



THE DECLINE OF UNITED STATES GLOBAL POWER

A Discourse Analysis of China's rise under the
Obama administration

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Introduction

“One of the largest economies now in the world. And, so it is to be expected that they will want a bigger seat at the table, when it comes to international affairs.”¹

President Barack Obama said this about China in an interview with CNN on 2 September 2016. Obama acknowledges the fact that China is on the rise in the world. It is becoming a global power and it is challenging the hegemony of the United States. Still, Obama perceived China as a strategic partner. This is in contrary to his predecessor President George W. Bush, who treated China, especially in his first term, as a competitor to the global power of the US.² The contradiction in foreign policies is remarkable, because China became more assertive in its foreign policy during the Obama administration. China’s assertiveness came forth from the 2008 financial crisis. The US entered a recession and had to cut its spending. China on the other hand, quickly overcame the financial crisis and was able to expand its economic influence.³ The growth of China’s economy also sparked its military modernization, which led the rising power to begin expanding its territories along its eastern and southern borders. It did so by coercing and pressuring its neighboring countries to let them acknowledge its territorial claims.⁴

Where President Bush might have reacted to this assertive policy by setting a hard line to China. Obama reacted with a more welcoming gesture, his “Pivot to Asia” policy. The “pivot” tried to maintain close arrangements with China in order to uphold the regional stability.⁵ Furthermore, the “pivot” was a way to strengthen the already significant role of the US in the Asian region. The Obama administration acknowledged the fact that China was on the rise and that in order to sustain US’ dominance, a more intensified relationship with the rising power was needed.⁶

¹ President Barack Obama, ‘Pres. Obama on China: More Power Means More Responsibility’, *CNN* 2 September 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4O17L5TvrSk> (19-11-2017).

² John W. Dietrich, *The George W. Bush Foreign Policy Reader: Presidential Speeches with Commentary* (New York 2015), 212.

³ Kyung Suk Lee & Kye Young Lee, ‘US Freedom of Navigation Operations in South China Sea: An Ongoing Riddle between the United States and China’, *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* Vol. 29, No. 3 (2017), 456.

⁴ Robert Sutter, ‘The United States in Asia: Durable Leadership’, in: David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda, *International Relations of Asia* (Plymouth 2014), 94.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 94-95.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 99-100.

The rise of China meant that there was a change going on in the world. After the Cold War, the rivalling superpower, the Soviet Union, fell from its status in the world. The US emerged as the only remaining superpower, changing the world from a bipolar to an unipolar one. This change points to the process of global shift, an IR concept in which a rising state challenges the dominance of a hegemonic state.⁷ The US was the only state in the world that could exercise influence in culture, economics, politics and military.⁸ It also acted like it was the only remaining superpower, taking the lead on keeping balance in the world. The US intervened in several conflicts, like Kuwait in 1991 and Somalia in 1993. Kuwait was considered as a military success, but in the end it was a political failure. Somalia was considered as an overall failure.⁹ Mainly the last interventions proved to the world that the almighty US did not seem that almighty anymore.

Nevertheless, the US kept investing in its defense budget, to make sure it remained to have the most powerful military in the world. Over the last couple of years the power of rising nations, like China, has grown as well. No nation is as dominant as the US is, as the US has still the biggest economy and is still spending the most money on its military. But even if the US' absolute military and economic power is still increasing, it does not mean it matches the high rate of increase of other nations. Therefore, relative to the power of other nations, the US' power can show decline. China is one of these fast rising nations. China's rise in power challenged the US position in the world. In 2014, China even exceeded the US in gross domestic product (GDP) of the world. The GDP is a monetary measurement of a country's economic health by measuring the value of all domestic produced products and services. China's GDP was 17 percent of the world's GDP, while the US' was 16 percent.¹⁰ So, the US is losing its unipolar position in the world. As the most dominant actor, that is hard to acknowledge. Most of the government officials were not ready to acknowledge the fact that

⁷ Salvador Santino F. Regilme & Henrik S. Hartmann, 'Global Shift', in: Romaniuk S., Thapa M., Marton P. (eds), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Global Security Studies* November 2019 https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/80828/2019_Global_Shift_REGILME_HARTMANN.pdf?sequence=1 (12-12-2019).

⁸ G. John Ikenberry, 'Introduction: Power, Order, and Change in World Politics', in: G. John Ikenberry, *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics* (New Jersey 2014), 1.

⁹ Kofi Annan, *Interventions: A Life of War and Peace* (London 2012), 318-319; Patrick Pitts, 'U.S. Foreign Policy Failures in Iraq', *E-International Relations* 4 April 2013 <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/04/04/u-s-foreign-policy-failures-in-iraq/> (28-1-2018); Richard W. Stewart, *The United States Army in Somalia, 1992-1994* (2003), 23-26.

¹⁰ International Monetary Fund, 'World Economic Outlook', *IMF Database* April 2014, 19-40.

their dominance was declining. President Obama deviated in this, he did recognize the changing powers in the world.¹¹ It is therefore interesting to research how this change was seen within the US government. This leads to the following research question: **did the Obama administration produce a discourse on United States relative power decline regarding China's rise and to what extent was that discourse produced?**

This study will argue that there is a discourse on relative decline of US' power in light of the rapid rise of China's power. China is on its way to take over the leadership of the international order the US has built after WWII. To prevent this from happening, the Obama administration tried to make China a responsible stakeholder in the global system. This way, the US and China could take on global issues together. That is a change from the previous perception of the US being the strongest superpower that could solve global issues on its own. During the Obama administration, the US was fearing it would have to surrender influence to China, unless the Chinese would become a responsible stakeholder within the US-led global system.

To build this argument, this study will be constructed along four events that occurred during the eight years of Obama's presidency. These case studies show a change in the discourse of the Obama administration towards China's rise as a global power. The discourse will be analyzed by examining the statements from different officials within the Obama administration that were done connecting to the chosen case studies. This will be elaborated more in the Theory and Methods section.

In order to analyze the above mentioned research puzzle, a political discourse analysis (PDA) will be used. Political discourse is identified by its actors or authors, in this case politicians. It is about what politicians or their institutions say or write and what kind of political functions and implications these statements have.¹² PDA views a political discourse as "a form of argumentation," argumentation for particular behavior and policy choices.¹³ Thus, the use of a PDA will help to solve the research puzzle, as the goal of this study is to

¹¹ Cheng Li, 'Assessing U.S.-China relations under the Obama administration', *Brookings Institution* 30 August 2016 <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/assessing-u-s-china-relations-under-the-obama-administration/> (28-1-2018); Thomas J. Christensen, 'Obama and Asia: Confronting the China Challenge', *Foreign Affairs* September/October 2015 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/obama-and-asia> (28-1-2018).

¹² Teun A. van Dijk, 'What is Political Discourse Analysis?', *Political Linguistics* No. 11 (1997), 12-15.

¹³ Isabella Fairclough and Norman Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis: A method for advanced students* (New York 2012), 1-2.

analyze the statements of government officials from the Obama administration. The use of a PDA will also contribute to the interpretation of these statements and what implication they had for the US foreign policy on China.

Literature review

This study will be a discourse analysis of the Obama administration and its policy towards China. But what is a discourse analysis exactly? Gillian Brown and George Yule have argued that a discourse analysis is essentially “the analysis of language in use”.¹⁴ So, to simplify, a discourse analysis serves to investigate for what ends the language is used. What is the underlying meaning of language used? Language is foremost used as a means of communication. Words are chosen to deliver a message or a thought. But words can also be used to let someone interpreter the meaning of a thought. This does not have to be what is actually meant by the person who said it. It is the work of a discourse analytic to investigate what is actually meant.

Discourse analytics differ from other linguists in a way that linguists focus on the formal properties of a language.¹⁵ This means that linguists analyze how things are written, while discourse analytics analyze on what is being said. The latter concentrates its attention on the meaning of the language that is used. What can be discovered from reading between the lines? This stresses the importance of the use of discourse analysis in the production of government statements. Government statements are not always the accurate reflection of the thoughts about a subject within the government. However, from the language those governments statements are made, the true meaning of the statements can be identified.

The importance for discourse analysis as a study is supported by Jennifer Milliken. She argued that discourse scholarship is a study in progress, and although it has its flaws, it deserves to be further progressed.¹⁶ Milliken is opposed to the discourse scholars who try to challenge the mainstream science of International Relations. According to her, discourse

¹⁴ Gillian Brown and George Yule, *Discourse Analysis* (New York 1983), 1.

¹⁵ Ibidem, 1.

¹⁶ Jennifer Milliken, ‘The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods’, *European Journal of International Relations* Vol. 5, No. 2 (1999), 225-254.

scholars are focused too much on the methodology of the science. Still, she does acknowledge the fact that discourse analysis can be fairly useful to understand the different views within the International Relations.¹⁷

One of the views within International Relations is realism. This school of thought is based on the understanding that the world is ruled by power politics.¹⁸ There is a current narrative about the changing of global power, whereas China is on the rise and the US is declining. Joseph Nye argued that power is the ability to have an effect on others to produce a beneficial outcome. This can be done through three things. The first way of using power is by threatening or coercing an opponent, in other words using “the stick”. Secondly, power can be used through payments, which is also called “the carrot”. Lastly, there is soft power, which is the ability to get others to do what you want without using payment or coercion.¹⁹ There are different spheres where power can be used. States can have influence in terms of economic power, or in terms of military power. Therefore, Nye believes that the current narrative on the global power shift is too one-dimensional. China can surpass the US in terms of economic power, but this will be only in total economic size, not in terms of capita per income.²⁰ People in the US have a higher average income than in China, because China still has many underdeveloped areas. The US will then remain above China in its economic power. Besides, the US still has greater military power than China, as well as more political influence.

In contrary to Nye, James F. Hoge believes that the growing economic power of Asia means that the military and political power is increasing as well.²¹ China’s economy is growing with nine percent each year. This increase will eventually translate into the strengthening of its military. China can improve its military expenses in ways it can surpass the US, if the country’s economy will keep growing. More money also means more political power, China can use payments to affect others in producing a beneficial outcome. It can maneuver itself to a position in the world where it can challenge the US. The change has

¹⁷ Ibidem, 225-254.

¹⁸ Duncan Bell, ‘Political Realism and International Relations’, *Philosophy Compass* Vol. 12, No. 2 (2017), 1-2.

¹⁹ Joseph Nye, ‘Lecture on Global Power Shifts’, *TEDTalks* July 2010

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1086&v=796LfXwzIUk (20-12-2017).

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ James F. Hoge Jr., ‘A Global Power Shift in the Making: Is the United States Ready?’, *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 83, No. 4 (2004), 2-3.

already begun, because in 2015 China was already the second largest spender in military budget. China spent that year over 200 billion dollars on its military and is looking to increase its spending in 2017 with 7 percent. Despite this fact, the US is still way ahead of any country, with spending almost 600 billion dollars on its military.²² So, China will not be surpassing the US in the near future.

Moreover, Hoge argues that the US is not prepared for this power shift. The US is perceiving the rise of China as the emergence of a new strategic competitor.²³ According to Hoge, this is not the way the US has to deal with China. If China will challenge the power of the US, the US has to embrace it as a partner.²⁴ Cooperation between the two powers will benefit the entire world. If they would cooperate in a global economic governance, the entire world could profit from their economic advantages.

All these arguments suggest the global shift is near. China's rise is undeniable, but is the US really declining? Ian Clark argues that since the 1960s the US compounded for 23 till 36 percent of the global GDP. Besides that, the US dollar held 65 percent of the world's currency reserve.²⁵ This edge is not to be overcome in the next few decades, so the US will still be a defining state in global power. It is also the reason most US government officials will not acknowledge the fact that they are declining. And according to Clark's argumentation, the US is still on the top level.

Salvador Santino Regilme Jr. contradicts that the US is still on top by stating US decline has set in. The US decline is visible as it is not able anymore to behave as the dominant actor in the international system.²⁶ Although the US still has an enormous amount of influence, its ability to dominate is diminishing. The reason for its demise comes from the contradictions of neoliberalism within the "domestic and transnational foundations" of US

²² BBC News, 'China to increase military spending by 7% in 2017', 4 March 2017 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-39165080> (21-12-2017); Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 'Military Expenditure Database 1949-2016' <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Milex-local-currency.pdf> (28-1-2018).

²³ Evelyn Goh, 'Hierarchy and the role of the United States in the East Asian security order', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* Vol. 8, No. 3 (2008), 353-355.

²⁴ Hoge, 'Global Power Shift', 4-5.

²⁵ Ian Clark, 'China and the United States: a succession of hegemonies', *International Affairs* Vol. 87, No. 1 (2011), 19.

²⁶ Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr., 'The decline of American power and Donald Trump: Reflections on human rights, neoliberalism, and the world order', *Geoforum* Vol. 102 (2019), 158.

power.²⁷ Meaning internal social conflicts within the US threaten the legitimacy of its power.²⁸

Since the end of World War II, the US gained much influence in Asia. Asian nations wanted to uphold good relations with the US, because it had the biggest military, largest economy and it was the biggest trading partner in the region.²⁹ The US focused on providing aid and trade to the countries there, through which it gained support for its policies. But with China's rise, the US had to share its influence and dominating position in the region.³⁰ Other Asian nations recognized this change and sought to distance itself from the US in order to ensure their own interests.³¹ China began to intensify its trade with South Korea and Japan, which were the largest trading partners of the US in Asia. This sharing of influence changed the balance of power in the region. The economic influence of the US gave it coercive power over South Korea and Japan to embrace US policies.³² With China as the newly biggest trading partner, the two nations became more independent from the US and more dependent on China. The US remained an important player nonetheless, but it had to share its dominating position with China, which affected the US-Asia relations.

It was however not a defined outcome China would challenge or replace the US as leader of the international system. According to Salvador Santino Regilme Jr. and James Parisot, China's rise does not necessarily have to lead to conflict among the two powers.³³ That the two powers could co-exist was also an important perception of the foreign policy of the Obama administration. The administration attempted to persuade China to cooperate instead of challenging each other.

The perception within the US on its global role has changed over the years. After the fall of the SU, there was uncertainty within the nation on how to describe the new world

²⁷ Ibidem, 159.

²⁸ Ibidem, 159.

²⁹ Sutter, 'The United States in Asia', 99.

³⁰ Jason T. Shaplen and James Laney, 'Washington's Eastern Sunset: The Decline of U.S. Power in Northeast Asia', *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 86, No. 6 (2007), 82-84.

³¹ Sutter, 'The United States in Asia', 99; Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War Asia* (New York 2013), 10-12.

³² Shaplen and Laney, 'Washington's Eastern Sunset', 82-84.

³³ Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr. and James Parisot, 'Conclusion: The future of global cooperation and conflict', in: Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr. and James Parisot, *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers: Cooperation or Conflict* (London 2017), 218.

order. While in nations, like France, the world was described as a multipolarity, in which more than two states have equal influence in several power categories. Authors in the US however, began to describe the world as a unipolarity, in which the US was the hegemonic power.³⁴ This was later acknowledged by more authors, because the US remained as the only superpower. The US also perceived itself as the hegemonic power, it acted like it was. Goedele de Keersmaecker stated that both the Bush and Obama administrations believed they had a dominant position in the world, but that the Bush administration would have never acknowledged a change of polarity in the world, while Obama did point out that the powers in the world were shifting.³⁵ He did however embrace the fact that the US had a leadership role in the world to fulfill.

According to G. John Ikenberry, that leadership role was the central point of the Obama administration's foreign policy agenda. He argued the administration made the reinstatement of American liberal hegemonic leadership its premier focus.³⁶ This is in line with Robert Sutter's argument. He believes that with the "pivot", the Obama administration deepened their diplomatic engagement with Asia. The US expanded its role as dominating player in Asia, in order to reassure its allies that it was going to deal with the rising assertiveness of China. The policy was a statement that the US was here to stay as dominating power.³⁷ The Obama administration embraced China's rise, but it tried to make sure that it would not be pushed back out of its leading position. That is also what Michael Cox argued on the US power decline. He stated the US position in the world was changing less than many other scholars suggested.³⁸

David Shambaugh has another insight on the role and dominance of the US. He has argued that some Chinese analysts believed that the transition from the Bush administration to the Obama administration had announced the beginning of American decline.³⁹ In their

³⁴ Goedele de Keersmaecker, *Polarity, Balance of Power and International Relations Theory: Post-Cold War and the 19th Century Compared* (Cham 2017), 203-204.

³⁵ De Keersmaecker, *Polarity*, 204-205.

³⁶ G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: the Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (New Jersey 2011), 4.

³⁷ Sutter, 'The United States in Asia', 99-101.

³⁸ Michael Cox, 'Power Shifts, Economic Change and the Decline of the West?', *International Relations* Vol. 26, No. 4 (2012), 372.

³⁹ David Shambaugh, 'Chinese thinking about world order', in: Xiaoming Huang and Robert G. Patman, *China and the International System: Becoming a World Power* (New York 2013), 26-27.

eyes, Bush showed off American power by predominating in international politics, while Obama acted more low-profile.

By critically reviewing these arguments, it is becoming clear that not all scholars are recognizing a decline for the US. All are agreeing on the fact that China is on the rise, but some argue that this does not necessarily mean that the US will be surpassed. The US still has lots of political power and it still has by far the largest military in the world. However, China is on the pace to surpass the US in economic power. The US will have to share its leadership role with China. And that is precisely what President Obama stated in his interview, he does recognize this change in leadership role. However, it is still not clear how other administration's officials saw the future role of the US. This research will add to this gap of information. It will search for the discourse of the Obama administration on US power decline and it will make clear how the administration's officials perceived the decline.

Theory and Methods

In order to answer the question on whether there was a discourse within the Obama administration on US global power decline, this research will try to analyze what the important foreign policy actors of the Obama administration stated about China's rise to power. The actors that will be used in the analysis, were Chinese foreign policy staffers of the White House and the heads of the Department of State (DoS), Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Treasury (DT). Together they shape the US foreign policy on China. To have a stricter definition of the discourse of the Obama administration, this thesis will focus on four events spread over the eight years of the administration. Two events will be from the first term of President Obama and two incidents will be from the second term. This way the thesis will have an overview of the discourse on US global power decline throughout the entire tenure of President Obama and it will show how there is a change in the discourse over the years.

The discourse will be analyzed through a theoretical framework. Within the realist theory there is a dominant inclination about seeing order in terms of anarchy. International order arises from states competing for security, trying to balance a decentralized state

system. The system is not ruled by one state.⁴⁰ Robert Gilpin's *War and Change in Politics* has a different perspective. He argues that order is created and lead by powerful states. In that perspective, powerful states do rule the system. Those powerful states have risen up after war willing to change interstate relations according to their own rules.⁴¹ That is what happened with the US after WWII. The international rules-based system it created, is the system we now live in. The same system in which China is rising in power and influence and is challenging the US leadership in the process.

According to Gilpin, the shift from one powerful state to another rising state is characterized by a hegemonic war.⁴² This brings us to the hegemonic stability theory (HST), an international relations theory that points out that an international system lead by a hegemon is more stable than other types of systems.⁴³ When a hegemon loses power, the system will crumble. The HST can be used to clarify the rise of new powers or it can help explain what shape the next international system will take by analyzing the relation between a rising power and a declining power.⁴⁴

In the case of this thesis, the rising power is China and the declining power is the US. China is challenging the hegemony of the US. The HST will help to understand if there is a discourse on US power decline within the Obama administration. In other words, is China aiming at a global power shift at the expense of the US?

In the meaning of global power shift, the word power stands out. What does power mean? How can power be measured? From the literature review it became clear that China's rise was mostly through its expanding economy. China will surpass the US as the largest economy of the world in a few decades. Until then, the US will remain to have a leadership role in the world. Besides, the US still has the largest military expenses and it will not be easily surpassed as the most powerful country in the world military wise. Economic and military power remain to be the most discussed spheres of influence, in which the global

⁴⁰ Ikenberry, 'Power', 3.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 3-5.

⁴² Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York 1981), 7-10.

⁴³ Joshua S. Goldstein, *International Relations* (New York 2005), 107.

⁴⁴ Luke M. Herrington, 'Why the Rise of China will not lead to Global Hegemony', *E-International Relations Students* 15 July 2011 <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/15/why-the-precarious-rise-of-china-will-not-lead-to-global-hegemony/> (24-04-2019).

power of these countries is explained. And as Secretary Clinton has argued in her *Foreign Policy* document in 2011: “the US will bring together in Asia its political, military and economic power.”⁴⁵ This research will therefore focus on the **1) economic** and **2) military power** discourse, but it will also discuss how economic and military power can be converted to **3) political power**. This will be the most important power to discuss, because it has the greatest influence on someone’s leadership role in the world. To what extent can China use its political power to get things done? Through these forms of power, a discourse analysis will be used to understand what the Obama administration has produced on the global power shift. An important note has to be added, since a discourse analysis is not an absolute objective method. This means the outcome is never fixed and it is always open to interpretation.

The statements will be linked to what in literature is discussed as a global power shift. The discourse will be analyzed by examining speeches and public statements on the rise of China and the decline of US global power. These speeches and statements will be consulted through the databank of the White House archives,⁴⁶ the State Department archives,⁴⁷ the Department of Treasury archives⁴⁸ and the Department of Defense archives.⁴⁹ The archives have written outlines of the speeches done by their respective staff members. While it is likely that the US government did not produce a discourse on the specific words “US power decline”, this research will therefore try to analyze what kind of language is used to address the issue.

Events

The four events that this thesis will be centered on, were chosen to indicate possible changes in the administration’s discourse. The events are suitable, because they represent moments when the US foreign policy changed course. Why the foreign policy exactly

⁴⁵ Hillary Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, *Foreign Policy* 11 October 2011 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/> (22-03-2019).

⁴⁶ The White House archives <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

⁴⁷ The State Department archives <https://2009-2017.state.gov//index.htm>.

⁴⁸ The Department of Treasury archives <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sb-programs/Pages/ssbci-archives.aspx>.

⁴⁹ The Department of Defense archives <https://archive.defense.gov/>.

changed, will help understand the produced discourse. These four cases contribute to the research as they focus the collected data on certain moments, which will lead to more decisive evidence.⁵⁰ The cases ensure a more defined discourse and limit the amount of data to certain periods during the course of the Obama administration.

According to Stephen van Evera, there are a number of criteria for case selection. First, the researcher should choose a case which serves the purpose of their research and has the most data to test the theory that is proposed.⁵¹ Second, the selected cases should favor strong tests.⁵² In light of those criteria, the following cases are chosen:

- The first US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in April 2009, that was being held with the idea of strengthening the US-China partnership. It was a major breakthrough in the US-China cooperation. It also shows the first attempts of the Obama administration to make China a responsible player. The case outlines the administration's stance towards China in the beginning of the tenure. It is also a moment during Obama's presidency where many public statements have been done.
- President Obama introducing the "Pivot to Asia" strategy in a speech to the Australian parliament in November 2011. The "pivot" became the collective term of the change of US foreign policy from the Middle Eastern focus towards a China/Asia focus. This case shows the changing stance of the administration towards a stronger China. It is also a period of time which has produced lots of data for the discourse analysis.
- Xi Jinping assuming office on March 14, 2013. The new president in China had a different view on foreign policy than his predecessors. It also meant a change in how the US had to interact with China. The two heads of state met for a total of 11 times. The case is an important moment in the US-China relations to discuss.
- Xi Jinping visits the US from September 22 to 28, 2015. It was a visit during a time of high tensions between the US and China. The case forms a turning-

⁵⁰ Stephen van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (New York 2017), 53-55.

⁵¹ Ibidem, 78.

⁵² Ibidem, 78-79.

point in US-China relations. The period that is under investigation is also one with many public statements about the status of the US-China relations.

Actors

The focus will be on three types of power usage in the US foreign policy: economic, military and political power. These types of power will each represent a department of the Obama administration. Firstly, the economic part will be represented by the US Department of Treasury. Secondly, the military part will be represented by the US Department of Defense. And finally, the political part will be represented by the US Department of State. From each department several people will be chosen as principal actors in the US foreign policy towards China. The actors that are important in this demarcated frame are outlined as followed:

The White House:

- Barack Obama, as the President he is the highest executive in US foreign policy and the most important person to point out.
- Joe Biden is the second man behind the President and an important actor in the dialogues with China.
- Thomas Donilon (2011-2013), as a member of the National Security Council (NSC) the NSA has an important role in the decision-making of the President on national security, foreign policy affairs and military matters. The NSA has an advising role to the President and is a person standing close to the President on helping him to formulate decisions. The NSA will be a focal point in this thesis, since the position is always a part of the process to shape foreign policy matters.
- Susan Rice: (2013-2017), the NSA during Obama's second term.
- Ben Rhodes: Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications (2009-2017), he was portrayed as the second mind behind Obama and he was responsible for the formulation of Obama's speeches. Rhodes is responsible for the formulation of the statements of the President and therefore he plays a significant role in the political discourse of the Obama administration.

Department of State:

- Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State in Obama's first term (2009-2013). She was one of the two co-chairs in the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue and one of the

important proponents of the “Pivot to Asia” strategy. The Secretary of State is the most important position for the foreign policy of the US and thus a person that has to be discussed in this thesis.

- John Kerry, the Secretary of State in Obama’s second term (2013-2017) and an important person in the third and fourth incidents.
- Daniel R. Russel: Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs (2013-2017) and a major figure in the “Pivot to Asia” strategy.

Department of Treasury:

- Timothy Geithner, the Secretary of Treasury during Obama’s first term (2009-2013). He was the other co-chair in the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue.
- Jack Lew, the Secretary of Treasury during Obama’s second term (2013-2017).

Department of Defense:

- Robert Gates (2006-2011), the Secretary of Defense during the First US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue.
- Leon Panetta (2011-2013), the Secretary of Defense during the introduction of the “Pivot to Asia” strategy.
- Chuck Hagel (2013-2015), the Secretary of Defense when President Xi Jinping assumed office.
- Ash Carter (2015-2017), the Secretary of Defense when President Xi Jinping visited the US in 2015.

Table of actors involved with US foreign policy towards China in the first term of the Obama administration

	First US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, April 2009	The “Pivot to Asia” strategy introduced, October 2011
President Barack Obama (2009-2017)	X	X
Vice president Joe Biden (2009-2017)	X	
Daniel R. Russel, director for East Asian Affairs on the National Security Council (2009-2013)		X
Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications (2009-2017)		X
Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State (2009-2013)	X	X
Timothy Geithner, Secretary of Treasury (2009-2013)	X	X
Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense (2006-2011)	X	
Leon Panetta, Secretary of Defense (2011-2013)		X

Table of actors involved with US foreign policy towards China in the second term of the Obama administration

	Xi Jinping assuming office on March 14, 2013	State visit of President Xi Jinping to the US, September 22 to 28, 2015
President Barack Obama (2009-2017)	X	X
Vice president Joe Biden (2009-2017)	X	X
Thomas E. Donilon, National Security Advisor (2011-2013)	X	
Susan Rice, National Security Advisor (2013-2017)		X
Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications (2009-2017)		X
John Kerry, Secretary of State (2013-2017)	X	X
Daniel R. Russel, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs (2013-2017)		X
Jack Lew, Secretary of Treasury (2013-2017)	X	X
Chuck Hagel, Secretary of Defense (2013-2015)	X	
Ash Carter, Secretary of Defense (2015-2017)		X

1. The US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue

The first US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) took place on July 27 and 28, 2009 in Washington DC.⁵³ It was meant as a high-level bilateral forum to address a wide range of bilateral, regional and global challenges and issues.⁵⁴ The S&ED replaced the Bush administration's Senior Dialogue and Strategic Economic Dialogue. The Obama administration combined the security and economic tracks, so that both governments could take on overlapping issues, like climate change and energy security, more effectively.⁵⁵ The first dialogue took place on October 27 and 28, 2009 in Washington DC and it would be co-chaired by secretaries Clinton and Geithner on the US side and State Councilor Dai Bingguo and Vice Premier Wang Qishan on the Chinese side.

1.1 The White House

President Obama opened the first S&ED with warming words for both nation's representatives that were present at the event. He spoke about the changes the world had undergone in the last one hundred years. This dialogue marked the start of a new century with new challenges and crises. The 21st century would be shaped "by the relationship between the US and China."⁵⁶ Obama underlined the importance of this bilateral relationship. In his opinion, both states have a responsibility to face global challenges together.⁵⁷ An opinion also shared by dr. Mao Weizhun, a Chinese associate professor International Politics at Nanjing university. He also believes China should take on more

⁵³ US Department of State, 'U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue to be Held July 27-28, 2009 in Washington, D.C.', *US Department of State Archives* 13 July 2009 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/july/125985.htm> (14-10-2019).

⁵⁴ US Department of Treasury, 'Fact Sheet: U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue' <http://treasury.gov/initiatives/Documents/SEDfactsheet09.pdf> (31-10-2019); Charles Freeman and Bonnie S. Glaser, 'The U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue', *Center for Strategic and International Studies* 9 May 2011 <http://csis.org/analysis/us-china-strategic-and-economic-dialogue> (31-10-2019).

⁵⁵ Freeman and Glaser, 'The U.S.-China' <http://csis.org/analysis/us-china-strategic-and-economic-dialogue> (31-10-2019).

⁵⁶ President Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President at the U.S./China Strategic and Economic Dialogue', *The White House Archives* 27 July 2009 <http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-uschina-strategic-and-economic-dialogue> (24-10-2019).

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

international responsibility, so it can expand its status in the current international structure.⁵⁸

Obama was persistent in welcoming China to accept a bigger role in the international system. To ensure the Chinese government to take on its responsibility as a global power, Obama offered to modify the international institutions, built by western nations including the US, so China could take on this greater role.⁵⁹ It would be beneficial for China to further integrate itself in the American-led international order, since the integration helped bring economic development to China and further integration would only help to increase its development.⁶⁰ And a prosperous China would also be beneficial for the US, as the state is well integrated in the world economy and it is a huge market for American firms.⁶¹

By treating the rising state as a strategic partner, the US is presenting itself as a cooperative actor to the outside. However, the country is still taking actions to contest China's influence.⁶² That does not mean that Obama's intentions to cooperate and coexist with China are false. Obama tries to encourage the rise of China, because he believes it is in their mutual benefit. At the same time, he is encouraging China to rise within the boundaries of international rules and regulations. Not to increase its wealth and influence, while putting other countries in a disadvantage.

A foreign policy that is in large contrast with the way the current US administration is practicing foreign policy.⁶³ In January 2018, President Trump made remarks at the World Economic Forum in Davos on China. "The US will no longer turn a blind eye to unfair economic practices including massive intellectual property theft, industrial subsidies and

⁵⁸ Mao Weizhun, 'Debating China's International Responsibility', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* Vol. 10, No. 2 (2017), 209.

⁵⁹ Obama, 'Remarks at the U.S./China' <http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-uschina-strategic-and-economic-dialogue> (24-10-2019).

⁶⁰ Dennyza Gabiella, 'How Does Neo-liberalism Explain the Likelihood of China's Threat towards United States' Global Hegemony in the 21st Century?', *Journal of ASEAN Studies* Vol. 4, No. 1 (2016), 26 (20-33).

⁶¹ Caroline Atkinson, 'The Obama Era of US-China Relations', *SupChina Podcast* 9 February 2019 <https://supchina.com/podcast/the-obama-era-of-u-s-china-economic-relations/> (28-10-2019).

⁶² Ford, 'Pivot Biggest Mistake' <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-pivot-to-asia-was-obamas-biggest-mistake/> (21-5-2019).

⁶³ Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich, 'Does Donald Trump have a grand strategy?', *International Affairs* Vol. 93, No. 5 (2017), 1015-1021.

pervasive state-led economic planning.”⁶⁴ President Trump points out the aggressive behavior of China in this sentence. His words are more robust towards China’s behavior. They do not at all show an incentive of attraction.

These differences of chosen language in speeches between Trump and Obama indicate a difference in foreign policy between the Trump administration and the Obama administration. It does not indicate whether the administrations acknowledge a decline in power or a power shift of some sort. The differences in foreign policy do point to the Obama administration perceiving China more as a strategic partner, while the Trump administration perceives China as a strategic competitor.⁶⁵ This does not mean that the Obama administration was not aware of any dangers China posed to the US.⁶⁶ In the National Security Strategies (NSS) of the Obama administration, there is a clear awareness of the aggressive competitiveness of China.⁶⁷ The Obama administration chose not to take in a hard stance against the Chinese, in contrast to the Trump administration. Some scholars perceive this change in position is a process by President Trump to reinforce American leadership.⁶⁸ The Obama administration is by some criticized to have neglected in acting robustly in its foreign policy.⁶⁹ This attitude was influenced by the foreign policy of his predecessor Bush, who intervened in Afghanistan and Iraq and left a lot for Obama to fix.⁷⁰

Due to the interventionist legacy Bush left behind, Obama sought to restrain on intervening, promoting more effective American interventions. With that, he turned the American focus on less involvement in the conflict plagued Middle East and more

⁶⁴ President Donald Trump, ‘President Trump’s Davos address in full’, *World Economic Forum* 26 January 2018 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/president-donald-trumps-davos-address-in-full-8e14ebc1-79bb-4134-8203-95efca182e94/> (7-5-2019).

⁶⁵ The White House, ‘National Security Strategy of the United States of America: December 2017’, 2-14.

⁶⁶ David Unger, ‘The Foreign Policy Legacy of Barack Obama’, *The International Spectator* Vol. 51, No. 4 (2016), 10-11.

⁶⁷ The White House, ‘National Security Strategy of the United States of America: May 2010’, 3-16.

⁶⁸ Doug Stokes, ‘Trump, American hegemony and future of the liberal international order’, *International Affairs* Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), 143-149; Dombrowski, ‘Trump grand strategy’, 1028-1030; Regilme Jr., ‘The Decline of American Power’, 157-158.

⁶⁹ Martin S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Michael E. O’Hanlon, ‘Scoring Obama’s Foreign Policy: A Progressive Pragmatist Tries to Bend History’, *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 93, No. 3 (2012), 29-31; Stephen M. Walt, ‘Obama Was Not A Realist President’, *Foreign Policy* 7 April 2016 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/07/obama-was-not-a-realist-president-jeffrey-goldberg-atlantic-obama-doctrine/> (7-5-2019); Dombrowski, ‘Trump grand strategy’, 1015-1021.

⁷⁰ Unger, ‘The Foreign Policy Legacy’, 1-10.

involvement on the economically progressive Asia-Pacific region.⁷¹ Obama's change of focus was not necessarily a shift to a region where global power was growing. It was a shift towards more economical benefits and less conflict for the US. The "Pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia was a result of Obama's desire to change the foreign policy of the Bush administration. It was not simply a result of the fear for a rising China.⁷² Something this study will elaborate more on in the next chapter.

Vice-President Joe Biden also made remarks about the importance of a rising China to the US.⁷³ He argued that the US-China relationship would be a key priority for the Obama administration. The two countries are the two largest economies in the world and with a more globalizing world, they are also more tied to each other.⁷⁴ Ties of commerce and investment, but also education are boosting the US-China relationship. Something also stated by Biden in his remarks.⁷⁵

Biden's remarks reflect the view of President Obama, where in the twenty-first century, America should withdraw in its hegemonic leadership role and become more of a partner.⁷⁶ With this view, Obama is promoting multilateralism. He believes that cooperation instead of competition will lead to progress in the world. As he states it: "nations need not to fear the success of another."⁷⁷

⁷¹ Ibidem, 1-2.

⁷² Christensen, 'Obama and Asia' <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/obama-and-asia> (12-5-2019); Daniel Twining, 'The Future of US-China Relations: From Conflict to Concert', *The International Spectator* Vol. 48, No. 2 (2013), 12-14.

⁷³ Vice President Joe Biden, 'Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden to the Opening Session of the U.S.-China Strategic & Economic Dialogue', *The White House Archives* 8 May 2011 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/05/09/us-china-strategic-and-economic-dialogue#transcript> (6-5-2019).

⁷⁴ Clark, 'China and the United States', 19-25.

⁷⁵ Biden, 'Remarks U.S.-China Dialogue' <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/05/09/us-china-strategic-and-economic-dialogue#transcript> (6-5-2019).

⁷⁶ Li, 'Assessing U.S.-China relations' <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/assessing-u-s-china-relations-under-the-obama-administration/> (02-06-2019).

⁷⁷ President Barack Obama, 'President Obama Speaks on the Future of U.S. Leadership in Asia Pacific Region', *The White House Archives* 14 November 2009 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/japan-event> (03-06-2019).

1.2 The State Department

Clinton stated about the dialogue that it marked “the beginning of an unprecedented effort to lay the foundation for a positive, cooperative and comprehensive US-Chinese relationship for the 21st century.”⁷⁸ Her words were warming and promising for a profitable relationship between the two nations. That is also visible when she mentioned the belief of President Obama’s cabinet members “that a stronger relationship will yield rewards” for the entire world.⁷⁹ It reflects the intentions of the Obama administration to seek rapprochement with China, as the administration recognizes the importance of a responsible China in the international system.

The Obama administration tried to perceive China as a strategic partner rather than a competitor. Clinton stated that “the fresh thinking of the 21st century can move us from a multi-polar world to a multi-partner world.”⁸⁰ That is a returning statement during the first years of the Obama administration. Rapprochement seemed to be the core principle of the Obama’s foreign policy with China.⁸¹ The welcoming efforts of the Obama administration were meant to show US acknowledgement of a rising power and also to prevent aggressiveness between the two nations.

Cooperation between the two powers will lead to “solutions to any of today’s global challenges.”⁸² Clinton recognizes the US is not able to solve the global challenges itself and stresses the need for China to assist them. That is something that keeps returning in remarks made by the Obama administration officials during the first S&ED. As Clinton stated: “few problems can be solved without the US and China together.”⁸³ That statement breaks with

⁷⁸ Hillary Clinton, ‘Remarks at Plenary Session of the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue’, *US Department of State Archives* 27 July 2009 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126521.htm> (14-10-2019).

⁷⁹ Ibidem.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ Li, ‘Assessing U.S.-China relations’ <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/assessing-u-s-china-relations-under-the-obama-administration/> (14-10-2019).

⁸² Clinton, ‘Remarks at Plenary Sessions’ <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126521.htm> (14-10-2019).

⁸³ Hillary Clinton, ‘A New Strategic and Economic Dialogue with China’, *US Department of State Archives* 27 July 2009 <http://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126455.htm> (14-10-2019).

the US discourse of its unipolar power.⁸⁴ It needs China or other powers assistance to solve the contemporary global issues.

However, Clinton did not only use warming words during the first S&ED. The Obama administration wanted to cooperate more intensively with China, but it did not want to display weakness of any kind. Therefore, Clinton emphasized the US' intentions to boost the US-China partnership, but also stressed that the US would still continue to support "its long-standing allies and friends in Asia."⁸⁵ This in an effort to comfort its allies and to show the world it still promotes its own international order.

1.3 The Department of Treasury

Geithner stated during the S&ED that the Chinese and Americans had a similar position and with that a shared strategy in their road to recovery from the 2008 financial crisis.⁸⁶ A positive statement towards China's economic policy. The secretary tried to point out the similarities between the two states. These similarities help clarify the administration's choice to seek rapprochement with the Chinese government. Whether the administration believed it was a necessity to improve the cooperation with China, to the public it appeared to be an obvious policy move to cooperate with a like-minded state.

The 2008 financial crisis had an extensive impact on the world's economy. Geithner claimed neither the US nor China could overcome the crisis on its own.⁸⁷ The cooperation between the two economies was also of critical importance to the rest of the world. Without the growth of the US and Chinese economies, it was not possible for the rest of the world to overcome the financial crisis.⁸⁸ That underlines the influence of both economies and how deep they are embedded in the world economy.

⁸⁴ De Keersmaecker, *Polarity*, 203-204.

⁸⁵ Clinton, 'A New Strategic' <http://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126455.htm> (14-10-2019).

⁸⁶ Timothy Geithner, 'Joint Press Availability With Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner', *US Department of State Archives* 28 July 2009 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126600.htm> (17-10-2019).

⁸⁷ Ibidem.

⁸⁸ Clark, 'China and the United States', 19-25.

Geithner also believed China would continue to “become more integrated into the world economy, more open.”⁸⁹ In addition, he also stated the “necessary transformation” their economy had undergone, from an “heavy investment-intensive economy towards an economy more reliant on services.”⁹⁰ The complimenting statements of Geithner indicate the approving attitude of the Obama administration towards the Chinese government. It sets the basis for a more to Asia aimed policy of the US. A policy in which the US is trying to bring China in its international system.

To ensure this from happening, Geithner declared the two states had agreed to cooperate on four areas. The three agreements seemed to be the US pressuring China to concessions in exchange for an improved cooperation.⁹¹ The fourth agreement seemed to be more of a concession for the US than for China. Both states recognized the significant part international financial institutions would play in the prevention of future crises. However, Geithner stated those outdated institutions, created more than 50 years ago, had to change to the new world economy.⁹² A world economy in which China was gaining more influence. The statement of Geithner was a remarkable recognition that the American-created system had to adapt to new realities in the global economy. Those realities being the US was losing relative influence, while China was expanding its influence.⁹³

1.4 The Department of Defense

Following up on the first S&ED in 2009, Secretary of Defense Gates made remarks a year later on the S&ED at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2010, an inter-governmental security summit held by the British think tank International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). His remarks

⁸⁹ Geithner, ‘Joint Press Availability’ <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126600.htm> (17-10-2019).

⁹⁰ Ibidem.

⁹¹ Timothy Geithner, ‘Closing Remarks for U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue’, *US Department of State Archives* 28 July 2009 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126599.htm> (18-10-2019).

⁹² Ibidem.

⁹³ Li, ‘Assessing U.S.-China relations’ <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/assessing-u-s-china-relations-under-the-obama-administration/> (14-10-2019).

are interesting to highlight, because it gives an insight in how the S&ED has evolved in a year time. What has it actually brought?

Gates started with recalling the US and Chinese “commitment to advance sustained and reliable military-to-military relations” at the S&ED.⁹⁴ His words were promising in the beginning, but he continued his speech with some negativity about the US-China relationship. Gates stated: “regrettably, we have not been able to make progress on this relationship.”⁹⁵ It was not even a year after the first S&ED and the relationship was already deteriorating. The reasons for that made little sense, according to Gates.⁹⁶ It was a remarkable statement, since the remarks of Obama, Clinton and Geithner after the dialogue were so promising.

While the S&ED was a gesture by the US of promoting a more cooperative strategy, other strategic actions were not.⁹⁷ The reasons for the Chinese government to have interactions between both militaries broken off, had something to do with the US selling arms to Taiwan. Taiwan has always been a major quarrel in US-China relations. Gates argued that the US had been selling arms to Taiwan for decades and that those arms sales were in the interest of improving regional security.⁹⁸ Thus, it was no surprise those arms sales were being carried out and it was not meant as to counter Chinese military buildups. The Chinese thought otherwise and felt antagonized by the US.⁹⁹ The Chinese government perceived these moves by the US as an attempt of containment. Its reaction made sense in that way.

Nevertheless, Gates still urged the Chinese government to continue interactions with the US. He believed the military-to-military relationship between the two countries was “essential to regional security.”¹⁰⁰ It becomes clear that all parts of the Obama administration were focusing on the same thing: bringing China on as a stakeholder in the

⁹⁴ Robert Gates, ‘Remarks at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (Shangri-La-Asia Security)’, *US Department of Defense Archives* 5 June 2010

<http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1483> (31-10-2019).

⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁹⁶ Ibidem.

⁹⁷ Nicholas D. Anderson and Victor D. Cha, ‘The Case of the Pivot to Asia: System Effects and the Origins of Strategy’, *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 132, No. 4 (2017), 603.

⁹⁸ Gates, ‘Remarks at the IISS’ <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1483> (31-10-2019).

⁹⁹ Robert S. Ross, ‘The Problem with the Pivot to Asia: Why President Obama’s Turn to the East is Easier Said than Done’, *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 91 (2012), 209-215.

¹⁰⁰ Gates, ‘Remarks at the IISS’ <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1483> (31-10-2019).

US-led international system. They all recognize the necessity of a prosperous China cooperating with the US to solve global issues. That would not only be in the interest of both countries, but in the interest of the entire world. This line of thought leads to the Obama administration's new strategy: the "Pivot to Asia", which will be discussed in the next chapter.

2. The "Pivot to Asia" strategy

The "Pivot" was both an economical as a military response to the shift of economic power from Europe and the US to Asia, where three of the six countries reside "that will account for one-half of the world's economic growth between 2011 and 2025."¹⁰¹ According to Samuel Huntington, economic power is the main factor of the strength of a state.¹⁰² Thus, changes in economic power will affect elements of national power. The Asia-Pacific area was predicted to grow in economic power. So, Obama's rebalancing policy was a logical shift towards more economical benefits.

Obama's "Pivot" was welcomed by most Asian governments with the exception of China. Most governments perceived the growing US engagement in Asia as a boost economically and diplomatically.¹⁰³ China sought hostile intentions in the US' rebalance towards the region. Especially since the US Air-Sea Battle doctrine from 2010 directly mentioned the need to counter the military capabilities of China.¹⁰⁴ The skepticism of Beijing towards Washington's intentions in the region was not unfounded. Washington's intentions were at times meant to develop close relations with China to avoid any controversy between the two states, which would not benefit the stability in the region.¹⁰⁵ Other times the advancing US engagement had evidently competitive incentives.¹⁰⁶ Those incentives came

¹⁰¹ Christopher Layne, 'This Time It's Real: The End of the Unipolarity and the *Pax Americana*', *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 56, No. 1 (2012), 205.

¹⁰² Samuel Huntington, 'The U.S. – Decline or Renewal', *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 67, No. 2 (1988), 76.

¹⁰³ Sutter, 'The United States in Asia', 95.

¹⁰⁴ John Ford, 'The Pivot to Asia Was Obama's Biggest Mistake', *The Diplomat* 21 January 2017 <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-pivot-to-asia-was-obamas-biggest-mistake/> (14-5-2019).

¹⁰⁵ Sutter, 'The United States in Asia', 95.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, 95.

from the US' perception of the threat China could pose if it kept rising without any resistance.

2.1 The White House

To take on this presumed threat, the Obama administration shifted its foreign policy focus towards Asia. President Obama introduced his administration's new focus in a speech to the Australian parliament on November 17, 2011. He stated the purpose of his visit to the region was in an effort "to advance security, prosperity and human dignity across the Asia-Pacific."¹⁰⁷ During his election campaign, Obama already showed his intentions to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And as said in the previous chapter, the interventionist legacy that Bush left behind, was something Obama wanted to deviate from.¹⁰⁸

The shift towards the Asia-Pacific region was not surprising. The region had a large rising potential that was important to the global economy.¹⁰⁹ Making the region of great interest to other economies. Economic growth was obviously in the national interest of the US. And according to Obama's words, the US "has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation."¹¹⁰ The shift makes sense this way. However, could there be other reasons for Obama to change his foreign policy focus?

During his candidate addresses, Obama rarely mentioned Asia as a focus point.¹¹¹ Let alone that it would be such a priority in US foreign policy. China as a rising power was an actor the US had to take into account. Obama sought more rapprochement with China in his reformed S&ED. Now the main focus of his foreign policy would be on the Asia region. Perhaps an underlying reason for the shift was the possible threat the rising power could pose to the US leadership role?

¹⁰⁷ President Barack Obama, 'Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament', *The White House Archives* 17 November 2011 http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks?term=node_tid_depth=31&page=285 (4-11-2019).

¹⁰⁸ Unger, 'The Foreign Policy Legacy', 1-2.

¹⁰⁹ Anderson and Cha, 'The Case of the Pivot', 596.

¹¹⁰ Obama, 'Remarks to the Australian Parliament' http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks?term=node_tid_depth=31&page=285 (4-11-2019).

¹¹¹ Anderson and Cha, 'The Case of the Pivot', 602; Barack Obama, 'Renewing American Leadership', *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 86, No. 4 (2008), 12.

As Gates stated a year after the first S&ED, the Chinese military had no intention to uphold interactions between the US military. The attitude of Beijing gave away warning signals that it could pose a threat. After all, China's rise to power partly originates from the ever-increasing trade surpluses it has with the US. The US trade deficit with China increased with \$70 billion dollars from 1991 to 2001. Fourteen years later, the US trade deficit was grown with almost \$300 billion. The result of this disparity was that China could convert the economic advantages into military capabilities, which in turn could be used to counter strategic interests of the US in the Asia-Pacific region.¹¹² This meant the domination of the US in world politics was fading. A rising China could balance the US hegemony.

The US fear for the rise of China, and with that, the balancing of power, is nothing new. During the Cold War era, the US feared the swift economic and military growth of the SU. After the fall of the SU, the US feared the economic rise of Japan.¹¹³ Paul Kennedy predicted Japan "would be the 'number one' economically in the early 21st century."¹¹⁴ And now China is taking over the role the SU and Japan had in the 20th century. However, where the SU and Japan diminished over the years, China's rise is still ongoing. But why should China's case have a different outcome than that of the cases of the SU and Japan? Only time will tell, but what can be said is that the rebalancing response of the US can be interpreted as a way of limiting its decline. Therefore, the US possibly perceived China's rise as a credible threat to its hegemony.

The remarks Obama made in the Australian parliament on China were reassuring. He stated the US' intentions of welcoming "a peaceful and prosperous China", while also upholding Beijing to "international norms."¹¹⁵ His words were carefully chosen and can be interpreted as both a welcoming of Chinese leadership and a warning towards Chinese

¹¹² Michiel Foulon, 'Trade and Security in US Grand Strategy vis-à-vis China', in: Salvador Santino F. Regilme and James Parisot, *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers: Cooperation or Conflict* (London 2017), 48.

¹¹³ Foulon, 'Trade and Security', 44.

¹¹⁴ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London 1988), 595.

¹¹⁵ Obama, 'Remarks to the Australian Parliament' http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks?term=node_tid_depth=31&page=285 (4-11-2019).

aggression. This two way meaning of Obama's statements characterizes his cooperativeness and passiveness stance in foreign policy issues. It is something he was largely criticized on.¹¹⁶

Ben Rhodes made remarks the day before Obama gave his speech at the Australian parliament. He gave insight on the issues the President would address the next day. The speech of the President would feature "three major areas: security, the global economy, and democracy and human rights."¹¹⁷ Obama's presidency started at the time there was a global financial crisis. In order to overcome the crisis, Obama's first term was largely dominated by tremendous budget cuts. While undergoing these budget cuts, the US had to still show its leadership role in the world on diplomatic, security and economic issues. Obama tried to show this by rebalancing US power towards the Asia-Pacific.

According to Rhodes, that would mean the budget cuts "will not come at the expense of the Asia Pacific region."¹¹⁸ A statement that showed the US perceived the Asia-Pacific as a top priority. It was willing to cut spending on all levels, as long as it would not damage the powerful position the US wanted to maintain in the region. A statement that can also be interpreted as a display of power towards the assertiveness of China in the region. The US would not be afraid to counter Chinese influence.

The statement was a message to the countries in the region that the US was there to stay. Rhodes explicitly mentioned in his remarks that the speech of President Obama was part of "the US sending a signal that we're going to be present."¹¹⁹ The speech had the purpose of making assurances to US' allies and partners that the US would remain to be the principal protector of security in the region.¹²⁰ It was an attempt of balancing China's power.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Anderson and Cha, 'The Case of the Pivot', 614; Klara Bilgin, 'The Decline of American Leadership: The Obama Years', *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* Vol. 41, No. 2 (2017), 61-63.

¹¹⁷ Ben Rhodes, 'Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes and NSC Senior Director for Asia Danny Russel', *The White House Archives* 16 November 2011 <http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/16/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-deputy-national-security-advis> (7-11-2019).

¹¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹²⁰ Ibidem.

¹²¹ David Shambaugh, 'Assessing the US "Pivot" to Asia', *Strategic Studies Quarterly* Vol. 7, No. 2 (2013), 17-18.

Still, the Obama administration's overall position and language towards China was reassuring and attractive. It was trying to involve the rising state with international affairs. The administration also appears to recognize China's growing importance to other countries in the world. Senior Director for Asian Affairs Daniel Russel stated, at a press briefing on February 10, 2012 about the visit of President Xi Jinping to the US, that the US' relations with China are important to other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. All would benefit from a positive relationship between the two states.¹²² Trade wars between the two countries would affect everyone in the world, since both countries are top trading partners. In addition, an economically declining China could lead to regional instability.¹²³ That made the country an important actor to focus foreign policy on.

2.2 The Department of State

That foreign policy focus came with the "Pivot to Asia" strategy. Hillary Clinton was the first one to use the word "pivot" in an article in *Foreign Policy*, named *America's Pacific Century*.¹²⁴ In this article, the new foreign policy focus of the US was discussed. One of the interesting statements she made, was that "our work abroad holds the key to our prosperity and security at home."¹²⁵ Which meant the Obama administration was not ready to surrender its tremendous influence in the world. Even with the failures of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the continued recession, the US would still want to uphold its dominance. The administration saw its chance to do so by focusing on the Asia-Pacific.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word "pivot" is the definition of a central point on which something balances.¹²⁶ In the strategy introduced by the Obama administration, the use of that word meant that the main foreign policy focus of the US

¹²² Daniel Russel, 'Press Briefing on the Upcoming Visit of Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping to the United States', *The White House Archives* 10 February 2012 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/02/10/press-briefing-upcoming-visit-chinese-vice-president-xi-jinping-united-s> (21-05-2019).

¹²³ Nicholas R. Lardy, 'U.S.-China Economic Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy', *Brookings Institution* 25 April 2001 <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/u-s-china-economic-relations-implications-for-u-s-policy/> (24-05-2019).

¹²⁴ Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century' <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/> (8-11-2019).

¹²⁵ Ibidem.

¹²⁶ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v., "pivot" <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pivot> (8-11-2019).

would be the Asia-Pacific. Its entire policy would revolve around that area, the rising economic center of the world. Ben Rhodes also used the word “pivot” as a definition of the administration’s efforts to emphasize its new foreign policy focus.¹²⁷ Remarkably Obama himself did not use the word “pivot” in his speech.¹²⁸ He would often restrain from actually using the word, in contrary to other officials of his administration.

Choosing the Asia-Pacific as a “pivot” made sense for US interests. The geo-strategic realities of the world were changing and the Obama administration tried to adapt to the new situation. A situation in which, according to Layne, the US was no longer a dominating power. Its decline had set in.¹²⁹ Clinton would assure the world it was not declining. She stressed the US would remain willing and capable to lead: “we can, and we will.”¹³⁰ Another form of power display to emphasize US leadership was not declining in anyway.

According to Clinton, the “Pivot” would be a permanent commitment of “forward-deployed diplomacy,” in which all diplomatic assets would be dispatched towards the Asia-Pacific.¹³¹ That would mean the US policy would consist of actual interaction and presence within the region. The commitment would deepen US engagement with the region along six pillars: “strengthening existing bilateral security alliances; deepening the working relationships with emerging regional powers, including China; reengaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.”¹³² Clinton’s words were meant as a signal towards China that the US would counter Chinese influence. That fitted into the interpretation of some scholars that the US used a strategy of containment.¹³³

¹²⁷ Rhodes, ‘Press Briefing Carney, Rhodes and Russel’ <http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/16/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-deputy-national-security-adviser> (7-11-2019).

¹²⁸ Obama, ‘Remarks to the Australian Parliament’ http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks?term=node_tid_depth=31&page=285 (4-11-2019).

¹²⁹ Layne, ‘This Time It’s Real’, 204-205.

¹³⁰ Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/> (8-11-2019).

¹³¹ Ibidem.

¹³² Ibidem.

¹³³ Stig Stenslie and Chen Gang, ‘Xi Jinping’s Grand Strategy: From Vision to Implementation’, in: Robert S. Ross & Jo Inge Bekkevold, *China in the Era of Xi Jinping: Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges* (Washington DC 2016), 127.

2.3 The Department of Defense

An example of the US containing strategy towards China came after the trip Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta made to Asia at the end of 2011. He visited Indonesia, Japan and South Korea, three countries that are important military allies to the US. The purpose of his visit was to assure those Asian countries the US commitment to the Asia-Pacific security was a strategic priority. The US would, as Panetta stated, “remain a Pacific power,” it would rebalance “to focus on the Asia-Pacific,” and it would enhance its “military presence in the region.”¹³⁴ His words were a statement to all US allies, that the US would balance China’s military rise. It is no coincidence Panetta specifically went to Japan and South Korea, since they are involved in territorial disputes with China.¹³⁵ They have welcomed the increased US presence in the Asia-Pacific.

Panetta still emphasized the US intentions of seeking “a constructive relationship with a responsible China.”¹³⁶ Again a characteristic of the Obama administration’s policy of not taking a hard stance towards China. It was still striving for a constructive relationship, while also giving warning signals to China that the US would not back down when necessary. That twofold strategy was something critics of the “Pivot” disputed.¹³⁷ They believed the strategy was doomed to fail.

2.4 The Department of Treasury

Nevertheless, the “Pivot” did have some success. The implementation and the early success of the attractive nature of the US foreign policy was visible in the remarks made by Secretary Geithner after the fourth S&ED in 2012. Geithner emphasized the enormous progress both China and the US made on the economic front since the first S&ED. According to the secretary, China had taking “a number of steps” to improve several focus areas, such as “the protection of intellectual property rights”, “reforms of its tariffs and taxes on imported

¹³⁴ Leon Panetta, ‘Trip Message: Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea’, *US Department of Defense Archives* 4 November 2011 <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1704> (14-11-2019).

¹³⁵ Sutter, ‘The United States in Asia’, 102.

¹³⁶ Panetta, ‘Trip Message’ <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1704> (14-11-2019).

¹³⁷ Anderson, ‘Case of the Pivot’, 595.

goods”, and “reduce privileges enjoyed by its state-owned enterprises.”¹³⁸ The Secretary of Treasury seemed to be more benevolent towards the US-China relationship than other administration’s officials. The reason for that had presumably something to do with the economic reforms China agreed to undergo. Those reforms were exactly what Washington wanted from Beijing. This is in contrary to what Secretary Gates and Panetta had stated about the military relationship between the two countries. That made the economic part of the relationship more successful than the military part.

Aside from Secretary Geithner statements, there is a change visible in the discourse of the Obama administration from the first S&ED in 2009 and the introduction of the “Pivot to Asia” strategy in 2011. In 2009, the administration was trying to be more cooperative with China. It focused on attraction and not on deterrence. In 2011, it seems the administration wanted to send a more robust message towards the rising state. That change would only become bigger when President Xi assumed office in 2013, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹³⁸ Timothy Geithner, ‘Remarks by Secretary Geithner at the Close of the Fourth Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED)’, *US Department of Treasury Archives* 4 May 2012 <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1566.aspx> (14-11-2019).

3. Xi Jinping assuming office

Xi Jinping assumed the office of president on March 14, 2013. Three months later the newly anointed Chinese president visited the US. Xi had already visited the US several times as vice president. He had various productive conversations with both Obama and Biden. But when Xi came to power, the US-China relationship was different than during the presidency of his predecessor Hu Jintao. That had everything to do with the fast economic rise China had undergone since Hu took office in 2002. From 2002 to 2012, the Chinese economy had grown from \$1.4 trillion to \$8.5 trillion.¹³⁹ China's economic growth had an enormous impact on its defense spending. From 2005 to 2014, China's military budget grew at 9.5% per year.¹⁴⁰ So when Xi became president, he had the means to enact a more aggressive foreign policy than his predecessor Hu.

It is arguable that the US-China relationship worsened with Xi as president. As it may have been inevitable that China would become more aggressive due to its economic growth, Xi was also a big factor of the change. Scholars have argued Xi to be more of a visionary leader and strategic thinker than his predecessors.¹⁴¹ With that, Xi emphasized more on a grand strategy of China and he established his own doctrines: "China Dream", "Asia-Pacific Dream", and "One Belt, One Road".¹⁴² It was an attempt of projecting Chinese influence on the rest of the world.

That also changed the way the US perceived its relationship with China. The first S&ED in 2009 had the purpose of welcoming China on the world stage. Obama enacted an attractive policy towards China. Three years later he announced a new military strategy that had 60 percent of the US Navy operating in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁴³ It was part of the US effort to balance China's military power in the region. The two countries began to rival each other more and more.

¹³⁹ Richard McGregor, 'Xi Jinping Is the Life and Soul of the Party: The Chinese president's ambitions can't be separated from the CCP's ideology', *Foreign Policy* 1 October 2019 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/01/xi-jinping-is-the-life-and-soul-of-the-party/> (6-12-2019).

¹⁴⁰ Lee & Lee, 'US FONOPs in South China Sea', 456.

¹⁴¹ Stenslie and Gang, 'Xi Jinping's Grand Strategy', 121; McGregor, 'Xi Jinping' <http://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/01/xi-jinping-is-the-life-and-soul-of-the-party/> (6-12-2019).

¹⁴² Stenslie and Gang, 'Xi Jinping's Grand Strategy', 118-121.

¹⁴³ *Ibidem*, 128.

3.1 The White House

That rivalry was not apparent during the first meeting between the two heads of state in June 2013. Obama hosted Xi and his delegation at the Sunnylands estate in California, so the two presidents could meet each other for the first time since Xi took office. Otherwise, the two state leaders would have met for the first time at the G20 in St. Petersburg in September the same year. The fact the meeting was organized in advance of the G20, pointed to the importance both leaders laid on a productive relationship between the US and China.

The language Obama used in his statements and remarks towards the Chinese delegation, was encouraging. He expressed his own belief that a successful China would benefit and boost the world economy. Consequently, China would be able to work with the US “as equal partners in dealing with many of the global challenges.”¹⁴⁴ The use of the words “equal partners” by Obama, demonstrate his respect towards China and his genuine willingness to cooperate with them.

Nevertheless, Obama did emphasize his intent of creating an international economic order “where states play by the rules.”¹⁴⁵ His statement was meant as a warning towards China’s behavior. That Obama did not restrain in calling out China if it was not playing by the international economic rules, was already evident in earlier speeches. In April 2012, Obama spoke at a rally in Tampa about trade enforcement cases the US government started against China. He was not backing out of taking action against countries that “... are skirting rules, breaking the rules, and putting workers and our businesses at an unfair position.”¹⁴⁶ That statement can be put in the perspective of two principle components of Obama’s foreign

¹⁴⁴ President Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by President Obama and President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China After Bilateral Meeting’, *The White House Archives* 8 June 2013 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/08/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-jinping-peoples-republic-china> (10-12-2019).

¹⁴⁵ President Barack Obama, ‘President Obama and President Xi Jinping of China Make a Statement’, *The White House Archives* 7 June 2013 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/2013/06/07/president-obama-and-president-xi-jinping-china-make-statement> (10-12-2019).

¹⁴⁶ President Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by the President at the Port of Tampa’, *The White House Archives* 13 April 2012 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/2012/04/13/president-obama-speaks-trade-and-economy#transcript> (14-5-2019).

policy: deterring China from destabilizing East Asia and motivate the country to support multilateral global governance.¹⁴⁷

At the same time, the policy could also be interpreted as a strategy to decrease international support for China in order for the US to remain dominant in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁴⁸ A powerful state, like the US, that is already for years strongly engaged with a region, that has a prospect of a big concentration of wealth and power in the future, will only focus more on this region.¹⁴⁹ Especially when another powerful state is contesting its supremacy. Obama's robust statements on China playing by the rules can be put in the framework of a containment strategy.

Still, Obama's overall statements did not point to a strategy of containment. He did highlight the fact that tensions between the two countries were inevitable, but that both countries "want a strong cooperative relationship."¹⁵⁰ Obama intended to strengthen the relationship with Xi. According to Evan Medeiros, a White House advisor on the Asia-Pacific, Obama was successful in that. He described the relationship between the two leaders as "cordial" and "professional", and perceived their conversations as "constructive".¹⁵¹

The strong relationship between Xi and Obama was also visible in Vice President Biden's statements. When he visited China in December 2013, he joked to Xi's staff that he hoped they did not think "that I trespassed on taking advantage of my friendship with the President."¹⁵² That Biden spoke about a friendship between him and Xi was a remarkable. Speaking about a good relationship is one thing, but calling something an actual friendship is

¹⁴⁷ Christensen, 'Obama and Asia' <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/obama-and-asia> (21-05-2019).

¹⁴⁸ Ford, 'Pivot Biggest Mistake' <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-pivot-to-asia-was-obamas-biggest-mistake/> (21-5-2019).

¹⁴⁹ Twining, 'Future of US-China Relations', 13.

¹⁵⁰ Obama, Obama and Xi Make a Statement' <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/2013/06/07/president-obama-and-president-xi-jinping-china-make-statement> (10-12-2019).

¹⁵¹ Evan Medeiros, 'Press Briefing by Ben Rhodes and Evan Medeiros', *The White House Archives* 6 September 2013 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/06/press-briefing-ben-rhodes-and-evan-medeiros> (5-12-2019).

¹⁵² Vice President Joe Biden, 'Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China', *The White House Archives* 4 December 2013 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/12/04/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-and-president-xi-jinping-peoples-republ> (10-12-2019).

a rather big statement. Especially since the US-China relations in 2012 had not been that worse in a decade.¹⁵³

However when Xi took over in 2013, China had attempted to restore the relationship.¹⁵⁴ Coming to meet Obama in the US was a first step in this. Biden's visit to China was building on the attempt of restoration, but it was also in the light of the declaration of a Chinese air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. The Chinese ADIZ largely overlapped a Japanese, South Korean and Taiwanese ADIZ.¹⁵⁵ A move that heightened tensions in the area, as it was a display of power towards the region.

So then, Biden's use of the word "friendship" was still a peculiar statement. It did indicate his intention of strengthening US-China relations. That is something that stands out in his entire speech. As Biden emphasized more on the improving relations, by stating that the relationship Xi and Obama had established, was "full of promise and real opportunity."¹⁵⁶ The remarks point to the Obama administration's recognition of the importance of a successful relationship with China. They seem to be eager to make it work, whatever the cost.

That the relationship between Xi and Obama, and between Xi and Biden had been strong for years, was also underlined by Thomas Donilon. In his remarks to The Asia Society in New York, he mentioned the Obama administration had an excellent opportunity to "build on our existing relationships with Xi Jinping," while Xi was taking over the presidency in China.¹⁵⁷ Donilon believed Xi was a more Western favored leader and that the relationship with him could only strengthen if the US sought cooperation over competition.

¹⁵³ Robert S. Ross and Mingjiang Li, 'Xi Jinping and the Challenges to Chinese Security', in: Robert S. Ross & Jo Inge Bekkevold, *China in the Era of Xi Jinping: Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges* (Washington DC 2016), 233.

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁵ James Fallows, 'More on This Strange Chinese ADIZ: 'Sovereign Is as Sovereign Does'', *The Atlantic* 27 November 2013 <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/11/more-on-this-strange-chinese-adiz-sovereign-is-as-sovereign-does/281890/> (10-12-2019).

¹⁵⁶ Biden, 'Remarks by Biden and President Xi' <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/12/04/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-and-president-xi-jinping-peoples-republ> (10-12-2019).

¹⁵⁷ Tom Donilon, 'Remarks by Tom Donilon, National Security Advisor to the President: "The United States and the Asia-Pacific in 2013"', *The White House Archives* 11 March 2013 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/11/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisor-president-united-states-an> (12-12-2019).

Donilon also touched on the debate of global power shift, by stating that he did not believe an existing power and a rising power “were destined for conflict.”¹⁵⁸ He stressed that with the US being open for dialogue to China and not entering a strategy of containment, would only be beneficial to both countries.

But was this US strategy feasible to ensure China would rise peacefully? Some scholars believe Xi’s doctrines resemble a grand strategy of building a strong economy and military so China could become the world’s dominant superpower.¹⁵⁹ In order to become that superpower, China has to surpass the US. This believe may not be the real intent of Beijing, but it is enforced by many indications. Document Number Nine being one of those indications China is trying to undermine or overtake the Western-led international system.¹⁶⁰

There is also a difference in what Donilon stated and how the US’ policy was actually carried out. The US tried to be cooperative on some terrains, while it also perceived China as a potential threat.¹⁶¹ So, the US strategy did consider China’s intentions of becoming the dominant superpower. The Obama administration only tried to appeal to China’s responsibility as a global power. It was willing to let China rise, but it would not allow China to take over the US’ leading position.

3.2 The Department of State

Secretary Kerry also touched on the threat of China during a visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to the US in September 2013. While he did not mention China as possible threat, he spoke indirectly about what it could mean if the partnership did not work. He stressed that it was necessary to avoid seeing each other as strategic rivals. Instead, the US-China partnership that was being strengthened the last years, drove on “issues from climate

¹⁵⁸ Donilon, ‘Remarks’ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/11/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisor-president-united-states-an> (12-12-2019).

¹⁵⁹ Stenslie and Gang, ‘Xi Jinping’s Grand Strategy’, 121.

¹⁶⁰ ChinaFile, ‘Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation’ 8 November 2013 <http://chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation> (12-12-2019); Chris Buckley, ‘China Takes Aim at Western Ideas’, *The New York Times* 19 August 2013 <http://nytimes.com/2013/08/20/world/asia/chinas-new-leadership-takes-hard-line-in-secret-memo.html> (12-12-2019).

¹⁶¹ Renato Cruz De Castro, ‘The Obama Administration’s Strategic Pivot to Asia: From a Diplomatic to a Strategic Constraint of an Emergent China?’, *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* Vol. 25, No. 3 (2013), 334.

change to wildlife trafficking to military consultations.”¹⁶² He put the emphasis on what the two countries could achieve if the relationship worked.

One of those achievements was a joint commitment to ensure the peaceful denuclearization of Korea.¹⁶³ The US tried to make China a responsible stakeholder by taking on geo-political issues together. This joint commitment was a progress in the US nonproliferation efforts and it also contributed to China taking on a more responsible role. Kerry also underlined that fact by stating the denuclearization would be a “central focus of our joint efforts.”¹⁶⁴ A peaceful denuclearization would not be possible without Chinese assistance.¹⁶⁵

Therefore, the Obama administration attempted to appeal to Beijing’s efforts of preventing any security instability in the region.¹⁶⁶ The US sought further cooperation by putting the emphasis on the goals both countries shared. By finding any common ground, the US-China relationship would be more focused on partnership than rivalry. Kerry accentuated that by continuously stating the goals the US and China shared.¹⁶⁷ With that, the Obama administration wanted to persuade China to strengthen the relationship.

3.3 The Department of Treasury

Secretary Lew also underlined the strength of the US-China relationship by stating how informative the discussion with his Chinese counterparts was.¹⁶⁸ It appeared that in the months after Xi came to power the US-China relationship was still developing for the better.

¹⁶² John Kerry, ‘Remarks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi Before Their Meeting’, *US Department of State Archives* 19 September 2013 <http://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/214419.htm> (12-12-2019).

¹⁶³ John Kerry, ‘Remarks with Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi at the Top of Their Meeting’, *US Department of State* 13 April 2013 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/04/207470.htm> (12-12-2019).

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁵ Eleanor Albert, ‘The China-North Korea Relationship’, *Council on Foreign Relations* 25 June 2019 <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-north-korea-relationship> (12-12-2019).

¹⁶⁶ Dong Soo Kim, ‘Between Denuclearization and Nonproliferation: U.S. Foreign Policy toward North Korea during the Obama Administration’, *The Korean Journal of Security Affairs* Vol. 18, No. 2 (2013), 39.

¹⁶⁷ Kerry, ‘Remarks with Yang Jiechi’ <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/04/207470.htm> (13-12-2019).

¹⁶⁸ Jack Lew, ‘Remarks of Treasury Secretary Jacob J. Lew at the Close of the Fifth U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue’, *US Department of Treasury Archives* 11 July 2013 <http://m.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2008.aspx> (13-12-2019).

Lew's words were strictly positive about the relationship. And like Biden did during his visit to China, Lew also used the word "friends" in describing his relationship with the Chinese delegation at the fifth S&ED.¹⁶⁹

What is also notable from Lew's remarks after the fifth S&ED is that all the remarks of both Geithner and Lew focus on the accomplishments of the economic relationship with China. More importantly, the Treasury secretary's mention the advances that have been made in China's reform process.¹⁷⁰ On the economic side, the two countries seem to be making lots of progress.

3.4 Department of Defense

On the military side, the discourse of the DoD differed from that of the DT. Where the DT never used the word "rebalance", the DoD focused heavily on the word. Hagel stated in his visit to the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2013 that "rebalancing should not, however, be misinterpreted."¹⁷¹ Rebalance means to restore balance, which points to the US having to balance the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁷² It was used as an alternative of the word "pivot", which suggested that Asia would be the center of US policy and the rest would be abandoned.¹⁷³ Therefore, rebalance was preferred by some people in the Obama administration.

Still, the word "rebalance" provoked some suspicion. On the one hand, US allies in Europe feared the US would retreat from the continent and would leave them alone against a resurging Russia. On the other hand, China felt antagonized and perceived the policy as an

¹⁶⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁷¹ Chuck Hagel, 'International Institute for Strategic Studies (Shangri-La Dialogue)', *US Department of Defense* 1 June 2013 <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1785> (13-12-2019).

¹⁷² Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v., "rebalance" <http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rebalance> (13-12-2019).

¹⁷³ Fred Dews, 'Pivot, Rebalance, or Reinvigorate? Words Matter in U.S. Strategy toward Asia', *Brookings Institution* 21 April 2014 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2014/04/21/pivot-rebalance-or-reinvigorate-words-matter-in-u-s-strategy-toward-asia/> (13-12-2019).

attempt of containment.¹⁷⁴ To counter this suspicion, Hagel tried to clarify the strategy was not a “retreat from other regions”, but a move to the “epicenter” of the changing world.¹⁷⁵

With that, Hagel attempted to distract the attention from the US interest of containing China, by making the rebalance a logical move for US overall interests. That may have been an accurate description of the situation, but managing China’s rise was one of the biggest explanations of the US strategy.¹⁷⁶ A strategy that seemed to work as both China and the US expressed their intentions of strengthening the military-to-military relationship.¹⁷⁷

However, those intentions were not being realized in the years after. Increasing tensions in the South China Sea would put the US and China opposed to each other. What comes forth of the discourse of the Obama administration after the appointment of Xi as the new Chinese president, was that it was still very hopeful of strengthening the relationship with China. That would change in the years after.

¹⁷⁴ Anderson & Cha, ‘The Case of the Pivot’, 595.

¹⁷⁵ Hagel, ‘International Institute’ <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1785> (14-12-2019).

¹⁷⁶ Matt Schiavenza, ‘What Exactly Does It Mean That the U.S. Is Pivoting to Asia? And will it last?’, *The Atlantic* 15 April 2013 <http://theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/04/what-exactly-does-it-mean-that-the-us-is-pivoting-to-asia/274936/> (14-12-2019); Anderson and Cha, ‘The Case of the Pivot’, 595-597.

¹⁷⁷ Hagel, ‘International Institute’ <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1785> (14-12-2019).

4. Xi Jinping visits the US

Obama's encouragement to let China become more responsible had little effect. China began to become more aggressive in territorial disputes like in the South China Sea. Large parts of the South China Sea have been claimed by various countries in the region. China is claiming the largest part of the sea as its own and it has been building airstrips and piers on islands that are laying within the claimed territory.¹⁷⁸ The constructions on these islands serve as strategic military bases for Beijing to project its military power in the region.

Along with the construction of these military bases, China is also rapidly strengthening its military. The military buildup of China in the South China Sea led Washington to believe China wanted to challenge US hegemony.¹⁷⁹ And with that came also the belief that the US Navy actually could be challenged by the fast growing Chinese Navy. Beijing was increasing its annual defense spending by double-digits since 2006.¹⁸⁰ The size and strength of the Chinese military is not near the strength of that of the US. Still, the US military has to respect the military capabilities of its competitor.

Knowing that a display of force against a continuously increasing Chinese military would eventually lead to conflict, Obama's policy in the South China Sea consisted of two elements. The first element was contesting China's claims by sailing naval vessels within 12 nautical miles of occupied islands. These so-called freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) were a message to Beijing that the US does not recognize the sea around these islands as territorial sea.¹⁸¹

Obama deemed these shows of force necessary to send a signal of resistance to Beijing's maritime claims, but he was also under the assumption that a dialogue had to be maintained.¹⁸² Therefore, the second element of Obama's policy was continuing to keep the dialogue going. In this dialogue, Obama kept encouraging China to uphold to

¹⁷⁸ Denny Roy, 'The United States and the South China Sea: Front Line of Hegemonic Tension?', in: Ian Storey and Cheng-Yi Lin, *The South China Sea Dispute: Navigating Diplomatic and Strategic Tensions* (Singapore 2016), 230.

¹⁷⁹ Roy, 'The United States and the South China Sea', 228-229.

¹⁸⁰ Castro, 'Obama Administration's Strategic Pivot to Asia', 334.

¹⁸¹ Eleanor Freund, 'Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea: A Practical Guide', *Belfer Center* June 2017 <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/freedom-navigation-south-china-sea-practical-guide> (09-06-2019).

¹⁸² Stephanie Condon, 'Obama: "We Welcome China's Rise"', *CBS News* 20 January 2011 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-we-welcome-chinas-rise/> (09-06-2019).

international norms and values, and not harm the interests of other states. This is a returning aspect in his speeches towards Chinese delegations.

4.1 The White House

In a joint press conference with President Xi of China in 2015, Obama tried to appeal to his presidential counterpart about upholding to international rules. He uttered his concerns “over land reclamation, construction and the militarization of disputed areas, which makes it harder for countries in the region to resolve disagreements peacefully.”¹⁸³ His words were more robust than in previous years, as Obama made clear the US would not accept Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.

Obama also called Xi out on upholding human rights. He specifically mentioned that the Chinese government was “preventing journalists, lawyers, NGOs and civil society groups from operating freely.”¹⁸⁴ With that, he was pointing to the restriction of the freedom of expression by Chinese authorities.¹⁸⁵ According to Obama, that stance of the Chinese government would prevent China “and its people from realizing its full potential.”¹⁸⁶

He was trying to persuade Xi to do the right thing, by including China in mutual partnering’s and promotions. That is also reflected in his words later in the press conference, as Obama underlined the cooperation of the US and China in world affairs. He stated the US and China would “bring countries together to promote development in Afghanistan, and we’ll work with our many partners to strengthen international peacekeeping.”¹⁸⁷ With this statement, Obama includes China in US world affairs. His words can be interpreted as an acknowledgement that it is essential for development in the world that China is

¹⁸³ President Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by President Obama and President Xi of the People’s Republic of China in Joint Press Conference’, *The White House Archives* 25 September 2015

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint> (09-06-2019).

¹⁸⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch, ‘World Report 2019: China and Tibet’ <http://hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/china-and-tibet> (20-12-2019).

¹⁸⁶ Obama, ‘Remarks by President Obama and President Xi’ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint> (09-06-2019).

¹⁸⁷ Obama, ‘Remarks by President Obama and President Xi’ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint> (09-06-2019).

contributing. This again points to Obama perceiving the rising state as a strategic partner instead of a competitor.

Biden spoke in a similar way as Obama. He congratulated the Chinese delegation during a lunch with the progress that it had made in the past 20 years.¹⁸⁸ He shared the progress the US and China both made in their relationship. And he also shared his suspicions. Where Biden started his speech with emphasizing the friendship he and Xi had built over the years, he ended his speech on a more serious note. Biden underlined the US' interest in a "peaceful and prosperous Asia Pacific region that's free from intimidation or coercion."¹⁸⁹ A direct message to the Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.

Some scholars perceive Chinese aggression as an attempt of striving for regional hegemony.¹⁹⁰ That would mean China was trying to prevent the US from jutting its military power over the South China Sea.¹⁹¹ This again points to the idea of hegemonic succession: China wanted to replace the US as global hegemon. The US would like to remain the global hegemon and appeal to China to uphold to the international rules-based order.

That is precisely what Susan Rice stated in remarks at the eve of Xi's visit to the US. She emphasized the rules-based order had "served both our nations so well for so long," and China would do better if the country would uphold to it.¹⁹² Her words made clear the US wanted China to become a responsible stakeholder in the current international system. While her words were not meant as a clear statement towards China, they become more robust as she speaks about the South China Sea and the US position in preserving freedom of navigation.¹⁹³

Rhodes also made a robust statement towards China on the subject of cyber theft. He stated the US would not back down invoking sanctions on Chinese entities that were

¹⁸⁸ Vice President Joe Biden, 'Vice President Biden Hosts a Luncheon for President Xi of the People's Republic of China', *The White House Archives* 25 September 2015 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/2015/09/25/vice-president-biden-hosts-luncheon-president-xi-people-s-republic> (20-12-2019).

¹⁸⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁰ Roy, 'The United States and the South China Sea', 228; Lee & Lee, 'US FONOPs in South China Sea', 456.

¹⁹¹ Lee & Lee, 'US FONOPs in South China Sea', 461.

¹⁹² Susan E. Rice, 'National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice's As Prepared Remarks on the U.S.-China Relationship at George Washington University', *The White House Archives* 21 September 2015 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/21/national-security-advisor-susan-e-rices-prepared-remarks-us-china> (22-12-2019).

¹⁹³ Ibidem.

involved in cyber intrusions.¹⁹⁴ The used language was a warning to China that a display of force by the US was a plausible option. It was a visible change from the dialogue from the years before, being more attractive then. Now the US was using more robust language, putting the two countries against each other. But still appealing to the responsibility of China by making sure “there is a level playing field in China.”¹⁹⁵

4.2 The State Department

That appealing stance was still being uphold by Kerry. In contrary to the seemingly hardened discourse of the White House, Kerry was emphasizing the strong collaboration between China and the US. At the lunch hosted by Biden and Kerry during the state visit of Xi, Kerry stated the “close ties between our nations” were hard to “envision years ago”.¹⁹⁶ That emphasis again shows the continuous attempt of the Obama administration to reinforce the relations with China.

A few months later during the visit of Kerry to China, the US Secretary of State underlined the mutual agreement of realizing the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.¹⁹⁷ Showing the world the two powers had the same interests and were in it together to resolve the issue of the nuclear threat of North Korea. Kerry’s remarks seemed to demonstrate positivity on the US-China relations.

And in contrary to Biden, Kerry did not pronounce against the Chinese aggression in the South China Sea in his remarks. He made clear the US did “not take sides on the sovereignty questions.”¹⁹⁸ That may be correct, but the US did condemn Chinese sovereignty claims, as it performed Freedom of Navigation Operations under the United

¹⁹⁴ Ben Rhodes, ‘Conference Call to Preview the Visit of Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China’, *The White House Archives* 22 September 2015 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/23/conference-call-preview-visit-president-xi-jinping-peoples-republic> (5-1-2020).

¹⁹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁶ John Kerry, ‘Secretary Kerry Co-hosts a Lunch for Chinese President Xi Jinping Along with Vice President Joe Biden’, *US Department of State Archives* 25 September 2015 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/09/247326.htm> (5-1-2020).

¹⁹⁷ John Kerry, ‘Press Availability With Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’, *US Department of State Archives* 27 January 2016 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/01/251708.htm> (5-1-2020).

¹⁹⁸ Ibidem.

Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹⁹⁹ The US largely criticized the Chinese claims, so Kerry's statement did not reflect the actual US policy. That policy focused on convincing the Chinese government of upholding to international rules.

Russel discussed that policy at the Fifth Annual South China Sea Conference. He stated "the international rules-based system has been the essential but underappreciated underpinning of global growth over the last 70 years."²⁰⁰ With that statement, he was emphasizing the importance of the system led by the US and that it should be uphold. A statement like that could be interpreted as a direct message to China, in its pursue of challenging the US hegemony. It points to the Obama administration's attempt of countering China's aspirations of power by appealing to mutual benefits. The US was not ready to give up its hegemonic role, but it tried to keep it by using dialogue, instead of tough measures.

4.3 The Department of Treasury

That the dialogue on the economic side between the US and China was working out, becomes clear from Secretary Lew's statements during a visit to China in February 2016. He stated that the openness and sincere communications between the two countries were important for their mutual benefits.²⁰¹ Again a positive note from Lew on the US-China relations. In this, the economic part does not seem to change.

Lew did urge the Chinese to make their economy more transparent.²⁰² Pointing to the fairness in the international economy. That urge is more visible in statements by his Under Secretary Nathan Sheets. He tried to encourage China to assume a greater role in world politics by stating China "must strengthen its sense of ownership in upholding and

¹⁹⁹ Roy, 'The United States and the South China Sea', 228; Lee & Lee, 'US FONOPs in South China Sea', 456.

²⁰⁰ Daniel R. Russel, 'Remarks at the Fifth Annual South China Sea Conference', *US Department of State Archives* 21 July 2015 <http://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2015/07/245142.htm> (8-1-2020).

²⁰¹ Jack Lew, 'Remarks of Secretary Lew Before Meeting with Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang', *US Department of Treasury Archives* 28 February 2016 <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0368.aspx> (9-1-2020).

²⁰² Ibidem.

strengthening the rules-based international system.”²⁰³ A returning statement by Obama administration’s officials.

4.4 The Department of Defense

China not upholding to those norms was becoming a concern for the DoD. It threatened the US-China relationship. Secretary Carter notably emphasized the US and China “are not allies,” a description of the US-China relationship that was not used by other Obama administration officials.²⁰⁴ It indicates a change in the discourse from previous years, where the words “friends” and “partners” were more used. Carter added “we don’t have to be adversaries,” making clear the US intentions in the Asia-Pacific were not hostile to China’s regional power.²⁰⁵ Although, his comments sounded reassuring, they appeared to be reflecting the US attempt of containing China’s power.

Carter enforced that thought by condemning Chinese activity in the South China Sea to be “intensive and aggressive reclamation.”²⁰⁶ The language used is robust and sends a clear signal to China that the US would not recognize any claims. And despite President Xi stating China would be upholding to international law, Carter questioning the President’s intentions by stating “we all must mean what we say.”²⁰⁷ Pointing to the Chinese government statements not reflecting its actions.

These statements point to an increasing possibility of an upcoming clash between the two countries. Nevertheless, Carter rejected the zero-sum thinking, in which the only thing China’s rise would lead to was displacing the US as leader of the international system. The Defense Secretary believed a strong American role in the Asia-Pacific would continue the

²⁰³ Nathan Sheets, ‘Remarks by Under Secretary Nathan Sheets on China’s Rebalancing and Financial Reform at Columbia University’, *US Department of Treasury Archives* 5 November 2015 <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0259.aspx> (9-1-2020).

²⁰⁴ Ash Carter, ‘Remarks on the Next Phase of the U.S. Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific (McCain Institute, Arizona State University)’, *US Department of Defense Archives* 6 April 2015 <https://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1929> (9-1-2020).

²⁰⁵ Ibidem.

²⁰⁶ Ash Carter, ‘Remarks at the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting – Plus (ADMM-Plus)’, *US Department of Defense Archives* 4 November 2015 <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/628351/remarks-at-the-asean-defense-ministers-meeting-plus-admm-plus/> (9-1-2020).

²⁰⁷ Ibidem.

“rise and prosper” of all countries in the region, including China.²⁰⁸ His statement suggests the US would not be backing down in the region and it would keep projecting its power there.

An upcoming clash was not how the situation would play out, but the fact remained that the US was trying to maintain its position as leading power in the Asia-Pacific. It appeared the Obama administration began to realize that in order to accomplish that, a tougher stance against China was necessary. While keeping the dialogue going with the US, China was following its own plans in the meantime. Caring little about the urges of the US of upholding to the international rules-based system.

²⁰⁸ Carter, ‘Remarks on the Next Phase’ <https://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1929> (9-1-2020).

Discussion

Throughout the length of the Obama administration, the foreign policy was focused on helping China to take on a more responsible role in the US-led international rules-based system. During the time of the first S&ED in 2009, the discourse of the administration had a welcoming character. The words that were used were appealing and had a welcoming gesture. The administration officials tried to make clear to their Chinese counterparts that it was in their mutual benefit to cooperate on major global challenges. It was also an acknowledgement of the US that it needed China's assistance to solve the contemporary global issues.

With the introduction of the "Pivot to Asia" strategy, it seemed the US made a logical change in its foreign policy by focusing on the new economic center of the world. However, underlying reasons in this new focus were the Chinese attempts of balancing the US hegemony. The discourse of the Obama administration showed more warnings and displays of power towards China than in the years before. The US was trying to assure the rest of the world that it was not declining. It was still the dominating power, also in the Asia-Pacific. Specifically the officials from the White House, DoS and DoD made more tough statements. The DT was mostly pleased with the changes the Chinese economy underwent.

When Xi Jinping assumed office, the Obama administration was hopeful of developing an even stronger relationship with China. The word "friendship" was frequently used to describe the relationship between Xi, Obama and Biden. This illustrated the sincere intentions of the Obama administration to strengthen the relationship, as the administration sought cooperation over competition. The US was willing to let China rise to power, but it was not willing to let China take over its leading position.

In the years after, the language of the Obama administration toughened. With tensions between the two countries rising, it seemed the administration began to realize China was not willing to keep up the status quo. Administration officials urged their Chinese counterparts to uphold to the international rules, as those rules were also beneficial for China's rise. The discourse changed to more robust statements and condemnations of Chinese activities. The Obama administration was not willing to let China become an adversary, but the two countries began to compete more and more.

Conclusion

This research aimed to identify if there was a discourse within the Obama administration on United States relative power decline regarding China's rise to power and to what extent that discourse was produced. The results of the analyses show the Obama administration did in fact produce a discourse on US relative power decline. The US could not take on global challenges on its own and it appealed to the rising power China to assist in their mutual benefit. The Obama administration acknowledged the fact China was becoming a rivalling power to the US. However, the administration was not willing to let China take over its leading role in the international system. The US was still the dominating power in the world. With his foreign policy in Asia, Obama tried to show his allies the US was there to stay, while also giving China time and room to grow. Obama believed a prosperous China was beneficial to the entire world. As long as China would be upholding to the rules of the international system.

The research was done by performing a political discourse analysis of remarks by prominent officials of the Obama administration. A political discourse analysis contributed to understanding what implications the statements had on the US foreign policy regarding China. The statements that were chosen to analyze were direct responses to four events that occurred during Obama's presidency. These four events illustrated a change in the discourse of the administration over the years. Finding that change supported the argument of the existence of a discourse on US relative power decline, as the change made clear US power was not able to restrict China's power anymore.

In order to understand how that change in discourse precisely affected the US policy, further research is needed. It would be interesting to research discursive constructions within the Obama administration, to see how the discourse influenced the foreign policy. Furthermore, there were some limitations in the discourse analysis. The amount of speeches and statements from the DoD and DT that could be consulted around the four cases were limited. Thus, it was harder to analyze the discourse from those departments. To get a better understanding of the discourse, more data needs to be analyzed.

That said, this research has contributed to the debate on the Obama administration's role in US power decline. It has shown the Obama administration had insight on its relative

decline in power. However, the administration was determined to maintain its leading position in the international system and it wanted China to become an equal partner in that system. This adds to the argument of Robert Sutter that the US “pivot” to Asia was a statement to the region the US was there to stay as the dominating power.

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