After World War II the West saw the Soviet Union occupy and bring Eastern Europe and half of Germany into the Communist fold. This loss prompted a change in U.S. foreign policy redirecting attention and effort to the Middle East for two key reasons: Access to oil in the region and to combat the spread of Communism. Not unlike President Eisenhower’s pivot to the Middle East and courtship of Saudi Arabia, President Obama’s decision to focus on Asia coincides with the costly and protracted fight against terrorism in the Middle East. Obama’s rebalance to Asia is largely seen as a response to the rising economic development in the region as well as an opportunity to influence the political norms while countering China’s growing dominance. However, Obama’s pivot to Asia, and away from the disastrous endeavors in the Middle East, is also the pursuit of a simpler political victory in a vital region where the U.S. can continue fighting an opposing ideology while promoting U.S. values and economic expansion.

Much like combating Communism, terrorism has forced the U.S. to accept certain losses and readjust its focus to areas where chances of success are greater. Eastern Europe was firmly within the Soviet Union’s sphere and there was little that the U.S. and Western Europe could do to intervene without risking total war. Before Communism could take root in the Middle East, Eisenhower pursued Saudi Arabia as a proxy to counter the spread of Communism. Similarly, the current struggles in the Middle East are so pervasive that full engagement by the West is needed to defeat Islamic extremism, but U.S. commitment is wearing thin. Asia, like the Middle East, battles its own extremist movements and opposing ideologies, but these forces have not yet taken control of a country or the region. In particular Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and India face terrorist organizations and attacks within their own borders. The pivot to Asia allows the U.S. to continue its fight against terrorism but in a region less embattled and more receptive to American presence and influence.

Communism absorbed U.S. interests and policy decisions for decades, but with the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. American attention was redirected towards fighting other ideologies. The fight against terrorism is not simply a matter of preserving national security but also maintaining and promoting economic development. Terrorism and economic stability are intrinsically linked - to combat the former promotes the latter. Obama began his presidency after the Great Recession where economics started to dominate both national and international politics. Fighting terrorism in the Middle East has been costly for the U.S. and done little to promote U.S. interests and perception. Pivoting to Asia presents Obama with the opportunity to provide greater attention and assistance to nations struggling with terrorist organizations while protecting and cultivating U.S. economic interests in the region.
From Eisenhower’s view, the resources and geographic position of the Middle East were invaluable similar to the current belief that the “lion’s share of the political and economic history of the 21st century will be written in the Asia-Pacific region.” Maintaining positive relations with Saudi Arabia was key as U.S. private investment in oil reserves had existed in the region since the 1920s. The influx of economic and development aid from the U.S. into the Middle East, and specifically Saudi Arabia, assisted in promoting stable and friendly governments that could then resist internal and external Communist pressures. However, an equally strong motivating concern was preventing the Soviets from occupying the oil rich Middle East that could effectively cutoff the West from this indispensable resource. The rebalance to Asia also comes from an economic desire to link U.S. interests and success to a burgeoning market that continues to develop both economically and politically. In order for the U.S. to maintain its role as a global leader it must acknowledge regions where its influence will be effective and beneficial as opposed to regions that would drain U.S. goodwill and resources. The pivot to Asia provides the U.S. will the ideal opportunity to repair its international image and succeed in a region that will be critical to future success.

As the U.S. redirects its attention to Asia its overall approach to diplomacy and relations will need to change to reflect the current reality. Failures and misleading justifications for U.S. actions in the Middle East have eroded the generally positive view of the U.S. The U.S. is forced to garner national and international support as well as establishing causes for intervention since the world no longer blindly accepts unilateral U.S. imposition in its own affairs. The U.S. is evolving into a convening power, rather than an imperial hegemon, that can still bring countries to the negotiating table but cannot force their submission. In pursuing a more integrated and equal international role, the U.S. can repair its reputation and hone its soft power as it pursues interests in Asia.

Eisenhower’s Middle East agenda hinged on courting Saudi Arabia as a regional proxy to prevent the spread of Communism as the Soviets courted Nasser over the Suez Canal. Courtship of countries has not fallen by the wayside in modern international affairs. U.S. influence is not singularly focused on one country in Asia, but specific countries act as an ideal gateway into the region. India in particular is a logical choice for the U.S. to focus its efforts as it is geographically well positioned to transition U.S. attention from the Middle East to Asia. The U.S. focuses on finding similarly oriented and likeminded nations to court thereby acting as a proxy to promote U.S. national interests in a region. Saudi Arabia was seen as the ideal regional leader to preserve the Islamic religion in the face of Communism as it was both home and guardian of Mecca and Medina. India is an established democracy that has the political and economic capacity to oppose China’s belligerence in the region. As Japan is already a staunch U.S. ally, gaining India’s support would effectively bookend Asia with U.S. proxies.

The U.S. courtship of India as a potential proxy, like Saudi Arabia, is not a simple one. Several concerns over India’s behavior have recently cooled U.S.-Indian relations, but significant measures and gestures have been made to improve the relationship. The standoff between the two countries over the stockpiling of food in the Trade Facilitation Agreement with the WTO was resolved in November 2014. Additionally, President Obama was India’s honored guest for their Republic Day in January of this year. These are critical and meaningful accomplishments towards building stronger bilateral relations, particularly as Obama was the first U.S. president to attend the Republic Day celebration. India’s importance as a regional ally comes from their growing economy and political strength that can combat terrorism, promote U.S. interests, and most importantly provide additional balance to China’s regional dominance.

The promotion of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) exemplifies the U.S. desire for further regional involvement through economic means. The TPP would link the U.S. economy to eleven other countries in Latin America and Asia and promote U.S. business interests. Agreements like the TPP bring the U.S. closer to Asian countries through mutual agreed upon terms, unlike the Eisenhower Doctrine where the U.S. imposed itself on the Middle East in defense against Communism. As U.S. power and in-
fluence abroad has decreased since the end of the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy has changed to reflect its new role. The rising power of other nations like China have sufficient strength to impede U.S. interests and goals. The TPP would create a stronger connection to the region as a whole and establish a multilateral agreement providing a means to challenge China’s aggressive behavior.

Obama’s pivot to Asia is certainly rooted in pursuing economic interests and U.S. norms in the region. However, other factors surrounding the redirection need to be considered to fully explain the policy shift. Parallels can be drawn between Eisenhower’s and Obama’s regional pivots. Failures against opposing ideologies preceded these policy realignments and were then followed by the cultivation of political alliances that could combat these ideologies on behalf of the U.S. Regional failures in Eastern Europe and the Middle East have not deterred the struggle against Communism and Islamic extremism, but caused further involvement in the region to be untenable. These hostile regions effectively forced the U.S. to reevaluate its position and look elsewhere for a successful outcome rather than continuing its current level of involvement and risking total war that would be a drain on its political and economic wellbeing.

President Obama meets with communist party leaders

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