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Wither American Strategy?
The Future of U.S. Policy toward the Indo-Pacific

イアン・イーストン (Project 2049 リサーチフェロー)

Introduction

The United States currently lacks a publically-available national security strategy for the Indo-Pacific region. This situation, while lamentable, is far from new. Washington has arguably been operating without a strategy in this region for 25 years. American presidents across multiple administrations have been unable to clearly articulate their long-term strategic objectives, making it difficult to develop and implement coherent policies.

In the absence of war, no sense of crisis has taken hold which might lead to concerted focus on the Indo-Pacific and maritime Asia. The time and attention of decision makers have been occupied by violent turmoil in the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe. When security crises in maritime Asia have come to the forefront, the U.S. government's tendency has been to handle matters on an ad hoc basis, often resulting in unproductive summitry between the U.S. Navy and the PLA Navy over issues such as the South China Sea and freedom of navigation.

While it has become conventional wisdom that the lion's share of history in the 21st century will be made in the Indo-Pacific, most American foreign policy elites do not spend their time and energy thinking about the region's future. When they do, the principal issue is managing the U.S.-China relationship, a task which undermines the development of strategy. Indeed, the growing influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) frequently colors and distorts the American view. As a result, many recognize that major strategic problems exist, but struggle forming any consensus about what to do. Action is paralyzed by uncertainty and debate, and hard decisions are avoided in an effort to cooperate with Beijing and maintain the status quo.

The status quo is neither static, nor sustainable. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) intends to maximize its own political-military interests at the expense of its neighbors, making the PRC a dangerous rival center of power. CCP actions have already begun eroding the American-led global order, destabilizing the Asia-Pacific region and placing China on a dangerous collision course with the U.S. and its allies. The risk of catastrophe, while probably still low, is impossible to accurately assess. At a minimum, the trend lines before us are disquieting. The authorities in Beijing are rapidly expanding their political, economic, and military power, and employing them to coerce and intimidate others. As a consequence, tensions across the Indo-Pacific are rising, and great power conflict may be closer than we realize.

This paper will argue that the United States lacks a national security strategy for the Indo-Pacific and needs to develop one focused on competition with China. First, this paper will define strategy and discuss elements of long-term competition. Second, it will examine why the U.S. has failed to develop such a strategy for Asia. Third, it will explain why a competitive strategy is needed. Finally, it will conclude with some thoughts regarding what a future strategy might look like in President Trump's administration and beyond.

What is Strategy?

Strategy is an elusive term that can be defined in different ways by different people. The meaning of the word strategy varies based on the context and purpose of its use. This paper will apply Professor Aaron Friedberg's definition of strategy. He defines strategy as: "A plan for applying means to achieve ends in a competitive interaction involving the threat or actual use of force."ⁱ This Clausewitz-inspired view of strategy focuses on understanding competitive situations in which there exists a contest of adversary wills. In such an environment, each side has different plans, goals, and interests, and each side is likely to react to the other's actions. Friedberg defines means as: "A credible ability to threaten or actually use force. Means are tangible and intangible resources that can be employed to advance one's strategy." The ends are one's strategic objectives. Means and ends are connected by ways, which include concepts and plans for applying means toward ends.ⁱⁱ

Professor Thomas Mahnken provides six considerations for the formulation and implementation of strategy in a long-term competition. First, strategists must be focused on a concrete adversary, not an abstraction. This allows for the study of a competitor's strengths, weaknesses, plans, and proclivities. Second, and related, strategists must make considerable investments into intelligence collection and analysis, needed for developing a deep and nuanced understanding of the adversary. Third, strategists should take advantage of a competitor's resource constraints, forcing them to make difficult trade-offs. Fourth, strategists should seek to understand and exploit the internal logic of an adversary's bureaucracies. Fifth, strategists should take time factors into account, seeking to delay and/or deny an adversary from achieving their objectives in an acceptable timeframe. Finally, strategists should seek an action-reaction dynamic where their side maintains the initiative, forcing the competitor into a disadvantageous position and keeping them there.ⁱⁱⁱ

With this basic framework in mind, let us now turn to the question of whether or not the United States has a strategy for Asia.

Does America Have a Strategy for Asia?

It is sometimes assumed that every leadership team who occupies the White House has a unified vision and a secret plan for achieving it. In the post-Cold War world, however, little evidence exists that would suggest the United States has ever developed a whole-of-government strategy for Asia. This is not to suggest that elements of the government have not made any attempts at security strategy. In the 1990s, for example, the Department of Defense published several East Asia Strategy Reports that outlined the Pentagon's regional security strategy.^{iv} During the first half of the Obama

administration, the Department of State announced a strategy that became known as the "Rebalance to Asia" or "The Pivot."^v More recently, defense officials announced a "Third Offset" strategy. Details are vague, but it appears aimed at keeping ahead of militarily-advanced competitors like China.^{vi} In the early months of the Trump Administration, a variety of statements and ideas from Secretary of Defense Mattis, PACOM Commander Harris, Secretary of State Tillerson, and Senator McCain suggest that the seedlings of strategy are there, but have not yet taken root.

The examples above do not fit the definition of strategy used for the purposes of this paper. In one sense, they are all too abstract and broad. None of them identify an adversary, let alone discuss their ends, ways, and means for dealing with it in an interactive competition. Instead, they often offer long lists of amorphous goals, including "trust building" and engagement and cooperation with China. Further undermining prospects for actual strategy, "The Pivot" and other attempts at strategy were neither whole-of-government efforts, nor were they fully funded and implemented.^{vii}

At least four factors can account for Washington's heretofore inability to develop a coherent strategy for Asia. These include leadership misperceptions, technology developments, foreign influence, and a string of crises situations at home and abroad. Let us examine each factor individually.

Leadership Misperceptions. For American leaders, the end of the Cold War was both shocking and euphoric. In 1992, with the Soviet Union suddenly gone and the Russian Federation in shambles, no rival superpower existed. The nightmarish threat of high-end war evaporated and there no longer seemed to be any justification for engaging in long-term strategic competitions. In the minds of many foreign policy experts, history had ended and democracy was on the march. Western civilization had won, and American power seemed limitless on the horizon. It became the predominant view that no other country could emerge to compete with the United States in a head-to-head fashion. Countries such as China might make efforts to challenge the new order on the fringes, but they would quickly find themselves assimilated into a welcoming globalized world. It was taken for granted that Washington could shape Beijing into a responsible stakeholder, accelerating the process of both economic and political reform. It was assumed that as long as the Western world treated the PRC like a friend, Beijing would reciprocate and strategic confrontation would be avoided. This assumption, of course, has been falsified by events.

Technology Developments. In the 1990s and 2000s, extraordinary leaps in computing power heightened American leaders' unrealistic sense of optimism. The Internet became regarded as a panacea which would soon usurp oppressive authoritarian regimes and replace them with enlightened democracies. It was assumed that the Internet would allow everyday Chinese people to access a flood of information, empowering them as individuals and making them capable of collective action. Social media, in particular, appeared destined to crumble the Great Firewall of China. Few Americans anticipated the ways in which new communications technology could be used by the CCP for propaganda, surveillance, misinformation, truth denial, and history manipulation. Fewer still expected the Internet to lower the quality of the Western media—and strategic analysis in

general.

In Washington, officials have increasingly come to treat short blurbs on Twitter and Facebook as alternatives to detailed papers and speeches. The instant gratification of current events, reported on social media platforms, has eroded long-term thinking. Society has become so consumed by the present that fewer policymakers can imagine or even think about the future, let alone develop and articulate their visions for it in meaningful terms. So much data has become available that many consumers of it are overwhelmed.

Foreign Influence. With globalization and technology have come the rapid expansion of hostile Chinese influence operations. As the PRC's economy has grown, so too have its efforts to channel financial resources into influence campaigns directed at American politicians, government officials, and thought-leaders.^{viii} Chinese political warfare operatives have made significant gains around the world.^{ix} Anecdotal evidence suggests that Chinese military and intelligence services have funneled massive amounts of money into gaining leverage over American media outlets, think tanks, universities, and government service companies, often using foundations and semi-private corporations as cover.

In the world of politics and decision making, it is difficult and perhaps impossible to assess the effect that hostile foreign influence operations have had. At a minimum, it is remarkable how many powerful Americans the Chinese authorities have been able to gain access to in venues that would allow for agents of Beijing to coax, cajole, or coerce them. It is unknowable the extent to which hostile influence operations have altered American policy decisions and curtailed efforts at strategy. But it would be delusional for anyone to think that retired four star generals, former secretaries of state, and university professors who frequently travel to China and have business interests there are not being subjected to situations that challenge their moral and ethical integrity.

Crisis Situations. Contrary to expectations, the end of the Cold War did not bring the United States any meaningful sense of security. For many, the collapse of one giant adversary seemed to create a legion of smaller ones. In the 1990s, America was drawn into conflicts in Somalia, Haiti, and Serbia. Washington also watched in horror as countries such as Rwanda and Congo were devastated by civil war and genocide, and as terrorists struck in Oklahoma City, New York, and Tokyo. Then, in the early 2000s, just as the PRC armaments program began to catch attention, the 9/11 terrorist attacks spun America into a state of national panic. From that point forward, long-term strategic thinking was pushed to the fringes and short-term tactical action dominated the discourse.

In late 2001 and early 2003, respectively, America plunged into wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Both countries quickly became lawless quagmires from which the U.S. could not extract itself with honor. These grueling foreign conflicts played out against the backdrop of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, one of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history. At home, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, and the Great Recession devastated Wall Street from 2007 to 2009, leaving in its

wake persistently high unemployment and low consumer confidence in main street America. The U.S. Congress, highly polarized by the national trauma of the past ten years, responded by enacting the Budget Control Act of 2011, a law that ultimately had cascading effects which were not anticipated. Severe cuts to defense spending and a constant sense of uncertainty in the Federal budget ensued.

From 2010 to 2012, a revolutionary wave of demonstrations, protests, coups, and riots swept across the Arab world, leaving in their wake destructive civil wars and failed states. In Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, conflicts produced terror and mass refugee flows. In 2014, the West Africa Ebola virus epidemic became the most widespread outbreak of the disease in history, with cases appearing as far away as the United States. Making matters worse, Russia invaded Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, and it continues to threaten many of its neighbors.

In Asia, the scene has darkened at an equally alarming pace. The Chinese military has launched a campaign of space weapons testing, cyber attacks, and naval expansion. North Korea, for its part, has conducted a series of nuclear weapons tests and missile launches. These have created significant, albeit intermittent, spikes in tensions. From 2015 to 2016, the United States suffered terror attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando, witnessed one of the most divisive presidential elections in its history, and saw Russia attempting to influence the White House. While no single scandal, crisis, terror attack, or regional conflict has shaken the American government, the steady stream of shocking events at home and abroad over the past 25 years have placed U.S. policymakers in a reactive position.

Does America Need Competitive Strategy?

America would not need a strategy for major power competition in the Asia-Pacific if no potential challenger existed. However, in view of the PRC's rapid buildup, America certainly does need a strategy now. According to authoritative assessments, Beijing's fundamental objective is to maintain the CCP elites' total monopoly on power in China for as long as possible, and for the PRC to become a regional Hegemon.^x Taken to its logical conclusion, this would place the United States in an inferior position and undermine freedom and democracy around the world. As an authoritarian state with a Marxist-Leninist ideology, the PRC is inherently hostile to the American-led world order. Beijing seems to believe it is locked in a life-and-death struggle, and accordingly works to erode Washington's power and influence in Asia and beyond.^{xi}

In China, every facet of the state can be made to advance the CCP's interests, including the military and security services; media, education, and propaganda systems; and Chinese banks, industry, and corporations. Even private Chinese citizens abroad are expected to serve the needs of the leadership. The CCP is able to harness immense national resources and apply them in a concerted and often opaque fashion, potentially making China a greater long-term threat to U.S. national security than the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, or Imperial Japan. The dangerous challenges inherent in China's system of government are not only military, but also political and economic.

Lacking a clear recognition of the rising threat, American decision makers have failed to develop and implement a strategy for countering it. This was unfortunate, but somewhat understandable, 10 years ago when China's ascendance and trajectory were still uncertain. Today, with Beijing's intentions clear and the balance of power tipping, further inaction could only be considered a dereliction of duty. To its credit, the Trump administration has finally identified China as a strategic competitor. Going forward, the U.S. government needs to develop and execute a competitive strategy, a blueprint for applying its national resources toward its strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific. If it fails to successfully apply a competitive strategy toward China, Washington will find itself in an increasingly weakened position both domestically and internationally as the PRC's strength continues to grow.

What Might Future Strategy Look Like?

The United States is just beginning to acknowledge and accept that the PRC is its main strategic rival and the most dangerous source of instability in the world today.^{xii} It is essential that Washington's approach to the Indo-Pacific begins to reflect the fundamentally competitive nature of U.S.-PRC relations. An improved policy toward China in the near future might consist of three primary elements: 1) external resistance to Chinese expansionism, especially as it relates to Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and the Philippines; 2) internal pressure to gradually weaken the Communist Party, which is the primary source of Chinese expansionism; and 3) purposeful negotiations on the basis of strict reciprocity.

Washington should seek to deter Chinese expansionism by competing effectively in a sustained manner with Beijing in a number of regional arenas, but particularly in the overall ideological, military, and economic balance in the Indo-Pacific. This geographical region should be accorded priority for the American national interest. Maintaining a favorable balance of influence and power should be the main focus of American policy toward China. Yet, it would be a mistake to turn the entire situation into a black and white choice between rivals. Nothing would benefit Beijing more than to get Americans to forbid their allies and partners from reaping the benefits of trade with China in exchange for security guarantees. Demanding that everyone take sides in a polarized region would place great strain on America's diplomatic relationships.

Rather, Washington's strategy should be to use political, economic, and military instruments of power to help free peoples pursue their destinies and dreams however they see fit and to support them as they resist Chinese pressure. The competition should be more about principles (like rule of law and human rights) and ideas than hard power.

American policy should aim to accelerate the inevitable process of political change in China, peacefully nudging Beijing toward a more pluralistic political system. The power of the CCP must be steadily constrained by institutional checks and balances if China is to peacefully evolve to become a responsible democracy that plays a positive role in Asia and the world. China's intransigence has

resulted from nothing America and the West have done or failed to do. Rather, it is rooted in the nature of the regime.

An improved U.S. policy would engage the PRC in negotiations to attempt to reach agreements only when they protect and enhance clearly-defined American interests. Pursuing open-ended dialogues, summits, and maritime diplomacy (like RIMPAC) with China for the sake of unclear objectives like "trust-building" unnecessarily gives the CCP political leverage and wastes finite government resources and energies that would be better spent elsewhere. When exchanges and negotiations do occur, it is important that they are purposeful and consistent with the principle of strict reciprocity. To expect that concessions to China might be reciprocated and agreements honored is to be naive and to ignore decades of foreign policy history.

The U.S. should develop ways to communicate clearly that unacceptable Chinese actions will incur costs that would significantly outweigh any of Beijing's hoped-for benefits. This is foundational to the implementation of American strategy, and continued peace and stability. The PRC's despotic leaders must clearly recognize that only genuine restraint in their behavior will bring the possibility of achieving future peace and prosperity. The U.S. should continue to modernize its military forces, both conventional and nuclear, to show both the Chinese and regional allies and partners that America is resolved to never accept an inferior position or a continued erosion of its relative influence and power. Chinese calculations of possible war outcomes in all scenarios must always be so unfavorable that the CCP Politburo and Central Military Commission do not perceive any incentive to initiate an attack.

Conclusion

For a variety of reasons, the United States has been unable to develop and implement a national security strategy for Asia, let alone an effective maritime security strategy. Because of the emergence of the PRC as a dangerous rival power, it is imperative that the U.S. government under President Trump begins to develop a competitive strategy for deterring conflict and maintaining American superiority in the spheres of politics, economics, and defense. Elevating the role of democratic allies and partners in American strategy would likely prove to be the single most effective means of signaling resolve and purpose, diminishing the likelihood of regional instability and conflict.

American leaders should invest in a whole-of-government effort to bolster the U.S. alliance system in Asia, thereby dampening flashpoints that are also growing more dangerous as the result of PRC actions. The overriding American policy aim should be to accelerate the inevitable process of political change in China, moving Beijing toward a more pluralistic political system in order to avoid the possibility of armed confrontation. The CCP's grip on power must be steadily reduced by institutional checks and balances if China is to peacefully evolve to become a responsible democracy that plays a positive role in the world. American leaders should avoid helping to support this rival authoritarian system, and encourage their allies and partners to do the same in a concert of democracies.

- i Aaron Friedberg, "What is Strategy?" (lecture, American Academy of Strategic Education, October 17, 2015, in Arlington, Virginia).
- ii Ibid.
- iii Thomas G. Mahnken, "Cost-Imposing Strategies: A Brief Primer," Center for New American Security, November 2014, pp. 7-8.
- iv For example, see *The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region 1998* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1998), accessible online at <http://www.dod.gov/pubs/easr98/easr98.pdf>.
- v Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "Far Eastern Promises: Why Washington Should Focus on Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2014-04-18/far-eastern-promises>; Kurt M. Campbell and Brian Andrews, "Explaining the US 'Pivot' to Asia," Chatham House, August 2013, at https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Americas/0813pp_pivott_oasia.pdf; and Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.
- vi Bob Work, "The Third U.S. Offset Strategy and its Implications for Partners and Allies," *U.S. Department of Defense*, January 28, 2015, at <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606641/the-third-us-offset-strategy-and-its-implications-for-partners-and-allies>. See also Christopher P. Cavas, "Better Defenses Change Nature of Precision Strike Warfare," *Defense News*, June 29, 2015, at <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/air-space/strike/2015/06/28/precision-strike-weapons-missiles-jassm-pgm-cruise-bob-work-rand-csba-mark-gunzinger-bryan-clark-warfare-bombs/29334345/>; Randy Forbes, "Sustaining our Undersea Power," (remarks for the 2015 DC Area Submarine Birthday Ball, April 10, 2015), at <http://news.usni.org/2015/04/13/document-rep-randy-forbes-speech-to-d-c-area-submarine-association>.
- vii Fareed Zakaria, "Whatever happened to Obama's pivot to Asia?" *Washington Post*, April 16, 2015, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-forgotten-pivot-to-asia/2015/04/16/529cc5b8-e477-11e4-905f-cc896d379a32_story.html.
- viii See J. Michael Cole, "Chinese Propaganda: Coming Soon to a Conference Near You," *The Diplomat*, September 23, 2015, at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/chinese-propaganda-coming-soon-to-a-conference-near-you/>. This assertion is also based on the author's private discussions with think tankers, graduate students, university professors, and researchers in Boston, Princeton, San Diego, and Washington, D.C.
- ix See "Australia battles Chinese political influence," *The Economist*, June 15, 2017, at <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21723454-it-will-be-uphill-struggle-australia-battles-chinese-political-influence>; J. Michael Cole, "Unstoppable: China's Secret Plan to Subvert Taiwan," *The National Interest*, March 23, 2015, at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/unstoppable-chinas-secret-plan-subvert-taiwan-12463>; Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, *The People's Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics* (Arlington, VA: Project 2049 Institute, October 2013), at

http://www.project2049.net/documents/PLA_General_Political_Department_Liaison_Stokes_Hsiao.pdf.

x *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2017), p.37. See also Matthew Pennington, "US-China tensions persist despite progress on NKorea," *Associated Press*, February 23, 2016, at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/4e0a8c6d263d4aad897fb5464d4f1f72/top-diplomats-meet-fraught-time-between-us-china>.

xi Liu Mingfu, "The World Is Too Important to be Left to America," *The Atlantic*, June 4, 2015, at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/china-dream-liu-mingfu-power/394748/>; Curtis Chin, "Xi Jinping's 'Asia for Asians' mantra evokes imperial Japan," *South China Morning Post*, July 14, 2014, at <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1553414/xi-jinpings-asia-asians-mantra-evokes-imperial-japan>; and Jane Perlez, "Strident Video by Chinese Military Casts U.S. as Menace," *Sinosphere, New York Times*, October 31, 2013, at http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/strident-video-by-chinese-military-casts-u-s-as-menace/?_r=0.

xii The following discussion draws from the author's recently published book, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Arlington, Virginia: Project 2049 Institute, 2017).
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