

Steve Micallef

# Is Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' enough to maintain US Influence in East Asia?

A look at Security Issues and  
the Senkaku Islands Dispute



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## Abstract

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has been defined as the American Century, however, the history of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be written in Asia.

Today East Asia is home to a third of the world's population and includes some of the world's largest economies. Hence the US has placed more emphasis on the region, to strengthen its economic ties and to show its long term allies that it has not forgotten about them. Disengagement from the Middle East and the rise of China has meant that the US has again turned its focus to the Asia-Pacific and East Asia, a region rife with old, long seated distrust and territorial disputes.

This book will focus on how the US is executing its 'Pivot to Asia' focusing on the many security issues which it must deal with, both those involving its allies and those involving its strategic rivals. All while trying to maintain its influence over East Asia in the face of a rising China.

Whilst the US is welcomed by some and unwelcomed by others, this book will try and determine whether the US's renewed interest will contribute to the prosperity of East Asia or whether the US will again be bogged down in a region where it is not welcomed.

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Steve Micallef

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## List of Acronyms and Terms

A2/AD – Anti- Access/Area Denial

ADIZ – Air Defence and Identification Zone

APEC – Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation

ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

ASM – Anti-Ship Missile

ASW – Anti-Submarine Warfare

BMD – Ballistic Missile Defence

East Asia – The US Department of State considers East Asia to include all countries East of Burma and West of Samoa (fig. 2) and are managed under the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. This book adopts this meaning when referring to the region.

East Asia – Geographically East Asia includes the countries of China, Japan, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea and Taiwan.

Southeast Asia – Geographically Southeast Asia includes the countries of Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

FDI – Foreign Direct Investment

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

GWoT – Global War on Terror

ICJ – International Court Of Justice



IFV – Infantry Fighting Vehicles

JASDF – Japan Air Self-Defence Force

JMSDF – Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force

JSDF – Japan Self-Defence Force

MEU – Marine Expeditionary Unit

PLA – People’s Liberation Army

PLAN – People’s Liberation Army Navy

PRC/PROC – People’s Republic of China, colloquially known as China

R&D – Research and Development

RIMPAC – Rim of the Pacific Exercise

ROC – Republic of China, better known as Taiwan

SLBM – Submarine-launched Ballistic Missiles

SSBN – Ballistic Missile Submarine, Nuclear

TPP – Trans-Pacific Partnership

UNCLOS – United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

US/USA – United States of America

USAF – United States Air Force

USMC – United States Marine Corps

USN – United States Navy

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or Soviet Union



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

## 1.1. Aims, Objectives and Background

East Asia is home to two billion people or 30% of the world's population (World Population Data Sheet, 2014), and boasts the world's largest and most successful modern economies. For this reason the United States has always been interested in this part of the world; it has a long history of involvement here, and today plays a major role in the region. This book will focus on US influence in East Asia, specifically how Barrack Obama's so called 'Pivot to Asia' aims at keeping the US at the heart of the region.

After ten years of focus on the Middle East with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Global War on Terror, Barrack Obama came to the Presidency with the idea of shifting US attention to East Asia, a region which offers many opportunities. Economically East Asia has vast markets and potential; offering immense opportunities for trade, investment and technology which President Obama is determined to exploit to further expand the American economy. Militarily East Asia is a region where the US has invested significant energy and resources in the last 70 years and is home to both long term allies: Japan and South Korea, and rivals: North Korea and China.

To this end this book looks at the historic role the US has played vis-à-vis the other nations in the region and how the rise of China is threatening to upset the 'balance' which exists with an emphasis on security issues in an area that is full of flash points which can potentially lead to war. Indeed many have argued that one of the underlining causes for the shift in focus is the fact that the last thirty years have seen the rise of the economic giant that is China. Today we are living in a world where China is the world's second largest economy (BBC, Dec 2014) and where it is increasingly

flexing its muscles in both regional and global affairs that are threatening US hegemony and the unipolar world order.

At the heart of this study is the discourse surrounding the 'Pivot to Asia', with emphasis on security issues. This book looks at the intentions of President Obama's shift, the scale of the rebalance, the advantages gained from this shift and the criticism surrounding the 'Pivot to Asia'. The US pivot 'on the ground' has meant the deployment of troops and assets to the region, together with the reinforcing of security commitments and a renewed push to pursue friendly ties. These actions are discussed at length, with the hope of providing an accurate picture of US action in Asia and try to determine whether these are enough to guarantee US influence.

Despite the obvious emphasis on the US and China this book also looks at a number of players in the East Asia region. This was done to show that; US and Chinese actions do not exist in a vacuum and, more importantly, that the US cannot maintain influence here if it is not welcomed. This means that this study will focus on both long term US allies like Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines but also on countries like Vietnam, which traditionally are not considered as US allies. What all these countries have in common however is outstanding issues with China which has meant that the US rebalance to Asia was welcomed by these countries as an initiative that will counter China's growing power and guarantee the rule of law and the protection of shipping lanes in the East and South China Seas.

## 1.2. Study Outline

This study is divided into eight chapters, each chapter discusses a different aspect of the 'Pivot to Asia'. The following chapter will treat US history in the context of East Asia and the Asia Pacific, this is done by giving some background on the US

position in East Asia. The Historical Context Chapter will look at the involvement of the US since the opening of Japan by Commodore Perry in 1854 until the end of the Cold War. Each period brought with it renewed challenges for the US which it was able to overcome. Similarly today the US is facing new challenges in East Asia.

This is followed by a literature review which analyses the literature surrounding the US 'Pivot to Asia', specifically the writings of analysts and authors, together with critique and policy documents. The idea is to give an insight into the challenges and problems facing the US in Asia and how the US aims to overcome these challenges. Specifically, the literature review looks at the discourse surrounding Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategies and the viewpoints of the different players regarding the 'Pivot to Asia'. Criticism is discussed both in regard to the validity of the Pivot itself and the means taken to achieve it.

The fourth chapter will treat theory and methodology. In this chapter two theories, the Security Dilemma and the Theory of Hegemonic Stability are examined and applied to the situation in East Asia. This is done to try and determine the possible future of East Asia in the context of renewed US interests in the region. This is followed by a Methodology where the tools and techniques used to write this study are mentioned so that the research can be better understood together with an overview of the case studies and the techniques used. This section also mentions the difficulties encountered when researching the study and how they were overcome.

The fifth chapter analyses the 'Pivot to Asia' in more detail; it looks at the actions of the US 'on the ground', rather than focusing on policy or strategy documents. Of importance in this chapter is the role that the various countries play and how the US is engaging China, not solely on its own initiatives, but also through the use of third

parties and multilateral talks. Emphasis is placed on security issues, territorial disputes and the protection of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the China Seas. A brief mention of the economic importance of East Asia is also undertaken, most notably the importance of the TPP and willingness of the Obama administration to undertake such an agreement. Together with this, the 'Pivot to Asia' is looked at as not solely a new concept that President Obama created but rather a continuation of the work of previous administrations; since 1989 US administrations have always had an East Asia aspect which some Presidents pursued to a great extent, but others chose to ignore.

The sixth and seventh chapters are the case studies where two specific issues are looked at and analysed. These were specifically chosen to demonstrate the involvement of the US in the region and complements the work done in the theory chapter.

The first case study will focus on the effects of China's military rise, specifically focusing on the impact of the increased capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and how the region is in the grips of an arms race. Countries are increasingly re-arming and modernising their armed forces in an attempt to counter China's massive military build-up. Emphasis is placed on the countries which have outstanding issues with China and the case study aims to establish a general trend in the re-arming of East Asia. Most importantly the role of the US in re-arming said region is scrutinised.

The second case study will focus on the Senkaku Islands and the role that the US is playing in the dispute, and how it differs from the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The Senkaku Islands saga is of particular interest since they are one of the few instances where China was unable to occupy a territory claimed by another country. A