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**Understanding and
Preserving the
Foundations of
America's Advantage
in Asia**

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Understanding and Preserving the Foundations of America's Advantage in Asia

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Introduction

In May 2009, Australia released its long awaited *Defense White Paper*.¹ Criticized in some parts as a confused and unclear document,² it was nevertheless upfront in arguing that the rise of China in particular during this 'Asia-Pacific century' marked the beginning of the end of the so-called 'unipolar moment' for the United States.

The White Paper would have caught the attention of those in high places in Washington. Australia has supported the Americans in every war that the latter fought in the previous century; and Afghanistan and Iraq in the current one. It was a policy response by America's most reliable ally in the region to the perception that as newly emerging and possibly competing great powers rise, the US will experience a significant and relative decline in power and capabilities, and therefore strategic and diplomatic influence. As one of Australia's foremost strategic experts, Hugh White, argues:

"It is still likely that China's economy will overtake that of the US within a few decades, and as that happens, China's strategic and political power will steadily grow. The US will lose the position of uncontested strategic primacy that has kept Asia so stable, and Australia so safe, over the past four decades."³

¹ *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Department of Defence, May 2009).

² For example, see Patrick Walters, "Experts shoot holes in Kevin Rudd's Defence White Paper," *The Australian*, 25 June, 2009.

³ Hugh White, "Bracing for the Asian century", *The Australian*, 11 April, 2009.

It is true that capabilities matter. America's share of global GDP has been hovering at between 20-22% since 1970 – and it has been responsible for almost a quarter of global output for almost a century⁴ – so one should be wary of predictions about imminent American economic decline even if it is relative. But it is expected that China and India will permanently reduce the American share of global GDP.

However, the logic of comparing the absolute size of a country's GDP to another's in order to predict the future strategic environment, although commonly accepted, is by itself inadequate. To offer one historical lesson, during Britain 'imperial century' from 1815-1915, its share of global GDP was significantly less than that of China and India. In 1820, Britain's share was 5.2% compared to China and India which was 32.9% and 16% respectively. In 1870, the British share was 9% while China and India's share was larger at 17.1% and 12.1% respectively.⁵

Evidently, relative distribution of hard power resources is not the only determinant of strategic, political, and diplomatic influence. Relative decline in economic power does not always imply a proportionate decline in strategic, political or diplomatic influence.

The paper is divided into three parts.

⁴ Fareed Zakaria, "The future of American power: How America can survive the rise of the rest", *Foreign Affairs* 87:3, May/June, 2008.

⁵ Angus Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy 1-2030 AD* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); *The World Economy: Historical Statistics* (Paris: OECD Development Center, 2001); World Bank statistics, 1 July, 2009: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP_PPP.pdf

Part A of the paper looks at the foundations of US dominance in Asia and argues that the beginning of the end of American strategic primacy in Asia is commonly asserted but usually poorly argued. Unless American relative power declines much more rapidly than is currently occurring, or else if significant strategic mistakes are made the decline of US *influence* in Asia will occur far slower than it is commonly believed.

As I will point out, the reason for this is due to the nature of the informal but enduring hierarchical security system in Asia within which America, as a foreign power, is overwhelmingly the preferred choice as leader. Indeed, even if China and India continue to rise, the US could actually find itself in a stronger position that will help preserve its preeminence in Asia – even if America enters a period of gradual and relative decline.

Part B looks at why China creates a strategic conundrum for the US but also presents the greatest challenge to the stability and continued existence of the informal US-led security hierarchy in Asia.

Finally, **PART C** looks at the question of preserving US dominance in Asia – particularly vis-à-vis rising Chinese power and influence - and offers some analysis and prescriptions pointing out how the US can prolong and even enhance its position of strategic primacy in the region. In particular, the following recommendations will be made:

- Washington should resist engaging Beijing as an ‘equal’ partner on high-level strategic and security architecture issues in Asia. Doing so would

weaken the informal security structure that has been enormously effective in managing China's rise, dilute the leverage that America has built up over several decades, alienate key US allies, and provide Beijing greater scope to be a disruptive rising power. The US should therefore reject any 'G-2' approach and be wary about expanding the scope of strategic matters (relevant to broad Asian security relations and architecture) covered in discussions in subsequent Strategic and Economic Dialogues with China.

- The reduction in the numbers of ships in the US navy and a subsequent reduction in its physical naval presence in the West Pacific Ocean, South China Sea and Indian Ocean will have serious consequences and must be resisted. Not doing so could have deleterious strategic consequences for US primacy in Asia since it would significantly harm perceptions and trust in the continuation of America's leadership role in the region.
- The strategic and diplomatic value of weak institutions such as ASEAN should not be ignored. The US needs to be fully engaged in the sometime tedious multilateral forums in Asia (especially ASEAN) since it indicates to political elites and populations in the region that America's leadership style will be subtle and cooperative rather than overbearing and distant.

PART A: UNDERSTANDING THE FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICA'S ADVANTAGE IN ASIA

The return of American 'declinism' in Asia

As Michael Green reminded me at the time of writing this paper, predictions in the media, by analysts and academics, and by officialdom, of the decline of American power and influence in Asia is nothing new; and past predictions have come and gone.⁶ For example, after the US failure in Vietnam and subsequent withdrawal in 1973, it was widely argued that the Soviet Union would replace the US as the preeminent power in Asia. In the 1980s, many saw Japan replacing America as the imminent leader in Asia. In fact, Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* which predicted imminent American decline (and resulting curtailment of its influence in Asia) due to 'imperial overstretch' was the most widely read and lauded geopolitical book in America and Asia in that decade. It was virtually required reading for all aspiring geo-strategists in Beijing well into the mid 1990s. Even in the late 1990s, Robert Sutter points out that many experts and media commentators focused on the rise of Chinese trade and Asian investment in China, as well as successes in Chinese bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in the region, in the aftermath of the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis. As Sutter observes, many commentators concluded that:

“These Chinese strengths coincided with weaknesses in U.S. standing in the region in terms of image and diplomacy in particular. This basic equation of Chinese strengths and U.S. weaknesses became standard fare in mainstream Asian and Western media. It was the focus of findings of many books and reports of government departments, international study groups, and think tanks, authored often by respected officials and specialists. The common prediction was that Asia

⁶ Michael Green was the special assistant to President George W. Bush for national security affairs and the senior director for Asian affairs in the National Security Council from 2004-2005.

was adjusting to an emerging China-centered order and U.S. influence was in decline.”⁷

Predictions of American decline of both power and influence, especially in Asia, are back in force. This is understandable - and this time many declinists say it is different. After all, more great powers are rising in Asia over the next few decades than in any other region in the world and relative American decline in economic power is already occurring. The investment bank Goldman Sachs in its ubiquitous BRIC reports suggest that by 2050, the largest economies in the world in order will be China, US, India with Japan further back in 8th position. Significantly, China’s GDP was projected to be almost twice that of the US. In a 2007 follow up report, Goldman Sachs predicted that China’s economy would surpass that of the US by 2025, meaning an ongoing political and strategic readjustment process away from US influence as these changes unfold.⁸

Tellingly, it is now orthodoxy for big-picture thinkers to release big-picture books and give big-picture sermons describing the gradual eclipse of American hegemony in Asia. In these, the only question is how US decline will be managed; determining whether it will play out peacefully or traumatically. Examples include Fareed Zakaria’s *The Post-American World* which lucidly describes the ‘rise of the rest’ (but also offer strong arguments why America is well placed to take advantage of these developments) and Kishore Mahbubani who argues that the West and America in particular is unwilling to accept that

⁷ Robert Sutter, “Assessing China’s Rise and US leadership in Asia: Growing Maturity and Balance”, *Georgetown University Asian Studies*, 2 February 2009.

⁸ Goldman Sachs, “Dreaming with BRICs”, *Global Economics Paper 134*, 2004; “The N-11: More than an Acronym”, *Global Economics Paper 153*, 2007.

its period of domination is at an end and that the 'Asian century' has arrived.⁹ Paul Kennedy has again predicted that America is the big loser, repackaging his previous thesis to accommodate the current global financial crisis, arguing that "the global tectonic shifts towards Asia... seem hard to reverse."¹⁰ Others such as Joshua Kurlantzick have written about the rise of Chinese 'soft power' overriding that of America's in the region.¹¹ Significantly, the US National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends 2025* report, after surveying the viewpoints of experts around the world, argued that "the unipolar world is over" or "it certainly will be by 2025." Replacing it will be a multipolar system whereby China and India will join the US to compete for influence in the region and the world.¹²

Asia's unique security hierarchy

Although a number of commentators (including myself) has express doubts as to whether the economy of China in particular can continue to grow as rapidly into the future as it has done since reforms in 1978,¹³ it is nevertheless prudent to assume that China (and eventually India) will become an increasingly important presence in the region. Talk about the rise of China and India, as well as the relative decline of the US, lead many commentators to reflexively assume that we are moving from a period of American hegemony toward a state of multipolarity; that is, a configuration characterized by the existence of several roughly equal powers keeping each other in check. But

⁹ Kishore Mahbubani, "The case against the West: America and Europe in the Asian century," *Foreign Affairs* 87:3, May/June 2008.

¹⁰ Paul Kennedy, "American Power is on the Wane," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 January 2009.

¹¹ Joshua Kurlantzick, *How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.)

¹² National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (Washington: NIC, 2008).

¹³ See John Lee, *Will China Fail?* (2nd edition) (Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies, 2009.)

even if the US in entering a period of relative decline, the pre-existing condition of *hierarchy*, rather than straightforward *multipolarity* is a better and more accurate model for understanding both the preexisting informal security system in the region and the likely structure of the future Asian order well into the middle of the century.

One misconception that has often provided the pretext for debates on the future of Asia is the common but mistaken assumption that America was a genuine hegemon – and one that depended almost exclusively on a preponderance of hard power resources over its rivals to remain on top. This has led some commentators to overplay the consequences of American relative decline (in hard power resources). Despite the fact that America spends more in defense than the next ten powers combined,¹⁴ it has never been a genuine regional hegemon in the sense that it relies on the approval and cooperation of other states in Asia to remain predominant.

For example, the US Pacific Command (USPACOM) has ‘Pacific Area of Responsibilities (PAR)’ for 36 countries that stretch from the west coast of the US to Antarctica to the western border of India. The US Pacific Fleet is manned by 125,000 military and civilian personnel. America has almost 70,000 military personnel deployed in Asia and the Pacific (excluding its territory of Guam,) mainly in Japan and South Korea.¹⁵ In Northeast Asia, the US relies on military cooperation with Japan and South Korea. The Commander of the US 7th Fleet which oversees the West Pacific is headquartered in Yokosuka, Japan. In Oceania, Australia serves as the primary partner. In South Asia, in addition

¹⁴ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/spending.htm>

¹⁵ <http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/MILITARY/history/hst0903.pdf>

to the US naval base in Guam, cooperation with the Philippines remains critical to US naval projection while India is fast becoming a genuine strategic partner in terms of naval cooperation.

The fact that the US navy depends heavily on bases in other sovereign states in Asia means that 'base rights' are always subject to the domestic governments of the host country; meaning that they are subject to domestic politics of that host country. In particular, Asian partners and its population expect the US Navy to play a dual role. Asia has more rising and prosperous littoral states than anywhere else in the world. In peacetime, the US navy is expected to guarantee the safe and orderly passage of sea-based economic activity. This includes protection against 'asymmetric' threats in Asia's littoral seas that can disrupt economic activity such as piracy, people and goods smuggling, and other crimes. As Geoffrey Till writes, "The US Navy is now the biggest coastal navy in the world – only it operates on other people's coasts."¹⁶ It is a foreign power with has constabulary and low-intensity responsibilities. In wartime, the US is expected to cooperate with other partner states to deal with the threat in terms of deployment and actual use of military force – both in littoral and the open seas. The point is that the US is kept on a relatively tight leash in Asia: its maritime and naval operations are structurally bound to enforce the region's public goods. The same might not be said for one of Asia's indigenous navies were it to take the lead.

With respect to operations, the US conducts 'combat readiness' and advanced 'interoperability' exercises with the militaries of countries such as Japan,

¹⁶ Geoffrey Till, "Maritime Strategy in a Global World", *Orbis* 51:4, 2007, 569

South Korea, the Philippines, Australia and Thailand. It closely coordinates military-to-military relationships with countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia to provide security in critical waterways such as the Straits of Malacca and to coordinate efforts against terrorism and other transnational crimes. USPACOM even hosts senior military exchanges with counterparts from Vietnam and Cambodia. Its healthy relationship with Asia states means that the US navy makes around 700 port visits throughout the Pacific each year.¹⁷

In a provocatively titled article, “How we would fight China?”, Robert Kaplan approvingly referred to USPACOM as the functional alternative to NATO: “a large and nimble (multilateral) construct” well suited to American strategic concerns that are now centered in the Pacific.¹⁸ Yet, without cooperation from allies and partners such as Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, the US simply could not retain its forward military positions in the West Pacific. In Asia and Oceania alone, the US military has infrastructure and other facilities in Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea¹⁹ while discussions with Vietnam and Cambodia to host US sites are ongoing. The importance of the US to peace and stability in Asia, but critically also of Asia to the US is highlighted by the fact that the Asia-Pacific region encompasses seven of the world’s ten largest armed forces and five of the seven US mutual defense treaties (Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Philippines, Australia/New Zealand).²⁰ The viability of the US strategic ‘hub

¹⁷ http://www.pacom.mil/web/site_pages/uspacom/facts.shtml

¹⁸ Robert Kaplan, “How we would fight China”, *The Atlantic* 295:5, June 2005.

¹⁹ <http://www.acq.osd.mil/ie/download/bsr/BSR2008Baseline.pdf>

²⁰ Association of the US Army, *Transforming US Army Pacific* (Arlington: Torchbearer National Security Report, June 2009.)

and spokes' model of alliances and partnerships in Asia, as well as the extent to which USPACOM can effectively coordinate and deploy its forces in the region depend heavily on continued support offered by Asian states.

Moreover, and enormously important, in remaining on top, America needs other key states and regional groupings such as ASEAN, in the region to acquiesce to its security relationships. Thus, there is broad based regional approval of the US-Japan alliance, the US-Korea alliance, and American security partnerships with the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Outside Beijing, Pyongyang, and Yangon, these bilateral security relationships are perceived to be in the region's interest rather than as instruments that will likely foster division, strategic competition, and tension. These security relationships enjoy widespread support and legitimacy as stabilizing arrangements in the region. Hence, the US-Japan alliance, for example, has not caused other states to balance against it as many classical realists would assume. Both the physical presence of the stand-alone predominant US power, and US bilateral security relationships benefit from a high degree of regional legitimacy conferred onto these. The various security relationships between the US and regional partners are genuinely complementary rather than in competition.

Combined with the raw military capacity that the US brings to the region (and will continue to do so), the US remains powerful enough to enforce the peace and provide stability for commerce to thrive. The American presence and the partnerships it leads have so far ensured competition remains peaceful. This is highly complementary to Asian states' obsession with building soft

institutions of counter-dominance and non-interference in the region: American dominance is welcome and legitimized because it exists largely to keep the peace. This dynamic 'liberal order' – fair, flexible and open enough to welcome in new entrants as they rise - has served Asia well. As Robert Kaplan observes, "The phenomenon (and economic benefits) of globalization could not occur without American ships and sailors."²¹ Even authoritarian China has been a beneficiary of the public goods in the form of stability provided by the Americans. It has risen within a hierarchical system and its rise will still not transform such a system into a multi-polar one for decades.

Critically, this interdependent relationship means that the US leader of the system is not so powerful that it can readily ignore the wishes of its current partners, and more broadly of key states in the region. America is not a Hobbesian Leviathan with absolute authority and power to do what it wants. It is not even, and never has been, a hegemon. The hierarchy is consensual. The US will retain primacy and its security partnerships will remain on board; but both US primacy and the viability of security alliances and partnerships depend on the consent of countries in the region. In this structure, the US presence will stop any state from dominating another or from regional rivalries from getting out of hand. As long as the US performs this role, there will be no reason for regional states to 'balance' against America, or deny territorial access that the US as a foreign power depends on to maintain a dominant capacity for force projection in Asia.

Balancing and bandwagoning within the hierarchy

²¹ Robert Kaplan, "How we would fight China", *The Atlantic* 295:5, June 2005.

Asia since World War Two is characterized by an 'under-balancing' vis-à-vis the US which strategists in especially China find puzzling and curious. But it is only a curiosity if one characterizes the security environment in Asia as multipolar rather than hierarchical.

Anticipation of an imminent multipolar Asia actually reached fever pitch after the implosion of the Soviet Union. Chinese strategists were initially confident that the end of the Cold War would see a multipolar power structure soon emerge. Since the imminent emergence of a multipolar region was widely assumed, some of the fiercest debates concerned the rate of American decline, as well as the strategies that China should use to position itself in relation to other regional powers. Creative strategies by Beijing's thinkers were put forward to exploit the anticipated poles of power that would emerge to balance the American one.²² Yet, from 1991 to 1999, US military spending as a proportion of global military spending actually grew from 28% to 33%, while China's spending hovered around 10% of global expenditure over the same period. By 2007, the US was responsible for almost 49% of global military expenditure, with China responsible for only 5% (according to Beijing's official figures.)²³

The increase in relative US military power was warily watched by Beijing. But of great concern to the Chinese was that Asian states did not seem at all perturbed by the increased in US military might; they appeared perfectly

²² See John Lee, "China's Insecurity and Search for Power" *CIS Issue Analysis* 101, 13 November 2008.

²³ *World and Military Expenditure Estimates* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2002); *The Fifteen Major Spenders in 2007* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2008).

comfortable with this development. In fact, it appeared to be welcomed since it gave Asian states a license to free-ride on the back of US power. In recent times, almost all Asian states fear that there will be *less* US military presence in the region, not more.²⁴ For example, most Asian states nervously monitored US priorities during the ‘War on Terror’ period of the first term of George W. Bush’s administration not because they feared the exercise of US power but because they feared an America losing interest in the region.

This leads to a profound strategic frustration for ambitious states such as China looking to challenge US preeminence in the near future. The balancing that has taken place in the past has not replaced this hierarchical structure in Asia; it occurs within it. In fact, recent history reaffirms that for the most part, any kind of balancing, bandwagoning or hedging has commonly taken place to *preserve* the existing hierarchy, not to supersede or transform it.

For example, despite China’s growing economic pull and rigorous diplomacy in the region, greater ‘regional’ security cooperation which excludes the US has always been subtly resisted. In particular, ASEAN insists that the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) be the preeminent multilateral security forum in the region despite the existence of other forums such as ASEAN+3, East Asian Summit (EAS) etc that could include greater security matters in the agenda and be transformed as an alternative to the ARF. But ASEAN upholds the primacy of the ARF precisely because it includes US participation; helping to institutionalize US involvement and regional leadership. In this sense, despite

²⁴ This largely explains why states such as Japan, Malaysia and Indonesia enthusiastically signed on to the US’s ‘War on Terror’ – where Asia was to be the ‘second front’ - after the September 11 attacks despite terrorism being relatively low on their agendas. These states saw it as a way of encouraging the US to reengage in the region.

its institutional failings and apparent lack of purpose, ASEAN offers the US a forum to entrench and enhance its strategic leadership whilst serving as an institution that can help constrain Chinese ambitions.

Another example of subtle regional balancing in order to preserve the hierarchy was the polite but disapproving response by ASEAN members to China's proposal at the recent 2006 ASEAN-China forum in Singapore for cooperation (meaning a greater role for the Chinese navy in the South China Sea) in maritime security. Moreover, while some were surprised that ASEAN rejected China's offer to join the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (which the US rejects), the fact that the bid was rejected on the grounds that ASEAN preferred all nuclear powers to join at the same time shows a clear reluctance to allow China to diplomatically out-manuever other powers on hard security matters.²⁵

The strategic behavior of Japan, Asia's most powerful actor for most of the post-War period offers further evidence. Tokyo has generally strongly supported Washington's role as leader in the region despite growing Japanese power. Indeed, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Japan has consistently used its growing power to support rather than confront the US in security matters.²⁶ This even occurred during the 1980s when Japan's rising economic clout created economic tensions between the two countries. In fact, Japanese strategy has mirrored a common approach taken by several other Asian states

²⁵ See John Lee, "China's ASEAN Invasion," *The National Interest* 89 May/June 2007.

²⁶ See Ming Wan, *Japan Between Asia and the West: Economic Power and Strategic Balance* (New York: M E Sharpe, 2001.)

such as Singapore: Japan frequently offered strong support for US dominance whilst minimizing its own economic costs of being a security partner.²⁷

PART B: CHINA'S FUTURE CHALLENGE TO A US-LED HIERARCHY IN ASIA

Like any power or security structure, hierarchies are fluid. The main reason why many are now questioning the durability of American preeminence in Asia is due to China's rise. Although Chinese power will be no match for American power for a considerable period of time, the rise of China presents a potentially serious challenge to the informal hierarchical system for a number of reasons – related to underlying Chinese dissatisfaction with the current order and its future willingness and capacity to challenge the extant regional order.

First, China views itself as the natural and historical apex state atop any hierarchy in Asia. In Chinese eyes, while the 'Middle Kingdom' was the center of Asia for all but 200 of the last 3,000 years, America is a relatively recent imposter. The US does not naturally belong in Asia and it enjoys its position in the region as a result of a historical accident (i.e., World War Two.) Therefore, even though China has currently few options and has done an excellent job at positioning itself as a 'legitimate' rising power within this system, it has never felt comfortable slipping into a hierarchy and order that it had no place defining, building or enforcing. Indeed, in a recent examination of over one hundred articles by China's leading strategist published in the last decade, I found that over three quarters of these were about binding, circumventing,

²⁷ See "Back under 1% (Japan defense spending), *The Economist*, 4 August 1990.

subverting or superseding American power and influence.²⁸ In addition to the military competition already well underway between the US and China,²⁹ if there were any doubts that Beijing already views Washington as a strategic competitor, these should be put aside.

Moreover, the modern Chinese narrative ‘cherry picks’ by taking a selective view of history that feeds its own resentment about the fact that it is still not ascendant in Asia. According to the modern Chinese interpretation of nineteenth and twentieth century history, while America was rising from the early 1800s onwards, China suffered a series of ‘humiliations’ at the hands of Western and Japanese powers. This began with the two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860), which ended in humiliating defeat for the Chinese and with the government agreeing to the sale of British opium in the country. China was also forced to sign the treaties of Nanjing (1842) and Tianjin (1858), known from the 1920s onwards as among a series of ‘Unequal Treaties.’ Other humiliations included the failure of the peasant-led Boxer Movement, considered by some to be reactionary if not xenophobic, which was put down by a coalition of forces from eight foreign countries in 1901; and the eventual downfall of the 270-year-old Qing Dynasty in 1912. The invasion by the Japanese in 1937 led to the Nanjing Massacre, in which up to 300,000 Chinese were slaughtered. In more recent times, the fact that Taiwan—the renegade province to which the defeated forces of the Kuomintang under Chiang Kai-shek fled in 1949 following its defeat in the Chinese Civil War – remains autonomous only because of US protection

²⁸ John Lee, “Why Beijing is reading Joseph Nye and Walter Russell Mead”, *The American Interest* (forthcoming).

²⁹ The most comprehensive piece of work on this issue I have come across is Constantine C. Menges, *China: The Gathering Threat* (Nashville: Nelson Current, 2005.)

continues to grate on Beijing. Importantly, a large part of this narrative is the belief that outside powers have long stood ready to divide China in order to weaken it.

Second, and related to the first, China realizes that beyond realist goals, the enemies of what its strategists commonly call the ‘American hegemon’ are generally authoritarian states such as Russia, Iraq (when it was ruled by Saddam Hussein), Iran, Libya, North Korea and presumably China. In an article written in 2005, influential Chinese scholar Yaqing Qin argued that the US is obsessed with “the problem of how to establish, consolidate, and consummate the international hegemonic system ... with its purpose to safeguard America’s leading role [and] the order and stability of its hegemonic system.’³⁰ Moreover, according to influential Chinese thinker Wang Jisi, there is a close link between American hegemony and American liberalism. Quoting American scholars such as Walter Russell Mead, Wang argues that Americans ‘worship violence’ and have a ‘warlike disposition.’³¹ Key to their preparedness to use force was the construction of ‘a universal collective identity’ that upheld liberal (democratic) values and systems. In other words, China believes that America seeks to dominate regional and global material and normative structures.³² Of further concern to the Chinese is that despite occasional diplomatic spats there appears to be a ‘grand alliance’ between North America, Europe, and Japan, which is underpinned by common political

³⁰ Yaqing Qin, ‘Theoretical Problematic of International Relationship Theory and the Construction of a Chinese School,’ *Social Sciences in China* XXVI:4 (2005), 65–66.

³¹ Wang Jisi, ‘The Logic of American Hegemony,’ *American Studies* 3 (2003), 24–25. See also Wang Jisi, ‘Sino–U.S. Relations Seeking a Stable New Framework,’ *Zhongguo dangzheng ganbu luntan* (6 January, 2005).

³² Wu Xinbo, ‘A Response to Yong Deng: Power, Perception, and the Cultural Lens,’ *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 28:3 (2001), 155. For other Chinese officials and thinkers emphasizing the threat of American hegemony, see Liu Jianfei, ‘Trends in U.S. Strategy Toward China,’ *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (14 February 2005); Ruan Zongze, ‘Change and Constraint,’ *Contemporary International Relations* 8 (2003), 17–19.

values.’³³ A US led Asia, presumably, would be one segment of this ‘grand alliance’. Non-democratic states would always be ‘outsiders’ and identified as potential threats in this liberal order – accentuating China’s discomfort in merely trying to ‘fit into’ the current order in Asia.

Third and enormously important from the point of view of other Asian powers, unlike America China is situated in Asia. It does not need the same level of acquiescence from other Asian states once dominant to maintain its position and military and political presence – and hence would be far less likely to compromise. The fact that America is a foreign power has made the US more acceptable as the dominant power in many respects. As John Ikenberry notes, powerful liberal states such as America chose to create institutions and harness expectations of strategic restraint in exchange for weaker states agreeing to accept American leadership.³⁴ This was necessary for a *distant* power. Even ignoring China’s view of its special place in Asia as the dominant ‘Middle Kingdom’, an Asian power rising to the top of Asia’s hierarchy is infinitely more threatening than a foreign, liberal power such as America.

For example, even a rising democracy such as Japan in the 1980s gave rise to genuine consternation in the region. As late as 1990, Southeast Asian states even viewed Japan as the primary threat to the region after the Soviet threat diminished. Importantly, Asian states feared that if the US withdrew from the region, Japan as an Asian power would be given free rein to dominate the Asia

³³ Jin Junhui, ‘Overcome Obstructions and Constantly Push Forward Sino–U.S. Relations,’ *Guoji wenti yanjiu* 3 (1999), 26–29.

³⁴ John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.)

to the detriment of other regional states. Subsequently as Jusuf Wanandi, then Director of Indonesia's Center for Strategic and International Studies, argued in 1990, "The central problem in the region right now is keeping the Americans in." Taking a position that was widely agreed to by states in the region, Wanandi further argued that "Militarily, it's much better for everybody – including the Japanese – if the Americans stay in."³⁵ Subsequently, in a similar rerun of very recent history, Singapore and Brunei offered the use of their territory for the US air force and navy while other Southeast Asian states publically voiced support for US bases in the Philippines; something they had resisted doing until the possibility of Japanese ascendancy and US withdraw appeared real.

Fourth, China is the only major power in Asia, and indeed in the world, that remains fundamentally dissatisfied with its current territorial and maritime borders. Rising and ambitious powers unhappy with existing land and maritime borders are a dangerous combination. If China continues to rise, this will create strategic and territorial problems of the first order.

The question of Taiwan remains a flashpoint that could yet lead to war between China and the US. Territorial disputes between China and countries such as India, Russia, Japan and several Southeast Asian states persist even if they have been stabilized for the moment. In particular, China still claims four fifths of the South China Sea as its 'historical waters' – illustrated by the (in)famous 'U' shaped line that Beijing claims defines its territorial waters. Although it is patently unreasonable that China should control such a large

³⁵ See Keith B. Richberg, "Many Asians fear potential military threat from Japan", *The Washington Post*, 4 August 1990.

area of the South China Sea, the claim is nevertheless strongly held and long-standing. Indeed, China's 'historical waters' claim is periodically and categorically affirmed by its own laws, statements and policies. Beijing recently reaffirmed these claims to the United Nations' Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in March 2009.³⁶ This includes specific claims over the Spratly and Paracel Islands which are disputed by countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and the Philippines, and over the Daiyoutai Islands which are disputed by Japan.

Moreover, Beijing is in the process of building naval capacity that will extend far beyond its stated aim of winning a war in the Taiwan Straits. It has also been increasing its naval patrols in these 'historic waters' despite signing the *2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea by ASEAN and China* which called for all parties to resolve their disputes through "friendly consultations and negotiations" and to "exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes."³⁷ In particular, Beijing has ominously transferred naval vessels from its North Sea fleet to its South Sea Fleet, the latter with responsibility for operations in the South China Sea. New aircraft carriers planned will also be assigned to the South Sea fleet.³⁸

Although China's maritime disputes receive the greater attention, its land based ones are also serious and far from settled. The most serious are with India. Indo-Sino tensions run deep. China's invasion of Tibet in 1950 had

³⁶ See Sam Bateman and Clive Schofield, "Outer Shelf Claims in the South China Sea: New dimensions to old disputes", *RSIS Commentaries*, 1 July 2009.

³⁷ <http://www.aseansec.org/13163.htm>

³⁸ "China: Beijing Strengthens its Claims in the South China Sea", *Stratfor*, 12 May 2009.

previously erased the traditionally buffer between China and British-ruled India. The China-India war in 1962 led to a defeat for India and China seizing the Aksai Chin region which linked Tibet and Xinjiang provinces. China still claims part of the Indian eastern-most Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (which has Myanmar to its East.) Tensions remain real, illustrated by China recently blocking an Asian Development Bank US\$2.9 billion loan destined for India because US\$60 million of it was earmarked for a water program in Arunachal Pradesh.

Finally, China's economic rise is essential to regional prosperity. While allowing unchecked Chinese ambitions is not an option for other Asian states, neither is the option of 'keeping China down' a viable one – creating a strategic conundrum for the US. In 2008, Chinese growth was responsible for almost one quarter of global growth. It is the largest export platform for Asia. From US\$100 billion in 2004, trade between China and ASEAN surpassed US\$200 billion last year and there is constant talk – although little progress - of a Free Trade Agreement to be concluded between China and ASEAN by 2010.³⁹

Moreover, just as with the success of Japan's reemergence, the rise of China is a source of genuine pride for Asian populations; especially for the 40 million Chinese Diaspora scattered mainly across Asia. Talk about the twenty first century being the 'Asian century' conjures up immense excitement for most populations in Asia. Despite remaining suspicious of China's ultimate ambitions for itself in the region – suspicions that are based on contemporary

³⁹ See "Global financial turmoil highlights importance of China-ASEAN free trade area", *China Daily*, 9 April, 2009.

evidence of disruptive Chinese behavior rather than the mostly historical fears that drove states to be suspicious of the Japanese in the 1980s - any move to obstruct China's rise by a Western power without explicitly provocation by Beijing would play out extremely badly for the US in the region.

PART C: PRESERVING AMERICA'S ADVANTAGE IN ASIA

Meeting China's rise – keeping the hierarchical faith

American policy towards China has focused on Robert Zoellick's approach of encouraging China to be a 'responsible stakeholder' in the global system although there is enormous debate as to what this might actually entail.⁴⁰ However, all sides would agree on two things. First, China is an integral part of the global economic system. And second, China will likely become an increasingly powerful strategic actor in Asia and the world making Beijing too big and important for strategists to ignore.

There is no doubt that the US relationship with China commands more attention for both economists and strategists in Washington than any bilateral relationship. The so-called 'G-2' approach – the US and China getting together as equal stakeholders in the regional and global system to discuss anything from the global financial crisis to nuclear proliferation to conflict in the Middle East – is one proposal offered for 'reaching out' to a likely peer competitor. It

⁴⁰ For example, see Bates Gill, Dan Blumenthal, Michael Swaine and Jessica Tuchman Matthews, "China as a Responsible Stakeholder," *Reframing China Policy: The Carnegie Debates 2006-2009*, 11 June, 2007.

has attracted heavyweight support from venerated figures such as Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

For others, especially many within the US Treasury fretting about whether China will continue to purchase US dollar denominated assets, it is a timely and logical extension of the existing 'Strategic Economic Dialogues' initiated under the previous Bush administration to reflect the increasing importance and complexity of the bilateral relationship between Washington and Beijing. For example, while not quite advocating a G-2 framework, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary to the Treasury Timothy Geithner argued in a recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed that while "few global problems can be solved by the US and China alone... few can be solved without the US and China together."⁴¹ This op-ed was published immediately prior to the inaugural 'Strategic and Economic Dialogue' between the US and China in Washington that extended the Strategic Economic Dialogues initiated by the previous George W. Bush administration to cover not just strategic economic issues but also strategic *and* economic issues.

The strategic issues that will be covered by the expanded framework of the new Dialogue are still a work in progress. So far, Secretaries Clinton and Geithner have only mention issues such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and North Korea, and possibly failed states and nuclear proliferation. However, the temptation to extend the range of strategic issues in the formal Dialogues will be strong. Beyond discussion of immediate crises such as events in North Korea, a widened top-level strategic dialogue of two 'equals' (Washington and

⁴¹ Hillary Clinton and Timothy Geithner, "A New Strategic and Economic Dialogue with China," *Wall Street Journal*, 27 July 2009.

Beijing) covering non-economic issues for the Asian region should be categorically resisted for several reasons.

First, such an approach overestimates China's intention and capacity to be a regional and global problem solver. As Elizabeth Economy and Adam Segal persuasively argue:

“It will raise expectations for a level of partnership that cannot be met and exacerbate the very real differences that still exist between Washington and Beijing. The current lack of U.S.-Chinese cooperation does not stem from a failure on Washington's part to recognize how much China matters, nor is it the result of leaders ignoring the bilateral relationship. It derives from mismatched interests, values, and capabilities.”⁴²

As argued earlier, Beijing has a long way to go to convince the region that if granted regional leadership, it is willing to uphold the regional liberal order that it had no role in defining or creating. In fact, a study of its top thinkers reveal that Beijing views the American backed liberal order as an institution designed to preserve what it calls America's 'hegemonic maintenance' in Asia;⁴³ even though Beijing has benefitted enormously from rising up within the existing regional order.

Moreover, even if values and interests of the US and China were well matched, their respective capabilities are not. To cite one example of mismatched

⁴² Elizabeth Economy and Adam Segal, “The G-2 Mirage”, *Foreign Affairs* 88:3, May/June, 2009.

⁴³ Yaqing Qin, ‘Theoretical Problematic of International Relationship Theory and the Construction of a Chinese School,’ *Social Sciences in China* XXVI:4 (2005), 65–66. More generally, see John Lee, “China's Insecurity and Search for Power”, *CIS Issue Analysis* 101, 6 November, 2008.

capabilities, US GDP which is approximately US\$14 trillion (by PPP method) is still around 20% of global GDP while China's GDP at approximately US\$7.9 trillion (by PPP method) constitutes around 11% of global GDP.⁴⁴ Using the exchange rate method, China's GDP stands at around US\$4.3 trillion⁴⁵ which is approximately the same as Japan's (which is around 6% of global GDP.) Significantly, Chinese GDP per capita is still 1/8th that of America's (by PPP method.) This is significant because it indicates that China is still very much an undeveloped country and pressing domestic requirements will continue to dog Beijing for some time – restricting its capacity to play any leadership role even if it were trusted by the region.

Second, it would significantly diminish the primary strategy that the US and key Asian states have successfully used so far to manage and constrain Chinese ambitions even as it rises. By offering China an *equal* seat at the table with the Americans – something Beijing deeply desires – leverage to reward or reprimand, or to include or exclude Beijing in select institutions or dialogues before it has firmly committed to the norms and practices of the region will be greatly diluted. Indeed, by downgrading the strategic worth, value, and utility of its allies, the US would risk seriously undermining its alliance and its own leadership position within the regional Asian order, as well as the future of the hierarchical order itself within which it remains the preferred leader. It is noteworthy that as China rises and even as other Asian states jostle to conclude beneficial economic agreements with Beijing, almost

⁴⁴ World Bank statistics, 1 July, 2009:

http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP_PPP.pdf

⁴⁵ "China's GDP grows 9% in 2008", *China Daily*, 22 January, 2009.

all Asian states have moved to reinforce and intensify security cooperation with Washington.

Moreover, institutions such as ASEAN which have proved useful in both keeping Southeast Asian states (most of which are US allies or security partners) relevant and in 'socializing' China would be gradually sidelined: a net strategic gain for China and a net strategic loss for the US. This in turn would delight the strategists in China that tirelessly continue to speculate about how to bind, circumvent, subvert or supersede American power and influence within the existing regional Asian order.

Dealing bilaterally with China on high level strategic matters would be playing straight into Beijing's hands – allowing China a privileged strategic voice and leverage in the region without spending resources providing public goods for the region or displaying an adequate track record of restraint or responsibility. Instead, there is sufficient flexibility in Asia's current America-led hierarchy to fit in a rising China (and also India.) A stable hierarchy can even be achieved vis-à-vis a relative decline in American power if democratic partners such as Japan and possibly India take up the slack. In fact, as American relative power declines and the danger of global over-extension grows, the rise of Japan and India is a happy coincidence. In particular, the US-India security partnership will become much more important. For example, the Malabar exercises in the Indian Ocean lead by the navies of America and India, and regularly involving Japan, Australia and Singapore is a promising example of maritime burden sharing and cooperation as US fleet numbers decline (in both absolute and relative terms.)

If the hierarchy can be maintained and strengthened, China can legitimately rise within it but its ambitions – including any designs for its own ‘Monroe Doctrine’ - will be ‘structurally’ constrained. For China to rise within the hierarchy, it needs to do so within the existing regime of restrained competition, regional norms and other processes. China will also find it difficult to dominate regional institutions if US partners such as Japan, South Korea and increasingly India (an emerging strategic competitor with China in all but name) are part of these same institutions. Yet, Beijing knows that it needs to rise as a major player within these soft institutions. If it does not, regional states will have reason to compile a compelling case to sideline and isolate China – the nightmare scenario for Beijing’s strategists.

There needs to be continued faith placed in the plan to limit Beijing’s choices and ‘socialize’ Chinese actions (if not Chinese ambitions which is harder to change.) Allowing China to rise only within the Asian hierarchy is a creative alternative to the traditional options of crude ‘balancing’ or ‘bandwagoning’. Indeed, should China try and buck the system in the future, the framework for powers such as Japan and India (and ASEAN) to join with the Americans to impose constraints upon China will already be in existence. This grand strategy of ‘bringing China in’ by using a hierarchical framework has the advantage of imposing structural constraints on the ambitions of any rising power without the ill effects of explicitly keeping China down (which would create further resentment in Beijing and cause it to have no option but to be a revisionist power.) It is also a clever scheme that allows Asian states to

economically benefit from China's rise but offer the security of a structure in place to keep Chinese ambitions in check.

This form of 'hedging' within the informal hierarchical system in Asia is far preferable to carving out spheres of influence for Asian powers (which is impossible since these would clash) or formalizing a decisive move toward recognition of an explicit multipolar configuration which would be premature and disband the socializing structure that has been used to tame disruptive powers. A hierarchical structure with America at the top – within which the US remains the decisive strategic actor - remains the firm preference of all major states in Asia (including, for the moment, China.) It is a structure that both reflects the fact that by any measurement of capability, America's share of power will still remain dominant for several decades (even if it is in relative decline,) and also one that stands the better chance of shaping and managing future Chinese geopolitical options in line with US and regional preferences. As Singaporean Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew argues, "no combination of other East Asian economies – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and ASEAN – will be able to balance China... Therefore the role of America as balancer is crucial if we are to have elbow room."⁴⁶

Furthermore, enmeshing China in Asia (which a hierarchy implies) means that the cost of outright rebellion becomes ever higher. In this sense, the bi-lateral relationship between the US and India, and the growing strategic cooperation between the two powers, is crucial as India rises. Importantly, it does not need the formality of an anti-Chinese alliance, which I argued would create

⁴⁶ Lee Kuan Yew, "ASEAN Must Balance China in Asia," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 18:3 (Winter 2001).

problems for the Indians and other Asian powers. China might remain disruptive but if it should eventually attempt to reject or undermine the existing order in Asia, Beijing will most likely be isolated. As former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice argues, “the US-Japan relationship, US-South Korea relationship, the US-India relationship are all important in creating an environment in which China is more likely to play a positive role than a negative role.”⁴⁷ Institutions such as ASEAN and the US bilateral security arrangements work in an ad hoc way to ‘socialize’ and ‘compel’ rising states (such as China) respectively.

Yet, the US must be mindful of the limitations imposed on independent US strategic maneuverings that are not seen by the vast majority of states as being in their interests. As mentioned, ASEAN states will simply not tolerate either the establishment of an explicitly anti-Chinese alliance (for example, between the US, India and Japan) which attempts to explicitly ‘contain’ China or keep it down. Attempting to do so would cause these states to become disapproving and even disruptive since China is too important to the regional economy.

A case in point is the 2007 Quadrilateral Initiative between the US, India, Japan and Australia which was seen by many ASEAN states as too explicit a containment initiative against China and one that was likely to cause Southeast Asian states to openly declare their hand in ‘choosing’ between China and the Quadrilateral members. The Quadrilateral Initiative also existed uncomfortably alongside the informal hierarchical order since it had the

⁴⁷ Condoleezza Rice, “Remarks at Sophia University,” Tokyo, 19 March 2005.

potential to evolve into an alternative security agreement that might sideline and undermine the existing (informal) hierarchical setup. Subsequently, there was little support for the initiative, and considerable behind-the-door criticism directed toward it by ASEAN states.

The better approach, which Washington has caught onto belatedly, is to develop the bilateral US-India relationship and entrench and institutionalize naval cooperation in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea between the navies of the US, India, Japan, Indonesia and Singapore. With this approach, the US-India relationship is more likely to receive de facto 'buy in' from Asian allies and complement the existing and informal hierarchical security structure. Subsequently, a rising India will be better placed to serve as a 'structural constraint' against Chinese ambitions.

Naval presence matters - PACOM needs to be seen

Although the US-led semi-formal security hierarchy in Asia has so far endured, such structures can become weakened or superseded either through significant changes in relative capabilities or else through strategic or diplomatic mismanagement.

Critically, 'hard power' capabilities matter and strong armed forces are built on the back of economic strength – on this point Paul Kennedy has always been correct. Looking past one or two decades into the future and forecasting the economic environment is fraught with uncertainty, despite what Goldman Sachs has earned great fame trying to do. But in the foreseeable future, the US

economy will remain superior to China's even if China's absolute GDP continues to grow. For example, the US leads the world in innovation, technology, education; and its economy remains the most adaptable in the world.⁴⁸ America is far from an outmoded giant. In contrast, growth in China is largely engineered for employment preservation rather than driven by productivity gains or innovation.

However, even if America's economy remains strong, military, especially naval presence, matters in a region littered with key littoral states. In looking at the dominance of the Anglo-powers over two centuries, military historian Jeremy Black puts it down largely to 'command of the ocean'.⁴⁹ In 1901, the Royal Navy had 330 ships.⁵⁰ By the time President Ronald Reagan left the Presidential office in 1988, the US navy had a fleet of 594 ships.⁵¹ The US navy currently has around 280 ships and there is some discussion that it might have to accept further fleet reductions to around 200 ships despite having a target of 313 ships for the period over the next half decade.⁵² Proponents of reducing the number of ships argue that merely 'counting ships' is misleading and 'force structure' is more important and increasing capabilities for these ships matter more than absolute numbers.

Yet, personal conversations with defense and foreign affairs bureaucratic heads in Singapore and Malaysia all say the same thing: numbers matter because presence matters. Especially in peacetime – which is most of the time

⁴⁸ See Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2008).

⁴⁹ Jeremy Black, *The British Seaborne Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁵⁰ Andrew Roberts, "The English Speaking Peoples and their Role Since 1900", *Orbis* 51:3, 2007, 384.

⁵¹ <http://www.defenselink.mil/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=2843>

⁵² See Don't Give Up the Ships: A Look at a 200-Ship Navy":

http://www.hudson.org/files/documents/Hudson_200_Ship_Navy_conference_summary.pdf

- where the US plays the role as primary 'coastguard' and enforcer of maritime order in Asia necessary for economic activity, US standing will suffer if its presence is significantly reduced. To maintain its leadership role, it cannot become merely a 'clever power' fighting the next hypothetical hi-tech war behind the scenes.

Conversations in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta also reveal something else: these littoral states are noticing the decrease in the US naval fleet and the increase in China's and are concerned. For example, numbers of Chinese submarines exceed that of the US in the Pacific by more than 4:1 (75 to 18). As Dan Blumenthal notes:

The rise of the Chinese submarine fleet and symmetrical decline in American subs is reflective of a broader trend. China is well on its way to having the greatest number of fighter planes, surface ships, missiles and submarines in the region."⁵³

Although many still take comfort in the fact that the US outspends China four to nine times in absolute terms depending on which set of figures we accept as closer to the truth,⁵⁴ we should remember that the US is an established global power with military capacities distributed around the world. China's are almost all focused on Asia alone.

⁵³ Dan Blumenthal, "The Erosion of US Power in Asia," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1 May, 2009.

⁵⁴ Beijing states that defense spending in 2009 is projected to be US\$70 billion. Washington believes it will be closer to US\$150 billion: "China's defense budget to grow 14.9% in 2009", *Xinhua*, 3 April, 2009; "China's defense tab sharply up," *Washington Post*, 26 March 2009. US defense spending in 2009 will be US\$650 billion: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy09/pdf/budget/defense.pdf>

The argument is frequently made that the US should be careful not to force Asian partners to choose between Washington and Beijing.⁵⁵ The counter argument should also be made that the US should be careful not to indicate to Asian partners that it is losing interest in playing its leadership role in the region. Despite continually US pronouncements that it has no intention of ‘ceding the West Pacific’, the presence of the US Navy in Asia is viewed by the region as the primary indicator of genuine US strategic intent and interest. If the US sends the signal that its capacity or willingness to maintain its role in the region is waning, this is much more likely to force Asian partners to allow freer rein to Beijing; therefore quickening the erosion of the hierarchical order and reducing the prospects that the region can remain peaceful. If this were to occur, it would be much more costly in the long run for the US and its regional partners.

Enduring the tedium of ‘weak’ multilateral ASEAN forums

The strategic and diplomatic value of Southeast Asia as a region and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an institution is sometimes poorly appreciated in Washington. Although Southeast Asia is still a long way away from evolving into a ‘security community’ and ASEAN falls far short of existing as a ‘security institution’, ASEAN is nevertheless an institution that offers vulnerable Southeast Asian states a greater leverage when dealing with much larger powers in the region. Indeed, the virtue of ASEAN being a weak institution is that while it is a convenient vehicle for small states to periodically bind together when dealing with larger powers, it allows member

⁵⁵ For example, see Robert Sutter, *China’s Rise in Asia – Promises, Prospects and Implications for the United States*,” *Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies: Occasional Paper Series*, February 2005.

states to develop their own security relations with the US and other partners. Moreover, as argued earlier, the existence of ASEAN allows the US a forum to entrench and enhance its strategic leadership, and help shape an institution that can help constrain Chinese ambitions.⁵⁶

The US should learn lessons from how China has cleverly seized onto Southeast Asia as a region and utilized ASEAN forums to enhance its strategic weight in Asia and attempt to lure Southeast Asian states away from the American sphere of influence. Chinese attempts to play the role as regional multilateral enthusiast par excellence and chief courtier of ASEAN is really an attempt to arouse enthusiasm for Chinese regional leadership amongst Southeast Asian states. Significantly, China has successfully launched over thirty ASEAN-China mechanisms in recent times while the US has initiated less than ten.

In contrast to Beijing's tireless diplomacy in the region, decisions taken such as the failure of then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to attend the ASEAN Regional Forum in Laos in 2005 was a careless diplomatic faux pas by the Bush Administration which played out badly in the region. Although frequently dismissed as 'talk fests' by Washington's diplomats, enthusiastic American participation in ASEAN-led forums signal to the region that the US is prepared to underwrite and work within the existing structures and processes of the region – the overwhelming preference of almost all Southeast Asian states.

⁵⁶ See also John Lee, "China's ASEAN Invasion," *The National Interest*, May/June, 2007.

In this context, Washington signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in July 2009⁵⁷ is an important symbolic gesture even though the TAC has little legal or strategic import. The appointment of Scot Marciel as the US Ambassador to ASEAN is another worthwhile gesture⁵⁸ that was warmly received by member states. Although diplomatically tedious, enthusiastic American participation sends a strong signal to political elites and populations within Southeast Asian states that the US will be a cooperative and attentive leader in the region rather than an overbearing and aloof one. This will help the US-led security hierarchy in Asia endure.

Conclusion

We need to better understand the workings of the here-and-now in Asia in order to meet the challenges for the future. Just as strategic disaster can result when underestimating the rise of emerging powers and ignoring our own weaknesses, it can also result from underestimating one's own strengths and built-in advantages.

The US remains well placed in Asia having accumulated decades of good will in the region but it needs to build on its advantages. America and its partners would do well to correctly read the security dynamics in the region that defines how Washington's strategic influence is acquired, preserved, and wielded – to the enormous benefit of the region - before giving up the advantage prematurely.

⁵⁷ <http://www.aseansec.org/PR-42AMM-US-Signed-TAC.pdf>

⁵⁸ <http://www.aseansec.org/21496.htm>

