

## Has the “Pivot to Asia” been Too Weak? It Depends on Who You Ask.

### The Problem with Conventional Wisdom

In a recent essay in *Foreign Policy* magazine, Trump advisors Peter Navarro and Alex Gray argue that the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” has failed. Through weakness, meekness, and fecklessness, they contend that Obama has failed to reassure allies in the region in the face of a rising China. In so doing, they reiterate many common critiques of Obama’s approach in Asia, many of which are worth parsing. It is important to take a close look at this type of criticism to highlight numerous unspoken assumptions, each of which should be the subject of close study and debate in its own right.

Navarro and Gray’s argument is built around a few key assertions: 1. The Asia pivot has lacked substance and has been nothing more than “talking loudly and carrying a small stick;” 2. The global financial crisis has granted China an aggressive confidence based in its assessment that America is in decline; 3. These factors together facilitate Chinese “aggression in the East and South China Seas.” Such assertions are not unique to Navarro and Gray. For example, Senator John McCain has made similar arguments in the past that the pivot is weak and isn’t “meaningful.” Other analysts have argued that Obama’s reputation for weakness has undermined US-ASEAN relations. It has become commonplace to assert—or often simply to infer—that Chinese officials think Barack Obama is weak.

Each of these propositions is in fact subject to legitimate debate, with credible arguments to the contrary. It is further revealing to examine a deeper set of unspoken assumptions that are implied by this argument: 1. Chinese *perceive* the pivot to have no military substance; 2. Chinese perceptions of American long-term decline lead to opportunism in the short-term; 3. Assertiveness in a state is typically “invited” by its rival’s weakness rather than other causes—a view captured in the “Munich analogy.”

These foundational assumptions are yet more dubious from the perspective of political science or basic observations about Chinese interpretations of American policy. Moreover, they evince chronic tendencies among practitioners and analysts of international affairs to rely on conventional wisdom, to lack empathy for others’ viewpoints, overemphasize the role that they play in others’ decisions, and misjudge the perceptions they themselves generate.

What ties these assumptions together is that they are largely about Chinese perceptions. In assessing the influence the pivot has had on China, everyone grasps that it is Chinese perceptions that are the critical factor, not American ones. Unfortunately, much criticism of the pivot simply assumes that Beijing sees American behavior the same way Washington does, or they make inferences about Chinese views based on interpretations of Chinese behavior.

There are many reasons for developing a deeper understanding of Chinese perceptions. Most clearly, if Americans interpret current Chinese activities to be a reaction to American weakness, they will likely come to a very different understanding of Chinese motives than if they viewed China's actions as a response to American strength. Put another way, it should not be assumed that the "Munich" dynamic is the only way to explain assertive or aggressive behavior. Assertiveness can arise in a security dilemma—out of a state's feeling of insecurity rather than a sense of power. Foreign policies can also originate in domestic politics or other factors entirely outside the bilateral relationship.

Failing to think through alternative explanations for a competitor's actions can misinform decisions about the future or even distort views of the present. Try as they might, it is hard for observers of international affairs to disentangle interpretations of a given action from expectations about the intentions behind it. This raises the question of whether American conventional wisdom about the level of Chinese assertiveness is properly calibrated.

### **Chinese Views of the Pivot**

Responses in China to the Asia pivot have been varied, but as one American observer notes, reactions have mostly ranged from tepid criticism of the pivot being unconstructive to outright condemnation of American attempts to contain China. Another pair of scholars observes that the pivot has "increased the sentiment of insecurity and sense of being threatened among elites and the public in mainland China." Unlike Obama's critics in Washington, many Chinese view American military activities as significant, closely scrutinize evolving US relations with other Asian states, and see important shifts in US policy in the South China Sea. Such perceptions are formed within a broader understanding that American foreign policy is determined by invidious motives and seeks to thwart China's development and militarily encircle it.

Deeply held Chinese beliefs about American grand strategy necessarily condition subsequent interpretations of US policies. Many Chinese and American analysts have observed that there is a pervasive view in China that US foreign policy is driven by the tenets of offensive neo-realism and seeks to maintain hegemonic control over Asia at China's direct expense. The US is often accused of embracing the "law of the jungle," pursuing "power politics," and failing to escape a "cold war mindset." Even purposeful American shifts towards conciliatory or "weak" positions must swim against this tide of baseline views.

There are many reasons to doubt that Obama's pivot policies have done anything to undermine rather than reinforce these baseline images of the US. Chinese pundits and academics frequently portray the pivot to be an intensification of military activity. Sometimes diplomatic or military activity connected with the pivot is associated with the "Air-Sea Battle Concept," a Pentagon doctrine that is regarded to be highly aggressive and aimed at China. Chinese academics frequently claim that the tempo of US close-in surveillance activities has intensified over the last several years, as have sea-days and joint exercises for US Navy ships in China's

near seas. US Navy freedom of navigation operations are widely regarded in China to be shows of force rather than simple exercises of legal rights. Chinese discussion of the pivot often echoes the Pentagon's claim that the quality of American and allied military technology has stepped up as part of the pivot as well. While Senator McCain and many others have downplayed new agreements with Australia and Singapore, many Chinese analysts see these as indicating a qualitative shift in strategy aimed embedding the US in the region in new ways.

On the diplomatic front, it is very common to hear Chinese scholars and pundits contend that the US no longer has a policy of neutrality in the South China Sea territorial disputes. Most will point to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks at the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum in which she announced that the US has a "national interest" in freedom of navigation in East Asia. This language is perceived to be a signal of intensified US assertiveness. It is also common to hear Chinese analysts accuse the United States of having prompted the Philippines to pursue its case against China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration, or even to have somehow influenced the court's verdict.

Some of these viewpoints are clearly off the mark. Many are sincere misapprehensions, while others are probably disingenuous rhetoric. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to sort out one group from the other because the second possibility affects our willingness to consider the first. An excellent example of this problem has been the divergence between American and Chinese views regarding the impact of the planned THAAD battery in South Korea. Because Americans do not believe that THAAD can harm China's security interests, they have strong suspicions about China's motives in making such an argument. On the other hand, since many Chinese analysts do not believe that THAAD can contribute to South Korea's security, they doubt the sincerity of American protestations that THAAD is meant to do this and nothing more.

On the other hand, many Chinese views of the pivot's assertiveness are quite reasonable, and are shared by some analysts in the US. One American scholar notes that an element of the pivot has been a potentially provocative shift toward stronger ties with continental Asia, particularly with Vietnam beginning in 2010. Another observes that the kinds of relations built by the agreements with Singapore and Australia were integral to a long-desired goal of creating partner capacity and interoperability in Asia in the name of external balancing against China. This shift towards a "federated defense" structure in Asia was regarded to be instrumental to a new approach to "dissuading" (a euphemism for deterring) China from challenging the status quo. Few people outside of China seem to believe that the US forced the Philippines into a legal confrontation with China. However, many academics in the US and elsewhere believe American diplomacy in 2010 and after emboldened its partners to overplay their hands.

One pervasive American view is that many Chinese are convinced that the US is in long-term, secular decline. By many accounts this is true, although some of the implications that Americans tend to derive from this observation are misguided. The 2008 financial crisis did generate many perceptions of American relative decline (most see this happening over decades), and to some degree this was associated with increased "assertiveness" even in the

minds of many Chinese scholars. However, one study shows that this period of confidence was brief, and has been overwritten by perceptions of a stronger US from 2010 or 2011 onward. The Chinese interview subjects in the study explain that China's behavior has since then been driven by a sense of a resurgent, though ultimately declining, America. In fact, perceptions of long-term decline should not necessarily spur a rising power like China to overconfidence. Part of the logic of the so-called "Thucydides trap" suggests that an established power facing long-term decline will be more dangerous in the short-term, as attempts to forestall or prevent being eclipsed by the rising power. Some scholars point to this dynamic itself as a source of suspicion regarding American motives: the US will feel compelled to do "whatever it takes" to maintain hegemony.

### **Risky Assumptions**

This essay does not intend to weigh in on the substantive questions of American policy in East Asia. It does not claim that the pivot has been either too weak or overly aggressive, or evaluate whether American views about Chinese "assertiveness" are accurate. It also does not claim the Chinese behavior described as assertiveness is primarily motivated in response to either American strength or weakness. There are many factors determining Chinese policy, including many competing perceptions of America's role in the region and completely exogenous factors. A study suggesting that Chinese assertiveness can be correlated to two opposing perceptions—that of American decline at one moment and US aggression at another—should raise red flags about attributing too much influence to either kind of perception in the first place.

These substantive questions should be evaluated, however, with a self-consciousness about our tendency to rely on conventional wisdom and an awareness of the limits of our empathy. Social scientists observe how common it is for people to adjust their interpretation of incoming information to conform with preconceived notions, rather than adjusting their understanding in light of new information. They also show how we overstate our relevance to others' calculations and are surprisingly bad at imagining how we appear to others or recognizing the situational drivers of other people's behavior. In international politics, these shortcomings can produce significant problems when erroneous understandings lead to misguided reactions.

A striking feature of the US-China relationship is the great potential for such problems to become recursive, potentially creating self-fulfilling prophecies. Most scholars and practitioners working in the trenches of the bilateral relationship grapple with this every day. But it is troubling to see how often critics or proponents of US policies simply assume that foreigners view things through the same lens that they do. As the next administration evaluates the substantial questions about the United States' role in the Asia-Pacific and its approach to managing the balance of power with China, it must accurately assess the impact of past or existing policies. This can only be achieved through an objective and thorough consideration of all perspectives.