

# The Debate Over US China Strategy

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Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has pursued a two-pronged strategy towards China. On the one hand, Washington has sought to engage Beijing across a wide range of domains, including through bilateral diplomacy, participation in multilateral institutions, trade, investment, scientific cooperation, educational and cultural exchange, civil-society initiatives and military-to-military dialogues. While activity in most of these areas extends back to the initial Nixon–Kissinger ‘opening’ to China in the late 1960s, since the early 1990s there has been a substantial broadening and deepening in each.

At the same time as it has engaged China, from the mid-1990s onwards the United States has also taken steps designed to offset its growing strength, maintaining a balance of ‘hard power’ in East Asia favourable to America’s interests and those of its allies. This balancing portion of the US strategic portfolio has included a number of subsidiary elements, including preserving and selectively strengthening American military capabilities in the region, bolstering strategic cooperation with traditional treaty allies such as Japan, South Korea and Australia, and developing ‘quasi-alliance’ relationships with a number of countries (including Singapore and India) to which the US does not extend security guarantees, but which share its concern over the implications of China’s growing military power.

The goals of this mixed strategy have been to ‘tame’ and ultimately to transform the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Through balancing, the

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United States aims to uphold its alliances and to preserve peace and stability by deterring aggression or attempts at coercion. At the same time, through engagement, Washington has sought to encourage China's full incorporation into the existing international system, in the anticipation that its leaders will come to see their interests as lying in preserving and strengthening that system rather than seeking to challenge or overthrow it. Although, in recent years, they have become somewhat more circumspect in stating this goal directly, since the early 1990s US policymakers have also continued to hope that, in time, China's domestic political institutions would evolve toward something more closely resembling those of a liberal democracy. This is not a process to which the United States has sought to contribute directly, but rather one that it has attempted to encourage by indirect means, including the promulgation of ideas and, above all, the promotion of trade. Thus, since the early 1990s, one of the primary justifications for deepening economic engagement has been the claim that expanding trade and investment would accelerate growth, thereby hastening the emergence of a reform-minded Chinese middle class.

Albeit with occasional shifts in rhetorical tone and emphasis, and comparatively minor adjustments in the blend of engagement and balancing, for the past quarter-century successive US administrations have continued to adhere to the same basic approach. In the last several years, however, questions have emerged about the adequacy and long-term durability of this strategy. While China is obviously far richer today than it was in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, it is no more democratic. Indeed, to the contrary, the elevation of Xi Jinping to the status of China's paramount leader in 2012 has been accompanied by a wide-ranging crack-down on dissent, a further tightening of controls over access to the internet, and new restrictions on the activities of non-governmental organisations, especially those suspected of trying to strengthen civil society in order to promote human rights and social justice.

Despite decades of deepening engagement, China appears, if anything, to have moved further away from meaningful political reform. Meanwhile, fuelled by rapid economic expansion, the nation's military capabilities have grown to impressive dimensions. Among other developments, the deployment by China of so-called 'anti-access/area-denial' (A2/AD) forces

has raised serious questions about the future willingness and, perhaps, the ability of the United States to project power into the Western Pacific. Especially in light of the fiscal constraints under which it now labours, it is not obvious that the United States can continue to play its accustomed role in preserving a favourable balance of power in East Asia.

Finally, China's recent behaviour, especially in disputes with several of its maritime neighbours, has caused some observers to re-examine the pleasing assumption that the country is fast on its way to becoming a status quo power. To the contrary, China's assertion of the right to control most of the water, islands and resources off its coasts, and its new-found ability to use displays of power and threats of force to advance those claims, have shattered the illusion that it wants nothing more than to become a 'responsible stakeholder' in the existing international order.

In light of all these developments, analysts have begun to consider whether and, if so, how the prevailing approach should be adapted to meet changing circumstances. A survey of recent writing suggests that there are six possibilities presently on offer in public discussion, each involving a different mixture of the familiar elements that make up current strategy. As described more fully below, these can be arrayed along a spectrum ranging from renewed and redoubled efforts at engagement, to a virtually exclusive emphasis on balancing.

### **Enhanced engagement**

The first approach essentially involves doubling down on engagement and, in particular, on efforts to 'tame' China by further enmeshing it in the existing international system. The arguments and assumptions underpinning this strategy are laid out most clearly in a 2008 *Foreign Affairs* article by Princeton professor John Ikenberry entitled 'The Rise of China and the Future of the West'. Ikenberry takes it as axiomatic that China's power will continue to grow while, at least in relative terms, that of the United States inevitably declines. According to him, what political scientists refer to as a 'power transition', in which a previously dominant state is eventually displaced by a rising one, is thus under way. Although the history of such transitions has often been violent, Ikenberry believes that, properly handled, this one need

not be. As he explains, the current US-led Western order is 'hard to overturn and easy to join'. Even if China wanted to overthrow it, the existence of nuclear weapons has 'made war among great powers unlikely – eliminating the major tool that rising powers have used to overturn international systems defended by declining hegemons'.<sup>1</sup> Thankfully, 'war-driven change has been abolished as a historical process'.<sup>2</sup>

More to the point, if its leaders see their interests as Ikenberry believes they must, China should have no reason to risk such drastic and dangerous measures. This is because the order that America designed and built is 'open, integrated, and rule-based'.<sup>3</sup> China can 'gain full access to and thrive within this system'; indeed, to a considerable degree it has already done precisely that. Because it is 'built around rules and norms of nondiscrimination and market openness', the Western order enables rising states to 'advance their expanding economic and political goals within it'. As Ikenberry notes, 'China has already discovered the massive economic returns that are possible by operating within this open-market system.'<sup>4</sup> In the security domain, the norms of 'state sovereignty and the rule of law' have provided China with a measure of protection and reassurance, even when it was relatively weak, and they continue to serve its interests.<sup>5</sup> At the highest levels, the existing global system provides 'new entrants' with 'ways of gaining status and authority and opportunities to play a role' in its governance. Small wonder, then, that, as Ikenberry sees it, China is 'increasingly working within, rather than outside of, the Western order'.<sup>6</sup>

The prescriptions that follow from this analysis are straightforward and reassuring. Basically, Washington needs to stay the course, demonstrating renewed faith in the resilience and attractive power of the system it built after the Second World War. The United States must invest in bolstering the existing order, reinforcing the rules and institutions that comprise it, and avoiding actions that might undermine them in pursuit of short-term advantage. Properly managed, the current system can continue to function, and to serve America's interests, even as its power declines relative to China's. In short, 'the rise of China need not lead to a volcanic struggle ... The Western order has the potential to turn the coming power shift into a peaceful change on terms favorable to the United States.'<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the balancing part of US strategy, Ikenberry advocates the preservation of existing alliances, which he describes as having primarily 'political value' as 'part of a wider Western institutional structure'.<sup>8</sup> On the question of whether and, if so, how the United States should try to ease Beijing down the road toward liberalising domestic political reform, he appears to favour a long-term, indirect approach. Even though the rules and institutions of the existing system are 'rooted in ... the evolving forces of democracy and capitalism', it is apparently unnecessary for a nation to be democratic to become a 'patron and stakeholder'.<sup>9</sup> However, while Ikenberry does not say so directly, the logic of his argument would seem to suggest that, in time, as it becomes more deeply integrated into the Western order, China is likely to embrace the principles on which it is based.

### Reassurance

A second strategy, outlined in a recent book by James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon (*Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.–China Relations in the Twenty-First Century*), is less optimistic in its assumptions, and less ambitious in its goals. Steinberg and O'Hanlon acknowledge that the US–China relationship contains elements that are 'inherently competitive and dynamic', and they accept the necessity of some measure of continued balancing. As they put it, each country will continue to feel compelled to find ways to 'demonstrate that it has the necessary will and capacity to defend its vital interests'.<sup>10</sup> Left unchecked, however, these self-protective impulses could easily lead to an escalating spiral of tension and a growing danger of war. In order to reduce the likelihood of such a tragic outcome, the authors recommend a specific and targeted form of engagement: each side must take steps designed to demonstrate restraint (which they define as 'forgoing actions that may be misinterpreted as threatening'), while at the same time increasing transparency regarding both capabilities and intentions.<sup>11</sup>

Steinberg and O'Hanlon offer more than 20 concrete proposals. Some aim to slow what the authors see as an escalating arms race. (Thus, they suggest that China should level off military spending once its budget 'approaches 50 percent of the U.S. level' and 'limit development and deployment of antiship ballistic missiles', while the United States should 'restrain

modernization and deployment of long-range strike systems, especially precision conventional strike', and commit 'not to develop a national missile defense [system] capable of neutralizing the Chinese deterrent'.<sup>12</sup>) Others are intended to head off potential crises or to reduce the risk that they might escalate. (Thus, the United States should commit not to support unilateral Taiwanese independence in return for a Chinese promise to use 'exclusively peaceful means' to resolve that long-standing issue. Moreover, Washington and Beijing should create a 'dedicated military-to-military hotline' and provide advance notice of 'military exercises and deployments in the South China Sea and the East China Sea'.<sup>13</sup>)

What the authors say they have in mind is not Cold War-style arms-control negotiations leading to a set of formal treaties, but rather an ongoing process of parallel and reciprocal steps that will, at a minimum, slow the emergence of a full-blown military competition, help avoid unintended crises, and reduce incentives for pre-emption. In time, such an approach can help not only to 'avoid the worst outcomes', but to 'provide space for an important degree of cooperation on issues of common concern'.<sup>14</sup> Assessing the factors that underlie the emerging Sino-American rivalry, Steinberg and O'Hanlon are guardedly optimistic. As they put it, 'the lack of intense ideological competition, as well as the absence of bilateral territorial disputes or imperial ambitions by either side, suggest grounds for hope.'<sup>15</sup>

### **Grand bargain/spheres of influence**

In contrast to a strategy of 'enhanced engagement', which has its roots in liberal theories of international relations, the third approach reflects the harsh logic of geopolitical realism. According to this view, if China's power continues to grow, the United States will inevitably face a choice between confrontation and accommodation. Given the enormous costs of conflict, the latter course would clearly be preferable. Assuming a continuation of current trends, it would be prudent to seek accommodation sooner, when the relative power relationship between the two countries is more favourable to the United States, rather than later, when it will become steadily less so. The object of American policy therefore should be to work out a mutually acceptable arrangement under which, in the words of Henry Kissinger, 'both countries pursue their

domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjust their relations to minimize conflict'. Under such an arrangement, 'neither side endorses all of the aims of the other or presumes a total identity of interests, but both sides seek to identify and develop complementary interests'.<sup>16</sup>

Kissinger envisions a process that would lead over time to the creation of what he terms a 'Pacific Community'. While he does not attempt to define its precise content or parameters, this would be 'a region to which the United States, China, and other states all belong and in whose peaceful development all participate'. The recognition of such a community 'would make the United States and China part of a common enterprise' in which, as Kissinger puts it, 'shared purposes – and the elaboration of them – would replace strategic uneasiness to some extent'.<sup>17</sup>

Other self-described realists are more concrete (and perhaps more candid) in their prescriptions. Writing in 1999, Robert Ross observed that the United States and China were 'strategic competitors engaged in a traditional great power struggle for security and influence'.<sup>18</sup> But he argued that, thanks largely to the geography of East Asia, their rivalry need not escalate to the point of open conflict. According to Ross, China is, by virtue of its location and history, a continental power, while America's strengths and interests in Asia lie primarily in the maritime domain. If both sides recognise and accept these realities, then it should be possible for them to work out a stable *modus vivendi*, one in which China dominates eastern Eurasia but forgoes the temptation of trying to develop serious naval capabilities, while the United States retains its position as the preponderant maritime power but does not challenge China on land.

Ross acknowledged that there were several areas in which the spheres of influence of the two great powers might appear to overlap, but he was confident that any resulting tensions could be managed with relative ease. As regards the Spratly Islands, Ross argued that China had 'neither the ability nor the strategic interest to challenge the status quo' in the 'U.S.-dominated South China Sea'.<sup>19</sup> While Washington's alliance relationship with South Korea was 'a valuable U.S. asset', it did not constitute a 'vital interest' and, in the long run, 'Korean unification and closer relations between Beijing and Seoul' would not 'make the United States significantly less secure or the

balance of power less stable'.<sup>20</sup> Only Taiwan truly sat on the seam between the two spheres. Although Ross did not believe that its occupation by China would significantly alter the regional military balance, he concluded that, assuming Taiwan's leaders did not make a move toward formal independence, the United States could help the island to preserve its physical autonomy 'for another quarter century' by retaining its security commitment and providing modest levels of support.<sup>21</sup>

Ongoing shifts in the military balance have caused some realists to revise their assessment of the likely dimensions of a spheres-of-influence arrangement, but not by much. In an article published in 2011, Charles Glaser argues that, for a mixture of geographic and technological reasons, the United States and China need not find themselves enmeshed in an intense security dilemma. In Glaser's assessment, the stabilising effect of the natural geographic division of Asia is reinforced by the fact that both the US and China possess secure second-strike nuclear forces. Although the United States also has 'massive conventional capabilities', China should not find these deeply threatening, thanks to the reassuring presence of its nuclear deterrent, and because 'the bulk of U.S. forces, logistics and support lie across the Pacific'.<sup>22</sup>

Still, while the prospects for avoiding escalating military competition and open conflict are generally good, the growth in Chinese power may 'require some changes in U.S. foreign policy that Washington will find disagreeable – particularly regarding Taiwan'.<sup>23</sup> Glaser concludes that the United States should 'consider backing away from its commitment to Taiwan' because doing so 'would remove the most obvious and contentious flash point between the United States and China and smooth the way for better relations between them in the decades to come'.<sup>24</sup> The goal of American diplomacy should be to find a way to make this one, comparatively minor adjustment in the existing dispensation.

### **Offshore balancing**

While they call for Washington to make adjustments ('backing away from Taiwan' and perhaps permitting the treaty with Korea to lapse following reunification), the advocates of a spheres-of-influence strategy generally assume that the United States will retain at least some of its alliances and

forward bases. A fourth approach to dealing with the rise of Chinese power would require a significant, additional step back from the Western Pacific. Proponents of what they prefer to call 'offshore balancing' urge that the United States end its long-standing practice of providing permanent security guarantees and basing its forces on foreign soil. The balance of power in Asia would still be a matter of concern but, henceforth, in the words of Doug Bandow, 'the formal U.S. defense perimeter ... should be the United States'.<sup>25</sup>

Pulling back would permit the United States to forgo an escalating military competition with the PRC, one which, in light of its fiscal problems, it would in any event find difficult to sustain. Detaching itself from its former allies would also make it easier for Washington to avoid being drawn into territorial conflicts in which it has no direct interest. And it would reduce the risk that friendly countries, secure in the knowledge of American support, might be 'more inclined to aggressively assert even dubious claims', whether against China or one another.<sup>26</sup>

The most important benefit of a policy of greater detachment, however, is that it would induce other countries to do more in their own defence. Protected by US forces and security guarantees, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, among others, have for a long time 'under-invested in their militaries'.<sup>27</sup> Without the US security umbrella, these prosperous countries would have the incentive, as well as the resources, to spend more on defence. Washington's former treaty partners would also have more reason to cooperate closely with one another and with other states, thereby improving their chances of blocking Chinese expansionism. Bandow suggests that, among other measures, some of them might wish to build their own independent nuclear deterrents. Such a development would be 'highly controversial', but it could ultimately prove stabilising, helping to 'restrain the PRC without drawing America into a regional nuclear crisis if China pursues a more aggressive course'.<sup>28</sup>

### **Better balancing**

Offshore balancing assumes that maintaining a geopolitical equilibrium in Asia is necessary to the preservation of peace, but it also rests on the belief that, thanks to the sometimes paradoxical logic of strategy, it may be possible to attain this goal with less American effort rather than more. A

more linear and straightforward approach would call for the United States to intensify its efforts at balancing. The main questions here are how this can best be done, and to what extent preserving a favourable balance of power requires that the engagement portion of America's strategic portfolio be adjusted or perhaps even curtailed.

The best recent example of a strategic proposal that seeks to combine enhanced balancing with some subtle adjustments in engagement is Ashley Tellis's 2014 monograph *Balancing Without Containment*. Tellis takes the view that the US–China rivalry is propelled primarily by structural, power-political factors. As he puts it,

the two nations are trapped in inescapable opposition. The United States seeks to protect its global hegemony – as it must, if it is to advance its varied national interests – while rising Chinese power is oriented toward eroding that U.S. primacy, which remains the most dangerous external constraint on Beijing's ability to use its steadily accumulating power to reshape the extant political order to serve its interests.<sup>29</sup>

Despite this fundamental divergence in their interests, the two nations also remain locked together in a mutually profitable embrace. China has benefited enormously from US trade and investment, and from its participation in the open global order that Washington created and which it is still committed to sustaining. Indeed, to a considerable extent, China owes its rapid rise to US international economic policy. But Americans, too, have enjoyed significant absolute gains in welfare from their economic relationship with China, and most are therefore reluctant to see it disrupted or disturbed. From a purely economic point of view, both sides are better off than they might otherwise have been. The problem from a strategic perspective is that China has also gained in *relative* terms; it is growing faster than the United States and is therefore closing the gap in wealth and power that still separates them. For American planners, this is, as Tellis puts it, 'a conundrum that admits of no easy solutions'.<sup>30</sup> 'It is simply too late to constrain Beijing's rise by restricting its access to the global economic system.'<sup>31</sup> It will take a major economic crisis or military confrontation to

force a fundamental change in US trade policy towards China or to sever the links that have grown up between the two countries.

Tellis is unusually candid in stating that the goal of the strategy he lays out is to preserve American primacy for as long as possible. In order to keep its lead and to maintain a favourable balance of power, the United States needs, first of all, to run faster, reinvigorating its economy through various measures designed to boost overall GDP growth rates and maintain its long-established capacity for technological innovation. Boosting growth closer to historic levels will make it easier for the US to afford selective enhancements in its military capabilities. Tellis places particular emphasis on expanding 'U.S. military capabilities to defeat ... Chinese attempts at stymieing Washington's ability to project military power into Asia'.<sup>32</sup> Blunting China's fast-evolving A2/AD system will require long-range, conventional, precision-strike weapons targeted on key elements in its C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) network; improved active defences; and other countermeasures against Chinese missiles, torpedoes and mines.<sup>33</sup>

As it increases its own capabilities, the United States should also take steps to encourage the growth of other nations that share its concerns about China's rise. Rather than try to restrain China, Washington should seek to 'raise others up'. Included here are not only traditional American treaty allies such as Japan and Australia, but other 'consequential states abutting China', such as India, Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia. The aim of American policy should be to help these nations 'realize their strategic potential and increase their mutual cooperation' so as to create 'objective constraints that limit the misuse of Chinese power in Asia'.<sup>34</sup>

While he disclaims any intention of 'holding China down', Tellis nevertheless advocates a number of policies that are clearly intended to generate disproportionate gains for the United States. Specifically, he urges that Washington proceed with regional free-trade agreements that would 'deepen globalization selectively', further reducing or eliminating remaining barriers to trade and investment among countries that are either friends or allies of the United States. With a handful of exceptions, these are mostly democracies and, in any event, they make up 'a fraternal cohort that

presently excludes China'.<sup>35</sup> Included on the list of desirable arrangements are a Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement that includes India, a North American economic union and a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. The purpose of these 'more restricted trading arrangements' is to help offset some of the losses in relative gains that the United States has accrued 'as a result of its support for China's integration into the global trading system'. Because the goal is to help close the gap in growth rates, 'the success of this approach ... will hinge entirely on keeping China out of these regional free-trade agreements for as long as possible'.<sup>36</sup>

Tellis is dubious of the notion that the eventual liberalisation of China's domestic political system would help resolve its strategic differences with the United States. His strategy therefore lacks a clear 'happy ending'. Still, he is by no means fatalistic; what he appears to envision is a world in which, by running faster, America stays ahead of China and retains its position of primacy for the foreseeable future. If it can do this, then, together with its friends and allies, the United States should be able to maintain a favourable balance of power, deter aggression and keep the peace.

### **Containment**

Moving one significant step further along the spectrum of strategic alternatives brings us finally to a policy of pure containment. Adherents of the so-called 'offensive realist' school of international relations envision the Sino-American relationship as a zero-sum struggle for power and influence. If China's power continues to grow, it will be driven to seek to displace the United States as the leader, not only in Asia but on the global stage. The antagonism between the two nations is therefore profound and absolute; it cannot be ameliorated by supple diplomacy or a change in the character of the Chinese regime, and it is very likely to lead eventually to conflict. Under the circumstances, writes John Mearsheimer, 'the optimal strategy for dealing with a rising China is containment'. The central feature of this approach would be an American-led effort to bring 'as many of China's neighbors as possible' into 'an alliance structure along the lines of NATO', and to oppose Chinese efforts to project its power into distant regions, including the Persian Gulf and the Western Hemisphere.<sup>37</sup>

As to other measures that might accompany this programme of alliance building, Mearsheimer appears ambivalent. He acknowledges that 'if the United States were to sever its military ties with Taiwan or fail to defend it in a crisis with China', it would send a signal of weakness to its other friends and allies in Asia. That said, because the island is more important to China than it is to the US, and because he believes that it will soon be indefensible in the face of growing Chinese power, Mearsheimer suggests that Washington 'will eventually conclude that it makes good strategic sense to abandon Taiwan and allow China to coerce it into accepting unification'.<sup>38</sup>

As regards economic policy, in 2001 Mearsheimer argued that the United States should 'reverse course and do what it can to slow the rise of China'.<sup>39</sup> More recently, he has taken the view that doing this is infeasible because 'there is no practical way of slowing the Chinese economy without also damaging the American economy'. Nevertheless, having doffed his cap to the conventional wisdom on this topic, Mearsheimer reverts to his previous position, asserting that 'the United States has a profound interest in seeing Chinese economic growth slow considerably in the years ahead. That outcome might not be good for American prosperity ... but it would be good for American security, which is what matters most'.<sup>40</sup>

A full-blown containment strategy would not shrink from measures designed to impede Chinese economic growth. Following the model of the Cold War, it would also call for restricting China's access to critical technologies and putting pressure on its domestic regime through information and political warfare designed to challenge its legitimacy, and by supporting dissidents, human-rights advocates and perhaps even violent separatist groups. In a notable departure from the mixed approach that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War, a containment strategy would effectively abandon engagement and any hope of 'taming' China, and would seek instead to hasten its transformation.

### **The case for better balancing**

The six strategies discussed here reflect differing assumptions about the sources of Chinese conduct and the likely impact of US behaviour upon it, as well as on the actions of other Asian nations. The first three options rest

on what appear increasingly to be overly optimistic assessments of the likely extent of the ambitions of the current Communist regime and the degree to which it can be placated or appeased. As regards 'enhanced engagement', the notion that the regime wants nothing more than to be accepted as a full-fledged member of the prevailing American-led order does not comport well with the evidence of recent Chinese behaviour; it also reflects a certain lack of imagination and historical perspective. Rising powers typically want to change things for reasons of pride and prestige, as well as rational material calculation. Their leaders believe that prevailing structures, put into place when they were relatively weak, are inherently unfair and disadvantageous. But they also chafe against having to accept rules and roles that were designed by others; they want to make their own mark and to receive the deference to which they believe themselves entitled.<sup>41</sup>

In intensifying its claims to offshore waters and resources, Beijing has already made clear its desire to alter certain aspects of the status quo in Asia. The fact that it has not yet put forward a full-fledged alternative vision for global order is hardly surprising, and should not be mistaken for acceptance of the one that currently exists. The growth of China's power has been so rapid in recent years that the nation's strategists have only just begun to lift their eyes from their immediate neighbourhood and to think about how they might like the wider world to look someday.<sup>42</sup> Instead of allowing themselves simply to be absorbed and transformed by the existing global system, as optimistic Western observers believe, China's leaders seem to have chosen to play within its rules for the time being, exploiting them to their advantage and pushing for marginal modifications wherever they can, while continuing to accumulate the wealth and power that will be needed to implement more far-reaching changes. Meanwhile, in its own neighbourhood, Beijing is already seeking to establish alternative structures, including regional trade agreements and new political mechanisms that serve its interests and enhance its influence, while marginalising the United States. An American strategy that continues to bank on the transformative potential of engagement may yet bear fruit, but only if it is accompanied by a programme of balancing sufficiently vigorous to defend the existing order and to compel China to continue to operate within its boundaries.

The claim that the United States needs to find ways to reassure China reflects a questionable reading of the dynamics of the current strategic competition, as well as what appears to be an overly benign interpretation of Beijing's motivations and intentions. While it may be true that China's leaders see their ongoing military build-up as in some sense 'defensive', this does not make it any less threatening to their neighbours or to the interests of the United States. Proposals for restraint rest on the belief that the United States and China are on the verge of an 'arms race'. In fact, a competition is already well under way. As during the Cold War, the mechanical 'action-reaction' image grossly oversimplifies the character of the interactions between the two sides and points towards prescriptions that are likely to be unhelpful, and possibly dangerous. China's leaders feel constrained and potentially threatened, not by any particular US weapons programme or operational concept, but by the presence of its forward-deployed forces, the persistence of its alliances and its continuing commitment to intervene on behalf of its friends if they are threatened or attacked. Beijing has had to live with these facts because, for many years, it lacked the means to challenge or change them. Today that is no longer the case. China now has the resources, as well as the resolve, to push back against American power, and it has started to do so. Many of its military-modernisation programmes appear to be aimed precisely at making it more difficult, costly and dangerous for the United States to continue to project power into the Western Pacific. Unfortunately, at this point in the sequence of strategic interaction, China's leaders are likely to interpret gestures of restraint not as an indication that a more aggressive approach is unnecessary, but rather as a sign that it is succeeding.

Advocates of reassurance also likely overestimate the degree to which the leadership of the Communist Party of China is motivated by fear and insecurity about external, as opposed to possible internal, threats. The current cycle of Chinese 'assertiveness' did not begin when the United States was building up its forces in the Western Pacific, but rather when it seemed to be weak, preoccupied and in decline.<sup>43</sup> While the initial announcement of the 'pivot' gave Beijing pause, the subsequent lack of follow-through has reinforced the view that the United States is constrained, at least for the

time being. Despite their protestations about 'encirclement', China's leaders evidently believe that their more assertive stance is succeeding, rather than provoking an effective countervailing response from the United States and its allies.<sup>44</sup>

Beijing's decision to push harder on maritime issues in 2009–10 may have been motivated primarily by a perception of American weakness, but it appears also to have reflected a concern that the global economic crisis would have damaging reverberations within China itself. At the onset of the crisis, the Communist regime had reason to fear that falling exports would lead to dramatically slower growth, rising unemployment and possible

social unrest. Ratcheting up external tensions may have been seen as one way of deflecting internal frustration and discontent. In the event, the massive stimulus programme unleashed in 2009 helped to stave off the worst effects of the global downturn, but it did nothing to address the structural imbalances in China's investment- and export-driven model of economic development. After a brief bump in 2010, growth began to slow,

and it has now sunk to its lowest level in a quarter-century.<sup>45</sup> The prospect that the regime may not be able to deliver on the promise of never-ending increases in prosperity seems to be reinforcing its inclination to use nationalism and international tension to sustain popular support. Given its internal preoccupations, as well as the external ambitions that are driving its behaviour, efforts to reassure Beijing are unlikely to have the desired effect.

The belief in Beijing that, whatever its current challenges, China's relative power will continue to grow while America's declines does not augur well for attempts to forge a 'grand bargain'. For as long as they see the tides of history flowing in their favour, China's leaders are unlikely to accept a spheres-of-influence arrangement based on the current distribution of power, even if it is in some respects an improvement on the status quo. In the past, Beijing had little choice but to accept America's dominant regional presence and its alliances, albeit with the caveat that they were 'relics of the Cold War'. Why should it ratify their existence now, when it has more means at its disposal than ever before with which to try and weaken them, and when (especially insofar as Japan is concerned) they no longer seem

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*Growth  
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to be acting as a restraint on the military programmes of other regional powers?

The idea that China's leaders believe they can subsist comfortably as a continental power, leaving control of the maritime domain to the United States, also appears increasingly implausible and at odds with the facts. Even if China succeeds in 'marching West', building transport and communication links through Central and South Asia, it will continue to be heavily reliant on seaborne imports of energy, food and raw materials.<sup>46</sup> The presence of US forces and bases around China's maritime periphery, and its leadership of a maritime coalition that extends from Northeast Asia into the Indian Ocean, will likely be perceived as posing an even greater threat in the future than it does today.

Attempting to implement a spheres-of-influence strategy would also carry significant risks. In addition to the harmful implications for its people, 'backing away' from Taiwan could unleash a cascade of damaging consequences for the United States. Finally succeeding in its decades-long campaign to 'reunify' with Taiwan seems more likely to feed Beijing's appetite for further gains than to satisfy it. Aside from its impact on China's intentions, gaining access to the island would increase its capabilities, enhancing its ability to project power into the Western Pacific and potentially threatening the sea lines of communication of Japan and South Korea.<sup>47</sup> Regardless of the way in which it was framed, a decision to abandon its ambiguous but long-standing commitment to Taiwan would inevitably raise doubts in the minds of America's other friends and allies. If they conclude that continued balancing is no longer a viable option, some may choose instead to bandwagon with China.

An explicit American shift towards 'offshore balancing' would greatly exacerbate these risks. While it is possible that the prospect of being forced to provide for their own security would shock at least some current US allies into more vigorous defence programmes, it would likely demoralise others, creating new opportunities for Beijing to pursue divide-and-conquer strategems. The advocates of this approach assume that, even if they cannot balance China alone, in the absence of full US support other Asian countries will be impelled to cooperate more closely with one another. Again, this

may be easier in theory than it turns out to be in practice. Some of the states that would have to join in a countervailing coalition (most notably Japan and South Korea) have long histories of suspicion and animosity. Others (such as Japan and India) do not, but they also have little experience of close strategic cooperation of the kind that would be needed to counter a fast-growing challenge.

If it were to happen overnight, the acquisition of nuclear weapons by current US security partners in East Asia (perhaps including Taiwan, as well as Japan and South Korea) might improve their prospects for balancing against Chinese power. But here again, there is likely to be a significant gap between theory and reality. Assuming that Washington did not actively assist them, and that they could not produce weapons overnight or in total secrecy, the interval during which its former allies lost the protection of the American nuclear umbrella and the point at which they acquired their own would be one in which they would be exposed to coercive threats and possibly pre-emptive attack. Because it contains a large number of tense and mistrustful dyads (including North Korea and South Korea, Japan and China, China and Taiwan, Japan and North Korea and possibly South Korea and Japan), a multipolar nuclear order in East Asia might be especially prone to instability.<sup>48</sup>

In contrast to the unduly optimistic assessments of Beijing's interests and intentions that underlie most proposed strategies for dealing with China, the assumptions underpinning a policy of pure containment are unnecessarily bleak. While it may eventually become far more tense and polarised than it is today, the relationship between the United States and China remains mixed, containing important areas of actual or potential cooperation, as well as intensifying competition. Abandoning attempts at engagement would create the self-fulfilling prophecy that critics of balancing have long and generally wrongly warned against; it would be tantamount, as Otto von Bismarck put it in opposing proposals for preventive war, to 'committing suicide for fear of death'.

Even if they wanted to shift towards a policy of pure containment, barring some major discontinuity, American leaders would find it extremely difficult to do so. Current budgetary constraints are neither permanent nor

insurmountable; the United States can certainly afford to fund a far more vigorous military competition with China than the one it is conducting today. Without an obvious breakdown in relations, however, forging a political consensus to support the required increase in expenditures would likely prove impossible. The fact that powerful and influential groups and individuals in American society remain deeply committed to preserving the best possible relations with China and opposed to any measures that, in their view, might damage them, will make the task of mobilising support even more difficult.

Elsewhere in the world, although concern over China is growing, there is no appetite for a full-blown rivalry. Aside from bigger defence budgets and less trade and investment, a shift toward containment would provoke fears of war. All parties would suffer in such a conflict, but China's Asian neighbours have reason to fear that they would suffer more than most. Even if American strategists concluded that it was necessary, the democratic countries that are its principal strategic partners in Asia are simply not ready to abandon engagement and sign on to a policy of containment.

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What this leaves, then, is a strategy that combines continued attempts at engagement with expanded and intensified balancing. Unlike containment, which would likely be both extremely costly and highly controversial, such an approach has the very important virtue of being feasible in light of current political and economic constraints. Unlike offshore balancing, it would not rest on unrealistic and potentially dangerous assumptions about the behaviour of third parties. And, in contrast to enhanced engagement, reassurance or a notional grand bargain, it is rooted in a realistic appreciation of the likely extent of China's ambitions, given its recent achievements and current momentum. Better balancing is not a perfect strategy, and arguing about how it should be adjusted at the margins is not as stimulating as debating the merits of bold new alternatives. But in the real world of practical policymaking, it remains the best available alternative.

## Notes

- 1 G. John Ikenberry, 'The Rise of China and the Future of the West', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 1, January–February 2008, p. 24.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
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- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 10 James Steinberg and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.–China Relations in the Twenty-first Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 203.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 210–11.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 16 Henry A. Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), p. 526. For the case for a new 'concert of power' built on a 'deal' between the US and China, see Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why We Should Share Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 17 Kissinger, *On China*, p. 528.
- 18 Robert S. Ross, 'The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century', *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 4, Spring 1999, p. 96.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 22 Charles Glaser, 'Will China's Rise Lead to War?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 2, March–April 2011, p. 83.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- 25 Doug Bandow, 'Strategic Restraint in the Near Seas', *Orbis*, vol. 56, no. 3, Summer 2012, p. 495. For another variant of the case for offshore balancing, see Christopher Layne, 'China's Challenge to U.S. Hegemony', *Current History*, vol. 107, no. 705, January 2008, pp. 13–18.
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- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 501.
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- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 54–66.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 37 John J. Mearsheimer, 'Can China Rise Peacefully?', *National Interest*, 8 April 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>.
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- 41 The classic statement of these arguments is still Robert Gilpin, *War and*

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- <sup>42</sup> For one example of Chinese thinking about the problems of global order, see Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- <sup>43</sup> See the discussion in Aaron L. Friedberg, 'The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4, Winter 2015, pp. 133–50.
- <sup>44</sup> On this point see Oriana Skyler Mastro, 'China's Assertiveness Is Here to Stay', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4, Winter 2015, pp. 159–61.
- <sup>45</sup> Mark Magnier, Linglin Wei and Ian Talley, 'China's Economic Growth Is Slowest in Decades', *Wall Street Journal*, 19 January 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-gdp-growth-is-slowest-in-24-years-1421719453>.
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- <sup>47</sup> See Iskandar Rahman, 'Why Taiwan Matters: A Small Island of Great Strategic Importance', *National Interest*, 28 February 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/why-taiwan-matters-9971>.
- <sup>48</sup> See Aaron L. Friedberg, 'The Evolving Nuclear Order: Implications for Proliferation, Arms Racing, and Stability', *Asia Policy*, no. 19, January 2015, pp. 45–8.