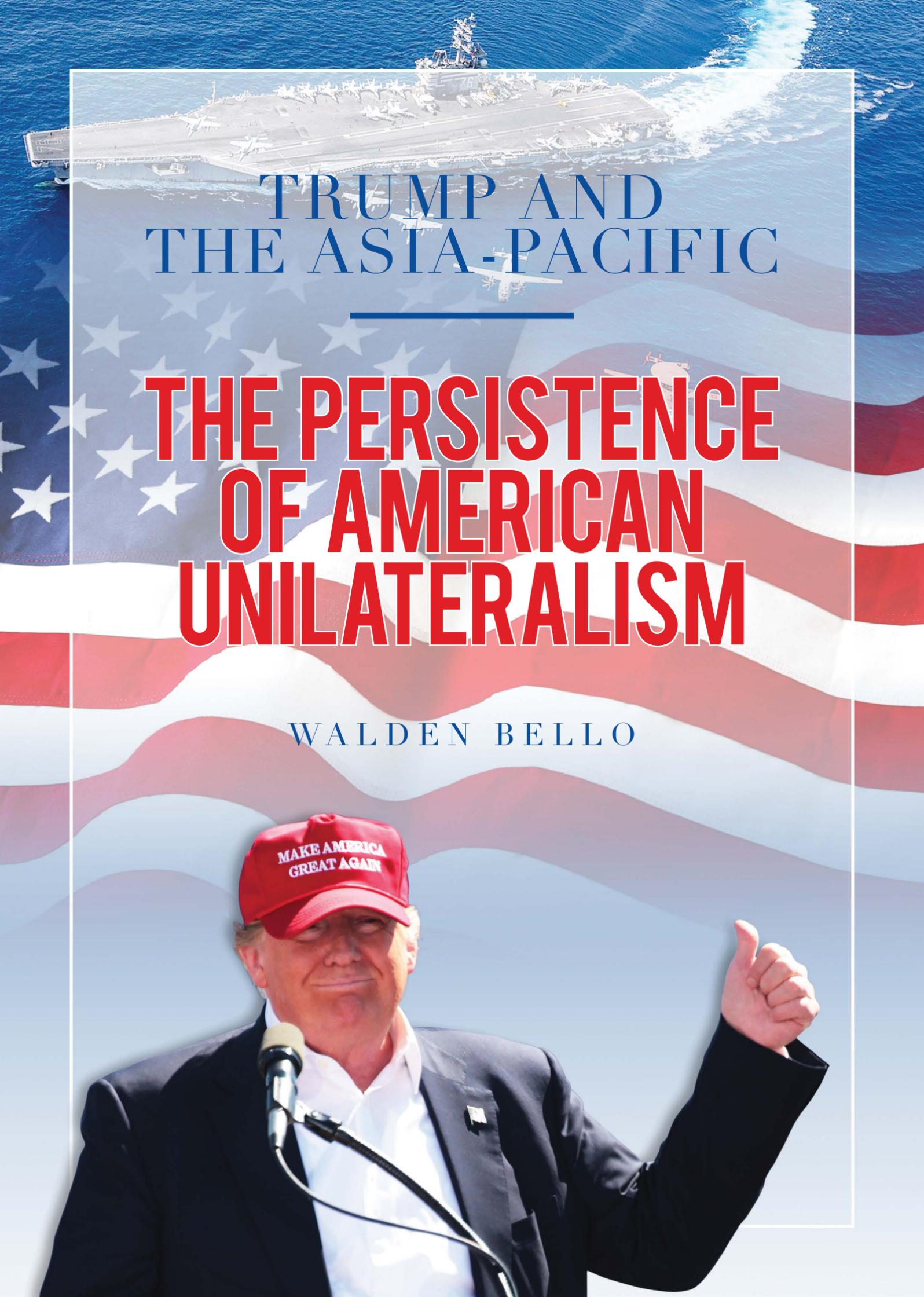




TRUMP AND
THE ASIA-PACIFIC



**THE PERSISTENCE
OF AMERICAN
UNILATERALISM**

WALDEN BELLO



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CONTENTS

7

Executive Summary

9

I. Introduction: US “Disengagement” in Perspective

12

II. The US in the Asia-Pacific: The Centrality of Strategic Extension

19

III. Unilateralism as the Central Feature of Strategic Extension

22

IV. Unilateralism and the US-East Asia Economic Relationship

25

V. Trump and the Economic Relationship with East Asia

29

VI. Trump and US Strategic Policy in the Asia-Pacific

41

VII. Conclusion

43

Endnotes

46

Acknowledgements

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a widespread perception, especially among East and Southeast Asian elites, that the US is in a process of disengagement from the Asia-Pacific under President Donald Trump.* This study contradicts that notion. It locates the main driver of the US presence in the region in the projection of power of the US state or its strategic extension. This force, the study contends, is far more powerful and lasting than the promotion or maintenance of diffuse economic or corporate interests.

Along with the perception of strategic disengagement is the idea that Washington is abandoning multilateral approaches to ensuring its interests and those of its allies. The study disputes the premise of this assertion and shows that unilateralism has been the dominant manner in which the US has asserted its military and political interests in the region, and that this unilateral approach continues today.

President Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has created the impression that the US is ceasing to pursue its economic interests and those of

its allies via multilateral means. Again, the study shows that the traditional pattern through which the US has managed economic relations with its allies has been, as on the strategic front, via unilateral action. Economic unilateralism has successively targeted Japan, then the "Asian Tigers," then China. Washington's aim in these campaigns has not only been to address the US trade deficit with these countries but to dismantle the "Asian developmental model" marked by strong state intervention, though this objective has been most pronounced and most comprehensively pursued in relation to China.

It is also pointed out that even as Trump targets China, he is also hitting the other Asia-Pacific economies since these have become suppliers of raw materials and industrial components to China that the latter puts together and exports to third-country markets. Moreover, he has imposed trade sanctions on Vietnam and Thailand, forced Korea to renegotiate its trade agreement with the United States, and entered into an unbalanced trade

agreement with Japan. Even as Trump takes on China, he is busy micromanaging the trade policies of the US's Asia-Pacific allies.

Even before Trump, the Pentagon already identified China as the main strategic competitor of the US. The "near peer" competitor designation of Beijing is not, however, supported by military strength indicators, on which China is far behind the United States. China's basic military posture, as even the Pentagon admits, is one of "strategic defense." It has focused on creating defensive installations (A2/AD) to protect its eastern and southeastern seaboard from attack and nullify the US's power projection capabilities from the first, second, and third island chains of the Western Pacific. In response, the Pentagon has devised the strategy of AirSea Battle designed to penetrate and destroy China's (A2/AD) defenses.

This already alarming competition for military edge in the Asia-Pacific has

become even more so under Trump owing to three developments from the US side: the deployment to South Korea of an anti-missile defense system, THAAD, that the Chinese think is aimed not only at North Korea but at China as well; the withdrawal of the US from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty and its announcement that it will deploy intermediate nuclear missiles in the Asia-Pacific; and the adoption by the Pentagon of the doctrine of "Overmatch," which requires the US to maintain massive military superiority over any rival or coalition of rivals. This combination of factors translates into a destabilizing balance of power competition in the Asia-Pacific, in which a mere ship collision can escalate to a conventional conflict and from there to a nuclear war.

It is this intensification of US power projection capabilities by the Trump administration, not an illusory US disengagement, that constitutes the greatest danger to the Asia-Pacific today.

* The geographical scope of this paper is East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Western Pacific. "Asia-Pacific" is often used as a term for this region; the paper adopts this usage. The paper does not cover the relationships of the United States with South Asia, Southwest Asia, and the Middle East. Occasionally, when the word "Asia" or "Asian" is used, it is used to refer to the region under study.

I

INTRODUCTION: US “DISENGAGEMENT” IN PERSPECTIVE

Worries about a US withdrawal from the Asia-Pacific are in the air these days. Trump’s “America First” strategy, it is said, has led to outright abandonment of multilateralism in economic matters, as exemplified by the very first executive order of the administration, which was to take the US out of the planned 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership.

But Washington’s alleged disengagement is said to be equally worrisome when it comes to regional security. As a former Japanese deputy minister of foreign affairs wrote recently, Trump’s “call for allies to pay the full cost of hosting US bases is rooted in the false understanding that bases are only for the benefit of host nations and fails to recognize the substantial benefits for the United States and the region of maintaining US forward deployment.”¹

The result has been “a staggering decline in US leadership” that has “a destabilizing effect on East Asia as the avenues for US allies and partners to engage the United States in multilateral cooperation have narrowed considerably.”²

Nature abhors a vacuum, some Asia-Pacific elites fear, and that vacuum is being filled by China, with its much ballyhooed multilateral proposals such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Cooperation initiative and its bold military moves in the South China Sea.

This is not the first time that worries about US withdrawal are in the air. In the 1930s, worried about being cut off by Imperial Japan’s expanding defense perimeter in the Pacific, the US Army command proposed a strategic withdrawal from the Philippines, then a US colony.³ The Navy vetoed the move, its advocates asking rhetorically if the American people were “ready for the burdens which inevitably would be thrust on them if this nation is to take on the responsibilities for the maintenance of order in the Far East?” Challenging the mood of isolationism dominant in the US at that time, the Navy asked, with respect to Asia, “Is the United States prepared for a new Manifest Destiny?”⁴ The Navy won the debate, though with tragic consequences for the US, as the strategic overextension of its forces in the western Pacific led to

their being cut off and defeated in the first months of the war in the Pacific.

The second time there were anxieties about US withdrawal was after the US defeat in Vietnam, in the late '70s. Asian elites, some of them facing domestic communist-led insurgencies, saw the event as heralding a precipitate withdrawal that could harm their own fortunes. However, diplomatic maneuvering on the part of the administrations of Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, playing in part on the rivalries between communist states that came to the surface precisely because of the defeat of the US, compensated for the military debacle in mainland Southeast Asia. An anti-Vietnamese "coincidence of strategic interests," as Malaysia's

ambassador to the United Nations described it, led to Washington being courted both by the People's Republic of China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to remain in Asia.⁵ The result was trumpeted by Harold Brown, Carter's Secretary of Defense: "Nearly thirty years after the end of the [Korean War], and a decade after the end of the [Vietnam War], the political-military balance in the Pacific appeared more favorable to US security interests than at any time since the Communist revolution in China in 1949."⁶

Worries about US withdrawal on the part of Asian elites are not new. But do they have more basis in reality today, with the coming of President Donald Trump, than in the past?



This photo of the frenzy on the deck of the USS Blue Ridge as helicopters filled with panic-stricken people sought to land captures the confusion that marked the evacuation of Saigon in late April 1975 as victorious North Vietnamese units reached the outskirts of Saigon. The US's Asian allies were worried that the defeat in Vietnam would lead to a wider American pullout from the Asia-Pacific, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BR,_Vietnam,_1975,_Operation_Eagle_Pull_%26_Operation_Frequent_Wind_\(evacuation_of_Saigon\),_file_19.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BR,_Vietnam,_1975,_Operation_Eagle_Pull_%26_Operation_Frequent_Wind_(evacuation_of_Saigon),_file_19.jpg)

This paper begins by showing that US disengagement from the Asia-Pacific is highly improbable owing to the fact that its central dynamic has been the projection of the hard power of the American state onto the region, and not so much the protection and promotion of diffuse American corporate interests. It provides a historical overview that shows how this projection of US military and political power since the mid-19th century, far from being done through multilateral means, has been consistently accomplished unilaterally.

Next, the paper contends that while the promotion of US economic interests has become more prominent in recent times, it has been, like the projection of the power of the American state, largely pursued unilaterally.

We then zero in on the dynamics of the American economic relationship with the Asia-Pacific under the Trump administration and to show that far from being marked by disengagement, this relationship follows the traditional pattern of the unilateral imposition of US interests and not only on China but also on US allies in the region.

Finally, the paper examines the exercise of US strategic power under Trump and shows that there has been an escalation of US military presence that has deepened Beijing's strategic dilemma, which in turn has contributed to a volatile balance of power unrestrained by rules and could erupt into conflict at the slightest incident. The new US doctrine of "Overmatch," it shall be pointed out, has introduced a permanent instability to military balance, and it is this, rather than an illusory US disengagement, that is the main factor destabilizing the region.

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II

THE US IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC: THE CENTRALITY OF STRATEGIC EXTENSION

The Trump administration's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership was indeed dramatic, with people like the former hardline conservative Max Boot calling it an "economic and geopolitical gift to China,"⁷ and it is understandable that many took the move to represent a coming, broader US disengagement from Asia. The picture of Trump showing off his executive order taking the US out of the TPP negotiations is indeed worth a thousand words. But the photo is grossly misleading. The US is as embedded in the Asia-Pacific as ever and the idea that it will somehow voluntarily withdraw or significantly reduce its presence in the region stems from profound misconceptions about its reasons for being in it.

To understand the long-term presence of the US, one must, first of all, take into consideration the dynamics of the US as an empire. There have been three "drivers" of the US empire: the expansion of its capitalist economy, the extension of the power of the US state or also called "strategic extension," and the ideological

legitimation of its economic expansion and extension. Much analysis has focused on the economic driver, often seeing the strategic thrust of the state and ideological legitimation in the form of "promoting democracy" as being determined by the dynamics of capitalist expansion. In reality, however, these three drivers exhibit a great degree of autonomy from one another and their particular configuration may be different in different regions.

In Latin America, certainly, economic interests had been dominant, this being exemplified by the way US political intervention directed at ousting progressive governments was carried out to safeguard the interests of United Fruit in Guatemala in the 1950s and those of the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation (ITT) during the Allende presidency in Chile.

Asia was different. There, US strategic interests had been paramount. In contrast to Latin America, commercial rationales were formulated to support the extension of the strategic reach of the US state.

This was true as far back as 1853, when Commodore Matthew Perry brought his ships to Tokyo Bay to open Japan up to commerce, though no US commercial interests were behind him.

It was not unusual that a naval officer rather than a merchant forced Japan to open up. In the US's century-long drive to the western Pacific, trade followed the flag more frequently than the flag followed trade. In 1898, when the US made its 8,000 leap to the Philippines, less than 10 percent of US trade crossed the Pacific, whereas 60 percent crossed the Atlantic. China, Korea, and Japan were sources of exotic imports rather than significant markets, and indeed, it was not so much merchants that accompanied military expansion but Protestant religious missionaries. As Whitney Griswold noted, in the pre-World War II period, "American capital for the exploitation of China [was] being raised with difficulty."⁸

What lay behind the great leap westward was not a business cabal but a strategic alliance of naval and political expansionists mainly interested in extending the reach of the US state beyond its natural terrestrial frontiers. It is true there had been American traders operating in Hawaii, China, and the interstices of the dominant European empires calling vociferously overseas expansion, but they had been marginal actors. The American East Coast was the center of industry, and trade-wise, it was far more oriented towards Europe than Asia. While there were labor and business voices calling for expansion in the Pacific during the depression of the 1890s to create demand for US goods, these were aspirational in intent rather than the product of a coordinated business lobby.

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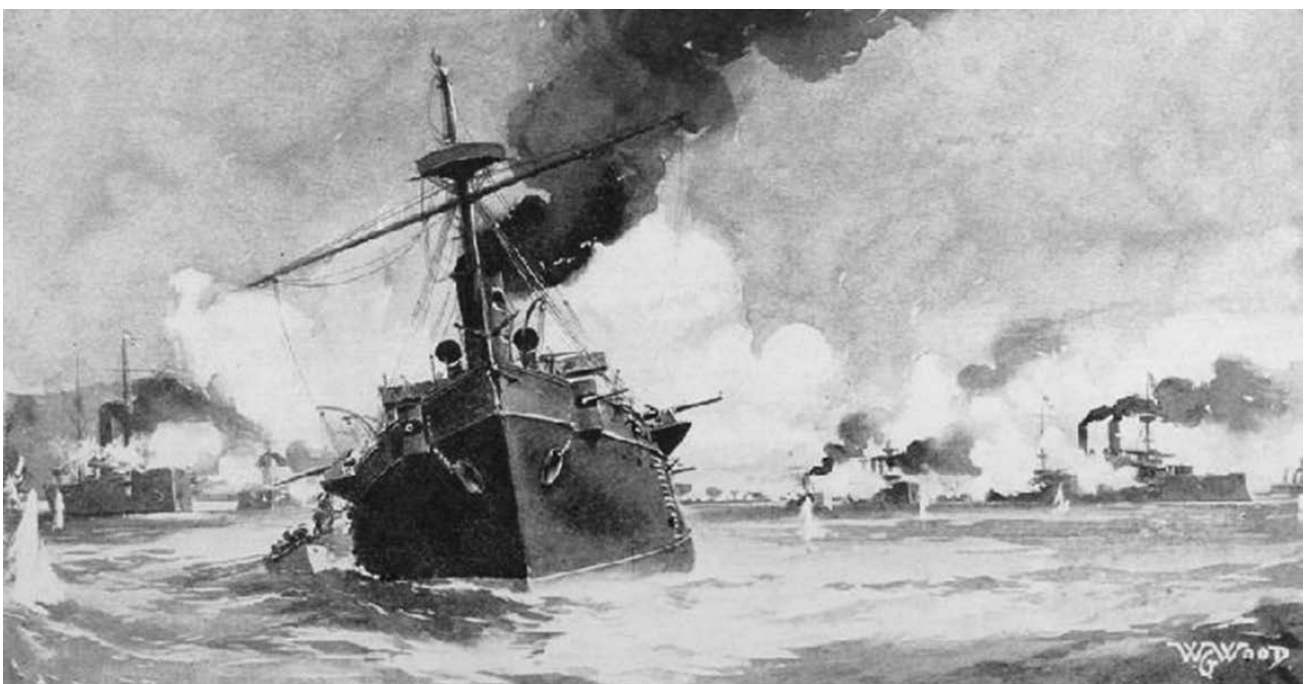
The US Navy had become particularly adept at invoking a commercial rationale to extend the reach of the American state and its own role as the cutting edge of that mission. Acquiring bases in the far reaches of the Pacific, among other things, provided powerful impetus to the creation of the “two-ocean Navy.” The two-ocean Navy was considered necessary to achieve the goal of “maritime supremacy” envisioned by the fleet’s leading strategic thinker, Captain Alfred Mahan.

Led by the influential Mahan and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, the Navy was the main force behind the acquisition of Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines on the heels of Admiral George Dewey’s victory over the antiquated Spanish naval squadron in Manila Bay in May 1898. The small island of Guam and the Philippine archipelago were depicted as stepping stones to the riches of China, but only to justify their annexation in the face

of significant domestic opposition such as Mark Twain’s Anti-Imperialist League. The navalists’ main desire was the projection of US power and the geographic positions of Guam and the Philippines were strategic for this purpose. Hawaii had been under the control of US planters for over a decade, but it was not until the Spanish-American War in 1898 that its strategic importance was fully appreciated. During the war, the naval installation at Pearl Harbor played a key role in projecting US naval power to the western Pacific; following the war, moves were made to formally annex Hawaii.

Ironically, the Navy’s thinking was most succinctly captured by an Army man, General Arthur MacArthur, father of the more famous Douglas. Chief of the colonizing army that subjugated the Philippines, MacArthur described the country as

the finest group of islands in the world. Its strategic location is unexcelled by any



The Battle of Manila Bay on May 1, 1898, which saw the Asiatic Squadron of the US Navy under Commodore George Dewey destroy a decrepit Spanish fleet, extended the strategic reach of the US thousands of miles from the country’s western borders, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_Manila_Bay_by_W._G._Wood.jpg

other position in the globe. The China Sea, which separates it by something like 750 miles from the continent, is nothing more than a safety moat. It lies on the flank of what might be called several thousand miles of coastline; it is the center of that position. It is therefore relatively better placed than Japan, which is on a flank, and therefore remote from the other extremity; likewise India, on another flank. It affords a means of protecting American interests which with the very least output of physical power has the effect of a commanding position in itself to retard hostile action.⁹

So important a western Pacific presence had been for the institutional expansion of the Navy that, as pointed out earlier, when key Army officials favored withdrawing from the western Pacific, arguing that the Philippines and Guam had become a strategic liability in the face of Japan's expanding defense perimeter, the Navy blocked any consideration of leaving. This overextension of strategic reach had set the stage for the US defeats in the early days of World War II.

Projection of strategic power continued to be the central point behind the US policy in the Asia-Pacific after World War II, at the end of which American forces occupied a chain of islands and peninsular points extending nearly 4000 kilometers from defeated Japan to the Philippines. Just as his father had most succinctly expressed the rationale for acquiring the Philippines some fifty years earlier, Army General Douglas MacArthur also expressed most cogently and candidly the US military's strategic imperative in post-war Asia-Pacific: "The strategic boundaries of the US were no longer along the western shore of North

America and South America; they lay along the eastern coast of the Asiatic continent."¹⁰

Withdrawal from the western Pacific was never in the cards in the immediate post-war period. The debate in US policy circles was not about withdrawal but between retaining a military presence on the Asian mainland and falling back to the more defensible "first island chain," with the influential diplomat and State Department strategist George Kennan favoring the latter as being more congenial to a strategy of "containment" of what he considered the geopolitical thrust of the Soviet Union in Asia.** At no point were the economic interests of the US a major factor in decision-making.

Projecting US strategic power onto the Asian mainland had been the key factor behind the creation of a network of some 300 bases and installations in four Asia-Pacific countries (Japan, South Korea, Philippines, South Vietnam), one United Nations trusteeship (Micronesia), and one US territory (Guam). In reality, these bases came to form an integrated and autonomous transnational garrison state transcending the boundaries of client regimes. Power projection was also the principal determinant of US military interventions in Korea in the early '50s and in Vietnam from the mid-'50s to the early '70s, though, of course, ideological considerations—stopping the spread of communism—also played a role. To Kennan, in fact, competition among states was driven mainly by strategic interests. In the case of the Soviet Union under Stalin, this was the primacy of the drive to maintain or extend the power of the Soviet state, with promoting communist revolution a subordinate objective.

TABLE 1
US Mobile and Fixed Military Bases in the Asia Pacific

MOBILE MARITIME BASE (Approximately 20,000 personnel)	
US Navy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seventh Fleet, with 1 aircraft carrier, about 50-70 ships and submarines, 150 aircraft*
JAPAN (Approximately 50,000 US personnel; 85 facilities spread over about 77,000 acres)	
US Air Force (5th Air Force)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kadena Air Force Base (Okinawa) • Misawa Air Force Base (Misawa) • Yokota Air Force Base (Fussa)
US Army	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Camp Zama (Kanagawa) • Torii Station (Okinawa) • Fort Buckner (Okinawa)
US Army Corps of Engineers, Japan District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Camp Zama
US Marine Corps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Camp Courtney (Uruma) • Camp Foster (Ginowan) • Camp Fuji (Shizuoka) • Camp Hansen (Okinawa) • Camp Kinser (Okinawa) • Camp Lester (Okinawa) • Camp SD Butler (Okinawa) • Camp Schwab (Okinawa) • Marine Corps Air Station (Futenma) • Marine Corps Iwakuni Air Station (Nishiki) • Camp Gonsalves (Okinawa) • Camp McTureous (Okinawa)
US Navy (7th Fleet; Commander Naval Forces Japan)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fleet Activities Okinawa Naval Base (Okinawa) • Fleet Activities Sasebo Naval Base (Sasebo) • Fleet Activities Yokosuka Naval Base (Yokosuka) • Naval Air Facility Atsugi Naval Base (Kanagawa) • Naval Air Facility Misawa (Misawa)
SOUTH KOREA (approximately 23,500 personnel)	
US Air Force (7th Air Force, 51st Fighter Wing, 8th Fighter Wing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kunsan Air Force Base (Gunsan) • Osan Air Force Base (Songtan)
US Army (8th Army, 7th Infantry Division)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Camp Carroll (Daegu) • Camp Castle (Daegu) • Camp Humphreys (Pyongtaek) • Camp Market (Bupyeong) • Camp Red Cloud (UiJeongbu) • Camp Stanley (UiJeongbu) • Camp Hovey (Seoul) • Camp Casey (Daegu) • K 16 Air Base Army Base (Seongnam) • USAG Yongsan (Yongsan) • USAG Daegu (Daegu)
US Army Corps of Engineers (Far Eastern District)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Camp Humphreys (Pyongtaek)
US Navy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fleet Activities Chinhae Navy Base (Busan)

GUAM (US Territory) (approximately 7,000 personnel)	
US Air Force (36th Wing of Pacific Air Forces, with B-1B, B-2, and B-52 strategic bombers)	• Andersen Air Base
US Navy (Submarine Squadron 15, Naval Special Warfare Unit 1, 30th Naval Construction Regiment, Elements of Indo-Pacific Command Pacific Fleet)	• Naval Base Guam • Naval Force Marianas Base
US Coast Guard Sector Guam	
PHILIPPINES (approximately 150-200 personnel)**	
	• Antonio Bautista Air Base*** • Basa Air Base*** • Fort Magsaysay*** • Lumbia Air Base*** • Mactan Benito Ebuen Air Base***
SINGAPORE (150 military personnel, 150 civilian contractors)	
US Navy (Indo-Pacific Command Logistics Group, servicing the Seventh Fleet)	• Facility located inside the civilian cargo terminal at Sembawang****

*Occasionally supplemented with another carrier and other ships based in US West Coast

**These are mainly Special Forces personnel engaged in assisting Philippine troops against Islamic fundamentalist militant groups in Mindanao and Sulu. US personnel numbers temporarily swell to several thousands during joint US-Philippine military exercises.

***The US-Philippine Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) allows the US to use and have operational control over nominally Philippine bases for diverse activities, including stockpiling war materiel, an arrangement that allows both governments to circumvent the Philippine Constitution's ban on foreign military bases. The Philippine government announced the termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States in February 2020, placing the status of EDCA and the bases in limbo.

****Governed according to "access agreement" with the government of Singapore.

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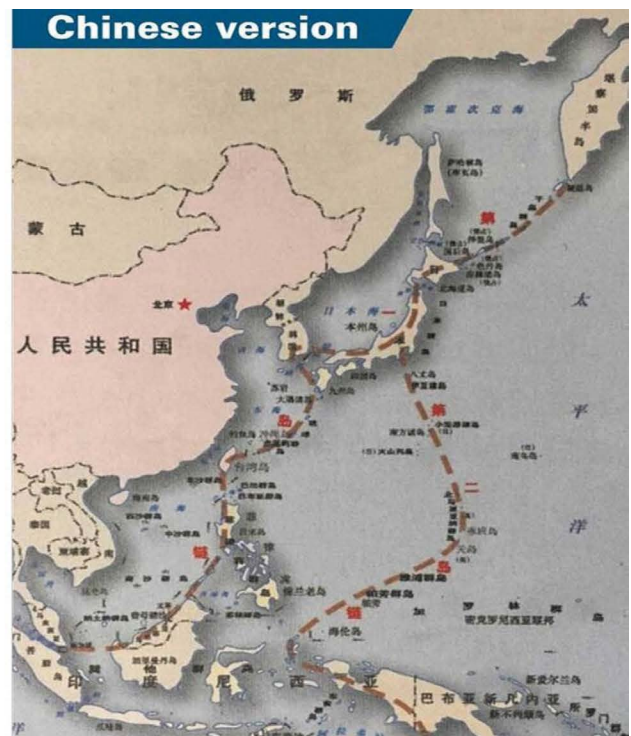
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"First and Second Island Chains" off the Asian land mass provide opportunities for the US to contain China with firepower from bases located there and present China with a strategic dilemma, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2016/02/01/powers-jockey-for-pacific-island-chain-influence/>

In justifying the US's massive intervention in Vietnam, Pentagon officials hastily offered up rationales about the importance of Southeast Asia's raw materials to the US economy, but, as shown by the *Pentagon Papers*, economic or corporate interests played hardly any role in Washington's decision-making.¹¹ This marginal role continued from the 1950s to the 1980s, as Washington turned a blind eye to the policies of protectionism, investment discrimination, and strong state support for local businesses of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, while allowing their subsidized exports easy entry into the US market. These policies severely disadvantaged US corporations and traders, but Washington judged these costs to be worth the political and military alliance it was able to extract as a quid pro quo from the Asian elites.

It was only when the Cold War started to wind down, during the Reagan presidency, that corporate and trade interests also began to have a major role in the US agenda for East Asia. Pressures for this shift had, of course, been building for years; pressures based on the growing—and accurate—perception of both American corporate executives and trade officials that the prosperity of Japan and the so-called "newly industrializing countries" (NICs) had been purchased at the expense of US interests.

In sum, the projection of the power of the American state has been the central determinant of the US's expansion in the Asia-Pacific region and this is more powerful and lasting than the promotion or maintenance of diffuse economic interests.

**** The "island chain" (later, "first island chain") was seen by US post-war strategists as extending from Northern Japan to Okinawa, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Later use included the South China Sea, with the Spratly Islands. Recent strategic writings, both in the US and China, have referred to a "second island chain," which includes the Marianas Islands and Micronesia. Today, in Chinese strategic writings, there is reference to a "third island chain" centered on Hawaii.**

III

UNILATERALISM AS THE CENTRAL FEATURE OF STRATEGIC EXTENSION

A common view of US foreign policy is that it has swung between unilateralism, acting alone to achieve one's objectives, and multilateralism, acting in concert with allies. Under the Trump administration, it is alleged, avenues for "multilateral cooperation have narrowed considerably."¹²

Now whereas multilateralism had been more than a fig-leaf in Europe, where the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) served as a formal decision-making structure, it had been non-existent in Asia, where the United States refused to be constrained by multilateral treaties and organizations set up to achieve collective security. The massive military capabilities of the Soviet Union and its satellite states that faced Western Europe necessitated multilateral concessions to the European elites to keep them in line. In contrast, Soviet military intervention had been perceived to be much less threatening in East Asia, though until the '80s, China, North Vietnam, and North Korea were seen as Moscow's pawns. Thus, there had been much less incentive for a multilateral arrangement involving East Asian elites,

with Washington securing maximum liberty of movement for its troops by establishing instead a network of bilateral treaties with much weaker clients than its Western European allies. The United Nations' "police action" in Korea in 1950-53 and the now defunct Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) were unabashed anti-communist fronts for political and military operations commanded by the US.

Freedom of action and unilateralist decision-making were the legacies of American victory in World War II; they rested on the infrastructure of a trans-Pacific garrison state extending from occupied Japan to former Japanese colonies Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Unilateral action, which reached its apogee in the US intervention in Vietnam from 1954 to 1975, has since continued to be the main avenue for US action in the region. Those who speak now of multilateralism point to the US-Japan partnership, but this is really a dependent relationship built on the occupation and then domination of a defeated enemy. Overwhelming dependency has also been the mark of the US relationship with South

Korea, a virtual protectorate with as massive US military presence, and the Philippines, an ex-US colony.

The reality is that in East Asia, the United States did not need multilateral alliances to exercise its power, as it did in Europe. As John Ikenberry observes, "In Europe, the United States had an elaborate agenda for uniting the European states, creating an institutional bulwark against communism, and supporting centrist democratic regimes," while in Asia, "unchallenged hegemonic power meant that the United States had fewer incentives...to secure its dominant position through international institutions that would have circumscribed its independent decision-making."¹³ Or as another analyst, the conservative Robert Tucker, has put it, "In Asia much more than in Europe we have clients rather than allies."¹⁴

Democrats, the orthodox view says, prefer multilateralism while Republicans are unilateralists. This is not, for the most part, true when it comes to East Asia. The so-called police action in Korea in 1950-53 masquerading as a United Nations expedition was a US unilateral action undertaken by the Democratic Truman administration. The massive buildup in Vietnam in the '60s and '70s was also a unilateral initiative that took place mainly under two Democratic administrations, those of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

Perhaps the only time alliance diplomacy played an important role in US strategy under Democrats was during the presidency of Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s, when the US worked with the Association of Southeast Asian States and China, then an informal

ally, in a misguided effort to influence developments in mainland Southeast Asia by backing the genocidal Khmer Rouge in Cambodia against Vietnam.

In a more recent time, however, the presidency of Bill Clinton, while it preached multilateralism, was as unilateralist as any Republican administration when it came to East Asia. There, Clinton actively opposed moves to multilateralize the existing security system dominated by Washington. The White House, for instance, systematically subverted the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) promoted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. For all its flaws, the ARF was a step in the direction of a collective security system. Yet the US boycotted the founding meeting of the ARF in Bangkok in July 1994 to register Washington's disapproval of ASEAN's ambitions. Clinton indeed denigrated the ARF and other multilateral security initiatives, saying they "are a way to supplement our alliances and forward military presence, not supplant them."¹⁵ As the US Congressional Research Service candidly observed, Washington did not look kindly at the ARF because a "problem would arise if East Asian governments used the ASEAN Regional Forum and other future consultative organizations in attempts to restrain the United States from acting on certain security issues."¹⁶

Aside from undermining the ARF, the other unilateral action by Clinton plunged the region to one of its most tense confrontations since the end of the Vietnam War. This was his sending of two aircraft carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Straits in response to Chinese military exercises in March 1996 near Taiwan and done without consultation of allies who would have been impacted by an outbreak of conflict. All this

show of force achieved was to show the Chinese that despite its closer economic relations with Washington, Beijing was seen as a strategic rival and that it was very vulnerable to the projection of American power. From then on, Beijing has moved to create a cordon sanitaire or protective screen, which includes the disputed Spratly Islands, against US power accelerated.

Another Democratic administration that was long in multilateralist rhetoric while being as unilateralist in action in the Asia-Pacific was the Obama presidency. The signature policy of President Barack Obama was the so-called Pacific Pivot, which sought to refocus US military power away from the Middle East quagmire to East Asia, where it was on more familiar ground and working with a more familiar strategy—containment, this time of China. The main feature of the Pivot was the deployment of 60 percent of the Navy's complement of ships to the Asia-Pacific. Supplementing this was the conclusion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the Philippines, which paved the way for US troops and materiel to be quartered in Philippine bases, some 20 years after the closure of US bases there owing to nationalist sentiment. Being both directed at China, these unilateral moves were regionally destabilizing, heightening a volatile balance of power unconstrained by multilateral rules.

When it comes to Donald Trump, the claim is that his policies represent a departure from traditional US strategic policy in that it is headed for disengagement from the Asia-Pacific and is abandoning the multilateral approach. We shall return to this issue after looking at the evolution of the US's economic relationship with the region.

When it comes to Donald Trump, the claim is that his policies represent a departure from traditional US strategic policy in that it is headed for disengagement from the Asia-Pacific and is abandoning the multilateral approach. This reading of Trump's direction has little basis in fact.

IV

UNILATERALISM AND THE US-EAST ASIA ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP

Except perhaps in the Philippines, a former US colony in Southeast Asia, US private capital was a relatively minor presence in East Asia during the period immediately following World War II; US trade with the region was likewise a small part of the US's global trade. Europe, followed by Latin America, accounted for the bulk of private investment and trade. A major reason for this was, as noted earlier, the US allowing its client regimes to maintain protectionist trade and investment regimes in exchange for their political and military support in the struggle against communist-led insurgencies and communist powers.

By the late '70s, when the ties between China and the US and Washington's Asian allies normalized and the conflicts among Communist states started coming to the surface, fears of Communist takeover had abated. By that time, Japan had become a formidable export machine, racking up big trade surpluses with the US. So had Singapore and Hong Kong. Also, South Korea and Taiwan's domestic protection had become a successful method for industrial growth and their labor-intensive

goods gained informal preferential access into the United States which increasingly led to pressure from US corporations on the US government to open up these economies, along with Japan's, to US investment and trade. The pressure intensified with the success of the so-called "tiger cubs"—Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia—in replicating the methods of Korea and Taiwan in the late '80s and early '90s. East Asia, US corporations and traders increasingly felt, was prosperous market from which they were being excluded.

As with its strategic policy, Washington's instinctive response was not multilateral but unilateral. Rather than make use of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a multilateral mechanism for settling trade disputes, the Reagan administration used heavy-handed direct pressure, forcing Japan to agree to the Plaza Accord in 1985, which drastically revalued the yen relative to the dollar, making Japanese imports to the US less attractive and placing "voluntary restraints" on its exports of automobiles to the US.***

Unilateral action was also taken against what had come to be known as the “Asian Tigers” or Newly Industrializing Countries (NICs), with the US deploying a host of weapons, including anti-dumping suits, ending preferential tariffs for their exports, placing them on the so-called “Super 301” watchlist of “unfair traders,” and pressing them to liberalize foreign investment regulations. Warning the NICs to comply, a senior official of the Treasury Department of the Reagan administration said, “Although the NICs may be regarded as tigers because they are strong, ferocious traders, the analogy has a darker side. Tigers live in the jungle and by the law of the jungle. They are a shrinking population.”¹⁷

The big opportunity to discipline and resubordinate the Asian economies came in the wake of the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98. Desperate for loans to bail them out, the countries in crisis went cap in hand to the International Monetary Fund while the US pushed the IMF to make rescue money dependent on these countries’ commitment to liberalize their trade and investment rules. In Korea, the US did away with the intermediate role of the IMF and took direct control of the restructuring process. The result of this unilateral management was that at the end of a decade of “reform,” the vaunted Korean developmental state had been replaced by a neoliberal state. Some 33 to 50 percent of bank assets in the country were accounted for by foreign-controlled banks. Liberalization of the capital market led to a share of equity-market capitalization by foreigners reaching 43.3 percent. Foreign institutional investors had also built up considerable stakes in the bulk of Korean blue-chip companies.¹⁸ No longer was

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Korea the “most difficult place in the world to do business,” as US corporations were wont to complain before the crisis.

More broadly, there was truth to be discerned in the words of the late Asia expert Chalmers Johnson that Washington’s unilateralist behavior towards its East Asian allies during the financial crisis and its aftermath reflected the fact that “having defeated the fascists and the communists, the United States now sought to defeat its last remaining rivals for global dominance: the nations of East Asia that had used the conditions of the Cold War to enrich themselves.”¹⁹ This unilateral resubordination of the Asian NICs was carried out, it must be stressed, by the supposedly multilateralist Clinton

administration that prided itself with having brought into being the North American Free Trade Area and the World Trade Organization.

When the Obama administration promoted the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which would bring together 12 countries in an economic pact promoting trade and investment liberalization, many analysts hailed the move as a significant step in the direction of multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific region. Still, the TPP drafts did not indicate that the United States would abjure unilateral action if it became a member of the partnership. Equally important in this connection was that the US purposely excluded China from the economic alliance and saw it as a mechanism to contain China.

*** While these were self-imposed restraints by Japanese exporters on the volume of their products sent to the US, they were hardly voluntary in the sense that the US threatened retaliation if they were not put in place.

TABLE 2
US Trade and Investment Data in Asia-Pacific Countries,
2019 or Latest Available Figures
(in billions of dollars)

Country	Balance of Trade	US Investment Stock
Brunei	+0.215	0.019
Cambodia	-3.4	0.151
China	-379	107.6
Hong Kong	+5.2	81.2
Indonesia	-11	15.2
Japan	-54.3	129
South Korea	-4.6	41.6
Laos	+0.127	NA
Malaysia	-24.8	15.1
Myanmar	-0.232	NA
Philippines	-7.4	7.1
Singapore	+16	274
Taiwan	-13.7	17
Thailand	-20.2	15
Vietnam	-38.5	2

Source: United States Trade Representative, 2019 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers (Washington, DC: USTR, 2019).

V

TRUMP AND THE ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP WITH EAST ASIA

As with Obama, China is the main concern in the US economic relationship with the Asia-Pacific under Trump, but it is merely the latest economic challenger from Asia that Washington is dealing with in a unilateral fashion. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Indonesia have all been on the other end of unilateral action. Seen from this perspective, the difference between Obama and Trump is tactical, that is, on how to achieve the strategic aim of containing China economically. Obama sought to enlist and use allies and client regimes in a superficially multilateral effort to reach this goal while Trump wants to preserve for the United States the freedom for unilateral action that most previous administrations jealously guarded and exercised owing to the lack of countervailing power in the region. Trump's withdrawal from the TPP was not a deviation from but a return to the traditional unilateralist US posture vis-a-vis the Asian economies.

While bringing down the trade surpluses of its Asian allies through retaliatory action has been a key objective,

Washington's agenda over the last three decades has been much broader. Under the slogan of "eliminating barriers to trade," the US's engagement with these countries over the last 35 years has been to cripple the source of the dynamism of these economies: the interventionist or developmental state. As we wrote as early as 25 years ago regarding the Reagan administration's policy towards South Korea and other NICs,

Against the NICs, trade policy was the choice weapon. While Washington's immediate goal was to rectify trade imbalances by reducing NIC exports to the US and prying open NIC markets, its strategic objective—so clear in its treatment of South Korea, the NIC par excellence—was to dismantle the system of state intervention and support that had enabled the NIC producers, following the "Japanese model," to compete successfully against American corporations not only in world markets but in the US market itself.²⁰

Trump's Unilateralism Plus

Trump's economic war with China certainly falls into this unilateralist tradition of seeking structural change. However, it is much more radical and encompassing compared to the previous US efforts to restructure Asia's economies.

First of all, it defines China as an "economic aggressor,"²¹ an epithet Washington never applied to its previous Asian targets.

Second, it seeks not incremental and sequential reforms for what it calls the "state-driven economic model" but drastically replaces the model in toto, including, in the case of China, eliminating the directive role of the Communist Party both at the macro level as well as in economic enterprises.

Third, it also seeks to decouple China and the US, that is, to end US dependence on China for manufactured consumer exports and China's dependence on the US for high technology. This is to be accomplished not only by imposing punishing tariffs but through a raft of "investment restrictions and export controls that would sever supply chains and discourage financial integration," including delisting Chinese corporations on Wall Street.²²

Fourth, it discourages US transnational corporations from investing in China, mainly through high tariffs placed on imports from China (a big portion of which are goods manufactured in that country by US subsidiaries or subcontractors), a move that has already led to some corporations shutting down their China operations.²³

Fifth, the administration's policy makes the rejuvenation of the US's industrial base and US monopoly of high technology a national security issue. Thus, it seeks to deprive China of access to the latest developments in high technology by invoking national security reasons. In the most highly publicized case, the US banned the Chinese high-tech corporation Hua Wei from obtaining technology developed by US firms to develop its 5G telecommunications technology. Hua Wei, the US alleged, had been funded by and worked closely with the Chinese state, which would use technology obtained from the US for military purposes. "Huawei is something that's very dangerous...from a security standpoint, from a military standpoint it's very dangerous," said Trump.²⁴

Moreover, the administration is not only cracking down on "intellectual property theft"; also seen as dangerous are the efforts of others to carry out "largely legitimate, legal transfers and relationships to gain access to fields, experts, and trusted foundries that fill their capability gaps" because they "erode America's long-term competitive advantages."²⁵

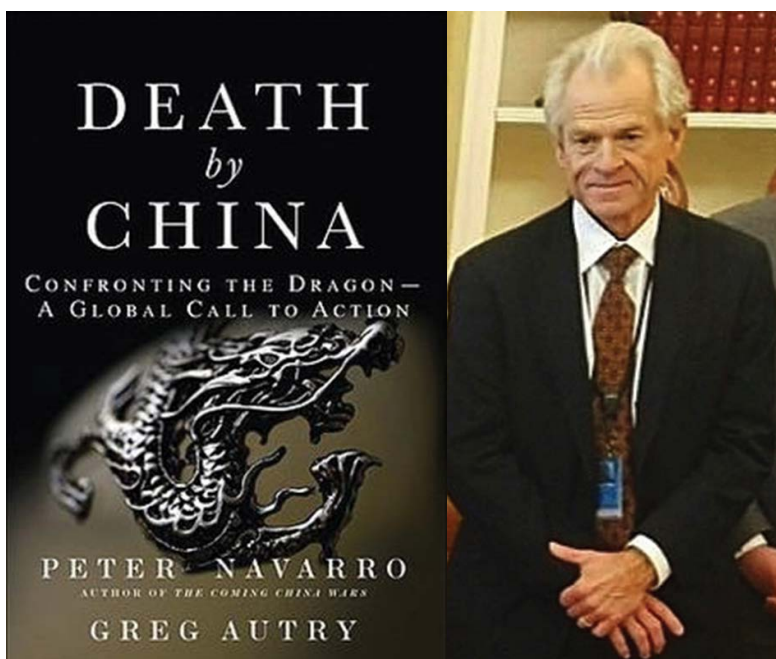
In mid-January 2020, the Trump administration announced that it had made a trade deal with China, the main element of which was China agreeing to buy US goods and services worth \$200 billion, including \$32 billion worth of agricultural goods. Much of the media portrayed the agreement as a defeat for Trump's hardliners like trade adviser Peter Navarro and United States Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer since it did not elicit concessions from China in terms of making structural changes. However, the White House made clear the deal was "Phase 1"

of an extended trade negotiations process, implying that there were more Chinese concessions to come, leading many to surmise that it was dictated by the election year considerations that the farm states would remain “red,” meaning Republican, in the 2020 presidential elections.

America’s Asian Friends are Targets Too

What is not often realized is that Trump’s declaration of trade war against China is also de facto an assault on many of China’s neighbors because over the past 20 years, China has become the center of a regional production network encompassing both the developed countries of Northeast Asia and the less developed economies of Southeast Asia. Under pressure from competition with China in finished manufactured goods, the neighboring Asian economies had chosen not to go head to head with China on these goods but painfully restructured their industries to provide components for goods that were then assembled with

Trump’s economic war with China certainly falls into this unilateralist tradition of seeking structural change. However, it is much more radical and encompassing compared to the previous US efforts to restructure Asia’s economies.



Peter Navarro, the White House adviser on trade, wrote *Death by China*, an economic potboiler much disliked by both conventional neoliberal and neo-Keynesian economists but a big hit with Donald Trump, leading to Navarro’s becoming arguably the US’s most influential economist, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_by_China#/media/File:Death_by_china-confronting_the_dragon.jpg; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peter_Navarro,_Director_of_the_White_House_National_Trade_Council_in_January_2017.jpg

cheap labor in China, then exported to developed country markets. What Ho-Fung Hung had termed a “Sinocentric” regional division of labor came into being, and it is this whole transborder complex now that is threatened by the 7.5 percent penalty tariff Washington has imposed on \$300 billion worth of Chinese exports to the US.²⁶

Moreover, not only have China’s neighbors been affected indirectly by the US’s trade war with China, Washington has also continued to follow a policy of disciplining its own allies, even as it engages China in a trade war.

In 2019, the US Commerce Department imposed 400 percent tariffs on steel from Vietnam saying that “certain products produced in South Korea and Taiwan were shipped to Vietnam for minor processing before being exported to U.S.”²⁷ Trump described Vietnam as “almost the single-worst abuser of everybody.”²⁸

Also in 2019, the administration pushed Japan to a trade deal that got the Japanese to lower tariffs on US agricultural goods to mollify American farmers that had lost much access to the China market owing to the US-China trade war without removing tariffs on Japanese cars entering the US, which Japan had wanted desperately.²⁹

South Korea was not exempt from US pressure, with Trump in 2018 forcing a renegotiation of the existing Korea-US Free Trade Agreement to get more US cars sold in Korea by, among other things, lifting “a cap on US car exports to South Korea that don’t need to meet Korean safety standards.”³⁰ Trump was obviously not satisfied that US automobile exports to

Korea went up by over 300 percent, from \$419 million in 2011 to \$1.7 billion in 2018.³¹

Washington in 2019 also withdrew duty-free treatment on US\$1.3 billion worth of goods from Thailand on the grounds that the country had not done anything to address violations of labor rights in its fishing industry. While the act certainly advanced workers’ rights, many analysts were wondering if there was more than met the eye in Washington’s action, especially since it came on the heels of a US State Department report commending Thailand for making progress in curbing human trafficking, one of the problems in its fishing industry. As one report noted, “It’s unclear if Trump’s decision to suspend part of Thailand’s GSP trade preferences, while small in relative trade terms, served as a warning of a potential bigger conflict if Bangkok fails to make more concessions to US business interests and uphold its previous ‘made in America’ import promises.”³²

In brief, it is difficult to characterize the US’s relationship with China’s East Asian neighbors under Trump as disengagement. In fact, even as it was waging a trade war with China, a first step in its ambition to transform China’s political economy, it was deepening its micromanagement of these countries’ trade policies.

As for American corporate investors in the region, there were no signs on their part of losing confidence owing to Trump’s withdrawal from the TPP or the continuing US trade deficit with East Asia. In practically all countries, including China, the stock of foreign direct investment from the United States rose in the period 2016 to 2018.³³

VI

TRUMP AND US STRATEGIC POLICY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

When it comes to strategic policy, unilateralism, as we showed earlier, has been Washington's preferred method to achieve the traditional offensive projection of US power onto Asia that comes under the euphemism "forward defense."

The target of unilateral power projection has, however, changed over time. From 1950s to the late '80s, it was mainly the Soviet Union, for whom North Vietnam and North Korea were seen as proxies. China became an informal ally of the US in the '80s, as it broke with the Soviet Union and joined the capitalist global system. From the early 1990s, however, the Pentagon began to regard China as a strategic problem for the US, along with Islamic fundamentalism, even as the Clinton administration announced that it sought a "strategic partnership" with Beijing, reflecting American businesses' growing investment in China.

Notwithstanding the corporations' increasing reliance on China to prop up their bottom lines, by 2002, the George W. Bush White House was defining China as a "strategic competitor" in its National Security Strategy

Paper, which also provocatively declared that the US could engage in "anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack."³⁴

Especially after a US intelligence aircraft had collided with a Chinese fighter plane near Hainan island in April 2001, there was widespread expectation of a new Cold War. However, owing to the priority it accorded the "War on Terror" focused on the Middle East after the 9-11 attack, when it felt it needed the help of Beijing, the Bush administration was distracted from following up on its strategic redefinition of China.

The Obama administration sought to refocus US military resources on containing China with the so-called Pivot to Asia, a move that drew the support of the Pentagon, which, like many in the civilian leadership, was tired of being bogged down in inconclusive wars in the Middle East. To accompany Obama's Pivot, the military leadership adopted the provocative strategy of "AirSea Battle," the most influential application which cast China

in the role of the enemy, whose “Anti-Access, Anti-Denial” (A2/AD) defenses had to be overcome.³⁵

Despite moves in the direction of consolidating an anti-China posture, Obama’s as well as Bush’s strategic approach towards China was subverted by the strong trade ties that “coupled” the US to China and US corporations’ dependence on China’s cheap labor for their profits. Economic interests and strategic interests, in the opinion of many in the US elite, diverged dangerously. In this respect, President Trump is different from his predecessors in that he has defined China both as a strategic and economic foe, affirming the defense establishment’s view of China and distancing himself from the pro-globalization and “soft-on-China” posture of powerful factions of the US policy-making, corporate, and academic elites.

When it comes to strategic policy proper, continuity rather than change marks the US under Trump. As one analyst has noted, ultimately, the Trump administration’s “free and open Indo-Pacific strategy” is not substantively different from the Obama administration’s rebalance, despite the concomitant change in the name from the US Pacific Command to the more unwieldy US Indo-Pacific Command...Though doubts have been raised if both strategies had done enough, such is a matter of effectiveness and not withdrawal.”³⁶

Continuing and Intensifying Unilateralism

In fact, not only is the US under Trump not disengaging, it is intensifying its presence in an alarming fashion. Probably the

most destabilizing military move made in the Western Pacific under Trump was Washington’s deployment in 2017 of a sophisticated anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense system known as the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea in 2017. While the US and South Korea claimed that the THAAD installation was aimed at intercepting and destroying missiles coming in from North Korea, Beijing felt they were also, if not primarily, directed at subverting China’s strategic nuclear defenses against the United States. “The Chinese were so upset and alarmed that they curtailed the number of tour groups going to Korea and suspended business at more than half of the stores of the Korean conglomerate Lotte.”³⁷

The reason for Beijing’s concern is not hard to discern: the Chinese have a small intercontinental ballistic missile force armed with nuclear warheads. Since it has a No First Use (NFU) doctrine, China’s strategic nuclear force’s deterrence value vis-a-vis a nuclear-armed enemy is its capacity to deliver a successful retaliatory strike. The Chinese were aware from the US-Soviet debate over the Reagan administration’s plan to install an ABM system during the Cold War that a successful ABM system would have nullified the Soviet Union’s retaliatory capacity and thus provided an incentive for the US to engage in a first use of nuclear weapons. Like the Soviets then, the Chinese have drawn the conclusion that were relations between China and the US to deteriorate significantly, the US, which unlike Beijing, does not adhere to the NFU doctrine, could become reckless and be tempted to engage in a preemptive nuclear attack if it felt THAAD could nullify Beijing’s retaliatory strike capabilities.³⁸

Washington was well aware of China's likely reaction and yet it made the THAAD deployment, which meant to send China a signal that it was escalating its military presence in the region.

On the heels of the THAAD deployment came the announcement in August 2019 that the United States was withdrawing from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), with the intention of deploying intermediate range ballistic missiles to the Asia-Pacific. There was little ambiguity that the planned deployment was for offensive purposes and that it was directed at China. True, China had its own intermediate range missiles that put US bases and ships in the Western Pacific within shooting distance, but they were defensively oriented and located in Chinese territory. But, as one military analyst notes,

As threatening as China's intermediate-range missiles are to U.S. bases in East Asia, those weapons are based on its own territory and do not threaten U.S. sovereign territory, with the exception of the highly-militarized island of Guam. From China's perspective, it is far more provocative for the United States to base weapons on partner or ally territory in the region that explicitly threaten the Chinese mainland. It is also more challenging for the United States to explain why such weapons are primarily for defense, and to counter persistent Chinese accusations that the United States is trying to contain it.³⁹

The THAAD system and intermediate range missiles are destabilizing additions to an already formidable arsenal encircling China. Separated from China by only a few hundred miles are US forces in the so-called

President Trump is different from his predecessors in that he has defined China both as a strategic and economic foe, affirming the defense establishment's view of China and distancing himself from the pro-globalization and "soft-on-China" posture of powerful factions of the US policy-making, corporate, and academic elites.



With its homeport in Yokosuka, Japan, the forward deployed supercarrier USS Ronald Reagan is the core of the US Seventh Fleet, which has been the cutting edge of US military power in the Asia-Pacific since the end of the Second World War, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Multiple_aircraft_from_Carrier_Air_Wing_5_fly_in_over_USS_Ronald_Reagan_\(CVN_76\)._\(4887579211\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Multiple_aircraft_from_Carrier_Air_Wing_5_fly_in_over_USS_Ronald_Reagan_(CVN_76)._(4887579211).jpg)

First Island Chain stretching from South Korea through Japan down to Okinawa, Taiwan, and the Philippines. South Korea and Japan host numerous US bases and installations and thousands of military personnel, the Philippines has US forces stationed in nominally Philippine bases, Taiwan remains a US protectorate, and the US Seventh Fleet, which never demobilized after World War II, roams the East and South China Seas with impunity from its base in Yokosuka, Japan.

Backing the US forces in the East and South China Sea and first island chain are massive forces deployed farther east, on the second island chain stretching from Japan to the Marianas and Micronesia, where deep waters provide an ideal environment for US ballistic missile submarines, and on and around the third island chain centered on

Hawaii, where the headquarters of the US Indo-Pacific Command is located.

The largest of the United States' Unified Commands, the Indo-Pacific Command has an awesome reach and a strike capability that has been displayed in war and aggressive "show the flag" actions numerous times in the South and East China Seas since the end of World War II, including the dispatching of two aircraft carrier task forces to intimidate China, if not actually defend its Taiwanese ally had Beijing taken more radical military action during the Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1996.

Currently, the Command deploys some 337,000 military personnel. The US Pacific Fleet consists of approximately 200 ships, including five aircraft carrier strike groups, nearly 1,100 aircraft, and more than

130,000 sailors. US Marine Corps forces include two Marine Expeditionary Forces and about 86,000 personnel and 640 aircraft. Also included are more than 1,200 Special Operations personnel.⁴⁰

The US-China Military Balance Today

To fully appreciate the destabilizing consequences of Trump's military moves in the Asia-Pacific, it is important to put them in the context of the US-China military relationship.

When the Pentagon released the 2017 National Security Strategy paper, US General Joseph Dunford, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called China a "near-peer competitor," implying that it had graduated from being just a "strategic competitor."⁴¹ This is difficult to grasp given the following facts.

First, the \$250 billion China spent on its military in 2018 was far outstripped by the \$649 billion military budget of the US, which accounted for 36 percent of worldwide military spending.⁴²

Second, as mentioned above, the nuclear armed intercontinental ballistic missile force of China is puny, compared to that of the United States.

Third, the conventional warfare capabilities of China's People Liberation Army are grossly inferior to that of the United States.

True, China's conventional warfare arsenal has multiplied over the last decades, with the development of short range anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles and carrier based-

aircraft like the J-15 aircraft designed to take off from carriers with a "ski-jump" deck. Much of the focus of western analysts has been on the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), now said to be the biggest in Asia, deploying 300 warships, including four ballistic missile submarines, four attack submarines, 50 conventionally powered submarines, and two aircraft carriers, only one of which is currently operational.⁴³ Numbers are not, however, a good measure of real strength, for the quality of many of China's new weapons remains largely a question mark, and where there is some more than superficial knowledge, the judgment is often negative, as in the case of its noisy submarines or its functionally handicapped aircraft carriers.⁴⁴

There is much writing about the so-called "blue-water" ambitions of the PLAN, that is, its alleged push to compete for naval supremacy with the US. Much of this writing remains highly speculative, however, and reminds one of the spate of analyses about the alleged Soviet push for maritime ascendancy in the 1970s and early 1980s, with the "founder" of the modern Chinese Navy, the now fabled Admiral Liu Huaqing, substituting for the then fabled Soviet Admiral Gorshkov.

When it comes to two key indicators of a military's offensive capability, aircraft carriers and overseas bases, China is severely handicapped. The PLAN has two carriers, one, the Liaoning a retrofitted former Soviet carrier; the other, the Shandong, a domestically built carrier modeled after the Liaoning that was just commissioned in December 2019. At the moment, China has only one overseas base, in Djibouti, and writing about its planned acquisition of a "string of pearls"

or island bases in the Indo-Pacific area is largely based, not on official defense policy, but on musings on China's strategy by US government agencies.⁴⁵ There are, however, claims that the Chinese and Cambodian governments have a secret deal allowing China to use the Cambodia's Ream naval base off the Gulf of Thailand; the Hun Sen government has denied these.⁴⁶

True, the PLAN has taken more active measures to protect its trade routes, such as establishing the base in Djibouti and participating in anti-piracy activities off the Gulf of Aden. Since about 78 percent of China's oil imports transit through the Straits of Malacca from farther west, it would be downright risky to let other navies such as the US to completely provide security for these shipments. It is also true that PLAN has become more active diplomatically, with increased ship visits to ports throughout the world. But these actions can hardly be taken as evidence of intent, effort, or capacity to establish maritime dominance, at least in the short and medium term.

Fifth, even the Pentagon accepts China's characterization of its fundamental military posture as one of "strategic defense" or "active defense," a concept described as "strategically defensive but operationally offensive." It is said to be "rooted in a commitment not to initiate armed conflict, but to respond robustly if an adversary challenges China's national unity, territorial sovereignty, or interests."⁴⁷ Or as one of the leading western analysts on the People's Liberation Army puts it, "Strategically, China is defensive—it's not offensive, it's not an aggressor, it's not a hegemon. But nevertheless, to achieve

these defensive goals, it will, at the operational and tactical levels of warfare, use offensive operations and means."⁴⁸

Beijing's Strategic Dilemma

The reason Beijing will not abandon its posture of strategic defense for a long, long time and will continually challenge the US as a "peer competitor," to use Pentagon jargon, is because of its strategic dilemma in the South China Sea.

The inescapable strategic dilemma of China is that large parts of the US military forces in the Western Pacific lie right on its doorstep, entrenched in bases on the First Island Chain or at sea in the forward-deployed US Seventh Fleet. The vulnerability to US power of their southeastern and eastern coasts, where most of China's industrial infrastructure and urban population are located, became especially visible when the US sent two aircraft carrier task forces to the Taiwan Straits to intimidate Beijing during the China-Taiwan face-off in 1996. That deployment, writes Bill Hayton in his detailed analysis of the evolution of China's military posture in the South China Sea, "was the trigger for the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to begin developing the means of preventing it from happening again."⁴⁹ Indeed, no less than William Perry, the US Secretary of Defense who sent the carriers to the Taiwan Straits, admitted that his action had this consequence.⁵⁰ For it was at that point that the Chinese realized that they were most vulnerable to US control of the seas outside China's 12-nautical mile maritime boundaries. From such an over-the-horizon maritime

vantage point, the US Navy would have the capability to cripple Chinese infrastructure along the eastern seaboard by long range shelling, missiles, and unmanned aerial bombing.⁵¹

In response, from 1996 on, the PLA beefed up its coastal defenses with anti-ship and anti-missile systems, or in Pentagon parlance, A2AD (anti-access anti-denial) weapons. It was also around this time that Beijing began its controversial moves to grab maritime formations in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea and eventually to claim 90 percent of that body of water, moves that other claimants rightfully opposed. A good description of the strategic dilemma driving Beijing's

behavior in the South China Sea is provided by Hayton:

Looking out from Hainan Island, China's dilemma seems acute. Ever since Deng Xiaoping ordered the creation of his country's first special economic zone in Shenzhen in 1980, national prosperity has depended upon an arc of cities around the coast, and the movement of imports and exports to sustain them. Foreign trade makes up more than half the value of Chinese GDP (compared to a third in the United States) yet the country has no access to the open sea. The forces of geophysics have thrown up islands all around its coast and the forces of



A naval honor guard on the deck of the People's Liberation Army Navy ship Liaoning. Liaoning, China's first carrier, is a retrofitted Soviet era carrier purchased from the Ukraine. Its capabilities are quite primitive compared to US supercarriers. (Xinhua News Agency Photo), <https://news.usni.org/2015/05/26/document-chinas-military-strategy>

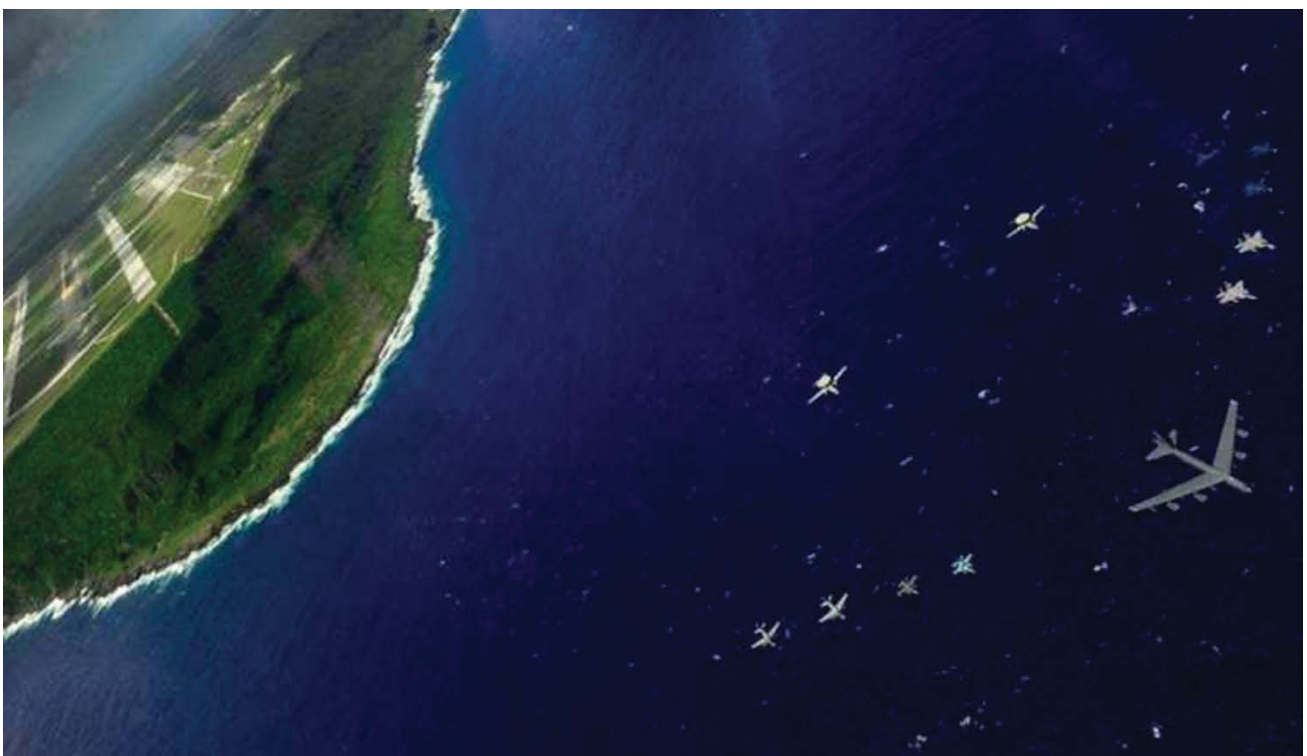
geopolitics have turned them all into potentially hostile neighbors...And a country serious about maintaining that access [to the world's oceans] must necessarily develop the capabilities to protect it. The logic is towards conflict in the South China Sea.⁵²

To address its strategic dilemma, military analyst Samir Tata writes, “in addition to modernizing and expanding its land-based anti-access/area denial capabilities, China is systematically establishing and demarcating a maritime equivalent of the Great Wall—a *cordon sanitaire* running from the South China Sea through the East China Sea to the Yellow Sea.”⁵³ The northern portion of this cordon runs from the Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku Islands to the Japanese) that China claims but Japan occupies to Taiwan, which China seeks to eventually integrate into its territory, and the southern part

from Taiwan to the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, which China claims as its national territory.

Still stymied by Japan in the northern portion, China has been more successful in the south, unilaterally seizing maritime formations claimed by the Philippines and, via land reclamation, adding some 3200 acres of artificial land to the seven formations it currently occupies. According to the Pentagon, in early 2018,

China continued its gradual deployment of military jamming equipment as well as advanced anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems to its Spratly Islands outposts. The missile systems are the most capable land-based weapons systems deployed by China in the disputed South China Sea. China completed shore-based infrastructure



US Air Force B-52 bombers and Air Force and Navy fighter and “electronic attack” planes coordinate their moves over Guam in the Western Pacific-wide Cope North Exercise. The AirSea Battle strategy, aimed at China, depends on close coordination between Air Force and Navy units to penetrate China’s missile defenses, <https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/the-air-sea-battle-concept-new-strategy-for-a-new-era/>



Face-off: Chinese air and naval bases and US military bases in the Asia-Pacific, <https://www.ousairpower.net/APA-PLA-AFBs.html>; <https://blogs.thomsonreuters.com/answeron/us-military-in-the-west-pacific-graphic/>

on four small outposts in the Spratly Islands in early 2016. Facilities on Johnson, Gaven, Hughes, and Cuarteron Reefs include administrative buildings, weapons stations, and sensor emplacements.⁵⁴

China had also “completed more extensive military infrastructure on three larger outposts in the Spratly Islands at Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs. These installations now include aviation facilities, port facilities, fixed-weapons positions, barracks, administration buildings, and communications facilities.”⁵⁵

The strategy guiding the formation of this cordon sanitaire is apparently that of “forward edge defense that would move potential conflicts far from China’s territory.”⁵⁶ In pursuing this strategy,

“China’s advantage is that it does not have, nor does it seek, the responsibility for controlling the global maritime commons, and, therefore, Beijing can concentrate substantially its entire naval fleet on ensuring that it controls what it considers to be territorial waters within the Middle Kingdom’s maritime Great Wall.”⁵⁷

For the US military leadership, which had come to see China as the US’s strongest rival, how to breach China’s formidable A2/AD firewall became the central strategic problem over the last decade. The result of these efforts was the Air-Sea Battle Doctrine. As one US Air Force analyst pointed out, in the most influential study detailing the new strategy, “China is, without question, America’s conceptual foe. The document even goes as far as portraying Chinese actions in the Pacific

as similar to Nazi Germany's unchecked rise prior to World War II. The scenarios presented ironically patterned Chinese perceived aggression along the lines of Imperial Japan in the 1930s."⁵⁸

Detailing how the US could fight a war with China, the document called for

"kinetic and non-kinetic" (in other words, both explosive and electronic) strikes against inland command centers, radar systems and intelligence gathering facilities, raids against missile production and storage facilities and "blinding" operations against Chinese satellites. It also said that China's "seaborne trade flows would be cut off, with an eye toward exerting major stress on the Chinese economy and, eventually, internal stress."⁵⁹

Failure to overcome China's A2/AD defenses, the study warned, would result in the "United States [finding] itself effectively locked out of a region that has been declared a vital security interest by every administration in the last sixty years...."⁶⁰

Not surprisingly, wrote one analyst, "This rather alarmist depiction of China associated with a future warfighting concept did not contribute to harmonious relations with Asia Pacific nations, and least of all, China."⁶¹

Recent coverage of developments in the South China Sea has focused on China's moves to unilaterally annex maritime formations claimed by other nations as well, mainly to fortify these outposts in addition to those that it occupied in earlier years. The other parties have justifiably

censured these unilateral efforts and have sought multilateral discussions to resolve conflicting territorial and resource claims, which Beijing has arrogantly brushed aside, leading to heightened political tensions. We have discussed this issue and laid out an alternative to Beijing's unilateral island and resource-grabbing in a separate publication.⁶² Unfortunately, what is lost in the maritime and verbal skirmishes is that the broader context is China's pursuit of an effective defensive perimeter against overwhelming US military might.

US unilateralism and China's defensive response to solve its strategic dilemma have combined to create a volatile balance of power marked by a response-counter-response dynamic that results in a US-China arms race that—in addition to the simmering tensions in the Korean peninsula among North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and the US—makes Northeast Asia the world's principal potential flashpoint for major war.⁶³

Pursuing "Overmatch"

An important element fueling this dangerous dynamic is the Pentagon's pursuit of what it calls "overmatch," the cornerstone concept of the new US grand strategy articulated in the 2017 National Security Strategy Paper under Trump. According to the paper,

The United States must retain overmatch—the combination of capabilities in sufficient scale to prevent enemy success and to ensure that America's sons and daughters will never be in a fair fight. Overmatch strengthens

our diplomacy and permits us to shape the international environment to protect our interests. To retain military overmatch the United States must restore our ability to produce innovative capabilities, restore the readiness of our forces for major war, and grow the size of the force so that it is capable of operating at sufficient scale and for ample duration to win across a range of scenarios."⁶⁴

The worrisome implications of the new US strategic posture are laid out by Mike Klare, the defense analyst of *The Nation*:

Although reminiscent of containment in some respects, overmatch differs from Cold War strategy not only because it presumes two (and possibly more) major competitors instead of

just one, but also because it requires a perpetual struggle for dominance in every realm, including in trade, energy, and technology. As the overmatch strategy gains momentum, it will require substantial changes in American society. Mammoth sums will be needed to procure new weapons systems to ensure US superiority over all conceivable combinations of adversaries. The tech sector, including large parts of Silicon Valley and its offshoots elsewhere in the country, will be harnessed for the development of exotic weapons—artificial intelligence, autonomous weapons, hypersonics, and so on. America's oil, coal, and natural gas will be used for geopolitical competition. International trade and travel will be subjected to military oversight to



A man who wiggled out of the draft during the Vietnam War citing “bone spurs in his heels,” Donald Trump is now commander-in-chief of the world's most powerful military, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Donald_Trump_at_Fort_Drum_2018_06.jpg

ensure that US technological advances are not transferred to America's military competitors; likewise, the Internet will be heavily policed to defend against enemy spying and technology theft. And more is bound to follow.⁶⁵

At the global level, overmatch will mean a continual striving for massive superiority since the US will never be sure it has achieved massive superiority. At the regional level, it is an offensive strategy that will endlessly try to overcome whatever perceived improvements China is able to make to its defensive A2/AD strategy. It sparks an uncontrolled arms competition between two powers and will entail constant probing of China's defenses such as the provocative patrols that US Air Force strategic bombers and US Navy craft carry out near Chinese-controlled maritime formations in the Spratly Islands with the justification of "ensuring freedom of navigation."⁶⁶

An unregulated balance- of-power competition, many have warned, can create a situation wherein a ship collision between US and its allies' ships and Chinese ships can quickly escalate into a major conventional conflict. During the author's visits to Vietnam while he was still a member of the House of Representatives of the Philippines, his hosts, who had been engaged in a territorial row with Beijing, stressed how a simple ship collision can escalate into a major conflict. The

Vietnamese' worries were not without basis. A similar balance of power had reigned in early 20th century Europe, with opposing forces then justifying it as the main mechanism to preserve the peace, until it broke down and war broke out in 1914.

With the Pentagon under Trump adopting Overmatch as a strategy and leaving the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, which has served as a firebreak between conventional and nuclear weapons, we may have come closer to the possibility of an escalation that runs out of anyone's control, as Klare rightfully warns us:

The acquisition of cruise and ballistic missiles of the sort now prohibited by the INF Treaty would allow US forces to overcome those defenses. In the future, then, an encounter between US and Russian or US and Chinese forces in contested areas like the Baltic or South China seas (however initiated) could lead to the use of high-tech conventional weapons, then intermediate-range non-nuclear missiles, then their nuclear variants—and from there, it's not hard to imagine the onset of nuclear catastrophe.⁶⁷

Trump's strategic policy in the Asia-Pacific is the newest and most dangerous incarnation of US unilateralism. It is the most destabilizing element in the region today, not an illusory US "disengagement."

VII

CONCLUSION

The withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and President Donald Trump's constant needling of his Asian allies to contribute more money to maintain US bases in their countries has created a widespread perception, especially among Asian elites, that the US is in a process of disengagement from the Asia-Pacific.

This study has found no support for this notion.

The main driver of the US presence in the region is the projection of power of the US state, or strategic extension, and this force, the study asserts, is far more powerful and lasting than the promotion or maintenance of diffuse economic or corporate interests.

Along with the perception of strategic disengagement is the idea that Washington is abandoning multilateral approaches to ensuring its interests and those of its allies. The premise of this assertion is faulty: not multilateralism but unilateralism has been the dominant

manner that the US has asserted its military and political interests in the region, and this unilateral approach continues today.

Some analysts also contend that the US is abandoning multilateralism in its approach to regional economic issues. Again, the study disputes the premise of this idea, showing that, as in military and strategic affairs, the US has managed its economic relations with its allies unilaterally. Washington's aim, we have shown, has been consistent; it has not only been to reduce or eliminate the US trade deficit with these countries but to dismantle the "Asian developmental model" marked by strong state intervention.

We have also shown that even as the US targets China, it is also indirectly assaulting the other Asian economies since these have become suppliers of raw materials and industrial components to China in what has been called a "Sino-centric" division of labor. Moreover, Trump has subjected Japan, Korea,

Vietnam, and Thailand to coercive trade actions. In short, even as he engaged China in a trade war, Trump is busy micromanaging the trade policies of the US's Asian allies.

Even before Trump, the Pentagon already identified China as the US's main strategic competitor. The "near peer competitor" designation of Beijing is not, however, supported by military strength indicators, on which China is far behind the United States. China's basic military posture, even the Pentagon admits, is one of "strategic defense." China, for its part, has focused on creating defensive installations (A2/AD) to protect its eastern and southeastern seaboard from attack and to nullify the US's power projection capabilities lying beyond its territorial waters. In response, the Pentagon has devised the strategy of AirSea Battle designed to penetrate and destroy China's (A2/AD) defenses.

The US-China military competition has become even more intense under Trump owing to the deployment to South Korea of an anti-missile defense system that Beijing feels is aimed not only at North Korea but at China as well; to the withdrawal of the US from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty and its announcement that it will deploy intermediate nuclear missiles in the Asia-Pacific; and to the adoption by the Pentagon of the doctrine "Overmatch," which requires the US to maintain massive military superiority over any rival or coalition of rivals. These developments are like fuel thrown on the already destabilizing balance of power in the Asia-Pacific.

This intensification of the US's unilateral power projection capabilities by the Trump administration, not Washington's "disengagement," constitutes the greatest threat to peace in the Asia-Pacific today.

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The destabilizing consequences of Overmatch are succinctly captured by Hayton: "To those who would argue that a Sino-US conflict is 'unthinkable,' wrote Jan van Tol in his May 2010 paper [articulating AirSea Battle], 'it should be emphasized again that the purpose of 'thinking about the unthinkable' is that by doing so, ways can be found to sustain and enhance a stable military balance in the Western Pacific, thus keeping conflict in the domain of the 'unthinkable.' In other words, the United States' military dominance in the South China Sea and its environs must remain so overwhelming that no other country would dare to challenge it. And, put like that, once a possible threat to US primacy has been articulated, the only possible acceptable response is to commission new strategies and weapons systems to defeat it." (Hayton, p. 219).

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Manila

There is a widespread perception, especially among East and Southeast Asian elites, that the United States is in a process of disengagement from the Asia-Pacific under President Donald Trump. This study shows that there is little basis for this view. Along with the perception of strategic disengagement is the idea that Washington is abandoning multilateral approaches to ensuring its interests and those of its allies. This report disputes the premise of this assertion and shows that unilateralism has been the dominant manner in which the US has asserted its military and political interests in the region, and that this unilateralist approach continues today. At no point in the last few decades is the US presence as destabilizing as it is today, with the Trump administration waging a trade war against Beijing at the same time that it has escalated the threat of the Pentagon's offensively-oriented "AirSea Battle" strategy by preparing the deployment of intermediate range nuclear missiles directed against China in the Western Pacific.



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