

The Question of American Strategy in the Indo-Pacific

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From nearly the beginning of its history the United States was constantly involved in the Indo-Pacific region, whether through trade, missionary activity, diplomacy, or military action. As engaged as America might be in the Pacific, however, Washington had relatively limited goals in the region until 1898, and thus had a comparatively limited strategy. Not until the global crisis of World War II did a fully blown US strategy for the Pacific come into being. Indeed, a self-conscious American grand strategy itself only emerged during the early Cold War, focusing necessarily on the whole world, and not on regions or subregions.

Perhaps only now with the post-Cold War rise of China and with Asia's vital role in the global economy can one realistically talk about a US grand strategy significantly focused on the Indo-Pacific region. Yet ironically, just at the moment when Asia has become central to US global strategy, Washington's influence and power in the region have been significantly challenged, perhaps for the first time since 1945. The great test for US policy makers is to formulate a truly effective, comprehensive strategy toward the Asia-Pacific that preserves stability, helps promote economic growth, encourages further liberalization and democratization, and protects American and allied interests, all in the context of a growing strategic competition between Washington and Beijing, the threat of a nuclear-capable North Korea, and an overall deterioration in the international order.

This paper will review the history of US strategy toward the Indo-Pacific region, consider current US policy toward the region, and question whether Washington's strategy meets professed goals. This paper considers the geographical boundary of the "Indo-Pacific" to correspond largely to the military "area of responsibility" allocated to the US Indo-Pacific Command (see figure 1).¹

The Indo-Pacific, on this definition, is perhaps the most diverse region on earth. It comprises thirty-six countries that are continental, peninsular, and archipelagic, including tens of thousands of inhabited islands, and covers much of the Pacific and Indian oceans, as well as the inner seas of Asia. With over three billion people, it contains more than half of the global population, including the world's two most populous nations, India and China,

¹This paper will use "Indo-Pacific," "Asia-Pacific," and "Asia" interchangeably, all to refer to the same geographic area defined herein.



Figure 1. US Indo-Pacific Command Area of Responsibility



Source: US Indo-Pacific Command, "Area of Responsibility," <http://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USIPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility>.

and is where over three thousand languages are spoken. It has the world's largest democracy (India) and the largest Muslim nations (Indonesia, Pakistan, and India). The Indo-Pacific is home to more than 40 percent of global economic output, including the leading economies of China, Japan, and South Korea. It also contains some of the world's largest and most developed military forces, including those of China, North Korea, South Korea, India, and Japan, as well as three declared nuclear powers (five, if the United States and Russia are included). Through its strategic waterways, such as the Malacca and Sunda Straits, transit 70 percent of global trade and 75,000 ships annually, linking Asia with the Middle East and Europe.² By any measure, economic disruption, regional conflict, or even domestic destabilization of any of Asia's major nations could have far-reaching effects both regionally and globally.

Early American Strategy in the Indo-Pacific

As a country born only in the late eighteenth century, the United States was a latecomer to the Indo-Pacific. European nations—starting with Portugal and followed by Spain, the Netherlands, and England—traded for centuries with Asian princely states, kingdoms, and islands. Eschewing the costly, land-based routes of the Silk Road, the Europeans rounded the Cape of Good Hope and followed the sea lanes long opened by Arab traders. This incursion from the western edge of the Eurasian landmass led inexorably, if unexpectedly, to the establishment of colonial outposts to protect the European traders, primarily spice merchants, and their small settlements. Starting on the western coast of the Indian subcontinent in the early sixteenth century, the Europeans by the mid-nineteenth century had ensconced themselves throughout the Indo-Pacific, reaching into Chinese territory, yet hardly into the Pacific Ocean itself.³

When the Americans came, they eventually sailed from the east, across the vast Pacific, thus opening up an entirely new set of sea routes.⁴ Their trading ships traversed thousands of miles of uncharted maritime territory, stopping at small island chains now and again, and then arrived suddenly in Asia proper, congested with empires and kingdoms and dotted with European colonial fortresses. Yet it was war that brought American power proper into the Indo-Pacific, thus marking the Pacific as a region of geopolitical competition from close to the beginning of the country's history. American military power, limited and inexperienced as it was, initially was deployed to uphold US neutrality rights in shipping that were threatened by European maritime powers. The protection of American commerce in the Pacific thus catalyzed the emergence of an official US presence in the region, represented primarily by the US Navy. Yet there was little in Washington's policy that initially could be considered a comprehensive or consistent strategy, let alone a truly grand strategy on the part of the young republic.⁵ Scattershot American attention overrode sometimes ambitious intentions, and it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that even the beginnings of a true strategy toward the Indo-Pacific could be discerned. That should not, however, lead to overlooking the fact that the new nation sought to project what power it could into the Pacific decades before a more comprehensive strategy emerged.

The first American merchant ship to trade with Asia, the *Empress of China*, sailed for China across the Atlantic Ocean from New York harbor in early 1784, just months after the signing of the Treaty of Paris that ended the American War for Independence. It was not until May 1800, during the Quasi-War with France, that the USS *Essex* became the first US Navy vessel to reach Asia, porting at Batavia (now Jakarta) in the Dutch East Indies. Having crossed the Atlantic and rounded the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean, taking the same route as the *Empress of China* previously, the *Essex* was to escort back to the United States a convoy of merchant ships and protect them from French privateers, which were equally potential prizes, should they be encountered.⁶ For the young nation, then, "Asia"



was initially reached via the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, and the “Indo” part of what we today call the Indo-Pacific was considered inseparable from the rest.

Yet America was destined to focus its Asian energies through and in the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps ironically, given the name of the ocean, it took another armed conflict, the War of 1812, to pull American power into the Pacific. In January 1813, the same USS *Essex* became the first US naval ship to round Cape Horn and transit into the Pacific, without any specific orders to do so. She was again in search of prizes, though this time British. *Essex* nearly decimated British whaling ships in rich hunting grounds in a few short months, forcing London to send the Royal Navy to hunt the American predator. Captain David Porter, commander of *Essex*, recklessly decided to confront the Royal Navy at Valparaiso, Chile, in March 1814, leading to the capture of his ship in one of the bloodiest battles in US Navy history. Meanwhile, at the other end of the great ocean, near Batavia, the USS *Peacock* captured the British East India Company brig *Nautilus* in June 1815 after the war had ended, killing a number of her crew in the action.

Not until 1818, with the dispatch of the USS *Macedonian* as the first ship of the “United States Naval Forces on Pacific Station,” was a regular US Navy presence established in the eastern Pacific Ocean. The Pacific Squadron, as it was soon called, was joined in 1835 by the East India Squadron, which later became the Asiatic Squadron.⁷ These two squadrons, of varying sizes and effectiveness, patrolled the Indo-Pacific region for the rest of the century. The growth of America’s whaling fleet in the Pacific in the middle of the nineteenth century led to general arguments for a stronger US presence in the region. Yet for decades, American trade in Asia lagged other regions and grew only slowly, with imports from Asia far outpacing exports. In 1840, five years after the establishment of the East India Squadron, trade with Asia amounted to just over \$12 million, 90 percent of which were imports to the United States.⁸ On the eve of the Spanish-American War in 1897, US exports to Asia were still under \$40 million, while nearly \$92 million worth of goods were imported. Yet politics and other interests were at least as important as actual profits. Trade treaties during the mid-1800s with China, Japan, and Siam, combined with an expatriate community of American missionaries throughout the Pacific, mandated at least a modest US force in the region to protect both merchant rights and the lives of American citizens and consular officials, as attacks on American shipping in lands as far-flung as Sumatra and Japan and violence against American diplomatic residences in Japan in the early 1860s proved.

Strategy, however, emerged only fitfully in relation to the Pacific. During the 1860s, William Henry Seward, Abraham Lincoln’s secretary of state, held perhaps the most articulated concept of US strategy in the region. Seward, echoing John Quincy Adams, argued that domination of global commerce was America’s destiny and that the Pacific would serve as a great highway to the riches of Asian markets. Seward oversaw the signing of a more expansive treaty with China and advocated for the annexation of the Hawaiian kingdom and the building of the Panama Canal. In terms of actual territorial expansion, Seward

of course purchased Alaska, but only the small atoll of Midway, claimed in 1867, marked any absorption of Pacific islands.⁹ Seward was decades ahead of his time, however, for not until 1898 did the United States become the type of colonial power envisioned by the most passionate expansionists. Fueled by concepts of maritime supremacy popularized by Alfred Thayer Mahan, and promoted by policy makers such as Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, US forces annexed Hawaii, invaded and captured the Philippines, and took over Guam and part of Samoa in 1898–99. In one fell swoop, America overturned nearly a century of tradition and became one of the leading colonial powers in the Pacific.

Yet strategy lagged expansion. Despite the growing shadow of Japanese power, US thinking in the early twentieth century was limited to relatively modest, and insufficient, planning for defending America's far-flung possessions. There was little, if any, discussion about how to maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific, given the multiple spheres of influence of the region's colonial powers and the presumption that the naval arms limitation treaties of 1921 and 1931 would prevent an arms race that could result in great power conflict. The creeping Sino-Japanese conflict, begun in Manchuria in September 1931, did not spur further US preparedness. Nor did it cause a coalition of Western colonial nations to consider collective defense of their territories.

The Japanese attacks throughout Asia on December 7, 1941, were a direct bid for hegemony. Alone, they may not have spurred any truly strategic thought on the part of the United States. But coming in conjunction with the Nazi threat to Europe, they generated the first serious, sustained strategic planning for Asia in the context of American global interests. That America had no grand strategy before World War II, let alone a strategy for Asia, was recognized by contemporaries. Walter Lippmann, perhaps the foremost foreign affairs commentator of his generation, for example, excoriated the very lack of US grand strategy prior to and during the war, reiterating what he called the “common principle” of genuine foreign policy—namely, that a nation must balance its commitments with its power. Without adequate resources, a state cannot uphold its commitments, and thus its foreign policy will remain out of balance. In particular, Lippmann argued, Washington left its frontiers unguarded, its armaments unprepared, and its alliances unfounded.¹⁰

As for the overarching US strategy required in a global environment, contemporary observers were equally clear. Lippmann argued that the continental limits of the United States did not equal the country's defensive frontiers.¹¹ This mirrored the wartime arguments of geopolitical scholar Nicholas Spykman, who stated that the goal of US foreign policy must be to preserve the balance of power in Europe and Asia as the first line of defense for the United States. He argued that America's unique geographical advantage of being protected by two great oceans would be irrelevant if Europe and Asia were both dominated by aggressive empires, thus isolating the country from global trade and threatening its ultimate security. To Spykman, continental defense (what he called quarter-sphere defense), was unviable without full hemispheric defense, including South America. That, in turn, could not be assured without a favorable balance of power in both Europe and Asia in the



Eastern Hemisphere.¹² Thus, American forces had to be present in those far-flung regions, which became part of the argument for near-permanent forward basing of US troops in both Europe and Asia after 1945.

This shift in strategic thinking led to concrete planning for the postwar era, forming the basis for US policy in the Pacific throughout the Cold War and beyond. Beginning with the need to neutralize a potential future Japanese threat, the first two pillars of Washington's strategy were the permanent militarization of the US presence in Asia and the democratization of Japan. The American occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1952 ensured that both these approaches became the basis of US policy.¹³ The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 further spurred a military-first strategy for Asia, while making the containment of Soviet-sponsored communism the third major pillar of US strategy. The threat of communist subversion in the newly decolonized Asia led to the fourth element of US strategy, which was to create a region-wide system of defensive alliances.¹⁴ Between 1951 and 1960, Washington signed a series of formal security treaties, attempting to create a network of multilateral agreements mirroring those in Europe, including the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) Treaty in 1951 and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954.

This treaty system evolved during the Cold War, with SEATO and ANZUS breaking apart, ultimately leading to enduring alliances with Australia (1951), the Philippines (1951), South Korea (1953), Thailand (1954), and Japan (1960). American forces were anchored by major air and naval bases located in Japan in the northeast and the Philippines in the southeast. These strategically located and extensive installations allowed US forces to project power, intervene when necessary, and provide a constant level of assurance and security for public goods such as freedom of navigation. While concerned about communist subversion of Asian countries, Washington did not face a significant traditional great power challenge in Asia's common seas or skies. The major American military priorities were to prevent another North Korean attack across the 38th parallel and to bottle up Soviet ballistic missile submarines in their littoral bastions in the Sea of Okhotsk and nearby waters—this latter was undertaken in conjunction particularly with Japanese naval and air forces.

As Asian economies took off in the 1960s and 1970s, beginning with Japan and then spreading to the so-called Four Tigers of South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, an economic element to the strategic importance of Asia increasingly came to the fore. As America's economy became more tied to Asian manufacturers, concern with ensuring freedom of navigation and the high seas and protecting crucial lanes of sea transport concurrently rose in importance. Subsidiary to that was a growing US interest in ensuring overall stability in Asia so that the economies of key allies such as Japan and South Korea were not threatened by external aggression or internal upheaval. Melding geo-economic interests with long-standing geopolitical and security interests reflected the rise of Asia during the final decades of the Cold War, but the region was still treated in many ways as simply one part of a global anti-Soviet/anticommunist grand strategy.

American Strategy in the Indo-Pacific after the Cold War and the Rise of China

Contemporaneous with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble, China began its unprecedented rise to global power. During the Cold War, US policy toward China was a combination of geopolitical maneuvering against the Soviet Union and aspirations of unlocking its massive market for American businesses. When President Richard Nixon traveled to meet Chinese leader Mao Zedong in 1972, few in the United States imagined that within a generation, China would be the second-most powerful nation on earth and would become an unambiguous challenger to America's leading global role. Yet US policy was focused on integrating China into the global economy and giving Beijing a place at the table of international politics. From normalization of US-China ties in 1978 through Beijing's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, in addition to high-level Sino-US government exchanges such as the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Washington consistently worked to promote deeper economic and political bonds with Beijing. The US approach was perhaps best summed up by Robert Zoellick, then deputy secretary of state, who in 2005 called on China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the global system, pointedly making distinctions between early twenty-first-century Sino-US relations and the Cold War competition between America and the Soviet Union.¹⁵

The early post-Cold War years saw attempts by both the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations to come up with a new grand strategy for the United States. With Europe taking a back seat in US interests for the first time in two generations, Asia rapidly began to fill the vacuum. Both administrations acknowledged the unique unipolar moment following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but did not yet argue that Asia would become the cockpit of international relations. However, by the time Clinton left office, tensions were already appearing in Sino-US relations that would lead to reconsiderations of American strategy in the region.

Reflecting the central role of military capability in maintaining America's presence in Asia, the Department of Defense in 1995 issued a "U.S. Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region," which remains the only formally published US government strategy for the Indo-Pacific region. Coming as it did when the full extent of the Japanese economic slowdown was not known, when China was just a few years into the relaunch of then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, and before North Korea had progressed in its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, the strategy adopted a more balanced perspective on Asia than many subsequent statements of US interest. America's central goals in Asia, the strategy proclaimed, are "to enhance security by maintaining a strong defense capability and promoting cooperative security measures; to open foreign markets and spur global economic growth; and to promote democracy abroad." These goals would be achieved by focusing on strengthening long-standing alliance relationships and other partnerships, maintaining a robust forward-based US military presence in the region, and encouraging the "constructive integration" of China into the international community.¹⁶



While the overall goals and means in Asia espoused by the US government did not formally change over the succeeding decades, American strategy began to shift in the 2000s in response to China's rise, the growing North Korean threat, and the gradual economic integration of the region. Early post-Cold War problems in Asia centered on Taiwan and its moves toward democracy, as early as the 1996 presidential election, which was the first direct election of Taiwan's leader. Beijing feared the potential independence leanings of then president Lee Teng-hui and of the Kuomintang Party, as well as the granting to Lee of a US visa to visit his alma mater, Cornell University. In an attempt to intimidate both him and Taiwanese voters, China fired ballistic missiles into the waters off the island nation in July and August 1995 and in March 1996. In turn, the Clinton administration sent two US aircraft carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Strait as a show of force. Beijing's subsequent naval buildup was designed to counter US strengths in waters China increasingly considered its sphere of influence.¹⁷ This modernization eventually became known as the "anti-access, area-denial" (A2/AD) strategy, whereby the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) began developing a set of capabilities to target qualitatively superior US forces in Asia's inner seas and the western Pacific Ocean, including antiship ballistic missiles, attack submarines, stealth fighters, and the like.¹⁸ During the same period, in 1994, the first North Korean nuclear crisis occurred, raising the specter of US military strikes on the Korean peninsula and spurring diplomatic negotiations that resulted in the so-called Agreed Framework to halt Pyongyang's nuclear development program.

Although the 9/11 terror attacks consumed the attention and energies of the Bush administration during the 2000s, China's undeniable growth, the discovery of North Korean cheating on the Agreed Framework, and a breakthrough in US-India relations pushed Washington to begin focusing more on the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁹ Much effort was spent on attempting to balance America's long-standing alliance commitments with the rising influence of China. Central to this was the establishment of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue between the top officials in Washington and Beijing, an attempt that some compared to the forging of a "G-2" condominium, or joint dominion, to settle major global issues.²⁰ As for North Korea, the Bush administration initiated the "six-party talks" mechanism as a multilateral diplomatic approach for solving the peninsula's nuclear crisis. By the end of Bush's second term, little progress had come of the G-2 and Pyongyang had claimed its first nuclear detonation. These two poles, China and North Korea, increasingly shaped US strategy in the region, challenging prior assumptions about Asia's peaceful rise and questioning the commitment Washington would have to make to maintain stability and promote prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

It was not until the Obama administration that a new, overarching concept came to be articulated, the so-called "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia. First rolled out by then secretary of state Hillary Clinton in an article entitled "America's Pacific Century," the argument behind the pivot was repeated by President Barack Obama and a host of administration officials, asserting that the United States would pursue a multipronged approach of military

buildup, diplomatic engagement, and free trade negotiations to shore up its position in Asia.²¹ The pivot envisioned a renewed push for Sino-US cooperation, symbolized by the 2013 Sunnylands summit between Obama and new Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Yet, by enhancing America's military presence in Asia, the pivot was interpreted by many, not least by China, as an attempt to contain a rising power.²² Further, by asserting that the United States had a "national interest" in seeing China and its neighbors peacefully resolve South China Sea territorial disputes, the Obama administration threatened to intervene in areas that Beijing considered to be core interests.²³ China's response was not only to continue its rapid military modernization, but to begin a massive land reclamation program in the contested Spratly Islands, creating islands out of submerged reefs and militarizing them with 3,000-meter runways, defensive weaponry, radars, and porting facilities. China further continued its predatory cyberattacks on US businesses and was charged in the theft of the confidential personal information of over 22 million American citizens from the US Office of Personnel Management. China's repeated watering down and undermining of UN sanctions against North Korea, as well as its support for authoritarian regimes around the world, further strained ties with the United States.

As for North Korea, the Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience" resulted largely in eight years of neglect of the issue, with only one, quickly broken agreement (the so-called Leap Day agreement) to show for diplomatic engagement. Pyongyang doubled down on its nuclear and missile program development during Obama's years, conducting nuclear tests in 2009 and 2013, and twice in 2016, while launching ballistic missiles on at least a dozen occasions. By the end of Obama's term, Pyongyang was deemed to have a nuclear arsenal of several dozen warheads and had largely perfected intercontinental ballistic missile technology, a capability it proved in the early months of the succeeding Trump administration.

Other elements of Obama's pivot added to complications in relations with Beijing. Washington and Tokyo deepened their bilateral security alliance with a revision of the "guidelines" for mutual cooperation. With the return of conservative Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to office in late 2012, the Obama Asia team found a willing partner to begin countering Chinese influence in Asia. Japan, with a \$50 billion annual defense budget and a highly trained, modernized military, was regarded by Beijing as the Asian nation most capable of opposing Chinese power. Although hamstrung by lingering legal restrictions on the types of overseas security activity it could undertake, Tokyo increased its commitments to support US forces engaged in military operations in northeast Asia and continued modernizing its forces, including purchasing F-35 stealth fighters and launching two large-deck helicopter carriers.

In addition, Washington enhanced its security cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, many of which have ongoing territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. The Obama administration pursued closer ties with Singapore and Malaysia and negotiated a



breakthrough pact with the Philippines to allow US military forces access to bases on the archipelago. This last accomplishment, however, was derailed by the breakdown in relations between Washington and Manila after the electoral victory of Rodrigo Duterte, a populist politician who moved closer to China after criticism by the Obama administration for his supposed support of vigilantes in cracking down on the Philippines' drug trade. And while ties with India during the Obama years did not achieve the warmth of the Bush years, any overtures by Washington to New Delhi were eyed suspiciously by Beijing.

A final element of the Obama administration's pivot to Asia was the negotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a twelve-nation free trade pact. Begun in 2005 by Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore, the TPP eventually attracted Obama's attention. It included Japan and America's NAFTA partners, Canada and Mexico, as well. However, the Obama administration did not succeed in getting the pact ratified by the US Senate before its term ended, and the new president, Donald Trump, withdrew from the agreement after criticizing it during the 2016 campaign (as did his opponent, Hillary Clinton). Despite the lack of implementation, the TPP presented China with the potential of a new free trade area developing among largely market economies, with high standards for labor and environmental issues, that would leave Beijing on the outside. China's response to TPP was to propose a massive new trade network, the Belt and Road Initiative or New Silk Road, underpinned by \$1 trillion in infrastructure spending across Eurasia and tying together land- and sea-based trading routes with China at the center.

By 2017 and the inauguration of the Trump administration, American strategy in Asia was questioned as to its coherence, effectiveness, and resources. Despite the promises of the Obama-era pivot, and a number of achievements, world opinion was that America was in retreat from Asia while China was ascendant. Not only did Washington seem outmaneuvered in the South China Sea, China's new economic initiatives seemed to promise more opportunity than the TPP, especially given US domestic opposition to the pact by both Democrats and Republicans. And while American policy makers would repeatedly argue that the United States was more engaged in Asia than ever before, the impression was of a country overpromising and under-delivering. Washington seemed without a clear strategy for maintaining its influence and countering the rise of China.

The Trump Era: Fundamental Change in Strategy or More of the Same?

Donald Trump ran for office promising to challenge the consensus on US foreign policy, not least in Asia, as part of his America First approach. He regularly attacked China on the campaign trail, asserting that lopsided bilateral trade practices contributed to a \$350 billion trade deficit with China and that the decades of opening up American markets to Chinese goods had resulted in the hollowing out of American industries and the loss of millions of jobs. Further, Trump lambasted previous administrations' Korea policy, stating that he would meet with dictator Kim Jong-un and promising that he would prevent North Korea

from getting a nuclear weapon that could hit the United States. Overturning decades of practice, Trump explicitly linked security and economic ties with China, arguing that if Beijing did not help solve the North Korean crisis, he would “make trade very difficult.”

Surprising many in Washington and Asia, Trump openly questioned the value of the US alliances with Japan and South Korea. On the one hand, he claimed that both countries should be paying more to offset the costs of basing American forces in their countries and intimated he might consider walking away from the alliances if Tokyo and Seoul did not contribute more funds. Even more shocking, he also suggested that he might encourage both countries to develop their own nuclear capabilities in response to North Korea. This threatened to undermine the long-standing US nuclear guarantee of so-called “extended deterrence,” by which Washington promised to defend both Japan and South Korea from nuclear attack in exchange for both countries forgoing an indigenous nuclear deterrent.²⁴ Trump’s victory, then, portended a potentially significant revision of US strategy in Asia in part by reducing US commitments and confronting China. His unprecedented phone conversation with Taiwan’s president, Tsai Ing-wen, during the transition period, further reinforced beliefs that he would not play by the traditional rules of diplomacy.

Once in office, however, the Trump administration adopted a more recognizable approach of reaffirming alliance relationships and engaging with China. Confounding critics who assumed he would pay little attention to Asia, Trump in reality made Asia a centerpiece of his foreign policy. He emphasized his personal relationships in early meetings with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping, but Trump’s diplomacy for the most part hewed to traditional discussions over deeper engagement. In addition, Trump attended the major gatherings of international and Pacific leaders in his first year and made the longest presidential trip to the region in decades.

If the Trump administration adopted a specific strategy for US Asia policy, it was to use US pressure to resolve seemingly intractable security and economic problems, while quietly retiring the concept of the overhyped “pivot” to Asia. In two specific ways, Trump departed from the policy of his predecessors. First, following outgoing President Obama’s warning that his greatest foreign policy challenge would be North Korea, Trump dramatically ratcheted up his bellicose rhetoric, warning that Pyongyang would face “fire and fury” if it threatened the United States or its allies with nuclear weapons. Trump increased military shows of force near the peninsula and sponsored a series of stronger UN sanctions to financially squeeze the Kim regime. This activity was capped by threats from the administration that it would preemptively strike North Korea, giving it a “bloody nose” to degrade its nuclear and ballistic missile capability. Pyongyang’s response through 2017 was to conduct another nuclear test and launch ballistic missiles on at least sixteen occasions, including launching two over Hokkaido, Japan’s main island, and theoretically achieving the capability of striking the American homeland.²⁵



At the same time, Trump and his senior officials, including Secretary of Defense James Mattis and then secretary of state Rex Tillerson, held open the possibility of another round of negotiations with Pyongyang. In a flurry of diplomatic activity in the spring of 2018, South Korean President Moon Jae-in announced that he would meet with Kim Jong-un and Trump accepted an unprecedented offer for a summit with the North Korean dictator. Credited by many with the threatening rhetoric that brought Kim to the negotiating table, Trump and his team returned to the long-standing US goal of “complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization” of the Korean peninsula, though skeptics warned that a repeat of failed negotiations and broken agreements was the most likely outcome.

Toward China, Trump adopted an approach of alternating cooperative gestures with confrontational moves. The administration’s first National Security Strategy, released in December 2017, laid to rest the idea that China would any longer be considered a unique partner of the United States, as pursued initially by the Obama administration. Rather, the document singled out China’s challenge to American “power, influence, and interests,” arguing that the United States was engaged in a “geopolitical competition” with Beijing, one between “free and repressive visions of world order.”²⁶ The document signaled that while Trump would pursue cooperation where possible with China, his administration would put China’s aggressive security and predatory economic policies at the top of the agenda.

Following up on his campaign promises, Trump announced in early 2018 a series of new tariffs against Chinese steel and demanded that the bilateral trade deficit be reduced by at least \$100 billion. Although darkly warning of a trade war, Beijing levied its own tariffs on US goods, yet at the same time responded with various proposals for evening out the unbalanced trade between the two countries. While not directly connected with the China trade moves, Trump’s early withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership portended the beginning of an era of more restrictive trade agreements, moving away from the robust free trade approach of US administrations at least since Bill Clinton. Given the strategic implications in the Pacific of a free trade area linking largely democratic market economies, Trump’s moves opened the question of his long-term strategy for ensuring American engagement in the Pacific.

The Fundamentals of US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region

Donald Trump’s approach in his first eighteen months as president raised the questions about the future of US strategy in Asia. There has been no US strategy document for the Indo-Pacific region since the 1995 Department of Defense security strategy. During those twenty-plus years, Asia’s global role has dramatically expanded as the region has become the manufacturing center of the global economy; raised hundreds of millions of persons into the middle class; sent hundreds of thousands of students, researchers, and travelers abroad; and fielded increasingly powerful militaries. Asia’s importance to the United States has grown proportionately, not least as more than seventeen million Americans are immigrants

from Asia or have Asian heritage, making up 5.6 percent of the US population.²⁷ Add to that the hundreds of thousands of Chinese, Indians, Koreans, and Japanese studying or working in the United States, and America's grassroots connections to Asia have never been stronger. US trade in goods with Asia totals nearly \$1.5 trillion, nearly doubling that with Europe.²⁸

The rising tensions in Asia—whether over disputed borders, historical issues, or rogue nations like North Korea—also draw the United States closer to the region. America's five formal treaty alliances and close relations with other nations evolved because Washington was willing to promise to spend American lives and treasure on the defense of its allies and to provide public goods such as protection of vital waterways. The US presence in Asia begins with the US Pacific Command (USPACOM), headquartered on Oahu in Hawaii, and comprised of nearly 330,000 servicemen and women and civilian employees. The US Pacific Fleet, Pacific Air Forces, US Army Pacific, and US Marine Corps Forces, Pacific, field hundreds of ships and fighter aircraft, helicopters, and transport vessels. Forward based throughout the region, particularly in Japan, Guam, and South Korea, they maintain a constant presence to defend US interests, allies, and regional stability. Added to this is diplomatic representation in over thirty countries in the Indo-Pacific and the aforementioned trade ties.

Any strategy for the Indo-Pacific must be comprehensive in nature, given American interests and commitments in the region. Strategy begins with ensuring the robust nature of America's multifaceted institutional presence, both civilian and military. Reducing our diplomatic or security presence undercuts attempts to play an engaged role that helps shape regional conditions. The goals of US strategy in the Indo-Pacific in the twenty-first century have not changed from the 1995 articulation—namely, maintaining peace and stability, promoting democracy, and developing trade relations. These ambitious goals are becoming more difficult to achieve, given many of the problems noted above as well as others including democratic backtracking, demographic pressures, corruption, political paralysis, environmental devastation, and the like.²⁹

The very size of the Indo-Pacific, with more than half of the world's population, along with its complexity, political diversity, and numerous problems, means that no one power can dominate the region in a way that seems more possible in a smaller, territorially contiguous realm like Europe. But if absolute control is impossible, hegemony, too, is difficult even for great powers in Asia. The traditional great power—indeed, even hegemon in early modern times—was of course China. Utilizing political and economic power, ideology, and military power when necessary, Chinese dynasties from the Han (second century BCE to second century CE) onward sought to and often succeeded in structuring political relations and trade routes, propped up client states, and either battled or bought off barbarian tribes that threatened its borders.³⁰ By the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese power had collapsed. From the end of the 1800s through 1945, Japan attempted to build a colonial empire that would make it the dominant state in the Indian Ocean region and the South Pacific.³¹



Given this history, America's post-World War II strategy was comparatively ambitious. Washington's goal for the Indo-Pacific was reconstruction, reform of Japan, and prevention of the rise of another dominant, aggressive power in the region.³² Over time, promotion of democracy and expansion of trade networks were added to the core set of US goals. America's current forward-based posture and alliance network in the Indo-Pacific is a legacy of the success in achieving that postwar goal. Yet Washington did not face a significant challenger for dominance in Asia during the Cold War. This is not to say, of course, that there were no challenges at all to American policy and goals during those decades. Although a secondary theater for the Soviet Union, Asia saw a great deal of Soviet activity. But Moscow was never able to bring major power to bear in a way that could have defeated US forces or taken over significant amounts of territory. Similarly, China during the Cold War was internally focused, veering from consolidation after the Chinese Communist Party victory in 1949 to domestically destructive policies by Mao like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. India, too, during these decades hewed to a Nehruvian nonalignment policy and put much of its energies into leading the nonaligned bloc. Japan, the region's erstwhile great power, poured its energies into domestic production and settled into a subordinate role as Washington's key Asian ally. Despite fighting brutal and domestically divisive wars in Korea and Vietnam, the United States never was forced into defending its position in Asia the way it was in Europe.

In other words, it is not misleading to conclude that for half a century after World War II, strategy in Asia was fairly easy for Washington. Only with the rise of China starting in the mid-1990s and the seemingly intractable North Korean nuclear and missile crisis did American strategy begin to seem fundamentally challenged. As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, these challenges, though different in scope and nature, have strengthened, further complicating American strategy. In the case of China, particularly, Washington confronts the difficulty of dealing with a potentially "near-peer" competitor whose goals increasingly seem antithetical to its own. These challenges do not obviate seven decades of US strategy, but mandate that policy be tailored to protect core American interests and, conversely, not attempt to be a chimerical attempt to freeze the Indo-Pacific in place. Overreach is a natural temptation in a region as large as the Indo-Pacific, as is the converse, a fatalism that engenders a timidity preventing the adoption of clear goals, the formation of a realistic strategy, and the will to attempt to implement it. A middle ground strategy that recognizes limitations on American power yet is and being willing to attempt to maintain the vast gains made in stability and prosperity will best serve US interests.

Maintaining an open and free Indo-Pacific should remain Washington's top priority. A strategy to ensure this outcome rests on a continued forward-based US naval and air presence in the region. Further effort should be made to form maritime communities of interest that develop common operating procedures and that cooperate more, particularly in crucial waterways. One focus should be countering and preventing any attempts to

restrict freedom of navigation or to intimidate states from fully exercising their right to peaceful passage and transit on the high seas. Attention should be paid above all to the East and South China Seas, eastern Indian Ocean, and the vital waterways of the Malacca, Sunda, Taiwan, and Tsushima straits.

While Washington's strategy of integrating China into the global economy and political system succeeded, it failed in bringing about a China more in line with postwar global norms. Increasingly, Beijing defines its interests in ways counter to Washington's, even as it continues to benefit from the open trading and financial architecture established after 1945. Multiple US administrations shied away from responding to policies and actions by China that contravened international agreements or norms of behavior, including dumping of manufactured products, widespread theft of US industrial and government secrets, militarization of disputed South China Sea territory, intimidation of neighbors, and support for disruptive regimes such as in North Korea. By avoiding risk, primarily so as not to upset trade relations, Washington in fact incentivized aggressive behavior by Beijing.

Going forward, US strategy must accept some increased tension in bilateral relations in order to hold the line on Beijing's attempts to undercut US influence and contravene the spirit of international agreements. The Trump administration has begun to do this by announcing tariffs on Chinese steel and other products as well as by increasing US military operations in the South China Sea. But there must be a consistent approach of seeking to work with Beijing while immediately responding to cyberespionage, aggression against US forces in international waters and air, and the intimidation of US partners.

As for North Korea, a quarter century of US diplomacy has failed in its primary goal of preventing Pyongyang from developing a nuclear arsenal and the ballistic missile force to deliver it. Short of war or the deposition of the Kim family regime (or both), there is little likelihood of North Korea fully denuclearizing, even with a complete withdrawal of US forces from the peninsula. While Trump's gambit of trying to obtain denuclearization through a combination of threats and negotiations should be given time to work, the bulk of US strategy toward Pyongyang should shift to considering how to deter and contain a nuclear North Korea. This will have to include articulating clear and credible red lines beyond which American retaliation will occur. Sustaining our allies to the fullest extent possible and making further efforts to force Japan and South Korea to work more closely together should also be a priority.

America's allies are indispensable to helping maintain a favorable balance of power in the region. Japan remains Washington's most steadfast ally. Continuing to deepen alliance cooperation, as well as provide defense materials, should be a priority. While relations with South Korea are being tested by Seoul's current outreach to Pyongyang, Washington's credibility throughout the region rests in no small part on its willingness to reaffirm its



commitment to South Korea's defense. Until Seoul determines that it desires a different relationship with Washington, US promises should be kept and all possible assistance should be given to South Korea to maintain a robust defense posture vis-à-vis the North. Similarly, Washington's support for Taiwan should remain steadfast. Many nations in the region carefully watch the strength of American ties with Taiwan as an indicator of how far Washington will go to help Asian nations resist Chinese pressure. While Taiwan is admittedly a special case, nonetheless, to abandon its thriving democracy would deliver a blow to stability in the region by encouraging China and would undermine US credibility as a political partner.

Working with Japan and Australia, the United States should continue to develop closer relations with India and with nations in Southeast Asia, particularly those with liberal political systems or which are leaning toward liberalism. Although formal alliances with such nations are unnecessary, the more a viable community of interests is formed, the more likely it is that Washington will find political and even security support for its efforts to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific. Countries such as India and Vietnam can be valuable partners in expanding regional maritime cooperation, which in turn can lead to closer political ties.

No small part of American strategy in Asia should be a fair free trade area. Although the Trump administration withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, it should either consider rejoining or come up with some viable alternative that begins linking largely free market economies in a closer trading network. This will help offset the inroads that Beijing is making with its Belt and Road Initiative and creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

In promoting these policy ends, America will be protecting its own interests. These are under direct attack from a confident China that too often ignores its own problems, from a North Korea that seeks the means to threaten all around it and from governments that are at risk of turning toward more authoritarian and confrontational policies. While supporting democracies and liberal ideas is not inherently controversial, Washington has too often failed to articulate the reasons behind such goals, namely that all nations benefit from an open system that respects national sovereignty, upholds international law, peacefully resolves disputes, and seeks cooperation rather than confrontation. American strategy should not be to persuade states to give up on pursuing their own interests, but rather to create mechanisms, relationships, and patterns of behavior that attempt to harmonize transnational goals. Developing such a community of interests will be a continual work in progress in the Indo-Pacific, as variegated as it is and with as many cross-cutting problems as it has. However, a strategy that hews to clear principles and parsimoniously seeks to take advantage of American strengths and partner self-interest is the best way forward in the world's most dynamic region.

NOTES

- 1 US Pacific Command, established in 1947, was renamed US Indo-Pacific Command in May 2018.
- 2 Marcus Hand, “Malacca and S’pore Straits Traffic Hits New High in 2016, VLCCs Fastest Growing Segment,” *Seatrade Maritime News*, February 13, 2017, accessed June 28, 2018, <http://www.seatrade-maritime.com/news/asia/malacca-and-s-pore-strait-traffic-hits-new-high-in-2016-vlccs-fastest-growing-segment.html>.
- 3 For a still valuable analysis, see George Sansom, *The Western World and Japan: A Study in the Interaction of European and Asiatic Cultures* (New York: Knopf, 1949); on the spice trade, see Charles Corn, *The Scents of Eden: A History of the Spice Trade* (New York: Kodansha, 1998). For an older study of the Pacific, see J. C. Beaglehole, *The Exploration of the Pacific*, 3rd ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1966).
- 4 For general treatments of the American Pacific experience, see Tyler Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia: A Critical Study of United States’ Policy in the Far East in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: MacMillan, 1922); Foster Rhea Dulles, *America in the Pacific: A Century of Expansion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1932); and Jean Heffer, *The United States and the Pacific: History of a Frontier*, trans. W. Donald Wilson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).
- 5 This is not the view of writers such as Michael J. Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
- 6 A brief account can be found in Frances Diane Robotti and James Vescovi, *The U.S.S. Essex and the Birth of the American Navy* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 1999), 53–64.
- 7 The best account of the Pacific Squadron is by Robert Erwin Johnson, *Thence Round Cape Horn: The Story of United States Naval Forces on Pacific Station, 1818–1923* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1963). For the East India and Asiatic Squadron, see Robert Erwin Johnson, *Far China Station: The U.S. Navy in Asian Waters, 1800–1898* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1979). The Asiatic Squadron became the Asiatic Fleet in 1902. In 1907, it and the Pacific Squadron were combined into the Pacific Fleet.
- 8 *Historical Statistics of the United States, 1789–1945* (Washington, DC: US Government Publishing Office, 1949).
- 9 On Seward’s diplomacy, see Ernest N. Paolino, *The Foundations of American Empire: William Henry Seward and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), especially chaps. 1, 5, 6, and 7.
- 10 Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (New York: Little Brown, 1943), 5.
- 11 Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 62.
- 12 Nicholas John Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942). See, for example, pp. 6, 447, and 457.
- 13 On the planning for postwar Japan, see Christopher D. O’Sullivan, *Sumner Welles, Postwar Planning, and the Quest for a New World Order, 1937–1943* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Dayna Leigh Barnes, “Armchair Occupation: American Wartime Planning for Postwar Japan, 1937–1945” (PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 2013); and older treatments such as Michael Schaller, *The American Occupation of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), especially chaps. 2–4.
- 14 Among others, see Hal M. Friedman, “Modified Mahanism: Pearl Harbor, the Pacific War, and Changes to U.S. National Security Strategy for the Pacific Basin, 1945–1947,” *Hawaiian Journal of History* 31 (1997): 179–201; and Ji-Young Lee, “Contested American Hegemony and Regional Order in Postwar Asia: The Case of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 2017: 1–31.
- 15 Zoellick’s speech can be found at “Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility,” Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, September 21, 2005, accessed April 21, 2018, https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf.



- 16 “U.S. Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region,” US Department of Defense, February 1995.
- 17 See Andrew Scobell, “Show of Force: The PLA and the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis,” Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University.
- 18 For an overview, see Andrew Krepinevich, Barry Watts, and Robert Work, “Meeting the Anti-Access and Area-Denial Challenge,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2003, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/2003.05.20-Anti-Access-Area-Denial-A2-AD.pdf>.
- 19 Nina Silove, “The Pivot before the Pivot,” *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 45–88.
- 20 See, for example, Richard C. Bush, “The United States and China: A G-2 in the Making?” Brookings Institution, October 11, 2011, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-united-states-and-china-a-g-2-in-the-making>.
- 21 Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, accessed May 3, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century>.
- 22 See, for example, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Work with China, Don’t Contain It,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2013, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/26/opinion/work-with-china-dont-contain-it.html>.
- 23 See the statement by Hillary Clinton at US State Department, “The South China Sea,” press statement, July 22, 2011, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168989.htm>.
- 24 A recap of Trump’s campaign positions can be found at the Council on Foreign Relations, “Trump on the Issues,” accessed May 4, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/campaign2016/donald-trump/on-north-korea>.
- 25 An overview and timeline can be found at “Missiles of North Korea,” CSIS Missile Defense Project, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk>; a simpler timeline for 2017 can be found at Joshua Berlinger, “North Korea’s Missile Tests: What You Need to Know,” CNN, December 3, 2017, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/29/asia/north-korea-missile-tests/index.html>.
- 26 White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December 2017, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.
- 27 Demographic figures are from the US Census Bureau, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045216>.
- 28 Trade figures are from the US Census Bureau, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0016.html>.
- 29 For a discussion of problems in Asia, see Michael R. Auslin, *The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World’s Most Dynamic Region* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).
- 30 The literature on Chinese foreign policy is vast. For some more recent works, see, for example, Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); and Ji-Young Lee, *China’s Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
- 31 See William G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism, 1894–1945*, rev. ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1991).
- 32 See Michael Schaller, *The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987); also, Dayna Barnes, “Think Tanks and a New Order in East Asia,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 22, no. 2 (2015): 89–119.



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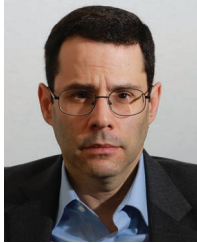
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