

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia.* By Kurt M. Campbell. New York and Boston: Twelve, 2016. Hardcover: 399pp.**

American foreign policy has always come in numerous editions. The first unfolds in the press as its practitioners try to shape the world to America's liking. Subsequent ones come out in book form, as they later seek to justify the wisdom of their policies. The Asian adventures of the first Obama administration (2009–12) are no exception. James Steinberg, a former Deputy Secretary of State, has co-authored (with Michael O'Hanlon) a book on "strategic reassurance" in US–China relations. Jeffrey Bader, who was on the National Security Council at the time, has written "an insider's account of America's Asia strategy". And the former Secretary of State herself, Hillary Clinton, has published a volume of memoirs covering the period.

The commander-in-chief's contribution presumably still awaits a book deal. But, with *The Pivot*, Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs from 2009–13, enters an already crowded field. It is to his credit that his book still has something to add to the debate, and is written in an engaging, readable style. It is a mixture familiar to aficionados of the genre: part personal anecdote (enough to give the reader the sense that he is being offered a truly "insider's" account, but not so much as to risk any security clearances); part appreciation of the famous politicians he has served (favourable enough not to jeopardize relations or career opportunities but not so starry-eyed as to sink into sycophancy); part self-justifying exposition (striking a delicate balance between claiming credit for a policy he clearly believes in without diminishing the role played by his political bosses).

Of all the members of the administration, Campbell was perhaps most closely associated with the policy that gives his book its title

and the Obama administration its foreign-policy legacy in Asia: the “pivot” or “rebalance” of American diplomatic, political and military assets towards Asia. Campbell’s book is an extended defence of the pivot. He has, he writes, two main arguments to advance in the book (p. 7). The first is that “Asia has often — if not always — played a secondary role behind more pressing regional concerns in Europe during the cold war and the Middle East during the war on terror. It is time to revisit these global rankings and to finally elevate Asia to a new prominence in the councils of American policymaking.” The second is to advocate a strategy to achieve this, with the aim of “fulfilling its traditional post-World War II role in the region, keeping credible its alliance commitments, and sustaining Asia’s ‘operating system’ (the complex legal, security and practical arrangements that have underscored four decades of prosperity and security).”

The months since *The Pivot* was published have not been kind to the pivot itself. China’s continued assertiveness in the South China Sea and its bare-faced refusal to accept the judgement of the Arbitral Tribunal’s ruling on its claims there suggest that Asia’s “operating system” is at serious risk. America’s opposition to China’s actions is shared by most of the region. But that is not affecting the new facts appearing in the water. The death in October of Thailand’s King Bhumibol Adulyadej makes it even more unlikely that the military will cede political control, continuing to complicate America’s relations with an important ally that is drawing closer to China. Worse, the free-trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), whose importance Mr Campbell says is “difficult to overstate”, being “the true *sine qua non* of the pivot” (p. 266), is in deep trouble. The two candidates for the American presidency competed with each other to condemn it, and it now seems unlikely that it will be ratified by a lame duck Congress.

Campbell offers a pre-emptive defence against criticism of the pivot. He points out that the pivot is accused of doing “so little it scarcely matters and so much that it causes serious harm” (p. 20). He uses this apparent contradiction to argue — as all politicians, journalists and officials do, when attacked from both sides — that the balance must have been about right. This, however, is to misunderstand the criticism: it is that the pivot has been both too little to reassure America’s allies, and too much not to alarm China with the fear that America is engaged in a concerted attempt to rally regional opposition against it, and to “contain” its rise.

Indeed, the Chinese officials who read his book will probably feel confirmed in their suspicions. Campbell is frank that “American statecraft has worked to blend diplomatic, economic and military *means* in order to prevent the emergence of a hegemon in Asia, which has been the key way to keep the region safe for American *ends* like trade, faith, democracy and traditional security” (p. 136). America says “hegemon-prevention”; China says “containment”. And, like so many US officials, Campbell seems, to Asian eyes, to underestimate the scale of the challenge China poses to the American-led order: why would Beijing want to upturn an arrangement from which it has been the most spectacular beneficiary? Yet the signs, for example, that the Philippines’ new president, Rodrigo Duterte may indeed be intent on a “pivot” of his own, away from American alliance and towards China-appeasement, knock a big dent in America’s East Asian ambitions and illustrate the extent to which its inability to prevent China’s creeping territorial aggrandisement has undermined its standing among some of its traditional friends in the region.

It would be unfair to accuse Campbell of ignoring the many difficulties the Obama administration’s Asian policy faces. He goes through a depressing litany: distractions from the Middle East (p. 307); “a sense of exhaustion” and desire to “come home” among America’s people (p. 303); inadequate defence spending (p. 300); and political “deadlock and dysfunction” (p. 297). It is his misfortune that prospects on most of these fronts have actually worsened since he began writing and since the book was published. During the 2016 election campaign, the incoming president, Donald Trump, took aim at many of the elements of the pivot, such as America’s alliances with Japan and South Korea and the TPP. Quite how many of the campaign threats and promises will be translated into policy is unknowable. But it seems, at the least, that American diplomacy is poised for another, very different pivot.

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