President Obama’s pivot to Asia was characterized by a restructuring of America’s soft power, specifically in public and economic diplomacy. This policy improved relations among some states in the Asia Pacific region, but also created animosity among others, which played a role in the election of President Trump. Trump defenestrated Obama’s diplomacy efforts, ushering in a new foreign policy grounded in more overt uses of hard power. However, he has also incorporated less overt mechanisms of persuasion through his emphasis on economic development. In other words, chief among Trump’s America First foreign policy agenda is his emphasis on hard power, but there are kernels of softer power policy in his economic development strategy that should be highlighted and utilized in his focus on the Indo-Pacific.

First, Obama employed public diplomacy through cultural connectivity. Obama’s 14 trips to Asia, not including multilateral meetings, signaled the administration’s commitment to engagement. Diplomatic ties were reinforced with states such as South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Japan, Australia, India, and the Philippines. Additional soft power initiatives like the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) sought to carry out strategic U.S. goals through economic development, education, and environmental protection.

Similarly, Obama and Secretary of State Clinton promoted economic diplomacy in the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP, a multilateral trade deal consisting of 11 states, was forged by Washington to pioneer trade in the 21st century and rewrite the rules of trade regarding intellectual property. Obama vigorously campaigned for the TPP because he felt it would promote prosperity through establishing an “open, rules based economy.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

In sum, Obama followed a policy of both containment and engagement to deal with China, by supporting the export of African minerals and Middle Eastern gas in the maritime region. Obama sought an opportunity to establish a foothold in the “world’s political and economic center of gravity”[[2]](#endnote-2) and fortify U.S. hegemony around the globe.

Obama’s public and economic diplomacy had varying effects across the Asia Pacific region. Powerful actors tended to feel threatened by America’s inexorable presence in the region. North Korea felt that the U.S. military presence infringed upon their sovereignty, and China denounced the containment strategy introduced by the Obama administration. Obama’s public diplomacy did help mediate Beijing’s animosity by welcoming the rise of China, but Xi responded by investing billions of dollars into his Silk Road initiative, establishing and extending communication channels and fueling economic prowess. Additionally, other actors sought refuge in America's presence in the region. Allies and smaller states were encouraged by U.S. engagement through their incorporation in the TPP, diplomatic engagement with foreign leaders, and “person-to-person” connections made in initiatives like YEASLI.

Pew Research Polls proved public and economic diplomacy effective. Favorability towards the U.S. improved with the exception of American ideals and customs. Countries like Vietnam, Japan, and the Philippines, favored American ideals and customs, while Australia, India, and Indonesia were less favorable. Median scores from the Asia Pacific (excluding China and North Korea) embraced the “elements of U.S. soft power” by 54%.[[3]](#endnote-3) Obama’s diplomacy made small steps in the right direction in Asia. That said, with the U.S’ retraction from the TPP, a nuclearized North Korea and an invigorated China weakened U.S. power posturing in the Asia Pacific and stymied strategic stability.

What followed was an “America First” foreign policy spearheaded by Trump and Secretary of State Tillerson.

Trump’s 12-day tour, visiting five states, demonstrated continuity with Obama’s pivot to Asia, but Trump focused less on defense and more on prosperity through economic nationalism. Trump’s speech in Danang orientated the U.S. towards economic development through trade, infrastructure, and economic relations. However, with the rejection of multilateral agreements like the TPP, the administration will have no choice but to pursue bilateral agreements. Washington will, therefore, find it easier to dictate trade relations that benefit the U.S., but likely at the expense of the partners in these trade agreements causing diplomatic dissonance.

However, this does not have to be the case. “America First” does not necessarily mean a turn away from economic and public diplomacy. Economic development in the maritime region can aid developing Asian states, put America first, and achieve diplomatic goals. Tillerson should aim to use actors like the Philippines as a strategic bridge to China when negotiating trade deals going forward and enter bilateral agreements that spur markets for U.S. products. Instead of encircling China to control the material flow in the maritime, Trump can use his good relations with Duterte to increase economic ties between the three states, effectively integrating U.S., Filipino, and Chinese economic interests. The U.S. could facilitate various economic projects that would enhance cross-Pacific and intra-Pacific trade and relations.

Trump should also look to a bilateral trade agreement with India that takes into consideration their rise on the global stage. India, in a few decades, could surpass China in population size and economic power. Thus, the U.S. would be remiss not to capitalize on the growth of India by funding and promoting infrastructural and manufacturing development that could be a future market for U.S. exports.

This approach, still consistent with the Trump Administration’s policies, turns U.S. Asia Pacific policy into a positive-sum approach by integrating economic interests. This approach remedies conflict, encouraging developing states’ prosperity, and ties the U.S. to the booming economic center of the world for decades to come.

1. Office of the Press Secretary, *FACT SHEET: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific*, The White House, (Washington, D.C., 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Press Secretary, *Rebalance to Asia*, (Washington, D.C., 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, Jacob Poushter and Janell Fetterolf, *U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump’s Leadership*, Pew Research Center, (Washington, D.C., 2017), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)