



10 Years After “the Pivot”: Still America’s Pacific Century?

By Zack Cooper and Adam P. Liff

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Key Points

- Asia’s significance to the United States has never been greater, but the past decade has seen a recurring gap between US rhetoric about the region’s importance and actual strategy, policies, budgets, and attention.
- To get America back on track in Asia, the Biden administration and Congress must prioritize three urgent course corrections: (1) re-centering US strategy on the region as a whole, rather than on China; (2) embracing a positive regional economic agenda; and (3) significantly increasing diplomatic and military resources devoted to the region.

This autumn marks the 10th anniversary of the Barack Obama administration’s announcement of the United States’ famous “pivot” to Asia.¹ In a high-profile November 2011 speech in Canberra, Australia, then-President Obama stated, “After a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, in blood and treasure, the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region.”² Several weeks earlier, in a widely discussed article titled “America’s Pacific Century,” then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted,

In Asia, they ask whether we are really there to stay, whether we are likely to be distracted again by events elsewhere, whether we can make—and keep—credible economic and strategic commitments, and whether we can back those commitments with action. The answer is: we can, and we will.³

A decade, two administrations, and five Congresses later, the same questions are being asked about the seriousness and sustainability of US economic and strategic commitments to Asia. But despite some important accomplishments, the reality of the past 10 years has been sobering. To many in the region, American answers to these questions are less convincing today than they were a decade ago.

This is especially unfortunate because Asia’s importance to the United States has never been greater. Since 2011, the region has become more wealthy, populous, militarily powerful, economically integrated, globally engaged, and influential. China’s rise is only part of the story. Economically, Asia is home to more than half the world’s population and gross domestic product, four of the world’s five largest economies, and five of America’s top 10 trading partners. Security-wise, it contains five US treaty allies, even more key security partners, and numerous military flash points. By 2030, Asia will contribute the majority of global growth and over 90 percent of the global middle

class' new members.⁴ For these reasons, the Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden administrations have all emphasized the crucial importance of Asia (or the Indo-Pacific) to America's future—and rightly so.

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Nevertheless, over the past decade there has often been a stark gap between US rhetoric and action. Across almost every element of US foreign policy—from diplomacy to the military, trade, and investment—implementation has come far short of the aspirations from 10 years ago. Rhetoric and policy are too often narrowly centered on competing with China rather than focusing on a positive and comprehensive vision for the region. Successive administrations and the US Congress have underinvested in diplomacy and failed to tailor the US military's approach to the rapidly changing regional threat environment. Perhaps most glaringly, US leaders have failed to realize the economic pillar of the vaunted rebalance—epitomized by the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). As the region has become more economically integrated, including with China, the United States has largely sat on the sidelines.

Today, Biden repeatedly asserts that “America is back” and emphasizes the importance of US leadership and international cooperation. His administration's early approach to Asia has much to commend it—particularly its proactive embrace of key allies and partners and its championing of a multilateral vision.⁵ But given repeated disconnects between US talk and action, many in the region will continue to wonder how committed Washington truly is.⁶

This report reflects on the United States' Asia strategy and the rapid changes unfolding in the region since the pivot and draws lessons for the Biden administration and Congress. It concludes that, despite some recent successes, Washington is again in danger of falling into familiar traps. US

administrations and congressional leaders—of both major political parties—are fond of asserting Asia's importance and talking tough about competition with China. But the sobering reality is these comments are often decoupled from US policies, budgets, and sustained attention. Despite widespread talk of “strategic competition,” the United States has often failed to compete effectively or strategically with China. The bottom line is that talk is cheap, and surveys of regional players make clear that the past decade of America's Pacific century has often underwhelmed. Today, nearly nine months into a new administration and Congress, concerns are growing that history may repeat itself.

If America is to get back on track in Asia, US leaders must learn from the past decade's missteps. Righting the balance between speechmaking and difference-making will require a clear purpose, grounded in shared principles and backed, when necessary, by power. US leaders must go beyond talking tough about China and security concerns. They must articulate a positive, affirmative, and multilateral agenda in Asia and spearhead a government-wide effort to resource and execute a comprehensive strategy for shaping the region's future.

“The Pivot” at 10: A Critical Reflection

The vision for US engagement in Asia that President Obama and Secretary Clinton sketched out a decade ago was compelling. When Clinton introduced the pivot, she argued, “In the next 10 years, we need to be smart and systematic about where we invest time and energy, so that we put ourselves in the best position to sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values.” Clinton proposed six lines of action: (1) strengthening bilateral security alliances, (2) deepening our working relationships with emerging powers, (3) engaging with regional multilateral institutions, (4) expanding trade and investment, (5) forging a broad-based military presence, and (6) advancing democracy and human rights.⁷ With the benefit of hindsight, we evaluate the progress (or lack thereof) in each area.

Strengthening US Alliances. America’s five treaty alliances in Asia have faced serious and novel challenges over the past decade, from without and within. In the 2010s, China’s rapidly modernizing military and embrace of gray-zone coercion in the East and South China Seas focused attention on complicated extended-deterrence challenges. Meanwhile, tensions on the Korean Peninsula rose as Pyongyang demonstrated increasingly advanced nuclear and missile capabilities. In 2017, the United States and North Korea appeared to be on the brink of war. Farther south, Beijing’s increased pressure on Taiwan has compelled the US and its allies to again consider the possibility of war across the Taiwan Strait. Under Trump, some US allies faced US economic sanctions on supposed national security grounds while also being asked to quadruple host-nation support payments or face the possible withdrawal of some US forces.

The combined effect of these new deterrence challenges, a changing balance of power, and intra-alliance frictions over basing and other matters led some US allies to worry about both abandonment and entrapment. Although the alliances with Australia, Japan, and South Korea are back on solid ground today, relations with the Philippines and Thailand remain at risk amid concerns about democratic backsliding and inclinations toward accommodating China. Polling of all five allies evinces significant concern about whether Washington is and will remain a reliable ally.⁸

Working with Emerging Powers. Relationships with emerging powers have also been tested. Those who hoped China would pursue liberalizing reforms and emerge as a responsible stakeholder have been chastened by developments under Xi Jinping, who ascended to the all-important posts of Chinese Communist Party general secretary and chairman of the Central Military Commission roughly one year after the Obama administration announced the pivot.⁹ In the years since, Beijing has engaged in economic coercion of its neighbors, brazenly asserted its vast sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas and on its border with India, tried to intimidate Taiwan, cracked down on freedoms in Hong Kong, and carried out egregious human rights violations in Xinjiang.

Many experts now consider the US-China relationship to be at its worst point since Richard Nixon launched an era of Sino-American strategic engagement half a century ago. As an indication of views in Washington today, President Biden openly identifies Beijing as a “foreign adversary,” calls actions in Xinjiang “genocide,” and speaks of a state of “extreme competition.”¹⁰ His top Asia official, Kurt Campbell, asserts that the period of engagement “has come to an end.”¹¹

The United States has fared better with other regional players, particularly India. The US-India partnership is at its apex, due in no small part to worries about China. But there are risks on the horizon, as observers express concerns about the government’s approach to human rights and democracy. Washington’s threat of sanctions for India’s acquisition of Russian S-400 defense systems is another source of tension.¹²

Meanwhile, although the Trump administration achieved some important progress with India and other partners, including Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Pacific Islands, many Southeast Asian leaders have been disheartened by a perceived lack of US engagement—a recurring theme. The subregion is a crucial variable in the Indo-Pacific’s future evolution due to its central location, economic dynamism, and large, relatively youthful, and growing population. Southeast Asia is already home to 660 million people—nearly 50 percent more than are in the European Union—and is expected to add 130 million more people by 2050.¹³ Southeast Asia’s economy is also experiencing significant growth. For example, in the five years before the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam and the Philippines grew at annual rates of 6.8 percent and 6.6 percent respectively—nearly identical to China’s 6.7 percent. Meanwhile, China’s population is projected to shrink, and economic growth is expected to slow significantly, owing to a rapidly aging population and other factors.¹⁴

For all these reasons, Southeast Asian governments’ alignment and policy choices will have immense bearing on the future regional order. Polling shows that many in Southeast Asia want greater US engagement, but experts in the region see America as declining in both overall power and regional commitment. By the last year of Trump’s presidency, only 8 percent of experts in Southeast

Asia considered the United States the most influential economic power, and just 27 percent said it was the most influential political and strategic power. More than three in four respondents assessed US engagement with Southeast Asia as having declined.¹⁵

Engaging Regional Multilateral Institutions.

One of the challenges in Southeast Asia has been multilateral institutions' inability to resolve several pressing regional problems that threaten regional stability. Most prominently, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been unable to address Myanmar's recent coup using its consensus-based approach.¹⁶ It has also failed to prevent or, now, effectively confront China's island-building and militarization campaign in the South China Sea, despite Beijing's brazen coercion of several ASEAN member states.

In contrast, another institution has thrived in recent years: the four-nation grouping now referred to as the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States). The Trump administration embraced a resurrected Quad as part of its reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific, and the Biden team has further invigorated and institutionalized cooperation centered on these four maritime democracies. But even a well-functioning Quad, with its conspicuous lack of representation from Southeast Asia, cannot replace ASEAN. Southeast Asia sits at the center of the Indo-Pacific, and its countries have extensive ties to all regional neighbors. Any US Asia strategy that neglects this important subregion has a conspicuous flaw.

Expanding Trade and Investment. Over the past decade, trade agreements have proliferated, and economic integration has accelerated across Asia, with a major caveat: The United States appears to be a conspicuous bystander. Despite the region's rapid economic growth—between 2009 and 2019, regional gross domestic product grew by \$12.5 trillion—US trade in goods with Asia has basically stagnated.¹⁷ The Obama administration embraced the TPP, with Obama himself describing it as a way to ensure that “the United States, not countries like China,” determines the standards and rules that govern trade in the 21st century.¹⁸ But the administration failed to get the agreement through

Congress before leaving office. Both Clinton and Trump ran against the TPP during the 2016 presidential campaign, to the dismay of Japan and the 10 other signatories. Three days after his inauguration, Trump unceremoniously withdrew from the deal. Over the next four years, the Trump administration held up the banner of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” but did so without a positive regional trade agenda.

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After Washington's abrupt withdrawal, Tokyo led the 10 other original signatories in adopting a renamed deal: the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Far from withering on the vine without the United States, the CPTPP has attracted the interest of other major economies inside and outside the region. The United Kingdom has already entered accession negotiations, and, sensing an opportunity created by the United States' absence, even China formally applied to join in September 2021.¹⁹

In addition, an ambitious Japan–European Union economic partnership agreement went into force in 2019, creating the world's largest open trade zone.²⁰ Last year, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership linked the economies of ASEAN members, Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, and beyond, accounting for 30 percent of global population and production. China has now become the top trading partner of most countries worldwide—including all US treaty allies in Asia and, for the first time in 2020, the European Union.²¹ Despite talk about strategic competition with China, Washington appears to be largely ignoring the strategic aspects of trade. Recent polls show high public support for trade, but the Biden administration appears just as stuck on regional trade policy as its predecessors were.²²

Forging a Broad-Based Military Presence. Over the past decade, the United States has also fallen short in efforts to forge a broad-based military presence in Asia. China’s increasingly well-resourced and rapidly modernizing military is far stronger today—in both absolute and relative terms—than it was when the pivot was announced a decade ago. China’s defense spending now exceeds that of the other major Asian powers (except the United States) combined. Although rhetoric about great-power competition has suggested urgency, Washington has not delivered in the military domain.²³ By 2019, the commander of US Indo-Pacific Command reported, “We had lost a quantitative advantage and our qualitative advantage was shrinking across several domains as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) fields higher quality systems.”²⁴

Far from a broad-based presence, challenges with the Philippine and Thai alliances mean that the United States is now more dependent on forces in Japan, South Korea, and Guam. This is of particular concern given the vulnerability of fixed bases to China’s increasingly accurate and numerous cruise missiles and conventionally tipped ballistic missiles. The US Congress has passed multiple well-intentioned bills to support a rebalance to Asia, but the devil has been in the details (e.g., the budget, or lack thereof, and how it is allocated). In short, although Obama, Trump, and Biden all promised to significantly upgrade and diversify the US presence in Asia, US actions to date leave much to be desired.

Advancing Democracy and Human Rights. Finally, efforts at progress in democracy and human rights in Asia have faced stiff headwinds the past 10 years. As Freedom House notes in its depressingly titled report, “Democracy Under Siege,” democracy has been in decline globally for over a decade, including problems in the world’s two largest democracies: India and the United States.²⁵ Coups in Myanmar and Thailand have undermined political reform efforts in those countries. And several leaders across the region have trampled on the rights of minority groups.

Meanwhile, Beijing has significantly curtailed freedoms in Hong Kong and engaged in repression in Xinjiang and elsewhere. Under Trump, US rhet-

oric and interest in these issues changed significantly. Trump repeatedly expressed contempt for democratic allies and disinterest in human rights and democracy, eventually also undermining it at home. Ten years after the pivot, Washington is not only confronting an Asia that is backsliding on democracy and human rights but also dealing with its own domestic challenges.

Revitalizing the Rebalance: Three Urgent Course Corrections

Across these six lines of action, it is hard to square the sobering realities of the past decade with Washington’s often self-congratulatory rhetoric and repeated assertions about prioritizing Asia. The Obama and Trump previous administrations claimed Asia is “the single most consequential region for America’s future.”²⁶ They promised to rebalance to the region. However, Washington often appeared unfocused and distracted, with bold talk masking underwhelming action. In short, despite the compelling vision at the heart of the pivot, successive administrations and Congresses have under-delivered. America’s rhetorical ambition in Asia has often outdistanced its strategy and execution. Unfortunately, the region is not simply waiting for Washington to get its act together.

To play its hand more effectively, Washington must recognize that many of its problems in Asia today stem significantly from US policies that have frequently been overly reactive, self-centered, and, in some prominent cases, even self-defeating. Despite some important achievements, the Trump administration did considerable damage in these regards.²⁷ But many of these problems manifested before 2017. And regardless, there is no turning back the clock. The Biden administration and Congress must work together to design, resource, implement, and champion a proactive, positive, and comprehensive regional agenda.

President Biden appears eager to reassert US leadership in Asia. Together with other major allies and partners, he has highlighted a vision for “a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion.”²⁸ He told a joint session of Congress that the United States is “in a competition with China and other countries to win the 21st Century” and that

Beijing is “deadly earnest on becoming the most significant, consequential nation in the world.”²⁹ Administration officials have committed to leverage allies and partners as “force multipliers.”³⁰ Hints at a positive and multilateral regional vision have manifested in joint statements with other democratic powers.³¹

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The Biden administration has expressed staunch support for a robust unofficial relationship with Taiwan and, together with Japan, Australia, and other democratic partners, engaged it as a valuable regional partner. Biden has also held the first leader-level Quad meetings, committing to address supply-chain concerns while providing a billion vaccine doses to South and Southeast Asia. This assertion of leadership and multilateral engagement has generally been welcomed abroad, resulting in a renewal of goodwill toward the United States.³²

Despite these hopeful signs, nearly nine months into the administration, several issues are already apparent. First, despite a lot of talk about competition with China, the Biden team has yet to publicly articulate a positive and comprehensive Asia strategy. US policy discourse remains overly and reflexively China-centric. Instead, US leaders should re-center their strategy on an affirmative vision for the broader region. Second, in an unfortunate sign of continuity, the administration has no obvious plans to champion a positive regional economic strategy, nor has Congress shown it would back one. Washington must develop a more proactive approach toward regional trade and economic integration; again, the region is not waiting around.

Lastly, diplomatic and military resources have yet to be rebalanced. Although Biden has asserted that “diplomacy is back at the center of [US] foreign policy,” he has yet to travel to the region, and

most Asian capitals still lack confirmed US ambassadors.³³ Presidential nominations and Senate confirmations have been disappointingly slow, undermining administration and congressional claims of Asia being a priority region. Meanwhile, strategic and budgetary inertia continue to frustrate efforts to reorient the US military’s presence in Asia.³⁴ In these three areas, urgent course corrections are needed to shrink the gap between talk and action.

Re-Center US Strategy on Asia. A top priority for the administration should be putting forward a positive regional vision to guide US policies toward Asia over the next four years. Too often, US leaders in the executive branch and Congress conflate China strategy—or worse, simply talking tough about competition with China—with a coherent, effective, and competitive regional strategy. As current White House officials have rightly noted, the two are not the same.³⁵ Across Washington, China strategy is too frequently discussed, conceived of, and carried out as though the bilateral relationship exists in a vacuum with only two players: Beijing and Washington. This is misguided.

The most crucial variable that will determine Asia’s future is not China; it is the collective policy decisions of the region’s other states. They, in turn, will profoundly affect Beijing’s behavior. Take trade, for example: Before the pandemic struck, more than half of China’s trade was with the United States and its democratic allies.³⁶ This provides real leverage for not just Washington but also its allies and partners. The Trump administration’s unilateral tariffs predictably failed to alter China’s economic behavior for the better, among other major problems.³⁷ This provided only the latest evidence that a more multilateral approach is required.

As such, US China strategy should flow from a regional strategy, not the other way around. Although “great-power competition” and “strategic competition” became seemingly ubiquitous buzzwords during the Trump administration, such US-China-relations-centric bumper stickers provide little guidance for leaders in Washington and even less for their counterparts in ally and partner capitals. After all, the most effective way for Washington to shape Beijing’s behavior is often through engagement with others.

Regional experts have long argued that a comprehensive strategy for Asia must logically come before any China-specific approach. Indeed, an Asia-first approach will facilitate US leadership, bolster coordination with allies and partners, and present a positive agenda that will more effectively attract an array of diverse coalitions. In contrast, narrowly focusing on US-China competition in isolation deprives the United States of its greatest strategic advantage: a network of countries that share a range of interests and, in many cases, values. The United States should seek to deepen and broaden existing multilateral cooperation on security, economic, technology, and governance issues. These four coalitions' memberships will shift in composition according to the specific issues and circumstances at hand.

Champion a Positive Regional Trade Agenda. In recent years, successive administrations and congresses have failed to lead on trade and, in a striking example of strategically incoherent action, have largely given up America's seat at the table. Allowing the United States to fall further behind on trade in the global nexus of economic growth not only hurts US competitiveness and economic interests but also leaves smaller economies more dependent on China and thus more susceptible to coercion—the very vulnerability that many in Washington profess they wish to counter.³⁸ Finally, without a major course correction, the United States' continued disengagement from regional economic integration also means it is becoming less influential in setting the high labor, environmental, and other standards that will define 21st-century trade. As Michael Green has argued, “The impact of US-led trade agreements within the United States is marginal, but the impact on regional order is enormous.”³⁹

US rhetoric and strategy must also take into account an important reality of contemporary Asia: Regional states have relied on China to drive much of their recent economic growth, which makes Beijing an unavoidable economic partner. Cooperation with Washington on security issues coexists alongside extensive economic integration with Beijing. As a result, few (if any) regional leaders support anything beyond selective economic diversification.

The abdication of US leadership on regional trade in the past five-plus years leaves a gaping hole in US Asia strategy, which the Biden team must fill urgently. As the previous administration's approach made clear, bilateral trade deals are hard to negotiate and do not themselves rewrite the region's economic rules or compel China to transform its behavior. The trade war with China was a predictable failure, based even on the misguided metrics Trump used to justify it: The US trade deficit was nearly as high at the end of Trump's term as it had been at the beginning, the costs of US tariffs largely fell on Americans, and the promised domestic manufacturing boom was not realized.⁴⁰ For all the previous administration's tough talk on China, a 12-nation TPP including the US and Japan—the world's first- and third-largest economies and China's top two national trading partners—would have placed far more pressure on Beijing to reform (in competitive self-interest) than the Trump administration's unilateral, failed trade war ever did.

Without a positive regional economic strategy, any US claims to be “back” in Asia will ring hollow.

Without a positive regional economic strategy, any US claims to be “back” in Asia will ring hollow. Although progressives have understandable concerns about some trade agreements, the apparently bipartisan willingness in recent years to sit on the sidelines is misguided and short-sighted. Washington's continued disengagement from regional economic integration means the United States is becoming less influential in setting the labor, environmental, and other standards that will define 21st-century trade. The US needs to get back in the game, not just say it's back.

Despite its imperfections, there appears to be no realistic alternative to negotiating entrance to the CPTPP. Starting negotiations on a separate multilateral trade deal outside the CPTPP is unrealistic, and a digital trade deal will be insufficient, especially in the developing countries of Southeast Asia.⁴¹ The United Kingdom, China, and Taiwan

have now formally applied to join the CPTPP, and other major economies and US trading partners, including South Korea, have expressed interest. It would be the height of irony (and strategic malpractice) if China joined the CPTPP—which President Obama described as an effort to ensure that “the United States, not countries like China,” determine the standards and rules that govern trade in the 21st century—while the United States remained aloof and disengaged.

So, it appears to be CPTPP or bust. The Obama administration appropriately made the TPP a litmus test of US economic engagement in Asia. As additional economies move to join the CPTPP, its attractiveness increases and so do the costs of the United States’ continued neglect. Beyond economic benefits and the ability to shape rules, norms, and standards, US accession would also reduce China’s geo-economic leverage over its neighbors. It could also provide an opportunity for the Biden administration and Congress to show support for Taiwan by supporting Taipei’s simultaneous accession. This, in turn, would facilitate Taiwan’s economic engagement and diversification of trade and other ties while reducing its asymmetric dependence on Beijing.⁴²

If the administration cannot sell the American people and Congress on a positive regional trade agenda, then the United States will have to accept a declining regional economic leadership role.⁴³ In the words of Mireya Solís, “China’s confidence in seeking CPTPP membership . . . speaks volumes to America’s marginalization. . . . The US has become a shadow to the center of action in regional economic integration.”⁴⁴ The Biden team must rise to the challenge or come to terms with a sharply diminished role in Asia.

Rebalance Resources, Finally. The Biden team will need to not only articulate a coherent and compelling Asia strategy but also resource it appropriately. From its opening weeks, the administration appointed many capable Asia experts to senior positions throughout the government—a clear testament to its seriousness about the region. Yet, vision is only a first step. In recent years, Washington has often been “long on attitude but short on regional strategy,” as Evan Feigenbaum has written.⁴⁵ To rectify this oversight, the administration

must adjust resourcing and prioritization, starting with diplomatic and military engagement in Asia.

How can Washington demonstrate to regional leaders and publics that the United States is not only “back” but also determined to make and keep credible economic and strategic commitments for good? A top diplomatic priority should be the prompt nomination and confirmation of ambassadors to all posts in the region. This should include a qualified ambassador to ASEAN—a key post left empty for the entirety of the Trump administration. Other diplomatic activity will also be important. This summer witnessed several high-level visits, including by Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin—a very welcome development. A visit from Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and additional and regular cabinet-level visits to other key regional partners (e.g., Indonesia and Malaysia)—including high-level multilateral meetings—should also be a priority. But these alone are insufficient.

A tour through the region by President Biden himself is also crucial, because one of Washington’s most valuable and visible resources is the president’s time and energy. Biden should travel to Asia this fall or winter and give a high-profile speech setting out US objectives and committing real resources to accomplish those ends. Ideally, such a speech would be delivered in Indonesia, which is often overlooked despite its immense importance. Such a speech could accompany stopovers and summitry in countries that are key treaty allies and with ASEAN leaders. It should also be paired with a complementary speech in the United States that makes the case to the American people (and Congress) that a far more proactive US posture in Asia—including a positive trade agenda—is urgently needed.

These measures would send an unambiguous signal that Asia is a top foreign policy priority and that Washington is focused on bringing benefits to the larger region—and not just as a means for competing with China. Although the administration’s task is made more difficult by the pandemic, Biden’s trip to Europe this past June shows that in-person summits are still possible when judged a priority. Furthermore, to visit Europe but not Asia during a new administration’s first year would send an unfortunate, even if unintended, signal

about priorities. The aforementioned steps would also help rectify the previous administration's neglect of much of Southeast Asia and provide grist for arguments that US diplomacy in Asia is truly back and backed by resources to sustain it.

While surging diplomatic engagement throughout Asia is an urgent task, the administration must also work with Congress to reverse the tide of military balance shifting against the United States and its allies and partners. This is not only about budgets but also how the money they allocate is spent. US leaders should look to bolster the US military posture toward Asia, which will necessitate adjustments elsewhere. The Pentagon should work with key allies to adopt a deterrence-by-denial strategy, which recognizes that the United States and its allies are status quo powers in Asia and that denial systems are growing increasingly capable relative to existing power-projection platforms.

Washington and its allies should also prioritize deterring aggression through a more resilient and diversified posture. The Biden team should continue to emphasize the importance of key treaty alliances and security partnerships, better defend forces in Guam, capitalize on recent deepening cooperation with Australia and Japan, build on the recent renewal of the Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines to explore possible expanded access, and build on the Trump administration's successes in the Pacific Islands, particularly its efforts to start negotiations on the Compacts of Free Association, which could ultimately expand US access in the region.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon will have to invest in the types of capabilities that are most needed to bolster deterrence in a rapidly changing threat environment, particularly long-range conventional missiles, submarines, and stealthy long-range strike platforms. Rapid adjustments are needed, as the deterrence challenge is not a distant, future concern. It is here already.

No Time to Waste

Ten years ago, the Obama administration pledged that the United States would pivot to Asia. It rightly identified the region as the “key driver of global politics,” called the US role “irreplaceable,” and articulated a compelling vision for leadership along six lines of action.⁴⁶ The Trump administration repeatedly spoke of the Indo-Pacific as its priority theater and competition with China as a defining foreign policy challenge. Yet the record of the past decade reveals a recurring gap between rhetoric and action.

Although circumstances have improved significantly under Biden, after nine months, warning signs are emerging. Notwithstanding the efforts of the administration's Asia team, the United States is not back in the region—at least not yet. As the new administration and Congress look to learn from US missteps over the past decade, three top priorities should be: (1) re-centering US strategy on Asia, rather than on China; (2) embracing a positive regional economic agenda; and (3) significantly enhancing diplomatic and military resources to prioritize the region.

Despite America's recent struggles, the importance of Asia to US interests and the core strategic logic of the pivot have only become clearer over the past decade. In addition to the rapidly growing region's inherent economic and strategic importance, Asia is the central stage of a competition that will define key standards, rules, and norms of regional and global geopolitics and geo-economics for decades to come. This competition is not some far-off, future challenge. It is already here.

The fact that much of what ails US Asia strategy is homegrown means that it is also fixable, with sufficient bipartisan action in Washington. US leaders must humbly reflect on the shortcomings of past efforts and invest in a comprehensive agenda focused on positively shaping the region's future. In the months and years ahead, the administration and Congress will have to act far more proactively, affirmatively, and multilaterally to ensure that this will truly be America's Pacific century.

About the Authors

Zack Cooper is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He also teaches at Princeton University, codirects the Alliance for Securing Democracy, and cohosts the *Net Assessment* podcast. He previously served in the Pentagon and White House.

Adam P. Liff is associate professor of East Asian international relations at Indiana University's Hamilton Lugar School of Global & International Studies. He is also a nonresident senior fellow at the nonpartisan Brookings Institution's Center for East Asia Policy Studies.

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