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AMERICA’S ASIA PIVOT – A RETURN TO REALISM?

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Abstract

This working paper demonstrates that the announced “pivot” to Asia by the United States represents a major break with twenty years of liberal and neoconservative priorities in American foreign policy. The pivot to Asia reflects a return to realist thinking in terms of America’s international goals. The paper also shows that this shift is difficult to achieve due to existing priorities in other regions and domestic policy dynamics. The paper begins with a brief explanation of the traditions of idealism and realism in American foreign policy. The analysis then explains the various dynamics necessary to implement the “pivot” to Asia and shows the major constraints on implementing this new approach. The conclusion shows that emerging priorities suggest both a need and capacity for a realist alignment of American foreign policy. However, institutionalized constraints risk undermining America’s ability to adjust to a new set of twenty-first century global economic and security interests.

America's Asia Pivot – A Return to Realism?

By Sean Kay

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Introduction and Overview

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Realism and American Foreign Policy

American foreign policy reflects a long tradition of tension between idealism and realism. Idealism has driven America to advance values derived from a belief in the benefits of cooperation among democracies, the importance of liberty, and a desire to spread commerce to advance economic progress.¹ After the Cold War, idealism was embraced by President Bill Clinton who prioritized spreading democracy as a core foreign policy goal and who said following the 1999 humanitarian war in Kosovo: “Whether you live in Africa or Central Europe, or any other place, if somebody comes after innocent civilians and tries to kill them en masse

¹ For core intellectual foundations, see Emmanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*. Excerpted in Richard K. Betts, ed., *Conflict after the Cold War: Arguments on Causes of War and Peace*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2002); John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (London: Merchant Books, 2011); and Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Simon and Brown, 2013).

because of their race, their ethnic background or their religion, and it's within our power to stop it, we will stop it.”² President George W. Bush said in his 2nd inaugural speech: “...it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”³ In 2009, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, President Barack Obama said: “We lose ourselves when we compromise the very ideals that we fight to defend. And we honor those ideals by upholding them not when it's easy, but when it is hard.”⁴ These worldviews were not new - America's sense of place in the world dates to the founding period and, in particular, the Declaration of Independence. Presidents from Woodrow Wilson to Ronald Reagan appealed to a sense of moral purpose for America's place in the world. The vision evolved to include a sense of possibility in world order so that, as Michael Doyle summarizes: “The peaceful intent and restraint that liberalism does manifest in limited aspects of its foreign affairs announces the possibility of a world peace this side of the grave or of world conquest...It has strengthened the prospects for a world peace established by the steady expansion of a separate peace among liberal societies.”⁵

By the early twenty-first century, America's foreign policy reflected a triumph of a new idealism derived from a sense of primacy of its values and a belief in exceptionalism that granted it a unique responsibility to use its position as the world's only global superpower to spread its vision of world order. One school, liberals, preferred to expand American ideals via the rules and norms of multilateral institutions, but was also willing to act unilaterally – including via

² Stephen S. Rosenfeld, “Exultant Crusader: For Overseas Rescue Missions, Americans Still Prefer Caution and Care,” *Washington Post*, 2 July 1999.

³ George W. Bush, “2nd Inaugural Address,” Washington, D.C., 20 January 2005.

⁴ Barack Obama, “Speech at the Nobel Institute,” Oslo, Norway, 10 December 2009.

⁵ Michael Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 2,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 206.

military intervention. Another school, neoconservatives, shared the same general vision of world order and American purpose, but expressed deep skepticism of multilateralism and preferred that America lead coalitions of willing states to advance its goals and influence. Both worldviews were idealistic in their sense of the sources of human motivations and a belief that good triumphs over bad. These were the perspectives that took America into a series of military operations like in Kosovo and Iraq and to policies like the enlargement of NATO into Central and Eastern Europe. At the core of this idealist worldview was a common belief among those with idealist leaning to see inherently unique value in “American leadership”.

Realism as an approach to foreign policy differs somewhat from the more theoretical assumptions that guide academic thinking and scholarship. Realism is less a theory of foreign policy but rather a set of assumptions about why and how states behave as they do. Thus the idea that American primacy as a stabilizing role in the international system can be a realist objective – and the idealist assumptions that accompany it can be a tool of justifying and sustaining mobilization for a global military role even in a time of general peace. There are many levels of realism that can frame and guide a nation’s foreign policy. Primacy, for example, suggests that there is a hierarchy of power in the world. It is thus natural that the most powerful state will have many interests in stabilizing potentially dangerous parts of the world because sustaining peace can be more cost effective than waging war if order breaks down.⁶ Charles Krauthammer introduced the concept of a “unipolar moment” to describe America’s post-Cold War position, arguing: “The true geopolitical structure of the post-Cold War world...[is] a single pole of world power that consists of the United States at the apex of the industrial West.

⁶ See Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Perhaps it is more accurate to say the United States, and behind it the West.”⁷ Seeing the taming of great power competition and stability as cheaper than the alternative, Krauthammer argues that the United States should not “...want to forfeit unipolarity for the familiarity of traditional multipolarity” as “multipolarity is inherently fluid and unpredictable.”⁸ Michael Mastanduno, meanwhile, demonstrates that, after the Cold War, the United States pursued a grand strategy of securing and expanding American primacy in the international system.⁹ Samuel J. Huntington writes: “...primacy is thus an alternative to war...A state such as the United States that has achieved international primacy has every reason to attempt to maintain that primacy through peaceful means so as to preclude the need to fight a war to maintain it.”¹⁰

Primacy, as a variation on hegemonic power, however, is built on assumptions that have proven to be inherently problematic. Primacy requires expanding global commitments and engagements which can often conflate core and peripheral national interests. Consequently, America is called on to show credibility of commitments whether they are of vital interest or not. It also creates negative incentives in which allies and partners which could otherwise be force-multipliers that enhance American power instead are better off free-riding or piggy-backing onto American power – often providing the bare minimum of commitment to their own security costs. These incentives thus require America to engage, often with military power, in areas that are better suited for allies to take responsibility for managing their own interests. Moreover, as primacy came to subsume both liberal and neoconservative idealist justifications it also meant conflating the spread of democracy with American national interests. This could therefore

⁷ Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs: America and the World*, vol. 70, no. 1 (1990-91): 23-33.

⁸ Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment Revisited,” *The National Interest* 70 (winter 2002-03): 13.

⁹ Michael Mastanduno, “Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War,” *International Security*, vol. 21, no. 4 (spring 1997): 49-88.

¹⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, “Why International Primacy Matters,” *International Security*, vol. 17, no. 4 (spring 1993): 68-83.

expose the United States to charges of being a hypocrite when its interests require it to work with authoritarian governments like in Saudi Arabia or Egypt. If global primacy means spreading democracy, then the conflation of interests with values can pull the United States into costly political and military engagements that it might have been better off avoiding – as with the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It is very expensive to be the world’s policeman and the end result can be to erode the internal sources of American power that made it strong in the first place. Domestically, the twenty-year mobilization for primacy, justified by the advancement of liberal and neoconservative idealism, was accompanied by entrenched domestic interests that often prefer to maintain the new status quo of priorities and budgets. These domestic variables consequently present the United States with serious planning dilemmas which make a new realist-driven alternative foreign policy approach difficult to achieve.

When applying realism to foreign policy it is important to note that there can be strategic and tactical distinctions. An idealist can claim that being “tough” and using power is an important tool for advancing policy goals – be they idealist or realist. Idealists and realists also can claim that one cannot “appease” aggression and thus being “resolute” and not negotiating with adversaries is an essential foreign policy attribute – though a realist, like Richard Nixon, might be willing to discard ideologically driven ideals in favor of stability. At the operational level, there is a necessary distinction between situational realism and broader foreign policy interests. For example, a military officer commanding troops on the ground in Iraq might see the immediacy of their situation as requiring more troops, more money, and more time to accomplish objectives and they would be right. Yet that immediate reality tells us little about whether America should have been in Iraq at all. Realism, however, does offer alternative frameworks that can inform efforts to provide balance to American foreign policy. Realists believe national

interests are best determined by gathering sound information about the world, a country's position relative to others, and then states can make rational decisions derived from cost-benefit analysis. Realists tend to see ambitious idealism as a potentially dangerous diversion from vital interests which can drain a nation of power. As President John Quincy Adams said in a speech to the House of Representatives in 1821, America does not go forth "in search of monsters to destroy." Quincy Adams did not disavow American ideals – and saw America as the "well wisher of freedom and independence of all" – encouraging, but not spreading it – because America is the "champion and vindicator only of her own."¹¹ He saw America's march as one of the mind, not dominion, and instilled a belief that the best way to spread values abroad was to build the best society at home. These views were advanced in the 20th century by one of America's most prominent diplomats and realist scholars, George F. Kennan. Kennan, the primary architect of America's cold war "containment" defensive doctrine towards the Soviet Union, wrote in 1999 that: "This whole tendency to see ourselves as the center of political enlightenment and as teachers to a great part of the rest of the world strikes me as unthought-through, vainglorious, and undesirable. If you think that our life here at home has meritorious aspects worthy of enumeration by peoples elsewhere, the best way to recommend them is, as John Quincy Adams maintained, not by preaching at others but by the force of example. I could not agree more."¹²

Foreign policy realists tend to prioritize stable relations among great powers and engagement with others driven by interests and not idealist assumptions about their governing systems. In terms of foreign policy, realists thus see power as the determining factor that shapes

¹¹ John Quincy Adams, "Address to the U.S. House of Representatives, 4 July 1821, available at <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3484> (accessed in May 2013).

¹² Richard Ullman, "The US and the World: An Interview with George Kennan," June 1999, interview published in the *New York Review of Books*, available at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1999/aug/12/the-us-and-the-world-an-interview-with-george-kennan/?pagination=false> (accessed in May 2013).

outcomes – but that power can be applied in support of diplomacy and defined in both military and relative economic terms.¹³ Because realism insists on seeing the world as it is, not as we wish it might be, it can help states to delineate priorities in their foreign policy. Realists also point out what can go wrong if policies are driven by idealist visions that ignore hard calculations of the national interest. These kinds of tough choices are not necessarily pleasing but often necessary – as Kenneth N. Waltz wrote regarding the Cold War: “Although we would prefer that East Europeans freely choose their governors, we may nevertheless understand that the Soviet Union’s managing a traditionally volatile part of the world has its good points.”¹⁴ Crucially, realism helps policymakers understand the dangers of overstretch resulting from the quest for primacy and idealism when ambition outpaces capacity or when peripheral issues drain the domestic foundations of power.¹⁵ Realists also show policy makers that the best way to appeal to other nations can be by leading through example, rather than imposing values on others. Realism does not negate the role of morality in shaping foreign policy decisions, but rather seeks to better define the conditions in which moral assumptions might relate to national interests. Finally, realists can be optimistic about international cooperation if states choose to define their interests in terms of mutual gains.¹⁶

The United States has had its greatest success stories when idealist and realist thinking exist in a balance. When out of balance, major disasters have occurred as with the initial idealist overreach of the League of Nations and the over-reaction in the turn to isolationism following its rejection in the US Senate, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan (after 2009). A foreign policy

¹³ For a good survey of realism and its foundations, see John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (winter 1994-1995): 5-49. For additional detail on the role of power, see Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations, Brief Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1992).

¹⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 208-9.

¹⁵ See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁶ Charles Glaser, “Realists as Optimists,” *International Security* vol 19, no. 3 (winter 1994-95): 50-90.

derived exclusively from realism, meanwhile, risks ignoring situations where the use of power to advance moral causes can be effective and it can create self-fulfilling prophecies if not also guided by restraint. Since 1994, realism took a backseat to idealist variations of liberal and neoconservative foreign policy agendas, in part because, as Ashley J. Tellis says: “Realism is alien to the American tradition. It is consciously amoral, focused as it is on interests rather than on values in a debased world. But realism never dies, because it accurately reflects how states actually behave, behind the façade of their values-based rhetoric.”¹⁷ Yet, since Bill Clinton embraced a national security policy of “enlargement and engagement” and “assertive multilateralism” – and George W. Bush embraced the neoconservative worldview in the invasion of Iraq, America has – with varying degrees – ignored key assumptions derived from realism. There have been cases where it was applied – like with the successful containment of Iraq before 2003 and diplomacy backed by economic sanctions and the threat of force used via North Korea and Iran’s nuclear program. But it was only with the announced plans to “pivot” to Asia in late 2011 that the United States appeared to embrace a return to a new, realist-driven general foreign policy strategy.

The Obama Pivot

In his first term, President Barack Obama carried on the Clinton and Bush foreign policy agenda – and populated his foreign policy team with experts who were legacies of the liberal approach to sustaining primacy. In his second term, however, President Obama began a process of realigning major American priorities. The goal was to reduce troops deployed in Europe and

¹⁷ Robert D. Kaplan, “Why John Mearsheimer is Right (About Some Things),” *The Atlantic* (January/February 2012), available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/01/why-john-j-mearsheimer-is-right-about-some-things/308839/> (accessed in May 2012).

encourage more burdensharing among allies there, narrow America's role in the Middle East to focus on the Persian Gulf, pivot to Asia with an array of foreign policy tools, and re-invest in the internal foundations of American power. This would, however, be an easier goal to conceptualize than to implement. The basis for the "pivot" was founded on a realist assessment of the international environment which shows a long-term rise of China but a generally benign international environment that allows the United States to handover responsibility in some parts of the world and to prioritize Asia. As Michael Cohen and Mica Zenko note, great power war seems unthinkable, regional wars are winding down, human rights and democracy have advanced with the end of the Cold War, and major improvements in the quality of people's lives have advanced globally.¹⁸ A second rationale for the pivot to Asia is the realist idea that states should make cost benefit assumptions to guide foreign policy relative to the national interest. Having waged a war in Iraq in 2003 and surged into Afghanistan in 2009 with no clear promise of success, the United States was now looking to better let facts inform worldviews, rather than idealist assumptions and narratives drive policy outcomes. This means that America would instead choose where and how it would intervene rather than sustain global primacy. A third foundation for the pivot can be found in the concept of restraint and reserving power for hedging against future challengers. As Patrick Cronin writes: "The United States can best pursue a protracted period of global order by resisting the temptation to solve all the world's problems."¹⁹ This requires a foreign policy realignment that harnesses American power for the future and avoids the temptation to fix challenges that are peripheral to vital areas of national interests. There is also a moral imperative in this approach because it is not moral to promise to be there

¹⁸ Michael Cohen and Micah Zenko, "Clear and Present Safety: The United States is More Secure than Washington Thinks," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 91, no 2 (March/April 2013): 79.

¹⁹ Patrick Cronin, "Restraint: Recalibrating American Strategy," Center for a New American Security, 6 June 2010, available at <http://www.cnas.org/node/4561> (accessed in October 2013).

for someone, and then not be. As Barry Posen notes regarding the war between Russia and (US partner) Georgia in 2008: "...Georgia acted far too adventurously given its size, proximity to Russia, and distance from any plausible source of military help...This needless war ironically made Russia look tough and the United States unreliable."²⁰ Worse, the idealist agenda which embraced using military power to change governments and spread democracy often employing illiberal tactics such as arbitrary detention, torture, drone attacks on civilians, and mass surveillance of American citizens at home.²¹ Thus idealists are as capable as realists of adopting a Machiavellian "ends justifies the means" approach to foreign policy.

In a speech to the Australian parliament in November 2011, Barack Obama proclaimed that as America re-aligned and reduced defense spending priorities, cuts would not affect America's commitments to the Asia-Pacific. He added that: "With most of the world's nuclear powers and some half of humanity, Asia will largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or cooperation, needless suffering or human progress...As we end today's wars, I have directed my national security team to make our presence and missions in the Asia-Pacific a top priority" and that America would be playing a "larger and long-term role in shaping this region."²² Secretary of State Hillary Clinton added, writing in *Foreign Policy* magazine:

The Asia-Pacific has become a key driver of global politics. Stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas, the region spans two oceans – the Pacific and the Indian – that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy. It boasts of almost half the world's population. It includes many of the key engines of the global economy, as well as the largest emitters of greenhouse gases. It is home to several of our key allies and important emerging powers like China, India, and Indonesia.²³

The American emphasis on Asia was, of course not new. But the suggestion that Asia was the priority signaled a major shift in foreign policy objectives. The policy was not an idealistic

²⁰ Barry Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, 92, no. 1 (January/February 2013), 122.

²¹ Michael C. Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security* vol. 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/08): 7-43.

²² "Barack Obama says Asia-Pacific is 'Top US Priority'," *BBC News*, 17 November 2011.

²³ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

venture into US-Chinese accommodation, nor a hard realist line of containment. Rather, the goal was to maintain America as an anchor of stability and a hedge against instability. If done well, this policy would utilize multiple tools to advance predictability in the region and provide channels of communication for managing disagreements and promoting norms and rules of behavior. A key architect of the pivot, Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, says the intent was: "...to secure a strong position in the Asian Pacific region and to make sure that our position is welcomed, enduring and principled."²⁴

David Shambaugh overviews the evidence supporting the pivot demonstrating the deep economic structural realities regarding the Asia-Pacific region:

Asia is the United States' most important economic partner and has been for more than three decades. The region surpassed Europe as our leading trade partner in 1977. Today the United States has more than twice as much trade with Asia as with Europe. In 2012, US trade with Asia totaled a stunning \$14.2 trillion. Since 2000, Asia has become our largest source of imports and second largest export market (outside North America). By 2010, Asia accounted for 32.2 percent of US total merchandise trade worldwide. US exports to Asia totaled \$457.2 billion in 2012. Today, the United States trades more with South Korea than with Germany, more with Singapore than with France, and more with Japan than with the United Kingdom, Germany, and France combined. China and Japan are the second and third largest trade partners for the United States. Asia is also our most important export market – nine of the United States' top 20 national export markets are now in Asia, and approximately one-third of all US overseas sales go to Asia. Growth in exports to China has been the fastest worldwide for the past five years. If East Asia continues to post only 5.5 percent growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), US exports to Asia are estimated to contribute 5 percent to US GDP. According to US government statistics, this translates into 4.6 million jobs, domestically per annum.²⁵

The US was maintaining significant trade deficits as it lacked equal access for many of its export products in Asian economies. Thus, a significant aspect of the pivot was to invest diplomatic and trade initiatives in support of a "Trans-Pacific Partnership" to lower trade barriers, open new markets, and reduce trade deficits. The relative trade opportunities with eight countries – excluding China – in the 2011 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit were at the core of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Two-way trade with those countries in 2010 was \$171 billion

²⁴ "The Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia: A conversation between Robert Kagan and Kurt Campbell," The Foreign Policy Initiative, 13 December 2011, available at <http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/content/2011FPIforum-wrap-up> (accessed in June 2013).

²⁵ David Shambaugh, "Assessing the US 'Pivot,' to Asia," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 10-12.

combined – versus \$467 billion with China and \$181 billion with Japan.²⁶ Finally, the Indian Ocean was included geographically in the pivot which brought into America’s geopolitical and operational interests an area that, combined, accounts for an estimated 50 percent of world container traffic and 70 percent of oil and petroleum transiting out of the Persian Gulf through the Indian Ocean – en route to East Asia.²⁷

Kurt Campbell repeatedly sought to persuade China that the policy was not one of military containment but rather to promote stability and reassurance. As Campbell notes: “...every country in Asia wants a better relationship with China. That’s just a fact on the ground...and what countries also want is a good relationship with the United States.” They want a strong relationship with the United States “in its own right...but they also believe that a strong, durable, stable reliable relationship with the United States gives them a better ability to deal with the giant in the neighborhood.”²⁸ President Obama summarized his approach towards engaging China following a heads of state meeting he hosted in California with the new Chinese leader, President Xi Jinping, in June 2013. President Obama indicated that: “...what I wanted to underscore and establish with him is the kind of relationship that recognizes it is in China’s interests and the United States’ interests for this relationship to work. That both leaders would be betraying their people if a healthy competition -- largely economic -- degenerated into serious conflict.” China had to be a responsible stakeholder in maintaining international rules and norms and it would not be effective for China in the long-run to be, as President Obama put it: “...free riders and let the United States worry about the big hassles and the big problems. At the same time, a growing nationalist pride where they say yes we’re big, too and we should be seen as

²⁶ Margaret Talev, “Obama’s Asia Pivot Puts U.S. Approach to China on New Path,” *Bloomberg*, 19 November 2011.

²⁷ Mark E. Manyin, et al, “Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administrations ‘Rebalancing’ Toward Asia,” *Congressional Research Service* 7-5700, 28 March 2012.

²⁸ “The Obama Administrations....”

equals on the world stage. And what we're saying to them is you can't pick and choose. You know you can't have all the rights of a major world power but none of the responsibilities. And if you accept both then I think you will have a strong partner in the United States.”²⁹

Both in the US and China, there remained a mutual ambivalence about the role of the military balance between the two nations in Asia. The potential for China to translate economic gains into military power is generated by its size, location, and population, which could prompt Beijing to adopt a more outward-looking national security policy. China was making a major investment in military modernization, spending by 2010 about 4.3 percent of its economy on defense. Still, its overall defense spending – estimated to be between \$135 and \$215 billion annually was still about one-sixth that of the United States. China has acquired nuclear submarines and an updated aircraft carrier which deployed in 2013. It also sent a battle capable ship to help Chinese citizens and to monitor events off the coast of Libya during the 2011 NATO war there. China's capacity is mainly focused on its ability to shape events in the South China Sea, in South and Southeast Asia, and on the Korean Peninsula. By 2013, China had a total of 2.285 million active-duty armed forces and about 510,000 reservists, making it the world's largest military. China had about one hundred thousand personnel working on strategic missiles located at twenty-seven inter-continental ballistic missile sites. China also had 35 intermediate-range missile launch sites and one submarine-based nuclear missile system. China maintained military-to-military relationships with over 140 countries.³⁰ China has also embarked on a modernization of its nuclear deterrent. China's intercontinental nuclear deterrence was historically based on limited deployment – about 24 hardened-silo nuclear missiles. However,

²⁹ President Barack Obama, “Interview with Charlie Rose,” 17 June 2013, available at <http://www.charlierose.com/download/transcript/12981> (accessed in June 2013).

³⁰ IISS, *The Military Balance: 2013...* Also see Edward Wong, “Chinese Military Seeks to Extend Its Naval Power,” *New York Times*, 23 April 2010.

China has been modernizing its nuclear arsenal to carry multiple warheads – the designs for which were purportedly obtained via espionage against the United States. China said it was concerned that America’s missile defense system could overcome its traditional deterrent posture and that this is what drove it to expand its deterrent capabilities.

China has focused on new types of warfare and new means of projecting power and influence. When China experienced tensions with the United States over Taiwan in 1996, military strategists there concluded that it would not be wise to fight the United States with conventional military power as their forces “...would not be sufficient...So we realized that China needs a new strategy to right the balance of power.”³¹ These planners saw complexity in warfare as a neutralizing factor against American military advantages. Any war between China and the United States would be guided in Beijing as “unrestricted war” which takes “non-military forms and military forms and creates a war on many fronts.”³² The Chinese were studying new military capabilities and doctrines, including mobile systems, solid-fuel propellants, advanced guidance systems, warhead miniaturization, space-based capabilities, enhanced radiation and directed energy weapons, anti-satellite munitions, and ballistic missile-defense countermeasures.³³ In 2013, the United States expressed deep displeasure at what it saw as efforts by elements within the Chinese military to conduct cyberattacks and espionage against American businesses and other locations inside the United States. Obama administration officials suggested that a likely intent was to map military capabilities that could be exploited during in a crisis. More than 90 percent of all cyber-spying on the United States had emanated from China. The US Defense Department warned that China was a major international actor in

³¹ John Pomfret, “China Ponders New Rules of ‘Unrestricted War’,” *Washington Post*, 8 August 1999.

³² Pomfret, “China Ponders....”

³³ Jason D. Ellis and Todd M. Koca, “China Rising: New Challenges to the U.S. Security Posture,” *Strategic Forum* 175 (October 2000).

terms of information technology. China, it appeared, sought to create a cyber-ring to keep the American military at a distance about 2,000 miles into the Pacific if it wished to conduct secure command and control of naval operations.³⁴ China's interests in the South China Sea, where it has territorial disputes, is heightened by its growing dependence on oil imports. China is now the second largest importer of foreign oil in the world after the United States. It will likely require up to 600 million tons of oil per year by 2020, three times its domestic productive capacity.³⁵

The major new military commitments associated with the pivot were limited to a contingent of US Marines stationed in Australia, ports of call for US Navy vessels in Singapore, and identifying a larger area of operational interest in the Indian Ocean. This, however, was built on top of 325,000 military and civilian personnel devoted to the Pacific theater of operations. This includes six aircraft carrier battle groups and 180 ships and submarines. The US maintains security alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia and has deepened ties to Singapore, New Zealand, and India. New partnerships have been negotiated with Vietnam and links to Myanmar (Burma) have increased.³⁶ By 2013, 50 percent of American naval power was devoted to Asia, with a goal of reaching 60 percent by 2020.³⁷ As Richard Halloran writes: "Washington has begun positioning forces which could threaten China's supply lines through the South China Sea. The oil and raw materials transported through those shipping lanes are crucial to a surging Chinese economy – an economy paying for Beijing's swiftly expanding military power."³⁸ While American officials focused on the role of these forces in new security missions like piracy and counter-narcotics, Chinese

³⁴ David Sanger, "U.S. Blame's China's Military Directly for Cyberattacks," *New York Times*, 6 May 2013.

³⁵ Peter S. Goodman, "1,500 Mile Oil Pipeline Fading Fast for China," *Washington Post*, 5 April 2004.

³⁶ Shambaugh, "Assessing the US...."

³⁷ Matthew Pennington, "Budget Cuts Could Hurt Obama's Pivot to Asia," *Associated Press*, 1 March 2013.

³⁸ Quoted in Justin Logan, "China, America, and the Pivot to Asia," *Policy Analysis*, No. 717, 8 January 2013.

leaders were not easily persuaded. Justin Logan writes: “If China made this sort of argument to defend deploying more than half its naval assets to the Western hemisphere, American leaders would not give the argument a moment’s consideration. If the success of America’s Asia policy relies on Chinese elites believing this story, the policy is in trouble.”³⁹

The pivot reflected a return to realist priorities in line with advancing the national interest in terms of the emerging distribution of power in the world and establishing a new hierarchy of foreign policy priorities. Getting the presence in Asia “right” was going to be a tough balancing act. Absent the realist guidance of restraint there was a risk that an overly military-oriented pivot to Asia could spark China to see the growing American presence as a threat and thus respond with enhanced military capabilities – further prompting American concerns about China and its rise. China did indicate worry about the military aspects of the American pivot. In a 2013 informal military planning document, China concluded that: “...some countries are strengthening their Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanding military presence in the region, and frequently making the situation there tenser.”⁴⁰

America had the potential to engage China and cultivate a steady rise that embraced regional cooperation and norms of behavior to produce mutual benefits. As Jim Hoagland writes of President Obama’s goals: “By design or otherwise, he is locating pressure points and acquiring bargaining chips in Asia that can be useful in fashioning a more stable U.S. relationship with China.”⁴¹ “These pressure points,” writes Hoagland, “solidarity with Japan, friendship with Asian nations upset over China’s growing shadow, expanding deployment of U.S. missile defense systems around China and putting a few more ships and U.S. Marines in the

³⁹ Logan, “China, America and the Pivot...”, 10.

⁴⁰ Anne Mulrine, “US General Aims to Ease China’s Concerns over Obama ‘Pivot’ to Asia,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 April 2013.

⁴¹ Hoagland, “Obama’s Well-Timed...”

Pacific – exert mostly psychological pressure on China at this point. They can be toned up, or down, depending on how conflictual the U.S.-China relationship becomes.”⁴² The two sides’ interests are reconcilable and thus “how” America pivots is very important to success. As China’s most senior military planner said at a meeting with the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, in April 2013: “...the Pacific Ocean is wide enough to accommodate us both” and that the two nations could work together to “avoid vicious competition, friction, or even confrontation in this area.” The two military leaders agreed to develop rules of behavior that would “prevent or minimize misunderstandings or accidents when US and Chinese military forces operate in proximity to one another.”⁴³ The goal was, according to National Security Advisor (also a key architect of the pivot) Tom Donilon, to advance a platform in which “international law and norms be respected, that commerce and freedom of navigation are not impeded, that emerging powers build trust with their neighbors, and that disagreements are resolved peacefully without threats or coercion.”⁴⁴

Intervening Variables

America could not just announce a priority for Asia and not make major realignments elsewhere. The approach required changing fundamental mindsets and deeply institutionalized policies that had dominated American foreign policy thinking for decades. As John J. Mearsheimer put it in a 2013 address to the US Army War College:

...Europe is likely to become not the second, but the third most important region. We talk today about pivoting to Asia, which obviously means shifting forces to Asia from other locations. This pivot, which is rather low-key at the moment, is likely to accelerate if China grows more and more powerful. But if a country pivots to a particular area, that must mean it is pivoting away from some other region. That other region in this case is almost

⁴² Hoagland, “Obama’s Well-Timed...”

⁴³ Mulrine, “US General Aims...”

⁴⁴ Tom Donilon, “America is Back in the Pacific and will Uphold the Rules,” *Financial Times*, 27 November 2011.

certain to be Europe, not the Persian Gulf, which is likely to be the second most important region for the United States.⁴⁵

Could America successfully make this level of shift in priorities? The new Secretary of State, John Kerry signaled skepticism over the pivot strategy in his confirmation hearings. He warned in January 2013 that: ““We have a lot more forces out there than any other nation in the world, including China...And the Chinese take a look at that and say, 'What's the United States doing? Are they trying to circle us?' I think we need to be thoughtful in how we go forward.”⁴⁶ He then embarked on his first official trip to Europe, and devoted the bulk of his time to the broader Middle East. If America failed to pivot its military deployments away from Europe and realign in the Middle East, then the ability to sustain the pivot to Asia could be lost. This outcome would raise security concerns among American-friendly countries in the Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, American liberal and neoconservative worldviews continued to press American leaders to advocate for democracy and human rights in China. The Chinese government says this damages efforts to promote mutual gains and they have increasingly come to see America’s posturing as their own existential threat. As Wei Jingsheng, a prominent Chinese dissident concludes: “America’s social and political system is very attractive to ordinary people in China, and this, the communist government feels, is a fundamental threat to the government’s survival.”⁴⁷ Still, the pivot and its assumed benefits united realists like John Mearsheimer and liberals like Joseph S. Nye. Nye wrote:

...China’s leaders cannot predict their successors’ intentions. The US is betting that they will be peaceful, but no one knows. A hedge expresses caution, not aggression. American military forces do not aspire to ‘contain’ China in Cold War fashion, but they can help to shape the environment in which future Chinese leaders make their choices. I stand by my testimony before the US Congress of 1995 in response to those who, even then, wanted a

⁴⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, “The Future of the Army,” 10 April 2013, Address to the U.S. Army War College Annual Strategy Conference, available at <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/Future%20of%20the%20Army%20Transcript.pdf> (accessed in June 2013).

⁴⁶ William Gallo, “Kerry Concerned about US Military Build-up in Asia,” *Voice of America*, 25 January 2013.

⁴⁷ Natalie Liu, “China Sees Threat in US Pivot to Asia,” *Voice of America*, 7 June 2013.

policy of containment rather than engagement: ‘Only China can contain China’...the last thing the US wants is a Cold War II in Asia.⁴⁸

China’s continued and expanded growth is certainly not assured as the country has major political problems, corruption, and serious environmental problems and growing energy requirements. Consequently, while some in the United States argue that China is a growing threat, it is important to understand it mainly in relative capacity to translate future power into military capabilities. The internal challenges China confronts are a major inhibiting factor in that regard. However, as nationalism could be a powerful political force that appeals to the Communist Party leadership as a tool to remain in power and deflect away from domestic problems, it will be important that the United States not take steps that might exacerbate that tendency in China.

China’s major advantage is its willingness to engage the world with patience and see policy development through a long-term lens. As the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, who laid out the general principles of long-term Chinese strategy in the 1970s, wrote: “Keep cool-headed to observe, be composed to make reactions, stand firmly, hide our capabilities and bide our time, never try to take the lead, and be able to accomplish something.”⁴⁹ Meanwhile, in fall 2013, the United States insisted instead on imposing self-inflicted economic wounds and handing major relative gains over to China. The Republican Party in Congress insisted on shutting down the government to change already established health care law – which among other major costs, forced President Obama to cancel a key trip to Asia ceding diplomatic ground to China. Then, the Congress pushed a debt limit ceiling increase to the last minute, threatening to default and put the global economy at risk. China took note, with the state run news agency writing that the

⁴⁸ Joseph S. Nye, “Obama’s Pacific Pivot,” *Project Syndicate*, 6 December 2011.

⁴⁹ Quoted by the US Department of Defense, *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People’s Republic of China* (Washington, D.C.: US Department of Defense, 2004).

dollar should be replaced as the world's reserve currency "so that the international community could permanently stay away from the spillover of the intensifying domestic political turmoil in the United States." It went on to say: "As U.S. politicians of both political parties are still shuffling back and forth between the White House and the Capitol Hill without striking a viable deal to bring normality to the body politic they brag about...it is perhaps a good time for the befuddled world to start considering building a de-Americanized world."⁵⁰ Meanwhile, as America spent months distracted by possible intervention in Syria and then marched into a self-inflicted economic disaster, key allies in Asia began to wonder about the viability of America's new strategic priority. As one observer of sideline discussions at a Manila economic forum in October 2013 said: "They were saying, 'Do Americans even have enough money to sustain their own state operations? Can they be a functional state to begin with, never mind them being a superpower?'"⁵¹

Europe

Europe is the region most immediately affected by the pivot concept as it is the part of the world where the logic for dramatic realignments of America's role is highest. During the Cold War, and in the two decades after, Europe received priority attention from the United States. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was seen in the Clinton administration as a major area of consolidation of post-Cold War gains as spreading democracy in Central and Eastern Europe became a major new mission for the United States – including fighting a war to liberate Kosovo from oppressive Serb crackdowns in 1999. Europe was also seen as an important place from which to move American forces to project power into the Persian Gulf

⁵⁰ Mark Lander, "Seeing its Own Money at Risk, China Rails at U.S.," *New York Times*, 15 October 2013.

⁵¹ Frank Langfitt, "Asian Allies' Anxieties Rise Amid Washington Paralysis," *National Public Radio*, 8 October 2013.

region in a crisis. The Bush administration continued policies like NATO enlargement and missile defense deployments while seeing Europe as a region from which to pick and choose coalitions of the willing in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since 1989, the US had made dramatic force reductions in Europe from well over 300,000 to 80,000 by 2013 with further reductions ongoing (down to 30,000 landforces by 2015). Still, by 2010, half of America's overseas deployed forces were based in Europe.⁵² The case for a deeper transatlantic alignment was exacerbated by growing American frustrations over burdensharing inequities. The European allies were capable to police their own neighborhood. However, mired in the Eurozone crisis, and with no significant threat even remotely on the horizon, Europeans should not be spending more on defense. America was, however, in a position to incentivize its European allies to pool resources by signaling deeper cuts in America's presence there. The United States could go to almost zero ground troops in Europe while still affirming its commitment to collective defense in NATO. In fact, while implementing deep cuts in ground forces, it was also realigning the priorities in the transatlantic relationship – focusing American's role in Europe on collective defense, via ballistic missile defense, and re-investing in trade by beginning negotiations on a US-EU trade agreement.

The Persian Gulf

Realigning forces out of Europe liberates money and resources to sustain a continued, but more narrow, American presence in the Persian Gulf. For the foreseeable future, America's energy interests and the need to either dissuade or deter states with weapons of mass destruction, Iran in particular, require an American military presence in the region. The challenge is that the

⁵² Office of the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense, "Department of Defense Base Structure Report: Fiscal Year 2011 Baseline," US Department of Defense, 2010.

geographical arch from North Africa through Central Asia has a plethora of governance, security, humanitarian, environmental, population, and economic challenges that cannot be solved by the United States and instead requires a comprehensive global engagement over an extended period of time. Its costly engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown the limits of American capacity and its commitment to supporting despotic governments to advance its interests runs counter to idealist goals of spreading democracy. Unlike Europe, however, there is no institutional architecture like NATO and thus America's presence remains essential to the regional balance of power. This means sustaining military capacity in the Persian Gulf and not getting drawn into intractable conflicts – like the Syrian civil war which, while seeing over 100,000 killed between 2011 and 2013, the US averted being pulled into. These objectives were made clear when Barack Obama spoke to the United Nations in September 2013 noting that keeping shipping lanes open, preventing nuclear proliferation, and securing against terrorism were the major Gulf priorities. The large arch of instability across North Africa to Central Asia was a concern, but not something America would handle alone. President Obama made clear that America's more limited engagement would be focused on the management of relations with Iran and the Arab-Israeli peace process – with primarily diplomatic emphasis. The president then acknowledged a wide range of other issues in the region and concluded: "I've made it clear that even when America's core interests are not directly threatened, we stand ready to do our part to prevent mass atrocities and protect basic human rights. But we cannot and should not bear that burden alone."⁵³

The Domestic Pivot

⁵³ Barack Obama, "President Obama's Speech to the UN General Assembly," 24 September 2013.

The United States has shown it can make major investments that enhance future sources of relative power and thus advance long-term gains. The Marshall Plan transferred wealth to rebuilding Europe after World War II while expanding markets for American products and jobs. After the 1957 *Sputnik* crisis, which appeared to suggest the Soviet Union was making major gains in technological research and development, the Eisenhower administration made dramatic investments in education, research and development, and built or enhanced major agencies like the DARPA program in the Defense Department, the National Science Foundation, and NASA.⁵⁴ Since the Cold War ended, the United States has had repeated warnings that its relative competitiveness and internal infrastructure to support human capital was deteriorating. For example, America's relative global share of high-tech manufactured goods fell from 21 to 14 percent between 1995 and 2008.⁵⁵ In 1997, the National Science Board stated: "...in the presence of global competition, a nation should be strong in all facets of technical innovation and should have available a continuously renewed base of knowledge to inform its decisions and those of its citizens."⁵⁶ The 2001 Hart-Rudman Commission concluded that "second only to a weapon of mass destruction detonating in an American city, we can think of nothing more dangerous than a failure to manage properly science, technology, and education for the common good over the next quarter century."⁵⁷ Yet, by 2013, the United States was making major cuts in federal and state funding for research and development and educational capacity. While America was cutting its investments in human capital, China was, by 2013, engaged in a \$250 billion annual investment in higher education over five years with a focus on alternative energy,

⁵⁴ Sean Kay, "America's Sputnik Moments," *Survival* vol. 55, no. 2 (April May 2013): 123-145.

⁵⁵ National Science Board, *Globalization of Science and Engineering Research* (Arlington, VA: National Science Foundation, 2010).

⁵⁶ National Science Board, *Globalization...*

⁵⁷ "United States Commission on National Security: Imperative for Change," available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/nssg.pdf> (accessed in October 2013).

energy efficiency, environmental protection, biotechnology, advanced information technologies, high-end equipment manufacturing, and new energy vehicles. China's long-term goal was to invest up to \$1.6 trillion to expand those industries to represent 8 percent of economic output by 2015 (an increase of 3 percent in five years).⁵⁸ In 2011, the United States came perilously close to default, saved only by a "sequester" plan of automatic spending cuts which went into effect in 2013, slowing economic growth and damaging key areas of investment in infrastructure and human capital. In 2013, the United States government shut down, coming perilously close to default, forcing the president to cancel a major trip to Asia demonstrating that at a key moment of global change, America's internal politics were unable to adapt to new circumstances. This was ironic in that investments in research and development have, historically, been very cheap but created massive dividends – like the Internet. However, the Battelle Memorial Institute notes that, while in 2013 China's overall investment in research and development was half that of the United States, its projected growth would see it surpass America by 2023; China and India were increasing investment annually by 10 percent or more, while the United States cut its federal funding for research and development in 2012 by 1.4 percent.⁵⁹ A 2013 study completed by the American Society of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology surveyed over 3,000 experts working in this field and found that 68 percent had insufficient funding to expand their research, 55 percent knew an expert in the field who had lost their job, and – crucially – 18 percent said they were considering leaving the United States and doing their research in another country.⁶⁰

The Syria Crossroads

⁵⁸ Keith Bradsher, "Next Made-in China Boom: College Graduates," *New York Times*, 17 January 2013.

⁵⁹ Patrick Thibodeau, "U.S. Could Fall Behind China in R&D Spending by 2023," *Computer World*, 14 January 2013.

⁶⁰ American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, "Unlimited Potential, Vanishing Opportunity," September 2013, available at <http://www.asbmb.org/Advocacy/advocacy.aspx?id=22422> (accessed in September 2013).

Barack Obama's second term appeared to reflect a shift back towards the traditional role for realism in American foreign policy. This new set of priorities came to a crashing intersection with liberal and neoconservative foreign policy worldviews in August and September 2013 in Syria. Barack Obama had said a year earlier that use by the Syrian military of chemical weapons against rebel forces there would be a "red line" leading to serious consequences. After over 1,400 people, including hundreds of children, were killed by sarin nerve gas, the United States felt compelled to threaten military intervention to uphold the 100 year old international norm against the use of chemical weapons. At the same time, many liberals and neoconservatives supported air strikes also to change the balance on the ground to favor rebels seeking to overthrow the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. The United States was on the verge of launching punitive cruise missile attacks when the British Parliament voted against participation with the United States in any military conflict in Syria. This prompted President Obama to request congressional approval for war. The delay opened a window for diplomacy, though the threat of force was still seen as important to ensure compliance with any agreement the Syrians might undertake to eliminate their chemical weapons. Facing strong and growing public and congressional opposition, the president addressed the nation, saying:

My fellow Americans, for nearly seven decades, the United States has been the anchor of global security. This has meant doing more than forging international agreements - it has meant enforcing them. The burdens of leadership are often heavy, but the world is a better place because we have borne them...I'd ask every member of Congress, and those of you watching at home tonight, to view those videos of the attack, and then ask: What kind of world will we live in if the United States of America sees a dictator brazenly violate international law with poison gas, and we choose to look the other way? Franklin Roosevelt once said, 'Our national determination to keep free of foreign wars and foreign entanglements cannot prevent us from feeling deep concern when ideals and principles that we have cherished are challenged.' Our ideals and principles, as well as our national security, are at stake in Syria, along with our leadership of a world where we seek to ensure that the worst weapons will never be used.⁶¹

The US and Russia subsequently negotiated steps towards an inspection regime to remove all chemical weapons from Syria. Implementation would be difficult but the prospects for an even

⁶¹ President Barack Obama, "Address to the Nation," 10 September 2013.

limited success of weapons inspections were more substantial than the utility of a limited cruise missile strike (as had been the announced plan). As Edward Luttwack writes, weapons inspectors: "...might miss quite a few chemical warheads and bombs if they are hidden well enough. But that's no less true of any attempt to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons by bombing depots and bases - some are bound to escape detection and destruction, not to mention the potential for a dangerous dispersal of chemical agents in a strike." There was a broader value in the great power cooperative approach as, according to Luttwack: "...Tehran's greatest fear is American and Russian cooperation. Especially now that economic sanctions have actually been effective, Iranian leaders might finally accept real limits on their nuclear activities once they see Americans and Russians really cooperating effectively in Syria."⁶²

If it worked, the deal to remove chemical weapons from Syria would mean working with the very Assad government which had used chemical weapons and brutally treated its opponents for two years. However, President Obama also said "Assad must go". The Syrian leader was now central to eliminating chemical weapons, but should step down and America would provide military support to rebels seeking Assad's ouster. This was a direct conflict between realist great power cooperation over regional stability – and idealism which called for unseating and punishing the Assad regime. The two worldviews were irreconcilable. Moreover, this approach towards regime change in Syria was a further distraction away from the required hard choices needed for the Asia pivot to succeed. Some supporters of war, both liberals and neoconservatives, were livid at the outcome. CNN's chief international correspondent, Christian Amanpour, dropped pretenses of journalistic neutrality and said: "How many more times do we have to say that weapons of mass destruction were used?...We can't use this false moral equivalence about what's going on right now. They tried to do it in the Second World War.

⁶² Edward Luttwack, "Take It and Like It," *Foreign Policy*, 10 September 2013.

They tried to do it in Bosnia. They tried to do it in Rwanda and they're trying to do it now. There is no moral equivalence." When a skeptic of intervention, Andrew Sullivan, suggested it was better to not make policy guided by emotion, Amanpour responded saying: "The president of the United States and the most moral country in the world based on the most moral principles in the world, at least that's the fundamental principle that the United States rests on, cannot allow this to go unchecked...President Clinton, 15, 16 years later, is still apologizing for Rwanda...I'm so emotional about this." Andrew Sullivan responded: "Exactly. And you're right to be. But that is not the state of mind to be thinking right about strategy and policy." Amanpour then begin talking over and interrupting other guests, advocating for war, and concluding: "It's not emotion. This is history coming out. We have turned our eyes away from some of the most terrible crimes...And that is not in America's national interests." To this, Charles Blow, another guest, said: "It's a false choice to suggest that if I don't want the United States to drop bombs on Syria that I do not care about the death of children."⁶³

The decision by Barack Obama to pursue a realist outcome to the Syrian crisis, rather than intervene and risk escalation on behalf of the rebels was derided by those who had been shaping American foreign policy for the past 20 years. Even before the crisis of August-September, Anne-Marie Slaughter, who had been a senior State Department official in the Obama administration wrote: "U.S. credibility is on the line. For all the temptation to hide behind the decision to invade Iraq based on faulty intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, Obama must realize the tremendous damage he will do to the United States and to his legacy if he fails to act. He should understand the deep and lasting damage done when the gap between words and deeds becomes too great to ignore, when those who wield power are

⁶³ Anderson Cooper, 360, "Transcripts" 12 September 2013, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1309/12/acl.01.html> (accessed in September 2013).

exposed as not saying what they mean or meaning what they say.”⁶⁴ Richard Cohen wrote: “Because of Obama’s fecklessness – abetted by a Congress that has turned darkly isolationist – the world is now a less safe place. The policeman has proved to be a bumbler. He is unschooled in foreign policy. Rogues and killers have taken the measure of him. He is smaller than first appeared.”⁶⁵ Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham said of the US-Russian framework deal to get weapons inspections into Syria: “It requires a willful suspension of disbelief to see this agreement as anything other than the start of a diplomatic blind alley, and the Obama administration is being led into it by Bashar Assad and [Russian president] Vladimir Putin.” The senators added: “What concerns us most is that our friends and enemies will take the same lessons from this agreement – they see it as an act of provocative weakness on America’s part. We cannot imagine a worse signal to send to Iran as it continues its push for a nuclear weapon...The only way this underlying conflict can be brought to a decent end is by significantly increasing our support to moderate opposition forces in Syria. We must strengthen their ability to degrade Assad’s military advantage, change the momentum on the battlefield, and thereby create real conditions for a negotiated end to the conflict.”⁶⁶ Yet both liberals and neoconservatives, who had more or less had their way for twenty years in American foreign policy debates, were now deeply out of step with the American public of which 67 percent supported, and only 23 percent disapproved of President Obama’s decision to defer military attacks on Syria and pursue diplomacy with Russia. Just 39 percent thought that President

⁶⁴ Ann-Marie Slaughter, “Obama Should Remember Rwanda as He Weighs Action in Syria,” *Washington Post*, 26 April 2013.

⁶⁵ Richard Cohen, “Obama is Bush 2.0, but It’s No Upgrade,” *Washington Post*, 16 September 2013.

⁶⁶ Martin Pengally, “John McCain and Lindsey Graham Criticize US-Russia Deal on Syria,” *The Guardian*, 14 September 2013.

Obama had shown weakness and inconsistency versus 49 percent who thought he had adapted well to new circumstances.⁶⁷

Henry Kissinger concluded that Russia was acting according to its national interest which coincided with America's interests regarding chemical weapons in Syria. Kissinger said: "...when the administration found itself in the extremely difficult and potentially embarrassing position of having...seen a request of military action refused by the Congress, he [Putin] saw an opportunity to perhaps get into step with us by easing an immediate American difficulty, but solving a common problem. In my observation, his [Putin's] biggest fear in Syria was that it would lead to a radicalization of the region and not so much to protect any one individual." Zbigniew Brzezinski likewise concluded that working with Russia was: "...compatible, in my view, with our interests because I see our involvement in the Syrian affair as something very unfortunate, unnecessary. I don't think an attack on Syria to strike at its chemical assets would be very productive for us. It would not solve the problem. It might ignite a wider regional explosion."⁶⁸ Missing from the criticisms of the American decision to pursue a more realist approach of restraint and negotiation was that the goal all along was to reinforce the norm on the prohibition of use of chemical weapons and not to intervene in the Syrian civil war. That goal was achieved and even if only half of Syria's chemical weapons were destroyed via UN weapons inspections this was 100 percent more than would have been through a limited air attack.

By putting Russian's credibility to deliver its client state on the line, America succeeded in getting someone else to take responsibility for something that it would have preferred not to. Russia had made gains in terms of influence in the Middle East – yet no peace was going to be

⁶⁷ Pew Research, "Public Backs Diplomatic Approach in Syria, but Distrusts Syria and Russia," 16 September 2013, available at <http://www.people-press.org/2013/09/16/public-backs-diplomatic-approach-in-syria-but-distrusts-syria-and-russia/> (accessed in September 2013).

⁶⁸ "Transcript: Fareed Zakaria, Global Public Square," *CNN*, 15 September 2013, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/130915/fzgps.01.html> (accessed in September 2013).

possible in Syria without Moscow's engagement. With its initial focus on cruise missile attacks without going to the UN, however, the Obama administration had opened a window for Russia to appear as a leader when in fact it had been a major enabler of Syrian war crimes. Moreover, with its focus on military intervention to uphold the norm on chemical weapons, the United States risked breaking the key norm of the role of the United Nations in authorizing intervention – a norm America had built into the international system. This was ironic that in advancing what it claimed to be a moral cause, the Obama administration was putting at risk some of the most important global norms central to the UN system. Finally, after the crisis ended, liberals and neoconservatives agreed that it was the credible threat of force that made diplomacy effective. This was a narrative, however, that was inconsistent with what actually happened. The administration was going to launch cruise missile attacks in a matter of days, but was frozen in place by the British parliamentary rejection of military intervention. Then the depth of American public opposition registered strongly with congress. These mechanisms of restraint caused a delay in the use of military force which subsequently gave diplomacy a chance.

The twenty year dominance of the liberal and neoconservative worldview guiding American foreign policy does not mean that realist premises were disregarded entirely. During this time, the United States deepened its relationship with China. On the Korean Peninsula, America combined military deterrence with multilateral diplomacy to mitigate crises there and avoid war. The United States also worked with Russia where it could and emphasized relations with emerging powers like India and Brazil. America began a process of pushing European allies to contribute more for their own defense. Meanwhile, the United States pursued multilateral diplomacy backed by sanctions and the option of military power to dissuade Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons or, if necessary, to contain it. This approach to Iran was

bolstered with a new concept for missile defense systems in Europe. The United States ignored its idealist values and worked with nations governed by authoritarian governments who were friendly with the United States as in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. A fundamental challenge for the United States would be whether it would pursue outreach to normalize relations with as part of an overall deal on its nuclear program as it did in opening ties with China in the 1970s. If successful, such an approach could change the geopolitical situation in the Persian Gulf for the better and further enhance the move towards the Asia pivot. As Thomas Pickering and Jessica Tuchman Mathews conclude reflecting on the Syria crisis: “As current events demonstrate, the security challenges of the Middle East cannot be permanently solved solely through the use of American military power. On Iran and other regional challenges, the only lasting solutions will be diplomatic ones.”⁶⁹ Indeed, a successful re-engagement with Iran, driven by a “Nixon goes to China” kind of realism, might be the most essential ingredient of full implementation of the realigning pivot to Asia.

Conclusion

For twenty years after the Cold War ended, the United States embraced a triumphant idealist vision of its place in the world that was put in the service of mobilizing to sustain American primacy. Realism offers a clear critique of these priorities including identifying foreign policy over-reach and diminishing the domestic foundations of power. Thus variations in realism help to explain what can go wrong with a strategy of primacy, especially if backed with idealist commitments that abandon restraint and prioritization in international relations. Realist assumptions about the importance of anarchy in the international system and how it relates to

⁶⁹ Thomas Pickering and Jessica Tuchman Mathews, “A New Way Forward is Now Possible with Iran,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 13 September 2013.

national interests remain fundamentally important – and thus the advancement of stability and predictability becomes increasingly important in the context of prioritizing Asia due to the depth of economic and military interests in the region. But realism also risks getting it wrong if the military emphasis is too high – therefore the means of implementing realist strategy can include liberal tools – which was how America engaged Europe for decades. There need not be a NATO or EU in Asia, but the cultivation of norms and principles, especially around trade and military activity would be essential ingredients to a balanced new foreign policy there. Realism, however, often ignores the internal constraints on national interests – seeing all states as rational actors. It is here that other schools of inquiry explain how domestic political, corporate, and bureaucratic interests have the potential to be the greatest constraint on realist foreign policy. The question thus remained to be seen whether Barack Obama, or his successor, could really be a realist, even if he or she wanted to be?