

# THE NEXT CHAPTER IN US-ASIAN RELATIONS: WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE PACIFIC

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## *Interview with Michael H. Fuchs*

*Michael H. Fuchs is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and a senior policy advisor at J Street. From 2013-2016 he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the US State Department Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, where he directed US policy regarding the South China Sea, regional security issues, and ASEAN. Mr. Fuchs also served as Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for Strategic Dialogues, Special Assistant to the Secretary of State, and a member of the secretary's policy planning staff from 2009 to 2013. Prior to joining the State Department, Mr. Fuchs served as deputy national security director for Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign and focused on foreign policy and energy and environment issues at the Center for American Progress. He co-authored, with Morton H. Halperin, *The Survival and the Success of Liberty: A Democracy Agenda for U.S. Foreign Policy* and is a graduate of Columbia University.*

**Y: Please briefly tell us what your current position as Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress entails.**

I primarily conduct research on issues related to US policy in East Asia, as well as a variety of other foreign policy issues, and write op-eds, long articles, and reports on issues in the South China Sea and regional institutions in Asia.

**Y: You served in the State Department under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for quite a few years, most recently as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Strategy and Multilateral Affairs in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. What led to your career in the State Department?**

I've had a long time interest in foreign policy. I think it probably started with an interest in history and current events and trying to figure out how I could apply this interest to something that would help improve the world and help

people. I began to do internships in foreign policy organizations and it quickly became a passion and an obsession. After a series of jobs, one thing led to another and I got a dream job working at the State Department, which was a really fantastic experience.

**Y: A deep level of mistrust has historically existed between the US and China. Given this context, is it possible that President Obama’s “pivot to Asia” may actually be exacerbating the trust issues between the two countries?**

I don’t think that it’s the policy of the Obama administration that is exacerbating certain issues. I’d take a step back first. I’d say that the relationship that the United States has had with China, even since normalization, has been a mixture of what we now would characterize as both cooperation and competition, and the areas in which we cooperate and compete have sort of ebbed and flowed over the years. Part of the Obama administration’s rebalance policy, an essential part of it, has been to build strong ties with China. I think the Obama administration, the president himself, has repeatedly said publicly that we welcome China’s rise and that a US-China relationship is essential, and so one of the priorities for the Obama administration has been to strengthen that relationship and make sure that it’s positive. Now, obviously there are areas in which we have certain disagreements with China and some of those areas have without a doubt exacerbated in recent years. I believe that that is in large part, if not entirely in part, due to new behavior by China in certain realms. One of the most illustrative is the maritime disputes in the South China Sea. I think that for years, aside from the occasional flare-up and spat, the territorial disputes have been calm or stable, and that it’s a series of activities that have exacerbated the situation. What the US is trying to do is to ensure that it can protect its interests and those of its allies and friends in the region. It’s definitely true that as both sides take steps with respect to the maritime disputes, or some other areas as well in terms of regional policies, that both sides increasingly see one another as doing something that is inimical to their interests, and that of course enters you into a realm where you have a potential security dilemma. So it’s not that one side is one hundred percent to blame or not, but it’s increasingly a series of actions that China has been taking, and I think the US has been taking prudent, necessary steps to protect US interests.

**Y: The use of the term “pivot” connotes an element of transition which inherently lacks a long-term outlook. How can the US move beyond the rebalance and what do you see as the next chapter in US-Asian relations?**

I think this is the huge challenge going forward. It's often times easier in US foreign policy to talk about a policy initiative that is launched, has a series of steps undertaken to achieve it, and then it's done and wrapped up. I think the rebalance is an initiative of a whole different nature, and the goal here is to fundamentally rethink policy in the region in a way that enables the United States to be best positioned to take advantage of the opportunities, mostly economic, that engagement in the region affords us but, similarly to our conversation on China, be able to deal with the potential contingencies and challenges in the region. So it's a long-term endeavor. I think that's just a fact. There are different things, different aspects, different policies that are within the rebalance that could be undertaken as a next step/next phase in a variety of different areas, but they're all part and parcel of the overall project, which is basically to recognize that we need to invest diplomatic, economic, and security resources, and time and energy into building relationships in the region and making sure that we're adapting to what is a rapidly changing region.

**Y: The US has made the Trans-Pacific Partnership a key piece of its rebalance. Meanwhile, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, many of whom are TPP signatories or potential members, have been negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Does the RCEP present a challenge to the TPP or can these two agreements coexist peacefully?**

I'm not an economist, but my perspective on this is that these regional trade agreements can absolutely coexist. We have had for many years and decades a variety of regional and bilateral trade agreements, the United States has and countries in this region have, that have been overlapping with one another. Everyone in the region basically has a trade agreement with ASEAN, for instance. I don't think those necessarily had an overall negative effect. Growth has continued relatively rapidly in recent decades, in no small part because of these liberalizing regimes of trade in the region. So the RCEP and the TPP are different types of agreements and they can absolutely live together.

**Y: Certain US presidential candidates have recently stirred up controversy on the Korean peninsula by demanding more financial compensation for the US troops stationed in the South and offering to open direct lines of communication with the North Korean leader Kim Jeong Eun. How realistic is the idea that these policy approaches may be implemented?**

I will say first that I only speak for myself and I don't speak for any campaign or anybody other than myself. My view on this is that there is a very strong bi-partisan consensus in the US in support of our treaty alliances in Asia and around the world. Without a doubt, there are strains of thinking in the US, and there always have been, that pursue a much more isolationist approach to the world, but relatively consistently for at least the last 70 years, the US has been firmly committed to our allies, and to a very proactive and engaged role in the world. I believe that there will always be a vigorous debate within the US about the type of foreign policy we should pursue, and that frankly is a good thing. I do believe, regardless of whatever statements are being made right now that are critical of the alliances, that there is now and there will continue to be a broad-based bi-partisan level of support for alliances. With respect to North Korea, despite some comments, there is a very strong consensus in the United States for the current approach to North Korea, for pushing North Korea harder, and ensuring that we and others, like China, implement the recent [United Nation] Security Council sanctions. The offer of dialogue with the North Koreans has been on the table for a number of years now, but North Koreans just seem unwilling and uninterested in actually talking about the key issue, which is denuclearization.

**Y: The Philippines recently elected a new president, Rodrigo Duterte, who has signaled his interest in closer relations with Beijing while also criticizing what he sees as a weak commitment from the US on South China Sea territorial disputes. How damaging are these statements to the US-Philippines alliance and will we see a shift in alignment from the Philippines?**

We've obviously just had the election. President Duterte hasn't even taken office yet, so we need to wait and see what kind of policies he actually pursues when in office. He has also made statements in support of the US alliance, as well as statements defending vigorously the Philippines' claims in the South China Sea and its position. So I'd say two things: first, there is actually very broad-based support in the Philippines for the US-Philippines alliance. Public opinion polling in the Philippines is astronomical

in terms of support for the US, based on my last recollection of it, and the recent conclusion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement is an important step forward. There is a vigorous debate in the Philippines, which is a healthy thing, but there is a broad base of support for the alliance and I don't think that that will change. With respect to the South China Sea, I absolutely hope that the Philippines continues its willingness to engage diplomatically with Beijing, as well as others, in the South China Sea. The US's interest is in peace and stability in the upholding of international law in the South China Sea. With respect to what President Duterte decides to do, my sense, based on my experience in Manila and in the Philippines, is that the issue of the South China Sea has become one, is one, that is an issue of nationalism, an issue of national pride and sovereignty, in addition to one of security. They are also having a very vigorous debate about what their policy should be with respect to the South China Sea. The US very much supports, as do I, the Philippines engaging in diplomacy with Beijing over it, but it needs to also ensure that they are protecting their own interests while they do that, which I think is part of what this arbitration case is about.<sup>1</sup>

**Y: This month cyber officials from the US and China gathered for a Senior Experts Group in Washington to discuss state behavior related to cyber security. What are the biggest obstacles to overcome in tackling cyber security and how might they best be handled?**

This is, obviously, an incredibly tough issue, not just between the US and China. The realm of cyber security, just as an issue in state-to-state relations and beyond, is relatively new. It's incredibly complex and it's presenting a wide variety of new challenges for states, for businesses, and for non-state actors of all stripes, and the issues that the US and China are having with one another are but one example of a very long, potentially increasing, list of challenges that we all face in the cyber security realm. So while the cyber security issue between the US and China has caused tension, and likely will continue to cause tension, the agreement that President Obama and President Xi struck last year on cyber security is a good step forward and a good example of how the two countries need to address this issue going forward. It doesn't mean they're necessarily going to see eye to eye on it, but I think they both recognize that this is the sort of issue that could get in the way of

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1 A United Nations arbitration court is currently deciding a case, brought by the Philippines in 2013, regarding whether or not China's actions in the South China Sea have violated UN conventions.

the overall relationship and that they both need to find ways to address it. Setting up the Expert Working Group and setting up the high level dialogue at the cabinet level with relevant ministers have been important components and mechanisms put in place to help the two sides be able to figure out how to deal with the more technical issues at play here, but it's going to continue to be an ongoing challenge. **Y**