
1. Introduction to the *Handbook on the United States in Asia*

Andrew T.H. Tan

ASIA, THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

The centre of the global economy today resides in Asia, not Europe or North America. According to the International Monetary Fund, Asia in 2016 accounted for 40 per cent of global GDP (Lagarde 2016). As Asia also accounts for much of global economic growth in recent years, developments in the region are therefore central to the global economic outlook and for formulating policies around the world (IMF 2015: 1). Asia's remarkable economic rise is led by China, which had a GDP of around US\$11.4 trillion in 2016, making it the second largest economy in the world after the United States. Despite economic stagnation since the 1990s, Japan in 2016 remained the world's third largest economy, with a GDP of about US\$4.7 trillion. Other significant economic powerhouses in Asia include India and South Korea (IMF 2016). The trend is quite clear: Asia is on course to regain the dominant economic position it held before the Industrial Revolution in Europe (ADB n.d.).

The maintenance of stability in Asia has therefore become pivotal to global stability; conversely, regional instability will have deep, global consequences. Since the surrender of Japan in 1945 at the end of the Second World War, the United States has been deeply engaged in Asia, and has maintained a form of hegemony over the region, though its failure in the Vietnam War demonstrated the limits of its dominance. The US role has been mostly seen as positive, at least to its allies and the non-communist states in Asia, as it has, through its hubs and spokes system of alliances and military presence, exercised sufficient power to maintain general stability in the region. In turn, this has facilitated Asia's economic rise (Beeson 2011).

In recent times, China's rise has prompted a discourse in the United States centred around the "China threat" to the United States' dominance in Asia, and how this could be managed. The growing tensions with China since the end of the Cold War in 1989 have led to the call for the revival of a Cold War-style containment strategy (Krauthammer 1995). The United States' Department of Defense has also expressed concern over China's development of asymmetric warfare and anti-access capabilities which

have the ability to restrict the United States' response to any conflict in East Asia (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2010). Indeed, a 2015 study by RAND concluded that the United States would find it extremely difficult to respond to any contingency on the Taiwan Strait, noting that while there are 39 Chinese air bases within 800 km of Taipei (the range of unrefuelled fighter aircraft), the United States has only one air force base, Kadena Air Base in Japan, that is within the same distance (RAND 2015: 327). RAND concluded that given current trajectory in the development of China's armed forces, US military dominance will recede, thus giving China's armed forces greater capacity in establishing at least temporary local air and naval superiority at the outset of any conflict in East Asia (RAND 2015: xxxi).

The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008, the result of the sub-prime housing crisis in the United States, has also had serious ramifications for the US in Asia. China's economy was unaffected and in fact grew throughout the crisis, helping to sustain the global economy. The deep economic problems that the United States faced coincided with rising nationalism and confidence in China, which began to assert its claims over disputed maritime territory in the East and South China Seas. While the Obama administration that assumed office in 2008 had initially considered the idea of a G2 with China to manage global problems, it soon hardened its position in the face of China's assertiveness in Asia. At a seminal foreign policy speech in Australia's parliament in November 2011, President Obama thus announced a new "Asia Pivot" policy (later rebranded as "rebalancing"). The speech was significant in that it strongly reaffirmed the United States' determination to stand its ground in Asia and maintain its dominant position. In his speech, Obama declared that the US presence in the Asia-Pacific was its top priority and that the reductions in US defence spending as a result of its budget and debt crises would not be at the expense of the region (*The Australian* 2011). Subsequently, the United States began the rotation of US troops through Australia's Northern Territory, and stationed the US Navy's latest Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore (*Daily Telegraph* 2012).

Apart from the Asia Pivot, the United States also developed a new joint warfighting doctrine known as AirSea Battle, reminiscent of the AirLand Battle strategy it had developed to counter the Warsaw Pact in Europe during the Cold War. This new military doctrine, subsequently revised in 2015 as the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) to incorporate land forces into the strategy, emphasises offensive operations involving the targeting of command centres and military infrastructure, and is clearly aimed at countering China's anti-access capabilities (van Tol et al. 2010). On the economic front, the United

States under the Obama administration had also pursued a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with a number of Asian countries (minus China) which would create a huge free-trade zone albeit dominated by the United States under rules set by it. Thus, the “Asia Pivot” or rebalancing included not only the strengthening of alliances in Asia and the increase in the US military presence, but also a new warfighting doctrine aimed at China, as well as efforts to contain China economically. The Asia Pivot or rebalancing was thus understood, correctly, by China as an ill-disguised containment strategy against it. Yet, unlike Cold War containment, the United States continued to engage China both politically and economically, with deep economic links that have tied the two economies together. Thus, the US policy towards China under Obama could be described as a mixture of containment and engagement, or “conengagement” (Friedberg 2011: 112–115). While it wanted to avoid a direct confrontation with China, it nonetheless has been determined to maintain its dominance in Asia. As then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made clear in 2009, the United States “is not ceding the Pacific to anyone” (*The Australian* 2009).

BEYOND CHINA AND AFTER HEGEMONY

Hegemonic stability theory asserts that stability in the global system requires a hegemon to enforce the rules of the system (Kindleberger 1973). The problem, as Paul Kennedy famously pointed out, is that hegemons are prone to imperial overstretch and eventually decline (Kennedy 1987). New powers invariably challenge the prevailing hegemon but as power transition theory posits, historically this has always resulted in conflict with the prevailing hegemon that will not easily surrender its dominant position (Organski 1968).

In the United States, the “China threat” discourse has shaped the debate over how the challenge to the US position in Asia should be met (Roy 1996). For instance, according to Aaron Friedberg, if China dominated Asia, it would be freed from the necessity of defending against threats from its maritime periphery, thus enabling China to advance its interests in the rest of the world. This, according to Friedberg, would lead to China challenging the United States’ global dominance (Friedberg 2011: 7–8). In other words, the United States would have to draw the line in Asia if it is to successfully contain China’s global challenge to it.

However, the United States’ engagement in Asia is not all about China. The US role in the region is a deep and multifaceted one, encompassing a range of political, security and economic engagements with a number of players that has been the legacy of its post-1945 domination of the regional

security architecture. Thus, while the United States has a fairly muscular military presence in East Asia, the Western Pacific, and the Indian Ocean, it also has strong relationships throughout the Asia-Pacific, such as with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Pakistan, India, Singapore and other Southeast Asian states. The United States also has a deep economic interest in Asia. In 2016, the United States conducted US\$532 billion worth of trade with Asia-Pacific nations compared to US\$146 billion for the European Union (USITC n.d.). After the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, the US has also been deeply involved in the Global War Against Terrorism (GWOT), in which South and Southeast Asia have been key strategic theatres. The increasing global reliance on seaborne trade in an era of globalisation has also highlighted the United States' expansive naval power, which has enabled it to command the seas in the Asia-Pacific, although that is now being challenged by China. Indeed, the United States retains a strong strategic interest in the security of important waterways in Asia, such as the Strait of Malacca, through which a third of the world's seaborne trade passes.

The challenges faced by the United States today however, are daunting, given the context of its long-term economic problems and the complexity of the geostrategic landscape in Asia. Indeed, apart from tensions with China, there are flashpoints in Korea, over Taiwan, and in the East and South China Seas. There are also challenges stemming from counter-terrorism in Asia, maritime security and sustaining as well as securing its deep economic links in the region. Yet, the evident increase in isolationist sentiments in the United States as demonstrated by the attacks on free trade by key candidates such as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders during the run-up to the presidential elections in November 2016 suggests that it might now struggle to meet all these challenges in Asia. As a senior US defence analyst summed up in 2013, the United States is presently "confronting a punishing budget crisis, an exhausted military, reluctant allies, and a public whose appetite for global engagements is waning". The questions then are: how will current political realities affect the range of strategic choices available to policymakers? How can the United States government make the best possible strategic choices? What role will the existing tapestry of US relationships and regional relationships play (Wilson 2013)?

The somewhat unexpected election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in November 2016 has added a new layer of complexity. Trump wasted no time in abandoning the TPP when he came into office in January 2017, reflecting his administration's opposition to multinational trade agreements that have been perceived to have disadvantaged the American worker (Baker 2017). Trump's foreign policy is also supposed to be based on the principle of "America First", which means that the United

States would now, as far as possible, make its foreign policy decisions based on what is in its best economic and other interests (Beckwith 2016). While this could mean greater isolationism and much less attention to Asia, various statements and actions have also hinted at a potentially more muscular foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific, for instance, Trump's strong position on North Korea's nuclear and missile developments and his attacks on China for its alleged unfair trade practices and currency manipulation (Bradner 2016). The unexpected US missile attack on the Assad regime in Syria in April 2017 after the regime's chemical attacks on civilians in rebel-held areas also seemed to suggest that the Trump administration would not be isolationist in its foreign policy after all (BBC 2017a).

While the Trump administration's Asia policy remained somewhat incoherent in the course of 2017, it is clear that it would not be presiding over the United States' withdrawal from Asia. Trump's hosting of China's President Xi Jinping in his Florida estate in April 2017 indicated that the United States in fact also wanted a cooperative relationship with China (BBC 2017b). Trump also responded to North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile developments by deploying an aircraft carrier task force to the Korean peninsula in April 2017 (Schmitt 2017). Indeed, in 2017, North Korea's successful testing of an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching Alaska and its detonation of a hydrogen bomb led to high tensions in the region. Responding to these developments, President Trump, in his address to the United Nations in September 2017, stated that the United States would "totally destroy North Korea" if it was forced to defend itself or its allies. This led to a war of words with North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un (Boghani 2017).

Trump's lengthy visit to Asia in November 2017, when he visited Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam (where he attended the APEC Summit) and the Philippines (where he also attended the US-ASEAN Summit and the East Asia Summit), appeared to signal that the United States is serious and committed to the region (BBC 2017c). Given that the centre of the global economy today resides in Asia and that the region is crucial to its economic future, it is likely that the United States will have to continue to be actively engaged with the region, since it is in its interest to do so. The problem for its allies, however, has been the United States' fixation with North Korea as well as the failure to dispel the perception of the transactional approach to foreign policy that the Trump administration appears to be following. This has left the region wide open for China to continue with its attempts at regional domination. Thus, various countries involved in the TPP (namely, Australia, Chile, New Zealand, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru and Vietnam) have pressed on, albeit without the United States and Canada (ABC News 2017).

THE UNITED STATES IN ASIA

Any examination of the US role in Asia must take into account the broad and comprehensive nature of its engagement. Thus, there is a need to go beyond Robert Sutter's excellent *The United States and Asia: Regional Dynamics and Twenty-First Century Relations* (Rowman and Littlefield 2015), which examines the US relationship with various regions in Asia as well as key players and allies, such as China, South Korea and Japan. Another recent work, *The New US Strategy Towards Asia: Adapting to the American Pivot*, edited by William T. Tow and Douglas Stuart (Routledge 2015) is an excellent take on adaptations by the Asian states to the United States' Asia Pivot, but there remains the need to examine how the United States could meet its challenges in the region. There are other works which focus on the US and Asia: for example, the USA's interactions with specific sub-regions in Asia, such as Evelyn Goh and Sheldon W. Simon (eds), *China, The United States and Southeast Asia* (Routledge 2008) and G. John Ikenberry and Chung In-Moon (eds) *The United States and Northeast Asia* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); on approaches to Asian regionalism, such as Ralph A. Cossa and Akihiko Tanaka (eds), *An East Asian Community and the United States* (CSIS Press 2007); on the US military posture in Asia, such as Zalmay Khalilzad et al., *The USA and Asia: Towards a New US Strategy and Force Posture* (published in 2001 by RAND, and now outdated); and on policy options for the US in Asia, such as the Council of Foreign Affairs Special Report entitled *The United States and the New Asia* (2009). However, these works are narrowly focused on specific issues or sub-regions and most are now dated.

This book attempts to assess the challenges to the United States in Asia, by moving the discussion away from the fixation with China and focusing on the broad range of dynamics and relationships which affect its position in Asia. It also assesses its prospects in the region, by examining how the United States can still maintain an influential position and play a stabilising role in Asia, even as its global and regional dominance is under challenge. In short, this book primarily seeks to answer an important question in the international relations of Asia: how the United States can continue to maintain influence in a region that has been acknowledged by President Obama in his seminal "Asia Pivot" speech in Australia in 2011 as the most important for its future.

To do so, the book examines the evolving strategic context in Asia and elements of the United States' much-touted "Asia Pivot", as well as the impact of the Trump presidency. It also assesses its position in Asia by examining its relationship with key allies as well as its military presence in the region. Finally, the book evaluates the challenges and prospects for the US in Asia.

The book has 24 chapters and is divided into six parts. The first introductory part has four chapters which include this introduction, as well as chapters covering the United States' strategic challenge in Asia, the historical evolution of the regional geostrategic environment, and Southeast Asian perceptions of the United States. Following this introductory chapter is Chapter 2, written by Andrew Tan (the editor of the volume), which sets the context for the volume by examining the United States' strategic challenges in Asia. While President Obama correctly identified Asia as being the most important region in the world for the future of the United States, and his Asia Pivot (or "rebalancing") is meant to shore up its dominant position in Asia, there are significant challenges in doing so. Domestically, there has been rising isolationism, a backlash against free trade, calls for "restraint" in US foreign engagements and the growing pressure on the US budget as a result of its economic problems. Externally, there is a long list of security issues and challenges in the region, including and especially the rise of China. As the Trump administration's foreign policy towards Asia remains somewhat incoherent, any diminishment of the United States' position in Asia would have very serious long-term political, strategic and economic consequences for it as well as for the stability of the region.

Part II of this volume has four chapters which examines the United States' Asia Pivot as enunciated by President Barack Obama in November 2011 in Australia. These chapters will evaluate the United States' military rebalancing to Asia, its economic engagement and the failed TPP. This is followed by six chapters in Part III of the volume, which examine the United States' position in Asia by assessing its most important relationships in the region, namely, its relations with Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, Pakistan and Singapore.

Part IV of the book focuses on the United States' military presence in Asia. The three chapters cover its military deployment in the Indian Ocean, analyses the impact of its much-vaunted Revolution in Military Affairs in Asia, and assesses the constraints and opportunities in the United States' defence posture in the region. This is followed by Part V of the volume, consisting of five chapters which examine the challenges to the United States in Asia. These include the strategic rivalry with China, the problem of North Korea, the coming crisis over Taiwan and terrorism.

The sixth and concluding part of the book has two chapters written by two eminent professors and long-time observers of the United States in Asia. The first, by Robert Sutter, examines the problems and opportunities for the United States in Asia and how it might strengthen its position in the region. The second, by Douglas Stuart, examines the future prospects

and challenges for the United States in Asia, and how it might manage or overcome those challenges to maintain its influence in the face of China's rise, its own difficulties, and the complex challenges it faces in Asia.

REFERENCES

- ABC News (2017), "'Screwed" by Justin Trudeau, Leaders Fume Over Scuppered Trans-Pacific Partnership Deal,' accessed 21 November 2017 at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-10/tpp-talks-stall-after-justin-trudeau-canada-fails-to-show-up/9140250>.
- ADB – Asian Development Bank (n.d.), *Asia 2050: Realising the Asian Century*, p. 3, accessed 10 April 2017 at <http://adb.org/sites/default/files/asia2050-executive-summary.pdf>.
- Baker, P. (2017), 'Trump Abandons Trans-Pacific Partnership, Obama's Signature Trade Deal,' *New York Times*, 23 January, accessed 5 April 2017 at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/us/politics/tpp-trump-trade-nafta.html?_r=0.
- BBC (2017a), 'Syria War: US Launches Missile Strikes in Response to Chemical Attack,' 7 April, accessed 10 April 2017 at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39523654>.
- BBC (2017b), 'Trump Hails "Tremendous" Progress in Talks with China's Xi,' 7 April, accessed 10 April 2017 at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39517569>.
- BBC (2017c), 'Trump Pledges US Resolve on Japan Leg of Asia Tour,' 5 November, accessed 21 November 2017 at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41867437>.
- Beckwith, Ryan (2016), 'Read Donald Trump's America First Foreign Policy Speech,' *Time*, 27 April, accessed 5 April 2017 at <http://time.com/4309786/read-donald-trumps-america-first-foreign-policy-speech/>.
- Beeson, Mark (2011), 'The USA's Relations with the Asia-Pacific Region,' *Far East and Australasia*, London: Routledge.
- Boghani, Priyanka (2017), 'The US and North Korea On The Brink: A Timeline,' *PBS*, 4 October, accessed 22 November 2017 at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-u-s-and-north-korea-on-the-brink-a-timeline/>.
- Bradner, Eric (2016), 'Trump: US Doesn't "Have to be Bound" by "One China" Policy,' *CNN*, 12 December, accessed 5 April 2017 at <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/11/politics/donald-trump-china-taiwan/index.html>.
- Daily Telegraph* (2012), 'US to Station Troops in Northern Australia as Fears of China's Pacific Presence Grow,' 2 February.
- Friedberg, Aaron (2011), *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, New York: W. W. Norton.
- IMF – International Monetary Fund (2015), *Regional Economic Outlook: Asia and Pacific*, accessed 10 April 2017 at <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/reo/2015/apd/eng/pdf/areo0415c1.pdf>.
- IMF – International Monetary Fund (2016), World Economic Outlook Database.
- Kennedy, Paul (1987), *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York: Random House.
- Kindleberger, Charles (1973), *The World in Depression, 1929–1939*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Krauthammer, Charles (1995), 'Why We Must Contain China,' *Time*, 31 July.
- Lagarde, Christine (2016), 'Asia's Advancing Role in the Global Economy,' International Monetary Fund, 12 March, accessed 10 April 2017 at <http://www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/2016/031216.htm>.
- Office of the Secretary of Defense (2010), Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2010, accessed 26 April 2018 at https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2010_CMPR_Final.pdf.
- Organski, A.F.K. (1968), *World Politics*, New York: Knopf.

- RAND (2015), *An Interactive Look at the US–China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017*, Santa Monica, accessed 10 April 2017 at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND_RR392.pdf.
- Roy, Denny (1996), 'The China Threat Issue: Major Arguments,' *Asia Survey*, **36** (8), 758–771.
- Schmitt, Eric (2017), 'US Reroutes Warships to Korean Peninsula in Show of Force,' *New York Times*, 9 April, accessed 10 April 2017 at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/09/world/asia/korean-peninsula-us-aircraft-carrier-north-korea.html?_r=0.
- The Australian* (2009), 'Hillary Clinton Firmly Commits the US to Asia-Pacific Security,' 21 May.
- The Australian* (2011), 'US President Barack Obama's Speech to Parliament,' 17 November.
- USITC – United States International Trade Commission (n.d.), accessed 10 April 2017 at <https://dataweb.usitc.gov/scripts/Regions.asp>.
- van Tol, Jan, Mark Gunzinger, Andrew F. Krepinevich and Jim Thomas (2010), *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 18 May, accessed 10 April 2017 at <http://csbaonline.org/publications/2010/05/airsea-battle-concept/>.
- Wilson, Isaiah (2013), 'The True Tragedy of American Power,' *Parameters*, **43** (4), 15–26.