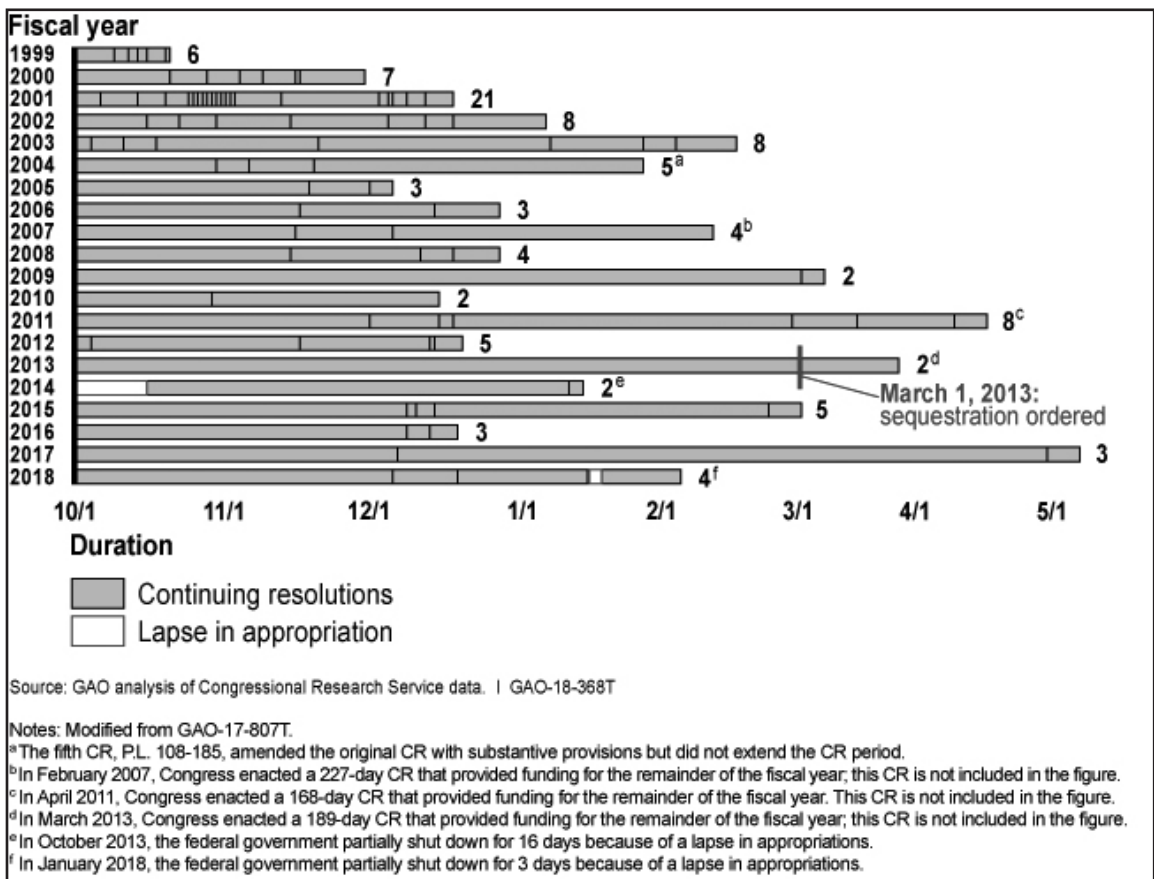


Figure 3. Continuing Resolutions per Year 99 – 18<sup>49</sup>

much of defense spending went toward the Middle East.

Though the Pentagon's budget was enormous, the use of Continuing Resolutions (CRs) increasingly disrupted funding. Repetitive CRs limited budget flexibility because they amounted to "copy and pasting" budget information from one fiscal year to the next on a pro-rated basis. According to Deputy Secretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy (2009 to 2012), CRs meant many items remained unchanged year to year.<sup>48</sup> The loss of time for both Congressional staff and Pentagon planners meant less analysis and strategic input went into each budget.

Complicating matters was the 2013 Sequester. Created to force a budget compromise, the Sequester cut billions arbitrarily in early 2013 following the failure of negotiations between Obama and Congressional Republicans. The Sequester arbitrarily cut Pentagon spending by ten percent. However, OCO funds were largely exempt from Sequester. Consequently, maintenance and training in the United States was suspended for months. Likewise, nascent efforts to change defense procurement and security cooperation in support of the Pivot were stillborn.

Panetta said the Sequester would cost the Pentagon \$500 billion in fees and losses over ten years.<sup>50</sup> Katrina McFarland, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Acquisition (2011 to 2017), was more blunt, "Right now, the pivot is being looked at again, because candidly it can't happen."<sup>51</sup> Pacific Command (PACOM) Commander Admiral Samuel Locklear (2012 to 2015) testified, "Budget uncertainty has hampered our readiness and complicated our ability to execute long-term plans and efficiently use resources."<sup>52</sup>

Misplaced hopes explain why the cuts were so arbitrarily applied. Up until early 2013, the administration felt a compromise would be reached; but when talks failed, the cuts immediately started. Bureaucratic politics

played a role as well. According to Joint Chiefs Vice Chairman (2011 to 2015) Admiral James Alexander "Sandy" Winnefeld Jr, Pentagon spending was subject to a "non-virtuous flywheel" of interservice rivalries, and the processes built to support the War on Terror. By 2011 these processes were deeply ingrained into Pentagon culture and processes.<sup>53</sup>

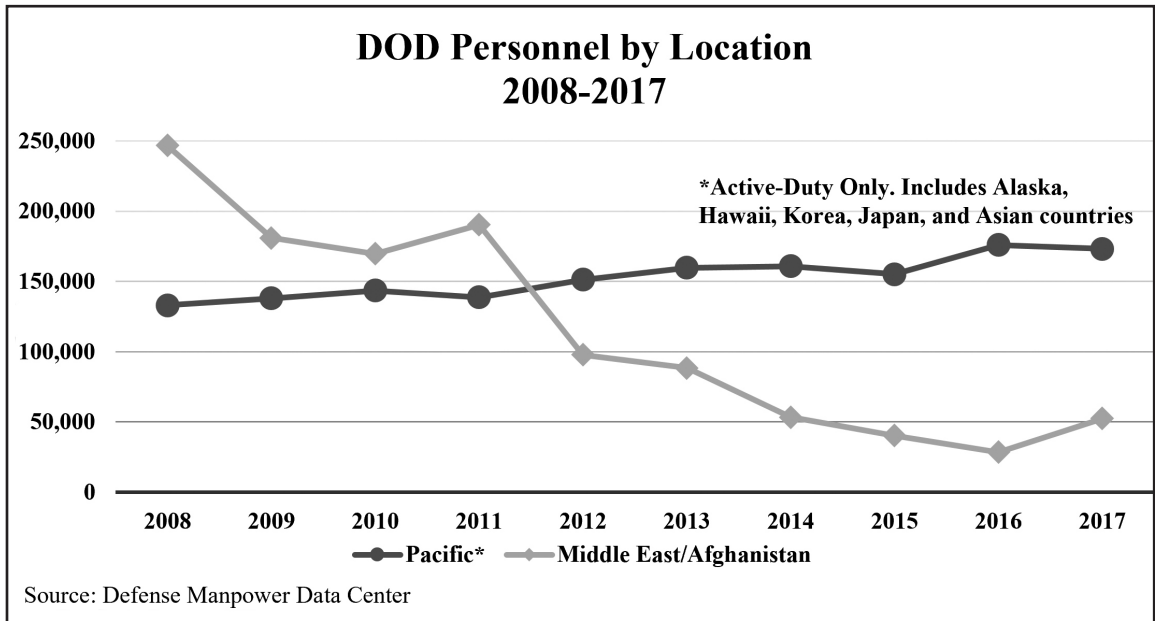
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### **Military Personnel in the Pacific**

Established processes preferring – directly and indirectly – help explain why, even as deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan decreased, forces did not necessarily move to the Pacific, though the lack of shift resulted, in part, from an overall shrinking of the military. But, as shown below, aside from modest increases in Alaska and Hawaii and Marine Corps rotations to Darwin, overall American military forces stationed in the Pacific *declined* through 2016 (though some alignment changes gave PACOM control of additional forces).<sup>54</sup>

While specifics are difficult to ascertain because many operations involve rotational forces, Air Force personnel and aircraft data is illustrative.<sup>55</sup> From 2007 to 2017 the number of Air Force active-duty personnel assigned to the Pacific and Europe *declined* though aircraft numbers remained consistent. According to former PACOM Deputy Commander Lieutenant General Anthony Crutchfield (2014 to 2017), another factor was limited basing options.<sup>56</sup> Aside from Darwin, there were no new facilities available to handle major increases in force structure.

There were subtle changes, however. For example, the U.S. Army blocked the First Corps headquarters and its two divisions from Middle



**Figure 4. DOD Personnel by Location 2008 - 2017**

East deployments.<sup>57</sup> This gave PACOM six more U.S. Army brigades (25,000 soldiers).<sup>58</sup>

Other actions included rotating B-52 bombers to Guam as well as high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft such as the U-2 and Global Hawk.<sup>59</sup> Yet despite the rotational Marine Corps unit in Darwin, nowhere in any official remarks was there talk of *increasing* permanently forces.

### **Military Construction (MILCON)**

Likewise, MILCON spending in the Pacific also remained flat or decreased.<sup>60</sup> Several MILCON projects had started during the Bush Administration, including facilities in Guam and South Korea. Funding went to *existing* rather than new facilities or access points, making the Pivot’s impact on MILCON unclear.<sup>61</sup>

New spending, excepting Guam, favored installations in Washington State and Southern California.<sup>62</sup> Improvements at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, a World War II-era facility south of Seattle enabled the base to support new U.S. Army units including an aviation brigade and a division headquarters, all assigned to U.S. Army Pacific.

On Guam, MILCON funded munitions storage, an enlarged aircraft ramp, and improved wharfs.

### **Procurement**

Shipbuilding provides a window into Pentagon procurement related to the Pivot. Given the ocean-dominated geography of the Pacific, the U.S. Navy is an *ideal case*; building more ships was an obvious means for the Pentagon to support the Pivot, especially if the U.S. Navy was going to place sixty percent of the fleet in the region.

Shipbuilding budgets remained flat or experienced a real decline during the Pivot years. This was especially concerning given an older, smaller, and busier U.S. Navy fleet. Older ships require longer maintenance periods, costing time and resources.

In fact, from 2000 to 2016 the Navy lost 1,300 carrier operational days and 12,500 days for submarines.<sup>63</sup>

More missions with a smaller fleet with longer maintenance times increased personnel stress and set conditions for the 2017 collisions of the USS *McCain* and the USS *Fitzgerald*.<sup>64</sup>



## Naval Presence and Freedom of Navigation Operations

The U.S. Navy made some force structure changes, basing a second carrier group at Yokosuka Naval Base in Japan and moving several submarines, cruisers, and destroyers from Bahrain to San Diego.<sup>65</sup> Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Scott Swift (2015 to 2018) said he “was surprised at how quickly ships moved” to the region following Panetta’s 2012 guidance.<sup>66</sup>

The new ships included Littoral Combat Ships (LCS), multi-mission ships designed to perform and operate in the littoral environments prevalent in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, mechanical issues meant “[LCS ships] mostly sat at the pier in Singapore” according to 7th Fleet Commander Vice Admiral Robert Thomas (2013 to 2015).<sup>67</sup> The new P-8 Poseidon had similar issues.<sup>68</sup>

Importantly, the military’s rotational presence in the Pacific *did* increase. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), port visits, and overflights through 2016 roughly doubled those of the early-2000s.<sup>69</sup> Military

reconnaissance flights also increased from “260 in 2009 to over 1,200 in 2014.”<sup>70</sup> But presence was not permanence. By 2017, the U.S. military force’s posture in Asia was *both smaller and more concentrated* since the closing of Subic Bay and Clark Air Force base twenty-five years earlier. The lack of increased presence, coupled with the failure of the Obama Administration to challenge China during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal affair discredited the Pivot. Though rotational forces helped improve interoperability with allies and did signal American engagement in Asia, it was not possible to reassure allies “on the cheap.”<sup>71</sup>

## Security Assistance/Cooperation

Between 2006 and 2016 the United States provided over \$200 billion in security assistance.<sup>72</sup> Funding overwhelmingly went to the Middle East; post-2012 cuts there did not fund increases elsewhere. The Pacific percentage remained around one percent.

Like defense spending, security cooperation funding was also subject to bureaucratic capture. FY16 spending provides an illustrative example.

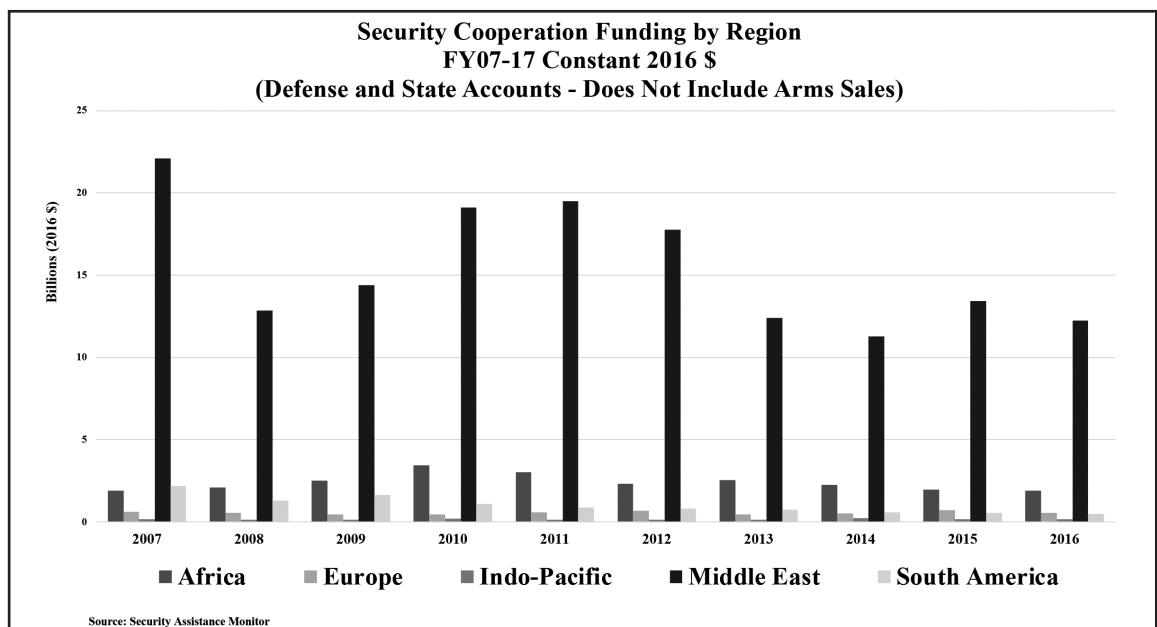
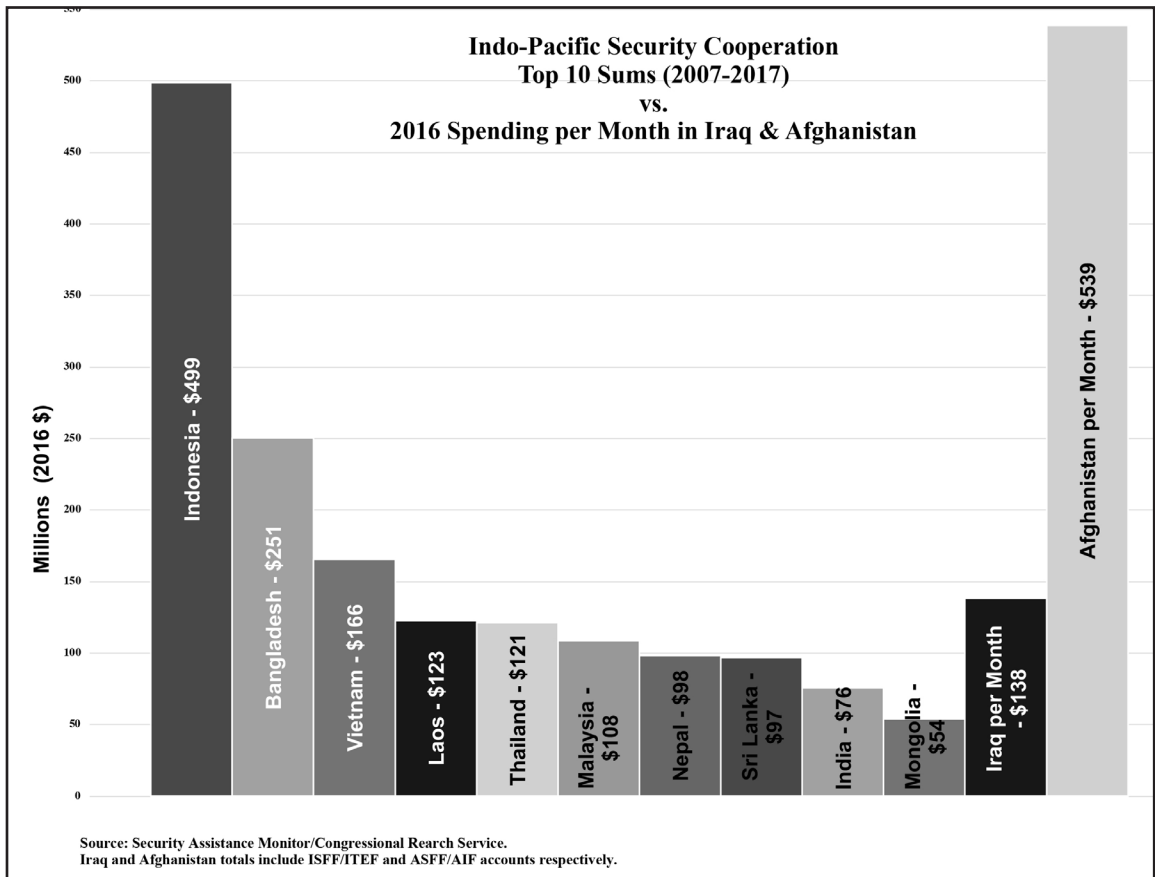


Figure 5. Security Cooperation Funding by Region



**Figure 6. Indo-Pacific Security Cooperation**

Five years into the Pivot, Middle East spending still dwarfed other regions. As Figure 5 shows, spending on the top ten Pacific recipients totaled between \$50 and \$500 million each for the *ten years* from 2007 to 2017. None of these sums exceeded 2016 *monthly* spending in Afghanistan (\$539 million).<sup>73</sup>

### **Pacific Pathways – Faces Without Bases**

One Pivot-related security cooperation expansion was “Pacific Pathways,” a program created by U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) Commander General Vincent K. Brooks (2013 to 2016).<sup>74</sup>

Pathways added Army exercises to existing joint wargames with Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Tellingly, Pathways did not receive a budget.<sup>75</sup> The program also

lacked explicit support from PACOM and the interagency level; it was, instead, Brook’s *sui generis* interpretation of strategic guidance.<sup>76</sup> According to one officer, Pathways “provided a lifeline” for U.S.-Philippine relations during the tenure of President Duterte.<sup>77</sup>

More broadly, only one Asia-specific security cooperation program, the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), was enshrined in the budget.<sup>79</sup> Announced by Secretary of Defense Ash Carter (2015 to 2017) in 2015, MSI expanded a State Department program and provided \$425 million for Southeast Asian navies over five years.<sup>80</sup>

But MSI was paltry compared to other programs.<sup>81</sup> For example, OCO Lift/Sustain funding, which supported airlift in the Middle East, was triple MSI.<sup>82</sup>

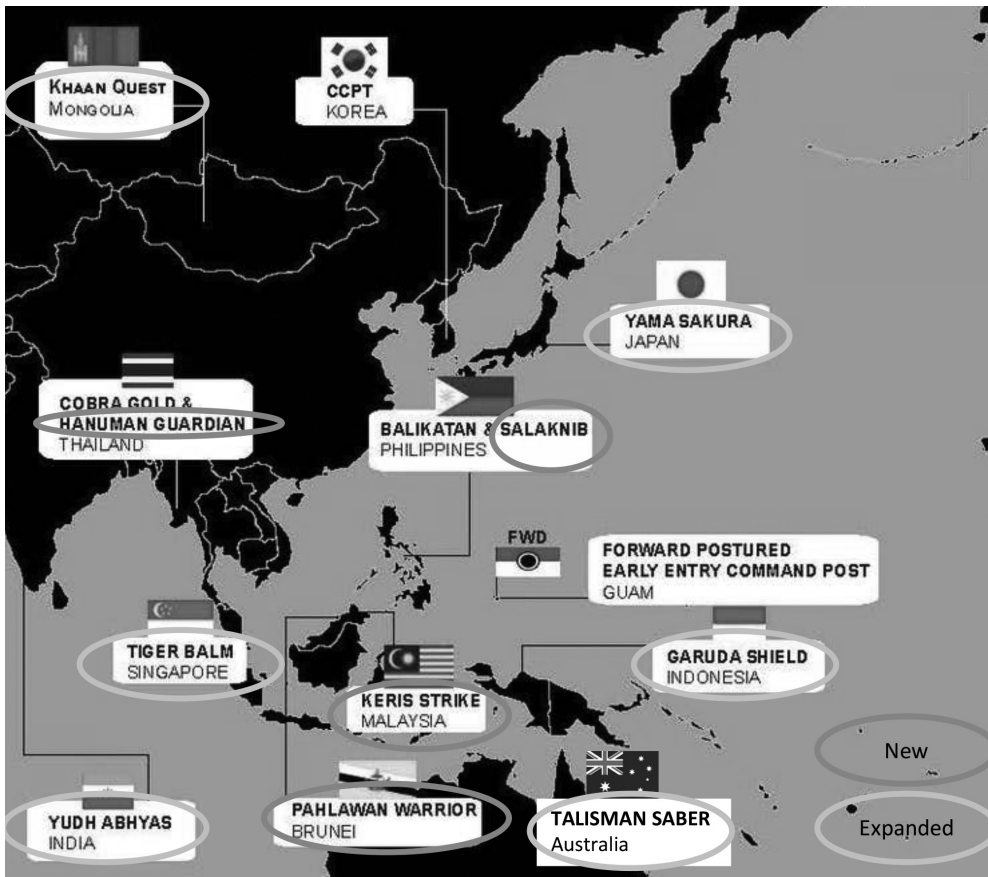


Figure 7. New and Expanded Pacific Military Exercises as of 2018<sup>78</sup>

## Bureaucratic Processes and Messaging

*The methods of policy execution are just as important as the results: how a policy is pursued and perceived can impact its success as much as the actual mechanics of its implementation.*<sup>83</sup>

**U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Staff Report, 2014**

Despite Obama’s desire to reduce military commitments in the Middle East, his administration enacted few limits on operations abroad prior to 2014.

Indeed, requests from U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) – the command overseeing military operations in the Middle East – frustrated senior military officers who agreed with the Pivot’s strategic logic. CENTCOM

tended to get “whatever it wanted,” according to Marine Corps Commandant General Robert Neller (2015 to 2019).<sup>84</sup> CENTCOM priorities were baked into Pentagon processes, according to Winnefeld.<sup>85</sup> This deference impacted military operations elsewhere. Pacific Air Forces commander, General Herbert Carlisle (2012 to 2014), explained: “resources have not followed [the Pivot] ... ongoing operations obviously in the Middle East [and Sequestration] make it actually incredibly hard to find places to pivot money to the Pacific.”<sup>86</sup>

CENTCOM’s prioritization was also reflected in the rhetoric and messaging of administration officials. As discussed, the Pivot never had a specific strategy document. Key strategy documents such as the National Security Strategy or National Military Strategy also exhibit a pattern regarding the Pivot and Asia.<sup>87</sup>

Though mentions of Asia/Pacific increased, the Middle East remained predominant. In fact, no document had *fewer* mentions of the Middle East (including Afghanistan) than any other major foreign policy area. The Middle East remained predominant in strategy documents.

The administration's rhetorical support for the Pivot ebbed over time and other efforts took priority. By 2014, the Middle East, terrorism, and Russia dominated administration rhetoric. Remarks of defense secretaries mirror this prioritization; even Panetta, a supporter of the Pivot, discussed the Pivot less than the Middle East.<sup>88</sup>

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**Topic Mentions Secretaries of Defense in Speeches/Remarks**

The State of the Union (SOTU) also shows lessening support for the Pivot. The address each February is the most important guidance issued to the executive branch.<sup>89</sup> Obama SOTUs mentioned Middle East topics much more frequently than the Pivot. Unsurprisingly, Pivot-related terms spike in 2011 to 2012 during the policy's formalization before dropping.

One area where the Pivot created rhetorical was popularizing "Indo-Pacific." The term became common in both government and academic discussions of Asian affairs around 2010. Vice President Biden's July 2013 speech prior to a trip to India and Singapore said the administration viewed the region as "Indo-Pacific in character if not necessarily in name."<sup>90</sup>

Social media also provides a window into administration messaging.<sup>91</sup> Though only five to ten percent of 186,000 tweets issued by the Obama Administration from late 2011 to 2017

concerned foreign policy, the tweets reveal focus and priorities.<sup>92</sup> The relatively paucity of the Pivot compared to the Middle in tweets is telling. For example, of 41,775 White House tweets, 9.1 percent were Middle East-related compared to 3.9 percent related for the Pivot. Tweets about the Middle East averaged between 150 to 200 monthly, often exceeding 250.<sup>93</sup> After spiking through 2012, Pivot-related tweets only surpassed 100 per month five times through January 2017.

**The Pivot Compared to Europe – An Apt Comparison**

The world also got a vote. Events in 2014 illustrated the difficulty of shifting to Asia but also showed how quickly a motivated administration and Congress could react. Following Russia's invasion of Crimea in early 2014, Congress and the Obama Administration – at the height of Sequestration – worked together to fund the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI). ERI provided \$1 billion loan guarantees and nearly \$100 million in direct assistance and eventually became a budget item surpassing \$6 billion in FY19.<sup>94</sup> The ERI increased U.S. military forces in Europe by 8,000 soldiers and thousands of airmen, marines, and sailors.<sup>95</sup> Though these deployments did not directly affect the Pivot, they cost billions annually and limited forces available for other operations.

One can hardly fault the Obama Administration and NATO for decisively responding to Russian aggression and improving the West's deterrence posture in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the alacrity with which money and troops went to Europe vis-à-vis the Pacific. That the rapid and enormous funding of a European initiative occurring during Sequestration contrasts with the stasis and occasional decline of both force structure and Pacific-focused military spending.

Better processes and structures would not have assured the Pivot's success. Any wide-

ranging policy faces varying challenges across its breadth. And Obama faced additional exogenous challenges as mentioned above but also from within the region. For example, better Obama Administration processes could not have changed the Philippines' acquiescence to China's maritime encroachment. Nor would better processes have prevented Obama's skepticism about intervention abroad, mostly notably seen in his hesitancy in Libya (2011) followed by punting a decision on striking Syria to Congress in 2014.

Nevertheless, processes are important. Had the Obama Administration implemented an effective policy process and supporting bureaucratic structures and backed the Pivot with explicit guidance, the policy would have better survived the challenges described above. Better management of the Pivot, including providing guidance to specific departments and shaping the annual budget more favorably to the Pacific, would have ameliorated some of the ongoing resource capture and predilection toward the Middle East. With better processes, Pivot efforts such as naval shipbuilding and Pentagon security cooperation efforts may have survived Sequestration rather than fall victim to the across-the-board cuts. Synchronizing Pivot efforts across the government would have improved the messaging supporting the Pivot and better tied specific efforts to the Pivot holistically.

## Conclusion

Contrary to criticism that the Pivot was simply a branding exercise, the Obama Administration made an earnest effort to better link the United States to the Pacific. This included a series of bilateral trade and partnership agreements as well as additional military exercises and additional rotations of military units to the region.

Some successes notwithstanding, the Pivot's limitations emerged from a particularly powerful

confluence of *process, geopolitics, and political* challenges that confounded Obama's attempts to re-focus and re-prioritize American foreign policy towards Asia. These challenges compounded in interesting ways, often confounding the Pivot. Political fights with Congressional Republicans seeking to deny Obama any wins, regardless of the cost, inevitably affected foreign policy.<sup>96</sup> Congressional scrutiny pushed the Obama White House and National Security Council toward micromanagement: of the anti-ISIS campaign; embassy security; and numbers of troops in Afghanistan.<sup>97</sup> This micromanagement, however, tended to favor the status quo – that is, the Middle East. Existing efforts held *de facto* priority over the Pivot due to bureaucratic path dependence. More security cooperation and military assistance funding, as well as arms sales financing, went to Middle East recipients than Asian states. Election year politics also delayed and then derailed the administration's push for TPP in 2016.

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But many of the Pivot's challenges resulted from structural and process issues endemic to any presidential administration (or large organization) attempting any change. While the Pivot was indeed buffeted by exogenous events, the administration's failure to adequately plan, process, protect/prioritize, and publicize the Pivot created most of these limits.

Importantly, designating a specific Pivot "czar" to shepherd officials and processes would have helped. The Obama Administration, in fact, used this exact model for nearly thirty



other governmental functions, appointing over fifty “czars.” Additionally, because the Pivot was never integrated through a formal interagency process by the National Security Council (NSC) or elsewhere, guidance issued to departments and agencies as well as military commands was largely indirect. Subordinates understood Asia was the priority but, absent specific guidance, were free to pick and choose what the policy meant for their specific agencies. This freedom, however, avoided hard tradeoffs. As a result, the status quo *effectively remained the same*.

The Pivot demonstrates two challenges of implementing any strategic change. First, while a superpower must indeed be able to do multiple things concurrently, it can only prioritize a few things. That focus is borne out in action, but action is informed by strategy documents, rhetoric of senior officials, and budgets. Because strategy is ultimately a zero-sum affair – a state ultimately has limited military force, funding, and time – strategy is really about prioritization. The bureaucracy affects both *how* presidential policy is enacted and *to what degree*. No matter how well supported by process, converting presidential ambitions into actions and effects is no easy task. “Policy,” according to scholar Hal Brands, “is more exciting than bureaucracy. But bureaucracy enables policy because it is how states organize for action.”<sup>98</sup>

Second, the time of senior officials is limited. Senior officials’ true priorities are demonstrated not only through their rhetoric, but also through their actions. Economists call the distinction between rhetoric and reality “revealed preference.” For practitioners of strategy, this is a key lesson. Any U.S. involvement, particularly the deployment of military units to dangerous locations, carries attendant costs in attention and money. As the lingering costs associated with Afghanistan demonstrate, *any* commitment to combat operations will out-prioritize any *non-combat* operation. Hence, even a “manageable footprint,” as many advocated for Afghanistan, inevitably carries a heavy cost.<sup>99</sup>

Last – and often unsaid in discussions of strategy by both practitioners and scholars – is the predicate of domestic political consensus. Though presidents and the executive branch generally conduct foreign policy unilaterally, Congress controls the purse strings. Strategy, of course, requires funding and thus Congressional support. During Obama’s presidency, domestic partisanship limited budget flexibility and affected key decisions on trade policy in Congress. Granted, the administration could have done better to sell the Pivot domestically, but without at least a general consensus about the direction and goals of U.S. policy, it may vary wildly from one president to another. This naturally limits the effectiveness of any strategy shift. **IAJ**

## Notes

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- 86 Herbert Carlisle, interview with Defense News, February 10, 2014, accessed December 15, 2022, via the Internet Archive, <https://archive.vn/20140211161748/http://www.defensenews.com/article/20140210/DEFREG02/302100036/1001/DEFSECT#selection-851.0-854.0>.
- 87 Documents analyzed include: 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS); 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR); 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR); 2011 National Military Strategy (NMS); 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG), “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership”; 2014 QDR; 2015 NSS; 2015 QDDR; 2017 Defense Posture Review.
- 88 Remarks summarized from press briefings, interviews, and speeches.
- 89 This analysis includes Obama’s February 2009 address to Congress. Though not a formal State of the Union Address it occurred around the time and was one of his first major addresses as president.
- 90 Rory Medcalf, “Mapping the Indo-Pacific,” in *Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from China, India, and the United States*, ed. Mohan Malik (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 45–59. This aggregation includes speeches, remarks at events, press conferences, and press statements from those departments. Over the administration these totaled 22,181 instances. Of these, 91 remarks mentioned Indo-Pacific or Asia-Pacific a total of 2,248 times.
- 91 Obama Administration embraced and utilized this then-emerging medium heavily. From 51 official Obama Administration Twitter accounts related to national-level issues or national security issues, there are 186,000 tweets issued during the Obama Administration.
- 92 Throughout this section “Pivot” and “Middle East” trendlines are highlighted to ease reading. Tweets from before September 2010 were unavailable due to a Twitter database error.

- 93 ISIS appears earlier than the terrorist groups emergence due to the term “Baghdadi.”
- 94 Paul Belkin and Hibbah Kaileh, “The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview,” *Congressional Research Service*, IF10946, July 1, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>; Mark Cancian, “The European Reassurance Initiative,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 9, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/european-reassurance-initiative-0>; Congressional Research Service, “The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview,” IF10946, 1-2..
- 95 U.S. Army Europe and Africa, “U.S. Army Europe and Africa Support to Atlantic Resolve,” July 6, 2021, <https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/Portals/19/documents/Fact%20Sheets>.
- 96 “GOP Leader’s Top Goal: Make Obama 1-Term President.” *NBC News*, November 4, 2010, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna40007802>.
- 97 These so-called “Boots on the Ground (BOG)” limits in Afghanistan existed from 2012 onward.
- 98 Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us about Great-Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 174.
- 99 Richard Haas, “How Not to Leave Afghanistan,” *Project Syndicate*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-us-taliban-agreement-poor-prospects-by-richard-n-haas-2020-03>; see also H.R. McMaster, interview by Mark Green, *Wilson Center*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/hindsight-front-afghanistan-ambassador-mark-green-conversation-hr-mcmaster>.