

Saving Face: America's TPP Disaster

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Long before US President-elect Donald Trump even began his presidential campaign, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was already crumbling along with the rest of America's so-called "pivot to Asia" policy.

In late 2011, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would begin promoting what was called "America's Pacific Century." A [US State Department archive](#) containing Secretary Clinton's remarks on the subject would reveal the "pivot to Asia" being promoted as (our emphasis):

...a need for a more dynamic and durable transpacific system, a more mature security and economic architecture that will promote security, prosperity, and universal values, resolve differences among nations, foster trust and accountability, and encourage effective cooperation on the scale that today's challenges demand.

And just as the United States played a central role in shaping that architecture across the Atlantic – to ensure that it worked, for us and for everyone else – we are now doing the same across the Pacific. The 21st century will be America's Pacific century, a period of unprecedented outreach and partnership in this dynamic, complex, and consequential region.

In both title and stated intentions, the "pivot to Asia" was a policy of, by and for the United States. Secretary Clinton would compare US intentions toward Asia Pacific with its alleged accomplishments across the Atlantic, even citing Afghanistan and Libya as success stories despite the fact that both nations were rendered and to this day remain decimated, dysfunctional failed states following US intervention.

From the Beginning the TPP was About Domination, Not Cooperation

Secretary Clinton would mention the TPP specifically, claiming:

There is new momentum in our trade agenda with the recent passage of the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement and our ongoing work on a binding, high-quality Trans-Pacific Partnership, the so-called TPP. The TPP will bring together economies from across the Pacific, developed and developing alike, into a single 21st century trading community. A rules-based order will also be critical to meeting APEC's goal of eventually creating a free trade area of the Asia Pacific.

In reality, however, the TPP was never about creating a "trading community," it was about reasserting US domination over Asian-Pacific trade. Prominent US policy think tank, the

Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), published a paper authored by Robert Blackwill, Henry Kissinger and Ashley Tellis titled, "[Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China](#)." In it, the TPP is referred to specifically in the context of containing China, not fostering economic cooperation (our emphasis):

The congressional role in sustaining a successful U.S. grand strategy toward China is manifested primarily in three areas: giving the president trade-promotion authority so that he may quickly conclude the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) freetrade agreements now being negotiated in Asia, reforming and providing the defense budgets necessary to maintain U.S. power projection and a credible Asian alliance system, and continuously holding U.S. administrations accountable for the implementation of their response to the rise of Chinese power.

Here, rhetoric about building stronger and more beneficial relationships with Asia-Pacific is dropped, and the reality of US policy serving a singular agenda, the containment of China's regional and global rise, is revealed. Throughout the report, the TPP is repeatedly cited as a means of competing with what US policymakers call "China's asymmetrical economic advantages."

China's economic and geopolitical rise has in turn helped drive development across all of Asia. Immense infrastructure projects from highways connecting China to Thailand, dams powering Laos, ports and pipelines in Myanmar and rail projects region-wide alone have tangibly transformed Asia over the past decade in ways US economic and military ties have failed categorically to match.

The rise of China has led to new markets the entire region can now exploit, as well as providing Chinese citizens with disposable income reviving tourism across the region.

Hindering China's rise, as the TPP seeks to do, then only hinders the collective rise of Asia-Pacific itself. That might explain why the US struggled to sell the TPP even to nations it repeatedly claimed constituted its traditional allies in the region.

"Universal Values" in Reverse

In addition to resistance from national governments across the region to sign onto the self-destructive, economically confining deal, the people of each and every respective nation courted for the deal also vehemently protested it. From New Zealand to Australia, Vietnam to Thailand and Japan to Malaysia, protests from a variety of advocacy groups periodically protested the TPP throughout the various stages of its development.

For nations like Japan, New Zealand and Australia, their governments simply ignoring protests and pushing the deal forward regardless only helped further expose its illegitimacy. Problems with the deal's transparency also hindered its legitimacy and raised questions about its true purpose. Secretary Clinton's insistence that the American "pivot to Asia" was about promoting "security, prosperity, and universal values," as well as fostering "trust and accountability," were seriously undermined by [the TPP's secretive nature](#), and frank policy papers like the CFR's "Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China" revealing the true nature of the deal.

"Trust and accountability" seem to be values least served by a secretive trade deal being

forced onto an unwilling public, especially when it is being promoted as a means to strengthen economic cooperation when in reality it is designed to target and undermine cooperation with China — the largest economy in the region.

Trump “Nationalism” a Convenient Face-Saving Opportunity

US President-elect Donald Trump’s supposed nationalism provides US policymakers with a convenient face-saving opportunity. The TPP was already doomed long before the 2016 elections, but with President-elect Trump’s arrival on the political scene, policymakers and the Western media who have long attempted to promote the TPP, are now able to blame the TPP’s collapse on reinvigorated nationalist and protectionist proclivities in the United States, not the fundamentally flawed concept of maintaining a unipolar international order in the 21st century.

The BBC’s article, [“US leaving TPP: A great news day for China,”](#) openly admits the TPP was perceived by China as a “thinly disguised plan to contain China’s growing might.” It also admits that the deal was more about “bolstering American leadership in the region” than enhancing economic opportunities.

Despite these admissions and the obvious, counterproductive implications they have in regards to a region recoiling from US domination, the BBC attempts to both blame the incoming Trump administration for the deal’s failure, and portray Asia-Pacific’s independence from US influence as a negative net result for the world.

In reality, the Trump administration is subordinate to the vast corporate and financial interests that created and promoted the TPP in the first place. This attempt to save face by pinning the TPP’s demise on an administration that hasn’t even taken office yet, is simply a means of compartmentalising failure.

The United States is still deeply committed to projecting power and influence into Asia-Pacific, as embodied by ongoing operations carried out under the guise of “democracy promotion” through organisations like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the [Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative \(YSEALI\)](#) in support of opposition fronts across the region that are indebted to and eager to serve American interests.

The most unpleasant aspects of the TPP deal have been and will continue to be promoted across Asia-Pacific through more subtle means, including through the work of various US-funded fronts posing as nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) as well as through lobbying groups and co-opted political fronts and the legislation pushed through by them on behalf of Washington and Wall Street.

At the end of the day, the Trump administration is simply helping the system tie up a loose end in the least embarrassing manner possible, while retrenching the TPP’s ambitions in a more decentralised and subtle strategy.

The Asia-Pacific region will need to continue building alternative networks and internal economic strength to counteract these attempts by Washington to reassert American domination across the region, domination that it has held onto for nearly a century with little for Asia to show for it beside war, political instability and economic manipulation designed to serve American interests at the cost of Asian prosperity and progress.

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