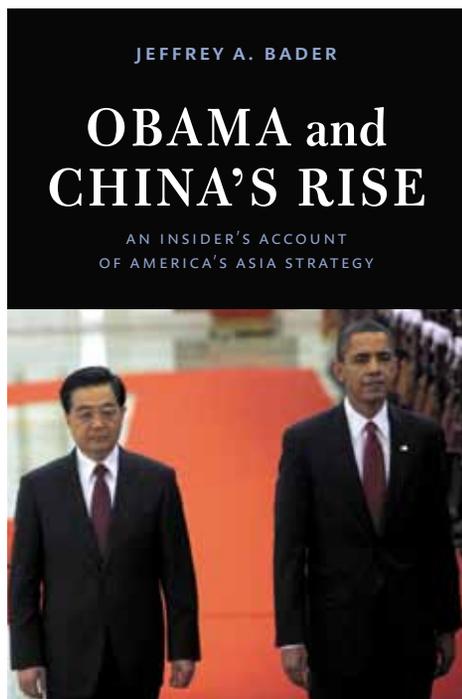


# Architect of fortunes

A new memoir from one of the designers of Obama's China policy



**Obama and China's Rise:  
An Insider's Account of  
America's Asia Strategy**

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The Brookings Institution  
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Each year, the National Security Council, State Department and Department of Defense churn out reams of paper laying out US strategies and priorities around the globe. These documents are circulated around the bureaucracy and sometimes released to the public, where they are studiously read and often misinterpreted. Then they are locked away in drawers and rarely seen again.

Unfortunately for the small army of government employees who produce them, these reports have little influence on US foreign policy. In a new memoir of his experiences as senior director for Asia at the National Security Council, Jeffrey Bader, now a senior

fellow at the Brookings Institution, shows that US foreign policy is built more through the series of tactical decisions that foreign policy practitioners make as they confront unexpected situations. Apparently, foreign policy is what happens while you're busy making other plans.

In "Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy," Bader provides an overview of both the Obama administration's foreign policy strategy going into office, as well as the series of tactical decisions which it has since confronted. A memoir of Bader's experiences in the White House between January 2009 and April 2011, the book gives a wonderful sense of how Barack Obama's "pivot" to Asia came about.

## The strategy

US relations in Asia were somewhat of a "mixed bag" when Barack Obama took office in January 2009, Bader writes. George W. Bush's administration had maintained strong relations with Japan and India, and a consistent policy towards China. With wars in Iraq and Afghanistan distracting the US, however, ties with South Korea had weakened and Southeast Asia had been largely ignored.

Even so, the American public and the world were somewhat suspicious of what a Democratic

foreign policy would entail. Since Jimmy Carter decided to withdraw troops from Korea in 1977, an order that was subsequently reversed, Democratic foreign policy has often been criticized as unrealistic or overly moralistic. More recently, the protectionist tendencies of labor unions and an unrelenting emphasis on democracy and human rights have weighed on Democratic leaders' foreign policy efforts, Bader writes.

In Asia, at least, Obama's foreign policy outlook was far more realist. The administration's goals were to strengthen relations with traditional allies like South Korea, Japan and Australia, focus more attention on Southeast Asia, become more involved in Asian multilateral institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and build ties and trust with a rising China.

Bader and his colleagues wanted to avoid a "unidimensional" approach to China; they believed the US should be neither antagonistic nor indulgent. "US policy toward a rising China could not rely solely on military muscle, economic blandishments, and pressure and sanctions on human rights, an overall strategy that had not been notably successful in altering unwelcome Chinese actions even when China was weaker," Bader writes. "At the same time, a policy of indulgence and accommodation of assertive Chinese conduct, or indifference to its internal evolution, could embolden bad behavior and frighten US allies and partners."

## The tactics

Obama's relations with China began much more smoothly than many of the previous administrations. In 1980, 1992 and 2000, new presidents entered office with already-rocky relations. Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush had all condemned their predecessors for appeasing Beijing and respectively pledged to take harder lines on Taiwan, human rights and commercial competition. Once they were in office, however, the realities of governing forced each of them to abandon campaign pledges and revert to previous China policies, damaging US credibility in the process.

Bader and his colleagues who worked on Obama's campaign wanted the president to take office "unburdened by rash promises that he would need to walk back." They believed the cooperation of the world's most populous country would be crucial to Obama's ability to deal with global issues like the economy, climate change and nuclear weapons programs in Iran and North Korea.

That was undoubtedly true, yet the US media repeatedly criticized the Obama administration for its efforts to build a strong initial relationship with China. During Hillary Clinton's first trip to China as Secretary of State in 2009, for example, she came under fire for remarking to the press that US-Chinese relations were often reduced to formalistic exchanges, as Americans presented their talking points on human rights while Chinese

presented their points on Taiwan. Yet that did not prevent the two countries from having serious exchanges on other global issues, Clinton said. The resulting press coverage suggested that Clinton and Obama were prepared to sacrifice human rights to obtain China's cooperation.

The administration was the focus of negative press again later that year when news leaked that they had delayed meeting the Dalai Lama for several months until after a meeting with Hu Jintao. The implication that Obama had kowtowed to Chinese demands damaged public perception of the administration's China policy. "Editorialists and op-ed writers piled on ... The importance of building a strong foundation for the US-China relationship early in the term was written off as cynical or naïve, or both," Bader writes. His account suggests the presence of a destructive faction in the US, one that argues for point-scoring against or otherwise humiliating China. Foreign policy practitioners know this would have little or no benefit to US interests.

### The usual roadblocks

The "smooth start" to US-China relations did not last long. US and Chinese officials had a chilly encounter at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009. By early 2010, the usual obstacles re-appeared: The US decided to sell arms to Taiwan, in line with a previous agreement, and the Dalai Lama visited Washington, DC, in February.

Obama's first term had also coincided with a period in which China began to adopt a more aggressive stance internationally, especially on territorial issues. Between 2008 and 2010, China became involved in an increasing number of maritime conflicts around the Korean peninsula, the Yellow Sea, the South China Sea and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

These clashes were a manifestation of changing attitudes in China, Bader writes. With the US grappling with recession and China still growing strongly, many Chinese policymakers felt it was time to forgo Deng Xiaoping's maxim of "hiding your brightness and biding your time" and take a more assertive global role. For many within China, that meant protecting disputed territorial claims.

But this strategy eventually backfired as countries like Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Australia and the Philippines sought to counterbalance China's growing influence by strengthening relations



**DYNAMIC DUO:** President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

and renewing military commitments with the US. By mid-2010, territorial conflicts had fallen off substantially, Bader writes.

As the US met with the Dalai Lama, sold arms to Taiwan and took a harder line on Chinese maritime aggression, US media coverage began to emphasize tension in the US-China relationship. The new narrative concluded that the administration had learned its previous strategy of appeasement was not working, and was now compensating, or overcompensating.

Bader disagrees with the assessment: "The administration had put a necessary floor under the relationship in the first year, avoiding the negative experiences in the transitions of past presidents. That floor had helped Washington weather the difficulties surrounding decisions in early 2010 that were problematic to the Chinese and allowed it to move past these decisions in record time."

### Here's to sobriety

"Obama and China's Rise" is a wonderful read for students of foreign policy and US-China relations. It is also likely to be valuable as a historical document, detailing such incidents as North Korea's shelling of Yeonpyeong Island and the meltdown at the Fukushima plant in Japan.

Yet Bader is a moderate Democrat, and it's clear where his allegiances lie. Obama is pictured as energetic, calm and decisive; Bader compliments his "forceful elegance and obvious mastery" in negotiations. He lauds Clinton for her "international rock star qualities" that elicited "shrieks of approval from Asians and Americans

gathering along her motorcade route, in hotel lobbies, or during her speeches." Other White House professionals are invariably talented and distinguished – except, of course, for the press corps.

There are incidents in which the reader feels the hint of a partisanship. Bader's account of Copenhagen, for example, reads like an epic battle in which Obama cows other heads of state into submission through the force of his will. The Chinese are described as making a last-minute about-face after realizing the error of their belligerence and caving in just as Air Force One is about to take off. "Thanks to Obama's cajoling, [the Chinese], and Wen in particular, realized at the last minute that China would bear the lion's share of the blame if the conference collapsed. Accordingly, Wen worked with Obama at that final chaotic meeting to ensure success," Bader writes. The reader is left wondering whether other heads of state also saw Obama as Copenhagen's savior.

Overall, however, Bader's style is measured and sober, refreshingly so. It's clear why he is so angered by sensationalist media portraits: His language is judicious, cautious and unembellished, that of an experienced diplomat that has spent his time crafting mutual statements.

Readers should not look to "Obama and China's Rise" for gossip or tantalizing details (though Bill Clinton's trip to Pyongyang to rescue two US journalists comes close). But for those seeking to understand the intentions and actions of the US in Asia during Obama's first term, Bader's book will be indispensable. ♦