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The United States (US) Strategy of Pivot to Asia: Balancing the China's Economic Power in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Despite the US official statement that the purpose of its pivot to Asia is to rebalance the foreign policy towards Asia, it is also known that it aimed for the US to “rebalance” growing China's power in economy and military. Prospectively, the pivot to Asia aims to create a more balanced economy, security and diplomacy. However, it risks creating Chinese perceptions and suspicions that lead to a more competitive acquisition of the position of “superpower” in the region, especially in the economy. So how did the US implement the strategy concerned with China's economic growth in the region? Thus, this article aims to discuss the strategy of the pivot to Asia in facing the rise of China's economic activities in Southeast Asia. The study was qualitative by conducting library research, and the data were analysed using a thematic approach. The study highlights four strategies of economic elements, i.e. reducing the defence budget, new defence plans, *engagement* in Southeast Asia multilateral and regional institutions, and promoting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). This article confirms that despite the aim to rebalance the policy to the Asia Pacific, all the economic strategies implemented concerned the rise of China as an economic power in the region. Overall, this study concludes that the pivot to Asia strategy only created another continuous rivalry between US-China and balanced the hegemonic superpower in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: The United States, Pivot to Asia, China, Economic, Southeast Asia.

Introduction

The primary purpose of the introduction of pivot to Asia by Barack Obama in 2010 was to enable the US to play a more significant and continuous role in shaping the direction of the Asia region in the future (The White House, 2011). According to John Kerry, the term pivot is a new opportunity for the US and one of the US foreign policy initiatives (Mishra, 2014). The pivot aimed at a rebalancing strategy for US interests from Europe and the Middle East toward East Asia. In this regard, it may be significant that Obama never mentioned the term pivot during his visit to Asia. US National Security Adviser Tom Donilon spoke in terms of rebalancing rather than making a pivot. However, Clinton has repeatedly called US policy a Pivot to Asia (Lieberthal, 2011).

This strategy is interpreted as the return of the superpower to a region long abandoned since the Global War on Terror (GWOT) campaign in 2001. With the return of the US to the area, closer ties in terms of economic, security and military diplomacy are expected between Washington and the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The pivot to Asia is also seen as an opportunity for Southeast Asia countries to make Washington an alternative to China's rise to power in recent years (Hu, 2021).

According to Donilon (2011), the primary US goal in the pivot to Asia is to promote US interests while helping to shape rules and norms in the Asia Pacific region. In addition, the strategy also aims to ensure that international law is fully complied with and can promote the economy and free trade practices that US investors often champion. Donilon described the pivot to Asia as formed as a solution to the problem of disputes so that the issues highlighted can be resolved prudently without involving any form of threat or the use of coercion by the major powers.

On the other hand, the pivot to Asia is often seen as another US hegemony strategy in the region. Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth (2013) highlighted that US hegemony has benefited the US and the world. Because hegemony has reduced serious security competition, hegemony provides a solution to an unmanageable power imbalance. It can offer considerable benefits to the US Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth added that it is essential for the US to put strategy a priority or deep *engagement*. It is crucial to prevent the return of political conflicts or disputes, where a balance of power can occur in a unipolar system.

The pivot to Asia is a US foreign policy that will be central to the US objectives for the Asia region. The Asia region that has been comfortable with US hegemony now faces challenges from other powers that are likely to have some implications (Cook, 2015). Even so, pivoting to Asia will face the situation of the choice of Southeast Asia countries to continue to side with the US or face the opposite reflection, especially when looking at the dynamics of the current situation (Graham, 2013). This spectrum of problems occurs when the pivot to Asia "is forced" to face Chinese competition. This competition is particularly evident in China's economic and military development, especially in the waters of the South China Sea (Cardenas, 2020).

China's gesture in increasing economic capacity has challenged the Obama administration to maintain hegemonic power through the pivot to Asia. Despite the US official statement that the purpose of its pivot to Asia is to rebalance the foreign policy towards Asia, it is also widely highlighted in literature and media reports that the US aimed to "rebalance" growing China's power in economy and military. Prospectively, the pivot to Asia aims to create a more balanced economy, security and diplomacy. However, it risks creating Chinese perceptions and suspicions that lead to a more competitive acquisition of the position of "superpower" in the region, especially in the economic sphere. So what is the implementation strategy of the Pivot to Asia? How did the US implement it within the context of the rising of China's economic activities in the region? Therefore, this article aims to discuss four strategies adopted by the US under the economic element with the concern of the rise of China's economic activity in the region.

Literature Review

There are significant past studies (such as Manyan et al., 2012; De Castro, 2013; Campbell and Andrews, 2013, and Reininger et al., 2016) on the US pivot to Asia during Obama and its relation to the balance of power. However, more in-depth studies need to be conducted on the implementation's challenges, especially in the context of power competition in Southeast Asia. This part will highlight a brief review of the US motives for the pivot to Asia, China's reaction to it and the competition between the US and China in the region.

Despite the denial made by Hillary Clinton (Copper, 2014), few studies (such as Silone, 2013; De Castro, 2013; Robertson, 2017) support the argument that one of the purposes of its pivot to Asia by Obama was to balance and manage the rise of China's power in the region. Campbell and Andrews (2013) described the Pivot to Asia strategy on Asia countries to balance US power in the South China Sea. The US had planned six strategies US to make the pivot to Asia a success. An alliance with a strategic partnership is among the important strategies for the US. Strengthening the allies is profound to ensure peace and security in Asia.

Campbell and Andrew (2013) state that it is essential for the US to realise that the Asia Pacific has become a focus of economic activity. This statement contrasts Silove's (2016) writing, which argued that the pivot to Asia's purpose is to manage China's rise. Earlier, the US and South Korea had agreed to a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) where tariffs of up to 95 per cent on exports of US consumer and industrial goods were eliminated for five years. In addition, the TPP agreement is expected to create a fair trade community for the countries involved. The US was also trying to work with ASEAN to make the TPP successful.

Furthermore, Ciuriak (2013) argues that the pivot to Asia is more inclined toward implementing economic elements of nationalism. Pivot to Asia faces the challenge of increasing Chinese trade by introducing the TPP. The introduction of the TPP is seen as likely to protect the economy of US nationalism. The TPP provides protections, tariffs, subsidies and a quota system. It is believed that the aim is to protect the economic industries of weak and less viable participating countries.

Some studies have shown that, apart from the TPP agreement, the US has strengthened good relations with allied countries, namely South Korea, Japan and Australia. Bader (2012) argued that the US would take an active role in various issues in the Asia region, especially as a guest at the East Asia Summit. In this context, the US is believed to use the pivot to Asia as one element of the initiative to strengthen ties with multilateral institutions in Southeast Asia (Campbell & Andrew, 2013). Recognising the strengths and importance of ASEAN in the region, the US was invited as a non-member guest in several ASEAN meetings and allowed to raise cooperation issues and organise related programs. Furthermore, in the US effort to implement the pivot to Asia, the US also is believed to promote universal values on issues of human rights and democracy in establishing diplomatic relations with foreign countries.

On the other hand, Southeast Asia, in general, is facing various political and security challenges, including the coercion of US hegemony. The emergence of China after the Cold War also created a new dimension of power balance in the Asia region, primarily related to the South China Sea (Wang, 2008; Cho & Park, 2013). The orientation of US foreign policy

within the pivot to Asia will determine how the US maintains a balance of power over Asia countries (Parameswaran, 2013).

While few studies confirm the importance of US-China relations in the international system, they also agree that the pivot to Asia was the US another way to compete with the emergence of China in the economic realm (Walia, 2014). Friedberg (2012) suggests that China's economic and military revival aimed to show Beijing's success and win without fighting with Washington. Indirectly, Beijing is seen to have succeeded in replacing the US as a major power in Asia by avoiding a real confrontation. Friedberg sees the pivot to Asia provide an unpleasant and risky sign of the dispute with China.

Andrew (2013) highlights a similar argument. He believes that factors influencing the US pivot to Asia were triggered by China's mega projects, i.e. *Belt and Road Initiatives* (BRI). Friedman and Mandelbaum (2011) also acknowledge that economic rivalry between these two powers becomes a major contributor to the existence of the pivot to Asia. This factor is clarified by suggesting that if the US deficit increases and the US does not increase trade activities with other countries, US economic dominance could fall in global markets.

Likewise, studies show that China perceived the pivot to Asia as a threat. Zhang (2016) highlights that China may consider the pivot to Asia a threat as the US aims to ensure hegemonic power in Asia. Friedberg (2018) also argues that from an economic point of view, China is more clearly competing with the US than other countries. Further, this is reinforced by the significant deficit rate in trade between the US and China has further fuelled Washington's concerns over Beijing's capabilities.

In addition, Swaine (2012) also discusses the rise of China and its impact on economic growth in the region. The negotiations of the TPP agreement and the claims in the South China Sea have brought China to the brink of conflict. Conflicts will get worse if those issues are not appropriately addressed. The study by Storey (2013); Li & Lee (2011) supported the idea that the US has to take into account the importance of TPP negotiations and disputes in the South China Sea for the success of the pivot to Asia.

The pivot to Asia was developed by the US when the TPP proposal faced Chinese rivals. Kissinger (2012) claims that the TPP will remove barriers in trade and be considered a productive, dynamic, resource-efficient cooperation. Obama has invited China to join the TPP. However, China the terms in the TPP agreement requiring China to change the structure of the domestic economy were not agreed upon. Therefore, the TPP, which is still under discussion, is seen as marginalising China.

Also, the US has taken appropriate measures to control the economy, which is always stable. The US will try to re-evaluate China's government subsidies to paper-making companies. The US also acts to keep all reports on some non-standard Chinese products to be brought to the World Trade Organization (WTO) report in the future (Kissinger, 2012).

In contrast, the study by Andrew (2013) highlights that the US faces competition from China's increasing capabilities in terms of international relations and security. Nevertheless, Friedman and Mandelbaum (2011) do not deny the rivalry of economic factors as a contributor to the

existence of the pivot to Asia. This factor is clarified by suggesting that if the US deficit increases and the US does not increase trade activities with other countries, US economic dominance could fall in global markets.

Implementing the pivot to Asia is a "boost" to China's economy. Pan and Mishra (2016) found that before the pivot to Asia, the US had experienced the phenomenon of economic recession. However, this phenomenon is faced with China's encouraging economic growth. China is growing economically, especially in terms of stock and financial markets. Feng and He (2017) study clarify this issue by highlighting that international economic ideology is at odds with international liberal economic policy. China's liberal economic policy ideology is an ideology that can disrupt the free trade process. It disrupts the process by which we have long supported international liberal economic policies.

As Lutter (2015) mentioned, economics is another policy tool for the US in international relations. Similarly, with China, the Obama administration also adopted a soft power approach in extending its power hegemony in Asia, especially in the Southeast Asian region. The pivot to Asia manifests this soft power in the region. Past studies have confirmed that there is real competition and rivalry between these two powers, albeit a soft approach, which created challenges to the implementation of the US policy of the pivot to Asia, especially the economic challenges from China.

Overall, the study on the pivot to Asia and its relations with China has been discussed from various perspectives. Past studies have shown that despite rebalancing the US foreign policy in the Asia Pacific, this policy is also seen as aiming to contain the power of China in the region. Nevertheless, despite US official documents and statements, there still needs to be more studies compiling the strategy adopted by the US in implementing the pivot to Asia. Therefore, this article expects to highlight the US strategy concerned with expanding China's economic activities.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach with the library research method. The primary data collection technique is based on accessing information from sources in the library, printed and electronic documents. This method involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information and personal or expert opinion on a research question (George, 2008). Primary data were obtained from books, journal articles, organisations, media reports, and newspaper clippings.

In qualitative research, the analysis is guided by research questions (Creswell, 2009). The researcher used thematic analysis to analyse all the gathered data and information. It is a process of identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting themes within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The themes were developed based on the main questions, i.e. what is the implementation strategy of the Pivot to Asia, and how is it implemented? This study followed the following steps: familiarising the data or the information, searching and generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the findings (Javadi & Zarea, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017).

Findings and Discussion

The US undertook four main strategies in implementing the pivot to Asia with the concern of China's economic activities in the Southeast Asia region. The strategy includes explicitly defence budget reductions, a new defence plan, engaging with the regional institution and platform and promoting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Defence Budget Reductions

The pivot to Asia had taken defence budget cuts in 2013. Nevertheless, Washington's stance that that year's defence budget cuts would not limit the US presence in the region indicates that the Obama Administration prioritises the pivot to Asia. The defence budget cuts issued by the Department of Defense (DoD) through the Strategic Guidelines in January 2012 showed a minimal cut to the size of the US Navy, with reductions more focused on the Army and Marines (Dale & Towell, 2012).

Except for the Korean Peninsula, the Asian region is essentially the focus of the pivot to Asia element's round of operations. Thus, the decision to reduce the US Navy's minimal defence budget compared to other services does not appear to jeopardise the transition plan. The following indicates the US and China's aggregate economic and military capabilities in **Table 1**.

Table 1

Aggregate Indications of US-China Economic and Military Capabilities

	GDP	PCI	Military Expenditure			Safety Personnel
	(\$Trillion)	(US\$)	Outlays (AS\$Billion)	From % GDP	PerCapita (AS\$)	(active, thousand)
The US	14.50	47,699	552,568	3.99	1,835	1,540
China	4.22	3,178	46,174	1.42	35	2,185

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2009* (London: Routledge, 2009).

Indications

Gross domestic product (GDP): Indicator of the aggregate size of the economy – national capabilities or power.

Per capita income (PCI): Indicator of level of economic development.

Military spending: Indicator of the magnitude of the overall defence spending.

Military spending as % of GDP and dollars per capita: indicators of the degree of commitment to allocating national resources to defence.

Armed forces personnel: Indicator of the overall size of the armed forces.

Based on Table 1 shows that the US GDP indicator exceeded China more than three times in 2009. The GDP difference of US \$ 10.28, and the US still maintains domestic productivity despite intending to reduce the US defence budget. Indicators also clearly prove that the US allocates a substantial percentage of military spending to the Pentagon, which is 3.99% of the

total US GDP. Compared to China, which has made some increase in military capabilities, data shows China accounts for only 1.42% of the total GDP earned.

Furthermore, China's GDP of US \$4.22 is also still lower than the US. The released indicator also distinguishes the number of US military personnel still actively serving in most US security deployments worldwide, which is 1,540. However, the number of Chinese security personnel on duty has surpassed the US by 645 thousand. This is because the Chinese population is one of the largest in the world has allowed the Chinese government to place its citizens as security personnel.

At the same time, cuts in the US defence budget cannot stop current technological developments. The US has had to keep up with the development of anti-access technology around the world. Especially against the PLA, which has now doubled its military R&D. Etzioni's view states that the Obama Administration should rethink how to maintain access in a contested environment. It requires a serious change in US engagement's strength, structure and posture. Nevertheless, the pivot to Asia could be planned by making a clear investment in long-distance and underwater assets will be beneficial. While requiring very high political and economic costs, the issue is discussed in who authorised preparations for war with China (Etzioni, 2013).

While defence budget cuts are only temporary, based on an international perspective, they have undermined US allies' confidence to some extent. Reinforced by China's challenge of doubling its defence and trade systems, countries like the Philippines have been impressed and on good terms with China during President Duterte's administration (Estrada, 2018). Overall, the Chinese threat has not yet been able to threaten US defence because, based on statistics, the US defence budget is still the highest in the world.

Overall, the defence budget reduction element has many other reasons and may not concern much with the rise of China in the region. It shows that Obama's primary purpose is to solve US internal problems. Among others, he tried to address the issue of relatively high unemployment and provided several initiatives to provide equipment and financial facilities to enterprises, including US agriculture.

New Defense Plan

The second most important strategy of the pivot to Asia after the defence budget reduction was the new defence plan, the pivot to Asia. Since November 2011, the US has taken several important steps in implementing elements of the rebalancing strategy in the Asia Pacific. Among them are three new initiatives under this strategic transition plan, namely military priorities and manoeuvres, a more integrated and comprehensive approach to the Asia Pacific region and a vision of geographical expansion of the region that also includes the Indian Ocean. It is considered the most high-profile initiative regarding military and mobilisation priorities.

Subsequently, changes in defence plans can influence the nationalism of opponents. There is ample evidence that nationalism affects mass and elite politics in China. It is also included among liberal intellectuals. According to Weiss (2011), the US is a liberal country, but nationalism has strongly influenced its foreign policy. Lieven (2004), however, believes that China wants power and needs changes towards liberalisation, including security from US

influence. Plans to mobilise personnel and assets to Australia, Singapore and the Philippines see the expansion of the US presence in the region.

The US military already has nearly 85,000 troops in South Korea and Japan. Meanwhile, the move to Australia is a new element in the US strategic transition, even though the country has been a US ally since 1951. Beginning in April 2012, a total of 250 US Marines were deployed to the Australian Army's existing facility in Darwin, Australia, for six months rotating. This size could reach 2,500 Marine Corps members over the next few years (Whitlock, 2012). The Pentagon then confirmed that the US Marine presence in Darwin would increase to 1,100 by mid-2014 (Hagel, 2013).

In addition, the US and Australia have also discussed providing broader access to the US Navy at the Australian Navy base, HMAS Stirling, on the southwest coast of Perth, Australia (McGuirk, 2012). The presence of the US Army in Australia will allow the superpower to react while meeting the demands of allied countries in the Asian region if the situation requires it. Singapore was also confirmed to have received the first US Littoral Combat Ship, the USS Freedom, from four ships allowed to dock at Changi Naval Base in April 2013 (Symonds, 2013).

The pivot to Asia element is expanded with several new placements planned to be located in the Philippines and Singapore. The security centre in Australia's Coco Islands has been extended to three more US military bases to be upgraded in Darwin, Brisbane and Perth. The US DoD plans to dock four US Navy coastal warships for the US military deployment in Singapore. Next, in the Coco Islands, the US will upgrade the aircraft maintenance centre for the so-called P-8 to monitor the movement of surveillance and observation aircraft and uncrewed aircraft (Taylor, 2013).

The Navy's security deployment in Perth would provide more complete facilities to accommodate US submarines. In addition, the HMAS Stirling Naval base's expansion can partially accommodate American aircraft carriers, warships and submarines (Ratner, 2013). The existing military strategy and the deployment of a new US trump to the Asia Pacific region under the next strategic shift in Australia based in Brisbane is a new naval base that can accommodate US submarines and other ships. This was followed by the deployment of troops based in Brisbane, able to accommodate as many as two thousand members of the Navy. The deployment in the Philippines will, in turn, place aircraft with new capabilities to base US surveillance aircraft and warships in Southeast Asia (Green et al., 2016).

In addition, US teams in Asia would also receive the best and latest equipment, including the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. More advanced US air defence fighters and missiles and improved radar capabilities worldwide (Davis et al., 2014). The new P-8 maritime patrol aircraft would be used for the first time in the Pacific as the new long-range missiles. In addition, the US and its major allies, including Japan and Australia, would operate high-altitude long-range endurance UAVs such as the Global Hawk and Triton (Spangler, 2018). New approaches would complement this equipment to maintain and enhance the US military presence, including more rotating forces and frequent demonstrations of US strength (RAND, 2021).

The new defence plan showed a strategy with concern for the rise of China's activity in the region. The US had arranged for the movement of personnel and officers' capacity to more strategic US bases. They deployed 42,000 troops in several strategic locations in Asia, including

Singapore, the Philippines, Australia, Japan and South Korea. It shows that the new defence plan in the pivot to Asia aimed to complement the US defence system. The US is also actively conducting military exercise cooperation with countries in Asia, where most sources indicated that the exercise was intended to warn China of the PLA's unpopular actions by some countries claiming rights in waters in the South China Sea.

Engaging with the Regional Institution and Platform

Under the umbrella goal called "rebalance", the next strategy of the US pivot to Asia is to engage more actively with Asia's regional multilateral institutions and economic platforms (Anderson & Cha, 2017). Obama indicated that this strategy aims to advance the shared rules, norms and principles using the regional order to promote and support the region's prosperity (The White House, 2015). Despite showing continuous support to the regional order, the US eventually used this opportunity through several meetings and conferences to promote their economic initiative plan, TPP.

Obama's first meeting with leaders in Singapore was in November 2009, at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting. Obama next held a follow-up meeting with APEC leaders with the UN Secretary-General at the UN General Assembly in September 2010. The US also intends to continue such discussions annually. The US is also involved in conferences and dialogues organised by ASEAN. The US also participated in the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2010. The US presence at the conference was successful as Southeast Asia leaders warmly welcomed the US despite some economic agencies from China being unhappy with the frequent participation of the US President. One reason for economic agencies is that Obama may only attend some conferences in Southeast Asia by simply being an observer (Gong, 2019). Nevertheless, the element of participating in an important Southeast Asia conference was assisted by the then US Secretary, Clinton, who had several times chaired meetings with Southeast Asia leaders to successfully produce a memorandum related to pivot to Asia (Bower, 2010).

Also, Tom Donilon sought to convince President Obama of the importance of the US joining the EAS. For Donilon, it is important if the US to play a more significant role in Southeast Asia (Jittiang, 2014). US participation in this kind of regional platform was strengthened during the G-20 conference in Toronto on June 27, 2010, where Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd jointly agreed for the US to evolve within the EAS. Both of these leaders argued that the EAS would not have been able to grow without US participation. In addition, Susilo and Rudd believe that the US will be able to play a more constructive role, especially in political and security challenges in Asia, especially when faced with challenges from China. Finally, Bader stated that after considering various aspects, Obama agreed to join the EAS in addition to being able to implement the pivot to Asia element (Pollack & Bader, 2014).

US participation in several discussions and conferences in the Asian region is an important element in determining the success or failure of the pivot to Asia. ASEAN's sensitivity to China's views on multilateral security cooperation has been prominent in the formulation of ARF guiding principles and the evolution of practices as well as ARF activities (De Castro, 2017). For a long time, participation in multilateral security arrangements has been the focus of Chinese leaders. This attitude reflects the realistic view that China should rely on a balance of power. It

is to protect China's security and avoid compromising China's freedom of action as well as sovereignty through involvement in multilateral organisations (Shih & Huang, 2015). In the context of Southeast Asia, China prefers to address security issues and problems bilaterally, where Beijing will maintain a significant advantage over any other Southeast Asia countries (Emmers, 2018).

The pivot to Asia can be considered successful if China is still in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) process. However, ASEAN countries have urged the ARF to follow the ASEAN format and procedures. It will give China enough influence to slow down or speed up activities in the ARF. Among them agreed with the request of Chinese leaders not to institutionalise ARF activities (Lampton, 2013).

Furthermore, Hong (2014) described China as proposing a joint expansion of offshore oil resources. Nevertheless, Beijing will violate the motion without formal confirmation, which is when a drilling concession has been unilaterally granted to a US oil company (Roy, 2016). At the same time, these waters are also claimed by Vietnam. Moreover, although China also used military force in resolving the *Spratlys* dispute, China's interpretation of this commitment did not preclude China's seizure of the uninhabited *Mischief Reef* in 1995 (Mirski, 2015). Thus, China has built a PLA military position on *Mischief Reef* (Fox, 2021).

To conclude, it shows that the US successfully implemented the strategy of *engagement* in the regional institution and platform in the Asia region through US diplomatic relations. Obama has not only acted to participate in conferences such as APEC, EAS and ARF meetings but has also visited almost all selected ASEAN and Asia countries. For example, previous visits to US enemies in Laos and Cambodia have opened a new chapter in US diplomatic relations with ASEAN countries. Another US goal in participating in the most important conferences is to promote the TPP as another strategy to maintain its hegemony in Southeast Asia.

Unsuccessful Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)

The TPP is a proposal paper by the US in the pivot to Asia element. The TPP is also a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the US, Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam. As the organiser, the US has informed those countries that the TPP is a comprehensive and high-level FTA framework. It aims to liberalise trade between member countries for almost all goods and services, including long-term commitments. The TPP is expected to strengthen further the US position in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

TPP is one of the elements of the pivot to Asia that is important to succeed. However, the TPP had problems during the negotiations that took place. It stems from the political differences and needs of most of the participating countries. Thus, the US recommends that the countries involved undertaking economic reforms through the TPP (Tran, Bair and Werner, 2017). For example, Brunei, Malaysia, and Vietnam pledged to reform the labour laws of their respective countries. In return, US consultants have agreed to compromise on some of the past stringent patent protection requirements for pharmacies (Rubinson, 2016).

However, the agreement was never ratified by the US Congress. Republican candidates targeted this issue against Democrats during the 2016 presidential campaign. Trump's victory caused him to withdraw officially from the TPP on his first full day in the White House (Baker,

2017). The TPP is one of the economic approaches used by the US in realising the strategic transition in Asia. In the beginning, the US promoted the TPP to selected countries. The countries involved in the trade pact process of this consideration are the US, Canada, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand.

The TPP is among Obama's key elements in Southeast Asia, which involves the involvement of many countries, most of which are Asia countries. However, Asia countries have their problems that need to be resolved. The TPP may be able to help ASEAN improve the economic issues of Asia countries. The TPP will be considered successful if there is no competition from China's more lucrative economic offer (Chiang, 2019).

Indirectly, China is seen trying to dominate the world economy. President Obama used the TPP to curb China's rise. The selection of countries to join the TPP is not an arbitrary choice. US policy analysts, in detail, must have done in-depth research so that the strategy launched has the maximum impact on the interests of the US (Swaine, 2010).

In November 2009, President Obama agreed to be the organiser of the first US-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) conference. Ironically, in the meantime, as many as 250 US navies have been at strategic security deployments based in Darwin, Australia (Manyin et al., 2012). Also, at the end of November, Obama visited Cambodia, which was also a significant visit because, for the first time, Obama became the US President who had visited Cambodia (Lum, 2013). On that inaugural visit, Obama attended the US-ASEAN Summit, which he expected to promote the TPP among ASEAN members.

Former US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said the pivot to Asia was not drastic because the US has been in Asia for a long time. According to him again, this strategy shift is heavily influenced by the recognition that US security and stability in the 21st century will be linked through security for the sake of Asia's progress beyond other regions (Mulrine, 2013). Thus, the presence of the US Army is intended to counter-attack to gain the power to rival China and strengthen ties with economically growing Asia countries.

TPP discussions should address issues of copyright ownership, services in trade, government procurement, investment, legal protection of indigenous peoples, competition, labour, environmental standards and other related matters. As the countries involved in the TPP discussions differ from various angles, such as industrial progress, income gap and economic growth, the US hopes to make some economic modifications for the benefit of the participating countries (Fergusson, McMinimy and Williams, 2015).

TPP was the centrepiece of the Pivot to Asia strategy. Some scholars (Lo, 2018) suggested that it is a strategy of soft balancing by the US towards the rise of China, and it may be a challenging outcome for Obama's pivot to Asia. Obama's successor, Trump, rejected the TPP, while Biden described the TPP as imperfect. However, it has successfully created more interdependency in import and export activities between China and Asian countries (Chan, 2017). Compared to China, it actively enhances economic activities with Southeast Asia. China has opened up opportunities for cooperation through ACFTA and CAEXPO, where the exhibition is held every year. To conclude, it shows that elements of TPP implementation that are less effective have constrained the US to continue to be the hegemon in the region. Thus, the US failed to

implement a total balance of power based on China's increasing economic capabilities in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

US soft rebalance strategy or pivot to Asia under Obama has generated various feedback and commentary. Most commentary tends to see it as a failure rather than a success. China's factor as a rival and the major competitor in the region is often seen as the main cause of the US implementation of the strategy. US strategy under the economic element probably needed to be successfully integrated into the Southeast Asia regional order and rules. Yet, it has created a great "motivation" for China to be more actively promoting its version of the soft rebalance strategy, the *Belt and Road Initiative*. Even without the policy on rebalancing to Asia, the competition between these two powers will remain continuously in terms of a balance of power in Southeast Asia.

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