

The Wire *China*

Q & A

Ash Carter on the Pentagon's Lonely Pivot to Asia

The former Secretary of Defense talks about what went wrong during the 'rebalancing' effort; Xi Jinping's big mistake with ethnocentrism; and the 'Great Firewall of self-isolation.'

BY BOB DAVIS — OCTOBER 2, 2022

*Ash Carter (<https://www.belfercenter.org/person/ash-carter>) started his career as a researcher in theoretical physics but quickly became enamored with public policy. As a Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientist, he rose to prominence in 1984 with a report ripping President Reagan's Star Wars missile-defense initiative as a dud. Recruited by the Clinton administration as a Pentagon assistant secretary in 1993, he helped oversee the removal of nuclear weapons from Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus after the end of the Cold War. During the Obama administration, Carter was undersecretary of Defense from 2011 to 2013 and then Pentagon chief from February 2015 until the end of the administration. During that time, he had to wrestle with the challenge from China and carry out that administration's much publicized – and much criticized – “pivot” to Asia. The blunt-speaking Carter also looked for ways to encourage start-ups in Silicon Valley and other tech centers to do military work and help the U.S. meet the Chinese challenge. This interview is part of **Rules of Engagement**, a new series by Bob Davis (https://twitter.com/bobdavis187?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor), who covered the U.S.-China relationship at The Wall Street Journal starting in the 1990s. In these interviews, Davis asks current and former U.S. officials and policymakers what went right, what went wrong and what comes next.*



Ash Carter.

Illustration by Lauren Crow

Q: In 2016 and 2018 you said China was erecting a ‘Great Wall of self-isolation.’ But that doesn’t really seem to reflect reality. There is the Belt and Road Initiative. They’re expanding in Africa. They have a ‘no limits’ alliance with Russia. Do you think that they’re still moving toward self-isolation, or have they managed to confound your prediction?

A: I was saying that China was excluding itself from the United States, from most of the principal Pacific regional powers, and from most of the European powers. I wasn’t talking about Africa, Latin America, or South Asia. China remains all by itself on the world stage amongst the principal geopolitical powers, with the exception possibly of Russia — although they seem to be trying to distance themselves from Russia in Ukraine, as well they might.

For a decade or so, in the ‘80s and the ‘90s, it was possible to believe that China was on a convergent path with the United States and most of the principal economic, political, and military powers. It was certainly clear when I was in the number one and two roles in the Defense Department that China had chosen a divergent path. It had proclaimed — and Xi Jinping does this most clearly and loudly — that it did not intend to pursue a path that is

broadly convergent with the United States and its principal political and economic partners. They are taking a Chinese path and nobody who is not Chinese can take that same path. And so, they're isolating themselves.

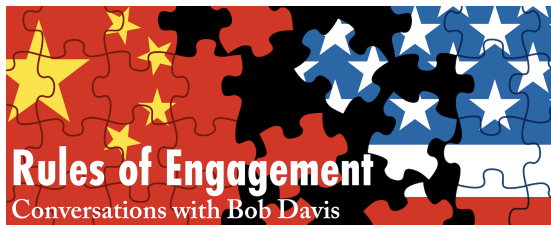


Illustration by Sam Ward.

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What explains that turn in Chinese policy?

Ethnocentrism. The Chinese ideology is fine if you're Chinese but since most of the world isn't Chinese, it's a little hard to identify with Xi Jinping.

It's not as if they have no allies. They are reaching out to Africa, Latin America, and so on.

Africa isn't going to help them in a military standoff. By the way, they're wearing out their welcome in Africa now, in the same way they wore out their welcome in Latin America years ago by being predatory and selfish. It usually takes three to five years until people realize that the terms of China's loans are predatory and that they're importing a lot of their own workers to do projects.

From an American point of view, it would seem to make more sense for China to throw in its lot with its biggest trading partners and richest economies. But instead, China has chosen a divergent path, as you say, particularly in signing on with Russia for this 'no limits' alliance. Why?

Xi Jinping, like Vladimir Putin, thought that Ukraine was going to be a pushover — that you could just blow on this fragile state and it would collapse. In that regard, Vladimir Putin was imagining the Ukraine of 2014, which I remember. I was in office as Deputy [Defense Secretary] around that time. The Ukraine of 2022 is not the Ukraine of 2014.

All Putin thinks about is Ukraine, and he is out of date in his estimation of Ukraine. Xi Jinping doesn't think about Ukraine all day, so he's got a better excuse. But still he was wrong. Ukraine didn't prove to be a pushover. I would guess Xi now wishes he hadn't said all those things. Now, of course, the Chinese are not associating themselves closely with Russia's disastrous war. They have backpedaled. This was a mistake on Xi Jinping's part.

President Xi: 20th CPC National Co...



Xi Jinping on the upcoming 20th National Congress of the CPC, and its importance in relation to China's future. For some guesstimates on what this 20th Congress will entail, read Tony Saich's exclusive piece for *The Wire*, [here](https://www.thewirechina.com/2022/09/18/what-to-expect-from-the-twentieth-congress-of-the-chinese-communist-party/?_thumbnail_id=23330) (https://www.thewirechina.com/2022/09/18/what-to-expect-from-the-twentieth-congress-of-the-chinese-communist-party/?_thumbnail_id=23330).

Xi is greatly overreaching by taking China in a self-declared divergent direction from the rest of the industrialized world. In ten to 20 years from now, it will prove to have been a great mistake. He has precipitated, finally, in the United States a reaction that has replaced the earlier naiveté Americans had about China. Particularly in the business and financial community, there was a feeling that 'We're making a lot of money and these people will turn out okay.'

You could believe that under Jiang Zemin, and you could believe that under Hu Jintao, but you can't believe that under Xi Jinping. It was a big mistake on Xi's part to tell us that he is taking his own path and 'screw you'. Maybe ten years from now he could get away with that, if he played his hand right. But [by doing it] now he's made a mistake.

Let's go back to the question of naiveté. Obama and Xi Jinping had a press conference in the Rose Garden in 2015 where Xi said China wouldn't militarize the South China Sea and wouldn't use spying for commercial advantage. Neither happened even though the U.S. held so-called freedom of navigation exercises where ships sailed near the islands and planes flew nearby. Do you think the U.S. should have done more, and if so, what?

Yes. President Obama is the architect of the rebalance or 'pivot.' [Carter is referring to Obama's efforts to shift more resources and attention to Asia from Europe and the Middle East.] My experience was that the only part of the government that really pivoted was the Defense Department. Treasury, State, and other departments didn't. I don't think the rebalancing efforts in the military sphere were reflected as strongly in the political and economic spheres. [During Carter's tenure as Defense Secretary, [John Kerry](https://www.state.gov/biographies/john-kerry/) (<https://www.state.gov/biographies/john-kerry/>) was Secretary of State and [Jack Lew](https://home.treasury.gov/about/history/prior-secretaries/jacob-j-lew-2013-2017) (<https://home.treasury.gov/about/history/prior-secretaries/jacob-j-lew-2013-2017>) was Treasury Secretary.]



What should have been done?

The South China Sea and cyber activities are not purely military issues. These are issues where typically the State Department leads efforts. And the State Department, generally speaking, didn't pivot as much as the Defense Department.

We put extra ships in the Pacific. We began to rewire our entire acquisition effort to focus on the Chinese threat starting in the 2012-2013 timeframe, even as we were doing the Afghan surge. [The U.S. sent an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan starting in 2010.] But you didn't see the other departments announcing a set of initiatives to reflect the fact that the President had said he wants to rebalance. We [in the Defense Department] rebalanced, in my opinion. We were the most responsive to the President's desire for us all to rebalance.

I wasn't in charge of political-economic policy in the country. I was responsible for the military dimension. And generally, President Obama approved of the things that I asked him for.

People like Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin respond to push back. You have to constantly push back, push back, push back, push back. Now, you know, for a lot of Americans that's kind of an exhausting, sort of an elementary-school-teacher kind of discipline. But that's what's required when you're dealing with people that have their mentality.

Every time they did something, I thought it was important to push back. And I wasn't able to get the entire U.S. government to push back every time they did something that should be pushed back against. I believe if the push back had been more consistent that they wouldn't have dared to do some of the things that they dared to do.

Was there some concrete action that you were pushing for that the President didn't accept?

No. Generally he said yes when I made a military proposal. I'm talking about non-military things.



Ash Carter speaking with then President Barack Obama during a meeting at the Pentagon December 14, 2015. Credit: U.S. Secretary of Defense via Flickr
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What might have made a difference?

Well, for example, in the cyber area, stirring up the U.S. business and cybersecurity or tech communities. But there wasn't any diplomatic outreach to them, or any effort to enlist them in getting China to stop doing this kind of stuff.

I wasn't in charge of political-economic policy in the country. I was responsible for the military dimension. And generally, President Obama approved of the things that I asked him for. I'm talking about other things that were not my responsibility as Secretary of Defense.

Do you think the Trump administration got it right, in terms of putting Chinese companies on the entity list [which makes it hard for Chinese companies to import Western technology] or trying to block Huawei?

Remember that there's a substratum of people in the national security arena who don't change their thinking every four years. Although many people in the Republican foreign policy and defense world refused to work for Donald Trump, some people did. And I would say that their thinking was pretty much along the lines of mine.



Hillary Clinton delivers remarks at the event, "The Week that Changed the World: President Nixon's Historic Trip to China and the Future of U.S.-China Relations", March 7, 2012. Credit: U.S. Department of State via [Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/statephotos/6818403740/in/photolist-bow6Tb-da8iSX-da8j2Q-9G2tMt-da8iVY-dPrP5x-a9aedW-9GrWpo-)

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Hillary Clinton was the Secretary of State at the time. She was identified with the pivot. Do you think she fell short?

No. She did the pivot and then was gone after that [Clinton left office in 2013]. I would put her at the forefront on this issue because there wouldn't have been a pivot without her and Kurt Campbell (<https://www.belfercenter.org/person/kurt-m-campbell>) [who was a senior State Department official under Obama, and is now the Biden National Security Council's Asia chief]. The problem is they got the President to say all the right things, but the Defense Department was the department that pivoted the most and we needed them all together.

In the years since then, Washington is finally realizing that Xi Jinping is not on a convergent path. He's on a divergent path. You can't deny that because he tells you that. Just listen to what the man says.

Is it true that Xi Jinping pressed Obama to declare Beijing as an equal partner and tried to get assurances that the U.S. would reduce its presence in the Pacific?

I wouldn't be surprised. President Obama wouldn't have fallen for a thing like that.

What was your relationship with the PLA? [Referring to the People's Liberation Army—the Chinese military.]

Interestingly, I had a very good relationship with the PLA through the '90s [when he was Assistant Defense Secretary for International Security Affairs under President Clinton] and during the time I was out of government. [Former Clinton Defense Secretary] William Perry (https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/people/william_j_perry) at Stanford and myself at Harvard had a very active exchange program with the Chinese military.

Unfortunately, when I was in office the PLA was doing things that were clearly inimical to our interests. It wasn't possible to have the same personal relationships that I had had with people in the PLA.



There was one naval exercise during the Obama years where American and Chinese ships sailed together from Guam to Hawaii. I can't imagine anything like that happening now.

Even after 2000 and through the [George W.] Bush administration we were still trying to invite the Chinese to RIMPAC exercises [referring to the Rim of the Pacific maritime exercise]. For a few years they came. That was the convergent path. But then at a certain point they stopped coming. And that's the divergent path.

That's when China said, 'We don't want to be one of them — i.e. an ASEAN or whatever country — 'we want to be an overlord.' That's the point the Great Firewall of self-isolation goes up.

Would it have made sense to try to physically stop the Chinese from reclaiming land and acting in the way they did? Was that ever an option?

That's not where you want to end up — in military confrontation. The way we get the Chinese not to do something we don't want them to do is to have a broader political, economic, and military relationship that makes them realize that they're going to pay a price for doing things that are self-isolating.

We can help Taiwan survive strangulation by, among other things, strangling China. After all, China depends on the sea lanes too. They're not going to last very long if there's no oil at all in Chinese ports.

As I said, I was willing to do my part, as was the Defense Department going back years. But if you're already at the point where they're dredging — we knew years before that they were going to do [island building] — that's not a good place to be with another major power. The only resort you have is to send us to a shoot-out. I wanted to see action start well before that point.

Would that have included economic sanctions or the threat of economic sanctions?

Yes. This was serious. Did you see American leaders going out and saying this is very serious? No. In fact, there were American leaders who went out and said, 'Oh, who's going to start a war over little islands in the South China Sea?' That's a self-defeating statement.

[Editor's note. Secretary of State Kerry, for instance, said the following in New Delhi in October 2016: "We want to support a code of conduct for the management of the South China Sea. We support diplomacy in an effort to try to resolve this with an understanding that there really is no, quote, 'military solution.'"]



Current Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III at the NATO Defense Ministerial in Brussels, Belgium, June 16, 2022. Credit: U.S. Secretary of Defense via [Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/secdef/52150056712/in/album-72177720299843874/)

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As a Secretary of Defense, what would an effective defense for Taiwan look like?

There are two dimensions. One is what they should do. They need to make themselves a very tough nut to crack. That means making it suicidal to attempt an amphibious or airborne invasion of Taiwan. And secondly, to make it as painful for China as it would be for Taiwan if they try to strangle Taiwan.

That is true of us also. We can respond to Chinese efforts to invade Taiwan by helping Taiwan stave off the invasion. We can help Taiwan survive strangulation by, among other things, strangling China. After all, China depends on the sea lanes too. They're not going to last very long if there's no oil at all in Chinese ports. They're in a funny position to try to strangle another country that is dependent upon sea lanes of communication.

How would Taiwan make itself a "tough nut to crack?"



President Tsai Ing-wen at the 33rd Han Kuang Exercise, Taiwan's annual military exercise, May 25, 2017. Credit: 總統府 via *Flickr* (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/presidentialoffice/34071733513/in/album-72157681081421583/>)

Using a lot of the same things the Ukrainians have. We've given them some anti-ship missiles — that kind of thing. Anti-ship weapons, anti-vehicular weapons, anti-air weapons. These can make it very miserable to attempt an amphibious or airborne landing.

Historically, Taiwan's military always tried to make itself a miniature model of a much larger military. But they didn't give adequate priority to the things that are uniquely important for their situation. They're beginning to pay attention to that.

In response to an emailed follow-up question about the difference between the competition with China now and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Carter responded:

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was not a serious economic technological competitor, and we didn't trade with the Soviet Union. All this is different with China and requires a close link between the tech sector and Washington

The Defense Innovation Unit (<https://www.diu.mil/>) [a Pentagon program started under Carter to encourage small Silicon Valley companies to work with the U.S. military] sounded the klaxon of renewal of ties between the tech sector and the Pentagon, and has exceeded my expectations.



Bob Davis, a former correspondent at *The Wall Street Journal*, covered U.S.-China relations beginning in the 1990s. He co-authored “Superpower Showdown (<https://www.amazon.com/Superpower-Showdown-Battle-Between-Threatens-ebook/dp/B07Z3RZ9NY>),” with Lingling Wei, which chronicles the two nations’ economic and trade rivalry.