

US PIVOT TO CHINA: TWO LEVELS AND A DUAL STRATEGY

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This essay is divided into two parts. First, it will present the different strategic options of how the United States should react to China's emergence as a global superpower if it wants to maintain its hegemonic position and the current world order. Given that most proposed strategies follow one paradigm, they have difficulties in explaining the seemingly contradicting behavior of the Chinese leadership. This essay will advance from the distinction between 'regional' and 'global' to prevent such a limitation. The author asserts that there is evidence to argue that the US should follow a 'dual strategy' of general engagement and situational balancing.

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Since the beginning of the market reforms in the 1970s, China's economy has quadrupled and its military capabilities have increased an average of 12.5% annually. With the newly acquired power, China has gradually increased its activities and expanded its economic interests on the global stage. After debilitating wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has, in contrast, decided to cut military spending by over 500 billion dollars over the next decade. Moreover, the Obama administration has shown reluctance to get involved in the situations in Ukraine and Syria. These developments are widely perceived as a great challenge to the US hegemony and the current world order. A lot of scholarly work has, therefore, addressed the question of how the United States should react to maintain its hegemonic position.

On the most basic level, there are two opposing ways of how the United States can act on the global stage: it can either retrench or actively face the uprising threats. Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press and Harvey Sapolsky have proposed the first option in their article "Come home, America". The three scholars argued that a foreign policy of restraint would best guarantee America's prior objectives: national security

and prosperity.¹ While plenty of time has passed since the article was published, the security environment has changed dramatically. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, the US military has mostly focused on interventions in the Middle East. Over the course of the last few years, however, the Pentagon's priority regarding its foreign policy commitments has gradually changed. China's rise and the North Korean nuclear threat have made the US administration pay greater attention to the East Asian region. Obama's speech in 2012 in which he announced the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy finally marked a significant shift in foreign policy. Since then only a few scholars have argued for retrenchment,² and if so only in regards to the US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.³ Most analysts, on the other hand,

¹ Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (1997): 6.

² Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (2011): 7-44.

³ Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Benjamin Valentino, "Time to Offshore Our Troops," *The New York Times*, December 12, 2006.

have recommended the US administration follow an active approach.⁴

This essay is divided into two parts. First, it will present the different strategic options of how the United States should react to China's emergence as a global superpower if it wants to maintain its hegemonic position and the current world order. Second, it will analyze the United States' decline and China's rise to see which strategy the US should best follow to address the changing environment. This essay will advance from the distinction between 'regional' and 'global' to prevent such a limitation. I think that there is evidence to argue that the US should follow a 'dual strategy' of general engagement and situational balancing.

Theorizing the United States' Strategies

The basic strategies about how a hegemon should react to the emergence of a global superpower can be categorized into four groups: preventive war, binding, containment/balancing, binding and engagement.⁵ Preventive war, as stated by

⁴ See, for example: Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2013): 7-51; Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Debate Over US China Strategy," *Survival* 57, no. 3 (2015): 89-110; G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008): 23-37; John Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 4 (2010): 381-96; Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (1999): 81-118; David Shambaugh, "Containment or Engagement of China? Calculating Beijing's Responses," *International Security* 21, no. 2 (1996): 180-209; Gerald Segal, "East Asia and the 'Constraint' of China," *International Security* 20, no. 4 (1996): 107-135; Ashley J. Tellis, "Balancing without Containment: A US Strategy for Confronting China's Rise," *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2013): 109-124; Hugh White and Brendan Taylor, "A rising China and American perturbations," in *Security Politics in the Asia-Pacific: A Regional-Global Nexus?*, ed. William T. Tow (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009) 85-98.

⁵ Randall L. Schweller, "Managing the rise of great power: history and theory," in *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power*, ed. Alastair

Alfred Vagts, is only an option if three conditions are met: first, the rising power poses a long-term threat; second, war seems inevitable in the future; and third, it is better to fight now than later.⁶ A situation that meets these conditions is most likely given when the rise of a new power is accompanied by the decline of the hegemon.⁷ Although China and the US follow this pattern, preventive war is unlikely. Given the spread of democracy and the existence of weapons of mass destruction, there has not been a direct confrontation between major powers since the beginning of the modern era.⁸

A strategy that has been used instead is containment. It aims at preventing the rising power from further expansion without starting a direct military conflict.⁹ This Cold War scheme of retaliation is advocated by John Mearsheimer, an offensive realist who has argued that China cannot rise peacefully.¹⁰ However, more defensive realists have not gone so far. They have suggested weakened versions. Robert Ross has argued that both the US and China can forge a 'grand bargain' that upholds China's position as a continental superpower in East Asia and the US position as the superior maritime power.¹¹ Gerald Segal, on the other hand, takes a different approach. He contends that China's neighbor countries must follow a policy of 'constraint' that exerts pressure on the Chinese leadership to comply with

Johnston and Robert Ross. (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.

⁶ Schweller, "Managing the rise of great power," 8.

⁷ Schweller, "Managing the rise of great power," 8.

⁸ Schweller, "Managing the rise of great power," 9.

⁹ Schweller, "Managing the rise of great power," 10.

¹⁰ John Mearsheimer, "The Rise of China Will Not Be Peaceful at All," *The Australian*, November 18, 2005; John Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006): 160-62; John Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 4 (2010): 381-96.

¹¹ Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (1999): 81-118.

international laws.¹² Moreover, Steinberg and O’Hanlon propose that both countries ‘reassure’ each other,¹³ whereas Friedberg and Tellis emphasize that the US should balance but not contain China because it is well integrated into the global economy.¹⁴ There are two ways to balance a rising power: internally and externally.¹⁵ While the former is about building up one’s national resources to match those of the competitor, the latter is about increasing one’s capabilities by fostering alliances with other states. The success of external balancing is, however, not always given. It can only work as long as the allies have a stable relationship and their combined capabilities can equal those of the rising threat.¹⁶ Binding takes up on those softened versions of containment. It is characterized by the attempt to establish a structural interaction that allows some control over the rising competitor. One way to do so is by using multilateral institutions to make non-compliance too costly.¹⁷

However, there is some controversy over China’s actions. Under the paradigm of realism, most analysts commonly take three things for granted: first, they interpret China’s activities as a challenge to the international order; second, they assume that China will continue to grow and thus become more assertive; and third they contrast China’s rise and the United States’ decline in relative terms. Proponents of an engagement strategy which aims at keeping the

¹² Gerald Segal, “East Asia and the ‘Constraint’ of China,” *International Security* 20, no. 4 (1996): 107-135.

¹³ James Steinberg and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S - China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Debate Over US China Strategy,” *Survival* 57, no. 3 (2015): 89-110; Ashley J. Tellis, “Balancing without Containment: A US Strategy for Confronting China’s Rise,” *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2013): 109-124.

¹⁵ Randall L. Schweller, “Managing the rise of great power: history and theory,” in *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power*, ed. Alastair Johnston and Robert Ross. (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 9.

¹⁶ Schweller, “Managing the rise of great power,” 9.

¹⁷ Schweller, “Managing the rise of great power,” 13-4.

status quo by using diplomatic, non-coercive means,¹⁸ on the other hand, question these assumptions. Institutionalists think that there is no need for a balancing or containing strategy because China does not only have access to but also enjoys a lot of benefits from staying within the status quo international order since it is well integrated into the major global institutions.¹⁹ Constructivists also spread optimism by pointing out that China has followed a diplomatic approach. Since the 1980s, Chinese officials have become socialized into the international community by increasingly participating in many regional and global institutions.²⁰ However, the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea “may be especially hard to resolve through the mechanisms of socialization [...]”²¹ Given this problem, there are also some analysts who do not follow any of those well-established paradigms. They have rather insisted that one should distinguish the regional and global level.²² An evaluation of China’s rise within only one paradigm fails to explain its seemingly contradicting behavior and can lead to foreign policy miscalculations.

The Case for a ‘Dual Strategy’

Finding the best strategy for the US depends highly on both the theoretical framework and

¹⁸ Schweller, “Managing the rise of great power,” 14.

¹⁹ Stephen G. Brooks et al., “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2013): 7-51; G. John Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008): 23-37; James Richardson, “East Asian Stability,” *The National Interest* 38 (1994-1995): 28-39.

²⁰ Alastair I. Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008). 207-209.

²¹ Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000*, 210.

²² Barry Buzan and Ole Waver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Hugh White and H. Taylor, “A rising China and American perturbations,” in *Security Politics in the Asia-Pacific: A Regional-Global Nexus?*, ed. by William T Tow (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009) 85-98.

how one interprets the above-mentioned assumptions. The following section will present evidence that facilitates a critical assessment. It starts from the fundamental question of whether China is challenging the current world order or not. This question can be further divided into two sub-questions: first, does China have the capability; and second, is it in its best interests to do so. There is evidence that seems to provide a negative answer to the first question. Although China's growth has been remarkable over the last few decades and it has been predicted that its economy will surpass America's in the near future, it is questionable whether the level is sufficient to build the capabilities that are required to become a hegemon. Taking the strength of the economy as a single indicator does not allow a meaningful evaluation since it is only based on overall GDP.²³ The US economy is still far ahead not only in GDP per capita but also in research and innovation capability which is directly linked to the production of military force.²⁴

The gap between the China and the US in terms of military power is remarkable. While China is spending about 146 billion dollars,²⁵ the US military budget is about 560 billion dollars.²⁶ Moreover, according to the Base Structure Report, the US military operates 10 aircraft carriers²⁷ and has over 686 overseas bases.²⁸ This makes it the only country that can project its power all over the globe. China, in contrast,

does not have such a capability; Its military has only one foreign base in Djibouti,²⁹ and one aircraft carrier. Additionally, the US army has not only much more operational experience but also more innovative military systems.

Another important factor in assessing China's capability to become a global hegemon is the country's domestic stability. In this regard, the Communist Party faces several challenges. One major challenge concerns the two regions Xinjiang and Tibet that have a complicated relationship with Beijing. The former area was forcefully integrated by Mao in 1949. The fertile land is widely populated by ethnic Turkic Uighurs who are continuously rioting against Chinese domination. The other contested region is Tibet. Here, China has to appease various movements which fight for the region's independence.³⁰ A second internal challenge is caused by China's one-child policy in the 1970s. It has led to rapidly ageing population. The percentage of people 65 and over will grow from 6.5% in 2000 to 15% in 2030.³¹ Only a decade from now, China is expected to not only face a workforce shortage but also high investments in senior care. It will be a difficult task to keep the current economic growth rates under these conditions. Moreover, the Chinese economy could fall into the middle-income trap as a result of heavily relying on foreign technologies and FDI.³² Moreover, since the population is getting wealthier, labor becomes more expensive. Therefore, one of China's most important comparative advantages will slowly diminish. All of this suggests that China faces substantial

²³ Michael Beckley, "China's Century?: Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2011): 58.

²⁴ Beckley, "China's Century?," 57.

²⁵ "China Power," <http://chinapower.csis.org/military-spending/>

²⁶ "Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request," http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/FY16_Budget_Request_Rollout_Final_2-2-15.pdf

²⁷ "Fiscal Year 2015 Budget Request - Appendix, A-1," http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/documents/defbudget/fy2015/fy2015_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf

²⁸ David Vine, *Base Nation: How US Military Bases abroad harm America and the World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2015), 4.

²⁹ Due to its strategic location at the gateway to the Suez Canal, Djibouti hosts military bases for five countries including China, France, Italy, Japan, and the United States.

³⁰ Robert D. Kaplan, "The Geography of Chinese Power," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no 3 (2010): 25-28.

³¹ Peng Du and Zhigang Guo, "Population ageing in China," in *Ageing in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Policies and Future Trends*, ed. by David R. Phillips (London: Routledge, 2000), 195.

³² Jin Zeng and Yuanyuan Fang, "Between poverty and prosperity: China's dependent development and the 'middle-income trap,'" *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 6, (2014): 1016.

domestic challenges, far beyond those of the US that will be a great obstacle to its rise. The third issue concerns China's soft power to win allies among the international community. While American economic liberalism is upheld by most developed countries, there are only a few states in Africa and Southeast Asia that have adopted the so-called Beijing Consensus that emphasizes authoritarian state capitalism. Given China's poor human rights record, its soft power to attract followers beyond this group of countries is still marginal. The Communist Party has systematically curbed fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, association, assembly, and religion. There are still incidents in which activists and civil society groups face hostility from the government.³³ Considering that most of the US soft power is due to its civil society and the values it represents, the Communist Party's authoritarian governance prevents China from matching it.³⁴

Whether China wants to challenge the current world order is much more difficult to answer since the Communist Party has often acted ambiguously. On the one hand, China has been unwilling to join other states in pressuring the North Korean regime and Iran to stop their nuclear programs. Moreover, it has successfully established its own global institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia that seem to undermine the status quo.

At the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, on the other hand, Xi Jinping announced in his speech that the Chinese government would contribute to the fight against environmental degradation, global poverty, and inequality. He also said it would always support developing countries through its

efforts to strive for inclusive and sustainable growth and development. This commitment was reinforced by the establishment of a 1-billion-dollar fund for UN peace and development missions that advance multilateral cooperation. Moreover, he promised to provide 100 million dollars of military assistance to support the African Union. Besides this reassurance of cooperation, the most remarkable statement in Xi's speech was that China would neither pursue hegemony nor expansion.³⁵

However, Xi's words can hardly be trusted if China's actions speak a different language. The Chinese military operations in the South and East China Sea seem to reveal much more assertive intentions. In May 2014, the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation placed an oil platform in an area of the South China Sea close to the Paracel Islands which are claimed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam. As the Vietnamese government thinks of the area as its exclusive economic zone, China's move caused immense anti-China riots.³⁶ The dispute represents a much greater issue in the South China Sea. Although the Chinese government has not officially said so, its military's actions seem to reveal that it claims territorial rights over the area within the so-called nine-dashed line. China's newest maneuvers to secure the waters in the South China Sea include building artificial islands that could be used to station military vessels. But this aspiration to control the water within the nine-dashed line overlaps with other nations' claims. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei also claim part of the territory by referring to the UNCLOS 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone. This sea area is not only significant to all these neighboring countries but also to the US; ship-

³³ "World Report 2015," https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/wr2015_web.pdf

³⁴ Joseph Nye, *Is the American Century Over?* (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell Ross and Johnston, 2015).

³⁵ "Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind," https://gdebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/70/70_ZH_en.pdf

³⁶ Paul J. Leaf, "Learning From China's Oil Rig Standoff With Vietnam," *The Diplomat*, August 30, 2014.

borne trade worth 5 trillion dollars passes through it every year.³⁷

Another no less dangerous dispute that involves the US is staged in the East China Sea. Here, both China and Japan claim territorial rights over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. After the Japanese government bought parts of these islands from a Japanese family in September 2012, Chinese military vessels have continuously approached the area around it. In November 2013, China even established the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone there. All these moves have pressured the US government to reinsure that the US-Japan security treaty covers the disputed islands.³⁸ The adversarial situation between China and Japan was a dilemma for the Obama administration. Keeping a strong relationship with Japan - which is needed not only to give a signal to other allies but also in case the relationship with China turns to worse - and engaging with China is difficult at the same time. However, solving the territorial dispute seems impossible because the Japanese government does not even admit that it exists. In sum, I think one can agree that there are two levels on which to evaluate China's emergence as a global superpower. On the global level, China does not only have constrained capabilities that cannot match those of the US but also uses diplomatic means to represent its national interests. Besides the constraints that include China's economic growth prospects, its domestic stability, and soft power to find allies, the Chinese leadership has gradually increased its involvement in international institutions. Here it looks like China will stay within the status quo international order as the 'engagement school' proponents argue. However, on the regional level, China's actions

are assertive. The disputes in the South and East China Sea show that issues of global security can be distinguished from those of regional security. America should, therefore, follow a 'dual strategy' towards China. On the one hand, it should generally engage with the Chinese leadership by giving them opportunities to enter into a diplomatic discourse. As China becomes more powerful it will naturally move away from a position of political and economic subordination to the United States. China's population is about four times that of the US and its people have no less right to a way of life that is similar to the one enjoyed by many American citizens. However, this does not justify China's provocative actions against other states in the South- and Northeast Asian region. The situation in the waters around China should not be ignored. Here, the US must show its commitment to defend international law and to guarantee the security of its allies by situationally balancing China's assertive actions. Although military power should not be used, the displaying of it seems sometimes unavoidable. This dilemma makes transparent maneuvering and good communication even more necessary. Since most of China's action in the South and East China Sea seem to address the issue of energy, it is of the utmost importance that the entire international community increases its efforts within multilateral institutions such as the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) that exclusively deals with this essential problem. These institutions should not only promote the development of sustainable energy but also provide a platform to rethink rights to territory and natural resources.

³⁷ "China building 'great wall of sand' in South China Sea," <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32126840>; "Beijing steps up defence of disputed South China Sea," <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/26/beijing-g-defence-disputed-south-china-sea>

³⁸ "Obama says US will defend Japan in island dispute with China," <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/24/obama-in-japan-backs-status-quo-in-island-dispute-with-china>

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US Department of Defense. "Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request." Accessed October 20, 2016, http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/FY16_Budget_Request_Rollout_Final_2-2-15.pdf