

Current US-China Relations and the Pivot to Asia

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Ever since the Obama administration first announced the US “pivot to Asia” in November 2011, the policy has never been free of controversy or debate. At the center of the questions raised by the matter lies the essential definition of what, precisely, constitutes the most significant and strategically consequential challenge to American national security. Indeed, 12 years later, observers can examine the record of three administrations—Barack Obama’s, Donald Trump’s, and Joe Biden’s—and discern a clear reorientation of US geopolitical priorities, shifting away from the Middle East and toward East Asia. Despite the partisan differences between the Obama and Biden administrations on the one hand and the Trump administration on the other, the reorientation of US national security strategy from counterterrorism to great power competition has been confirmed as the United States’ general foreign policy guideline, not only for the time being, but also likely for years to come.

One could certainly question the premise, implementation, and conclusion of the United States’ shift away from the Middle East to East Asia, and especially to China. Most important to ask is whether China

warrants being assigned the role of the most consequential long-term strategic threat to the United States, and whether it truly represents *the* fundamental challenge to US hegemony. If the answer to both questions is in the affirmative, the natural next question would be how to best adjust US strategy to accommodate the strategic requirements from both regions—the Middle East and East Asia—on issues that run the gamut from nuclear nonproliferation to energy security. Furthermore, as a region that is central to the global energy supply, the role of the Middle East in current great power competition also deserves more consideration.

A Brief Overview of the “Pivot to Asia”

The “pivot to Asia,” also known as the “rebalance to Asia,” was officially launched in then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s article in *Foreign Policy*, “America’s Pacific Century.”¹ The article emphasized the key importance of the Asia-Pacific region for the global economy and geopolitics, and called for a “sustained commitment” to “forward-deployed” diplomacy, new partnerships, multilateral cooperation, and elevated economic statecraft. The strategy, according to Clinton, would proceed along six courses of action: strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening America’s relationships with rising powers, including China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.²

The pivot to Asia strategy was framed from the very beginning as a strategic rebalancing of US priorities and resources toward the Asia-Pacific, the perceived epicenter of the global economy and geopolitics. An implied premise of the strategy lies in the recognition that the Middle East, and especially America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, absorbed the majority of the United States’ attention and priorities for so long that it was lagging behind in other geopolitically consequential regions, especially in light of China’s rapid development and muscle-flexing in the Asia-Pacific. For this reason, throughout his two terms, President Obama worked to reduce the US military footprint in the Middle East, with greater emphasis placed

1 Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

2 *Ibid.*

on diplomacy—even though he did not always succeed in achieving his goal.³

Critics of the pivot to Asia, meanwhile, have been loud and clear about what was seen as a fundamental flaw in the strategy's assumption, namely that the United States had never been absent from Asia to begin with. Considering the United States' global superpower status, some have argued that the pivot to Asia neglected the reality that the United States cannot afford to prioritize one single region at the expense of other regions and issues, with the recent Ukraine war serving as a perfect example.

Asian allies of the United States had complained that the pivot strategy began to drift during Obama's second term, despite the nominal propensity and direction it maintained. By the beginning of the Trump administration, the buzzword of US grand strategy shifted to become the "Indo-Pacific Strategy," which to a certain extent also reflects the continuation of the US prioritization of the Asia region, as Indo-Pacific is perceived by many as "Asia-Pacific plus India." More importantly, the Trump administration clearly continued the tectonic shifts in the focus of US grand strategy away from counterterrorism, for which the Middle East is the geographical center. In the 2017 National Security Strategy, the Trump administration summed up its understanding of the return of great power competition as "China and Russia began to reassert their influence regionally and globally."⁴ Despite the Trump administration's perceived deviation from multilateralism and the American alliance system, Washington from 2017 to 2020 clearly followed a theme of a vigorously competitive and "no-concessions" approach to China. In this sense, although Trump's grand strategy was quite different in its approaches to its adversaries, allies, and the global system, his focus on the Indo-Pacific region, especially his prioritization of China as America's most consequential strategic threat, attests to a continued shift away from the counterterrorism campaign and the Middle East region.

3 Greg Myre, "Pledging To End Two Wars, Obama Finds Himself Entangled In Three," *National Public Radio*, October 15 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/10/15/448925947/pledging-to-end-two-wars-obama-finds-himself-entangled-in-three>.

4 "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, December 2017, p. 27, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

President Biden, meanwhile, has envisioned a future that seeks to “more firmly anchor the United States in the Indo-Pacific.”⁵ In its national security strategy, released in October 2022, the Biden administration defined China as the US military’s “pacing challenge” and “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”⁶ It also sees Beijing as having “ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world’s leading power.”⁷ In the China strategy also announced by Secretary of State Antony Blinken in 2022, the United States put forth its strategy of investing at home and aligning with its allies in order to compete with China.⁸ The Biden administration continued the Trump administration’s commitment to the Indo-Pacific region by defining the United States as “an Indo-Pacific power” and recognizing the Indo-Pacific as “vital to our security and prosperity.”⁹ The Russian war in Ukraine has forced the United States to divide and focus a significant portion of its attention and resources on the European theater. However, throughout the process, the United States has neither abandoned nor shifted its competitive strategy on China. With the formal US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the effort to minimize its footprint in the Middle East, the essence of the pivot to Asia has continued.

Is the “Pivot” Warranted?

A key question associated with the “pivot to Asia” strategy is whether the threat and risks posed by China warrant such a dramatic overhaul of US national security priorities. After all, the decision was not made in a vacuum; in fact, it reflects a fundamental reassessment of China, its future trajectory,

5 “FACT SHEET: Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” The White House, February 11, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/11/fact-sheet-indo-pacific-strategy-of-the-united-states/>.

6 “National Security Strategy,” The White House, October 2022, pp. 8, 20, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

7 *Ibid.*, 23.

8 Antony J. Blinken, “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” U.S. Department of State, May 26 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

9 “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” The White House, February 2022, p. 4, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/US-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

and the reality of US-China relations that began under the Obama administration and was consolidated under the Trump administration.

The most significant change that happened in China toward the end of the Hu Jintao administration and the beginning of the Xi Jinping era in the early 2010s was the fast accumulation of national wealth and the growing sense of empowerment that came along with it. After China's accession into the World Trade Organization, its foreign trade experienced explosive growth. Driven in part by tariff reductions, China's trade in goods rose from \$516.4 billion in 2001 to \$4.1 trillion in 2017.¹⁰ Foreign trade, along with the vast inflow of foreign direct investment, boosted China's economic growth during the first ten years of the twenty-first century. Six out of those 10 years saw double-digit economic growth, which peaked in 2007 at an astounding 14.2 percent.¹¹ With vast wealth came China's growing sense of national pride. While the 2008 Beijing Olympics were seen as China's return to the center of the world stage, domestic public opinion became increasingly impatient and dissatisfied with deceased former leader Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy mantra: "Keep a low profile and bide our time."¹² The muscle-flexing first began in the South China Sea, which China declared as its "core national interest" in 2010, implying that Beijing would resort to the use of force to defend it if necessary.¹³ This uncompromising maritime position and China's growing assertiveness in its foreign relations became an increasingly harsh and alarming reality for the United States and its allies in the region.

From a political leadership perspective, the assertive trajectory only accelerated after President Xi Jinping formally took power in 2013. Defining his mission as "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," Xi formally abandoned China's "keeping a low profile" diplomatic path, and instead sought a proactive diplomacy and security policy to assert

10 "How Influential is China in the World Trade Organization?," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 31, 2019, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-world-trade-organization-wto/>.

11 "1961-2021 GDP Growth (annual %) - China," The World Bank, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN>.

12 "Should China continue to keep a low-profile attitude?," *The People's Daily*, December 13, 2012, <http://en.people.cn/90883/8057776.html>.

13 Nicola Casarini "A Sea at the Heart of Chinese National Interest," *Global Challenges*, no. 1 (February 2017), <https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/1/a-sea-at-the-heart-of-chinese-national-interest/>.

China's interests.¹⁴ With China's Belt and Road Initiative representing its geoeconomic campaign for expansion, Beijing has actively sought to build up its military sector, especially in terms of the Chinese Navy's power projection capability.¹⁵ With China now equipped with new wealth from a decade of rapid economic growth, economic resources and statecraft have become two of the most effective instruments in its foreign policy toolkit, and Beijing has begun to adeptly utilize economic rewards and sanctions to influence other countries' policy decisions. All these developments are perceived as a fundamental threat to the US-led liberal international order and the rules that anchor it.

A strong and increasingly assertive China is not only challenging the US-led international system from the outside; its distinct model of growth—earlier called the “Beijing consensus,” which combined political authoritarianism with economic capitalism—forms a powerful challenge to the liberal democratic political system on which the United States and its allies place great emphasis. With its own distinct growth and governance model, China successfully chartered a course of high-speed growth without accompanying political liberalization, thereby presenting itself to the rest of the world as an alternative model of development, with political and economic appeal unparalleled by any previous experience. Under Xi Jinping, China further developed its agenda to replicate its “China wisdom” and “China model” in other developing countries, a mission that was emphasized in the official report of the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party.¹⁶ At this point, China has emerged not only as the near-peer competitor of the United States in terms of material wealth and national power, but it has also entered the realm of ideological competition with the US. This more profound layer of ideological contest led to the argument that the United States and China have formally entered a new

14 Graham Allison, “What Xi Jinping Wants,” *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/what-china-wants/528561/>.

15 James McBride et al., “China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative.>; Timothy R. Heath, “Why Is China Strengthening Its Military? It's Not All About War,” *The Rand Blog*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/03/why-is-china-strengthening-its-military-its-not-all.html>.

16 “Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress,” *China Daily*, November 4, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm.

“cold war.” Since then, the dichotomy of “democracy versus autocracy” has become an even more distinct feature in the strategic competition between the two great powers.

Despite the close economic cooperation and interdependence China has formed with the United States over the past decades, in the national security arena the US has always been seen as the most significant and consequential external threat to China’s national security. In Beijing’s view, US intervention in China’s civil war in the late 1940s is the core reason that mainland China remains divided from Taiwan, preventing unification seven decades after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. And the United States’ mission to promote democracy and human rights is the core reason for the “color revolutions” that overthrew authoritarian leaders in former Soviet states. That same US mission continues to threaten the Chinese Communist Party’s domestic legitimacy and regime security.

With Xi’s leadership and vision for China’s resumption of regional and global leadership in place, Beijing sees the United States as the hegemon that it will surpass and displace, first in its immediate neighborhood of Asia, and then potentially in other parts of the world. It remains up for debate whether China should really aim to replace the United States as the global hegemon. Especially in regions farther away from the Chinese border, such as the Middle East and Africa, there is a strong argument in China that the country should just enjoy the free ride in terms of the security provided by the United States, at America’s expense.

Indeed, the Chinese challenge to US hegemony is certain. Even if China does not aim to completely replace the United States as the global hegemon, it is keen on revising the international system, the geopolitical reality, and the rules and norms that it perceives to be against its national interests. For example, when China’s Global Security Initiative challenges the US-led alliance system, such as NATO, painting it as a source of instability and insecurity, and instead tries to present an alternative definition of security as “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable,” the global security order under American leadership comes under serious challenges, both conceptually and in practice.¹⁷

17 “The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper,” People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 21, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221_11028348.html.

Choosing between Two Critical Regions?

Both East Asia and the Middle East carry tremendous strategic importance for the United States as a global hegemon, but another important region is Europe. For many Asian observers, the transatlantic NATO alliance has always remained the cornerstone of the United States' security strategy, as was demonstrated by the US prioritization of Europe during the Cold War. The end of the war and the disintegration of the Soviet Union have not removed Russia from its position as a primary geopolitical and geostrategic threat to the United States. The Russian war in Ukraine, ongoing since February 2022, is a living reminder that even if the United States is trying to pivot toward Asia and prioritize China as its "pacing challenge," the geopolitical reality in other key regions of the world does not allow for the luxury of focusing on only one region, or on one challenge at a given time.

The same is also true when it comes to East Asia and the Middle East. East Asia, or the Asia-Pacific more broadly, commands vast potential in terms of human and economic resources. The rise of China for the first time in recent history poses a credible and long-term critical challenge to the United States, not only in terms of economic and military hard power, but also through its ideological and revisionist appeal. Effectively countering China's rise and outcompeting it are indispensable to the maintenance of US supremacy and the international order as the world has known it.

However, this by no means suggests that the Middle East region has lost its geopolitical significance. The Middle East is still the center of global energy security and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Any instability in the region will create unimaginable disruption and damage to the global supply chain and to economic well-being. The profound spillover effect of security threats from the region extends to both traditional and nontraditional security arenas, including nuclear nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and climate change. Instability in the Middle East, as well as the region's future economic and security trajectory, have the ability to critically impact the future of the world and the United States' leadership role in it.

Furthermore, in today's interconnected world, and with the global implications of US-China great power competition, the Middle East does not exist outside the scope of the US-China power contest. The recent Saudi-Iran rapprochement brokered by China is a good reminder for the United States that any US withdrawal of attention and influence in the

region will create a vacuum that Beijing will be eager to fill, and the consequences will play against the US strategic priority of effectively competing with China.¹⁸ Indeed, the strategic competition between the United States and China is not just about the two countries' respective national wealth and technological advantages; more importantly, it is also about the rest of the world. Which great power the rest of the world will identify with and support will eventually shape the outcome of this great power competition. If the United States relinquishes its leadership and its focus on the Middle East, it will only create opportunities for Beijing and vulnerabilities that will cost Washington dearly later. This message is resonating loud and clear throughout the US policy community today.

Conclusion

Regardless of debate surrounding the issue, the American pivot to Asia is a reality, rather than a myth. After starting with the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia strategy, the reorientation of the United States' strategic focus to Asia, especially to East Asia and China, has remained in place under the Trump and Biden administrations. And in fact, it has accelerated with the prioritization of the Indo-Pacific region, the prominence of great power competition as a main theme of the US national security strategy, and the identification of China as America's most consequential challenge in the long run. The US reorientation is anchored on the rise of China and the growing economic, political, security, and ideological challenges that it represents, and this trajectory is unlikely to falter or shift in the foreseeable future.

However, the Middle East remains a critical strategic center of the global system, not only because of its central position in global energy security, but also due to the tremendous impact from both traditional and nontraditional security threats in the region. The Middle East is also emerging as a new area of US-China strategic competition, which means that the region's future is intricately linked to the result of the strategic contest between the two great powers.

18 Peter Baker, "Chinese-Brokered Deal Upends Mideast Diplomacy and Challenges U.S.," *New York Times*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html>.