

# Chapter 7

## The US Role in the Future Security Architecture for East Asia

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Although the US role in East Asia over the period 1900–45 was by no means inconsequential, this investigation will take up the story from 1945. Washington approached the questions of post-war arrangements in Europe and East Asia with one big lesson from the First World War in mind: that staying engaged and shaping the course of events directly was smarter than walking away and trusting the local powers to preclude history repeating itself. In Europe, even though the United States had a decisive voice after the defeat of Nazi Germany, the winners' side of the table was pretty crowded with the likes of the United Kingdom, France and the Soviet Union. In East Asia, the United States had a freer hand, and the success of the Manhattan Project allowed the defeat of Japan to be accelerated sufficiently to make the bargains struck at Potsdam in June 1945 regarding Soviet participation in ending the war in the Pacific all but redundant.

At the same time, East Asia did not compare with Europe as a region that had and should continue to engage US interests comprehensively. Japan was both an enemy (vanquished, but to be kept down) and the only state in a vast region that had any pedigree as an advanced, industrial power and thus the potential to be a profitable economic and, imaginably, political partner for the United States. Moreover, despite an abundance of signs that relations with the Soviet Union were going to be a defining difficulty of the post-war period, the United States de-mobilised quite extravagantly in the years 1945–49 and resisted the notion that a new 'war' was already underway which would require it to maintain substantial armed forces on a permanent basis. These inhibitions were abandoned with the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 1949. The Soviet nuclear test in August 1949 and US President Harry S. Truman's decision to develop the hydrogen bomb a few months later confirmed that there would be no re-consideration or turning back. Truman also commissioned the preparation of a study of what a Cold War with, and containment of, the Soviet Union would imply for the military capabilities the United States would have to regard as 'normal' even in peacetime. This study, *United States Objectives and Programs for National Security* (NSC-68), was completed in April 1950 and

recommended full-scale development of the nuclear forces alongside the comprehensive re-development of US conventional forces. But, in the absence of a clear political trigger to justify re-armament, NSC-68 languished.

East Asia, of course, ranked a poor second to Europe. The communist victory in China's civil war appears to have been regarded in Washington, at least initially, more as a disappointment than a strategic reversal. Similarly, China's early occupation of Taiwan to complete the process was anticipated and accepted. The United States was disillusioned with its local partners in the southern half of Korea and began withdrawing its forces in 1949. These several straws came together in a now-famous speech by US Secretary of State Allen Dulles in January 1950 which implied only too clearly that the United States saw its vital interests in Northeast Asia as limited to the Japanese islands. A few months later, in June 1950, the United States nonetheless promptly decided to contest North Korea's Soviet-enabled invasion of South Korea, to endorse NSC-68 as an initial blueprint for a characteristically spectacular re-armament program (the Pentagon budget went up more than three-fold in real terms between 1950 and 1953), and, on the second day of the war, 26 June 1950, to view China's expected invasion of Taiwan as an unhelpful complication that should be deterred by deploying the 7th Fleet to the Taiwan Strait. At the time, China had no known association with the invasion, and disguised its infiltration of volunteers during October and November 1950 until the last possible moment. This prompt sealing-off of Taiwan suggests that, in the early months of 1950, the United States had become at least ambivalent about what it would do if China moved against the island.

The United States had toyed with a Pacific counterpart to NATO, but this only made sense to the United States if Japan was included while Japan's inclusion deterred every other interested party. America's appetite for additional 'entangling alliances', especially in theatres of secondary importance, faded until the Korean War revived the imperatives needed to overcome these domestic hesitations. America's military footprint in East Asia can therefore be said to have been supported in a rather general sense by the drift toward the Cold War and the resolve to posture itself to 'contain' Soviet expansion during the late 1940s, but with the specifics driven by the imperatives of the Korean War: larger forces permanently deployed in Japan, the new commitments to the defence of South Korea and Taiwan and codified bilateral security arrangements with the Philippines, Thailand and Australia/New Zealand—the so-called 'hubs and spokes' pattern of alliances rather than a single collective security pact along the lines of NATO. Apart from the changed arrangements with Taiwan, including the withdrawal of all US forces, following US-China re-engagement in 1972, this US military presence in East Asia remained unchanged for 50 years.

The American purpose in committing itself to the indefinite forward-deployment of significant military capabilities was to preclude the use

or threat of use of force to change boundaries, to as far as possible deny the Soviet Union and China any soft options for the spread of communism, and to reassure itself and the wider region that Japanese militarism was a thing of the past. An additional driver, prominent in the preceding century but much less so in the early years after the Second World War, was that a generally stable region would be hospitable to US trade and investment. Over time, as the Japanese economic miracle of 1955–70 sparked comparable phases of dramatic growth in South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and other ASEAN states, most elites in Asia subscribed to the view that there was a powerful association between the US military presence and East Asia's strategic tranquility on the one hand and the region's transforming economic dynamism on the other hand. Not even the trauma of the Vietnam War seemed to dent this view. Indeed, most seem to subscribe to former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's assessment that the Vietnam War bought an additional decade for the new non-communist states of Asia to build their economic and political resilience. Unsurprisingly, official US justifications for sustaining their forward presence in Asia, directed equally at domestic and foreign audiences, began to refer more prominently to this presence as the 'oxygen' that sustained growth and development.

The end of the Cold War in 1989–91 naturally rocked the foundations of this US-dominated security system in East Asia. Washington reacted first (but under strident public pressure), moving unilaterally to declare that the new circumstances allowed the US Administration to initiate a significant drawdown in US forces stationed abroad in Europe and Asia, but without stepping back from the security obligations that these forces were intended to meet. In other words, the United States wanted to (and thought it safely could) thin-out its forward-deployed forces without signalling any basic transformation of its global security posture. East Asians apparently thought otherwise, viewing the drawdown alongside America's withdrawal from its large bases in the Philippines as potentially destabilising. The signals of discomfort and concern received in the United States were such that the drawdown was terminated well short of the target, and the United States Government set out to reassure Asian audiences that it would keep 100 000 US military personnel forward-deployed in Asia into the indefinite future. Even so, Washington found that fully repairing the loss of confidence in its resolve to underwrite regional security took several years.

Less visibly, an entirely different policy response to the end of the Cold War was taking shape in the Pentagon. The then Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, was in the market for a new grand strategy—some coherent set of ideas that could replace the Soviet Union as guidance for US foreign and security policy settings in place of what he saw as a rather aimless and potentially dangerous dissipation of US power.

It is important to note, first of all, that the central thesis of the Pentagon strategy was not the literal adoption of a particular strand of obscure academic thinking. It would seem that the foundations for the strategy were built up rather pragmatically—‘discovered’ as Cheney put it—by officials of the neo-conservative persuasion in response to the challenge of defending the Pentagon’s budget from the pressures for a post Cold War peace dividend. An influential consideration in crafting this strategy was that the United States had endured some major scares during the Cold War and should at all costs avoid the emergence of another ‘peer competitor’. Given the opportunity to build a new order, the first requirement was to avoid getting back into a glass jar with another scorpion (the classic depiction of the United States and the Soviet Union in circumstances of mutual assured destruction). The obvious precursor to a global rival was the emergence of a regional hegemon where the resources of the hegemon and its immediate region provided the strategic muscle to challenge the United States globally. This, too, had to be prevented. Regions like Africa and Latin America could be ruled out with reasonable confidence as a springboard for global rivalry with the United States, but Europe, the Middle East and East Asia were another matter.

The neo-conservative prescription differed significantly from that of the Realists—the mainstream school of thought about these matters. Realists contended that the US propensity toward idealism and messianism had to be held in check by a rigorous focus on ‘national interests’. The policy prescription from this school was to guard against the risk that winning the Cold War would encourage the view that the United States—the state that was the exception to all other hegemonic powers the world had ever experienced—was now free to reshape the world to its advantage, and that doing so would be recognised by all (or nearly all) as to their benefit as well. Realists favoured the discipline of recognising the limits of US power and confining the nation’s foreign policy ambitions to the protection and advancement of rigorously defined national interests.<sup>1</sup>

The draft Pentagon strategy called for the United States to be the dominant outside power in the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions to protect access to oil. In Europe and Asia, the United States would seek to prevent any of the resident major powers from dominating the region and perhaps using the consolidated resources of the region as a springboard to global power status. On Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), the draft noted that ‘the United States could be faced with the question of whether to take military steps to prevent the development or use of weapons of mass destruction’—a rather clear indication that pre-emption could emerge as the preferred or necessary option.

The draft went a crucial step further: it suggested that the United States should actively discourage the emergence of potentially competitive powers,

and pointed to several policy settings that would contribute to this objective. Specifically:

First, the United States must show the leadership necessary to establish and protect a new order that holds the promise of convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests. Second, in the non-defense areas, we must account sufficiently for the interests of the advanced industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order. Finally, we must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role. An effective reconstitution capability is important here, since it implies that a potential rival could not hope to quickly or easily gain a predominant military position in the world.<sup>2</sup>

These thoughts went to the heart of the brief. They mandated a militarily dominant United States capable of acting independently when collective action could not be orchestrated and visibly positioned to increase its military power faster than any potential competitor. Cheney considered these strands of thinking to be a promising step toward a strategy that would be politically viable and would protect US military superiority.

This strategy would commit the United States to a very demanding and costly international role into the indefinite future, something that the American public was seeking to get away from. Strangely, however, no other groups in the foreign and security policy community in Washington had yet even been exposed to it, let alone persuaded of its merits. In other words, there had been no whole-of-government assessment and review. In fact, the Pentagon strategy ran counter to sentiments elsewhere in the US Administration, particularly in the White House, and may even have been intended to contest these sentiments. For example, US President George H.W. Bush's *National Security Strategy* of August 1991 said:

If the end of the Cold War lives up to its promise and liberates U.S. policy from many of its earlier concerns, we should be able to concentrate more on enhancing security—in the developing world, particularly through means that are more political, social and economic than military.

...

In the face of competing fiscal demands and a changing but still dangerous world, we have developed a new defense strategy that provides the conceptual framework for our future forces. This new strategy will guide our deliberate reductions *to no more than the forces we need to defend our interests and meet our global responsibilities.*<sup>3</sup>

When a copy of the Pentagon document was leaked to the *New York Times* in March 1992, its thesis was savaged from all sides, and it was disowned by Bush. A new draft, appropriately softer in tone and giving new prominence to the importance of allies and the United Nations, was also 'leaked' (in May 1992) without reviving the controversy. After this, as the Presidential election campaign of 1992 intensified, the issue seemed to disappear.

We now know, however, that Cheney tasked Lewis 'Scooter' Libby (then assistant to the then US Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz) to further develop the basic ideas of the strategy.<sup>4</sup> Libby endorsed the core proposition that US military superiority should be so stark and overwhelming that no other state would even consider setting out on the long road to challenge it, but he added that this superiority should be extant rather than dependent on a reconstitution capability. In this way, unipolarity, at least in the military dimension, would remain a permanent feature of the international landscape.

In the last days of the George H.W. Bush Administration (that is, in January 1993), Cheney issued a document called *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*.<sup>5</sup> Journalists learned later that this was in fact a sanitised version of the Pentagon strategy. It is instructive, therefore, to take a closer look at this statement.

Cheney's defence strategy was an eminently marketable product, presenting a relatively optimistic view of the security outlook and highlighting allies (frequently) as a critical strategic asset for the United States. Its network of alliances constituted a 'zone of peace' and a 'framework for security not through competitive rivalry in arms, but through cooperative approaches and collective security institutions'.<sup>6</sup>

Several interesting themes permeated the document. One was the notion that the end of the Cold War had given the United States greater 'strategic depth'. This outcome, which took as given the fact that the United States was militarily dominant in every region that mattered, resulted from two factors. First, the Soviet Union was no longer there to boost the military potential of regional actors threatening US interests. Second, absent the pervasive ideological contest with the Soviet Union and the Cold War concern that even peripheral Soviet gains could begin to tip the central balance, the United States no longer had to spread its resources to cover every front. It now had greater choice about where it should focus its energy. A third factor might be regarded as implicit in these two, but is worth drawing out. The demise of the Soviet Union not only greatly enhanced America's relative power; it also made it much safer for the United States to exercise that power. During the Cold War, any clash of US and Soviet armed forces carried an irreducible risk of escalation to strategic nuclear war. This inhibiting risk was now gone. Cheney's document stressed that this

relatively luxurious position had been won at great cost and should therefore not be 'squandered'.

A second theme Cheney stressed was that allied support was most effectively assured if it was clear that the United States had the ability, and the will, to win by itself if necessary. History, the document plausibly argued, 'suggests that effective multilateral action is most likely to come about in response to US leadership, not as an alternative to it'.<sup>7</sup> Preserving the ability to act independently was essential insurance, and responded to the lessons of history. Later, and with considerable prescience, the document addressed possible domestic impediments to the role it recommended the United States play. Specifically, Cheney's document argued that the security challenges of the future would not be the major, global, relatively 'black and white' contests that the American public could be relied upon to support. On the contrary, US interests in regional conflicts 'may seem less apparent' and US involvement rather more optional. To counter the risk that future administrations may find it difficult to generate or sustain public support for military ventures in distant places, the United States needed the capacity to respond decisively to regional crises, 'to win quickly and with minimum casualties'.

The document did not repeat the proposal that the United States should actively discourage the emergence of rival powers, but it came close:

It is not in our interest or those of the other democracies to return to earlier periods in which multiple military powers balanced against one another in what passed for security structures, while regional, or even global peace hung in the balance.

...

Our fundamental belief in democracy and human rights gives other nations confidence that our significant military power threatens no one's aspirations for peaceful democratic progress.<sup>8</sup>

Other language in the document betrayed a deep appreciation of the political options that flowed from America's emergence from the Cold War as a military colossus. The notion of shaping security environments is a very old one. It refers to activities, including military activities, designed to discourage and deter developments deemed injurious to the national interest. Cheney's document, however, goes a significant step further to suggest, throughout, that the US objective should be to *preclude* (that is, make impossible) regional threats and challenges, or hostile non-democratic powers from dominating regions of importance to the United States. This posture, the document states, 'is not simply within our means: it is critical to our future security'.<sup>9</sup> Many analysts would see in this observation evidence of the propensity in hegemonic states toward strategic over-reach; that is, toward the adoption of postures that almost ensure

the eventual exhaustion of the capacity or the collapse of the political will needed to sustain them.

The Pentagon strategy essentially disappeared from view for nearly a decade; that is, for the two terms of the Clinton Administration, for the Bush/Gore election campaign in 2000, and, so it seemed, for the first 18 months of the George W. Bush Administration. Eventually, in June 2002, Bush quite abruptly declared the Pentagon strategy to be the policy of the United States, using the starkest formulations of its key premises. Speaking at the West Point military academy on 1 June 2002, Bush said:

As we defend the peace, we also have an historic opportunity to preserve the peace. We have our best chance since the rise of the nation state in the 17th century to build a world where the great powers compete in peace instead of prepare for war. The history of the last century, in particular, was dominated by a series of destructive national rivalries that left battlefields and graveyards across the Earth. Germany fought France, the Axis fought the Allies, and then the East fought the West, in proxy wars and tense standoffs, against a backdrop of nuclear Armageddon.

Competition between great nations is inevitable, but armed conflict in our world is not. More and more, civilized nations find ourselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos. America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.<sup>10</sup>

Several facets of the Pentagon strategy are of particular interest. First, in advocating that the US step forward and declare its intention to take charge, and to ensure that its leadership could not be challenged, the strategy departed from a posture that US Administrations had consistently preferred for over a century. Second, the strategy had been wholly crafted within the Pentagon and had never been subjected to the usual inter-agency review and assessment. Third, the strategy never formed the basis of anyone's political platform and was therefore never tested electorally. In mid-2002, with the enduring shock of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the 'axis of evil', the doctrine of pre-emption and the political manoeuvring over regime change in Iraq, the announcement made little impact. In the circumstances, it seemed all but redundant. Still, enough of the senior leadership in the Bush Administration attached importance to seeing it adopted as a formal policy setting. It is true, of course, that Bush won a second term in 2004 (what he has described as an 'accountability moment' for his policies), but it seems fair to say that the Pentagon's 'grand strategy' was so completely sidelined by Iraq and the global 'war on terror' that it had no visibility with the electorate.



The Clinton Administration, as could be inferred from its election slogan '*It's the economy, stupid*', shared the instincts of its predecessor and opted for caution in the realm of foreign and security policy. Its 'bottom up' review of the US defence posture identified the Korean Peninsula and the Persian Gulf as the two most testing security challenges that could arise, particularly if they erupted at about the same time. Thus, coping with two medium regional conflicts (2MRC) occurring in overlapping timeframes became the benchmark against which the Pentagon measured the adequacy of its capabilities. Other challenges, especially terrorism, the proliferation of WMD and the characteristic of asymmetry inherent in these phenomena received a prominent mention, but were basically subsumed in the more traditional 2MRC mission. Moreover, this mission basically validated the forward-deployments that had emerged from the Cold War.

The eight years of Bill Clinton's presidency witnessed an increasingly heated debate about the scope for the information revolution and capacities for long-range precision strike, in particular, to transform the conduct of conventional warfare, especially if there was the courage to not only acquire the technologies but to explore the capacity of radically different military formations, command and control arrangements, and arrangements for the collection and dissemination of intelligence to capture the full synergistic potential of these new technologies. Although the pile of major studies pointing to the possibility that the United States could 'transform' conventional war and place itself far ahead of all potential rivals grew higher throughout the 1990s, the Clinton Administration saw no compelling reason to rush into this new era. The Pentagon's 1998 *East Asian Strategy Report* observed that while

this transformation involves harnessing new technologies, operational concepts and organizational structures to give U.S. forces greater mobility, flexibility and military capabilities so that they can dominate any future battlefield, the administration judged that the improvements in military hardware and support systems are not yet at the stage of fundamentally altering our strategic perceptions or force structure in the region, or elsewhere around the world.<sup>11</sup>

The stridency of the debate, and the progressive breakdown of bipartisanship even on national security, was reflected in the decision of the US Congress to establish a National Defense Panel (NDP) to critique the Administration's *Quadrennial Defense Review* of 1997. The NDP castigated the 2MRC as precluding the acquisition of capabilities within reach and important to coping with the different security challenges taking shape: mobility, stealth, speed, increased range, precision strike, and a smaller logistical footprint. Part of the US Administration's caution stemmed from the view that the US military had to remain ready at all times to defeat large-scale trans-border aggression by a significant military power or coalition. For many, however, including the authors

of the NDP, available technologies had already transformed the nature of war such that the United States no longer had to think in terms of massive, force-on-force engagements even for the largest imaginable military threats.

The Clinton Administration, in opting to defer full-scale exploration of these possibilities, also refined its thinking about how America's extant military posture, particularly in Asia, effectively advanced US interests. *The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region, 1998*, is worth quoting in full on this score:

U.S. military presence in Asia has long provided critical and symbolic contributions to regional security. Our forces stationed in Japan and Korea, as well as those rotated throughout the region, promote security and stability, deter conflict, give substance to our security commitments and ensure our continued access to the region.

Our military presence in Asia serves as an important deterrent to aggression, often lessening the need for a more substantial and costly U.S. response later. Today deterrent capability remains critical in areas such as the Korean Peninsula. A visible U.S. force presence in Asia demonstrates firm determination to defend U.S., allied and friendly interests in this critical region.

In addition to its deterrent function, U.S. military presence in Asia serves to shape the security environment to prevent challenges from emerging at all. U.S. force presence mitigates the impact of historical regional tensions and allows the United States to anticipate problems, manage potential threats and encourage peaceful resolution of disputes. Only through active engagement can the United States contribute to constructive political, economic and military development within Asia's diverse environment. Forward presence allows the United States to continue playing a role in broadening regional confidence, promoting democratic values and enhancing common security.

Overseas military presence also provides political leaders and commanders the ability to respond rapidly to crises with a flexible array of options. Such missions may include regional and extra-regional contingencies, from humanitarian relief, non-combatant evacuation and peacekeeping operations to meeting active threats as in the Arabian Gulf. During the Arabian Gulf crisis in early 1998, for example, USS *Independence* deployed to the Gulf and was an important element of our deterrent force posture that alleviated the crisis. Military presence also enhances coalition operations by promoting joint, bilateral and combined training, and encouraging responsibility sharing on the part of friends and allies.<sup>12</sup>

In a speech in February 2001, former US President George W. Bush declared that the United States would aspire to keep the peace by *redefining war on its terms*. He did so in the context of announcing that he had given the then US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, carte blanche to transform the US armed forces and take full advantage of new technological capacities. This authority fed into the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR2001)—released on 30 September 2001.<sup>13</sup> Although released shortly after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, and presented as a document that absorbed the lessons of that dreadful event, QDR2001 was arguably the only strategy document crafted by the Bush Administration in a pre-11 September 2001 mindset. And a strong case could be made that, in addition to projecting what the new technologies, operational concepts and organisational structures would mean for force structure and military strategies, QDR2001 also reflected the philosophy that underpinned the ‘grand strategy’ developed in the Pentagon in 1992–93.

The QDR2001 essentially declared that the United States would seek to shape the security environment more directly and across a broader front than it had aspired to do in the past. A key judgement shaping the report was that the security outlook was so fluid that it would be dangerous for the United States to focus on who or where threats to its interests might arise. Instead, it would focus on how capabilities to harm US interests could develop over time and prepare to deal with such challenges wherever they might appear.

The report also made clear that the focus of US attention in strategic and security terms had shifted emphatically to Asia. This region is described as the most susceptible to military competition, containing a volatile mix of rising and declining powers, and as the possible source of a real military competitor to the United States. To reinforce this new strategic focus, and to distinguish it from the historical preoccupation with the Korean Peninsula, the QDR introduced a new region—the East Asian Littoral, defined as the region stretching from south of Japan through Australia and into the Bay of Bengal.

A further key judgement was to require that the capabilities of US forces deployed or stationed abroad be transformed so that they became lighter, more responsive and easier to sustain logistically, but also more lethal. The QDR2001 conveyed the impression of a Pentagon that now looked out upon the entire world as a battlespace and aspired to forces that could be surged quickly within or between regions to create, along with long-range precision strike forces, decisive and persistent military effects at any location. For the Asian theatre, with its vast distances and with the US forward presence heavily concentrated in North Asia, this requirement was also seen to put a premium on developing a wider network of austere bases and support facilities. At the same time, to avoid undue dependence on such bases and support facilities, QDR2001 called

for the capability to conduct sustained operations at great distances with minimal support from within the theatre.

The fallout from the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States meant that Washington's intent to give priority to Asia (the first time in at least 30 years that Asia had displaced Europe and the Middle East) never materialised. One consequence of this, it would seem, was that it strengthened the hand of those in Chinese policy circles who argued that the window of opportunity to give maximum priority to economic development, and gathering the political influence that flowed from success on this front without having to consider focused American counter-strategems, had been extended.

Despite the almost complete diversion of US political and military energies into Iraq since 2002, the *Quadrennial Defense Review* released in 2006 (QDR2006) basically developed and fine-tuned its predecessor.<sup>14</sup> The Pentagon remains committed to shifting away from large garrisons at fixed bases toward expeditionary forces operating out of austere forward bases. QDR2006 speaks undramatically of the need to conduct multiple, overlapping wars<sup>15</sup>—an indicator of how far the Pentagon has moved intellectually from the 2MRC era. Another QDR2001 theme, the need to tailor deterrent and defence strategies to a trilogy of distinctive threats—rogue powers, terrorist networks and near-peer competitors—is reiterated. The Iraq experience produced an important concession in that QDR2006 notes<sup>16</sup> that military force alone cannot succeed against dispersed non-state networks and that the real key lies in creating a global environment inhospitable to terrorism.<sup>17</sup>

QDR2006 also revived the question of China, and directly so rather than elliptically as in QDR2001. Despite China's strenuous claims to military weakness and technological backwardness, QDR2006 considered that 'China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages absent U.S. counter strategies'.<sup>18</sup> The report goes on to itemise the capabilities that China is giving priority to before observing that 'these capabilities, the vast distances of the Asian theater, China's continental depth, and the challenge of en route and in-theater U.S. basing place a premium on forces capable of sustained operations at great distances into denied areas'.<sup>19</sup> The US Navy objective is to place 50 per cent of its aircraft carriers (six ships) and 60 per cent of its submarines (over 30 boats) in the Pacific to support engagement, presence, and deterrence.<sup>20</sup>

The Pentagon's high tempo of operations, the emphasis on expeditionary forces surging to achieve synergistic effects and the blurring of regional boundaries has seen the end of the consolidated statement on the rewards of forward-deployment such as that quoted above from 1998. All the functions and objectives remain, but there is now a stronger disposition to blend these

purposes into more operationalised characterisations of US military missions: irregular challenges (defeating terrorist networks); catastrophic challenges (preventing rogue regimes from acquiring or using WMD); and disruptive challenges (shaping the choices of states at strategic crossroads).

## Taking stock

With Europe as the reference point, and setting aside the forces injected to prosecute the wars in Korea and Vietnam, the fixed elements of the US security posture in Asia have always appeared relatively thin—a limited spider web of bilateral ‘spokes’ radiating out from Washington. Still, it is likely that most political and foreign/security policy elites in the region would judge that this posture has been adequate to the task; that it has provided a sufficiency of confidence in the integrity of a basic regional order to underpin the region’s impressive economic development.

It might also be agreed that the US posture has not been about micro-management of the region’s affairs but instead directed at the big picture—the deterrence of the use or threat of use of force to secure fundamental change in the region’s political and security order. Finally, it would probably be agreed that, with significant variations over the years in terms of intensity and directness, China has always ranked among the important targets whose thinking and actions the United States has endeavoured to influence. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, China has unquestionably been *the* most important target.

The long cycles in China-US relations over the past 50 years have been elegantly explored by James Mann in *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton*.<sup>21</sup> China has never been enamoured of the US alliances with Asian states and the forward-deployed forces that attended these arrangements. But China’s tolerance of these arrangements fluctuated pragmatically in response to factors like the state of China-Soviet relations, and whether the alliances continued to deliver outcomes of value to China, particularly effective constraints on Japanese military power but also a reliable stalemate on the Korean Peninsula. A more subtle consideration is that confidence in the US-backed security framework has permitted the smaller states in East Asia, especially those in Southeast Asia, to engage China unreservedly as a rewarding economic partner—a posture that has proved to be extremely beneficial for China.

There is speculation however that, from about the time of the near-confrontation with the United States over Taiwan in 1996, China’s assessment has been that the direct and prominent US role in the security equation in East Asia was no longer in China’s interests. Some point to China’s relentless marketing of its new security concept, and the associated strong

criticism of existing arrangements as hegemonic, anachronistic and reflective of a 'Cold War mentality', as evidence of this. Others suggest that while China may now be of this view, its political judgement remains that China must be patient and endure the status quo on the security front so that it can continue to give first priority to rebuilding its economic capacity.

Assuming that some such re-evaluation has occurred, the issue of interest becomes the main points of divergence in Chinese and American security interests and why these might now outweigh the benefits that once flowed from the US security presence and, to some extent, presumably continue to do so.

Taiwan is undoubtedly the most prominent and consequential of these points of divergence. This issue has bedevilled the China-US relationship since 1950 and has been at the heart of several major confrontations, including a couple of incidents in the 1950s that involved serious consideration by the United States of its nuclear options. China has made it clear that it would have no choice but to use force if Taiwan, as a perceived integral part of China, attempted to achieve formal independence. The United States is equally locked into the position that it cannot allow the status quo to be altered by force. There has been adequate 'wiggle room' between these positions to allow the issue to be continually finessed. Neither the United States nor China wants a war over Taiwan, and China has all but acknowledged that it would probably lose a military contest if the issue blew up in the medium-term future and the United States elected to get involved quickly and unreservedly. This prospect may have motivated the occasional warning from senior Chinese figures that China would not exclude escalation to the level of strategic nuclear threats against the United States.

In recent years, the concern has become that Beijing views a Taiwanese push for independence as an irreducible risk that necessitates, within the overall priority attached to 'peaceful development', the acquisition of military capabilities that will more reliably deter Taiwan even if it assumes US involvement. This has been the Pentagon's judgement for some time. QDR2006 reaffirmed this judgement, asserting that 'Chinese military modernization has accelerated since the mid-to-late 1990s in response to central leadership demands to develop military options against Taiwan scenarios'.<sup>22</sup>

The second specific issue arising from US military engagement in East Asia and involving a significant clash of important Chinese and US interests probably concerns Japan. Specifically, it would appear that the US-Japan alliance, once viewed by China as a constraint on Japan's acquisition of comprehensive conventional military capabilities and the 'normalisation' of Japanese attitudes toward the use of its armed forces to protect and advance the national interest, is now seen as a springboard for these developments. When the former was the case, it constituted a major consideration in China's reluctance to oppose the US alliance system. But while it is a weighty issue, it is diffuse in the sense that,

unlike Taiwan, it does not contain a clear potential trigger for conflict with the United States. China-Japan territorial disputes, particularly with regards to the Diaoyutai Islands, clearly have the potential to involve Japan's alliance partner, but it still lacks the gravity of the Taiwan issue.

We should bear in mind, of course, that we do not require more than one clash of vital interests to produce a worst-case outcome for the security outlook in East Asia. Still, in examining how the prevailing US security posture toward East Asia might shape the China-US relationship in the future, it seems worthwhile to look beyond the specific and the concrete and to consider some of the more subjective or intangible dimensions of this issue. The United States has, over the post-war period, become comfortable and familiar with pre-eminence, not least in East Asia. Even under the Clinton Administration, it was rather clear that the United States also became increasingly comfortable with unipolarity and the expanded opportunities for leadership and influence associated with it. This was true even though the United States was aware that unipolarity also expanded its already formidable obligations and responsibilities and made the United States the target of choice for some gathering challenges that focused on irregular or asymmetric capabilities so as to bypass America's overwhelming conventional military power.

US rhetoric on the role it perceived itself playing arguably became more formulaic, more presumptive of its unique status as a natural state of affairs and, together with its support for (democratic) change in the nature of the regime in Beijing, was offensive to states like China that aspired to a greater role in shaping events, particularly in its immediate region. Many Chinese, it seems, anticipate and look forward to the progressive democratisation of governance in China, but this does not preclude resenting any suggestion that acceptance of a strong and influential China is in any way conditional on such a development. The inescapable corollary to US views on the role it is playing in East Asia is that there is no local player with the resources and the national qualities to perform this role as reliably as the United States—again an implicit message that China probably finds vaguely offensive.

This is not the first time that the United States has been accused of slipping onto 'auto-pilot' with respect to its engagement with East Asia. In the early 1990s, Winston Lord, then US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in the Clinton Administration's first term, said in an internal memo (that was subsequently leaked) that the United States was seen in the region as something of a 'nanny' and that this was diminishing its standing and influence.

In addition, events like the Kosovo campaign in 1999, conducted with NATO over the objections (in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)) of China and Russia, the 1995–96 clash over Taiwan, and awareness of the grand strategy

articulated by the Pentagon in 1992–93, would have made China (and a number of other states) more uncertain that the United States would remain a ‘benign hegemon’—a state that was ominously powerful without being an ominous power.

Under the Bush Administration, of course, this relatively subtle, to some extent unconscious and incremental, evolution in America’s appreciation of the potential of its ‘unipolar moment’ was cast aside in favour of overt exploitation and determined defence of this status. Equally, this (neo-conservative) posture of deliberate dominance and of the forceful and proactive promotion of US interests and values (especially liberal democracy) has been thoroughly discredited.

That said, the United States will not soon, or readily, relinquish its position in East Asia. It has expended a great deal of treasure and not a little blood to establish and consolidate this position. Moreover, the impulses of power and prestige, not to mention the economic rewards from a region that is stable, progressively more democratic, and economically dynamic (including an increasingly open trading regime), will endure. The United States not only has the power to project itself into East Asia if it must; many if not most states in the region can be expected to continue to welcome a prominent US role into the indefinite future.

There are unmistakable signs that the United States is casting about for a less taxing mode of leadership and that it will exhibit greater acceptance of the inevitable but gradual erosion of its status as the unipolar power. Coral Bell of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) has speculated that the prevailing and emerging circumstances may be relatively conducive to global governance by a *concert of powers* rather than the *balance of powers*, implicit in the expectation that the global system will trend back to multipolarity.<sup>23</sup> A concert of powers, clearly, is a more collegiate arrangement and more accommodating of significant power differentials among participating states.

The most conspicuous sign from Washington was the speech in September 2005 by the then US Deputy Secretary of State, Robert B. Zoellick, advocating that China think in terms of being a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the international system, to accept responsibility to strengthen the system that has contributed so much to its success, and to look to working with the United States to ‘shape the future international system’.<sup>24</sup> Other signs include a preparedness to engage North Korea and Iran on their nuclear ambitions rather than simply demand that they change their ways.

The United States and China cannot escape a long process of adjustment to the gradual transformation in their relative strategic weight. The twilight of the unipolar era will be measured in decades. A great deal of statesmanship and diplomacy will be called for to prevent the inevitable frictions that will attend



this process from degenerating and hardening into deeper animosities. If this is a broadly reasonable prognosis, the earlier these two countries commit to a process of determined engagement and to building robust channels of communication and dialogue, the greater the likelihood of success over the longer term. To the extent that we have a real choice as to whether unipolarity fades gradually into a multipolar balance of power or a concert, that choice rests primarily with the United States. Yet there is much that the other major powers can do to shape US thinking.

At various times over the past 30 years or so, the United States has assigned carriage of the US-China relationship to very senior people: Zbigniew Brzezinski and Alexander Haig come to mind, although I have no knowledge of who their Chinese counterparts may have been. What is striking, however, is that there has been nothing comparable to the intellectual engagement that Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai managed to build during 1971–75. The danger, perhaps, is that both countries will remain reluctant for some time to give such ‘determined engagement’ a real chance. In Washington, which often finds it difficult to think long-term, China may continue to be viewed as too distant an issue to be placed at the top of the agenda. Beijing, equally, may view any fundamental engagement with the United States in the near term as too risky, because it will be seen as engaging on the modalities of a US-designed world with a United States that is still comprehensively more powerful than China.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Robert Kagan, ‘A retreat From Power?’, *Commentary*, July 1995, pp. 19–25.
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in Patrick E. Tyler, ‘US Strategy Plan Calls for Ensuring No Rivals Develop: A One Superpower World’, *New York Times*, 8 March 1992.
- <sup>3</sup> President George H.W. Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, White House, Washington, DC, August 1991. [emphasis added]
- <sup>4</sup> James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet*, Penguin, New York, 2004, p. 211.
- <sup>5</sup> Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, Washington, DC, January 1993.
- <sup>6</sup> Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, p. 2.
- <sup>7</sup> Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, p. 4.
- <sup>8</sup> Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, p. 4.
- <sup>9</sup> Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, p. 8.
- <sup>10</sup> President George W. Bush, Graduation Speech at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, 1 June 2002.
- <sup>11</sup> Secretary of Defense William Cohen, *The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region*, Department of Defense, November 1998, p. 16, available at <<http://www.dod.mil/pubs/easr98/easr98.pdf>>, accessed 17 June 2009.
- <sup>12</sup> Cohen, *The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region*, pp. 9–10.
- <sup>13</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, 30 September 2001.
- <sup>14</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR2006)*, 6 February 2006, available at <<http://www.comw.org/qdr/qdr2006.pdf>>, accessed 17 June 2009.
- <sup>15</sup> Department of Defense, QDR2006, p. 4.
- <sup>16</sup> Department of Defense, QDR2006, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Department of Defense, QDR2006, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Department of Defense, QDR2006, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Department of Defense, QDR2006, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Defense, QDR2006, p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Defense, QDR2006, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Coral Bell, 'The Twilight of the Unipolar World', *The National Interest*, Winter 2005, pp. 1–12.

<sup>24</sup> Robert B. Zoellick, *Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility*, US Department of State, 21 September 2005 (remarks to the National Committee on US-China Relations, New York).