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US GRAND STRATEGY IN ASIA

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Introduction

Asia will be the paramount focus of US grand strategy in the twenty-first century. The centre of gravity in world politics is shifting from the trans-Atlantic West, whose geopolitical and ideological struggles for global supremacy have dominated international relations in the twentieth century, to the trans-Pacific East. The dynamic economic growth across the Indo-Pacific, and in particular the rise, or rather re-emergence of China into a position of regional preponderance – economically, diplomatically, and militarily – challenges the established position of the United States as Asia's predominant power and extra-regional security guarantor. A far-flung system of Washington-centred alliances and partnerships has underwritten a *Pax Americana* in support of economic openness, liberal democracy, and the international rule of law. Historically, the United States has sought to defend this hegemonic legacy and to prevent the rise of any strategic rival to its dominant position either globally or regionally. Today, China pursues its own claim to regional hegemony and national exceptionalism, seeking the revival of its historical position as a focal point of a Sino-centric world order. The United States' strategic vision of leading a 'Pacific Century' (Clinton 2011) therefore raises the spectre of an escalating contest for supremacy with the 'Asia-Pacific Dream' of Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (Friedberg 2011).

The United States' pursuit of liberal hegemony has, at the same time, come under growing pressure at home. Critics, ranging from left-wing progressives to small-government libertarians and adherents to realist IR theory, have argued that Washington's failed post-'9/11' military interventions have overextended the country's financial and military resources, and that the United States should pursue an alternative grand strategy of restraint. They attacked both the hegemonic groupthink of the US foreign policy establishment 'Blob' and what they saw as the hubris of American exceptionalism. The origin of the 2008 financial crisis in the United States, the failure to effectively respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the continued struggle for racial equality in America were all seen as casting doubt on the country's self-ascribed role as an 'indispensable nation', whose national destiny it was to remake the world in its image. Donald Trump's blend of nationalist populism, on the other hand, demonstrated a pronounced hostility towards Washington's global leadership role and its foundation in a rules-based international order over the course of his presidency (2017–2021). The volatile four-year period of

'America First' further challenged the credibility and reliability of US grand strategy, in Asia and beyond.

In providing readers with an overview of these various external and internal dynamics, the material and ideational dimensions informing US grand strategy in Asia, this chapter will first review the study of grand strategy in International Relations (IR). As the chapter will demonstrate, different theoretical approaches underwrite competing strategic visions of Washington's role in the world, which manifest both on the political decision-making level and in the wider academic, policy expert and media debates. The subsequent historical evaluation then mainly explores the post-Cold War era and how US grand strategy in Asia was anchored in the pursuit of liberal hegemony through diplomatic, military and economic means. A particular focus lies on comparing the strategic visions of Barack Obama ('pivot to Asia') and Donald Trump ('America First') and their practical manifestations in the region. The chapter concludes that the United States has increasingly struggled to match its enduring strategic aim of regional leadership with its actual investment in the Indo-Pacific.

American Grand Strategy and the Washington Consensus on Liberal Hegemony

Conventionally understood, a grand strategy envisions how a state can best use its various resources of power (military, economic, diplomatic) to pursue the national interest. According to the realist IR scholar Barry Posen: 'A grand strategy is a nation state's theory about how to produce security for itself' (Posen 2014: 1). The influential Center for a New American Security (CNAS) think tank argued that a grand strategy should answer fundamental questions about 'America's core national interest' and 'the purpose of American power' (Fournoy and Brimley 2008: 5). Given this prevalent analytical focus on national security and power, a majority of the academic literature on grand strategy is informed by the theoretical assumptions of (neo)realism regarding an international system defined by structural anarchy and the functional equivalence of states seeking to guarantee their survival against external threats (Walt 2018a). Such works tend to focus on the materialist determinants of US grand strategy as analytical categories, in particular changes and continuities in the global military and economic balance of power as explanatory variables for strategic decision-making (Green 2017).

However, as the Joint Doctrine of the United States Armed Forces makes clear: 'At the grand strategic level, the ways and means to achieve US core national interests are based on the national leadership's strategic vision of America's role in the world' (JDN 2018: vi). Grand strategy then extends beyond a mere material equation of means, ends and ways. It formulates a vision of a country's role and position in world politics, providing an idealized big picture of the national interest. A growing body of research in International Relations, from such diverse theoretical, conceptual and epistemological approaches as neoclassical realism, liberal institutionalism, conventional constructivism, and critical security studies has therefore emphasized the influential role of domestic socio-economic systems and political actors (Campbell 2016), strategic culture (Dueck 2006), professional elite networks (Van Apeldoorn and De Graaff 2015), and narratives, identity and discourse (Kang 2017; Löfflmann 2017) in the analysis of grand strategy and its political effects. Empirically, any analysis of American grand strategy, understood here as the 'national leadership's strategic vision', should pay special attention to the role of the President of the United States and key texts produced under a presidential administration. In the case of Donald Trump, this primarily includes the 2017 *United States National Security Strategy* (NSS) issued by the White House, and the 2020 *Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*, as well as the Pentagon's 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) and 2019 *Indo*

Pacific Strategy Report (IPSR), together with various Congressional reports on the United States' strategic approach towards the region. According to the Pentagon's 2018 analysis, for example, China was seeking 'Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global pre-eminence in the future', requiring a shift from engagement towards long-term strategic competition of the United States with China to secure American 'security and prosperity' (United States Department of Defense 2018: 4).

At the same time, however, debates about US grand strategy extend far beyond the highest echelons of the White House and Pentagon and preoccupy a large segment of the foreign policy and national security establishment in Washington DC; a far-flung elite network of prestigious academic institutions, mainstream media organizations, career diplomats, military and intelligence professionals, and influential think tanks and policy experts that shape ideas and advance policies to pursue the national interest of the United States. The US foreign policy establishment's role in promoting a strategic elite consensus on liberal hegemony and military interventionism has drawn increasing attention (and criticism) in IR research (Porter 2018; Walt 2018b). President Obama himself and leading members of his administration publicly attacked a lack of political nuance and intellectual depth in formulating US policy responses among the Washington establishment's membership in prominent media outlets like the *Atlantic* and the *New York Times* (Goldberg 2016). For the purposes of mapping this internal debate, it is useful to refer to the categorization of grand strategy options in the respective IR literature, ranging from unipolar primacy to cooperative security, selective engagement, and offshore balancing to neo-isolationism (Posen and Ross 1996). At the broadest level of an identity-policy nexus, however, which links the ideational and practical dimensions of US grand strategy, we can differentiate three basic competing geopolitical visions: primacy, engagement, and restraint. Debates among practitioners, scholars, think tanks, pundits, and media in the United States tend to occur within this established matrix of ideas and discourses about the country's role and position in the world, and the ways and means to pursue the long-term national interest.

A grand strategy of primacy is focused on the preservation of the dominant military, economic and geopolitical position of the United States in the international system. It seeks to prevent the rise of any rival great power achieving hegemony in Eurasia. Beyond power politics, primacy, alternatively referred to as hegemony, or American leadership of the 'free world', also articulates a special responsibility of the United States to maintain and, where possible, expand freedom and democracy in the international system. After the end of the Cold War, geopolitical visions of US primacy and liberal imperialism were aggressively promoted by neoconservative intellectuals like William Kristol or Charles Krauthammer, and think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), proclaiming the arrival of Washington's triumphalist 'unipolar moment' on the world stage (Krauthammer 2002). Unilateral primacy reached its geopolitical apex under the George W. Bush administration and the Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive warfare, which provided the intellectual foundation and strategic justification for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In respect to the Indo-Pacific, proponents of American primacy under the Trump presidency focused primarily on an intensifying political-ideological, economic and military struggle with the People's Republic of China for regional supremacy from 2017 onwards. This 'new Cold War' paradigm united both neoconservative 'Never Trumpers', GOP establishment figures, and staunch supporters of a nationalist populist foreign policy course like Steve Bannon, who would serve for a time as Trump's White House chief strategist.

Engagement, alternatively known as cooperative security, or 'burden sharing', on the other hand, is centred on the idea that the United States should seek increased international cooperation with allies and partners, and on issues ranging from nuclear non-proliferation to climate change and counter-terrorism even with rivals and adversaries, including with strategic

competitors like China or Russia. Rather than the projection of military power and the use of force, engagement emphasizes diplomacy, economic interdependence, soft power, international organizations and multilateral institutions, and is endorsed in particular by liberal institutionalists and proponents of the Wilsonian idealist and internationalist tradition in US foreign policy (Ikenberry 2011). Cooperative means are seen as vital instruments for the United States to promote its interests and values in an increasingly multipolar international system, which US government reports like the long-term strategic forecasts of the National Intelligence Council (NIC) have assessed as being defined by an increasing diffusion of power and influence away from US unipolarity (NIC 2008). The Obama administration's conclusion of a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement with eleven other nations in February 2016 was testament to its enduring focus to foster cooperative engagement in the Asia-Pacific as part of its pivot strategy (Campbell 2016). Viewed from a constructivist perspective on national identity, however, both conservative visions of unilateral primacy and liberal ideas about global engagement reflect a deep-seated belief in American exceptionalism (Restad 2014). Since the end of the Cold War, a broad bi-partisan elite consensus on liberal hegemony was based on the assumption that the global leadership role of the United States was both a moral imperative and functional necessity for the continued success and survival of a liberal international order defined by great power peace, the international rule of law, the promotion of democracy and human rights, and a prosperous globalized economy. Both liberals and conservatives also expected the United States to act unilaterally, including with the use of force, to maintain this global *Pax Americana* and to defend American values of freedom and democracy. Barack Obama himself frequently invoked the rhetoric of American exceptionalism to legitimate a less financially and militarily costly pursuit of US grand strategy, including through 'burden sharing' with allies and partners, while never doubting the ultimate necessity of the United States' global leadership role. As Obama made clear at the US military academy of West Point: 'America must always lead on the world stage. If we don't, no one else will' (Obama 2014). The dominant debate over grand strategy in Washington was not *if* hegemony should be pursued, but *how*.

While the Obama Doctrine followed a pragmatist approach to military restraint, viewing it as more cost-effective pursuit of US leadership abroad, proponents of an alternative grand strategy of offshore balancing advanced a more comprehensive critique of liberal hegemony. Notable realist IR scholars in the United States, such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, viewed liberal hegemony as fundamentally misguided strategic vision, based on flawed assumptions about the United States' national interest (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016). They argued that there was neither the necessity nor the ability to control outside events in remote corners of the world through force. The United States should instead practice restraint and focus on maintaining its position of regional hegemony in the Western hemisphere. In respect to US grand strategy in Asia, the US should significantly draw down its forces in Japan and South Korea, reducing its military footprint to an 'over the horizon' posture around US military bases, naval installations and logistics hubs on islands in the Indo-Pacific (esp. Guam, Diego Garcia, Hawaii). According to a grand strategy of restraint, the United States would only directly intervene militarily in Asia if China were to make an all-out bid for regional hegemony akin to the expansionist threat of Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century. For realist proponents of offshore balancing, the defence of Taiwan against a potential future Chinese invasion was not a core strategic interest of the United States. The burden to organize the strategic deterrence of China would instead fall primarily on India, Japan and South Korea, the latter two countries which, in line with realist balance of power calculations, would have to consider the acquisition of nuclear weapons for this purpose (Posen 2014). This realist sentiment was echoed to some extent by Donald Trump when he campaigned for the

presidency in 2016. To its many liberal and neoconservative critics in the US foreign policy establishment, however, restraint represented a politically irresponsible and morally reprehensible, discredited *realpolitik* vision of ‘neo-isolationism’, a potentially catastrophic disengagement of the United States from international affairs, which could result in a major war in Asia, or even trigger World War III (Kagan 2014).

In Washington, strategic visions of restraint and offshore balancing were politically endorsed to varying degrees by an ideologically diverse set of supporters. Libertarians like the Cato Institute think tank, were concerned about excessive government spending on national security and the global overreach and imperial distortion of the American republic. Progressive critics in turn targeted the militarization of US foreign policy and demanded an end to ‘forever wars’ to focus more energy on domestic policy priorities. This included prominent Democrats like Senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, and the progressive Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Both Barack Obama and Donald Trump repeatedly voiced arguments for restraint in public, from prioritizing ‘nation building at home’ and suggestions of ‘leading from behind’ under Obama, to attacking a Washington establishment record of ‘failed policies and continued losses in war’ under Trump (Trump 2016). Such sentiments testified to the growing political significance of a restraint discourse in Washington, in particular since Obama’s second term. Ultimately, however, neither the Obama Doctrine nor ‘America First’ could be considered comprehensive and consistent strategies for offshore balancing, or even isolationist disengagement from the Indo-Pacific.

The Genealogy of American Hegemony in Asia

Historically, US diplomatic, commercial, and military engagement in Asia pursued an overarching strategic goal of preventing a hostile power from dominating the region. The United States sought uninhibited access to regional resources and markets for both economic and security reasons, and prioritized relations with China and Japan respectively to that effect (Green 2017). This grand strategy motivated both Washington’s Open Door policy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, designed to prevent China’s formal colonization and territorial disintegration by the European imperialist powers, and the pursuit of Japan’s unconditional surrender in the Pacific War (1941–1945). Intellectually, this strategic vision drew significant inspiration from Anglo-American writings on the vital significance of naval supremacy and maritime power, overseas empire and the geopolitics of Eurasia by such revered figures as Alfred Thayer Mahan, Halford Mackinder, and Nicolas Spykman, whose influence on American grand strategy thinking remains considerable (Wilkins 2019: 746). Victory over Imperial Japan in the Second World War and the pursuit of Containment during the Cold War aimed at halting the expansion of Communism and Soviet influence, established the United States as an extra-regional hegemon in Asia from the early 1950s onwards. The cornerstone and enduring legacy of this hegemonic role is the so-called ‘hub and spoke’ alliance system of bilateral defence treaties with the United States at its centre, incorporating Japan (since 1952), South Korea (since 1953), Australia (since 1951), the Philippines (since 1951), and Thailand (since 1954).¹

Following the end of the Cold War, the United States sought to strengthen these alliances, especially with Japan and Australia, to enable greater allied support for US military operations in the region and beyond. Japan’s economic size, geographic location, military resources and shared history with America established it as the most significant member in this Pacific security system after the US itself. Most problematic for the United States from a strategic standpoint was that subsequent Japanese governments had interpreted Article 9 of Japan’s post-War

constitution as strictly limiting the country to national self-defence. Under the conservative governments led by Premier Shinzo Abe, however, Japan sought to loosen the interpretation of Article 9 to allow for collective defence and greater military cooperation with the United States, in particular after Abe's return to the premiership in 2012 and consecutive tenure as head of government, which lasted until September 2020. Geopolitically, these efforts coincided with an intensifying Sino-Japanese conflict over jurisdiction of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Strengthening the US-Japan alliance allowed both Washington and Tokyo to more effectively balance against China's growing military power and territorial claims in the South and East China Sea. After the end of the Cold War, substantial numbers of US air, ground and naval forces continued to be stationed in Japan (2020: ca.55.000), mainly on the island of Okinawa, and in South Korea (2020: ca. 26.000). US troops on the Korean peninsula remained in place to deter a potential North Korean attack on the South, and to provide early warning and surveillance of the North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missile arsenals, which could threaten both US territory and that of its allies in the Pacific. North Korea's series of ballistic missile and nuclear tests, which progressively matured in scope and size from a first underground nuclear test in 2006 were a clear setback for US strategic ambitions regarding nuclear non-proliferation in Asia. Despite repeated efforts to curb Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions under the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations through a mix of diplomatic engagement and international economic sanctions, the US intelligence community estimated that in 2019 North Korea possessed up to 60 nuclear warheads and the ability to launch them (Albert 2019).

Individual policy initiatives for new strategic partnerships, in particular in South East Asia, and the overall commitment to diplomatic engagement with the region clearly differed between the three post-Cold War administrations that preceded Donald Trump. The Obama administration, for example, paid much greater attention to ASEAN compared to Bush. George W. Bush in turn invested more heavily in strategically developing US ties with India than Bill Clinton, finalizing a nuclear agreement with New Delhi in 2007 that allowed for the transfer of civilian US nuclear technology and materials to the country, ending its nuclear pariah status. Despite these policy differences, however, Washington was also consistent in its support for the growth of a trans-Pacific institutional architecture under US leadership. One example for this overarching commitment to liberal hegemony were the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summits, which were held annually from 2001 onwards and included the United States as member.

A strong element of strategic continuity in the US approach to Asia also extended to relations with China, where the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations all sought to simultaneously engage and balance a rising China through a dual approach of 'conengagement' (Logan 2013) that commanded broad bipartisan support. It was the Trump administration, which abandoned engagement as a failed strategy from 2017 onwards, moving towards an open stance of great power competition. This included explicitly identifying Beijing as a strategic rival and revisionist power, while also questioning the merits of Washington's leadership role of a liberal international order. While the incoming Biden administration reasserted liberal hegemony ('America is back'), the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (2021) and statements by President Joe Biden about 'long-term strategic competition' and confronting China's 'economic abuses and coercion' (Sevastopulo 2021) reconfirmed this policy shift, signalling the most significant change in American grand strategy in the region since the Sino-American rapprochement of the 1970s.

Historically, US relations with China were defined by a complex pattern of confrontational and cooperative periods since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949. Under George W. Bush, an early resolve to focus the administration's energies on the emerging great power

competition in Asia was soon overtaken by the terrorist attacks of '9/11'. The ensuing strategic shift towards a global counter-terrorism campaign ('War on Terror') and prioritization of the threat of 'rogue states' armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) resulted in a geopolitical focus on the Greater Middle East region. The considerable financial and military resources committed there to support US designs for regime change, democratic transformation, and counter-insurgency operations meant a relative strategic neglect of US relations with China and the Indo-Pacific overall. Washington, however, devoted significant attention to regional counter-terrorism efforts given the presence of radical Islamist groups in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia and the Philippines. Overall, the Bush administration's vision for the Indo-Pacific consisted of defending the status quo as it had emerged after the end of the Cold War, while being strategically over-committed elsewhere. As a consequence, diplomatic, economic, and military investments undertaken to maintain the United States' position as Asia's predominant power were only limited in nature. Barack Obama would identify this relative neglect and underinvestment into the Pacific region as the greatest design flaw of US grand strategy in the twenty-first century.

Barack Obama and the 'Pivot to Asia'

In his speech to the Australian Parliament on 17 November 2011, President Obama envisioned a geopolitical transition of the United States towards a Pacific future, ending its post-'9/11' fixation on the Middle East (Obama 2011). The 'pivot to Asia', later termed 'rebalancing' to dispel European fears of US abandonment, described a substantially increased diplomatic, economic, and military investment in the Asia-Pacific in order to secure the United States' leadership of a dawning 'Pacific Century' (Clinton 2011). At the same time, the pivot was meant to reverse perceptions of Washington's hegemonic decline after the 2008 financial crisis and the costly setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan (Manyin et al. 2012; Turner 2014). While the Obama administration framed the pivot as a fundamental strategic shift away from the legacy of Bush's 'War on Terror', many of its basic policy elements had already been in place. Other initiatives, such as new military deployments, were rather limited in scope and size. Fundamentally, the pivot suffered from a mismatch between strategic ambitions for hegemonic continuity and policies that seemed largely designed to realize US hegemony on the cheap. The pivot thus formulated Obama's strategic aspirations for continued American leadership in Asia rather than delivering the policies needed to make this goal a reality.

Under Obama, the United States renewed its strategic focus on its traditional security alliances, for example, through an agreement with Australia to station 3,000 US Marines in Darwin in 2011, and by reversing a 25-year absence of the US military from the Philippines in 2014 (Manyin et al. 2012). The United States also continued its integration in the region's institutional architecture, becoming a formal member of the East Asia Summit in 2011. Diplomatically, Obama sought in particular to develop new strategic partnerships with South East Asia, traditionally a region relatively neglected by US foreign policy (Parameswaran 2020). This included US initiatives to strengthen ties with Myanmar, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and also with India. Efforts to foster cooperative engagement in support of a rules-based international order in the Asia-Pacific directly followed from Obama's strategic emphasis on greater 'burden sharing' to maintain and revitalize US hegemony. Washington's diplomatic pivot ultimately bore fruit in the form of regular diplomatic consultations and joint military exercises, as well as significant export deals for US weapons, and various cooperation agreements in security and defence related matters. Obama also elevated the US relationship with ASEAN to a strategic partnership in 2015, complementing various bilateral initiatives

on the institutional level. Geopolitically, however, most South East Asian nations preferred to passively hedge against the growing influence of China, further developing cooperation with Washington to this end, while also seeking to avoid open confrontation with Beijing. The United States, on the other hand, perceived its cooperative engagement and institutional involvement in the Asia-Pacific predominantly through the lens of securing its hegemonic position and an active counterbalancing of China. This strategic discrepancy occasionally resulted in the United States failing to win diplomatic support of its position; for example, when attempting to include a direct reference to Chinese territorial ambitions in the South and East China Sea at the 2016 US–ASEAN summit, the first held on US soil (Mason 2016).

In the economic realm, the signature element of Obama's grand strategy was the US-led initiative to conclude a Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP), originally begun under Bush in 2008. If subsequently ratified by all its members TPP would have created the world's largest regional trading bloc, surpassing the EU and NAFTA with a combined population of 800 million people, accounting for almost 40 per cent of global economic output. Besides further reducing tariffs and eliminating trade barriers, TPP contained regulatory directives and provisions for the protection of intellectual property, investment liberalization, labour and environmental standards, and the equal treatment of state-run enterprises and private competitors, which meant that the United States rather than China would set trade rules across the region reflecting its own liberal economic preferences. In a 2015 report for the Council on Foreign Relations, closer economic integration of the US with TPP partner nations, unofficially referred to in Washington as 'anyone but China', was already clearly linked to a more confrontational American grand strategy that centred on 'balancing the rise of Chinese power rather than continuing to assist its ascendancy' (Blackwill and Tellis 2015).

Obama ultimately failed to ratify the TPP agreement during his final year in office, stemming from domestic opposition in Congress and a rise of protectionist sentiment in both parties. This was a clear indicator that the continued pursuit of US grand strategy in Asia not only faced the external challenge of how to respond to China and marshal the support of ambivalent allies. At least as significant was the internal problem of liberal hegemony's diminishing political legitimacy in the United States itself. TPP's failure occurred in conjunction with a relative decline of US defence budgets, and a Republican forced government shutdown, which prevented Obama's attendance at the East Asia Summit in 2013. These domestic setbacks raised questions about the credibility, coherence and consistency of the pivot and the seriousness of the United States' strategic commitment to the Asia-Pacific, both within Washington and among US allies and partners in the region. This was compounded by the conceptual incoherence of the Obama Doctrine, which was unable to square the circle between exceptionalist rhetoric and a policy course of limiting the financial and military costs of global leadership (Löfflmann 2017). The central conundrum of the pivot, however, was how to respond to the challenge of China, which both competed and cooperated with the United States. Washington was unable to agree to Xi's demands for a 'new type of great power relations', which besides recognition of equal status and Chinese hegemony in Asia, meant acceptance of China's 'core interests', including on the issue of Taiwan and Beijing's far-reaching territorial claims in the East and South China Sea. At the same time, the global economic significance of Sino–American links in trade, commerce and finance made Cold War-style Containment impossible, and the Obama administration continued to actively identify and pursue areas of cooperation and engagement with Beijing, from counter-terrorism and counter-piracy to cyber security and the improvement of military-to-military contacts under the 'responsible stakeholder' paradigm. Both rhetorically and practically, however, the military dimension of the pivot clearly intensified the strategic rivalry

between the United States and China, moving ‘conengagement’ increasingly from cooperative engagement towards geostrategic confrontation.

In response to a shifting balance of power, in particular the growth of the Chinese Navy, the United States announced in 2012 its intention to station 60 per cent of its naval forces in the Asia-Pacific from 2020 onwards, moving away from a parity of forces between the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean. Of 11 active aircraft carrier strike groups, America’s principle tool for the projection of military power, six would be committed to the region. United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) would be prioritized for getting access to the most advanced military technologies and new equipment in the US arsenal. Joint military exercises and manoeuvres with several US allies and partners were increased in size, scope, and frequency since the announcement of the pivot in 2011/2012 (United States Department of Defense 2015). At the same time, however, the United States’ military rebalancing had to be measured against moderate cuts to the defence budget and a general drawdown of US forces under the Obama presidency, together with bipartisan efforts at deficit reduction, which culminated in the Budget Control Act of 2011 and Congressional sequestration, further negatively affecting US defence spending from 2013 onwards. The US Marine Corps, for example, went from a troop strength of 202,000 in 2012 to 186,000 troops in 2017. The US Navy and US Air Force received fewer new ships and aircraft than originally demanded, while training exercises were curtailed or cancelled (Löfflmann 2016). In March 2014, Katrina McFarland, assistant secretary of defence for acquisition in the Pentagon, therefore commented: ‘Right now, the pivot is being looked at again, because candidly it can’t happen’ (quoted in *ibid.*). While the US military was expected to maintain a qualitative edge over its Chinese counterpart for the foreseeable future, cuts to the Pentagon budget under Obama and public reactions by political and military officials and leading Washington think tanks on their negative effects undermined the key narrative of the rebalancing as securing America’s long-term position in the region. America’s military build-up ultimately remained incremental, and was predominantly aimed at managing perceptions, both among US allies and partners and *vis-à-vis* Beijing.

US military officials and national security think tanks thereby accused China repeatedly of militarizing the South China Sea, notably through the construction of artificial islands with military-grade airfields and ports, and the deployment of surface-to-air and anti-ship missile batteries in contested territories like the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, and the Scarborough Shoal. At an Asian security summit in 2015, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter declared emphatically that the US military would not accept Chinese attempts to curtail its freedom of movement: ‘The United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows’ (Cronk 2015). The US Navy subsequently conducted a series of ‘freedom of navigation’ operations, flying planes and sailing ships near disputed islands to underscore its right to move uninhibited within the region, a practice that was intensified under the Trump administration. The United States also reemphasized its treaty commitments to the defence of Japan with President Obama confirming that collective defence under Article 5 covered all territories under Japan’s administration, including the Senkaku Islands. Obama likewise declared an ironclad US commitment to defend Manila. While these announcements reiterated existing US security guarantees, they only had limited practical consequences. The United States, for example, continued to observe an official position of neutrality regarding the various territorial disputes involving China and several US partners in the region.

China, in turn, accused the United States of its own form of militarization, citing its increased naval operations and new basing arrangements. The US national security establishment clearly viewed China’s growing military power, especially its anti-access/area-denial

(A2/AD) capabilities, as a strategic challenge to US security and economic interests. As a consequence, the Pentagon and the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) think tank developed the Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept – later upgraded to Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) – which envisioned ‘the ability to project dominant military force across transoceanic ranges’ (Van Tol et al. 2010). The US military formulated several scenarios to counter A2/AD, ranging from drone and cyber warfare campaigns to long-range strikes against strategic targets inside China and a naval blockade to cripple the Chinese economy (ibid.). While American political and military officials repeatedly stressed that the pivot was not designed to contain China, the military element of the re-balancing was clearly focused on deterring Chinese territorial and geopolitical ambitions and maintaining the United States’ overseas forward presence. Ultimately, US grand strategy in Asia faced a double dilemma under Obama. Cooperative engagement with China was increasingly put into question, if not made impossible, by US efforts to strengthen its diplomatic, economic and military footprint in the region. For both geopolitical and domestic reasons, US efforts, at the same time, were not substantial enough to lastingly alter Chinese behaviour or to decidedly shift the balance of power in Washington’s favour. The response of the Trump administration to this dilemma was to largely abandon engagement with China.

Donald Trump and ‘America First’: The End of Pax Americana in Asia?

Donald Trump campaigned for the presidency on promoting and reinforcing a sense of economic grievance, cultural alienation, and political resentment among his voter base of predominantly white, male, working-class and non-college educated voters, who secured his Electoral College win in 2016. While coherence and consistency were largely absent from Trump’s policy performance and political communication after entering the White House in January 2017, the worldview behind ‘America First’, combining anti-globalist nationalism with anti-elitist populism nonetheless signalled a significant course change for US grand strategy. In advocating for economic protectionism, restricting immigration in the name of national security, rejecting alliances as costly drain on financial and military resources, and attacking the repeated failures of an elitist Washington establishment, ‘America First’ represented a deliberate break with the bipartisan consensus on liberal hegemony (Löffmann 2019).

This applied in particular to Obama’s emphasis on cooperative engagement. In fact, the deliberate undoing of Obama’s internationalist legacy partially motivated Trump’s abandonment of TPP early in his presidency, which was followed by similar US withdrawals from the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Iran nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action JCPOA), all viewed by Trump as emblematic of a failed ‘globalist’ approach that had weakened the United States and advantaged other nations instead. Trump reduced liberal hegemony to an emphasis on global US supremacy, replacing Washington’s leadership of a liberal world order with a narrow focus on transactionalism and securing direct political and economic gain for the United States, irrespective if these results were to be achieved against liberal democracies and longstanding US allies and partners, or authoritarian regimes and historical rivals. Rather than American exceptionalism, support for freedom and democracy, and advocacy of human rights, the Trump administration’s definition of the national interest was guided by a self-declared ‘principled realism’ (White House 2017), according to which the international system was a zero-sum arena of existential conflict and strategic competition.

For the Indo-Pacific (which replaced Asia-Pacific in US government statements under Trump), ‘America First’ primarily translated into a renewed focus on confronting China and

to abandon the idea of Beijing ever developing into a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the eyes of Washington. Established US alliances and partnerships were simultaneously put under pressure by Trump’s policy priorities, impulsive behaviour, and undisciplined communication via the social media platform Twitter. This included Trump’s vacillations on North Korea, between a confrontational ‘fire and fury’ rhetoric and high-level diplomatic overtures towards ‘rocket man’ Kim Jong-un, resulting in an unprecedented first meeting between the two leaders in June 2018. The strategic goal of nuclear disarmament of the Korean peninsula however, eluded Trump just as it had his predecessors. President Trump’s unilateral cancellation of annual large-scale US–South Korean military exercises in March 2019, seemingly undertaken in order to accommodate Kim, at the same time, generated renewed questions about the credibility and reliability of Washington’s security guarantees to its Asian allies. Overall, America First’s endorsement of nationalist populism and Trump’s aggressive pursuit of transactionalism were an ill fit with Washington’s stated objective to secure the US legacy of liberal hegemony in Asia in documents like the 2017 NSS, which nearly mirrored the language of Obama’s pivot: ‘We will redouble our commitment to established alliances and partnerships, while expanding and deepening relationships with new partners that share respect for sovereignty, fair and reciprocal trade, and the rule of law’ (White House 2017: 46–47). Parallels to the strategic approaches pursued by the Bush and Obama administrations could also be found in the vision for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ released by the State Department in November 2019, which emphasized close and enduring economic and security ties with the United States’ regional allies, partners and institutions like ASEAN (United States Department of State 2019).

Yet, in the economic realm, Trump emphasized bilateral trade deals, where US economic weight could supposedly be more easily leveraged for advantage. The imposition of tariffs and quotas, however, ultimately only extracted marginal concessions in trade negotiations. Trump’s withdrawal from TPP, on the other hand, negatively affected American diplomatic credibility and undermined claims to regional leadership (Mastanduno 2020). Trump’s basic strategic incoherence was also illustrated when he questioned the value of Washington’s traditional alliances in Asia by forcefully demanding greater financial compensation in return for the US military protection of South Korea and Japan, thus linking trade objectives with national security policy (Swanson and Mozur 2019). Discrepancies not only existed between strategic aims and Trump’s pursuit of diplomacy, but manifested repeatedly between the President’s populist instincts and the priorities of his national security team. National security establishment figures like James Mattis, John Kelly, and H. R. McMaster, the so-called ‘adults in the room’, had all departed the administration over irreconcilable differences with the President’s worldview by the end of 2018.

On China, Trump remained characteristically inconsistent. While repeatedly attacking Beijing for taking advantage of the United States economically, Trump showed personal admiration for Xi Jinping, as he did for other authoritarian leaders. Fraught attempts at economic engagement, resulting in multiple new tariff rounds during Sino–American trade talks in 2018 and 2019, were followed by open confrontation from 2020 onwards. The Trump administration sought to accelerate economic decoupling from China, for example, by pressuring US allies to exclude the Chinese technology giant Huawei from the development of 5G networks. Trump also blamed China directly for the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic in the United States in 2020, seeking to capitalize on growing anti-Chinese sentiments among US voters. Trump’s anti-China rhetoric, however, also reflected a wider strategic shift in the United States among national security experts, the Pentagon, members of Congress in both parties, Washington think tanks, and mainstream media, which called for a new grand strategy to confront Chinese hegemonic ambitions (Brands and Cooper 2019).

An increasingly influential anti-China wing in the Trump administration consisted of national security hawks like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Deputy National Security Advisor Matthew Pottinger. Pottinger had spearheaded a new China strategy, released in 2020, which emphasized the basic antagonism between American democracy and growing Chinese authoritarianism under Xi. The document described China in starkly Manichean terms as challenging the ‘bedrock American belief in the unalienable right of every person to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ (White House 2020). This identity narrative and moral absolutism expanded on the power-centric *realpolitik* view promoted through the 2017 *National Security Strategy* and 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, framing strategic competition with a revisionist China and US efforts to counter its growing assertiveness in both geo-strategic and political-ideological terms. At the same time, however, the Trump administration faced the same strategic conundrum as its predecessors in that a full-scale Containment of China in Asia was neither possible, nor advisable, given its sheer economic size and regional influence. Proposals for a new era of strategic competition in Washington still had to be measured against enduring economic, geopolitical and military-operational realities in the Indo-Pacific, especially the limited ambition of US allies for an open confrontation with China. In seeking a ‘New Cold War’ to reassert its primacy, ‘America First’ threatened to result in America alone.

Conclusion

Throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century, US grand strategy in Asia has faced the dilemma of how to respond to the rise China and defend its hegemonic legacy against structural geopolitical changes through which Washington’s ‘unipolar moment’ recedes further and further into the distance. To this end, the United States has sought to strengthen its existing alliances, develop new strategic partnerships, support the growth of a trans-Pacific institutional architecture, and find a *modus vivendi* with China somewhere between engagement and Containment. Yet, for the United States, China remains an unsolvable strategic puzzle. Its economic size, diplomatic clout and military power make it simply too great to ignore, isolate or contain, while for both geopolitical and ideological reasons, the United States is unable to accept China as an equal. In Washington, the pendulum has swung from more cooperative visions of liberal hegemony with Beijing ultimately emerging as ‘responsible stakeholder’ of a *Pax Americana*, towards an increasingly open confrontation under Trump’s ‘America First’ paradigm. The second dilemma for US grand strategy in Asia is that while its stated objectives have stayed relatively constant over time, an Indo-Pacific region underwritten by free trade, economic openness and the rule of law, Washington has struggled to invest the material resources, diplomatically, economically and militarily to unambiguously underwrite its geopolitical vision of regional leadership, and to convince both US allies and partners and domestic audiences of the long-term viability of its commitment.

These basic challenges for US grand strategy in Asia are compounded by the fact that trade, investment, and financial links between China and the remaining countries in the Indo-Pacific continue to grow, while the region has ‘widened its economic and institutional focus beyond the United States’ (Kang 2017: 183). An emerging post-American regional order is already visible in parts in new institutions like the Beijing-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade agreement signed in November 2020, both of which exclude the United States. These trends will likely continue to grow in the coming decades. Trying to prevent the emergence of a more Asia-centric regional order outright will result in strategic failure for the United States. Neither

Obama's 'pivot to Asia' nor Trump's 'America First' were successful in this regard. An alternative grand strategy of restraint could seek to positively influence this geopolitical shift rather than resisting it, letting the United States adopt the roles of honest broker and offshore balancer of last resort. A successful US grand strategy for Asia would require acknowledging structural geopolitical and macroeconomic developments that point to a less exalted US role in the region in the 'Pacific Century', while seeking to recalibrate stated ambitions with the means available to the United States. Redefining US grand strategy in Asia, however, would first require finding a new domestic consensus on Washington's role in the world at large.

Note

- 1 New Zealand was a signatory to the ANZUS security treaty concluded between the United States, Australia and New Zealand in 1951, but suspended its membership in 1985 after its declaration of a nuclear-free zone in its territorial waters.

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